

# **When Women Were Birds Study Guide**

**When Women Were Birds by Terry Tempest Williams**

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## Summary

According to Terry Tempest Williams' memoir, "When Women Were Birds," Mormon women write journals and have children. Williams was shocked to discover that all the journals her mother had left to her were blank. Williams' memoir reflects her struggle to reconcile the meaning of the blank journals, as well as her search for her own unique voice.

Williams tells her readers that she began writing her book at age fifty-four, the same age her mother was when she died. Looking back on her life, Williams realizes how naive she once was and how she has matured since her mother's death. In her first chapter, Williams describes how her mother made a point of telling Williams she was leaving her journals to her. Her mother died all over again when Williams realized her mother had not recorded any thoughts on a single page of any of the books. Since those journals were blank she decided to use them to chronicle her own journey to discover her purpose in life as she puzzled through her mother's reasoning for not writing in the journals.

This beautifully written book includes a good deal of imagery that focuses on birds, wildlife, and nature. Williams describes the formative moments of her life as she discusses her discovery of the many things her mother's blank journals represented. Her experiences include almost losing a job as a school teacher because she shared her ideas as an environmentalist with her students. Williams worked on a political conservation committee where she decided that she was not one to argue policy and work against other environmental groups in favor of her own. She describes her decision of going back to school rather than having children as a taboo among her Mormon family. She also talks about her own illness and its possible effect on her ability to speak and write. She refers to the title she chose for her book "When Women Were Birds" in the conclusion of her story as she says she must learn to greet each day and night with joy. Williams believes that long ago women were birds. As birds, they knew how to greet life with joy. Modern women have forgotten how to celebrate the joy in life. This has caused them to suffer.



# Chapters I - IV

## Summary

In Chapter I, Terry Tempest Williams writes about her mother's death. Her mother told Williams she was leaving all her journals to her. After her mother died, Williams decided to read the journals. All of the journals were blank.

In Chapter II, Williams describes how seeing the blank journals was similar to experiencing her mother's death again. Now that she is fifty-four, the age her mother was when she died, she realizes how young her mother was at her death. She knows that her mother's abilities and desires would always be secrets because she did not write about them in the journals. Williams begins her discussion of voice by writing that her mother's voice was the first one she heard.

In Chapter III, Williams describes how much of a person's being has evolved from the sea. She then describes the importance of journals for Mormon women. Keeping a journal was one of two requirements for the women. Having children was the second.

In Chapter IV, Williams describes her early years when her family lived in California while her father was in the U.S. Air Force. Her mother took her to the beach daily. She fell in love with the ocean. She recognized the relationship between her mother and the ocean, as well as mothers and water in general. She believes that her mother passed hunger and thirst to her. She remarks that she now lives in the desert and is thirsty every day for the solitude that water always brought to her. She has decided she will write her own story in her mother's journals.

## Analysis

"When Women Were Birds" is nonfiction. As Terry Williams relates her memoir, she explores finding your "voice," as it refers to creating order out of personal experiences in life. Williams narrates the important aspects of her life that led to the development of her own voice. Williams begins her discussion of voice by describing the first voice she heard, that of her mother. Even before she was born, Williams heard her mother's voice. She describes it as a lullaby.

The number fifty-four is important in the book. Williams' mother was fifty-four when she died. Williams was the same age as her mother when she decided she wanted to write this memoir, which contains fifty-four chapters. Williams chooses to number her chapters so the next to last chapter is fifty-four. The Roman numerals for fifty-four are LIV. Her final chapter does not have a legitimate chapter number. Instead, Williams plays on the Roman numeral LIV and adds an "E." The title of the final chapter is LIV(E).



Williams introduces her thoughts on silence by incorporating a quote in which a writer speaks of both natural and unnatural silences. Williams shares that her mother was strong in her silences. Her mother's blank journals were a form of silence.

These first chapters example the abundance of imagery, which Williams uses throughout her book. Williams refers to the thirst that her mother left to her. She says that she lives in the desert. This desert is both literal (because she lives in Utah) and figurative( because she feels thirst from the lack of knowledge about things she wants to know better).

Williams offers the memoir's commentary on relationships between women, especially mothers and daughters, in this section. She discusses how the role of a mother to her children is to make it appear that her life focuses only on the children. For this reason, the children do not get to know their mother as a person. Williams had hoped she would be able to get to know the hidden side of her mother when she read the journals. However, she was disappointed because the journals turned out to be blank.

The Mormon faith comes into play in this section of Williams' story. After Williams realizes her mother's journals are all blank, she notes that her mother had neglected a requirement of Mormon women, which was to keep a journal. According to the church, the journals are supposed to be a nod to the past as well as to the future.

Williams explains the title of the book in this section. She refers to a time when "women were birds." They existed both in the light of day and in the dark of night. As birds, the women were free to fly at night and to explore themselves beyond the realm of their daytime role as a mother.

## Vocabulary

comprehended, conceit, inviolable, liminal, undulating, vistas, oscillations, mesmerizing



# Chapters V - IX

## Summary

In Chapter V, Williams writes in one of her mother's journals. She uses a pencil because she likes the idea that she can erase her words completely. She provides a complete definition of erasure and a list of synonyms for the word. She remembers her mother's words that she was leaving her journals to Williams. Williams compiles a list of things that her mother's empty journals represent to her.

In Chapter VI, Williams remembers that the times her father was out of town with his work were like vacations for her family and her mother. They had time free from his intense presence. He was a doer. He loved the mountains and wilderness. He was a storyteller. Williams remembers sitting on his knee while she listened to him tell the story of Scarface. She remembers that her mother was also intense, but in a different way. Her mother had introduced Williams and her brother to Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf," an orchestral rendition of the fairy tale. As an adult, Williams realizes her mother encouraged their interest in the record so she could have some solitude. To Williams, the record was her first lesson in voice. It also helped her to learn about the balance of nature as well as the dignity and uniqueness of each animal. Through the recording, Williams believes her mother also taught her about the world. The lesson was that even though the world was a dangerous and frightening place, Williams and her brothers could survive their fears and make peace with the world.

In Chapter VII, Williams shares that to her grandmother, her field guides were her journals. Her favorite was "A Field Guide to Western Birds." Williams still owns her grandmother's copy of this book. Her grandmother had notated next to images of several birds when she first saw that particular species and where she was. Williams's grandmother gave Williams her own copy of this particular field guide when Williams was five. Even though her father shot birds for a hobby, Williams prayed for the birds.

In Chapter VIII, Williams shares with her reader some entries from her journal when she was fourteen. She and her grandmother were bird watching at their family's cabin in Utah. Her journal entry shares how her grandmother had turned to her and told her that they were part of nature. When she read her entry to her father, she only remembered him describing her words as "flowery."

In Chapter IX, Williams remembers that when she was in the fourth grade she almost lost her voice because she had a speech impediment, a lisp. Because the other students picked on her, she chose to be silent. Instead of being allowed to go going to recess, she had to take "tongue swallowing lessons" with Mrs. Parkinson. Mrs. Parkinson had Williams practice speaking without a lisp by reading poetry. She began to enjoy these exercises when she realized it mattered how each poem was spoken. Mrs. Parkinson taught Williams how to listen to words. She called the human voice an instrument. Williams believes that it was through these speech lessons that she gained



the love of words. She also believes it was through these early lessons that her voice found her.

## Analysis

Williams begins this section by talking about the differences between writing with a pen and a pencil. Getting rid of a word by erasing is important to her. To stress this importance she includes a full definition and a list of synonyms for "erasure." Williams also works through a list of the things that her mother's journals represent to her. Interestingly, many of the statements she makes in her list are conflicting. For instance, it seems the journals could not represent both the power of presence as well as the power of absence. Yet, to Williams, they do.

Williams discusses the early years of her life in this section. She describes the way her knowledge of voice and her own voice developed. She talks about the orchestral recording of "Peter and the Wolf" that her mother played for her and her brother when they were children. The recording taught her lessons about voice. First, she learned that everyone has a physical voice. Secondly, the world should hear each voice. She realized that she must learn to listen in order to hear the distinctive voices.

A disability in Williams' life led her down a path to her love of words. It was through her speech therapy during grade school that Williams believes she received her voice. Her teacher made her practice speaking without a lisp by reading poetry. Through reading aloud, Williams learned the beauty and the power of poetry. Before Williams began her speech therapy lessons, she had kept quiet to keep the other students from making fun of her. She says it was at this point she lost her voice, almost before she realized she had one.

Williams adds to the meaning of silence when she describes chosen silence and imposed silence. Remaining silent to avoid confrontation lowers self-confidence. Imposed silence is censorship. Neither type of silence is positive.

When Williams was a child, she started developing her love for nature and wildlife. Her father, who loved the wilderness, took her on walks through the mountains. Using the orchestral recording of "Peter and the Wolf," her mother taught her about the different voices of animals. Perhaps, even more important in Williams' development as a lover of nature was her grandmother's influence. Her grandmother taught her about birds. She gave Williams her own copy of a birding field guide. Her speech therapist gave her poems to read to practice her speech. In the poems, Williams saw themes in nature and culture, though she did not completely understand what they were saying at the time. The speech therapist also found poems about birds for Williams to read because she knew that Williams loved birds and would enjoy those poems.

## Vocabulary

constituted, articulated, niche, contemplating, effusive, impediment, diversion, elocution, ricocheting





# Chapters X - XVI

## Summary

In Chapter X, Williams remembers how her one-year-old great-niece, of Korean descent, picked among items to determine her future career a pencil representing a possible career in writing. Williams wondered about a fitting gift for the child. When she thought about giving the child a blank piece of paper, she remembers her mother teaching her and her brother how to write in invisible ink. This thought leads Williams to the idea that her mother used invisible ink to write her journals.

In Chapter XI, Williams remembered how air had fascinated her. The air contained stardust, evidence that people were made of stardust. Even though she could not see the air, she learned it was made of real things. Similarly, even though she could not see the words in her mother's journals, she knew there was substance.

In Chapter XII, Williams speaks of the way that indoor religion bored her as a child. In her opinion, truth was what she could see, hear, and touch. Nature was her religion. She describes the games she played with neighborhood children. Then, she writes about a white bird she saw perched in a tree. She recalls how she described it to her grandmother over the phone. From her description, her grandmother believed it was an albino robin. Williams reported the sighting to her local Audubon chapter. Since she was only eight-years-old, the Audubon Society did not consider her sighting legitimate.

In Chapter XIII, Williams experience with the robin makes her wonder what must be present in order for a person to have a voice. She knows she has had a voice for years through her journals. Her first journal was from her great grandfather at her baptism and acceptance into the Mormon Church. Even though this journal had a lock and key, Williams often wrote in code about things she wanted to be sure her parents or brother could not interpret. Once again, Williams reminds her reader that the Mormon faith expected a woman to keep a written journal. Through the course of her life, she had filled numerous journals with writing as well as feathers, flowers, pictures, and other keepsakes. Mothers were supposed to pass their journals down to their daughters. Williams was aware that her mother was a private person who did not want other people to know her thoughts. Williams realized that it made sense that her mother's journals were all blank. Williams, on the other hand, wanted others to read her journals and hear her voice. Even as she realizes her own desire to write, questions about her mother's empty journals continue to plague Williams.

In Chapter XIV, Williams remembers hearing a conversation between her grandmother (Mimi) and her mother about theology. Mimi took the stand that the Mormon Church was sexist and racist. Williams' mother asked Mimi never to criticize the church in front of Williams again. Williams spent the night with her Mimi, who calmly told Williams that her mother was about to leave the church.



In Chapter XV, Williams discusses how it is through conversation that changes come about. She says that even when the women in her family argued with one another, she felt safe and inspired by those women.

In Chapter XVI, when Williams got her period, her mother picked her up from school early. She made her a bath with rose petals.

## Analysis

Williams continues to describe her growing up years. She includes an experience that could be both a positive and a negative influence on her voice. As an eight-year-old, she spotted an albino robin. After hearing Williams' description of the bird, her grandmother had agreed that the bird was an albino. However, when Williams tried to report what she had seen to the local chapter of the Audubon Society, they would not consider her sighting legitimate because of her age. She learned at that point there were certain criteria that needed to be met for some people to believe that another person's voice was worthy of hearing. It was Williams' grandmother who told her that Williams did not need anyone to affirm what she knew to be the truth, but Williams still wondered what a person needed to have to make his voice count.

Williams includes a quote by Susan Howe about Emily Dickinson's choice to write her poems in secret, or silence, as both Williams and Susan Howe choose to describe Dickinson's writing style. Howe indicates that Dickinson may have chosen to write in silence because it allowed her to create without having to worry about power, gender, or voice. She was free to just write.

The commentary on women's relationships in this section includes Williams' relationship with older and younger generations in her family. For example, she carefully considered how she should approach her one-year-old great niece when the child chose a writing pencil from a group of objects. She told the child about the danger and joy of writing. Then, Williams wondered if it might have been more proper to give the child a blank piece of paper, just as her mother had given her blank journals. The blank journals had planted the idea in Williams that she could write her own story.

Williams' mother picked her up from school early the day that Williams got her period. It does not appear that it was because Williams felt bad but because her mother wanted to her daughter to think of the beginning of her womanhood as something to be celebrated. She fixed her daughter a special bath with rose petals as a way to communicate to her daughter that she was entering a new phase in her life.

The Mormon faith's role in Williams' life is expanded in this section of the memoir. She shares that indoor religion bored her. She believed in things that were tangible. Williams' comments that the only things she had done religiously through her life were writing in her journals and taking birth control are amusing. Williams kept her journals because she wanted to, not because it was an expectation of the church. The more Williams thought about how much she enjoyed keeping journals, she wondered more and more



why her mother's were blank. She suspected one of the reasons was because her mother was such a private person. She comes to the conclusion that her mother's blank journals were an act of defiance, perhaps against the church because it insisted that she write. Her mother saw her refusal to write as an act of aggression against those who wanted to delve into her personal thoughts It was also and act of modesty to keep people from knowing her personal and, perhaps, secret thoughts she wished to remain hidden.

Williams remembered that when she was a child she had heard her mother and Mimi (her paternal grandmother) discuss the Mormon religion. Mimi argued the Mormon Church was sexist and racist. They would not allow women to be priests. Men of color or with dark complexions could not serve as priests. She tried to impress upon her daughter-in-law that she would change and grow as a woman through the course of her life. She would come to realize, as she had, how limiting the Mormon Church was for women. Even though Williams' mother asked her mother-in-law not to say anything critical about the church again around Williams, Mimi told Williams with certainty after her mother left that Diane was thinking about leaving the church. It was as if she already knew that Diane would not allow herself to be ruled over by men forever. Notice also the security that Williams said she felt in the presence of her female relatives, even when they argued.

Williams compares birds and words. She uses a metaphor of how words fly out of a person's mouth never to return. If the words should return, she describes them as being caged in a poem or some other form of writing.

## Vocabulary

portend, arid, inherent, legitimately, embossed, polygamy, bequeathed, parity, subjugation, codified, embodied, emancipation, plausible, sovereignty



# Chapters XVII - XXI

## Summary

In Chapter XVII, Williams remembers speaking at a Mormon conference. Four generations of her female family were present. Her life had a feeling of uncertainty because her mother had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. She had two years to live. Her father retreated into his work while her mother retreated into herself. Williams sensed her mother felt she had to reinvent a role, or voice, for herself so she could heal and survive. At the same time, she needed to take care of her family. Williams watched as her mother immersed herself in reading and taking classes. Williams was also at the point in her life where she was trying to find a voice for herself. It was the time of the women's rights, civil rights, and environmental movements. She wore a silver bracelet that paid honor to a Vietnam captain who was listed as a POW/MIA. He was never found. The one day Williams skipped high school she went to see "Pink Flamingos," a show which she thought would be about birds. She was shocked to learn it was about a drag queen.

Church did not comfort Williams the way books did. She wanted to spend time with her family and was not interested in school activities. She came to the decision that "nature held the secret to harmony and unity." She wanted to be transformed like Gregor Samsa was in "Metamorphosis." Her line of thinking brings back to mind the statements she made at the conference. She knew she was rebelling against the church by testing ideas and experimenting with her own voice by saying she wanted to walk a path that would be her own.

Chapter XVIII is an extended metaphor that compares words on a page to ravens on snow. Even though her mother's journals were empty, Williams knows she wanted them read. She struggles with how to read them.

In Chapter XIX, Williams discusses her fear of silence. Now, she is forced to write about her mother's silence. She uses an example of John Cage's piano masterpiece 4'33" to describe the effect of silence on people. The intention of the piece was to challenge people to listen to the silence around them. Instead, people became angry because there was no music. Many left the concert. In the art world "White Paintings" and "White on White" were similar in that they were silent of images and colors. Some people said the works scared them. Williams compares these pieces with her mother's blank journals. She wonders if the journals are commenting that it was more important for her mother to spending time doing things rather than just writing about them.

According to Williams, silence gives a person a higher capacity for listening. She notes how Cage began composing by using quiet sounds during World War II. She believes Americans have been silenced by war. Instead of using their voices to speak out against suffering, they remain silent.



In Chapter XX, Mimi included Williams and her brother in her listening project in which she learned to identify birds by their calls. She believed she would go blind before she went deaf. Her line of thinking led Williams to think about musicians who played music with birds or used bird songs as the basis for their compositions. For Williams, birds not only became her compass point but also led her to her husband.

In Chapter XIX, Williams describes how she was working at Sam Weller's Bookstore one day when she heard a man whom she later learned was named Brooke Williams comment that his life's dream was to own all of the Peterson field guides. Williams told the man she already had them. They were married on June 2, 1975, in Salt Lake Temple.

A year before she had married, Williams had attended the Teton Science School, the first environmental education center in America. At the time, it was considered to be radical. Ted Major was the director of the school. He believed there needed to be laws to protect the environment. Ted put Williams in connection with David Raskin who helped Williams to get an environmental scholarship that allowed her to return to the Teton Science School for a summer project. She was the school's first intern. She remembers returning from a backpacking trip to see a skinned coyote hanging from the crossbar at the entrance of the school. Ted told her it had been put there by people who did not like what was happening at the Teton School. It was at this point when Williams made a vow with that dead coyote and another she had seen earlier at Gannett Peak not to remain silent.

## Analysis

This section describes the development of Williams's voice particularly as an environmentalist. Before she married, she attended school at Teton Science School. During an internship position, it was from a coyote she saw at the same point she and a group of students were backpacking that the boundaries for her between wilderness animals and humans dissolved. Another coyote had been skinned and hung on the crossbar of the entrance of the school. It was a symbol of hatred and disrespect for the animals. At this point, Williams decided that she would use her voice to speak for the animals.

Silence is an important idea as Williams spends a good deal of time talking about silence. She believes her mother's blank journals are the literary version of silence. She describes the way silence affects different people. Some people are made angry by silence, while some people are afraid of it. Other people are made uncomfortable by silence. Williams incorporates into her discussion of silence artists that have challenged people either by presenting works of music that were silent or works of art that were silent in that they contained no colors or images. The artists intended to teach the audience important lessons about silence through their works of art even though their audiences sometimes didn't appreciate the lessons they were being taught. Williams wonders if her mother were similarly trying to teach her some lesson through her blank journals.



In this section of the memoir Williams watches as her mother tries to define a new role for herself. She had been diagnosed with cancer for the first time. She was struggling to find a place where she could take care of both herself and her family. This is an example of the commentary the book makes on women's relationships. Williams' mother was trying to break out of the role of a woman as the primary caregiver for her family. She needed to find some way not only to take care of her family but also a way to take care of herself because she wanted to live long enough to see her children grown. The image of the quilt square and Williams' mother's description of what the square represents is especially significant in this chapter. Scraps that are left over make up the lives of women.

While speaking at a Mormon conference, Williams described both her ancestry and her sovereignty. By realizing that she had power over herself, she was breaking the pattern that had been followed by Mormon women through the years. It was her way of rebelling.

Birds are the focal point of a metaphor used by Williams in Chapter XVIII. She uses the image of ravens to represent words on a page. Meanwhile, a snow covered ground represents an empty page. In this section, the tone and style of writing is similar to a stream of consciousness as Williams moves from the idea of ravens on snow to the blank pages of her mother's journals to the fear that she feels when she considers these empty journals.

## Vocabulary

pristine, begets, eccentricities, asymmetrical, parody, solipsism, ambient, complacency, myriad, improvised, evocative, inconspicuous, procreation, charismatic, insatiable, rubric, mogul, martyred



# Chapters XXII-XXIV

## Summary

In Chapter XXII, Williams describes working conditions at the Carden School, a conservative school where she taught for the first time. She decorated her classroom before leaving for a two-week trip to Alaska. She returned to find that all of her decorations, including a bee hive and other articles she had hoped would spark her students' interest in nature, were gone. When she asked Mrs. Jeffs ( a school administrator) about the missing items, she learned that they were no longer there because the decorations cluttered the room and distracted the students. Mrs. Jeffs asked Williams not to refer to the subject she was teaching as biology. Her job was to teach science. Williams almost lost her job when she encouraged her students to swim on the floor while listening to the mating calls of whales. During the time Mr. and Mrs. Jeffs questioned her, they asked if she were an environmentalist. Because the students would miss her, the Jeffs allowed Williams to remain at the school, but they told her she could not bring her politics into the classroom. She went on to teach at that school for five years.

In Chapter XXIII, Williams' writing returns to her mother. She includes the personal note from a birthday card her mother sent to her on her twenty-fifth birthday. While she treasured the card, she had negative memories of that birthday because she was given a surprise party. A slide show of Williams' life had been shown which left her feeling bored with her own life. She decided to stop teaching, postpone having children, and enroll in graduate school. It was at this point in her life that Williams had decided that finding her voice was most important.

In Chapter XXIV, Williams refers to Changing Woman, a character in Navajo mythology. She discusses how she finally began to feel comfortable in the desert after she stopped searching for a story there and accepted it.

## Analysis

It is a turning point in Williams' life when she realizes that finding her own voice is more important than having children or continuing to teach. She believes she will discover her voice by attending graduate school. She had taught in a conservative school for five years. The school's policies had muffled her desire and her vow to speak out in support of the animals. After a disastrous birthday party, Williams realizes her own life bored her. She wants to do something to correct the path she believes her life is taking.

One of the struggles that Williams faces with her membership in the Mormon Church is abiding by the commandment of the church that women should have babies. Williams is so distressed by her inability to decide what direction her life should take that her mother fears she is depressed. Williams feels that having children and a family will limit



her ability to find her voice. She also knows if she decides to forego having children in order to try to find her own voice she will be breaking out of the accepted role the church had laid out for women. She feels claustrophobic, bored, and unfulfilled when she attends church. In the end, Williams decides to be true to herself and break out of the accepted mold women were supposed to fill even though she knows her decision will create a void between herself and the church, as well as between herself and her family.

Williams learns from the experiences she has included in this section of her life's story that a person's voice is often found in discovering one's passion. She believes her voice had developed more deeply when she discovered her love of teaching and the way that profession gave her an opportunity to speak for the animals, even though her attempts to speak were somewhat hindered.

Also significant in this section of the book are Diane's words to Williams in a birthday card. She encourages her daughter to try to find her own way in the world. It is perhaps these words that give Williams the courage to break from the church's expectations of her and find her own path.

## Vocabulary

protocol, staunch, mesmerized, pedagogy, sonorous, emanated, burgeoning, polemical, nostalgia, emulate, pantheon, cyclic, catamount, arroyo





# Chapters XXV-XXIX

## Summary

In Chapter XXV, Williams seeks to answer the age old question of how humans are to give a voice to creation. She shares some information about personal vows she and her husband exchanged before their wedding day. As she and Brooke stood before the congregation representing Eve and Adam, Williams' mind betrayed her. Inappropriate words kept coming into her mind. She shares with her reader that she remembered even as a child having trouble making her mind behave. She takes this story one-step further as she describes how her Mimi showed her through the book "Creation Myths" that Eve was not necessarily the evil creature the church made her out to be. Eve was one who chose betrayal and sin in order to discover her own voice. She shares with her reader how she is writing her own creation story — that of the creation of her voice — in her mother's journals.

The

In Chapter XXVI, Williams speaks of her first sexual encounter with Brooke as well as the power that a woman's sexuality holds. She uses as an illustration the portrait "The Origin of Life" in which she saw not only herself but also her mother and her grandmother.

In Chapter XXVII, Williams describes the way that the opening of the first family planning and birth control centers affected America. Margaret Sanger, the woman who opened that clinic was arrested for speaking out for women. Williams says that birth control is one of the things that gave her her voice. Although she never faced a situation where she had to consider an abortion, she was glad that was a choice that was open to her. She speaks of the cyclical life of women as they realize when they get their period that they are not carrying a baby. They also have to realize that each time they have sex they have the opportunity to become pregnant, a condition of which they will be unsure until their period comes again. She describes how sex is a spiritual act for women. She believes that if a man knew a woman could not forget that each sexual encounter with a man might result in a child he would love her differently.

In Chapter XXIX, Williams dreamed she was told she would go to Africa. She was handed some seeds. In 1985, she did go to Nairobi. She listened to Professor Wangari Maathai talk at the UN Decade for Women Forum. She focused on combating the problem of deforestation by encouraging women to plant trees. Since the forests were being burned for charcoal, the African women had trouble finding firewood to cook meals. Maathai became a mentor to Williams and helped her to start the Green Belt Movement of Utah. She remembered that Brooke's father had been interested in her work and had invited her to lunch. She asked him for help in her movement that he could give her through the church. In exchange, he asked Williams to help him bring Brooke back into the church. She was not to tell Brooke of her conversation with his



father. Williams found herself in a position that threatened her integrity. As a result, Williams and her workers with the Green Belt Movement raised the money themselves. Maathai died from ovarian cancer. Williams was stunned to tears when she learned of Maathai's death. She cried outside until she looked up and saw a hummingbird hovering in front of her. Williams was not surprised to recognize the bird as one of Maathai's favorites.

## Analysis

Williams talks about women's sexual health and reproduction in this section of the memoir. Williams stresses that without birth control, every time a woman has a sexual intercourse she faces the possibility she could become pregnant. This uncertainty lasts until the woman gets her period. The cycle continues, just as Williams continues to stress by repeating "until she bleeds," with the woman uncertain what direction her life might take until her period begins.

Notice how the women in Williams' life encourage her to be independent and think for herself. Her Mimi, who has left the Mormon Church, gives Williams the book "The Origin of Life." The book gives alternate opinions of the story of Adam and Eve. Instead of picturing Eve as a sinner, the one who betrayed Adam and went against God's command, the book portrays Eve from the feminist point of view. It praises her for deciding that she does not want to live a life of perfection. Instead, she wants to have knowledge of herself and the world around her.

Although Williams and Brooke were married in the Mormon Church in a traditional Mormon ceremony, they moved away from the church during the first years of their marriage. This division between the couple and the church becomes important when Williams goes to Brooke's father hoping that he can influence the powerful in the Mormon Church to support her conservation program. Brooke's father agrees with the requirement that Williams would encourage Brooke to come back to the church. Williams realizes she cannot in good faith encourage Brooke to rejoin the Mormons. It is through this experience that Williams realizes it is more important for her to maintain her integrity than to make false promises in order to get what she wants.

Williams might see herself in Eve as Eve went against the command of God in order to find her own voice. Similarly, Williams is struggling with her dissatisfaction with the church and the rules the leaders of the church (representing God) are placing on her. She feels these rules are putting her at a disadvantage as she tries to discover her voice.

When Williams grieves the death of her mentor, Professor Wangari Maathai, she finds comfort in the appearance of a hummingbird. A hummingbird was Maathai's favorite bird. Williams feels that the bird has been sent by Maathai for the purpose of helping Williams to heal.



## Vocabulary

endowments, subversive, bequeathed, repose, intrinsically, abrogate, intrinsic, imperiled, demeaning, ineffable, cacophony, denuded, pragmatism, collaborate, subvert, proposition



# Chapters XXX-XXXIV

## Summary

In Chapter XXX, Williams describes an encounter she saw between a squirrel and weasel.

In Chapter XXXI, Williams describes Joseph, a man with whom she went on a walk in the Idaho wilderness even though it went against her instincts. Joseph began acting more and more strangely during their walk until he finally raised a double-edged ax at her. She believed he intended to kill her and ran away. When she arrived back late at the camp where she was working as a teacher's assistant, she did not tell her supervising professor what had happened when he asked. She was afraid she might have been wrong about Joseph and his intentions. She did write a letter to Brooke in which she described the incident. A few days later Joseph walked up behind Williams in the kitchen. When Williams spoke her husband's name and Joseph realized she was married, he began mumbling and said he had thought she was a virgin. Joseph disappeared after their encounter. Even though she wanted to tell someone what had happened, she couldn't bring herself to do so. She was still afraid the incident had been her fault. During the last week of the studies, Williams became physically ill when one of her students pulled out a double-edged ax. Brooke told Williams she should go to the police, but Williams refused to do so. She still wonders when she hears about a woman who has been hurt by a man if her silence allowed Joseph to hurt someone. She closes the chapter by stressing the importance of listening to one's intuition.

In Chapter XXXII, Williams describes the sorrow she associates with the death of her mother.

In Chapter XXXIII, Williams recalls taking the wing of an indigo bunting to a friend as a hostess' gift. The woman declared it a murderous beauty. Later, Williams received a cut near her eye by a falcon when she and Brooke were canoeing. She compares the hit by the bird to the sudden nature of death.

In Chapter XXXIV, after her encounter with the falcon, Williams suggested that bird for the cover of the book "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place." The bird represented to her the things she did not see coming. She believed these things, which included the deaths of her mother and grandmothers, were a sign that she needed to speak out. Her first episode of speaking out came when she was arrested for committing civil disobedience at a testing site for nuclear bombs in Nevada. Williams tried to think of herself and her family members as warriors instead of victims. She thought of herself and her family members as a clan of one-breasted women. Twenty-two years later when she thought of this image, she had the idea "When Women Were Birds." She believed that if women lived in a voiced community they would all flourish.



## Analysis

Williams shares a scary and life-changing experience she had as a teaching assistant in the Sawtooth Wilderness in Idaho. She pleads with women to listen to their instincts as she shares the story of how she chose to ignore her better judgement. She also pleads with women to use their voices and speak out if they know there is a man who is a threat to women. Williams remains ashamed of herself because she shared the story of Joseph with no one but Brooke. She fears that she may have allowed other women to be hurt because she didn't speak up. Despite her strength and independence, Williams empathizes with and shows understanding for women who do not speak out after they are attacked. Williams shares her feeling that she did something that caused Joseph to try to attack her. Even though she knew she was in no way responsible for what had happened, she was still afraid that others might see her as responsible.

It is also in this section of the memoir that Williams shares the idea that led to the title of her book, "When Women Were Birds." As she thought of the way the women in her family had mastectomies and thought of herself as coming from a "clan of one-breasted women," she began to see her family members as warriors instead of victims. She writes it was twenty-two years later that she had a dream about women having been birds at one point. The image of birds with their ability to fly above the world gives the idea of hope and resurrection, despite sickness and the trials of life.

Williams introduces the falcon, a bird she associates with things in life that come out of the blue to take one by surprise. She shares the canoeing trip that she and Brooke

took. During that trip, a falcon injured her out of the blue. The occurrence had taken her and Brooke by surprise. Soon after this experience, she suggested the falcon be used as the bird that would be on the cover of her book "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place." She compares the way the sickness and death of her mother and grandmothers took her by surprise just as the falcon took her by surprise during the canoeing trip.

## Vocabulary

foiling, credible, duplicitous, demeanor, sabotaging, incoherent, esoteric, ventriloquist, detonated, vaporized, declarative, improvise, elusive



# Chapters XXXV-XXXVIII

## Summary

In Chapter XXXV, Williams describes a photo of her mother. She wonders what her mother saw when she looked at her.

In Chapter XXXVI, Williams writes about the tough women in her family. Her great-grandmother was among those who sought refuge in Mexico after the persecution of Mormons for polygamy began. In 1911, however, the Mormons were forced to leave Mexico. They had to leave so quickly that her great-grandmother left a cake baking in the oven.

After the death of her mother and grandmother, Williams felt she had to go to a family reunion hosted by Bea. At the time she was writing a book from which she didn't want to take a break and she also didn't want to have to face questions about her lack of children. When Williams told Bea she was writing a book about her mother, she noticed Bea's smile falter. After the reunion, she wondered if there really was no foundation for her book. At home alone that night, she wrote divided the topics she hoped to address in her book into two lists. They did not seem to be connected by anything until she drew a circle around each list and realized she was the connecting factor between each list. On the page it also appeared she had drawn a picture of the female reproductive system. She divided her book into the half that had to do with her mother and the half that had to do with the bird refuge. Those parts that dealt with her mother she had printed on turquoise paper. She balanced her book by evenly dividing the mix between blue and white.

In Chapter XXXVII, Williams questions why the owl cries at dawn. She says her mother's journals are a similar paradox.

In Chapter XXXVIII, Williams writes that the morning after her Mimi died she woke to a gray world. She was depressed. She walked only because Brooke told her it would help. Meanwhile, Owl Canyon was suffering from an extreme drought. She and a biologist friend found algae that turned orange when they touched it. They painted themselves with it. She noticed that the lizards, sage, and salt brush were more vibrant despite the drought. Williams ends her chapter by describing a self portrait her Mimi had painted. It was of a house wren perched on her finger. Williams indicated that the bird appeared to be pointing the way.

## Analysis

The most significant idea presented in this section of the memoir is Williams' decision to delay having children and concentrate on identifying her voice. This is a major decision for Williams because one of the unspoken requirements for a Mormon woman is to have children. Failing to procreate is considered as being disobedient to God. Even though



Williams and Brooke had fallen away from the church, Williams' family still judged her by the rules of the Mormon Church. She knew her family would not consider her decision to write a book about her mother as a proper use of her time. She says that her family would not consider her writing a book or finding her voice because both activities focus on Williams rather than God. They are not suitable substitutes for a baby.

Even though the remaining members of Williams' family do not say anything negative about the book, Williams feels their criticism through the expressions on their faces when she tells them she is writing a book about her mother. After she leaves the reunion, Williams is so discouraged that she wonders if her ideas for a book are well-founded. When Williams compiles her lists of the topics she wants to discuss in the book, she connects them with her initials and then draws lines, indicating the connections she sees in a drawing of the female reproductive system. This is significant because she believes that based on Mormon teaching she would be breaking the laws of God if she chooses not to have children and concentrates on finding her voice. The diagram, however, indicates to Williams that her book would be an act of female creativity, just as having children is an act of female creativity. It is an affirmation that she is justified in pursuing her own path in life.

Williams' process in creating a connected, balanced book is interesting. From the original manuscript, she selects the pages of two topics she wants to cover. Then, she has the pages of one topic printed on white paper and the pages of the other topic printed on brightly colored paper. Her goal is to work her ideas together until her completed manuscript contains no large sections of either white or brightly colored pages. This description of the way she balances her story demonstrates Williams' visual nature. Although she cannot easily balance the two stories during the act of writing, she is able to do so by a visual inspection of the two colors. She makes sure that both colors are divided evenly.

## Vocabulary

innuendoes, renegade, matriarch, inevitably, chimera, crepuscular, koan, penury, penultimate



# Chapters XXXIX-XL

## Summary

In Chapter XXXIX, Williams tells how Mardy Murie encouraged her to become one of the twenty-six members of the Wilderness Society's Governing Council. During the first year that she served, she never opened her mouth. The ways in which the men argued, debated, and made recommendations impressed her. During a break, Alice Rivlin asked if Williams had a voice and told her it would be nice to hear it. During the second year, Williams did speak. However, she noticed that her comments did not seem to have any impact on the conversation. Even though she had read all of the literature she had been given, Williams felt she did not have all of the information which other members had. One of the men finally invited Williams to have drinks with the group after a meeting. She learned then that the policy was decided outside the boardroom. It was during these after meeting parties that Williams began to learn what the others knew.

Williams decided to try to make a statement for her colleagues by leaving a copy of the book "The Tongue Snatchers" on the meeting room table. The book described how women either ran from opportunities to speak or adopted the speech of men. She hoped the book would spark conversation, but it was ignored. In her third year on the council, Williams really tried to take an active role. She noticed, however, the conversations had begun to focus more on politics than on the wild lands. Williams recognized she was becoming part of the political shadow dance. She quit the council during her fourth year. She realized she was a writer, not a politician. She could not longer deal with the split she felt in herself between conviction and compromise. She realized that her voice was extreme because she wanted to save all of the wilderness, not just part of it.

In Chapter XL, Williams describes a specific debate in the governing council. The group was split as to whether they should publicly denounce an environmental policy of Secretary of the Interior Manuel Luhan by putting an article in a newspaper or by working behind the scenes in an attempt to influence President George Bush. Wallace Stegner had been called upon to be the tie breaker. Williams and Charles Wilkinson had been chosen to write the article for the newspaper. They presented their work to Stegner, who was appalled by how timid he believed they were in their writing. Stegner had been awarded the 1992 National Medal of Arts but turned it down because of the political restrictions placed on the arts.

Williams describes her involvement in the drafting of the Utah wilderness bill. She was to speak at a public hearing on behalf of the conservation panel. As she spoke, Williams realized that Utah Congressman Jim Hansen was not even listening to her. When the congressman told Williams there was something about her voice that he could not hear, she knew that he was refusing to hear what she and the others were saying about their desire to maintain the state's wilderness areas. The conservationists were treated in the same way during a special hearing before the Senate Committee on Energy and





Natural Resources. Two minutes into the first testimony by the three conservationists, the committee chairman Senator Larry Craig walked out of the presentation. He left things in the hands of Mark Hatfield. Hatfield read a book during the presentation.

Williams and a fellow writer, Stephen Trimble, decided to ask fellow writers for essays to compile into a book describing the beauty of the wilderness. The title of the book was "Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of Utah Wilderness." During a press conference, the book was called the equivalent of a literary bill presented by American writers to Congress. One senator, Russ Feingold, vowed he would take "Testimony" to the Senate and defeat the Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995. Even though one newspaper reporter told Williams she was being naive for believing her book could make a difference, the Utah Public Lands Management Act died during a Senate filibuster. President Clinton held up the book "Testimony" when he designated the new Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. He told those gathered that the book had made a difference. The national monument protects nearly two million acres of the Utah wilderness.

## Analysis

In this section, Williams describes two different forays she made into the realm of politics. One of the experiences leads Williams to realize she does not have the ability to compromise her convictions that she needed in order to be successful in politics. Through the other experience, she learns that sometimes a collection of voices can influence politicians even if it appears the odds are stacked against the owners of those voices.

It is Williams' audible voice that is important in this section. One of the other women who was a member of the Governing Council of the Wilderness Society had told Williams in a sarcastic manner that it would be nice to hear her voice during the meetings. At this point, Williams had been on the council only a short period of time and was not sure of herself. When she finally started speaking up during meetings, Williams felt her attempts to make contributions were ignored. According to Williams, this was not the only time she felt her voice was being ignored during her attempts to speak up for the wilderness in the political realm. The congressman, Jim Hansen, had told Williams that there was something about her voice that made him unable to hear it. He was being hateful and was unwilling to listen to Williams and those with a point of view similar to hers.

Williams notes that it was her written voice and that of her friends that got through to the politicians. Even though they were discouraged and told they were being naive, Williams and her writer friends put together a collection of essays that eventually wound up in the hands of President Bill Clinton. Clinton praised the book and the voices it represented as making a difference in the work to get nearly 2 million acres of wilderness land in Utah

## Vocabulary

pontificate, vernacular, virile, infiltrate, despondent, tyranny, eloquent, incredulous, filibuster



# Chapters XLI-XLII

## Summary

In Chapter XLI, Williams describes her experience of spending a night in jail because she was caught speeding while driving on a suspended license. She believes she is fraudulent in her lifestyle. She thinks that it is not sustainable and it is time for her to consider making changes. She hears the other women cussing and tells them those words are ugly. She compares the women to caged birds with clipped wings. When she is released, Brooke is waiting outside for her.

In Chapter XLII, Williams continues to consider her prison experience. She believes some people, especially writers, live both on the inside and on the outside. She changes her focus to the book of Ruth in the Bible. Even though Ruth was an outsider, she swore her loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, after her husband died. She took care of both herself and her mother-in-law. In time, she attracted the attention of Boaz, who was a relative of Naomi. Boaz married Ruth. It is through their relationship that they have a son, Obed an ancestor both of King David of Israel and Jesus Christ.

Williams wonders what it is that women glean from the stories of other women. She wonders what she is gleaning from her mother's blank journals. She plans to use everything she can remember from before her mother's death to add to the story. Even though there were no words on the pages of her journals, Williams has come to realize that her mother did her speaking through gestures instead of her physical voice. Her Mimi, on the other hand, contributed to Williams' voice by speaking her thoughts out loud.

## Analysis

In Chapter XLI, Williams' story changes from past tense to present tense. She writes about her prison experience as if she were recording it as it happens. This use of the present tense clues the reader that this experience must have taken place very close to the end of the time when Williams was writing her book. Most of her other experiences are described as if Williams is looking back on them from the present. This is one of the few times that Williams writes completely in the present tense.

Her time in jail not only makes Williams wonder if her lifestyle as a writer is really sustainable but also about the differences of being "inside" and "outside." She wonders if inside and being outside deal with being in jail or being in one's own personal space. For instance, Williams indicates that writers come outside themselves to glean information for their writing, while they go "inside" to do their actual writing.

Williams writes about the voices of the women with whom she is in prison. Williams believes that the women's cursing is an ugly sound coming from a woman. She tries to



tell the women they would feel better about themselves if they cleaned up their language. The women do not take her seriously.

Williams includes a discussion about women's relationships in this chapter by referring to the book of Ruth in the Bible. In the Bible story, Ruth left her home to go with her mother-in-law Naomi back to her native country. Ruth took care of her mother-in-law once they arrived in that country. Even though she was a stranger, Ruth went out and gathered food for her and her mother-in-law. Williams concludes that it was because Ruth loved her mother-in-law so strongly and so loyally that she was rewarded by meeting and marrying Boaz. Just as Ruth gleaned good things from caring for her mother-in-law, Williams believes she has gleaned good things from the women whom she has loved. She knows it was because of her mother's decision to leave her journals blank that prompted Williams to start on her journey to find her voice. She also believes that her grandmother's willingness to voice her own opinion gave Williams the courage she needed to try to voice hers.

## Vocabulary

solidarity, embodies, gleaner, forage, culling



# Chapters XLIII-XLVII

## Summary

In Chapter XLIII, Williams speaks of the way her voice presents itself in love. She indicates she is both silenced and given a voice by love. Sometimes she does not like the voice she is given when it causes her to belittle her lover.

In Chapter XLIV, Williams identifies her mother's journals as a love story. She can only imagine what her mother was trying to tell her through her empty pages. Williams discusses how people lose themselves through their own busyness. She believes they also hide their own voices by borrowing a voice from another person and "plagiarizing" his words. She suggests people learn to flow like water, instead of being molded like clay. Then, people would understand that power and love do not need to be absolute. They would be able to follow the advice "let it go" that Williams' mother had always given to her when she asked what she keep and what she should give away.

In Chapter XLV, Williams describes how the Nushu script looks like bird tracks. In the rural villages of Jiangyong in Hunan Province of China, the women worshiped birds. They used Nushu as their secret form of writing. Williams identifies the script as dating back as far as 1600 B.C. The women passed these writings down from woman to woman through the generations. It was a way for the women to communicate with each other without using the language of men. Special books written in this language were given to women when they were married. Williams concludes that women write in code as a way to protect themselves.

In Chapter XLVI, Williams includes the text of a letter that her mother wrote to her the day before her wedding. In the letter, her mother offered advice for a peaceful and vital marriage. Williams realizes after being married for four decades that the strength of her parents' marriage came from the time they spent together away from their children. Williams believes her marriage is strengthened by the time she and Brooke spend apart from one another. She remembers a day in Big Sur when Brooke surprised her by suggesting they cut up magazines and make collages. She was surprised how much they learned about one another through that project.

In Chapter XLVII, Williams describes her habit of writing one line over another repeatedly. It is her way of writing out her thoughts and feelings but keeping others from reading them. She includes examples of other writers who had similar habits to keep their writing private.

## Analysis

Williams continues to tell her story primarily in present tense. Her focus seems to be on how women and other writers find ways to write so their thoughts and feelings can be kept private. Rural Chinese women, for instance, developed a script called Nushu in



order to be able to communicate with each other beyond the language created by men. Stories and letters in this code were passed down from generation to generation. The women were the only ones who could read the writings. A mother's letter to her daughter on the daughter's wedding day stayed secret from the eyes of the new husband.

Although it wasn't a secret code, Williams devised her own way to write so that others could not read her thoughts. She would write one sentence on top of another until an entire paragraph was written in the space of only one line of text. In this way Williams could express what she was feeling and thinking with no fear her words would hurt others.

Williams talks about her voice and the way this voice presents itself in her relationship with her husband. She indicates she sometimes does not like the way her voice sounds when she is dealing with her husband. She believes she becomes hateful and short. She also describes the times when she and Brooke become so far apart that she believes her voice cannot reach him. It was during one of these times that Brooke suggested they make collages. Surprisingly, Williams learned a good deal about her husband during this exercise. It was as if their voices needed a physical outlet to get started so they could reconnect and hear one another again.

It is significant that the special, written language created by the Chinese women looked like the tracks of birds. This fact connects with Williams' idea that women were once birds who flew and celebrated together.

## Vocabulary

ravage, retaliate, connivance, cartographies, plagiarize, predate, carapaces, discretely, missives, equipoise, articulation, feral, stratigraphy, minuscule, monotonously, aesthetic, profundity, malaise, ephemeral, obfuscation



# Chapters XLVIII-LII

## Summary

In Chapter XLVIII, Williams describes her visit to a church on the road to Donnini. After kneeling in the confessional because she wanted to feel that posture, she lit a candle.

In Chapter XLIX, relates an experience that occurred when she was fifty. She and Brooke took in Louis Gakumba, a foreign student who was studying in America. He was the son of a Congolese prince. Louis was Williams' translator during the time she spent in Rwanda. She indicates that she will tell about her relationship with Louis. She includes only blank pages.

The experience was the closest that Williams had ever had to feeling like a mother. She worries about where Louis is and if he needs anything. The Rwandans often say a person has a good heart, and Williams wonders how this quality can be defined. She decides it is through one's voice. It is the tone and feeling left when it enters another person's body. She indicates that Louis had improved the quality of her listening.

In Chapter L, Williams tried to teach Louis how to float. He was unsuccessful and told Williams he did not want to talk about his failed attempt. Louis tells Williams he has told her too much and that he is trying to go back to who he was. Williams tells him he cannot do that. Meanwhile, Brooke is angry with Williams. He tells her that she is losing herself in her obsession. She realizes she has become obsessed with Louis and thanks Brooke for pointing it out to her.

In Chapter LI, Williams refers to the customary Japanese greeting of another person's shadow. She discusses the role of one's shadow. This brief discussion is followed by a list of things. Williams believes the list defines her mother's journals. She next writes of how she mourns the death of her friendship with her sister. She criticizes women for not supporting each other. Instead, they choose to hurt each other. She realizes that although she has sinned, she can also be forgiven. She asks her reader who can judge the intention of another. Specifically, she wants to know the intentions of her mother's journals.

In Chapter LII, Williams discusses her love of opera. She enjoys the shows because of their hysterical nature. She believes her life seems calm in comparison. She says no other art form could master falsetto. Along this line of thinking, she calls her mother's journals both a falsetto and an artifice. She describes seeing the opera "Die Frau Ohne Schatten" with her father and gives a synopsis of the story. Williams said she felt something within herself beginning to resolve as she and her father watched. She realized how her experience with Peter and the Wolf had prepared her for the musical journey of the opera. During one of the intermissions, her father opened up to her that he had rarely spoken because Diane, his wife, had always taken over for him. Williams was happy to have been able to enjoy the opera with her father.



## Analysis

In Chapter XLVIII, Williams returns to the use of past tense to refer to the things that have happened to her as opposed to the use of present tense in Chapters XLI-XLVII. Williams refers to her age as being 50 when she and Brooke took in Louis while he studied in America, four years before the time that Williams decided to write this book.

Louis has deep effects on Williams. Even though she had no children of her own, she easily adopted the mother's instinct of worrying about Louis, even though he was practically grown. As she had feared motherhood would do, Williams' relationship with Louis overshadowed her search for herself and her own unique voice. It was Brooke who told Williams what was happening to her. He was angry with the way she was allowing herself to be pulled into the role of motherhood so easily. Williams again showed her maturity when she recognized that Brooke was telling her the truth about her obsession with Louis and that he had her best interests in mind. She thanked him for pointing out the path she had started down.

Williams incorporates the various ideas about the importance of one's shadow. In Japan, she says, people ask of others they meet "how their shadow is." At one point in this section, Williams describes her journal writing as a way of conversing with her shadow. She also describes the opera that she saw with her father "The Woman Without a Shadow." In the opera, an Empress searches for a shadow in order to keep her husband from being turned to stone. Ironically, it is a falcon, the same bird that Williams associates with having the ability to harm a person out of the blue, that gave the Empress the news of her curse. At the end of the opera, the Empress follows her own heart and expresses her own voice. For this reason, she is granted a shadow and her husband is saved. As Williams watched and listened to the opera, she realized that it was from listening to "Peter and the Wolf" as a child that she was prepared for the opera and more properly able to listen and appreciate what she was hearing.

After her discussion of the necessity of facing and acknowledging one's shadow, Williams includes another long list of the things she believes that her mother's journals represent. There are fifty-four metaphors for Williams' mother's journals included in the long list. Fifty-four is significant because it was the age Williams was when she wrote this memoir. Fifty-four was also the age her mother was when she died.

Williams discusses the way women can hurt each other when they are not supportive of one another. She references the relationship with a friend, whom she describes as once being her sister. The two have since become estranged. She says only that their friendship came apart because of a death. Along the lines of the death, which could be literal or figurative, Williams says that she and her friend killed each other (for certain figuratively) with their judgements and words about the other.

Williams realizes that it is not only through writing that a woman can exercise her voice. Even though her mother did not put anything down on paper, Williams understands that her mother did instill memories in her through her actions.



## Vocabulary

perforated, numinous, annunciation, buoyant, solstice, capricious, amorphous, scrim, palindrome, duplicitous, runic, transgress, vicarious, artifice, progeny, denounces, alchemical, convergence, jubilation, cairns, discordant, gregarious



## Chapters LIII-LIV(E)

### Summary

In Chapter LIII, Williams compares her role in life and her mother's role in life to the opera that she saw with her father. She includes snippets of a speech her mother made in church in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. In her speech, Williams' mother made the point that one of the two most important days in a woman's life was the day she discovered why she was born. Following this line of thinking, Williams refers to the story of Mary and Martha from the Christian Bible. Martha prepared for a visit by Jesus while Mary sat at His feet and listened. Williams indicates that Martha had allowed her priorities to become mixed. Her mother's inability to write in her journals makes Williams believe that her mother could not stand to mix her own priorities and allow herself to be known. She did not want to hurt those who might read her journals in the future.

In Chapter LIV, as Williams sat in the emergency room at the Maine Medical Coast Clinic she watched as a boy who had just tried to slit his wrists was taken away in handcuffs. She apologized to the staff. She did not know if she had a true emergency or not. After several tests she was taken into a private room and told by a physician's assistant that she had a soft-tissue density located on her brain. Williams started laughing when the woman told her she had a brain tumor and appeared to be having a stroke. It got Williams' attention when the doctor told her on a scale of one to ten, her condition was at a severity level of eight. She called Brooke. He promised to get on a plane as quickly as he could. He was in Castle Valley, and their neighbors were sandbagging Placer Creek, hoping to save homes include theirs. She imagines the rising river as the falcon that had taken her by surprise, cutting her eye.

In Salt Lake City, Williams is given a definite diagnosis. She has a small tangle of blood vessels on the part of her brain that controls language comprehension. The blood vessels had bled, causing the numbness. She had two options. She could wait and see what happened, or she could elect to have brain surgery. If she chose surgery it was unsure if her ability to communicate would be affected. She decided to wait. For several weeks afterward she dreamed of birds.

She tells of the death of a writer friend from anorexia. A story was read at her funeral in which the black raven of death ate nestlings. The parents were outraged but unable to do anything. They were joined by flocks of other small birds who could not attack the raven but shared the misery of the parents. Even in the shared misery, the birds began to sing even in the presence of the raven.

After the funeral, she went to see a rare painted bunting that had been blown off course by a blizzard and was eating frequently at a man's bird feeder. She, like the bird, felt like she had been blown off course. After she saw the unusual bird, she stopped having dreams about birds.



She also tells of a piece of artwork she saw at the Spheris Gallery in Hanover, New Hampshire. The work is a spiral of birds in the colors of red, grey, black, and white. When she stepped closer she saw the birds were fashioned from x-ray and MRI films. To Williams, the piece of art is both inspiring and disturbing, just like her mother's blank journals are disturbing. She wonders how she can move beyond her own diagnosis. She thinks of the bunting that chose to stay where it was after it got blown off course. Williams believes even though she also had been blown off course, she could correct herself and get her life back on course.

As Williams thinks about the red bird in the center of that piece of artwork having its own velocity, she considers the velocity of words and what words mean to her. She is frightened by the idea that she might lose the gift of working with words. She realizes that her mother's journals frighten her as well. Williams watches as her shadow merges with the shadow of the artwork. She wonders how she will live and if she will live considering her diagnosis. She knows she must remember what women have forgotten but birds have not, that the world is to be celebrated.

In Chapter LIV(E), Williams inwardly hears her mother's voice as she and Louis walk the Spiral Jetty. Although her mother has been gone for 24 years, Williams feels her presence closer than ever. She realizes that although she had wanted to write a book about voice, about women baring their souls, that she has been unable to do so because she wants to keep that part of herself private. She lies down on the ground and hears her mother's voice. It is a paradox to her that her mother's blank journals have led her to such a deep mystery and such a deep journey within herself.

## Analysis

In this final section of her life's story, Williams details her own health scare. She went to the emergency room because she had numbness in half her body. She was not sure she had a real emergency. The seriousness of what was happening to her did not sink in until the doctor told her she was probably having a stroke. After the doctors finally made a definite diagnosis, Williams faced a terrible choice. Surgery to repair the vessels that allowed blood to pool on her brain carried the possibility that she would lose her ability to speak and understand language. Williams has spent the entirety of the memoir describing how she had been on a search for her voice ever since she was a young adult. Her livelihood involved her ability to understand and manipulate words.

Birds are again in the forefront as Williams faces her health crisis. The falcon that flew close enough to Williams to cut her eye appears again in this section of the memoir. Williams imagines the falcon, a bird that has become an image representing things that come out of the blue to take a person by surprise, as she thinks not only of her own health issues but also the flooding in her usually dry Utah home town.

Another bird that catches Williams's interest in this part of her story is the painted bunting that was blown off course by a storm. The bird chose to stay where it landed. Williams can relate to this bird because she believes she has also been blown off



course by her health issue. Unlike the bunting, however, Williams has decided she does not want to stay in the place to which the storm had blown her. She realizes she has the ability to redirect her course and move to the place she wants to be.

Birds also speak to Williams through the piece of artwork “Red Swirl.” The swallows and swifts of this piece are both joyous and disturbing as Williams realizes that the birds are made out of pieces of x-ray and MRI film. The birds carry devastating news just like the news that Williams received about her own brain bleed. AT the end of her story, Williams concludes that the only way for women to live full lives, despite the troubles that life may throw their way, is for them to learn the secret that birds have known for so long. They must learn to sing and celebrate the joy of life.

## Vocabulary

reciprocity, gyre, turbulent, intangible, punctual, emanated, tawdry, paradox



# Important People

## Ted Major

Ted Major was the director of the Teton Science School. He was the one who inspired Williams' love of nature. He is also the one who put Williams in touch with Dr. Raskin. He helped Williams to get a scholarship in environmental studies. At Carden School, Williams realized that Ted Major had taught her well about reaching out for the help of others when she was faced with a topic she didn't know. One of her nine-year-old students helped her to teach the others about the solar system.

## Mr. and Mrs. Jeffs

Mr. and Mrs. Jeffs were the couple who created and led the Carden School, the school at which Williams got her first teaching job. The Jeffs were conservative and did not approve of Williams's teaching style. At one point, she almost lost her job for teaching students about the mating calls of whales. The school accused her of being an environmentalist and told that the devil was an environmentalist. She continued to teach at the school; however, it was suggested that she keep her politics out of the classroom.

## Kathryn Blackett Tempest

Kathryn Blackett Tempest was Williams' paternal grandmother. Williams often refers to Kathryn as Mimi. Mimi helped Williams discover and nurture a love of birds. She gave Williams a copy of "A Field Guide to Western Birds." Several of their first sightings of birds matched. As an older woman, Williams still has her Mimi's copy of that field guide on her desk. Mimi died of ovarian cancer on June 27, 1989.

## Joseph

Joseph was the man who persuaded Williams to take a walk into the wilderness with him, even though she sensed that he meant her harm. He began acting more and more strangely as the walk progressed. It was when he raised a double-edged ax at her that she finally ran away from him. She felt bad after the incident because she never reported what he had done. She was afraid her refusal to speak out had caused other women to be in danger.

## Diane Dixon Tempest

Diane Dixon Tempest was Williams' mother. Diane died of breast cancer when she was fifty-four years old. She promised before she died that she would leave Williams her journals. When Williams looked at the journals, she discovered they were all empty. It



was these empty journals that prompted Williams to begin her search for her own voice, as she simultaneously searched for the meaning of the blank journals.

## **John Cage**

John Cage wrote the piano piece 4'33". The pianist played no notes in this piece hoping to engage the audience in the other sounds made by the audience and outdoors during the performance. He had hoped to teach the audience how to listen and hear silence.

## **Brooke Williams**

Brooke Williams was Williams' husband. Williams was working in a bookstore the day that Brooke came in and mentioned that his life's dream was to own all of Peterson's field guides. The eyes of the two locked when Williams told him that she already had all those books.

## **Louis Gakumba**

Louis Gakumba was the son of a Congolese prince. Louis had served as Williams' translator in Rwanda. Williams and Brooke hosted Louis while he pursued his college education in America. Williams was fifty at the time. Her time with Louis was the closest she ever felt to being a mother to someone.

## **Lee Chouquette**

Lee Chouquette was Williams' nine-year-old student at Carden School. Lee helped Williams teach her students about the velocity of the solar system. It was a sign of maturity on Williams' part for her to allow this student to step in and teach what she did not know.

## **John Tempest**

John Tempest was Williams' father. With him, Williams explored the outdoors and was infected with his love for the wilderness. Of all the things that her father did, Williams remembered that he was foremost a story teller. Another wonderful memory for Williams was the time that she and her father attended the opera.

## **Lettie Romney Dixon**

Lettie Romney Dixon was Williams' maternal grandmother. Lettie was among the first women to join the Green Belt Movement of Utah after Williams and Wangari Maathai started that movement. Lettie died of cervical cancer.



## **David Raskin**

David Raskin was the professor who helped Williams get a scholarship for a summer program at Teton Science School. During the internship, she was to study tourist behavior at Grand Teton National Park.

## **Wangari Maathai**

Professor Wangari Maathai was one of the women whose voices stood out at the UN Decade for Women Forum. She was passionate about the deforestation in Africa. She became Williams' mentor in starting the Green Belt Movement of Utah.

## **Mrs. Parkinson**

Mrs. Parkinson was Williams' speech therapist in grade school. Mrs. Parkinson inspired Williams' love of words and the discovery of the power of poetry.

## **Eve**

Although Eve is generally viewed in religion as the destroyer of paradise, Williams admired her for seeking the truth instead of perfection.

## **Mardy Murie**

Mardy Murie, a conservationist, became a mentor to Williams when she first attended the Teton Science School.

# Objects/Places

## Journals

Journals, left to Williams by her mother, are the central objects in Williams' story. They precipitated Williams' decision to write her story. At her death, Williams' mother left her journals to Williams. When Williams decided it was time to read the journals, she discovered they were all blank. Williams began the journey to discover the meaning of her mother's blank journals and to write the story of her own life.

## Capistrano

When Williams was a child living with her parents in California, her mother took her daily to a beach near Capistrano.

## “A Field Guide to Western Birds”

Though Williams' grandmother, Mimi, had copies of all of Roger Tory Peterson's field guides, “A Field Guide to Western Birds” was her favorite. When Williams was a child Mimi gave Williams her own copy of this guide. The two had several identical entries for their first sightings of birds notated in the journal. In Chapter VII, Williams notes that she still kept her grandmother's copy of the field guide on her desk.

## Williams' First Journal

Williams' first journal was a diary given to her by her great-grandfather as a gift on the occasion of her eighth birthday and baptism into the Mormon Church.

## A POW/MIA Bracelet

Williams wore a silver POW/MIA bracelet that bore the name of Capt. Robert Willett. To her, the bracelet was a symbol of the Vietnam War. Willett was never located.

## “Pink Flamingos”

“Pink Flamingos” was the name of the show that Williams skipped high school classes to see. Based on the name, she had thought the show would be about flamingos. As it turned out, it was about a drag queen. Williams was shocked by what she saw and learned.





## **Sam Weller's Bookstore**

It was in Sam Weller's bookstore that Williams met Brooke, her future husband. Brooke caught Williams' interest when she heard him tell the boy he was with in the bookstore that his goal in life was to own all of Roger Tory Peterson's field guides. Williams caught his interest when she told him that she already had all of those books.

## **Salt Lake Temple**

Brooke and Williams were married at the Salt Lake Temple.

## **Teton Science School**

Williams was a student at Teton Science School. The school had been started by Ted and Joan Major in 1968 as a summer field school. Williams notes in her book that the school was the first environmental education center in America. It was supported by a biologist (Frank Craighead), a geologist (David Love), and a conservationist (Mardy Murie).

## **A Skinned Coyote**

When Williams and some other students from Teton Science School returned to the school from a backpacking trip one day, they found a skinned coyote hanging from the crossbar of the ranch where the school met. The coyote was a symbol of the hatred and lack of understanding people had for environmentalists.

## **Carden School**

Carden School was the first school at which Williams taught. The leaders of the school were very conservative in their thinking. They were shocked when they learned that Williams was an environmentalist. They threatened to fire her.

## **A Paperweight**

Williams' mother gave her a glass paperweight. She said she bought it for Williams because she realized it was symbolic of her daughter. Later, she recognized the specific symbolism. A red lily pad in the center of the paperweight represented Williams, her mother said. Williams' mother warned her not to let anyone invade the space that surrounded the red lily pad because she said that space represented Williams' creativity.



## Nairobi

Nairobi is the capital of Kenya. It was to this African city that Williams traveled in 1985 for the UN Decade for Women Forum and heard Professor Wangari Maathai speak for the first time. This trip influenced Williams' decision to help start the Green Belt Movement of Utah.

## Double-Edged Ax

It was when Joseph raised a double-edged ax at Williams that she realized she was potentially in real trouble. It was at this point that she ran from him.

## “The Tongue Snatchers”

During a meeting of the Governing Council of the Wilderness Society, Williams left a copy of the memoir “The Tongue Snatchers” in the middle of the board room table before one of the meetings. She hoped it would initiate a discussion about the land from the feminine viewpoint. However, the book was ignored.

## “Testimony: Writers of the West Speak on Behalf of Utah Wilderness”

Williams and other members of the conservation committee were ignored during the public hearings for the Utah wilderness bill. As a result, Williams and her writer friend Stephen Trimble asked other authors to contribute to this book. There were 20 pieces written for the book including one by the U.S. poet laureate Mark Strand. Although a newspaper reportedly told Williams she was naive for believing the book would do any good, the Senate went into filibuster during which excerpts from the book were read. Because of that filibuster, the book became part of Congressional record.

## The Falcon

While canoeing on the Colorado River, Williams received a cut on her eye by a falcon that flew unusually close. Later, after Williams had her stroke, she imagined the falcon that had cut her eye when it flew past her. In that same way, her brain issue that caused the stroke had blindsided her. The falcon is a symbol of the things that took Williams by surprise like the deaths of her mother and grandmothers, as well as her own illness.

## “Red Swirl”

The “Red Swirl” is a piece of artwork that Williams saw at the Spheris Gallery in Hanover, New Hampshire. This display of red, black, gray, and white birds was made

from the x-ray film and MRI film taken of real people who suffered from diseases diagnosed with the use of the film.

## **Caribou County Jail in Idaho**

It was in the Caribou County Jail in Idaho that Williams spent one night after she was caught speeding while her drivers license was suspended. She could not afford to pay the fine, so she decided to do the jail time.

# Themes

## Voice

Williams' search for her voice is central to her memoir. The voice for which she searches is not her audible voice but opinions, her way of thinking and her ability to express these opinions. Williams chooses to express her voice through writing. Ironically, it was her mother's choice not to express her voice through writing that initiated Williams' search for her own voice. Williams began writing the story of her search for her voice after her mother died. Her mother had left Williams her journals. Williams was saddened and disturbed when she realized her mother's journals were blank. Connected with Williams' search for her own voice is her exploration into the meaning of her mother's blank journals.

Williams intertwines references to a person's voice and their opinions and stance on life with their audible voice. This is understandable, as a person's opinions are often expressed through their audible voice. In Williams' case, however, she chooses to share her opinions through writing. One of the most important voices in Williams' life is her mother's voice. It was the first voice she heard. Even twenty-four years after her mother's death, she can still hear her mother talking to her in her mind. Because her mother's voice was so important to her, it makes sense that Williams's discovery that her mother's journals were blank was such a shock to her. These journals would have shared Williams' last chance to understand more about the things that her mother chose to keep private.

Some of the things that helped Williams to develop her voice are detailed in her memoir. One of these things was the speech impediment that Williams suffered as a child. Her speech therapist introduced Williams to poetry. Williams credits her with teaching her the love of words and the way that words work together to form rhythms. Birth control was another thing that Williams believed helped her to develop her voice. Instead of having children, an unspoken requirement by the Mormon Church, Williams chose to search for her voice. She believed it was only because she had access to birth control that she had this option.

Her grandmother's love of birds also helped to shape Williams' voice. Her grandmother passed this love to Williams, along with a good deal of her birding knowledge. Williams' mother taught her about voice and how to listen for different, unique voices through an orchestral recording of "Peter and the Wolf."

Williams' father helped develop her love for the wilderness when she went along with him on his hiking trips. A specific instance where Williams decided it was her purpose to speak out for the animals occurred when she was on a backpacking trip with other students from the Teton Science School. She watched as a coyote took in the beauty of the landscape just as she and her fellow students were doing. When they returned to school, however, they found the skinned carcass of a coyote that someone had hung



from the crossbar above the drive to the school. It was this realization of the lack of respect some people had for animals that made Williams vow to the coyote she would use her voice to speak for protection of animals like the coyote.

## Silence

Silence is another important theme in Williams' story. As Williams went about trying to determine the meaning of her mother's blank journals, she compared these blank pages to silence. Williams knew that silence was important to her mother and that it was her mother's silence that represented her strength. Williams still struggles to understand what her mother was trying to tell her through the silence of her journals.

In one portion of her story, Williams discusses the differences between natural silence and unnatural silence. She argues there are times when silence is necessary for renewal and growth. She also says there are times of imposed silence. These silences are not natural. In fact, Williams says these imposed silences are equal to censorship.

Williams also writes about the reaction of different people to silence. She tells her reader that she is afraid of silence. Her fear of silence lies in the fact that silence makes her turn her thoughts inward, a place she does not find particularly comfortable. In other cases, people are angered by silence. She uses the example of the musical composition "4'33" to describe how people were so angered by the piece's lack of music that they failed to notice the music of everyday life, the sounds to which the composer had hoped they would pay attention. Similarly, some people were intrigued by white art like "White Paintings" and "White on White," while others did not understand its significance. Williams wondered if her mother was trying to make a similar statement through her blank journals.

## Women's Relationships

The relationships between women are also important to Williams' story. Through the course of her book, she describes the way in which her female family members encouraged her, taught her, and lifted her up. She writes of the way that women can encourage, discourage, and even hurt one another through their relationships. Williams also writes about the way that her mother's blank journals made her question her relationship with her mother.

Williams' mother and her paternal grandmother were women to whom Williams looked for guidance and support. Her mother encouraged Williams to be true to herself and to protect the parts of herself that led to her creativity. Her mother helped to teach her that womanhood was something to be celebrated when Williams first got her period. Williams' mother picked her up from school early that day and fixed her a special bath with rose petals. Williams tells her reader that her mother influenced her voice through her silence. It was her blank journals that initiated the writing of the book "When Women Were Birds" and also encouraged Williams to search for and identify her own voice.



It was Williams' grandmother, whom she called Mimi, who helped Williams to develop her great love for birds. It was Mimi who taught Williams to identify birds through their calls. Mimi comforted Williams after Williams was disturbed by the skinned coyote someone had left hanging from the crossbar of the Teton Science School. She also took Williams on whale watching ventures, as well as birding outings. Mimi encouraged Williams to look beyond the religious interpretation of Bible stories by giving her the book "Creation Myths" which described Eve as the first feminist.

Along with describing the ways that women can encourage each other and lift each other up, Williams describes the way women can do harm to one another. After Williams experience with Joseph, she did not report what happened to the authorities. She was afraid they would think she had done something wrong to initiate his behavior. As time when by, Williams realized what a disservice she had done to other women as she considered that Joseph was still on the loose and could still do harm to other women. It was at this point that Williams realized that by not speaking out and using her voice, she had potentially put others in danger.

Williams writes about a friend who was like a sister to her. She indicates that she and this friend killed their own friendship because of a death. In their pain, they had hurt each other with their judgements until there was nothing left of their friendship. Williams notes how much she misses that friend. She wishes that women would learn to encourage each other and build each other up, instead of tearing one another down.

## The Mormon Faith

The Mormon faith is significant in Williams' story because she was raised as a Mormon. As she grew and matured, however, she separated herself from the teachings of the church. The most important precept of the church that Williams moved away from was the unspoken rule that Mormon women were supposed to have children. It was a struggle for Williams to come to the decision that she wanted to search for her voice instead of having children. She felt like she was going against the rules of God and disappointing her family. Another unspoken expectation of Mormon women was for them to keep journals. Even though Williams' mother had been a faithful member of the church, her mother had broken this unspoken rule by not keeping journals. This surprised Williams.

## Birds

Birds are important in this story. Williams developed her love of birds with the help of her paternal grandmother whom she referred to as Mimi. Mimi gave Williams her own copy of "A Field Guide to Western Birds," and the two spent a good deal of time watching birds together. Later, Williams gives credit to birds for getting her and her husband Brooke together, as their interest in one another was sparked by their knowledge of Peterson's field guides.



As Williams writes about her search to identify her own voice, she often uses birds in her imagery. It is a falcon, for instance, that represents life's ability to take one by surprise. A rare painted bunting taught Williams that even though her health diagnosis had figuratively blown her off course, she had the ability to get her life back on track. It is also through the birds' joyful singing in the morning and at night that Williams concludes that women needed to follow the birds' examples. Women should learn to sing to celebrate the joy in life, even when life threw less than ideal circumstances their way.

# Styles

## Structure

Williams divides her memoir into 55 chapters. She titles her chapters using Roman numerals for a significant twist on the numbers. The Roman numerals only go through Chapter 54 (LIV). Fifty-four is a significant number in the book because it is at that age that Williams' mother died. It is also the age that Williams was when she decided she wanted to write her memoir.

The final chapter in the book is titled Chapter LIV(E). In this chapter, Williams indicates that she plans to live and celebrate her life despite her diagnosis of a cavernous mass on her brain. With the exception of the first few chapters, Williams tells her story on what is more or less a linear time line. Although there are 54 chapters numbered by Roman numeral in the book, the chapters do not appear to correlate with each year of Williams' life.

## Perspective

Williams tells her own story through the first person point of view. The information she shares through her book is both subjective and objective. Her opinions about her mother's journals, the direction she decides she wants her life to take, and her ideas about religion are all subjective. These ideas are all based on Williams' personal interpretation of her life and the life of her mother. In some places, Williams includes objective, or factual, information in her memoir. These include the examples of pieces of art that she uses to describe the impacts of silence.

## Tone

The tone of Williams' story is thoughtful and introspective as she goes about trying to determine why her mother left her three shelves full of blank journals. Although her book was inspired by the death of Williams' mother and the discovery that her journals were blank, a discovery that was like a second loss of her mother to Williams, the story is not depressing or overly sad in tone. The story is tinged with a hopeful tone as Williams challenges women to remember there is joy in each day and always a reason to celebrate and sing, just as the birds do.





## Quotes

I am fifty-four years old, the age my mother was when she died.”

-- Narrator (Chapter I paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Williams opens her memoir with the statement that she has turned the same age that her mother was when she died. She realizes not only how young her mother was when she died but also how much she has learned and changed since her mother's death.

When I opened my mother's journals and read emptiness, it translated to longing, that same hunger and thirst Mother translated to me. I will rewrite this story, create my own story on the pages of my mother's journals.”

-- Narrator (Chapter IV paragraph 8)

**Importance:** The emptiness that Williams discovers in her mother's journals makes her want to write her own story, a story of how her life had been molded and impacted by her mother.

When silence is a choice, it is an unnerving presence. When silence is imposed, it is censorship.”

-- Narrator (Chapter V paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Williams gives very negative opinions of silence in this quote. If a person chooses to be silent, Williams believes it is unnerving. If a person is forced to be silent, she sees it as censorship.

What I realize now is this: within those thirty minutes that took Prokofiev only four days to compose, I received my first tutorial on voice. Each of us has one. Each voice is distinct and has something to say. Each voice deserves to be heard. But it requires the act of listening.”

-- Narrator (Chapter VI paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Williams describes the way that a recording of “Peter and the Wolf” taught her about voice and how to listen and learn to appreciate the uniqueness of each voice.

But the sure remedy to criticism and ridicule was a simple one: keep quiet.”

-- Narrator (Chapter IX paragraph 2)

**Importance:** When Williams developed a lisp in grade school, the other children began making fun of her. It was at this time that she almost abandoned her voice because she chose to keep quiet, instead of giving the other kids a chance to laugh at her.

When I reported this finding to our local Audubon chapter as an eight-year-old bird-watcher, the president said that because of my age, he could not legitimately count it as ‘a credible sighting.’”



-- Narrator (Chapter XII paragraph 7)

**Importance:** It was this experience with the Audubon Society's president that made Williams wonder what it was about some people's voices that made some people believe some were more worthy of being heard than others.

She also knew and more than understood the Mormon promptings to become a scribe. In our possession, passed down from mother to daughter, we have many journals written in the most elegant script by our forebearers, especially women who practiced polygamy."

-- Narrator (Chapter XIII paragraph 8)

**Importance:** One additional reason that Williams was perplexed by her mother's blank journals was because Mormon women, like her mother, were expected to keep journals detailing their lives.

She was finding a different voice for herself, one that required a new vocabulary that included her needs, not ours, not only to heal, but to survive."

-- Narrator (Chapter XVII paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Williams remembers that her mother made changes in her life when she learned she had malignant cancer. She believes her mother was looking for a new voice that would allow her to take care not only of her family but also to voice her own needs to her family.

This was the emerging moment in American society when civil rights, women's rights, and the environmental movement were finding their voices within the context of a divisive war between generations."

-- Narrator (Chapter XVII paragraph 14)

**Importance:** As Williams was growing up, women's rights and environmental issues were among the hot topics of the day.

I couldn't have said exactly why, but I knew enough to know that we were expected to follow an unbreakable pattern through time even though our Mormon history was brief."

-- Narrator (Chapter XVII paragraph 23)

**Importance:** Despite the changes in popular culture, Williams knew that Mormons, especially Mormon women, were expected to follow the same rules as previous generations had followed. They were not to be swayed by changes in culture outside the church.

Mr. Jeffs leaned toward me. 'Did you know that the Devil is an environmentalist?'"

-- Narrator (Chapter XXII paragraph 45)

**Importance:** Mr. Jeffs, the headmaster of the conservative Carden School showed his



dislike and lack of knowledge about environmentalists when he told Williams that the Devil was an environmentalist.

The unexpected gift was this: after seeing my life on a carousel of images, bored literally to tears, I decided, Why not do something arresting?"

-- Narrator (Chapter XXIII paragraph 16)

**Importance:** Although Williams was embarrassed by the uninteresting play put on at her birthday party that detailed what she had done during her life, she was able to take away a desire to make her life more interesting from that point forward.

Having children could wait. My desire to find my own voice in the world could not."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXIII paragraph N/A)

**Importance:** Even though it was almost a requirement for Mormon women to have children, Williams broke with tradition by deciding it was more important for her to discover her voice than to raise a family.

In this very public moment I was privately struggling with my own demon. 'In the beginning was the Word.' Nobody warned me about which one."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXV paragraph 11)

**Importance:** Williams describes how she fought with her mind and its ability to revolt even during the most solemn moments in her life. She mixes her knowledge of scripture with the quote "In the beginning was the Word" with her humor as she indicates that no one told her which word would infiltrate into her mind at the beginning of her married life with Brooke.

She exposed the truth of what every woman knows: to find our sovereign voice often requires a betrayal."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXV paragraph 13)

**Importance:** Williams offers a different view of Eve, the first woman created by God according to the Bible. Instead of being a traitor, Williams sees Eve as the first woman willing to stand up for women's rights and a woman's right to decide for herself what she wanted for herself.

Birth control gave me my voice."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXVII paragraph 7)

**Importance:** It was because Williams lived during a point of time that birth control was available that she was able to search for her voice, instead of worrying about getting pregnant every time she and Brooke had sex.

Both landscapes were degraded by the removal of vegetation: in Africa, the cutting of trees; in the American Southwest, overgrazing by cattle."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXIX paragraph 14)



**Importance:** From a visit to Nairobi Williams decided to start a similar movement in her own state of Utah. She indicated the two areas of the world, though located hundreds of miles apart and for different reasons, were facing similar problems with loss of plant life.

My father-in-law unknowingly had forced the issue of integrity. Mine. I realized I couldn't have it both ways — use the Mormon Church's influence for what I wanted with my father-in-law's help, yet be unwilling to help him with what he wanted most, for his son to attend Church."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXIX paragraph 22)

**Importance:** Williams realized from this experience that she could not expect help with her project unless she agreed to do what her father-in-law told he to do, as dictated by the Mormon Church. She decided that she would not compromise her integrity. She would do what she wanted to do without her father-in-law's help.

I don't know why I ignored my body's instincts, my own intuition. It had all the ingredients of an ill-fated story."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXXI paragraph 16)

**Importance:** Even though she knew Joseph's request for her to go for a walk with him seemed dangerous, Williams chose to ignore her instincts and go with him anyway.

When one woman doesn't speak, other women get hurt. And now Joseph could be hurting another woman asleep in another wilderness."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXXI paragraph 52)

**Importance:** Williams told no one about her encounter with Joseph because she thought that somehow she was to blame for what had happened. She regretted her decision not to tell anyone because she knew that her silence gave him the freedom to attack other women.

I belong to a Clan of One-breasted Women.' These words flew out of my mind after a friend simply asked, 'How are you?' I could not know then what I know now, that this image allowed me to see the women in my family as warriors, not victims of breast cancer. Twenty-two years later, these words, this image, 'When Women Were Birds,' came to me in a dream without explanation."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXXIV paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Williams is explaining the title of her book.

Maybe I really am crazy. Maybe there really is nothing to connect a flooding Great Salt Lake, a drowning bird refuge, and my mother's death from ovarian cancer."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXXVI paragraph 21)

**Importance:** It was after a family reunion that Williams began to question her motives for writing a book and how the material for the book was connected.



I circled both lists. Nothing connected them. And then I realized what brought these seemingly unrelated worlds together was the narrator. So I wrote 'TTW' below, circled it, and then drew two lines from each of the two circles above, connecting them all together. I stood back and stared. Suddenly I realized I wasn't crazy. Before me was a map of the female reproductive system."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXXVI paragraph 26)

**Importance:** As Williams struggled to find a connection between the things she wanted to write about in her book, she realized she was the connecting factor. Ironically, after she had written out her lists and drawn connecting lines, her list looked like the female reproductive system.

The fourth year, I quit. I couldn't reconcile the split within myself between conviction and compromise. Whatever gains I had made politically, I had lost personally."

-- Narrator (Chapter XXXIX paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Williams quit her position on the Governing Council of the Wilderness Society after she realized it was not through political means that she could best serve the wilderness. She felt like she was losing a part of herself through the compromises necessary in the political system.

One never knows the tangible effects of literature, but on that particular day, looking north into the vast wildlands of the Colorado Plateau, one could believe in the collective power of a chorus of voices."

-- Narrator (Chapter XL paragraph 48)

**Importance:** Williams points out that President Clinton's nod toward the book of essays she had helped put together was one of the tangible effects of literature because the collection helped to preserve the Utah wilderness.

She explained how Nushu was a way women could speak to themselves outside of the language of men. Women in the village would make hand-bound books written in Nushu and pass them from one woman to the next as gifts."

-- Narrator (Chapter XLV paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Chinese women used the written language Nushu to have a way to communicate from woman to woman without using the language of men, a language they were not allowed to go to school and learn. This quote expands Williams' use of birds in the imagery of her story. She compares the Nushu characters to the prints left behind by birds.

The sin I have committed is the sin of adoption. I have adopted a different set of beliefs from the beliefs I was raised to obey."

-- Narrator (Chapter LI paragraph 61)

**Importance:** Williams believes the only sin she has committed is that of adopting ideas and a lifestyle different from the one she was raised to believe she should embrace.



What was the intention of my mother's journals?"  
-- Narrator (Chapter LI paragraph 67)

**Importance:** This question is central to Williams' book as she seeks not only to understand her mother's intentions in leaving her blank journals but also to more fully understand herself in the context of her mother's lack of words.

I don't know exactly how to say this,' she said, 'but it appears you have a brain tumor and you're in the middle of a stroke.'"  
-- Narrator (Chapter LIV paragraph 9)

**Importance:** It was not until the doctor told Williams she was possibly having a stroke that Williams understood the symptoms she was having were really caused by something serious.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Through the course of her memoir, Williams has searched for the meaning behind her mother's blank journals. Why do you think her mother's journals were blank? What do you think Williams' mother was trying to tell her?

## Topic 2

Discuss the imagery of birds that Williams uses throughout her story. Why were birds so important to her? What did they symbolize?

## Topic 3

Williams' story details her search for her own unique voice. Discuss some of the experiences that helped to mold her voice.

## Topic 4

Williams chose to go back to school, rather than have children. She believed this decision would help her to develop her voice. Why was this decision so hard for her?

## Topic 5

If you had received Williams' diagnosis, what course of action would you have chosen? Would you have elected to try surgery, even though it might have left you unable to communicate? Would you have opted out of surgery? Discuss the reasons behind your decision.

## Topic 6

Discuss Williams' reaction to being a surrogate parent to Louis.

## Topic 7

Discuss the significance of the shadow as it is presented in the latter chapters of the memoir. How does Williams use the image of the shadow to further her discussion of voice and her mother's empty journals?



## Topic 8

Williams did quite a bit of work in the environmental/conservationist realm. Discuss some of her contributions.

## Topic 9

Discuss Williams' opinions of abortion and other women's health issues. Do you agree with her opinions? Why or why not?

## Topic 10

Mormonism was a major influence in Williams' life. What was her relationship with her religion? In what ways did it shape her life?