

# What About Grandma? Short Guide

## What About Grandma? by Hadley Irwin (Lee Hadley)

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## Overview

When the story of *What About Grandma?* begins Eve, Grandma's daughter, and Rhys, her granddaughter, expect to spend four weeks at Grandma's home in the process of disposing of her house and other possessions. They expect, also, to make certain that Grandma Wyn is comfortable in the nursing home where she has already been placed by her son Dave, Eve's brother.

Wyn has a broken hip caused by falling down the stairs in her home. It seems clear to Eve and Rhys that at her advanced age Wyn cannot be expected to live alone any longer and care for herself.

Everyone is in for a surprise, however, when on their first visit to the nursing home, Eve and Rhys find that Wyn has already checked out, is packed and determined to return to her own home. Previous plans have to be changed drastically. Wyn's house cannot be put up for sale as planned. No disposition can be made of Wyn's household and personal belongings.

Eve's and Rhy's plans for a four-week visit must be extended in order to try to cope with the numerous problems associated with Wyn's decision to resume living in her own home.

In the process of resolving all attendant problems, Hadley Irwin brings to *What About Grandma?*

the reader's attention many current problems in society associated with ageism. At the same time, attention is focused on the critical events of terminal illness and dying. Concomitant with exploration of these major concerns, the novel provides insights regarding many other present-day dilemmas. Included among these are the problems often associated with growing up in one-parent families: love, loyalty, friendship, romance, jealousy, ecology, cultural roots, and independence. The fast-moving narrative is entertaining and absorbing at its most basic level. Higher levels of meaning are encountered by the perceptive reader who is presented with many values to ponder.

By the end of the story Rhys, Eve, and Wyn know a great deal more about themselves. Rhys grows up. Eve recognizes that she has spend most of her life being either a daughter or a mother with little thought about herself as an individual, and Wyn leaves a lasting legacy regarding the nature of endings as beginnings.

## About the Author

Hadley Irwin is the pen name of Lee Hadley and Ann Irwin. According to Hadley and Irwin, the name "Hadley Irwin" identified an entity that is separate from each individual. Both women are professors on the English faculty at Iowa State University. Both credit their students with having taught them that the same concerns, problems, and emotions are shared by younger and older adults alike. Ann Irwin, in addition, credits the rearing of her own children with having increased her sensitivity to the needs of young people. Lee Hadley attributes some of her insights regarding young people to memories of her own adolescence and her "survival of it."

Lee Hadley and Ann Irwin share similar backgrounds. Both grew up on farms in Iowa; both were teachers at junior high, high school, and college levels; both were born under the sign of Libra; both lead lives in which words are a major preoccupation, professionally and personally. As English professors, both are involved professionally in a world of words. As pastimes, both enjoy solving crossword puzzles and playing scrabble.

Ann Irwin was born on October 8, 1915 in Peterson, Iowa, the daughter of Benjamin Rees, a farmer and Mary Rees, a teacher. She received her bachelor's degree from Morningside College in 1937 and her master's degree from the University of Iowa in 1967. She married Keight C. Irwin in 1943 and is the mother of four children. She resides in Lake View, Iowa. Besides the books she has co-authored under the pen name of Hadley Irwin, she is the author or co-author of several other books.

Lee Hadley was born on October 10, 1934, in Eastham, Iowa, the daughter of Oren B. Hadley, a farmer, and Pearle Hadley, a housewife. She received her baccalaureate degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1956 and her master's degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1961. She resides in Madrid, Iowa, and is the author of several other books and one-act plays.

# Setting

The story of What About Grandma?

takes place in the small town of Preston, Colorado. Life in Preston, whose main street is "all of two blocks long," is like life in many small towns almost anywhere in the United States. Residents of Preston have lived there most of their lives and they know and trust their neighbors. Grandma's doors, for instance, are never locked. Preston is not only a small town but a reasonably affluent one, and Grandma is a lady of considerable financial means. She owns a large part of Preston, and she and her friends have lived lives that afforded time for pursuing their hobbies as well as for making a living.

For Rhys and Eve the prospect of staying all summer in Preston was not altogether dismal. Rhys was able to pursue her interest in golfing which she was prepared to do without companionship. Golfing, according to Rhys, "is like anything you really care about: reading, painting, writing. It's nice if you can share, but if you can't, the thing itself is important." Eve was able to continue work on her Ph.D. dissertation and both she and Rhys often swam in the lake and sunned on the beach.

Most of the action in the story occurs at or near Wyn's house which, in a sense, is a prototype of real or imagined views of the nature of grandmothers' homes. Wyn's house is large and is distinguished by a "big glass front door flanked by stained glass panels that made a rainbow on the hallway floor even on dark days." The house has five bedrooms, a sun porch, a big wraparound front porch, an attic, a basement, a fireplace and a winding stairway. The house is a perfect setting for nurturing daydreams, explorations, aspirations and, eventually, memories of childhood. There are intimations of warmth, safety and security in the fragrances emanating from the big kitchen, in the heavy dark paneling everywhere and, even, in the big, heavy and "ugly" furniture. In the yard are the ubiquitous elm trees and a white rock driveway. Behind the house is a large lake with a beach. Wyn's house and the small town of Preston are in sharp contrast to the turbulent emotions experienced by the principal characters in the story during a period of one summer.

## Social Sensitivity

Several phenomena affecting present-day society are treated in *What About Grandma?* These include one-parent families as a result of divorce, communication across generations, aging, terminal illness, and death. All of these major themes are treated with understanding, good taste and without sensationalism. *What About Grandma?* can be recommended for reading by both girls and boys from approximately ages eleven and twelve years and upward. It can also be recommended for reading by parents or teachers to children. It can be helpful to youth faced with specific problems related to the major themes. It has the potential for placing several problems facing young people into a perspective that is rational and satisfying to the reader.



# Literary Qualities

Even though it has a relatively simple plot, *What About Grandma?* provides the reader with an engrossing experience. The plight of Grandma is the major conflict about which all other events revolve. On the way to resolution of the major problem, several unexpected developments take place.

These developments require much soul-searching among the principal characters. When Grandma decides not to spend her last days in a nursing home, her daughter and her granddaughter are forced to see themselves and Grandma in a new perspective.

Rhys is forced to determine her real position in a family in which she is called upon to take sides. Eve is forced to try to understand her relationship with her daughter and with her mother. Most important, she is faced with the prospect of deciding who she really is. The plot, simple and tight, provides continuity and suspense in the story.

The major characters in the story are realistic. Neither Rhys, Eve nor Wyn are all good nor are all their traits admirable. Rhys's excellent intentions are balanced by her reluctance to embrace with enthusiasm all the demands made upon her. While her love for her mother and her grandmother is indisputable, frequently she can see the human weaknesses of each. That Rhys' background experiences are limited can be seen in her tendency to regard Lew as the core of a possible lifelong and dependable romance. Rhys's attitude toward life and death changes as she becomes better acquainted with Grandma and Grandma's philosophy of life.

Her attitude toward her mother becomes more realistic and she shares critical experiences with her. Eve, while well-intentioned and concerned about Wyn's welfare, is conscious of the inconvenience caused by Grandma's illness and care. Eve, as is Wyn, is sometimes stubborn and at times her temper flares. While defying usual stereotypes about aging persons, Wyn is quite set in her own ways. She is accustomed to living along and to ordering her own life. She is no more interested in having Eve and Rhys live with her than they are anxious to disrupt their lives and establish a home in Preston. It is clear that each of these characters places a high value on privacy, each exercising her own independence.

Each of the additional characters in the story is made memorable through his or her own colorful nature. Virene is a massive woman whose entrances and appearances in the story are accompanied with a certain hustle and bustle. Although Virene is quite the opposite of Wyn in many ways, they have much in common. While they do not pursue the same hobbies, each is very involved with her own pursuits, Wyn with gardening, Virene with fishing. Both women have become financially independent largely through their respective business acumen. Lew does not depart from the prototype serious student he is depicted to be.

*What About Grandma?*



Reverend Badderley, while being an old and faithful friend to Wyn, maintains a degree of mystery about his innermost thoughts and experiences.

The natures of the characters are illuminated by use of clear descriptions, but conversation is the vehicle to provide emphasis on the themes upon which they story is based. Rhys, the principal character, narrates the story and reports the various conversations in the standard first-person format.

Each character's manner of speaking, dialect, or regional expressions are reported faithfully. It seems perfectly natural that Virene would describe someone as being someone's "spitting image." It is in line with Grandma's personality that she would buy new clothes and explain "there is nothing like a new outfit to make you feel human. Makes you know you've got a body that's alive" and add "something else, "love" does the same thing." It is through Grandma's frequent references to food, customs, myth and use of phrases and quotations in the Welsh language that the reader becomes aware of her deeply imbedded cultural roots.

The technique of flashback is used skillfully as Rhys reflect on past events. Although brief, they provide information essential to an understanding of the current situation. These are also used to acquaint the reader with important experiences of the characters essential to understanding their present attitudes and concerns.

Grandma's terminal illness and eventual death are foreshadowed by events and thoughts expressed by the characters. The technique of foreshadowing helps to build suspense, at first slowly, but rising in its impact as the climax of the story approaches.

Death is described in the same general tone of the novel, and is treated in such a way that the reader can feel hopeful and uplifted. Rather than being presented as an ending, the author shows that the legacy of the departed one can mean a new beginning for the family.





## Themes and Characters

The pervasive themes and several less dominant ones of *What About Grandma?* are portrayed through the actions, personalities, and communication among the principal and minor characters of the story. The major characters are believable and likable. The situations with which they cope are ones with which most readers can readily identify. Rhys, her mother Eve, and her grandmother, Wyn, representing three generations in a family, struggle with problems of loyalty, communication, attaining a measure of independence and privacy, and generally understanding each other. Rhys, Eve, and Wyn are well-rounded characters, and their actions, thoughts, and conversations convey ideas stimulating readers' reflection on the themes of the novel.

Rhys is the main character and the first-person narrator of the story. At age sixteen, she typifies many qualities of girls her age. She is open to new experiences. She reflects on previous experiences trying to make sense of them. She has become stoic and acceptant of her status as the only child in a one-parent family. She tries to understand her mother whom she not only loves but also likes and with whom she sometimes disagrees. Occasionally, the roles of Rhys as daughter and Eve as mother seem to become reversed. At such times, Rhys advises and tries to help her mother with some of their problems. Although she wishes she had had more experiences as a child with her grandmother, Rhys remembers fondly the ones that she did have. She sees her grandmother as a viable human being whose worth has not become diminished by age. A keen observer, Rhys ponders the relationship between her mother and her grandmother that sometimes forces her to play the role of a "go-between."

Through conversations with her mother, Rhys comes to realize that her mother has found, as she has found, that it is not easy to be a daughter. She also finds that it is not unusual for mothers and daughters to find themselves in competition with each other.

Rhys reflects on her relationships with Kim, her childhood friend, and with her father and his new family, and wonders about the roles of males and females in families and in society.

When Rhys meets Lew, she believes for awhile that she is being launched into her first romantic experience. She finds herself suspicious and jealous of her young, beautiful mother in whom she feels Lew might be developing an interest.

Wyn defies stereotyped notions of what grandmothers are like. One of the strongest characters in the story, Wyn is talented, strong-willed and used to being in control of her own life and the lives of others close to her. She is daring and competitive, given to doing things at least once in order to see if she can do them. The single painting that hangs on her living room wall, for example, is the one and only painting she has done, just to prove that she could do it. Through Wyn's devotion to her herb garden and other living plants, the theme of ecology is introduced. Wyn's aversion to cut flowers and artificial settings for plants is clearly expressed. "It's like keeping animals in a zoo. Things should be where they naturally belong" she tell Rhys. "Plants shouldn't be stuck



in a clay pot, dribbled up with aluminum foil and held with plastic sticks." At another time she declares, "Gardening is the process of growth, not the product." Wyn's attitude toward aging can be inferred from her statement that "age isn't measured in years. Look at the trees, They're measured in growth rings." Wyn is proud of her cultural heritage, her Welsh descent. This pride is evident in several ways. For example, one of her favorite games played first with her own children and later with Rhys required her to pretend she was a Welsh witch dancing and singing the Welsh ditty: "The sprites of Glyn Mawddy will wring my old neck if anyone discovers I'm Twtti Wyn Hec."

She delights in making Welsh cakes called "Pice ar y Maen" and, occasionally, quotes an adage in Welsh: "Amser i blannu, ac amser i dynnu y peth a blannwyd," explaining that "it means a time to plant and a time to pluck out the things that were planted."

Eve is forty-two years old, beautiful, efficient, self-contained and self-controlled. That she is concerned with improving her station in life is evident in her determination to complete her Ph.D. dissertation despite the unexpected events she is required to face.

She is preoccupied with seeing to her mother's safety and contentment. She has spent a large portion of her life trying to please her mother and provide for her own daughter's needs. She has reflected little on the nature of her own needs and desires. Her love for her mother becomes evident in her behavior when the various crises involving Wyn become pressing matters.

Her love for Rhys is apparent in the patience and understanding with which she meets the challenges inherent in trying to guide a teen-age daughter.

Virene, Wyn's long-time friend, is colorful and even humorous in many instances. Principally, however, she and Wyn share a friendship marked by consistent care, loyalty, and faithfulness that has endured over a period of forty years. Love and devotion also mark the relationship between Wyn and the Reverend Badderley, called "Wid" affectionately. Wid and Wyn share a long-time relationship that is obviously more than, and different from, that ordinarily shared by a minister and a parishioner. Evident in this relationship is a kind of honesty and frankness that sometimes erupt in angry words yet do not upset the relationship.

Lew is Virene's son who attends medical school and works in the pro shop on the golf course during summers. In the process of pursuing their common interest in golf, Lew and Rhys become fond of each other. Lew is twenty-six years old, too old to be considered a suitable boyfriend of Rhys.

Perhaps Lew is too young to be considered a suitable suitor for Eve, but Rhys becomes jealous when she suspects her mother and Lew may be interested in each other.

Many kinds of love are apparent in *What About Grandma?* Through Rhys's reflections, it is clear that she loves Kim, her childhood friend and playmate, left behind when Rhys and her mother go to Preston. The special kind of love shared by parents, grandparents and their children is shown in the conversations, thoughts and actions of Rhys, Eve, and



Wyn. Virene and Wyn love each other in the special way of old friends grown tolerant and familiar with each other throughout the years.

The love shared by Wyn and Wid provide strength for Rhys and Eve when they must realize the reality of Wyn's terminal illness and death. The collective wisdom of Wyn and Wid help to make the crises more bearable. According to Wid, "we scream our way into the world and leave it with a sigh and who's to say which takes more strength." Wid assures Rhys that "nothing beautiful happens only once."

Wid assures her that endings or beginnings are scarcely distinguishable from each other.

When the story ends, the two sets of mothers and daughters have found each other and have also found themselves. The family recognizes the depth of the love that binds them together.

Rhys gains a clear picture of her past and future and realizes that in this one eventful summer she has grown up.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Rhys is out of school for the summer and has not seen her grandmother for a number of years, yet she is reluctant to spend even four weeks at Grandma's house. What did Rhys think she would rather do during the summer?
2. In flashbacks, we are acquainted with Kim. Why did Rhys dislike leaving Kim for the summer? What was the special relationship between Kim and Rhys?
3. Although Kim does not appear in the story as a character in the present conflict, the reader becomes very much aware of Kim as a real person. What techniques did the author use to make Kim a realistic character?
4. Rhys entertained hopes for working at a resort in Colorado for the summer. What was her real reason for wanting a job? Was this reason different from that she shared with her mother?
5. One of the conclusions of the novel is that Rhys grew up during the summer. What does it mean to grow up? Are critical events essential for growing up?
6. Rhys and Eve, her mother, shared a very special relationship. Are they closer as mother and daughter than teen-agers and their mothers tend to be? What are some of the factors that accounted for the type of relationship shared by Rhys and Eve?
7. The relationship between Wyn and Wid was somewhat mysterious. What were some of the characteristics of this relationship that made it different from that usually shared between a minister and a parishioner?
8. Why does Rhys become upset when she suspected that there maybe an attraction developing between Eve and Lew?
9. Identify some of the events in the novel that showed that Grandma was particularly sensitive to the preservation of the environment.
10. How did the town of Preston, Colorado differ from large urban communities in terms of the types of people who lived there, the businesses and hobbies of the residents?
11. What were some of Eve's behaviors that showed she was more like a child in the presence of her mother than like an adult who determines her own actions and behavior?
12. Grandma often referred to her Welsh background and her involvement with it was apparent in many of the habits she had and the phrases she liked to use. Why, at the advanced age, was she still so preoccupied with experiences of her earlier life?
13. Virene and Wyn were very different in the impressions the townspeople had of them. What accounted for the deep friendship that existed between the two?



14. Wyn spoke of endings as beginnings. Can death, commonly thought of as end, be interpreted as a new beginning? For whom?

15. Eve and Rhys obviously strive to be different from each other. The same can be said of Wyn and Eve. Is it common for daughters to try to be as different from their mothers as possible?

When, if ever, do they become willing to be like each other?

16. The relationship between Rhys and Lew had many strikes against its likelihood for becoming permanent.

What were some indications that the relationship between them would not outlast the summer?

17. Although they do not appear in What About Grandma?

person in the story, Rhys had formed many of her ideas about gender roles from her association with Kim, her relationship with her father, and her knowledge of her uncle, Dave. How did Rhys interpret the roles of males and females in society and in families?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Hadley Irwin is the pen name for the authors of *What About Grandma?*

Explain the differences, if any, between a "pseudonym" and a "pen name."

Discuss some of the problems and advantages of two authors who write together as one. Examine the lives of Lee Hadley and Ann Irwin and explain why they would likely share similar thoughts, writing interests, and writing styles that would enable them to write successfully together.

2. In recent years, family reunions have become more prominent in American society. What indications are there in *What About Grandma?* that Wyn believed in maintaining family traditions and exploring family roots? Would Wyn have supported the idea of a family reunion? Why or why not?

3. Wyn was definitely opposed to being placed in a nursing home. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages for placing an elderly, ill family member in a traditional-type nursing home? What was the major fear that Wyn held about life in a nursing home? What are some of the presentday types of residences for elderly people that might have been more appealing to Wyn?

4. The characters in *What About Grandma?* tend to be good people, yet good people tend also to have sides to their personalities that might be less than desirable. Was this true of the characters in the story? Make a list of some of the traits of Rhys, Wyn, Eve, Lew, Virene, and Wid that showed them to be capable of some of the frailties generally found in real people.

5. Each of the major characters in *What About Grandma?* had deep interest in some particular activity or hobby.

Identify the interests of each character.

What are some of the advantages and disadvantages in pursuing a particular interest in a very concentrated manner?

6. While *What About Grandma?* is a serious treatment of serious themes and events, there are several instances of humor in the novel. Identify these and explain whether they are presented as humor for the sake of humor or if they actually convey serious ideas.

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Irwin, Ann" In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 38.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1985: 90.

Contains information about books written by Ann Irwin under her own name and others co-authored with Bernice Reida. Titles of the books indicate Irwin's interest in a broad range of problems faced by many teen-agers.

Constant, Helen. "The Image of Grandparents in Children's Literature."

*Language Arts* 54 (January 1977): 33-40. This article contains information on research studies that focus on how the topic of aging is treated in children's literature. Cites studies showing how some books present positive views of old age. Wyn in *What About Grandma?* presents a model of an aged person living a vigorous and diverse lifestyle.

Davis, Gary L. "A Content Analysis of Fifty-seven Children's Books with Death Themes." *Child Study Journal* 16, 1 (1986): 39-54. This analysis of the contents of fifty-seven selected books identifies the kinds of information presented about death in books for children. Teachers and parents can use it as a guide for analyzing the way death is treated in *What About Grandma?* Hadley Irwin's treatment of the death of Grandma is in line with the questions usually answered in books dealing with the subject and is particularly sensitive with regard to feelings expressed by the dying person.

"Irwin, Ann (Abelle Bowen)." In *Contemporary Authors*. Vol. 101. Edited by Frances C. Locher. Detroit: Gale, 1981: 231. This is an autobiographical sketch by Ann Irwin on aspects of her personal life, including family, names of her children, career, and personal interests.

"Irwin, Hadley." In *The Elementary School Library Collection*. 18th ed. Edited by Lauren K. Lee. Williamsport, PA: Brodart, 1992: 613. Contains a synopsis of Hadley Irwin's *Moon and Me*.

Gillespie, John T., and Corinne J. Naden, eds. *Best Books for Children*.

New York: R. R. Bowker, 1990: 207, 225, and 233. This reference contains synopses of several novels by Hadley Irwin including: *Bring to a Boil and Separate*, *I Be Somebody*, and *The Lilith Summer*.

## Related Titles

What About Grandma? is one of several novels written by Hadley Irwin that focus specifically on various types of human relationships, particularly those between persons of younger and older generations. The novels are further related in their common emphasis on honesty, understanding, and use of humor to highlight pervasive themes.

Each novel enables the reader to develop insights regarding problems encountered by young people in the process of growing up. The *Lilith Summer* and *Bring to a Boil and Separate* focus on themes related to those developed in *What About Grandma?*

Major themes in *The Lilith Summer* include respect for age and the meaning of love. Ellen, at age twelve thinks she is being paid to look after Lilith, the elderly best friend of her deceased grandmother, while Lilith, the elderly best friend of her deceased grandmother, thinks she is being paid to look after Ellen. Each person soon finds out that each is being paid to look after the other. Following their initial resentment, the relationship develops into one in which each person develops respect and affection for the other. Mutual treasures of the young and the old are shared and enhance their respective lives.

In *Bring to a Boil and Separate*, the major themes include divorce of a parent and the acceptance of change between best friends. The main characters, Katie Warren, initially fears the changes that will come about as a result of her parents' pending divorce.

Katie's worries are even more severe because of the anticipated four-weeks long absence of her best friend and confidante. After a series of critical events and by story's end, the friendship of the two best friends is more secure than ever and the two look forward to four years together in high school. As a result of the tumultuous events of the summer, Katie develops a measure of increased self-understanding, finally accepting her family's situation and, most important, herself.

*Moon and Me* highlights the themes of boy/girl friendships and what it means to grow up. The story involves E. J., a fourteen-year-old girl who has traveled the world and has lived in many fabulous places. She does not look forward to spending six months on her grandparents' farm while her mother and father are away because she perceives life on her grandparents' farm as dull, boring, and unsophisticated. But the stay on the farm brings several surprises including a possible romance. E. J. gives much thought to the differences between friendship and romance and discovers that the boundary between the two can change in unexpected and delightful ways.

*The Lilith Summer* has been adapted to a film with a teacher's guide by AIMS (1984). Most of the books by Hadley Irwin have been published in foreign countries including Denmark, Holland, Sweden, Canada, Great Britain, and France.





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