

The Woman Who Walked Into Doors Study Guide

The Woman Who Walked Into Doors by Roddy Doyle

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Plot Summary

Paula, a middle-aged Irish housewife, answers the door to find a police officer, who informs her that her husband, Charlo, is dead. As Paula deals with Charlo's death, she is forced to face the memories of years of brutal abuse at his hands. Paula examines the path that led her to marry the man who would torture and abuse her for seventeen years and how she finally found the strength to kick him out of her house. A year later, he was shot by police after murdering a woman and Paula tries to make sense of her life, for the sake of her growing children.

Paula remembers growing up in a violent Catholic household with little money and many siblings. When she met Charlo, who was already a criminal, Paula fell instantly in love with his bad-boy image and married him to spite her abusive father. After a perfect honeymoon, Paula and Charlo settled into penniless married life as they awaited the birth of their first child, but Charlo became less loving and more cruel as Paula got fatter. Soon he started beating her, and he continued teasing, torturing, and hurting his wife for years, whether or not she was pregnant at the time. He would always go with her to the hospital and the doctors and nurses always believed that Paula was such a drunk that she was always falling down the stairs. Once, Charlo's violence caused Paula to miscarry a baby girl and Paula could never forgive him for that.

Looking back, Paula recalls how she became an empty shell, losing entire days at a time in her haze of alcohol and beatings. Charlo rarely brought in much money from his robberies so that Paula had to keep her children out of the kitchen for fear that they would eat all the food. The only thing keeping her from killing herself was her desire to protect her four children, but in spite of all this, she still loved Charlo. The only outsider who recognized the abuse was Paula's sister Carmel, who herself had suffered at their father's hand. Finally, one day Paula realized that Charlo had raped and abused their teenaged daughter Nicola, and Paula found the strength to resist Charlo. Beating him over the head with a heavy frying pan, she chased him out of the house and demanded that he never come back.

Paula managed to find a job cleaning houses and office buildings and was happy to learn that she could support her own children. There seemed to be hope that Paula's younger children would break the cycle of abuse and crime, and go on to live happy, successful lives. After a year, Paula had no idea what Charlo has been up to, but she learned from the police that he tried to rob a bank by holding the banker's wife hostage. When the job did not go as expected, Charlo beat and murdered his hostage and was shot to death by the police when he tried to run.



Chapters 1-7

Chapters 1-7 Summary

Paula describes her life to a Guard who has come to tell her some distressing news. Over tea, she relates her childhood and the beginning of her marriage, painting a portrait of a family characterized by tough love and many children competing for parents' attention.

The story opens with Paula finding a Guard at her door, and she thinks about the many times she has heard bad news after hearing her doorbell. For years, she hated the jarring sound or it, which would drive her to slap her daughter Nicola, but she still hates even the nice new melodious doorchime that her husband Charlo bought her. With several brothers, a husband, and a son likely to get into trouble with the law, Paula has never heard anything good from a Guard. She does not recognize the young man who is obviously terrified to reveal his bad news, so she invites him in for tea, to get acquainted.

The young Guard's name is Gerard and the two exchange life stories. It is not clear just how much Paula is telling Gerard, and how much she is just remembering as the narrative drifts between past and present. Paula came from a family with four girls and three boys, who had enough money growing up, but little to spare. Paula remembers how miserably cold her feet used to get in the winters when she was a child, and she wonders why the winters do not seem as bad anymore. She reminisces about the one time her family, the O'Learys, had enough money to go on vacation, the summer she was thirteen. They went camping for a week and Paula let a boy at the campsite feel her up, which made her feel like a woman.

Paula remembers the first time her own mother noticed that Paula was developing breasts, and for years Paula was confused about the horrified expression on her mother's face. A few days later, however, her mother kept Paula home from school to have a special talk about the facts of life, earning Paula the enviable status as the most informed girl at school. Paula never understood the meaning of her mother's expression until the day that Paula's oldest daughter Nicola got her period for the first time. Then, Paula realized that her baby girl had disappeared and would never exist again, but she hid her sadness and congratulated Nicola on her new womanhood. They went to see the movie "Dirty Dancing" because Paula hoped it will have a positive, tasteful depiction of sex for Nicola to observe.

Sometimes, if Paula reminisces with her sisters, they get into arguments about what really happened so many years ago. Some details they can easily agree on, but Paula remembers her early years as a much happier, safer time than her older sister Carmel does. Carmel claims to remember their mother crying after having two miscarriages, and Paula can sympathize with this, because she too has lost a baby. Paula only has two sisters now, because one of them died young in a motorcycle accident.



Paula remembers the first time she met her husband Charlo, after hearing about what a bad boy he was. Her narrative takes on the present tense and once again, she is seventeen and carried away by the tough, James Dean character. She knows that he is a delinquent and a former skinhead, and the moment she sees Charlo take a drag on his cigarette and ask her to dance, she belongs to him. She knows all along that he is not a nice guy, from the first time that they have drunken sex on the ground in a vacant lot. Afterward, Paula is finally lucid enough to know what has happened, but she tries to convince herself that he was kind, that he put a cloth on the ground underneath them, and that she was not so drunk that it was date rape.

Chapters 1-7 Analysis

The narrative style, which pays little attention to chronology of events, is somewhat confusing, especially since many events in Paula's adult life seem to echo experiences from her childhood. The story seems to emerge slowly, which goes along with the premise of an interview with a police officer, like a mystery unraveling. Although the mystery has not been solved, it is clear that to Paula, family is a rough environment, and her husband Charlo is a harsh man.

The episodes where Paula's mother, and later Paula herself, treat their daughters to a special holiday to celebrate their new womanhood, create a sad contrast with Charlo's sexual treatment of Paula. Both mother's cherish their daughters' innocence, wanting to protect it and make their introduction to the adult world a special, pleasant experience. Although Paula's adolescent fumbling with the boy at the campground is pleasant for her, the same can hardly be said of her date rape at the hands of the man she would one day marry.



Chapters 8-11

Chapters 8-11 Summary

Paula sits at her table after Gerard leaves, trying to digest the information he has given her. As the knowledge begins to set in that her husband Charlo is dead, she puts more sugar into her tea. She thinks back over her formative years, trying to figure out how she has gotten to this point.

Paula remembers going to primary school at a school called Saint Mary's, where one kind teacher watched over fifty-four little girls. This teacher always praised Paula's writing and urged her to read her stories to the class. Paula learned to love writing in this chaotic school. When she entered high school, it was another story. Paula was assigned to class 1.6, which was only one step up from being in Special Education. On the first day, her seatmate, Derek O'Leary, groped her thigh during class. When Paula punched him to defend herself, she was punished by the teacher.

Every teacher at the high school was terrible. Mr. Dillon, the history teacher, gave the students coloring pages and offered good grades in exchange for kisses. Many male teachers were fascinated by Paula's early physical development, and sexually harassed her on a regular basis. Only her friend Fiona ever stood up to the teachers. Soon Paula learned to grab Derek before he could grab her, and he learned to shy away from her iron grip. High school made her hard and vulgar, as a means of survival.

Paula remembers her first real boyfriend, a boy named Martin that she gave a hand job to in class. Both of them knew that the entire class knew what was happening, but only Fiona dared to watch. Paula only went steady with Martin for a couple of weeks out of a sense of obligation. After "wanking" him in public, Paula felt proud of herself, as though she had accomplished something. Telling the story, she draws a distinction between "wanking" and masturbating, implying that "wanking" is raunchier.

Sitting at her kitchen table drinking her sugary tea, Paula contrasts her teenaged self with her self today, at the age of thirty-eight. As a teen, she was pretty in a very sexy way, which brought negative attention from most men. Now, she is no longer as pretty, especially without makeup to camouflage the years. She openly admits that she is an alcoholic, and she cleans houses and offices for low pay. However, she is a survivor, and she is strong.

Paula has not seen Charlo in a while, because she threw him out a year ago. However, she has to admit that she has never stopped loving him, and that, in fact, she has loved him from the moment she first saw him. She has always been helpless to resist her love for him, even though he is such a bad man. Suddenly, she realizes that she has no idea how he died. Since she has no phone, she goes down to a nearby diner and uses the phone to call the police station. There is laughter in the background as Gerard comes to



the phone, but once he realizes why she is calling, it falls silent. Gerard reveals that Charlo was shot by a police officer, after Charlo killed a woman.

Chapters 8-11 Analysis

Paula's sexual experiences in high school are appalling, partly because of the way her male teachers sexually victimize her, and partly because of the unloving, impersonal nature of them. Paula learns, before she even understands why the teachers are drawn to her, that she must fight tooth and nail to avoid sexual assault. When Paula took her own daughter to see "Dirty Dancing" in hopes of showing her a positive, caring example of sex, she showed that she wanted her daughter to have a better initiation into the adult world than Paula had. Paula recognizes that her early sexual experiences, in which unpleasant, painful interactions were seen as conquests, prepared her to fall instantly in love with a boy that she already knew was a violent criminal.



Chapters 12-14

Chapters 12-14 Summary

Paula manages to make it back home before a swarm of news reporters surround her house, wanting to talk to the family of Charlo Spencer. Paula is only dimly aware of what is going on around her, and she finds her sisters, Carmel and Denise, picking her up off of her kitchen floor. Paula is aware that the house is filled with the children of the three sisters, but her primary thought is how to tell Nicola, who is at work. By the time Nicola arrives, she has already had to push away a crowd of reporters, so she knows that something has happened. When Paula tells her that her father is dead, Nicola shrugs, exhibiting the same indifference that Paula thinks is her most self-preserving feature.

Paula and her sisters argue about their memories of their past. Carmel, the oldest, has never gotten along with their father, and she remembers him as always being a cruel man. Paula insists that there were also some good times, early on, and she cites specific memories of happy times with their father. Carmel laughs and points out details that are direct contradictions to the truth, but Denise finally corroborates Paula's stories. Carmel accuses Paula of trying to rewrite history. It makes Paula feel very good, that Denise agrees with her, because it means that there was once a time when Paula was happy. Paula lies in bed, half-drunk, listing all the things she can now believe to have happened. She herself has pointed out already that she can believe anything when she is drunk, and many of the things she is thankful for probably never happened.

As the sisters continue their conversation over the next few days, Carmel insists that all men are terrible. Paula feels that there must be some men who are alright, and when Carmel challenges her to name one, Paula ruminates on her own dating history. She recalls the intricate system of "going together" practiced by boys and girls between ten and fourteen years old. A girl had to get her friend or sister to ask a boy to ask the girl out, and then the boy would ask her, and she would say yes, and they might not see each other again until one of them decided to break up. Paula remembers it as a lot of fun, a bunch of kids pretending to be grown-ups. It makes her sad that she can not remember the name of her first boyfriend.

Paula describes growing up in Dublin, Ireland, where every young girl was labeled either a "slut" or a "tight bitch." Every little type of behavior could give a girl a reputation as a slut, and Paula was not immune to being called a slut by her father, her brothers, and all the boys in the neighborhood. Paula was especially targeted because she developed breasts early. She remembers having to fend off the groping of her younger brother, who then called her a slut. As soon as Paula started going steady with Charlo, everyone stopped calling her a slut. Everyone knew better than to mess with Charlo Spencer's girl, because he might kill them. This made Paula feel good, and although he was unkind and proprietary, she felt that Charlo respected her. Even though Charlo was a thief from a family of thieves, Paula felt like she was somebody when she was with him.



Nicola, who is dating a nice boy, does not indulge in such sentimentality about it. Paula tells her that she should try to remember the little details, because she will want to know them someday, but Nicola does not understand. Paula reasons that this is good, because Nicola has her whole life ahead of her. Hopefully, Nicola will have a happy enough life that she will not need to cling to the memories of a happier time, the way Paula does. As the women drink their tea and vodka, they can not help laughing at the fact that, as expected, Charlo has gotten himself shot.

Chapters 12-14 Analysis

As Paula tells stories from her own childhood, and from her own motherhood, a pattern of harshness and casual abuse emerges. The rough world of lower-class Dublin described here is characterized by violence, poverty, and bullying the weak. The dual nickname system for young girls ("slut" or "tight bitch Virgin Mary") shows how the society around them set up many young women for failure, by condemning them if they were too innocent, and also condemning them if they were anything else. Such an environment created mean, brutal girls who fought dirty and saw sex as a weapon or a negotiating tool.

Despite this pattern, Paula clearly wants something better for her daughter Nicola. Paula is happy that Nicola has not found an abusive boyfriend, and she hopes that Nicola will never need to fall back on happy memories to get her through times of despair. Paula desperately needs to see parts of her early childhood as idyllic and happy times, so that her entire life will not have been a waste. Carmel has suffered more abuse at their father's hands, so she is too bitter to remember any happiness with him.



Chapters 15-17

Chapters 15-17 Summary

Paula remembers the first time Charlo brought her home to meet his family. Both Paula and Charlo were drunk and unkempt, and as they arrived at his house, Charlo went in first, quickly telling his mother Paula's name. Both Charlo and Paula badly needed to use the bathroom, and so Paula stood awkwardly in the kitchen with Mrs. Spencer, waiting for Charlo to come back for her so that she could use the toilet. Charlo's mother did not feel like talking, and as the woman prepared a stack of sandwiches for her husband and sons, Paula was overwhelmed by the woman's strength, and also afraid of the evil she saw in Mrs. Spencer.

Finally, Paula realized that Charlo was watching television with his family and she rushed up the stairs to find the bathroom. On the verge of wetting herself, Paula burst into a room with her panties around her knees and her skirt up, only to wake up a man sleeping in what turned out to be a bedroom. By the time Paula made it into the bathroom next door, she could not control herself, and she urinated all over the bathroom floor, happy to have made it to the linoleum. She cleaned up the bathroom as best she could, terrified she would be caught by a member of Charlo's family, but she did not know what to do with her wet underpants. Finally, she threw them out the window, so that she would not make a bad impression on Charlo's family.

Back in Paula's kitchen, Carmel hints that their father abused her in ways that she never revealed to her younger siblings. Paula demands to know what she is talking about. Paula remembers drunkenly wishing for the deaths of her own children, because she felt that she did not deserve to have such wonderful blessings. As the women pause, they watch the news report on television, showing Charlo's body hanging halfway out of a car.

Chapters 15-17 Analysis

The scene in which Charlo brought Paula home to his parents for the first time grimly foreshadowed what Paula could expect for the future. Just as Mrs. Spencer acted as a servant to her family, so Charlo would always keep Paula far beneath him. Charlo attended to his own needs first, abandoning Paula in an awkward social situation, and did not even think to check on her once his needs were filled. Because of Charlo's rudeness, Paula was literally "caught with her pants down," and she faced the humiliation of making a mess in someone else's house. Paula secretly cleaned up after herself, taking responsibility for her humiliation, and Charlo never even noticed that she had sacrificed anything. Paula's abusive father had been her primary example of a man who loved her, and she could see from the beginning that Charlo did not care if he hurt her.

Paula's self-destructive or self-denying streak can be seen in her drunken outburst, when she decided that her son had died, because she was an unfit mother. This twisted episode ended with Paula realizing that her son was fine, and feeling disappointed to lose her turbulent grief. This implies that she really needed to grieve for something else, and wanted to find an outlet for her grief. Instead of appropriately grieving over her abusive marriage, she pretended that her son had died, once again allowing the weak to be sacrificed to the violence of the strong and careless.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

One year after Charlo's death, Paula has fallen back into the ordinary patterns of everyday life. She still cleans houses and offices, and she enjoys the camaraderie she feels with the other cleaning women on the way to work. Other than her sisters, these women are the closest thing Paula has to real friends, and she wishes that she had a chance to get closer to them. Instead, their conversations always skim the surface, and Paula has no chance to confess the pain and alcoholism that make up her life. Paula enjoys cleaning the houses, and hardly ever feels jealous of the wealthy people with such fancy, luxurious houses. The only family Paula ever envies is a family with lots of spoiled children, who seem to avoid taking care of their house in any way, so that Paula can do everything. These people, who buy their children hordes of toys and avoid contact with Paula, are sometimes late in paying her, not realizing or caring that she really needs the money, and can not wait.

In the evenings, Paula cleans an office building and it is incredibly boring. Once in a while, she finds magazines or even novels in the trash and she takes these home and reads them and then adds them to her bookshelf. Looking at the books makes Paula feel proud. In addition to working, Paula puts in the effort to get up each morning at eight o'clock so she can help her children get ready for school and give them corn flakes. Paula knows that it is not much, but for her, this is progress, and she wants to be a positive influence in her children's lives.

Paula's daughter Nicola is eighteen, and she works a lot and spends time with her boyfriend, Tony. John Paul, Paula's son, is sixteen, but he has run away from home, and Paula suspects that he is a drug addict. He has robbed her mother twice, but he knows better than to try to find any money in Paula's house. Paula sadly remembers getting him a tattoo for his fourteenth birthday, to keep him from hating her, and she acknowledges that this tattoo is the only connection they now share. Leanne is twelve, and a good student. Leanne studies hard, and Paula looks forward to seeing the first O'Leary or Spencer graduate from high school. Leanne helps out a lot with Jack, the youngest, who is five. Jack is a sweet child, and Paula spoils him as much as she can afford. Paula is determined that Jack will never have to wear other people's cast-off clothing, because she thinks it is humiliating. When Paula sees an advertisement showing a father reading to a child, it occurs to her for the first time that this is something she could do with her own children. From then on, she reads "Winnie-the-Pooh" to Jack, and the two of them love the ritual.

Paula thinks back to times when Charlo spent time with the kids, but he was never very interested in them. Even while she thinks about her childhood crush on Mickey Dolenz of the band the Monkees, she contrasts his seemingly kind, chaste persona with Charlo's harshness and brutality. Even a year later, Charlo's smell lingers in the house, and Paula can not afford to replace all the things that smell like him.



Because Paula wants to be a good mother, she makes a rule for herself that she can not drink until after she has put Jack to bed. In the meantime, she locks up all her liquor in a shed, and hides the key from herself each day. This does not work out so well, as she finds herself putting Jack to bed early, and even changing the time on the clock, so that Leanne will not point out her ruse. Even this pattern is hard to stick to, and Paula can focus on nothing but the thought of getting drunk, even as she gets Jack ready for bed and reads him a story. As the demons of desire hound her, Paula worries that her daughters will recognize her problem. She would like to go to Alcoholics Anonymous, but she feels that she does not have the time, so there is no one for her to talk to about her problem. Finally, Jack goes to sleep and Paula pours the gin down her throat, and things are a little bit better. As Paula proceeds to get falling-down drunk, she is filled with relief and self-loathing.

Chapter 18 Analysis

When Paula is thinking about her son John Paul, she insists that she is not just being dramatic about his tattoo of the name of a football team, by saying that it is the only connection they share now. This is sadder than it sounds, because she also knows that John Paul does not even care about that football team anymore. This shows that John Paul still has the impetuous taste of a child, without considering what will be left on his body for the rest of his life. More significantly, he no longer cares about Paula, who bought him the tattoo.

Although John Paul seems to show that history repeats itself, since he seems in many ways to be a younger version of Charlo, Paula's younger children represent hope for the future. Leanne is fulfilling the academic hopes that Paula cherished as a child, before being told how stupid she was in high school. Although the entire family is characterized by drunkenness and violence, little Jack is allowed to remain a baby even though he goes to school, and the women of his family enjoy taking care of him and sheltering him from an uncaring world. Paula comments that Jack still wears a diaper to bed, and she likes the baby's silhouette that it gives him, because it emphasizes his innocence. Jack and Leanne show that it is possible to break the cycle of abuse and poverty. Unfortunately, Paula herself is an alcoholic, and her addiction makes it hard for her to raise the kids on her own.



Chapters 19-20

Chapters 19-20 Summary

Paula thinks back to the first time she brought Charlo home to have tea and meet her parents. He was the only boy she had ever brought home, and she was somewhat nervous about having him meet her father. Paula was surprised and touched to see that Charlo was making an effort to be polite to her family, calling them by their proper names, and making light conversation about television. However, she could see from her father's mannerisms that he had decided to hate Charlo even before meeting him. Seething, Paula helped her mother prepare the dinner to her father's exact specifications.

Paula noticed that her parents had changed in the last few years. Her mother had become a smaller, quieter shadow of herself, living life to keep house and obey her husband. Paula's father had become more of a tyrant and a bully, pushing his wife around and picking which television shows they would watch all evening. Paula noticed that one of her father's favorite comedy shows, "Catweezil," was not funny at all, but brutal and cruel. Looking back on her father's and Charlo's hatred for one another, Paula realizes that Charlo and her father ended up being a lot alike.

Paula attempts to keep a cool head and reveal only the relevant facts while she tells the story of how her husband murdered Mrs. Gwen Fleming, a fifty-four-year-old housewife. Gwen's husband, Kevin, worked at a bank. On the morning of 17 February, 1994, Gwen answered a knock at the door, to find two men in ski masks, one of them brandishing a gun. They forced their way inside, and her scream brought Kevin running, to see what the ruckus was. The men, Charlo and his accomplice, Richie Massey, explained their plan to their victims.

Kevin was to go to the bank early, and take Richie with him. After Kevin took a large sum of money out of the vault, he was to give it to Richie, who would call Charlo and tell him that everything was all right. Charlo was to stay behind with Gwen, guarding her with the shotgun. Although Kevin instantly agreed to give them the money, and begged them to let him take Gwen with him, they laughed and sent him on his way.

Richie did not notice that the car was approaching a road block, and so Kevin drove into it at full speed, knowing that there would be Guards patrolling the road block. Sure enough, the car was quickly surrounded by police, and Kevin cried out to them that someone was holding his wife captive. Paula knows that the Guards shot Charlo after he killed Mrs. Fleming, and the news report tells Paula that there is no evidence that Charlo raped Mrs. Fleming. Paula is overwhelmed by the horror of it.



Chapters 19-20 Analysis

Mr. Fleming is a foil for Charlo and Paula's father, so that their cruel carelessness is made all the more disturbing when contrasted with Kevin Fleming's love for his wife. The description of the short interaction between Mr. and Mrs. Fleming shows that Mr. Fleming had tender feelings toward his wife Gwen, and he tried to think rationally in order to protect her. In fact, this is exactly why Charlo and Richie thought that only one gun would be necessary, and why they knew that Kevin would be willing to work with them and give them the money. It is especially disturbing that Charlo was capable of recognizing this love, when he himself was cruel and abusive to his wife.

Some of Paula's dismay in the case of Mrs. Fleming's murder comes from the fact that she has been left out of the loop. Even though Paula kicked Charlo out of her house a year before the murder, she was still somewhat annoyed that Richie Massey, Charlo's accomplice, was a stranger to her, showing that she had no idea what was going on in Charlo's life. Paula is also horrified that there are no living witnesses to describe what went on between Charlo and Mrs. Fleming, so that the best the police can say is that there is "no evidence of sexual assault."



Chapters 21-22

Chapters 21-22 Summary

Still reminiscing about the past, Paula looks at old wedding photos and remembers that there were some happy moments on her wedding day. Paula admits that, although she and Charlo were in love, part of the reason she married Charlo was to spite her father, who hated him. They were engaged for a full year, and when they went to a jewelry shop to pick out an engagement ring, Paula lingered, knowing Charlo was embarrassed to be there. They daydreamed about the future and made plans to travel the world, but the most important thing was to get out of their parents' houses, no matter where. One evening, Charlo made Paula laugh by insisting on borrowing her panties and then eating a serving of chips out of them.

On Paula's wedding day, her father said nothing to her, although she knew that this would be a good chance to bury the hatchet. Instead, he avoided all contact with her, not willing to pretend that he was happy about her marrying Charlo. After the wedding, Charlo joked about skipping the reception altogether, but it was a lot of fun, and everyone stuffed themselves. Paula was relieved to finally be able to leave the O'Leary family behind and she was glad to finally be a Spencer. She saw the Spencers as strong, rowdy, and good protection, and they became more boisterous, taking over the party. Paula went to the honeymoon suite and waited for Charlo to come to her for their wedding night, but he was off partying. Instead, she got into bed in her wedding dress.

Back in the present, Paula takes a trip to Lambay Island, the home of Mr. Kevin Fleming. As it begins to rain, she walks from the bus station to the Fleming house, wanting to see it, although she does not want to see Kevin. In fact, she has avoided seeing him on television or in newspapers, because she would rather imagine how he looks. After standing outside his house, which is named "The Haven," for a while, Paula walks around the beautiful island community. She imagines that Kevin is doing quite well at recovering from his loss and that he is happy inside his home. She pictures a woman being in love with Kevin and how he might soon remarry and start a new life. Satisfied, she makes her way home, thinking that imagining his happiness is much better than actually seeing him and finding out how his life is.

Chapters 21-22 Analysis

The name of Mr. Fleming's house, "The Haven," is ironic, since it was there that Charlo broke in and murdered Mrs. Fleming. The fact that the house has a name, and is part of a lovely seaside community, are both signifiers that the Flemings had a lot of money and could pay a ransom, although it is also clear that Charlo and Ricky had done some research beforehand, since they knew that Mr. Fleming worked at the bank, and that he loved his wife. Paula does not seem to recognize this irony, but chooses to imagine that the house truly is a safe haven from the outside world. She enjoys looking in from the



rain, thinking about the warmth and happiness that she supposes to be inside, without realizing that Mr. Fleming is probably haunted by similar pain to her own. This is another example of ways in which Paula tries to rewrite history in her storytelling, to make it happier, so that at least she can know that somewhere, sometime, someone has been happy.



Chapters 23-25

Chapters 23-25 Summary

Paula ruefully admits that her wedding never did conclude with a bouquet toss, a good-bye to family and friends, or a romantic wedding night. Eventually, Charlo came in and passed out on the bed. Paula had looked forward to the feeling of superiority over the unmarried girls as she tossed her bouquet, but instead, she shoved the flowers upside-down in the trash. The couple went to Courtown for their honeymoon, which was Paula's idea, inspired by her family's one camping vacation. It was the off-season, and the area was deserted of tourists, so Charlo and Paula wandered around in the rain, enjoying the emptiness. They stayed at a bed and breakfast run by a kind old lady named Mrs. Doyle. Mrs. Doyle told Paula about how one of her granddaughters had gotten trapped in an old refrigerator abandoned in a field, and how the child had suffocated to death. Charlo did not understand why Paula cried at the story, and he said that Mrs. Doyle was probably just making it up.

The honeymoon was perfect and blissful. For the first time, Paula and Charlo had the time and the space to enjoy lying in bed together, without hurrying to avoid getting caught. They experimented sexually, and made love almost constantly. Partway through the honeymoon, Paula was aware of the exact moment when she conceived Nicola, knowing instantly that she was pregnant. After they returned to their flat, and a doctor had confirmed it, Paula told Charlo her secret, and he was overcome with pride in his own virility. It was a wonderful time. They did not mind being so poor, because they were so in love, and they knew that all of this was only temporary. Charlo put in the effort to come straight home from work every night, and instead of buying alcohol, saved his money for the future. He was working on the construction on the house where Paula and the children still live.

After a while, Charlo was not as excited about Paula's pregnancy. She got fat and awkward, as well as moody and grouchy. Charlo stopped coming home as often, but would often come home hours late, drunk. Paula was heartbroken when she realized that he was no longer willing to have sex with her, and she soon knew that he was going with other women.

One night, Charlo came home and was disappointed to learn that Paula had not prepared any supper. She angrily pointed out that she could never tell whether he would come home to eat, and refused to make him even a cup of tea. She was shocked when he hit her, throwing her across the room. Paula told herself that it was the last time it would ever happen, and she continued to think so on subsequent times. She desperately wished a doctor or nurse would finally ask her what had happened, and not believe that she walked into a door.

Paula once again focuses on the day that Charlo killed Gwen Fleming, and was himself killed by the Guards. Paula imagines his panicked flight, trying to make some sense of



it, and trying to salvage the goodness of the man she still loves. She thinks it is funny that Charlo bought the ski mask he wore, even though he stole everything else. Paula is horrified by the fact that Charlo struck Mrs. Fleming twice across the face before shooting her. Paula can not believe that Charlo would hit a woman that he was not married to.

Chapters 23-25 Analysis

Paula's shock that Charlo would hit a woman who was not his wife shows just how warped her view of love is. She treats the matter almost like a sexual infidelity, and finds it much more disturbing than if Charlo had raped Mrs. Fleming. Paula grew up watching her father abuse his wife and children, and she viewed it as a form of love. When their father tortured Carmel for wearing makeup or dressing too flashily, Paula thought that it showed that he loved and valued his daughter's purity. Charlo's abuse of Paula had become so central to her life that she could not separate love from cruelty, and even her sex life was an extension of Charlo's sadism and rape.

Mrs. Doyle's granddaughter, who died in the refrigerator, could be seen as a symbol of Paula's marriage, presented during the honeymoon, just when Paula herself was creating a new life. Charlo turned a deaf ear to the pain and tragedy of mothers and grandmothers, laughing skeptically at Mrs. Doyle's story. It was easy for Paula to believe, because she had lived with women who lived in pain, and knew that Mrs. Doyle would not make up mundane, tragic details, like how the event happened at Christmas, forever ruining the holiday for the entire family. This calls to mind the Christmas story of the Nativity, when Mary, a new bride, gave birth to a child that she already knew was doomed to die.

Charlo clearly saw pregnancy as a sexual accomplishment, and not as a miracle or a symbol of love and hope. This is obvious in his cruel, violent treatment of Paula when she was far along in her pregnancy. He was not worried about hurting the woman he loved, or the child she carried, and years later, he would punch her to the point of making her lose a baby. Paula's motivations were just beginning to split, between the desire to protect her children, and the inclination to submit to Charlo's abuse and claim that it was all her fault.



Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Paula begs the reader to "Ask me." She knows that often the evidence of Charlo's abuse was plastered all over her face, yet no one would ever ask what had happened, or who had hurt her. Ironically, her horrible bruises made her invisible to others, who would immediately look away when they saw her face. Charlo would always accompany her to the hospital, and he would never walk away for long enough for Paula to tell the doctors the truth about what had happened. No one would ever look close enough to recognize the obvious signs of extreme physical abuse, but would instead always conclude that she was such a drunk that she was always falling down, and that Charlo was a good man to put up with her. Paula sometimes saw other women with the same injuries and excuses that she had, and she felt sorry for them, since they were clearly so clumsy.

One of the first times Charlo gave Paula a black eye, he tested her by later asking her how she got it. Terrified, she answered that she had walked into a door. Soon, she learned that any behavior could earn her a beating, and Charlo was creative in carrying out his punishments. Paula stopped leaving the house, living only in a daze of fear and pain, with one day blending into the next. She was often tempted to kill herself, seeing death as a merciful escape, but she held on, wanting to protect her children from her monster of a husband.

Paula runs through an inventory of seventeen years of brutal beatings and cruelty. Charlo would hit her, threatened her with a knife in front of the children, and told her he would kill her if she ever left him. He kicked her, pinched her, broke her bones on purpose, and headbutted her. He burned her with cigarettes, scalded her, broke out her teeth, ripped out her hair, dragged her, and slammed her fingers in the cabinet. He deliberately came home smelling of other women, and then raped Paula while calling out other women's names. Paula can never forgive him for making her miscarry a baby girl that she would have named Sally. The only person who saw that something was wrong was Paula's sister Carmel.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Paula's list of grievances is appalling, but almost as disturbing is the willingness of so many people to tolerate them. Paula put up with her situation for seventeen years, considering suicide to be an easier escape than leaving Charlo. Although she truly wanted to protect her children from him, she was still willing to allow them to grow up in such a violent, abusive household, mired in poverty. She was completely helpless to protect her baby Sally from Charlo, but she sees this as entirely Charlo's fault, not recognizing that she chose to stay with a man whom she knew would hit her when she was pregnant. This is an interesting example of the power of denial, since Paula was



always quick to assume the blame when Charlo hurt her, insisting that she had provoked him in some way. It is as though Paula can handle taking all the guilt of her marriage onto herself, but she can not face the guilt of having put her children in danger. Paula's younger sister Denise, and many doctors and nurses also ignored Paula's situation, wanting to look away from something ugly.

As Paula continues to beg the reader, or anyone, to "Ask me," her repetitive words assume the quality of a Greek chorus, with mourners expressing their grief through repetitive questions and refrains. The refrain is Paula's daughter Leanne shouting at Charlo not to hurt her mommy, reminding Paula what rooted her to her situation, as she tried to stay between Charlo and Leanne. This style of storytelling is appropriate for a story about family members hurting one another in terrible and tragic ways, since this was a common theme in Greek epics.



Chapters 27-31

Chapters 27-31 Summary

Looking back, trying to extract the facts from her memories, Paula has to admit that the entire decade of the 1980's is just a blur to her. All she can remember is a list of dates, and specific sensations of terror. She remembers being trapped in her house with a man who fed on her pain, who brought home so little money that she had to always guard the kitchen from her children, lest they eat up all the food. On the good days, she was aware of taking care of her children while waiting for Charlo to start beating her again. On the bad days, she would just lose several days at a time, wandering through life in a fugue state.

Paula drank more and more often, and soon alcohol was her only refuge. She would try to black out from drink each night before Charlo got home from the bar, so that at least she would not be conscious for the beatings and torture. One day, she screamed at Charlo that she would leave him, and that she didn't need his money, because she would get a job of her own. Charlo laughed and once again threatened to kill her, and she believed him. He said that she would never get to keep the kids because she was just a pathetic drunk.

The next day, Charlo came home and tossed a huge amount of money on the table in front of Paula. Her face lit up as she saw what a good provider he could be with his robberies, and she thought about all the family necessities she could finally buy. A moment later, Charlo lit one bill, then, used it to light the pile, making a game of rubbing in just how much she needed his money. Carmel could tell that something was wrong, and since she grew up being abused by her and Paula's father, she begged Paula to leave Charlo and go somewhere, anywhere. Although Paula would angrily scream at Carmel to butt out and leave her alone, Carmel kept at it, showing Paula that she cared.

Paula knew that there was little hope in their home, and that their children could see that one day, they might grow up to be in her situation. She passed most of her days daydreaming about finally leaving, even going so far as to step out the front door time after time. She imagined getting a job in an office, and in the story of her life, she saw herself played by Sally Field. Paula fashioned classy school uniforms for her children, and imagined a big house like on "The Cosby Show."

One morning at breakfast, Paula noticed that Nicola seemed defeated and hurt and when Charlo walked into the kitchen, Paula could see the lust and hatred as he gazed at his daughter. Immediately she realized that Charlo had raped Nicola the night before and intended to destroy her life in the same way that he had destroyed Paula's. Suddenly, Paula felt like the Bionic Woman and grabbed the big, heavy frying pan, swinging it around to hit Charlo on the side of the head. She beat him senseless, and although Nicola urged her to kill him, Paula decided to kick him out of the house instead.



Paula's son John Paul walked in and wanted to know what the women were doing to his father. He angrily tried to stop Paula as she poured freezing cold water all over Charlo and then hounded him with frying pan blows to the front door. Finally, Paula got him out the front door and screamed at him to leave and never come back. Terrified, she went back inside, suddenly worried about how she would continue her life without him. Nonetheless, she assured her children that he would not be allowed back, saying, "Hasta la vista, baby."

Chapters 27-31 Analysis

Paula talks about losing any sense of the present for ten years of her abusive marriage. Her own mother seemed to have given up at living real life, and instead Paula's mother's life revolved around keeping house and watching the television shows selected by her husband. In a similar way, many of Paula's cultural references are of television shows and movies, showing both that she is not very educated and that it is easier for her to focus on the imaginary lives of fictional characters, than on her own hellish life. Her ideal life is a combination of a Sally Field movie and "The Cosby Show." When Paula finally takes power into her own hands to protect her children, she calls to mind the ferocious Sarah Connor from "The Terminator" movies, quoting "Terminator 2: Judgment Day." This is quite a contrast from her previous female role models, such as her own mother and the Virgin Mary. Both the Terminator robots and the Bionic Woman are examples of beings which seem to be human, but are not constrained by human weaknesses and Paula finally realized that she had allowed her human weaknesses destroy her family for too long. Her switch in role models can also be seen in her suspicion that the huge frying pan, a wedding gift from her mother-in-law, might have been a secret message all along.



Characters

Paula O'Leary Spencer

Paula is the main character, and the first-person narrator of the book. Paula is an Irish girl with many brothers and sisters, and she grew up watching her father exert tyrannical control over their household. Although she started out with high hopes for romance, education, and career, she was soon told that she was stupid, and her early puberty made her a target of constant sexual harassment at school. Paula already knew she wanted to be bad when she met Charlo and fell for him, and she married him to spite her father, even though Charlo had already started abusing her. Paula tells her own story, but she seems defined by her resignation to the unpleasant life she chose for herself. Paula managed to blame herself throughout years of unspeakable sadism and abuse, hiding her bruises from the world even as she desperately looked for escape in the form of anyone who would help her. Paula loves her four children, and the baby that she miscarried because of Charlo's beatings.

Even though Charlo's abuse destroyed Paula inside and out, Paula's desire to protect her children kept her going, and in the end, it was the only thing powerful enough to make her stand up to Charlo. Throwing Charlo out of her house was the major defining victory of Paula's adult life, but she did not know how to deal with it when he died. After everything, she still loves him, and she tries to help her family heal, even while she tries to recover from her painful marriage. Paula seems to be both weak and infinitely strong, capable of taking more abuse than many could and still live, and also finding the strength to fight off a man stronger, meaner, and more destructive than she is.

Charles Charlo Spencer

Charlo is Paula's husband, who abused her for seventeen years before she finally kicked him out. As a teenager, Charlo was a rough-edged juvenile delinquent, stealing and getting into brawls, and anyone could see that there was something dangerous about him. Initially, Paula was attracted to him because of his violent reputation, because she knew that finally people would stop treating her like trash, but he raped her even before they got engaged. Charlo was a successful carpenter when times were good, but when things got harder, he relied on crime to pay for alcohol and family necessities. As their marriage continued, Charlo's sadistic cruelty came to the surface, and he seemed to be addicted to hurting Paula in any way he could. Charlo saw his children as a testament to his powerful virility, and not something to be cherished and protected. In fact, he caused his wife to have a miscarriage, and raped his own daughter. Once Paula kicked him out, Charlo continued with his life of crime, showing no respect for the humanity of the woman he murdered. Soon Charlo reaped what he sowed, getting gunned down by the police in a stolen car he could not drive.



Carmel O'Leary

Carmel is Paula's oldest sister and she received more abuse than her siblings from their cruel father. It was Carmel, with her tough love, who saw that Paula was being abused and needed to escape.

Nicola Spencer

Nicola is Paula's oldest daughter and the reason that Paula realized that she had to force Charlo out of her life. Nicola seems to have enough strength to face adulthood and break the cycle of domestic abuse.

John Paul Spencer

John Paul is Paula's older son who ran away and lives a life of crime and drugs. He does not understand why his mother attacked Charlo one day and kicked him out. His only reminder of his mother's love is the tattoo she bought him.

Leanne Spencer

Like Nicola, Leanne seems to represent great hope for the future so that she will not end up like Paula. Paula's younger daughter is good in school and helps out at home.

Jack Spencer

Jack is the baby of Paula's family and his innocence has not been destroyed by Charlo's brutality. Paula reads to him, and delights in his gentle childishness, overjoyed that he will get to grow up without Charlo in his life.

Paula's Father

Paula grew up thinking that her father's tyrannical control over their household was normal and evidence of his love. She got married young to get away from him and she picked Charlo because she knew that her father hated him. She did not recognize at the time that Charlo and her father were a lot alike.

Richie Massey

Charlo's accomplice in the Fleming robbery was Richie Massey, who went in the car with Mr. Fleming.



Mrs. Gwen Fleming

Mrs. Gwen Fleming was beaten and murdered by Charlo, because Charlo was trying to rob a bank and it did not go well.

Mr. Kevin Fleming

Mr. Fleming worked at a bank, so Charlo and Richie told him to get them the money or they would kill his wife. When Mr. Fleming alerted the police, Charlo shot Mrs. Fleming.

Denise O'Leary

Denise is Paula's younger sister, who confirms her memories that they did have some happy times with their father.

Doctors and Nurses

Paula became familiar with many emergency room doctors and nurses, but none of them ever guessed that Charlo was beating her up.

Mrs. Doyle

Mrs. Doyle was the owner of the bed and breakfast in Courtown where Paula and Charlo spent their honeymoon.

Gerard the Guard

Gerard the Guard is the police officer who informs Paula that her husband is dead.



Objects/Places

O'Leary House

Paula lived for many years in the O'Leary house with her many siblings, until she could finally get married and leave her family behind.

Spencer House

The first time Paula visited the Spencer home, she urinated all over the bathroom floor and then cleaned it up, terrified that someone would catch her at it.

Courtown

As a child, Paula went on only one vacation with her family, to a campground in Courtown. Years later, she selected the location for her honeymoon as well.

The Refrigerator in the Field

Mrs. Doyle's granddaughter got trapped in an abandoned refrigerator in a field, suffocating to death. To Paula, this was not just a tragedy, but a strange example of luxurious waste, throwing away a refrigerator.

Saint Mary's Primary School

Although there was only one teacher for fifty-four little girls at Paula's primary school, Paula loved it and learned to enjoy writing.

The Tech

Paula's high school did not have a proper name, but was just called "The tech." At this school, all the teachers were terrible and Paula was always being sexually harassed.

The Frying Pan

Paula used a large, heavy frying pan to beat Charlo until he left the apartment. When she realized that it was a gift from his mother, Paula wondered if Charlo's mother intended it as a weapon.



The Haven

The Haven is the name of the house that Mr. and Mrs. Fleming lived in. It turned out to not be a haven at all, since Mrs. Fleming was murdered there.

Lombay Island

Lombay Island is a pleasant seaside community where Mr. and Mrs. Fleming lived. Paula likes to imagine that everything there is happy and safe.

The Gardai

The Gardai, or the Guards, are the police force of Ireland. They surrounded and killed Charlo after he murdered Mrs. Fleming.

Dublin, Ireland

Most of the story takes place at various locations within Dublin, the capitol of Ireland.



Themes

Domestic Violence

Paula's father introduced her to the ugliness of domestic violence when she was just a child. Paula observed the iron fist with which her father ruled his wife and his household, yet she saw his torture of her sister Carmel as an expression of fatherly love. Years later, despite Carmel's vows that their childhood home was cruel and hateful, Paula still insists, "He'd meant it for the best, being cruel to be kind" (Chapter 12, pg. 47.) Years later, Paula is able to assume the blame for psychotic amounts of abuse from Charlo, still insisting, "When he'd hit me he'd been keeping me in my place, putting me back in my box" (Chapter 24, pg. 157.) It seems that Paula, having observed domestic violence so much in her own home, believed that it was the normal pattern for marriage.

Desperate to escape her father's control, Paula foolishly chose a man just as brutal as her father, and failed to recognize early on that he would destroy her life, robbing her of her humanity as though she were an object to be kept in a box.

Although Charlo's sadistic abuse of Paula is shocking, it is surprising that no one except Carmel ever realized that Paula was a victim. The title of the book comes from Paula's typical explanation as to the origin of her many injuries, claiming that she fell down the stairs or walked into a door. Doctors and nurses seeing the same types of bizarre wounds over and over should have noticed what was going on, but domestic violence is such an ugly, forbidden topic that everyone always looked past Paula's bruises and cuts, attributing them to her alcoholism. Even after kicking Charlo out, Paula still deals with the emotional and physical scars left by Charlo, and she knows that she will never fully recover. Her back hurts constantly, but not as badly as the emotional pain of having lost an unborn daughter when Charlo beat her until she had a miscarriage. Despite these tragic remnants, Paula managed to struggle out of the cycle of domestic violence, and she has high hopes that her daughters will never submit to it, and that her son Jack will grow up into a good and gentle man.

Alcoholism

Early in her life, Paula was a social drinker, often getting drunk with her friends. The first time she and Charlo ever had sex, she was too drunk to resist, paving the way for many years of problems caused by, and soothed by alcohol. Paula can simultaneously admit how big of a problem her alcoholism is, and still fiercely cling to her addiction, feeling that she needs alcohol to deal with many of the problems caused, directly and indirectly, by alcohol. She practices double-talk, confessing, "My children have gone without good food because of my drinking...But I have it under control." (Chapter 18, pg. 88.)

The dangers, as well as the effectiveness of alcohol as an escape from reality, are illustrated in Paula's concession that, "You made things up when you were drinking and you believed them if you were drunk enough. They became absolutely true and real"



(Chapter 16, pg. 83.) For many years, Paula used alcohol as a temporary respite from the prison of her marriage, and once Charlo is gone, she uses alcohol to try to forget him. Her own self-destructive desires could be seen when she decided that her youngest son Jack had died because his drunk mother left him unattended. She used her grief for its healing power, feeling that finally she had gotten what she deserved, and when she was forced to realize that he was merely sleeping, she felt deflated and pathetic. Later, when she is trying to overcome her addiction, she forces herself to wait until Jack has gone to sleep each night before drinking, and the power of both her addiction and her motherly love can be seen in the intense battle to stick to her resolution.

Motherhood

"The Woman Who Walked Into Doors" is a novel about intense struggles between powerful forces, but Paula's love for her children is the only force that is strong enough to combat both alcoholism and domestic violence. Paula's children are the only thing that keep her rooted in reality, and through years of abuse, she managed to focus on taking care of them. She recalls, "I limped around the rooms, tucking the children up in their beds. I hung out the washing with a broken finger" (Chapter 27, pg. 205.) She was so intent on sacrificing herself for the sake of her family, that she did not notice that she was putting her children in danger by staying in such a violent situation. When Paula was finally forced to admit that Charlo was hurting their daughter Nicola, her protective instinct for her children overpowered her fear of Charlo, and Paula attacked him with a frying pan, demanding that he leave her life and her children once and for all. She compared Charlo's defeat to her own many injuries at his hands, and used those very memories to gain strength. She describes, "All the years, the stitches, all the cries, the baby I lost—I could feel them all in my arms going into the pan. They lifted it" (Chapter 28, pg. 213.) It is no coincidence that Paula called upon the baby she lost, because she realized that Charlo might destroy another of her children, the way he destroyed her unborn baby. Nicola almost seems like a more resilient version of that baby, since Charlo started beating Paula when she was pregnant with Nicola. Nicola is proof that Paula can start over and have hope for the future, and that her children will have happier lives than she has.

Style

Point of View

"The Woman Who Walked Into Doors" is told through the first-person viewpoint of Paula O'Leary Spencer, an Irish housewife trying to make sense of her memories of her husband Charlo. Paula starts out in the present, but she is soon lost in memory and most of the book is told in flashback form. Paula's point of view is greatly shaped by the domestic tyranny of her father and later, of her husband. Paula's interpretation of events she remembers is often disturbing, as she admits how destructive Charlo was, and still steps up to defend him. When she does not want to admit that she is an unreliable narrator, her older sister Carmel speaks up, laughing at Paula for inventing happy memories instead of looking at the truth. Paula also has trouble keeping the facts straight when alcohol is involved, which it always is. Paula's desperation and her shame for being in such a situation, can be seen in her remorse after she slapped her daughter Nicola and Paula admits, "I was sorry I was drunk, ashamed, angry; I usually made sure that no one noticed" (Chapter 1, pg. 2.) Paula desperately hoped that someone would notice her disaster of a life, but she had been taught that her victimhood was something to be ashamed of, so she hid her pain behind a shaky facade.

Paula's viewpoint at times becomes entirely focused on Charlo's abuse, yet in her description of it, she calls to mind her Catholic upbringing when she recites, "Daylight and darkness. Pain and the fear of it. Darkness and daylight, over and over; world without end." It sounds as though Paula had accepted her destructive relationship with Charlo as a substitute for religion and she mindlessly recites a modified liturgy to describe her experience. This also shows how she had come to view Charlo as having god-like power over her world and how she could see no possibility of escape. Now that she has escaped, Paula still has trouble believing that she was capable of it, but her life is so much better because of it and she has hope for her children's futures.

Setting

Paula grew up in Dublin, Ireland, in a poor, working-class family in the early 1960's. Paula and her sisters seemed set up for failure in a society that pounced on any evidence of womanhood as proof that they were "sluts." Paula recalls realizing in high school that, "I was a dirty slut in some way that I didn't understand and couldn't control; I made men and boys do things" (Chapter 9, pg. 35.) This, and other things like Paula's father's tyranny over their household, showed Paula that as a lower-class woman, she had little value except as a possession of her father. Paula's schools had very little money for teachers and supplies and what little education she received seemed calculated to push her into a life of illiterate drudgery and sexual humiliation. In Ireland, the Roman Catholic religion is ubiquitous to the point that Paula assumes that any character, regardless of moral fiber, is Catholic. For example, when insisting that there are certain events that stay with people their entire lives, she says, "Everybody



remembers their First Holy Communion, or things about it" (Chapter 16, pg. 82.) First Holy Communion is an important Catholic ritual done around age eight, so most children are old enough to remember it.

Paula became trapped in her house, and the 1980's passed without her being aware of them. Every location in her house became imbued with painful memories of Charlo's abuse, so that his persona lingers long after he is dead. Paula's primary escape from her house is her cleaning job, which allows her the experience of spending time in other people's houses and offices, even though she is denied the chance to use them for herself.

Language and Meaning

In general, Paula has the vocabulary of a woman who never got much education and she uses everyday, common words with a lot of Irish slang mixed in. She swears freely, reflecting her low-class origins. Paula often makes references to television and movies, showing that these media, rather than literature, have been the foundational ideas for Paula's experience. Sometimes, Paula emphasizes the difference between the connotation of a slang word and that of a more technical term meaning the same thing. For example, she explains that "wanking" and masturbating are practically the same thing, but that "wanking" implies raunchiness and shame. This sets the scene for her careful explanations of Charlo's behavior, when she can call him a monster with one breath and say with the next that it was all her fault.

Paula becomes most eloquent when describing her abuse at Charlo's hands, summoning up metaphor, poetry, and alliteration to show what an artist Charlo was in the medium of pain. The repetition of the experience is felt in sequences like, "Bruised, burnt and broken. Bewitched, bothered and bewildered." (Chapter 26, pg. 176.) Paula can speak eloquently about Charlo's beatings because they have been the defining experience of her life, making all other experiences seem ordinary and forgettable. As she continues to repeat herself, saying things like, "He killed parts of me. He killed most of me. He killed all of me," her voice takes on the plaintive tone of a Greek chorus or a Catholic liturgy.

Structure

"The Woman Who Walked Into Doors" is a painful confession, and so Paula, the narrator, saves the most painful admissions till the end. The events are told completely out of chronological order, beginning with Charlo's death, and jumping around Paula's life as she tries to see how she got to where she is now. Paula starts with relatively tame memories, with brief interludes where she remembers visceral moments that she is not yet ready to face. Paula often remembers the past more clearly than she can remember her present, saying, "I remember every moment and detail. I remember it better than this morning" (Chapter 19, pg. 119.) She admits to the reader that she is incapable of telling her story from start to finish, because she has such huge gaps in her



memory, blocked out because of such intense pain. She says, "It's all a mess—there's no order or sequence. I have dates, a beginning and an end, but the years in between won't fall into place" (Chapter 27, pg. 203.)

Chapter 18 shows Paula's life one year later, when enough time has passed that she is able to face some of her more painful memories. She describes her everyday life first, showing both her progress at making it on her own, and her debilitating addiction to alcohol. Paula must first try to understand the events that led Charlo to murder a woman, and she visits the site of the murder, wondering what connection it has to her. Finally, having seen the destruction that Charlo wrought on another family, Paula is able to admit that Charlo used to beat her constantly and brutally, so that she seemed to miss an entire decade of their marriage. Although the reader already knows that Paula eventually kicked Charlo out, the action builds dramatically to the climactic scene when Paula finally attacked Charlo and forced him out of her house. The book ends with Paula feeling good about finally having done something right.



Quotes

"I picked myself up. I washed the blood off my face. I put on the kettle" (Chapter 27, pg. 205.)

"I'm not...Rewriting history. I'm doing the opposite. I want to know the truth, not make it up" (Chapter 13, pg. 57.)

"Wooden floors are in; people don't seem to like carpets any more. Bare floors; pretending they're poor" (Chapter 18, pg. 94.)

"I hate it. I hate myself. I hate the dirt and the emptiness and the stuffing coming out of the furniture, and nothing in the fridge" (Chapter 18, pg. 103.)

"Mona's seen me drunk and covered in my own vomit and she still sits beside me" (Chapter 18, pg. 105.)

"He made rules now just to make us obey them, just to catch us out" (Chapter 19, pg. 120.)

"I'll put the photographs away now so I don't start going through the rows, counting the dead" (Chapter 21, pg. 129.)

"It happened. Looks and age had nothing to do with it. Men raped women" (Chapter 24, pg. 159.)

"When he wasn't hitting me he was reminding me that he could. Like the cat playing with the bird, letting it live a bit longer before he killed it" (Chapter 26, pg. 181-182.)

"And his love becomes a cruel thing, like a smile on a Nazi's face" (Chapter 26, pg. 192.)

"He had just pulled my arm out of its socket, less than an hour before, and I was listening to him; I was actually admiring him, proud of him" (Chapter 26, pg. 198.)



Topics for Discussion

What attracted Paula to Charlo in the first place? Why was she willing to stay with him for so long?

What are some examples in the story of a continuing cycle of abuse? What are some examples of people breaking that cycle?

How did Paula's Catholic upbringing affect her life choices? How might they have been different if she had not been Catholic, or if she had not been Irish?

Paula briefly mentions her dead sister Wendy several times, as well as the baby that Paula lost, Sally. What do these lost girls represent? Who are some other lost girls in the book?

Why did John Paul not sympathize with Paula? In what ways is he like his father? Do you think Paula and John Paul will ever be reconciled?

Paula deals each day with poverty, abuse, and alcoholism. Which of these forces is most destructive in her life? How do they overlap?

What do Paula's old boyfriends reveal about her? How were they different from Charlo?

Paula was terrified to leave Charlo because she felt helpless to take care of herself and her family without him. What could she have done to free herself, other than beating him and forcing him out of the house?

In what ways was Paula to blame for her children's suffering? How did she try to cope and help them grow up?

What are some examples of pop culture references in "The Woman Who Walked Into Doors"? What do these references suggest?