

# **Waiting to Exhale Study Guide**

**Waiting to Exhale by Terry Mcmillan**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Waiting to Exhale Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Not Dick Clark.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Suddenly Single.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Forget What I Just Said.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Unanswered Prayers.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Fire.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Fat.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Interstate Lust.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Discovery.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Venus in Virgo.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Happy Hour.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Freedom of Expression.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Steam.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Control.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">It Ain't About Nothin'.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">BWOTM.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Why Are You Here?.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Rebounding.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Killing Time.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">New Territory.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Closer to the Bone.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Drunk.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Monsoon.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>



[To Heaven and Back..... 37](#)

[Still Waves in It..... 38](#)

[Unreasonable Requests..... 39](#)

[Friendship..... 40](#)

[The Weight of All Things..... 41](#)

[Characters..... 42](#)

[Objects/Places..... 46](#)

[Social Sensitivity..... 48](#)

[Techniques..... 49](#)

[Themes..... 51](#)

[Style..... 55](#)

[Quotes..... 56](#)

[Adaptations..... 60](#)

[Key Questions..... 61](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 63](#)

[Literary Precedents..... 64](#)

[Related Titles..... 65](#)

[Copyright Information..... 66](#)



## Plot Summary

*Waiting to Exhale* is the story of four black women - Savannah Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Robin Stokes, and Gloria Matthews - residing in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1991. The women, who are all in their 30's, support each other through personal and professional challenges and successes. The women are savvy enough to manage every element of their lives, except finding fulfillment in love. The book's title stems from their collective anticipation of exhaling only when they have achieved satisfying relationships with a man.

The women think that they are doing everything possible to enact the change they seek in their lives, but stereotypes and bad habits seem to undermine their efforts. At the beginning of the novel, Savannah Jackson moves from Denver to Phoenix, because her friend, Bernadine lives there. Savannah has just landed a new job in Public Relations at a television station and has taken a pay cut just to leave the doldrums of living in Denver. Savannah's mother, whom Savannah substantially helps financially, does not understand why Savannah cannot find a man or a job that satisfy her.

Bernadine Harris has been married to her husband for twelve years, when he informs her that he wants a divorce so that he can marry his bookkeeper, who is a white girl. Bernadine is doubly wounded because of the sacrifices she has made to build her husband's business, and he has the audacity leave her for a white woman. The divorce process is more revealing than Bernadine could have ever imagined but she perseveres and successfully restructures her life.

Robin Stokes has a professional position is an insurance company but feels inadequate, because her intermittent boyfriend will not commit to marriage, and her father is dying from Alzheimer's, and she cannot afford better care for him and her mother. Robin's attempts to date other men are unsatisfactory, and she returns to her original lover. The relationship fails but Robin gains new hope for her future with an unexpected development.

Gloria Matthews owns a beauty shop catering to black women and is on the board of a civic organization that promotes black women in business and supports the causes of Black families in Phoenix. Gloria has a teenaged son from an unwanted pregnancy in college and tries to instill appropriate values in him so that he will not fall into the stereotype of so many black men, who abuse and abandon their wives and families. Gloria has buried her disappointment of years of unrequited love in food. Her weight problem becomes a serious health issue, which fortunately can be managed with a new outlook and love from a new neighbor.

At the end of the novel, each woman reaches a place of internal confidence in herself as a woman and as a friend to the other three, regardless of their individual circumstances and relationships with men.



# Not Dick Clark

## Not Dick Clark Summary

As the novel begins, Savannah Jackson is dressing to attend a New Year's Eve party at the invitation of a man named Lionel to whom she has only spoken on the phone.

Savannah's brother-in-law used to know Lionel in college and suggested that Savannah call him, since both he and Savannah live in Denver. Savannah is moving to Phoenix in February but she connects with Lionel so that she will not be alone on New Year's Eve.

Savannah's mother and sister, Sheila, worry about Savannah still being unmarried at the age of 36 and are concerned that she is moving again, after being in Denver for only three years. Savannah is tired of the cold weather, weary of a stagnant job, and has not met any man with, whom she would like to spend time. Savannah will be taking a \$12,000 pay cut to take the Public Relations job at a television studio in Phoenix but the cost of living is lower there, plus her best friend Bernadine lives in Phoenix and it will be good to be close to her. Savannah is the oldest of four children and substantially supports her mother financially each month.

Savannah had talked to Lionel on the phone but they have never met so she is apprehensive about what the evening will hold. As Savannah looks at her reflection in the mirror, she is pleased overall but wishes she had bigger breasts and less rear end. Savannah scrutinizes her face for signs of smoking and although she still looks good, she vows to stop smoking in the new year before the ravages of the nasty habit and age begin to take their toll. As Savannah finishes dressing, she hopes that the New Year will bring a man she can love, and who will love her completely in return. All the men she has known to this point have been weak, manipulative, and selfish. Savannah longs for a real man in her life.

When Savannah arrives at the hotel where the dance is being held she is surprised to see that there is a cover charge but she pays and enters the ballroom hoping to find Lionel. Savannah wonders aimlessly throughout the crowd for quite awhile, until she sees a man of Lionel's description walking toward her. Savannah's first impression is one of being pleasantly surprised. Not many blind dates turn out being as handsome as Lionel is. Savannah is impressed by how intelligent and articulate Lionel is and feels comfortable as they dance. When Savannah and Lionel return to their table, a woman named Denise petulantly orders Lionel to dance with her. Savannah leaves them on the dance floor, thinking that she can probably get home in time to watch the ball drop in Times Square on Dick Clark's TV show.

## Not Dick Clark Analysis

The author uses very descriptive language in the novel to help fill in Savannah's moods and thoughts. For example, when Savannah thinks about the pressure that her family



places on her to get married, Savannah thinks, "I'm also willing to spend the rest of my life alone if I have to, until I find someone that makes me feel like I was born with a tiara on my head." (Pg. 11) Obviously the author could have said, "...makes me feel like a queen" but her description of Savannah's self-esteem is much more interesting the way it is crafted.

The author also uses the literary device of foreshadowing in this chapter with the dismal turn of events with Lionel at the New Year's Eve dance. Savannah gets a small run in her pantyhose but it is indistinguishable at first. As the evening progresses and it is clear that Lionel has asked more than one woman to the dance, the run in Savannah's stocking has crept all the way to the heel of her foot, and she knows it is time to leave. The run in the pantyhose foreshadows not only this night with Lionel but also another ill-fated encounter to come soon.



# Suddenly Single

## Suddenly Single Summary

It is Sunday morning at the home of Bernadine and John Harris in Phoenix and John has just nonchalantly informed Bernadine that he is leaving her for his bookkeeper, a white girl named Kathleen. Bernadine is rendered speechless and cannot move while John's words sink in. The sensations she has are similar to the time she almost drowned years ago while swimming with a friend. Being torn between wanting to kick John out of the house and begging him to stay, Bernadine grapples with the fact that John is leaving her for a white woman. This behavior fits perfectly with John's actions of the past several years in his attempts to achieve the life enjoyed by successful white men like Donald Trump. Bernadine had been satisfied with less but John would not settle for anything less than the best in their home, cars, and private schools for their children, John Jr. and Onika.

The achievement of John's goals forced Bernadine to sideline her own wish to open a catering business, because John never felt that the time was right to take the risk. Consequently, Bernadine took a job as a controller for a real estate management company, which denied her creative talents and plunged her into even more stress of working full-time and taking care of the kids and the house, while John worked most of the time.

Suddenly Bernadine is jolted back to reality by John's announcement that he will return in a week to pick up his personal items. Bernadine is outraged by John's nonchalance at the destruction of their life but is powerless to stop the change. Bernadine locks herself in her bedroom and examines her face and naked body in a mirror and cursing her new single status, takes two Xanax tablets to calm her nerves. With no other outlet for her rage, Bernadine kicks the mirror on the door and then drives to the Circle K Store to get some cigarettes. The Xanax begins its work and Bernadine does not remember leaving her two small children asleep in their beds and has a difficult time remembering how to get back home.

## Suddenly Single Analysis

The author uses the literary device of a metaphor in describing Bernadine's perception of John's management of the break-up of the marriage, just as he manages his software company. Bernadine thinks, "And like everything else he did, you could tell that he'd been creating the software for this program for some time. But he'd computed wrong. You wanted to catch him off guard, remind him that you also knew how to exit DOS, how to search and replace, how to merge, but when you thought about it, you realized you didn't have to prove anything to him anymore, so instead you simply moved your cursor."(Pg. 33-34)



The author also uses a metaphor to portray the shattering of Bernadine's life, as she looks at her reflection in the broken mirror. "A spider web spread across the silver surface and made her body look as though it had cracked into hundreds of broken pieces."





# Forget What I Just Said

## Forget What I Just Said Summary

Robin Stokes has been involved with a man named Russell for two years, and he refuses to commit to marriage. Robin is thirty-five years old and wants to be married and have children so she tolerates Russell's indifference, because she feels he is her last chance to achieve her dreams. Robin had met Russell when another woman had left him, and Robin gave Russell a place to live and helped him financially with the hopes that he would love her and want to stay with her forever. Before long, a strange woman begins to call Robin's apartment, and she receives an anonymous letter detailing Russell's financial and personal instability. When the tires on Robin's car are slit one day, Robin kicks Russell out of her home but is tormented by thoughts of taking him back.

A month after Russell leaves, Robin begins to date a man named Michael, who works in the same insurance company she does. Robin is apprehensive about Michael, because he is not handsome like the men she had always dated in the past. However, he seems genuinely interested in Robin's welfare, which is different from the shallow men she has known. On their first evening date, Robin invites Michael to dinner at her apartment, and they end up having sex. Michael's overweight body repulses Robin. However, she decides to see him again, because he seems sincere in getting to know her as a real person, not just a woman to be used to satisfy his own desires.

## Forget What I Just Said Analysis

The book is written from differing points of view. This chapter and all those about Robin and Savannah are written in the first person point of view. This means that the author allows the reader to know what Robin and Savannah are thinking and feeling, as they tell their stories. The chapters about Bernadine and Gloria are written from the third person point of view but the author also provides detailed information about the characters so that the reader understands Bernadine and Gloria's thoughts and emotions.



# Unanswered Prayers

## Unanswered Prayers Summary

Gloria Mathews stands naked outside her bedroom door and yells at her fifteen-year-old son Tarik to turn down his stereo and call Philip a stylist at her hair salon, the Oasis, to let Philip know that Gloria is running late. Gloria swallows a blood pressure pill, dons a robe, and goes downstairs to make the call herself. Philip updates Gloria on the morning's appointments, and Gloria asks about Desiree, who is late once again. Gloria would like to fire Desiree for her sullen and nonchalant attitude but it is hard to find anyone in Phoenix, who can do weaves on black hair. Desiree is the best at this skill.

After Gloria ends her phone call, she talks to Tarik about his slipping grades and the need for him to begin to consider some career options. Tarik's long absent father, David, is coming into town tonight to spend some time with Tarik, who accuses his mother of wanting to sleep with the man, just as she did the last time he visited. Tarik does not want to see his father, who visits only every few years with not much communication between visits. Tarik is also mad, because Gloria sleeps with David, when he visits. Tarik leaves to go to the video arcade, and Gloria proceeds with her shower and thinks about the efforts she has made to insure that Tarik will grow up to be a responsible, nonviolent man.

Gloria got pregnant when she was a senior in college and flattered by David's attentions during a frat party when she was drunk. Gloria chose not to abort the child and David's parents made him agree to support the baby but David has focused on his own life all these years, not Tarik's. Gloria's life changed dramatically when both her parents died suddenly, her mother suffered a heart attack during a church picnic, and her father was killed in a car accident not long after that. With the money from the sale of her parents' home in California, Gloria moved to Phoenix not knowing anyone but thinking that the climate would be good for Tarik's allergies. Gloria buried herself in her son, her work, and food and now speculates on her future when Tarik leaves for college. Gloria's hair salon, Oasis, provides Gloria with some socializing. She loves how comfortable her shop is and has come to consider her patrons as friends.

That night when David arrives, he is not pleased that Tarik is not home and does not want to see him. David defers Gloria's invitation to stay for dinner and to spend the night and tells Gloria that he had been bisexual for many years but is now a homosexual. David leaves soon after his revelation, and Gloria sits down to think about her life.

## Unanswered Prayers Analysis

This chapter has two important literary devices, theme and symbolism. The author writes about David's absent parenting to highlight the major issue of young black men fathering babies and disappearing. At first, David helps to financially support Tarik and

visits relatively often but eventually the interest drops off when his own life takes precedence. Unfortunately, this occurs at the same time that Tarik is able to notice his father's lack of interest. Gloria knows that this is inevitable, because the pattern is a common one in the lives of black children and tries to overcompensate for David's indifference.

The author uses symbolism in the name of Gloria's hair salon, Oasis. Not only is it appropriate for a business located in a desert, but also serves as a haven and meeting place for Gloria's patrons, who find emotional support and friendship among each other.



# Fire

## Fire Summary

After Bernadine returns home from the Circle K, she dresses herself and the kids, and they head to Sun City where Bernadine's mother, Geneva, lives. Bernadine leaves John Jr. and Onika with Geneva claiming that she and John are going on a romantic trip to Sedona for a few days. Geneva knows that Bernadine and John's marriage has been unstable for some time and is mildly suspicious of Geneva's request but agrees to keep the children.

On the way home, Bernadine stops again at the Circle K to buy more cigarettes. Once she is home, Bernadette sits in the car for several minutes, because she does not want to enter an empty house but eventually she goes in, takes another Xanax, and looks around at the precise organization of John's things in the bedroom. As Bernadine stands in the huge closet and examines John's expensive clothing, she begins to grab armloads of custom shirts and suits and dumps them into John's BMW which she had backed out of the garage. Bernadine continues this routine, until every article of John's clothing and personal effects is emptied from the bedroom. After her last trip from the bedroom, Bernadine drenches the clothing and the car in lighter fluid, throws a match inside the car, and walks back into the house to take a nap. Awakened by a fireman at her door, Bernadine listens to the man's warnings about burning trash in a residential area and promises him that this will never happen again.

The next morning Bernadine calls her office claiming a family emergency that will keep her away from work for the week. Bernadine also leaves voice messages for Robin and Gloria telling them that John has left her and then proceeds with a week of self-indulgence, not eating or bathing as she wallows in self-pity. At the end of the week, Bernadine calls AAA to tow the burned BMW, cleans the house, and places an ad in the paper announcing a garage sale where every item will be available for only a dollar. Gloria then drives to Sun City to pick up John Jr. and Onika. The garage sale begins early the next morning and by noon all John's possessions have been eliminated from the house for only one dollar each, including power tools, skis, and an antique car.

## Fire Analysis

The author uses the literary device of irony when describing Bernadine's satisfaction after the garage sale. "She was standing on a puddle of old oil, in the space where the Ford used to be. Now the kids would have some room to play. As she wiped her feet on the doormat, she said out loud, 'Since you want to start a new life, motherfucker, see what starting from scratch feels like.'" (Pg. 95) John had wiped Bernadine out of his life with little conscience after treating her like a doormat for so many years and now, ironically, Bernadine wipes her feet on the doormat after she has eliminated him from hers.

# Fat

## Fat Summary

The next day Gloria tells Tarik about David's visit and Tarik apologizes for not coming home to see his father. Tarik tells Gloria that she had some phone calls including Robin and Philip, who has the flu and will not be in to work for a few days. Gloria discovers that Tarik had not been with the friend he told her last night but instead had spent time with a girl. Gloria probes a little more and Tarik eventually reveals that he has been having sex for almost a year. Gloria's shock is quickly replaced by motherly concern, and she instructs Tarik in the precautions he needs for safe sex. After Tarik leaves to be with his friends, Gloria thinks about her hopes that Tarik will behave responsibly and not jeopardize his future by getting a girl pregnant. As she washes the dishes, Gloria notices the For Sale sign at the house across the street, and her thoughts turn to her own dismal love life and wonders if she will ever fall in love.

## Fat Analysis

The author uses the literary device of foreshadowing in this chapter. The phone call from Philip about his flu symptoms will soon reveal themselves to be something much more serious. The For Sale sign at the house across the street is also significant because of the new neighbor, who will inhabit the house, as well as Gloria's heart.



# Interstate Lust

## Interstate Lust Summary

Savannah is two days away from moving to Phoenix. The girl who was going to ride with her has backed out, leaving Savannah to face the thousand-mile drive on her own. Savannah receives a phone call from Lionel, inviting her to dinner before she leaves. Lionel offers to help Savannah with the drive. Lionel claims to be self-employed with a versatile schedule. He has never visited Phoenix, so Savannah accepts his offer to drive with her.

On the morning of their departure, Savannah picks up Lionel at his house, which Savannah notes as much smaller and sparsely furnished than she had been led to believe. Savannah also sees that Lionel has packed several suitcases, which they stuff into Savannah's already full car. After only a couple of hours into the trip, Savannah is bored with Lionel and his life story of failed business attempts. Lionel tells her that he is to meet a prospective business partner in Phoenix, and Savannah now realizes that Lionel has used her for transportation to get to Arizona, because he does not have the money to travel on his own.

When Savannah and Lionel reach Gallup, New Mexico, Savannah pays for two hotel rooms. Lionel knocks on Savannah's door soon after, suggesting that he stay the night in her room, and Savannah relents. Savannah and Lionel end up having sex and the next morning Savannah sincerely regrets her behavior when Lionel asks for room service. Savannah proceeds to the coffee shop and soon she and Lionel are on the road again. Lionel asks Savannah to stop in Sedona for a little side trip and is annoyed when Savannah declines, intent on reaching Phoenix as soon as possible. When they reach Phoenix, Savannah drives to a travel agency to purchase an airline ticket for Lionel's return to Denver, but Lionel asks Savannah if she could just give him the cash she would have expended on a ticket. Lionel asks Savannah to introduce him to some of her friends, who might be able to help him get back on his feet, but Savannah just gives Lionel the money, deposits him at a cheap hotel, and drives into Phoenix and her new life.

## Interstate Lust Analysis

The author uses many references to the current books, movies, cars, and people popular during the 1990's throughout the book. In this chapter alone, she mentions Donald Trump's book, *The Art of the Deal*; Savannah's car, a Toyota Celica; Nelson Mandela's recent release from prison; musician Kenny G; and the movies *Men Don't Leave*, *Steel Magnolias*, and *The War of the Roses*. By naming these popular people and events, the author fixes the time period firmly in the reader's mind and adds dimension to the characters' experiences.



# Discovery

## Discovery Summary

During Bernadine's first meeting with her divorce attorney, she discovers that John has been devious in his financial matters that will impact the scope of the divorce settlement. The attorney tells Bernadine that John had sold his partnership in the software company for only three thousand dollars and is now a regular salaried employee making eighty thousand dollars as opposed to the four hundred thousand he had earned in previous years. Bernadine's situation drops even more drastically when she goes to the bank and learns that John has closed all of their joint checking accounts with the exception of one with a balance of a little over three thousand dollars. Bernadine opens a new account using the funds from this account and heads to John's office.

Arriving at John's software company, Bernadine rushes past the secretary and bursts in on John and Kathleen in John's office. Bernadine verbally attacks John over his unethical behavior of closing the checking accounts and John urges her not to make a scene. This request pushes the already distraught Bernadine to the point of slapping Kathleen, who sits watching this display between husband and wife. John urges Bernadine to accept his offer to settle out of court with a check for three hundred thousand dollars, but Bernadine is no longer willing to take whatever John determines is good for her and storms out of the office.

On her way home, Bernadine stops in at the Oasis and has a makeover with a dramatically short haircut and new makeup. When Bernadine returns to her car, her American Express checkbook falls out of her purse so she immediately writes a check for sixteen thousand dollars, half of the amount which had been in the joint checking accounts and deposits the money in her new bank account.

Later that evening, Bernadine explains the upcoming divorce to John Jr. and Onika, who are not as upset as Bernadine had anticipated they would be. After that task is over, Bernadine drives to her mother's home to tell her about the divorce and Geneva is righteously angry for her daughter's sake. Geneva admits that she has never liked John's overbearing demeanor and urges Bernadine to get everything she can in the divorce settlement. When Bernadine returns home, she realizes that Savannah has arrived and the two old friends sit on the patio and talk until dawn.

## Discovery Analysis

The title of this chapter, Discovery, is symbolic for several reasons. First, Bernadine discovers John's secretive behavior regarding financial matters, which not only affects Bernadine's financial security, but also reveals the type of person John has become with his cunning activities. There is a less obvious element of discovery occurring with



Bernadine's emotional strength surfacing in the midst of her anger and hurt. The author symbolizes Bernadine's new persona through the dramatically different haircut and new makeup with which the world will now view her and through which Bernadine will present herself.

The author also uses references to breathing and exhaling throughout the book to support the novel's title. For example, in this chapter, she writes, "'What are you doing sitting out here in the dark?' 'Thinking,' Savannah said, and sat back down. 'Just thinking.' Bernadine pulled a lounge chair next to hers and nestled into it. They both lit cigarettes and smoked in silence. Finally, Savannah exhaled. 'Are you scared?' And Bernadine said, 'Yes.'"(Pgs. 140-141)





# Venus in Virgo

## Venus in Virgo Summary

Robin comes to the realization that Michael is a nice, considerate man, but he cannot satisfy her sexually and that is a critical component for Robin's relationships. Robin searches for a way to end the relationship but does not want to hurt Michael's feelings, because he is such a sensitive person. To complicate matters, Michael has loaned Robin money for taxes and personal expenditures, and she does not want him to think that she had ulterior motives for their friendship. Robin mulls over all the issues including Michael's astrological sign and concludes that Michael's planets do not align with hers and that is a satisfactory reason to stop seeing him.

Robin decides one morning to tell Michael that she does not want to see him anymore and wakes him with the intention of having this conversation. Michael is surprised and admits his love for Robin, who tells him that she wants some time apart from him to sort out her feelings. Michael reluctantly agrees leaving Robin with the entire day to spend by herself. After completing her housework, Robin drives to Tucson to visit her parents for the day. Robin's mother is always pleased to see Robin, because Robin's father has Alzheimer's disease and it is hard to watch his capacities diminish. Robin vows to find a way to help her parents, because they cannot afford specialized care for her father.

When Robin returns home, she has a phone message from Bernadine telling her that Savannah has found an apartment close to Robin's and invites Robin out for drinks on Wednesday so that she can meet Savannah. Robin calls Bernadine's house and when Savannah answers, she and Robin speak for a little while. The two promise to meet so that Robin can help acclimate Savannah to the Phoenix area.

## Venus in Virgo Analysis

Symbolically, Robin uses astrology as signs to keep or abandon a man depending on how she wants to view the situation. For example, Michael is kind and generous yet Robin does not want to continue a relationship, because the astrological forecast is not favorable. Ironically, Russell is unfaithful and insensitive to her needs, but Robin will justify this negative behavior, because Russell's birth sign is compatible with her own.

Robin's only positive male influence in her life, her father, is diminishing due to Alzheimer's disease, which increases her need to find another strong man to fill the void in her life.



# Happy Hour

## Happy Hour Summary

Robin, Bernadine, Savannah, and Gloria agree to meet for Happy Hour at a bar called Pendleton's to help introduce Savannah to Phoenix nightlife. Since Savannah's new apartment is near Robin's, Robin offers to pick up Savannah, and they arrive at the bar before Bernadine or Gloria do. The gathering is hosted by a black businessperson's organization with the objective of networking for other black professionals in the city. Robin and Savannah are more interested in personal connections than business contacts and are less than enthused by the potential men.

While Robin and Savannah wait for Bernadine and Gloria to arrive, Robin fills Savannah in on her life story and her sense of urgency to marry and have children. Robin shares with Savannah the fact that she is seeing Russell again and asks Savannah not to tell the others, who do not understand her attraction to him. Robin has heard rumors that Russell has been seeing another woman, who is pregnant with his child. Russell denies the story each time Robin broaches the subject. Despite Savannah's objections to Russell, Robin is convinced that she wants Russell back in her life and is determined to make that happen.

Finally, Bernadine and Gloria arrive and join Robin and Savannah. Before long, Bernadine sees a man she knows at the bar and approaches him. Bernadine returns to the table and introduces the man, Herbert Webster, to her friends. Then, Bernadine and Herbert head to the dance floor. Bernadine's friends do not approve of the fact that Bernadine may be interested in Herbert, who is a married man, but there is nothing they can say to Bernadine.

Gloria tells Savannah about an organization called Black Women on the Move in which Savannah may be interested. The group's purpose is to help black women throughout different phases of their lives and it is a valuable networking tool. Savannah shows interest and Gloria, who is on the group's advisory board, promises to have Savannah registered as a new member.

Suddenly Robin sees Michael enter the room with a woman on his arm, and Robin is instantly upset. Even though Robin had sent Michael away, she is jealous that he has found another woman so soon after breaking up with Robin. Savannah and Robin dance with very ordinary-looking men, and Gloria remains at the table thinking about going home to watch TV. This has not been a promising evening for Robin, Savannah and Gloria, who leave Pendleton's, while Bernadine continues to dance with Herbert.

When Robin arrives home, she immediately calls Michael and leaves a voice message chastising him for his flaunting another woman at the bar tonight. Robin then dials Russell's number, and a woman's voice on the other end of the line confirms for Robin that Russell has been deceiving her about his "roommate."



Gloria is happy to crawl into bed with some popcorn and watch TV when she arrives home. Gloria would like to have love in her life but is not willing to endure the mistreatment of men like John and Russell, who emotionally abuse her friends. Gloria is happy when she hears Tarik come home for the night and falls asleep.

By the time Bernadine leaves the bar and drives home, she is interested in pursuing a physical relationship with Herbert even though he is married. The fact that Herbert is married makes Bernadine's choice even easier, because she will not have to worry about what to do with him when she is tired of his attentions.

## Happy Hour Analysis

The author uses the literary device of irony in the chapter title and setting. Meeting at Pendleton's for Happy Hour is the first time all four women have met since Savannah's arrival in Phoenix. The bar's designated Happy Hour is anything but pleasant for all the women with maybe the exception of Bernadine, who has connected with Herbert. The anticipation of meeting interesting men fades dramatically as the evening progresses and the women share their own troubles and worries with each other. The author is still creating the characters as women, who need a man to be "happy" and this night is woefully disappointing for three of them.



# Freedom of Expression

## Freedom of Expression Summary

Gloria is shocked to find that Tarik has been expelled from school for being in a gang. Tarik contends that he and his friends had started wearing white handkerchiefs in their back pockets but that they do not do violent or negative activities like the Crips and the Bloods gangs. Tarik's group simply dresses alike and eats lunch together and some other students reported them as gang members to the school principal. Tarik feels that his group is being discriminated against, because they are black and Hispanic. He is outraged, because their First Amendment rights have been violated. Gloria intends to talk to the school principal at the earliest opportunity and grounds Tarik for three weeks.

Later that night Gloria visits Bernadine and hears about the divorce progress. Bernadine is livid, because the mortgage payment has not been made, although John claims that he paid it. Bernadine's patience is stretched thin, but her attorney is still investigating John's assets, so it looks like the divorce will not be finalized for a while yet. Bernadine is considering selling the house and buying a smaller one, but the real estate market for such large homes is not good at the time. Gloria's suggestion that Bernadine find a better job is met with fury so Gloria changes the subject to Bernadine's relationship with Herbert. When Herbert calls on the phone, Gloria takes the opportunity to excuse herself and head home. When Gloria arrives home, she is outraged to find Tarik engaged in oral sex with a white girl in his bedroom. Gloria screams for the girl to leave, Tarik apologizes, and Gloria refuses to talk to him anymore tonight.

## Freedom of Expression Analysis

The author addresses many of the current social issues that parents of black boys must face, such as gang membership and sexual relations. Gloria symbolizes one of the many single black mothers, who struggle to raise boys without the benefit of any strong male influence for the children.

The author uses the literary device of foreshadowing when Gloria tells Bernadine, "One day, that boy's gonna get my pressure up so high, he's gonna give me a heart attack." (Pg. 190) Gloria's weight problem and increasing stress levels are serious threats to her health, as events during the balance of the story will reveal.

The author also uses symbolism in this chapter when she writes, "Gloria opened the cabinet, got her bottle of blood pressure medication, and took a pill with some water. Then she yanked out the silverware drawer, grabbed a handful of teaspoons, and dropped them on the countertop. She snatched up the salad forks, dinner forks, and then the knives. By the time she slung the tablespoons on top, at least thirty pieces of silverware had crashed to the floor. It was times like this when she understood how parents could really hurt their children." (Pg. 183) The "thirty pieces of silverware" which



have fallen to Gloria's kitchen floor can be compared phonetically and figuratively to the "thirty pieces of silver" with which Judas betrays Jesus prior to His crucifixion in the belief of Christian religions. Gloria's silverware outburst symbolizes her own betrayal by Tarik, David, and so many other men, and she reaches a point of emotional crisis in her own life.



# Steam

## Steam Summary

Savannah and Robin meet in the steam room at their health club where Robin talks about the increased stress of her job due to a major project for her company. Robin has been working overtime and has not received an increase in salary for a long time. Savannah is disillusioned about her job as well and resents the male-dominated executive world that she feels keeps her in a middle management position with not much hope for advancement.

Eventually the conversation turns to the topic of the lack of available and appropriate men. Savannah feels that the amount of men who just want to be friends has diminished, too, because men are too busy assessing a woman's potential for sex and romance. Robin suggests that perhaps they should consider dating white men, but Savannah has no interest in doing that. However, she may consider it if it means being excited about something or someone again.

Savannah shares that she will be going to Las Vegas soon to attend a media conference, and Robin invites herself, much to Savannah's chagrin. Savannah hopes that Robin will not be able to come, because she sometimes is too flashy and obvious, and Savannah does not want any gossip about a friend of hers at the conference. When Savannah returns home, she has a phone message from Kenneth Dawkins, a man, whom she had dated while living in Boston a few years ago. Kenneth's message states that he will be in Phoenix next month to attend a medical conference and would like to see Savannah again. Savannah determines that Kenneth must have retrieved her phone number from her mother in Pittsburgh so Savannah makes a mental note to phone her mother in the morning.

As Savannah begins to relax for the evening, Kenneth calls again, and Savannah is stirred by the sound of his voice. Savannah asks Kenneth about his wife and son, but he is evasive preferring to discuss Savannah's new life in Phoenix. Kenneth wants to see Savannah when he comes to Phoenix and it is her turn to be evasive, but Kenneth promises to call her when he arrives in town. After their conversation ends, Savannah reflects on the wonderful times she had spent with Kenneth in New England, and although Kenneth treated Savannah like a queen, she was never sure of her position in his life, and she ended the relationship.

The next morning Savannah calls her mother, who confirms that Kenneth had called for Savannah's phone number, and she encourages Savannah to see him when he comes to Phoenix. Savannah reminds her mother that Kenneth is married, but her mother contends that the marriage must be rocky for Kenneth to go to the trouble of tracking down Savannah after all this time.



## Steam Analysis

The author uses the steam in the health club as a metaphor for the lack of clarity experienced by Savannah and Robin about the direction of their lives and about their frustrations with men. "The steam had finally filled up the whole room, until you couldn't even see your hand in front of you. We were still the only ones in there." (Pg. 200) Not only do Savannah and Robin feel lost, but they also feel as if they are unique in their frustrations, because it seems as if the rest of the women in the world have discerned more clarity for their lives.

The steam also serves as an element of foreshadowing about Kenneth's reappearance in Savannah's life, which will be revealed as the novel continues.



# Control

## Control Summary

As the weeks progress, Bernadine's attorney has discovered more about John's extensive network of assets and Bernadine shares the information with Gloria one Saturday afternoon on her patio. Apparently, John owns many real estate properties in several locations in the U.S. as well as a fast food restaurant franchise, insurance policies, and retirement plans. Fortunately, Bernadine's attorney has secured a continuance to postpone the divorce hearing, until the investigation into John's assets can be completed. Bernadine is hurt and shocked, but vows to never be so gullible and vulnerable in a relationship again.

Gloria and Bernadine head to the mall where they see Robin and the three women catch up each other's lives while seated at a little table in the food court. Robin reveals that she has met a new man named Ted three days ago while shopping at the grocery store and that he is a football coach at a nearby university and is a Libra, the perfect astrological sign for compatibility with her. Bernadine and Gloria tease Robin, who claims that Ted is Mr. Right. The friends part with plans to see each other at the next meeting of the Black Women on the Move.

On Monday morning, the stress level in Bernadine's life increases at work with so much to do and not enough time to accomplish everything. Bernadine's irritation rises even more from repeated phone calls from Herbert, who does not understand Bernadine's situation. Bernadine is able to stop Herbert's calls for the day only to be interrupted by a call telling her that Onika is sick and Bernadine must pick her up immediately. Bernadine issues a few directives to some of the office staff and rushes off to the school where she finds Onika with a touch of fever. Onika is able to sleep for a couple hours at home but wakes up with a high fever so Bernadine rushes her to the emergency room where it is discovered that Onika has an ear infection. Armed with antibiotics and popsicles, mother and daughter return home for more rest.

The following week Bernadine has an appointment with her therapist, who prescribes an antidepressant to counter Bernadine's anxiety and feelings of sadness. After being on the pills for about a week, Bernadine experiences uncomfortable physical side effects including disorientation and hallucinations. Bernadine confronts her therapist on the lack of information about the drug and refuses to take any more pills in spite of the therapist's advice.

## Control Analysis

The author uses the literary device of irony in this chapter, because none of the characters is in control of her life at this point. Bernadine is the best example of the irony, because her job as a Controller does not define her current state of frenzy.





"Bernadine's fingers were clicking away on the adding machine. In front of her were at least ten different sets of *control* sheets. The auditors were coming next week. If she didn't have the figures in order by then, she'd be in deep shit." (Pg. 219) By the end of the chapter, though, Bernadine begins to rein in her life by refusing the therapist's advice to stay on the antidepressant and this is the turning point for Bernadine's return to herself.



# It Ain't About Nothin'

## It Ain't About Nothin' Summary

Robin had hoped to spend time getting to know Troy better, but he seems distracted when he arrives at her apartment tonight. Troy suggests a drive to Scottsdale to visit a lawyer friend of his, named Bill, and Robin agrees to go. As they ride along Robin asks Troy about his life, and he reveals that he lives with his mother and sixteen-year-old son. Troy's son had been living with his mother in Detroit, but Troy has brought him to Phoenix to live to keep him out of trouble. Troy's mother moved to Phoenix four years ago for some relief from her asthma problems and now takes care of the household. Robin is encouraged when Troy admits to being anxious for Robin to meet his family.

Soon after arriving at Bill's house, Robin surmises that the group of men gathered there is smoking marijuana joints and crack cocaine. Robin does not join in with the men and is anxious to leave, because Troy had never mentioned that he does drugs. After Robin and Troy leave Bill's home Robin approaches Troy on the subject of drug especially in light of his career as a football coach, but Troy claims that the drugs do not interfere with his life, because he uses them for purely recreational reasons. Troy changes the subject and invites Robin to dinner at his house the next night, and Robin agrees, thrilled that he wants her to meet his family so soon in their relationship.

The next day Savannah warns Robin about the dangers of getting involved with a man who does drugs, and Robin calls Troy's house to tell him she cannot come to dinner that night. Troy's mother answers the phone and tells Robin that she is planning the cookout in Robin's honor, and Robin tells the woman that she looks forward to meeting her. At noon that day, Robin cannot find her wallet to pay for her lunch and is frantic in her attempts to locate it. When Troy arrives to pick up Robin that evening, he is bleary eyed and smelling like wine. Robin tells him that she does not like his lifestyle, and she is not going to dinner at his home. Troy is offended and angry and accuses Robin of being like most other black women who do not know how to behave with a real black man, which is the reason that black men date white women. After Troy leaves, Robin calls Savannah to relate the incident. Savannah suggests that it was Troy who had stolen Robin's wallet.

## It Ain't About Nothin' Analysis

The author brings up two important topics current for black women in the '90's, drug use and the evolution of black men dating white women. The use of drugs for recreational use is a significant trend in the 90's and is popular among all groups in society, even professionals like Bill and Troy, who disregard the potential harm to their careers. Robin understands the devastation to lives that drugs can cause and for once is able to resist an attractive man by putting common sense first in her priorities. The trend of black men dating white women is also prevalent in this time period because of the social status

associated with it. The situation does not seem to pose any immediate problems, but the long-term harm caused to the breakdown of black families is a major social trend in American society.

# **BWOTM**

## **BWOTM Summary**

At the meeting of the Black Women on the Move, the organization's president shares the disappointing financial situation of the group calling for the cancellation of the annual Sisters' Nite Out. This event is a major social function for the group members, who vote this year to forego the event in order to maintain support to important civic causes. After the meeting Robin shares with Savannah that she had found her wallet after driving over it in her carport. Everything but the money was still in the wallet, but Robin will not admit that Troy had robbed her. Savannah, Robin, Gloria, and Bernadine agree to host their own Sisters' Nite Out for just the four of them at some later time.

## **BWOTM Analysis**

This chapter is important in positioning the four women as vital professional women committed to supporting other black women and families less fortunate than themselves. The vulnerability of black women forced to act as single parents with inadequate incomes has reached a critical point. The characters in the story are able to push past their own personal distresses to help others, which helps to strengthen the perception of black women as a whole through the author's crafting.



# Why Are You Here?

## Why Are You Here? Summary

Savannah is so nervous anticipating Kenneth's arrival that she forgets to get the oil changed in her car and is chain-smoking all morning. When Kenneth does arrive this evening Savannah realizes that he is still extremely handsome and charming. Kenneth is complimentary about Savannah's appearance and the interior design of her apartment. During the course of their conversation, Savannah realizes that Kenneth had been in love with her when they dated a few years ago but never shared his feelings, because he did not think Savannah was interested in an exclusive relationship. Kenneth is tired from his long day of traveling, and he leaves Savannah's apartment only to return five minutes later. He and Savannah end up spending the night together. The next morning, Kenneth reveals that he is thinking about divorcing his wife. Savannah asks him to leave, so that she will not become further involved in a situation in which she can only be hurt.

## Why Are You Here? Analysis

The author uses the literary device of foreshadowing related to Savannah's neglect of car maintenance because of her distraction over Kenneth's imminent visit. Kenneth's unexpected return to her life will soon stall Savannah's life in more ways than one.

The author continues to use references to breathing and exhaling throughout the story. For example, in this chapter Savannah nervously waits for Kenneth to arrive. "My heart started pounding so hard I could hear it. Now I was hyperventilating. I had to pant, blowing air rings out of my mouth just to get my bearings." (Pg. 254)



# Rebounding

## Rebounding Summary

Robin checks her voice messages and deletes the ones from Troy and Michael asking for a return call. The third message is from Russell, and Robin is shocked to hear him ask her to stop calling his home, because his wife is getting annoyed. Robin cannot decide if she is more hurt over the fact that Russell is married or over the cowardly way he chose to deliver the message. Robin feels betrayed, because Russell had indicated that he loved her not that long ago, and she is outraged when she thinks about how she had helped him both emotionally and financially when his ex-girlfriend kicked him out of their apartment. To add to her bad mood, Robin answers a phone call from a creditor wanting to know when Robin will be paying the balance on her student loan. Robin tries to gain her composure, calls Michael's house, and is surprised when a woman answers the phone.

A few days later Robin calls Michael's house again and this time Michael is home and tells Robin that the woman staying with him is an old friend, who needs a place to live for a short while. Robin agrees to have dinner with Michael on Friday night, and when he does not show up the appointed time, Robin calls his home only to find that Michael has forgotten about the date and is eating dinner at home. Michael apologizes for forgetting the date and tells Robin he will make it up to her by taking her to dinner next Friday. Robin does not want to be alone tonight, though, and calls Troy, who agrees to come to Robin's apartment immediately.

## Rebounding Analysis

The author uses the technique of memory with Robin's character in this chapter as Robin re-lives her relationship with Russell. Upon hearing the message about Russell's marriage, Robin begins to re-lay their time together and all the things she had done for Russell. This allows the reader to understand more fully the hurt and betrayal that Robin feels. It also provides insight into Robin's motivation for re-connecting with Michael and Troy, when Robin has decided that neither is the correct man for her.



# Killing Time

## Killing Time Summary

Bernadine has quickly tired of Herbert's attentions yet he refuses to believe that she does not want to see him any longer. Herbert offers to divorce his wife, but Bernadine tells him that she is not interested in a man who will cheat on his wife. She has no desire to remarry. Herbert perseveres, however, and Bernadine is forced to screen all her phone calls.

John Jr. and Onika are spending a month of their summer vacation with their father and Bernadine rambles through the big empty house not sure of what to do with herself. One day, in a particularly low mood, Bernadine succumbs to a bout of self-pity over the unexpected direction of her life and cries by herself before relaxing into a lounge chair on the patio looking at but not really seeing the gorgeous sunset.

A few days later, Bernadine is in the mood to celebrate, because her divorce is now final. Neither Gloria, Savannah, nor Robin is available to go out tonight so Bernadine dresses and heads to the Scottsdale Princess resort to treat herself to a wonderful dinner. The atmosphere in the restaurant is too sedate for Bernadine's mood so she leaves and drives toward the Ritz-Carlton where she reserves a suite for the night and heads for the bar downstairs. Before long, Bernadine is joined by a handsome, polite man named James Wheeler. Bernadine and James spend an enjoyable evening talking and end the night in Bernadine's suite. The next morning James and Bernadine know they are in love and part reluctantly.

## Killing Time Analysis

The author uses irony in this chapter by providing both an ending to an old way of life as well as the start of a new life for Bernadine all in one day. As Bernadine's old life of marriage to John ends with the news of her divorce, she begins a bright new life when she meets James Wheeler that same night. It is also ironic that Bernadine falls in love with James, because she has vowed to never fall in love or marry again.



# New Territory

## New Territory Summary

Early one morning Gloria wakes to the sound of a big moving van pulling up to the vacant house across the street. Following the van is a car driven by a black man about fifty-years-old, and Gloria is happy that some more black people are moving into the neighborhood. Gloria makes a mental note to thaw a sweet potato pie from the freezer to take to her new neighbors and then heads to the Oasis.

Gloria checks her voice messages at the salon and learns that Phillip has a virus called shingles, which will keep him home for at least a month and possibly longer. Gloria takes a blood pressure pill and wonders whether this development means that Phillip has AIDS but does not know anyone who has any information on this new disease. Gloria's first appointment for the day is Bernadine, who tells Gloria about her new love, James. Gloria cautions Bernadine about getting involved with a younger man, but Bernadine brushes off the admonitions.

Later that night, Gloria returns home to find Tarik practicing his saxophone, and she is pleased that he is taking interest in his studies and music again. Tarik tells his mother that he wants to join the Up With People music organization so that he can perform and travel all over the world for a year before starting college. After hearing more about the opportunity, Gloria gives her consent and tells Tarik she can provide some of the eight thousand dollars necessary, but that he needs to earn the balance himself and Tarik eagerly agrees.

A little later Gloria walks toward the house across the street intent on meeting her new neighbor and delivering the sweet potato pie. Gloria introduces herself to her handsome new neighbor named Marvin King and learns that Marvin is a widower with no children. Gloria is captivated by Marvin's good looks and smooth Southern drawl as he offers his handyman services should Gloria ever need help around her house. Gloria promises to send a plate of dinner over to Marvin and begins to walk back across the street attempting to stay as poised as possible given her nervous state. Gloria realizes that Marvin is watching her cross the street, and she is giddy with the possibility of a new friendship or possibly love.

## New Territory Analysis

The author addresses the issue of AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, in this chapter with Phillip's disclosure of shingles. AIDS is relatively new to people at this point in time, and Gloria is not alone in her ignorance of the disease. Although it is not clear that Phillip has AIDS, it can be assumed because of his homosexuality, a group of people especially stricken with it. The author takes a positive stance by creating Gloria's character as noble and tolerant of both Phillip's sexual preference and vulnerability to



the devastating disease especially at a time when information is scarce and hysteria is the usual reaction to the problem.

# Closer to the Bone

## Closer to the Bone Summary

Russell's wife, Carolyn, has kicked him out of the house. He has returned to Robin, claiming that he had made a huge mistake by leaving Robin in the first place. Russell confides that he had only married his wife on a whim, and he regretted it almost immediately. Robin orders Russell to never speak Carolyn's name again, and he promises not to.

A couple days later Robin waits for Russell to return to her apartment from a meeting with Carolyn in which they are supposed to be discussing the terms of their divorce. While Robin anxiously awaits Russell's return, she phones her mother to learn that an attorney has advised her mother to divorce her father in order to separate their assets so that the state will pay for her father's nursing home care. Robin wishes she could provide the finances for her father's care so that her mother would not have to face such an agonizing decision, but all she can offer is to drive to Tucson and spend next week with her parents.

When Russell finally returns Robin is not pleased to hear that the divorce plans are not proceeding with any certainty and Russell goes to bed immediately which Robin assumes means that he is really tired.

## Closer to the Bone Analysis

Robin reasons that Russell has returned to her so that he can be close to his primary choice. "The important thing was this: He had a hundred other places he could've gone, but Russell came here, to me, which - as far as I'm concerned - is where he wanted to be: closer to the bone." (Pg. 308) The author refers to the idiom, "the closer to the bone, the sweeter the meat," and Robin assumes that Russell has chosen her, because she is preferential to Carolyn. Ironically, wounds that are closer to the bone are the deepest and take the longest time to heal, and Robin does not realize that this is the true situation she will soon suffer from Russell.



# Drunk

## Drunk Summary

September arrives, and Savannah, Bernadine and Robin plan to celebrate Gloria's birthday by taking champagne and gifts to her house, knowing that Gloria does not like to go out as much as she likes to stay home. This little surprise party is well timed, because Gloria's depression about losing three stylists at the Oasis. Gloria's blood pressure is dangerously high, but she does not mention this to her friends hoping that her health will level out once she gets the salon functioning properly again.

Gloria hears the music from Robin's car, signaling the arrival of her friends. Gloria thinks for a moment about how she feels more mature than the other three women. However, tonight she will try to have a good time in spite of her low mood. Before long, the champagne has done its work and the four friends are chattering away about men as if they are teenagers at a slumber party. As usual, the talk turns to the lack of available black men and the women continue to drink champagne, until they are sick and pass out in Gloria's living room.

## Drunk Analysis

The author presents the theme of loneliness, as the women bemoan the lack of available black men due to the men fearing commitment, being already married, being homosexual, or preferring white women. Ironically, the champagne consumed to lift their spirits has the opposite effect. The women end the evening depressed, drunk and passed out, as a sense of futility washes over them.



# Monsoon

## Monsoon Summary

John Jr. and Onika return home after spending the weekend with their father. Onika is anxious to tell Bernadine that John and Kathleen were married today and that she served as flower girl at the wedding. Onika also tells Bernadine that Kathleen is pregnant and John chastises Onika for her insensitivity. Bernadine had vowed never to react negatively about John in front of the children, but today's news pushes her over the edge, and she retreats to her bedroom for some privacy.

As Bernadine lay in her bed she pushes away thoughts of John and Kathleen and focuses instead on James. Soon Onika interrupts her pleasant thoughts by delivering today's mail, which contains a letter from James telling Bernadine that his wife has succumbed to cancer and, although he mourns her death, their marriage had been over for a long time. James is interested in exploring a relationship with Bernadine and provides his phone number so that she may call him. Bernadine shares the letter with Savannah, who advises her not to wait too long to get James into her life.

## Monsoon Analysis

The significance of the chapter's title stems from the foreshadowing of the return of John and Onika, who have spent the weekend with their father. "A gust of wind blew in the front door right after Onika..." This is not only another "air" or "breathing" reference, but also a symbol of the changes that are about to blow through Bernadine's life. The news of John's marriage and Kathleen's pregnancy are disturbing, but the mail brings a positive, new direction for Bernadine with the letter from James. The "monsoon" of John's news which devastates Bernadine is quickly replaced by even brighter prospects with James just as a monsoon found in nature destroys and is ultimately replaced with much more pleasant weather.



# To Heaven and Back

## To Heaven and Back Summary

Savannah's mother calls her early one morning requesting that Savannah write another letter to the food stamp people, because the one Savannah had written previously had been improperly processed. The next morning, Savannah hurriedly composes the letter and wires her mother some money before leaving for Las Vegas to attend a TV producers' conference. Savannah meets a man named Charles Turner at the conference, and they spend time together attending business sessions as well as social functions. Charles and Savannah also become intimate spending the nights in Savannah's hotel room and part in Las Vegas promising to visit each other as soon as possible.

When she returns to Phoenix, Savannah shares the news about Charles with Gloria, Robin, and Bernadine, but none of them is very interested because of their own relationship situations. Robin is sad because of Russell's indifference; Gloria is enthused by Marvin's attentions; and Bernadine is floating about James. Savannah eagerly awaits some word from Charles, but by the end of a week, there is no call from him so Savannah leaves a voice message for him, but there is still no return call after two weeks. Instinctively Savannah now knows that she will not hear from Charles, and she is devastated to think that she made such a fool of herself by opening up to him in Las Vegas. Savannah vows to never be so vulnerable with a man again, because the pain of the betrayal is just too intense.

## To Heaven and Back Analysis

Savannah has reached the point of no return in her willingness to enter too quickly into a relationship with a selfish man like Charles. At last, Savannah values herself more than any stranger, who promises everything and delivers nothing. As Savannah says, "I can't afford to do this shit anymore. It costs too much. And besides, being lonely has *never* made me feel this damn bad." (Pg. 373)



# Still Waves in It

## Still Waves in It Summary

As the weeks go by and Phillip is still out sick, his clients at the Oasis begin to gossip about his precarious health condition, but Gloria will not allow any speculation about his future and is quick to remind everyone that Phillip is still an employee and that they cannot catch AIDS by Phillip styling their hair. Phillip has admitted to Gloria that he has been HIV positive for three years, and she is pained to hear about his current suffering both physically and financially. Gloria sends Phillip extra money when she can and has taken on his clients resulting in her work schedule and stress level both on overload. Gloria's emotional and physical fatigue prompt her to think about selling the salon, but she decides to wait a little while before making that decision.

On one particularly trying day, Phillip tells Gloria that he will not be returning to work. The commode overflows. She spots a mouse in her pantry. The garage door comes off the hinges. The sprinkler system breaks. Tarik hits a car in the grocery parking lot, and finally the washing machine will not stop spinning. When Savannah arrives for her appointment, Gloria is glad that her hair is short, and she can close the shop soon. Savannah senses Gloria's fatigue and postpones her haircut so that she and Gloria can go to dinner before going home.

Gloria feels another bout of heartburn and vows to not eat anything too heavy. The two women decide on a Chinese restaurant, and Gloria orders a big meal, because the pain in her chest has subsided. As the women eat dinner, Gloria tells Savannah how attentive Marvin has become. Savannah encourages Gloria to start planning her life, because Tarik will be leaving home soon, and Gloria will be all alone.

When Gloria arrives home, she changes into a swimsuit and jumps into her backyard pool to float for a few minutes. As Gloria dries off and returns to her bedroom she notes that the calm moonlit night is perfect for lovers. Suddenly, Gloria feels another pain in her chest only this time it does not dissipate, and she falls to the floor in her bathroom.

## Still Waves in It Analysis

The author uses foreshadowing by giving Gloria's character persistent heartburn, stress and high blood pressure throughout the novel. The heartburn occurs in this chapter too as well as the mention of Gloria's mother's death by a heart attack. The pain that brings Gloria to her knees is more than heartburn, and she realizes that she is in serious trouble.

# Unreasonable Requests

## Unreasonable Requests Summary

Savannah's car dies in traffic soon after she leaves the restaurant so she borrows a cell phone from a stranger and calls AAA for assistance. The engine in Savannah's car is blown, because it has run out of oil. Savannah returns home to find two voice messages, one from her mother and one from Kenneth. Savannah's return call to her mother reveals that Sheila has had her baby and that Savannah's mother is going to stay in Pittsburgh to help with the newborn instead of flying to Phoenix to see Savannah for Christmas. Savannah's mother asks her about Kenneth and urges Savannah to let Kenneth back into her life, but Savannah tells her mother that she has reached a point where she does not need a man to feel complete.

As soon as Savannah completes the conversation with her mother, the phone rings and it is Kenneth wondering if Savannah can meet him in Palm Springs in a couple weeks, because he has to attend a conference there. Savannah declines the invitation, because Kenneth has not filed for divorce yet and tells Kenneth not to call again.

## Unreasonable Requests Analysis

Savannah's dead car stalls not only her mobility but makes her take stock in what else is broken in her life. Symbolically, the car represents the fact that Savannah can no longer continue in the manner she has been living. By neglecting her own internal issues, Savannah has reached a dead end just as the neglected car refuses to move without the proper attention.



# Friendship

## Friendship Summary

Gloria wakes in the hospital to understand that she has had a massive heart attack and can sense that Tarik, Marvin, Bernadine, Savannah and Robin are with her. Gloria's chest still hurts, but she is glad that the people she loves are close by as she falls asleep from the pain medication. Four days later, Gloria's condition is much improved. Her three best friends and Marvin await her arrival in the progressive care unit.

## Friendship Analysis

The author sidesteps the issue of finding the perfect man in this chapter and focuses on the friendship the four women share, which is the core theme of the novel. The crisis makes them all realize their vulnerability and the truly important people in their lives. Ironically, it is Gloria, who has eschewed pursuing men in the story, who ultimately secures a relationship with a solid man like Marvin, who is available during a time of crisis and vows to remain to take care of Gloria.





# The Weight of All Things

## The Weight of All Things Summary

Robin's father dies in his sleep soon after being admitted to a nursing home, and she is especially sad that he did not live to see the baby she is carrying. Russell does not know about the baby yet, and Robin does not intend to tell him, until it is too late for an abortion. She does not want him to try to talk her out of having the baby. Robin does not want Russell back in her life, because she is tired of the hurt he inflicts by his emotional abuse and betrayal. Michael has been a strong support in Robin's grief over her father and although she realizes that she cannot love him, Robin is comforted by Michael's goodness and sincerity. The focus of Robin's life will now be her child and for the first time she will have someone on whom she can shower all her love.

## The Weight of All Things Analysis

Just as Savannah has come to the turning point in her life, Robin, too, realizes her own value in spite of validation by a man. Robin's maturity has led her to eliminate the toxic effects of Russell from her life and lets her accept Michael's friendship without the complication of sexual intimacy.



# Characters

## Savannah Jackson

Savannah is the first of the four friends to be introduced in the novel as she is in the final stages of planning a move from Denver, Colorado, to Phoenix, Arizona. Savannah is a professional woman, who moves frequently when the men she meets in the various cities in which she lives do not meet her emotional needs. Savannah's choice to move to Phoenix is an emotional choice to be near her best friend, Bernadine, and Savannah even takes a pay cut in her new job in order to make the move. Savannah is the most professionally and socially competent of the four main characters as evidenced by her Public Relations career and interests in art collecting and interior design. Savannah's search for the perfect man is complicated by a financially dependent mother and working class family, who do not understand Savannah's refusal to settle for just any man. Savannah's track record with men is not a good one, and the men who attract her are cunning and self-absorbed. Her repeated relationship failures weigh heavily on her vulnerable self-esteem. Savannah is the most pragmatic of the four main characters, and she facilitates the emotional healing of the other women in spite of her own vulnerable state. Savannah is also the first of the four women to reach a pivotal point at which she will no longer allow herself to be emotionally abused by insincere or self-motivated men.

## Bernadine Harris

Bernadine represents the classic story of a young wife, who sacrifices her own education and career in favor of her husband's professional life. Bernadine has helped her husband achieve fantastic success in the establishment of his own business under the caveat that they are working as a team toward their mutual future. When Bernadine's husband leaves her for a younger woman, her self-esteem is more seriously wounded, when she learns that John's new love is a white woman. Bernadine falls into the typical pattern of a scorned woman, spending money indiscriminately just so that her ex-husband will be forced to pay and pursuing unavailable men for sexual intimacy in attempts to boost her self-image in the aftermath of the divorce. Ultimately, the divorce is Bernadine's salvation as she is free for the first time in a long time to pursue her own dreams instead of living the life her ex-husband dictated. By the end of the novel, Bernadine ironically finds a younger love just as her ex-husband did, but Bernadine finds love in this man's sincerity, a quality not evident in her ex-husband.

## Robin Stokes

Robin is the youngest of the four main characters and also the most sexually promiscuous. Convinced that her only appeal is her sexuality, Robin gauges her life by successful sexual encounters, rejecting good men because of lack of sexual prowess.



Not surprisingly, Robin's relationships are doomed to fail, because they are based on shallow tenets. Robin has a successful career in a large insurance firm but undermines her life by overspending in compensation for unfulfilled emotional needs. Ironically, the only true male relationship Robin has had in her life is the one with her father and even that is fading due to his diminishing capacities from Alzheimer's disease. In spite of the repeated disappointments and betrayals, Robin continues to search for love from the right man and in the end she finally knows unconditional love, not from any man, but from the child she bears.

## **Gloria Matthews**

Gloria has been an independent woman all her life and is the only one of the four women to own her own business and to have a teenaged son. Gloria never married the father of her baby, who was conceived at a college fraternity party. She did not believe that a mistake could be corrected by creating an even bigger problem. Gloria feels as if she is more mature than the other three women, possibly, because she has lost both her parents and is raising her son with no help from his father. The pressures of running her hair salon and raising a responsible son without any emotional support force Gloria to turn to food for comfort, and her weight has become a serious health threat. Gloria tries to push down her hopes for love as a single parent but still wonders if she is doomed to live alone for the rest of her life. Gloria's self-esteem is hindered by her being overweight, but she learns to love herself again with the appreciation of a new man in her life. Gloria's heart attack is both literal and figurative as she suffers the physical pain but realizes that her emotional heart has never been so loved and protected.

## **Sheila**

Sheila is Savannah's sister, who is unhappily married with four children, still living in Pittsburgh. She is eager to hear that Savannah has found the right man and will be married.

## **Savannah's Mother**

Savannah's mother has lived in Pittsburgh her entire life, has four grown children, and lives in public housing partially funded each month by Savannah, the oldest.

## **John Harris, Jr.**

John Jr. is Bernadine and John's ten-year-old son, who is wiser than his years about his parent's divorce and shows incredible sensitivity for a child his age.



## **Onika Harris**

Onika is Bernadine and John's seven-year-old daughter, who is not as affected by her parents' divorce, as her brother is. She actually enjoys meeting her father's new wife and participating in their new life.

## **Lionel**

Lionel is the man whom Sheila encourages Savannah to date, but whose real life is far different from what Savannah has been led to believe. This results in another disappointing encounter.

## **Russell**

Russell is Robin's long-term boyfriend, whom she repeatedly allows back into her life, regardless of his refusal to commit to marriage.

## **Tarik Mathews**

Tarik is Gloria's sixteen-year-old son, whose intelligence and worldliness challenge his mother, who wants him to grow up to be a responsible black man.

## **Philip**

Philip is a homosexual black man, who works as a stylist at Gloria's hair salon, the Oasis.

## **Desiree**

Desiree is a stylist in Gloria's hair salon. Her sullen demeanor irritates Gloria, but her talent doing weaves on black hair is unsurpassed.

## **David**

David is Tarik's biological father, who has no real relationship with his son.

## **Geneva**

Geneva is Bernadine's mother, who lives in Sun City and baby-sits for John Jr. and Onika. Geneva supports Bernadine emotionally during the divorce, because she had never liked Bernadine's husband from the beginning of the marriage.



## **Kenneth Dawkins**

Savannah had dated Kenneth when she lived in Boston, and he tracks her down in Phoenix with the hope of rekindling their relationship.

## **Troy**

Troy is the college football coach Robin dates briefly and then refuses to continue a relationship, because of his drug and alcohol abuse.

## **James Wheeler**

Bernadine meets and falls in love with James at the Ritz-Carlton on the night that her divorce is finalized.

## **Marvin King**

Marvin is the fifty-year-old widower, who moves into the empty house across the street from Gloria and becomes romantically involved with her. He becomes a strong male role model for Tarik.

## **Charles Turner**

Charles is the opportunistic television producer Savannah meets at the Las Vegas conference.



## Objects/Places

### Denver, Colorado

Denver is the city where Savannah has lived for the past few years and where she meets Lionel at a New Year's Eve party. Savannah has exhausted all her opportunities in Denver and moves to Phoenix to be closer to her best friend, Bernadine.

### Phoenix, Arizona

Phoenix is the location of the bulk of the novel's plot line.

### Sun City, Arizona

Sun City is a suburb of Phoenix known as a retirement community and the current home of Bernadine's mother, Geneva.

### Tucson, Arizona

Tucson is located approximately 100 miles southeast of Phoenix and is the location of Robin's parents' home.

### Las Vegas, Nevada

Las Vegas is the famous desert city in Nevada where Savannah has an ill-fated encounter with Charles Taylor during a TV producers' convention.

### Circle K Convenience Store

The Circle K is the convenience store close to Bernadine's home where she buys cigarettes.

### Pendleton's

Pendleton's is the bar where the four women meet to introduce Savannah to Phoenix nightlife.



## **The Oasis**

The Oasis is Gloria's hair salon where Savannah, Bernadine, and Robin come as clients for haircuts and weaves.

## **The Hospital**

The hospital is the last location noted in the novel as the main characters, Tarik, and Marvin gather to support Gloria, who is recuperating from a heart attack.

# Social Sensitivity

In *Waiting to Exhale*, McMillan tries to show the need for a radical improvement in gender relations, notably among African Americans. She does so through the characters of four African American women living in Phoenix in the 1990s: Savannah Jackson, Bernadine Harris, Robin Stokes, and Gloria Matthews. These good friends are intelligent, well educated, successful professional women in their mid-thirties.

Each is preoccupied with, and deeply frustrated by, her attempts to establish a wholesome, enduring relationship with a man. Savannah and Robin, still unmarried, encounter liars, philanderers, poor lovers, men flawed in various ways that make them undesirable or unable to relate and commit.

The situations of Bernadine and Gloria involve problems of single parenthood. Bernadine, mother of two, is undergoing a painful divorce initiated by her wealthy husband of eleven years, who prefers a white woman.

Through Bernadine's situation, McMillan raises questions about the damaging social effects of success in the white, male-dominated business climate of America. Bernadine has struggled to preserve her racial and cultural identity in the affluent white neighborhood chosen by her husband, among wives frustrated by loneliness and unfulfilled hopes.

Self-employed Gloria has a teenage son conceived with a man she never married and does not live with. The boy's father is uncaring, rarely present, and has decided he is gay. Through Gloria's problems, McMillan raises the social issues of teenage sex, teenage gangs, and racism in the public schools. The son, named Tarik, plunges Gloria into these issues because he rebels. Gloria purchased a house in a "safe, clean, middle-class neighborhood that happened to be predominantly white" for the sake of Tarik. The drug called crack "seemed to love black people more than anybody else."

But Tarik complains: "I want to know what it's like being around people my own color." Gloria concedes that Tarik's high-school principal is "a real diehard racist."

Problems of the elderly are illustrated through the dealings of Savannah and Robin with their parents. Savannah's mother, who receives government aid including food stamps, often needs help to untangle bureaucratic snarls. Social outreach, especially to needy African Americans, is another facet of the lives of the major characters. They hold memberships in Black Women on the Move, an organization involved in humanitarian and feminist programs. The women's support of the organization, as well as their strong ties of friendship, show the value of feminist solidarity, and more. These bonds reflect a necessity to band together in order to heal social ills in an African American community isolated by persistent discriminatory practices and the intrusions of undesirable elements of white culture.



# Techniques

Waiting to Exhale is structured as a series of alternating chapters, almost all written from the point of view of one of the four main characters. The chapters about Savannah and Robin are narrated by them, while those about Bernadine and Gloria consist of very introspective, third-person narration.

The device is McMillan's clever way of sustaining the reader's interest, and of rounding out characters by providing several perspectives on each one's personality. Savannah and Robin particularly, who tell in narration only what they wish known about themselves, are revealed further through comments by Bernadine and Gloria.

Occasionally a man provides a revealing remark. "James said she was brave," for example, appears in a chapter about Bernadine. Savannah records a remark made to her by Charles Turner: "You're attractive — beautiful, really — sexy, and obviously smart."

Because McMillan is careful to maintain a woman's point of view about relationships, the novel's men are largely one-dimensional, peripheral figures. Although the men are with little exception objects of complaint, they are never hateful because McMillan sustains that subjective, woman's point of view and gives her female characters foibles as well. Part of the novel's power derives from the realistic blend of faulty and admirable qualities.

McMillan frequently draws from her own life for her fiction, and has indicated that *Waiting to Exhale* is based upon real people in her experience. She identifies Savannah as the character most like herself.

Credibility is also enhanced by chatty dialogue, most of it centered on men, bad romances, everyday affairs.

The snappy, sometimes sad, often humorous conversation drives the novel and works to sustain pace, a strong sense of forward movement in these women's lives. The style is vernacularbased, and includes a lavish use of coarse language some critics object to.

Critics otherwise praise McMillan's authentic depictions of 1990s African American middle-class culture. McMillan centers her narrative squarely in African American womanhood with frequent references to details of the characters' hairdos, makeup, clothing.

These touches lend believability to the characters as very feminine as well as strongly feminist.

A contemporary tone is achieved not only by the catalog of topical issues the characters confront, but by the almost nonstop references to popular singers and recordings, brand-name products, and African American magazines. African American identity is



reinforced by references to the weaves, individual braids, and cornrowing that constitute specialties at Gloria's Oasis Hair.

Savannah's art collection includes works by Charles Alston, John Rozelle.

African names are given to Bernadine's young daughter Onika and Gloria's son Tarik, reinforcing the theme of hope in the new generation. A birthday party for Gloria turns into a celebration of "sisterhood" and African American community. Savannah plays a record: "It was Stevie Wonder's birthday song to Dr. Martin Luther King." The women sing along, clap, dance to it.

McMillan cleverly applies imagery appropriate to her concepts. Savannah notices the beginning of a run in her panty hose when she first meets Lionel, the freeloader. The run intensifies, then zips completely to her heel as his behavior proves to be a "downer."

Bernadine's thoughts are conveyed in imagery suitable to her husband's work as a computer engineer. She also "knew how to exit DOS, how to search and replace, how to merge," or move her cursor. Images related to breathing recur repeatedly to reinforce the theme expressed in the novel's title. Bernadine "took a deep breath," then "exhaled" when she realized her divorce settlement brought the money she hoped for. She and Savannah also quit smoking, and Savannah finally says, "I'm not holding my breath anymore, looking around every corner, hoping he'll be there."



# Themes

## Themes

Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria are on quests for self-realization. Each believes at the outset that fulfillment is to be found in a lasting relationship with a man. The women cannot understand why they have been unable to achieve this goal. As they agree in a serious moment during a fun-filled party among themselves, they are "good catches." They are good-hearted and nice, youthful in manner, and attractive. Even overweight Gloria is "pretty." Yet "meeting Mr. Wonderful" eludes them all, a problem they see exacerbated by time.

Savannah worries that she is "thirty-six years old and still childless and single." Bernadine realizes that divorce is making her a single mother at that age: "Who's gonna want me?" Robin, thirtyfive, looks into mirrors for "new flaws," trying to forgive herself "for not looking twenty-four anymore."

Coping with the aging process is a universal theme, and it is carried forward in portrayals of the women's parents coping with illness and life alone. McMillan also makes it clear that her obvious theme of gender conflict, especially that aspect conveyed by the adage "a good man is hard to find," transcends race. Robin says that article titles like "How to Find Mr. Right" grace the covers of women's magazines every month, stressing "how bad it is. For white women too."

Nonetheless, the novel is plainly centered in African American concerns.

After a very harsh experience with a man she cared for and was deceived by, Savannah grieves. "What happened to all the pride, the tenderness, the love and compassion, black men are supposed to show MS?" She seeks a man of decency and feeling, with a sense of purpose. "Could he already be what he aspired to?" she asks. "Could he be honest, responsible, mature, drug-free, and a little bit spontaneous?" The women's dialogues contain every conceivable complaint. "Black men play too many games. It feels like they're always testing you." The men are either boring, or selfish, or unemployed, or weak, manipulative, shallow, arrogant, stupid, bad at making love. The men are either married, or gay, or fearful of commitment.

"They're with white women," Bernadine points out. The complaint reflects a persistent thematic undercurrent. "I hate black men who run to white women," Robin says. "I hate the fact that they think white girls epitomize beauty and femininity." Gloria is driven to self-doubt by her teenage son's interest in a white girl. "Did white women have something we didn't?" The issue is part of an overall concern in this novel for inroads made by white cultural elements, many of them destructive of the identity of a wholesome African American community. Bernadine copes with her daughter's demand for a blond, blue-eyed Barbie doll. Bernadine copes, too, with the emptiness she



perceives in a lifestyle dictated by her husband's insistence that the family imitate and live among "rich white folks."

The thematic thread of push-andpull between African American and white culture is one of the novel's intriguing features. What emerges is the women's strong advocacy of African American confidence and pride, and the gender conflict is troublesome in part because it disrupts the community. The novel's obvious message to men is communicated by Robin, when the women toy with the notion that white men would treat them nicely: "[black men] better hurry up and get their act together or I might be tempted to cross the street like some of these sisters, who don't seem to have any regrets either." On a broad thematic level, the novel is about friendship, people needing people, and African American and feminist strength.

"Look, I've got a whole lot of other things on my mind besides men," Bernadine says, in reference to her divorce case, child-rearing and financial stress.

Savannah is troubled by family matters, and by her dislike for her job. She is discriminated against by "the good old boys" because of her race, and because she is a woman. Savannah echoes Bernadine's thought. "So men aren't the only thing on my mind either.

It just seems that way because we talk about 'em all the time." The women know that each is there to lend comfort and help to any of her friends, whatever and whenever the need. "So don't ever think a man would have that much power over me," Savannah tells Gloria, "that I'd stop caring about my friends."

The themes are sustained by the women's affiliation with Black Women on the Move. The organization holds workshops for women who want to function outside of traditional roles, and want "to do something for black folks whose lives — for whatever reason — were in bad shape." The group raises money for scholarships, offers free legal and medical advice, presents achievement awards, holds workshops on stress, financial planning, single parenting, sexual harassment, and — "you name it. Anything that's helpful to black women." The women realize that they are responsible for themselves, that they should not let men influence them toward self-doubt.

According to Savannah, men are "getting away with murder when it comes to women. And we let them."

## **Support of Black Women**

One of the important themes in the book is that of support among black women. The relationship between Savannah, Bernadine, Robin and Gloria is strong with each woman supporting the other in spite of differences of opinion and lifestyle choices. There is an overriding assumption that black women must remain as a cohesive unit because of the naturally occurring disintegration of their collective self-esteem due to the move of Black men seeking relationships with white women. The main characters are fierce in their loyalty on this issue, especially in their support of Bernadine, who has



suffered this indignity firsthand. Not only do the four main characters support each other emotionally, but they also extend themselves to the betterment of other black women in less fortunate situations through their involvement in the Black Women on the Move organization. Savannah adopts the role of support with her immediate family as she supplements her mother's meager pension with rent and food money. The author makes the point that the need for a strong network among black women is a continuing effort necessary through every phase of a woman's life. The societal, cultural and political forces which are at work against black women, especially those who are single and are single parents, are hurdles which cannot be crossed without the intervention of friends and family on the intimate and personal levels.

## **The Struggle for Self-Validation**

Each one of the four main characters suffers from wounded self-esteem as the result of disastrous relationships and encounters with less than noble men. In the aftermath of rejection, the women assume that the onus of the failed relationship must rest with them, because of some physical imperfection or character flaw. There is constant self-evaluation and examination of personal attributes in relation to each betrayal or rejection. Ironically, the women, especially Savannah and Robin, seek out solutions for physical self-improvement such as health clubs and new lingerie, just reinforcing the very areas by which they feel they are judged by men. The search for validation leads the women in vicious cycles of making themselves available sexually and emotionally too early in new male relationships with the inevitable disastrous results of betrayal and wounds to their psyches. The desperation for love and validation drives all the women, with the exception of Gloria, to make rapid, indiscriminate choices that in all cases lead to the drop in feelings of self worth to a point even lower than where they began. It is interesting to note, too, that the women do not accept approval from the men they do not approve of themselves. When Michael declares his love for Robin, she rejects his claims, because she does not value him. There is irony in the fact that there are men offering their unconditional love and support, but the women must feel that the man is worthy to provide it. There are moments of revelation where the women glimpse that the support provided by each other can sustain, but the search for male validation is always present and the real driving force behind all their decisions.

## **Owning Personal Choices**

Despite their vulnerability to men, each of the four main characters is an incredibly strong woman driven to succeed and totally responsible for choices made or assumed. Savannah provides financially for her mother and loves her dearly, and yet she will not be coerced by her family to marry simply because she is in her mid-thirties. Savannah makes flawed decisions by becoming sexually intimate too soon in her relationships, but by the end of the novel, she finds her power and stops the cycle of intimacy followed by male betrayal. Bernadine has a difficult time grasping that the life she thought she was building will no longer exist, but she makes the decision that she will not let her ex-husband's betrayal make her a lesser person. By the end of the story, Bernadine is



healthy again and ready to make the decisions for her life that she had wanted all along. Robin struggles with making the right choices for herself, because she has a false view of what her value is. For many years, Robin thinks that her physical attractiveness and sexuality are her only assets, but eventually, she realizes that the relationships built on these shallow beliefs lead only to pain. By the end of the story, Robin owns the consequences of her behavior and makes healthy choices for the first time in her life. Gloria's nurturing personality has drained her dry emotionally as she lives in support of other people such as Tarik, her girlfriends and employees at the hair salon. The physical toll that this position takes on Gloria's health is her wake up call to take care of herself first so that she can be in satisfying relationships without sacrificing the essence of who she is at heart.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written from the points of view of the main characters. The chapters dedicated to Savannah and Robin are told from the first person narrative perspective. This means that the reader can not only experience the plot through the actions and events viewed by the main character, but can also understand the characters' thoughts and emotions. The chapters dedicated to Gloria and Bernadine are written from the third person point of view enhanced by background narrative provided by those characters' thoughts and memories. Although there are some male characters in the book, the majority of the plot line and dialogue is female-driven so the male perspective is limited.

## Setting

Savannah symbolically leaves Denver, because it is cold and the men no longer hold any interest for her. The bulk of the story takes place in the desert cities of Phoenix, Tucson, Sun City, and Las Vegas, symbolizing the arid situation in the male relationships of the male characters. The intimate living spaces in the book also reflect the inner state of mind of the main characters. Bernadine's divorce leaves her in a huge empty house devoid of any real personality, while Gloria's house is a comfortable home with a well-stocked pantry in an almost exclusively white neighborhood. Robin and Savannah are the least settled reflected in their temporary apartment lifestyles.

## Language and Meaning

Most of the dialogue in the novel occurs between the four main characters, and as such, reflects the casual style and idioms of black women in the 1990's. For example, many sentences are begun with, "Girl, I tell you..." The author also sprinkles the novel liberally with obscene and sexually suggestive language. At times this usage seems overdone for dramatic effect and is unbelievable in its overuse. Probably the most obvious language technique is the continuing thread of allusions to breathing such as breaths, inhale, gasp, etc. to support the book's title.

## Structure

The book is created with separate chapters dedicated to the four main characters which alternate as the story progresses to provide differing points of view. The book begins with Savannah's story as she prepares to leave Denver, then moves to the chapter of Bernadine's marriage break-up, followed by Robin's story of her history with Russell, which is followed by Gloria's frenetic life. This pattern repeats throughout the novel so that the reader can focus on each character appropriately and fairly without the characters being diluted which can happen in a book with four protagonists.



## Quotes

"From the outside, everything looks good: I've got a decent job, money in the bank, live in a nice condo, and drive a respectable car. I've got everything I need except a man. And I'm not one of these women who think that a man is the answer to everything, but I'm tired of being by myself. Being single isn't half as much fun as it used to be." Not Dick Clark, pg. 2

"People aren't so quick to call it quits when they're married. I'm also willing to spend the rest of my life alone if I have to until I find someone that makes me feel like I was born with a tiara on my head." Not Dick Clark, pg. 11

"Not only was he leaving her. Not only was he leaving her for another woman. He was leaving her for a white woman. Bernadine hadn't expected this kind of betrayal, this kind of insult." Suddenly Single, pg. 25

"This was entirely too easy for him. And like everything else he did, you could tell that he'd been creating the software for this program for some time. But he'd computed wrong. You wanted to catch him off guard, remind him that you also knew how to exit DOS, how to search and replace, how to merge, but when you thought about it, you realized you didn't have to prove anything to him anymore, so instead you simply moved your cursor." Suddenly Single, pgs.33-34

"They say love is a two-way street. But I don't believe it, because the one I've been on for the last two years was a dirt road." Forget What I Just Said, pg. 39

"These new men of the Nineties are scared of women like me. I thought if I was honest and told them what I wanted, then all the cards would be on the table. Silly me. All I did was tell a few of them I was interested in having a serious relationship because I wanted to get married and have a baby. They ran like mice. What was the big deal?" Forget What I Just Said, pg. 44

"You don't get it, do you? That man is not my *father*, he's my *daddy*. If he was my *father*, he'da done more than drop a check in the mail. He'da taken me to my baseball games, to the movies, somewhere - anywhere." Unanswered Prayers, Pg. 64

"And she worried about whether or not she'd been doing a good job. She had introduced him to God a long time ago, but she still worried whether or not she had taught him the right things at the right time: manners, kindness, generosity, respect for others and respect for himself; pride in the color of his skin; how to eat at the dinner table and how to act in restaurants; why she'd refused to buy him any kind of guns except water guns; how to talk like he had some sense; how to stick up for himself and fight if talking didn't work; and when he was hurting, she didn't care if it was a scrape or a fall or his feelings, she had told him it was okay for him to cry and to ignore the little boys that called him a sissy. But she wasn't sure if she'd done enough, or if she was doing it right." Unanswered Prayers, Pg. 65





"On Friday morning, Bernadine sprang up in bed and realized she'd been in the house for five days, had not bathed, had not brushed her teeth or combed her hair, had hardly eaten, and this bedroom smelled like a pigsty, and so did she. 'I won't let you reduce me to this,' she said out loud, and got up." Fire, Pg. 91

"Bernadine was on her third cigarette by the time she pulled into the bank's parking lot. She put the car in Park and sat there for a few minutes. What kind of man would stoop this low to avoid paying for his kids? And how in the hell could she have ever fallen in love with somebody who had absolutely no respect for anybody but himself? If she had known this was the kind of man she was marrying, she would never have said 'I do.'" Discovery, Pg. 127

"And my daddy doesn't wake up during the night. As hard as I try not to, I keep wondering why he had to get stuck with this stupid disease in the first place. Why couldn't God have given him some other affliction, one that wouldn't wreak havoc with his mind? My daddy has always been a strong man, the one man I respected, the one man I looked up to, the one man I expected all the others to live up to. I've always been his little girl, and I'm still his little girl." Venus in Virgo, Pg. 154

"Savannah sipped at her second margarita, thinking: This woman is pitiful. Too hard up. But she liked Robin, mostly because she was apparently quite resilient, openly honest, and totally unaware of how dense she was. She ran her mouth a mile a minute, no doubt about that, because Savannah had already smoked three cigarettes in the thirty-five minutes they'd been sitting here." Happy Hour, Pg. 166

"It was amazing to her how some women could be so stupid. They make up all kinds of excuses for a man after he's treated them like dirt; apologize for his revolting behavior; and take him back after he's broken their fucking hearts - so he can break them again. And this is supposed to be love? This is supposed to be healthy? This is supposed to be the way to live your life with a man?" Happy Hour, Pg. 168

"I know one thing: if a man of mine ever left me for a white girl, I'd blow him to kingdom come. Simple as that." Happy Hour, Pg. 176

"What's the problem? Gloria wondered, as she turned out the light. Why are we all out here by ourselves? Are we just going to have to learn how to live the rest of our lives alone or make do with inferiors like Russell and John and maybe even the Michaels of the world? Happy Hour, Pg. 180

"The fact that Herbert was married didn't bother her. As a matter of fact, Bernadine thought, as she turned the Cherokee into her driveway and pressed the Genie, she was glad he was married, because this way she wouldn't have to worry about what to do with him after she was finished." Happy Hour, Pg. 180

"Oh, you think I'm in a frame of mind to be job hunting? My marriage is over; I'm stuck in a big-ass house I can't afford and may have to move; my devoted husband has left me for some white cunt, and he's out there having the time of his fucking life, living like a goddamn bachelor, and he's probably fucking his brains out right this minute; and I'm



sitting here with my girlfriend on a Friday night, going fucking crazy because I don't know what the fuck is happening to my life and I have no fucking idea what the future holds for me and my kids because I never had to think about so much shit at once until now!" Freedom of Expression, Pg. 188

"From what I hear, girl, it's rough everywhere. All you see on the cover of women's magazines every single month is how bad it is. For white women too. They change the titles, but it's always the same stuff. I know most of 'em by heart: The New Dating Game, Will I Ever Meet a Decent Guy?, The Ideal Man: Is He Out There?, Spot Mr. Wrong, How to Avoid the Tender Trap, One Hundred Places to Look for a Man: In Places You'd Never Guess. And so on and so on." Steam, Pg. 196

"It's not *that* rough. The media want us to believe this shit. I work for 'em. I know how effective it is. The deal is, men are just pussies. They're scared to make the first move because they're too worried we might want their asses and then they'd have to stop playing games, grow up, and act like men. That's what they're terrified of. It's not *us*." Steam, Pg. 196

"I mean, it's as if they're automatically assuming they're our next victim, a target we've picked out, so they act distant, sometimes downright cold, to keep you at bay. Some of them accuse you of being too aggressive or get downright intimidated if you say more than three words to them. I guess they still think it's the fifties, when a man was expected to make the first move. But hell, if we had to hold our breath waiting for them to say something to us, we'd suffocate." Steam, Pg. 197

"You can *have* being married. It's not all it's cracked up to be. And believe me, Glo, you're probably better off being single. You just don't know it.' *All marriages aren't bad, Bernie.*' 'I didn't say they were, but it's so much bullshit you have to deal with, it's not worth it. Take it from me.' *Sometimes people marry the wrong person.*' 'Yeah, but how the hell are you supposed to know that until after you marry the motherfucker?' *Good point,*" Control, Pg. 215

"You know what? You black bitches are all alike. First you complain that don't nobody want your asses or know how to treat you, and then when a man shows a genuine interest in you, you act simple. And y'all wanna know why we go out with white women.' I guess this was supposed to hurt my feelings, but it didn't. A white woman could have his sorry ass." It Ain't About Nothin', Pgs. 240-241

"We want to continue to brainstorm in doing things that are of concern to and will benefit black women. Without us, there'll be no future for our children, and without our children, there'll be no future families. BWOTM, Pg. 250

"That was some rotten shit to pull, Russell. Low. And what did you tell me last time? That you still loved me, that you knew you'd made a mistake and you'd try to remedy the situation. You said, 'Just hold on a minute,' isn't that what you said? You motherfucker. And here I was with your sorry ass for two whole years and you were



supposed to be so in love with me and had me believing that shit for the longest."  
Rebounding, Pg. 266

"I know I shouldn't give a damn, but I can't help it. Just because you break up with somebody doesn't mean you stop loving them. Looks like it wasn't too hard for you to get over me, though, was it? This is some cold cruel shit to pull on somebody you split up with less than a year ago." Rebounding, Pg. 266

"As far as Bernadine was concerned, they'd had a good time, so what was he complaining about? The only thing she wanted from him was between his legs. She assumed that Herbert must've thought he was giving her more than that. He was probably hoping she'd fall madly in love with him and go crazy. But she hadn't. Herbert didn't have a clue that on those dry nights when Bernadine needed to get her parts oiled, she simply knew who to call. She used him. But so what? That's what they'd been doing to women for years, she thought. Taking advantage of us. Killing Time, Pgs. 274-275

"Charles has scarred my heart, my fucking world. This is not the kind of shit you forget about in a few weeks. You don't just get over it. You can't wake up and pretend it never happened, because it *did* happen. I've got feelings. And right now they hurt. And he's the cause of it. All I want to know is this: What happened to all the pride, the tenderness, the love and compassion, black men are supposed to show *us*? I thought we were supposed to be a prized 'possession.' How are we supposed to feel beautiful and loving and soft and caring and gentle and tender and compassionate and sensitive, when they treat us like shit after we surrender ourselves to them? Would somebody tell me that?"  
To Heaven and Back, Pg. 372

"If I don't do anything else right, I'm going to do this right. I'll finally have somebody I can love as hard as I want to. Somebody who needs *me*. Hopefully, I'll have at least eighteen years to get used to the idea. And whenever I have any questions, or any doubts, I can always ask Gloria or Bernadine. They always know what to do." The Weight of All Things, Pg. 401

# Adaptations

An abridged, two-cassette edition of *Waiting to Exhale* was published in 1992 by Penguin-High Bridge Audio. The reader is Terry McMillan. An unabridged, eleven-cassette edition was published in 1992 by Books on Tape.

The reader is Dorothy Gray.

A motion picture version was released in 1995 by Twentieth Century Fox, directed by Forest Whitaker with Terry McMillan as co-executive producer. McMillan wrote the screenplay in collaboration with Ron Bass. Whitney Houston starred as Savannah, Angela Bassett as Bernadine, Lela Rochon as Robin, and Loretta Devine as Gloria. The supporting cast of men included Gregory Hines as Marvin. The spirit of the novel is preserved in the film, although the storyline is altered for reasons of structure. Unlike the novel, the film opens with Bernadine's discovery that her husband has left her for a white woman. The direction was conceived from the perspective of maintaining a careful balance among male characters in order to forestall the impression that almost all are woefully inadequate, and to imply that the female characters are also responsible for making bad choices.

## Key Questions

McMillan's fiction should provoke stimulating discussions because it engages themes of relationships and the problems that arise from them, among women, genders, and races.

Waiting to Exhale could readily lend itself to enlightening discussion of the portrayed tug between white and African American cultures. The group might consider how issues of alienation might be resolved. Another good line to pursue is to what extent the novel's thematic elements and characters have a universal appeal.

Discussion groups may find it useful to compare Waiting to Exhale with a novel from an earlier period in African American literature. The particular exploration of themes of feminism and gender relations should prove fruitful.

Groups might read a novel such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), for purposes of comparison of concepts and techniques.

1. Men in this novel are known solely through the women's point of view.

To what extent might the women also be responsible for the bad relationships they complain of?

2. Are the chapters written in firstperson narration more or less effective than the others? Why does McMillan choose to switch back and forth between first- and third-person points of view?

3. By the novel's end, Bernadine and Gloria each seem to have achieved a happy relationship with a man. Are they doing something right that Savannah and Robin are not? Or is luck the primary factor?

4. What does Bernadine's house symbolize?

5. For most of the novel the main male in Gloria's life is her son, Tarik. Is he entirely satisfactory as a foil to the men his mother and her friends complain so much about?

6. Compare and contrast the personalities of the four protagonists. Are the characters drawn equally well? Does McMillan maintain an effective balance among them? Do they seem to blend in one voice?

7. The name of Gloria's shop, Oasis Hair, may apply to the desert setting of Phoenix, but does it have any symbolic meaning? In what ways might it be seen as a woman's place of spiritual refuge?

8. How effective is McMillan in developing the threads of each character's story, in spite of alternating points of view?



9. McMillan's novel has been called "dialogue-driven." In what ways is the dialogue an effective means of conveying thematic concepts and characterizations?

10. How important in *Waiting to Exhale* is the multitude of 1990s cultural references? With the passage of time — during which various brand names or magazines may be discontinued, musical tastes change, and so on — will the novel lose much of its impact? Or will the themes sustain it?



## Topics for Discussion

To what degree are the characters of Savannah, Bernadine, Robin and Gloria believable?

Is it possible for professional women to enter into such ill-fated personal relationships on a continuing basis?

Discuss the importance of the bond between the four women. How does the friendship between these black women possibly differ from friendships among white women?

What societal issues does the author attempt to address from the stories of Savannah, Bernadine, Robin and Gloria?

Which one of the four women can be considered the most self-confident by the end of the story? Why?

In what ways do the four main characters jeopardize their own happiness? Explain.

Why does Gloria feel that she is the most mature woman among the group of friends?

What advice could be offered to each of the women at the beginning of the novel that would impact the ending of the story?

## Literary Precedents

Critical commentary relates McMillan's work to a trend toward African American feminist literature that arose after the early 1970s. African American women realized that they were not represented in the literature of their male counterparts. Also, a perception that the 1960s feminist movement reflected an exclusively white perspective provoked such literature as Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). African American female writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote during the pre-World War II period, again became popular, along with the theme of gender relations. Hurston outlined a volatile relationship between a man and a woman in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). McMillan's second novel, *Disappearing Acts* (1989), honors Hurston in a character named after her, Zora Banks, who is involved in a similar relationship.

*Waiting to Exhale* treats a genderrelations theme, and follows also, to a degree, a trend of "male-bashing." Toni Morrison treated abusive African American gender relations in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The trend was confirmed with the appearance on Broadway of the work by Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976). Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, published in 1982, was controversial because of its harsh depiction of African American men. Critics compare McMillan's tough heroines to those of Morrison and Walker. At the same time, McMillan belongs to a trend away from the "protest" literature written for some decades by African American women, and men as well. The desperation of ghetto dwellers was a theme for Richard Wright, for example, who wrote in the 1940s.

In genre fiction, the theme of the ghetto echoed in the novels of Chester Himes. His *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), for example, draws from hardboiled detective tradition and portrays African Americans coping with neighborhood squalor and violence. In Walter Mosley's mystery series published in the 1990s, the African American detective Easy Rawlins prowls with difficulty the racism-blighted, dangerous streets of South Central Los Angeles. McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* represents a break from this type of genre fiction as well as from past "protest" literature, dealing instead with African American women for whom poverty is not a personal problem. The college-educated protagonists are economically upscale, appreciative of the richness of African American culture.

Critical commentary notes that massmarket fiction for a white middle-class readership has existed for years. McMillan provides a fresh, new voice for an African American middle class which has received scant attention in the past. She depicts men who leave much to be desired, but they are not violently abusive as in much past African American feminist fiction. And her "sisters" are well able to hold their own.





## Related Titles

In *Disappearing Acts*, McMillan treats the theme of gender relations through the characters of Zora Banks, a schoolteacher and aspiring singer living in Brooklyn, and Franklin Swift, an occasionally employed building contractor.

The two fall in love and conduct a mercurial romance. As in *Waiting to Exhale*, the characters include women who are friends, but the alternating points of view are those of Zora and Franklin.

*How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996) is the story of an affluent 42-year-old single mom in San Francisco whose antidote to stagnation is a luxury resort vacation in Jamaica. Stella sets her eye on, and attracts a 20-year-old Adonis.

His beauty and honesty challenge her perceptions of what is acceptable in pursuing men, and force her to reconsider her self-image and her life. Once she returns from her vacation, she realizes that her life has been satisfying only because she was conforming to what is expected of a woman her age.

The role reversal in this May-December romance provides McMillan with a foil to traditional male fantasies where women are objectified and ultimately controlled by men. Critics have pointed out the obvious autobiographical parallels between McMillan and Stella, both attractive women in their early 40s who meet a 20-something man on vacation, fall in love and move in together.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994