

Where the Heart Is Study Guide

Where the Heart Is by Billie Letts

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Plot Summary

Where the Heart Is, a young adult novel published in 1995, was written by Billie Letts. The novel follows unfolding life of seventeen year-old Novalee Nation, who is pregnant.

When the novel begins, Novalee is traveling west with her boyfriend, Willy Jack, so Willy can get a job working on the railroad with his cousin. Novalee and Willy Jack have left their hometown of Tellico Plains, Tennessee, behind. Willy Jack abandons Novalee at a Wal-Mart in Sequoyah, Oklahoma, where Novalee comes to live secretly inside the store. While staying there, Novalee is befriended by Sister Thelma Husband, a devout Christian and the welcoming committee for the town.

Novalee also meets Forney Hull, the man who runs the local library. Novalee seeks out Forney's help in caring for her buckeye tree, a gift from Benny Goodluck. Novalee turns eighteen, and soon thereafter, gives birth to a baby girl in Wal-Mart, assisted by Forney. Novalee names the girl Americus. Novalee continues to struggle on, working at Wal-Mart and deepening her friendship with Forney, Sister, and other locals.

Meanwhile, Willy Jack goes to jail. While there, he writes a song called "The Beat of a Heart." When Willy Jack is released, he heads to Nashville, where he signs with agent Ruth Meyers. His career begins to take off. But, when he pushes too far and wants to sign on with another agent, Willy's career crumbles, and he becomes a drug addict and a drunk.

A tornado destroys part of Sequoyah, killing Sister, who leaves behind money for Novalee. Novalee uses the money to build a new home. Forney's sister dies, and Forney declares his love for Novalee, who lies and tells Forney she does not love him. She is afraid she does not deserve him.

Later, Willy Jack stumbles into a rail yard, where he has his legs below the knees severed by a train. Novalee goes to see him in the hospital, agreeing to bring him back home. She also takes the time to tell Forney the truth. She really does love him and wants to be a family with him and Americus.



Part 1, Chapter 1 - Part 1, Chapter 8

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 1 – Novalee Nation is seventeen years old, seven months pregnant, and superstitious about the number seven, all stemming back to her mother running off with a baseball umpire when Novalee was seven. After dropping out of high school and getting a waitressing job at Red's, a crazy woman named Gladys began screaming about seeing Jesus, and when Novalee tried to calm her down, slashed Novalee's arm from wrist to elbow, which required seventy-seven stitches to fix. Novalee therefore does not trust sevens.

Novalee is in eastern Oklahoma, heading toward Muldrow with Willy Jack Pickens, one year older and four inches shorter than Novalee. Their home is Tellico Plains, Tennessee, and their goal is Bakersfield, California, but Willy is unhappy that Novalee has to go to the bathroom so frequently. Willy is also mad because Novalee has purchased a Polaroid to take photos at each state line they cross. But Willy had refused to stop at Oklahoma's border. To get her mind off her needing to use the bathroom, Novalee looks through her book of pictures, a scrapbook she has been assembling since childhood, full of photos from magazines, of things like bedrooms and houses. Novalee desires the American dream of a house and a place to raise their baby.

Willy tries to enjoy himself by running over turtles, which makes Novalee unhappy. Willy continues driving through Muldrow despite Novalee's protests, and they begin to head toward Sequoyah. They are heading to California for Willy to work on the railroad for his cousin named J. Paul. What Novalee doesn't know is that J. Paul had lost his thumb, an injury which meant he received a cash settlement of \$65,000 and \$800 a month for life. Willy wants to do the same. Novalee tries to get Willy to feel her belly, to feel where the heart is, Willy grabs his hand away from her, and Novalee feels like crying, so she puts her head back and shortly falls asleep. She dreams of a train racing toward her and her baby. Willy wakes her up, and Novalee explains she had a bad dream. She discovers that her sandals have fallen through a hole in the floor of the pickup truck. Willy spots a Wal-Mart on the side of the road, where they stop for Novalee to use the bathroom. Novalee asks for five dollars to buy house shoes. Willy reluctantly gives her a ten. Novalee asks Willy if he wants to come in, but he declines. She also offers to get him some popcorn, but he declines again.

Novalee settles on a pair of thongs, and her change at the register is seven dollars and seventy-seven cents. She panics. Outside, she realizes bad luck has struck again. Willy is gone.

Part 1, Chapter 2 – A kind man gives Novalee her camera, found in the parking lot, while a clerk gives her some money, and the manager brings Novalee to a bench to sit down and relax. A little before three, a small, thin woman named Sister Thelma Husband mistakes Novalee for a girl named Ruth Ann Mott. Sister explains that her one



job is to give away Bibles that help bring people closer to God, so the Lord can save souls. Sister gives out one chapter of the Bible at a time, so people aren't overwhelmed or utterly confused by everything in the Bible. Sister tells Novalee to come with her to the parking lot, where Sister brings her to a blue Toyota pickup. Sister is part of the town's welcoming committee. She gives Novalee a basket of items from local businesses, as well as a map of the city. Novalee asks to take Sister's picture, and Sister obliges. Sister tells Novalee where she lives and drives away after giving Novalee an open invitation to her house.

Novalee goes back inside. She meets a black man named Moses Whitecotton, and the two talk about baby names. Moses tells Novalee that names are very important. Moses used to be an engraver, cutting names into everything from trophies to graves. Names are very important to Moses. Moses is now a baby photographer. He travels around stores and takes photos of babies. Novalee is impressed by his photos. Moses tells Novalee to bring her baby in when the baby is born, and he will take the baby's picture for free. Novalee then asks to take Moses' picture, and Moses consents happily. Novalee has a chili dog and a root beer float for dinner. Then, she reads an article about keeping fit during pregnancy, which prompts her to eat some beef jerky for protein. She takes a three-lap walk around the parking lot.

While outside, she sees a truck for Ben Goodluck Nursery, Earth Care Growers. The truck is full of small trees in burlap sacks. The driver, a tall, thin Indian, gets out, but his son stays in the truck. Novalee says hello to the boy, and he tells Novalee the trees in the truck are buckeye trees. The boy shows Novalee a polished buckeye, a good luck charm. He tells her to make a wish on it. Before the boy and his father leave, the boy gives Novalee a buckeye tree –making her wish come true. Inside Wal-Mart, announcements are made that the store will be closing. Novalee panics and gets sick in the bathroom. She begins to wonder what she will do. She wonders if there is a way to contact her mother, or if she could get back to Tellico Plains. Exhausted, Novalee falls sleep. When she wakes up, the store is quiet and dark. She moves around the store and finds that it is raining lightly outside.

Part 1, Chapter 3 – In Tucumari, Willy runs out of money. Eighty miles later, he runs out of gas. He locks his suitcase in the trunk and starts walking. He makes it to a bar called Tom Pony's where he is served by a girl about twelve or thirteen. Her name is Jolene, and she gives Willy the beers he drinks on the house. From in the back, Jolene's mother shouts to her to take care of filling salt shakers and finishing up other odds and ends. Willy tells Jolene he is headed to Vegas for a gig, and Jolene tells him that Vegas is only eight hours further. Willy is attracted to Jolene, especially to the fact that two of her front teeth are missing. Jolene's mother is furious to find that Jolene has given away beer. She orders Willy out of the bar. Jolene catches up to Willy and offers him the two hundred dollars she has saved up if he takes her with him to Vegas. She insists that she is nineteen. Then, she insists that she is older than she looks.

Jolene gets Willy to agree to meet her at the high school that night, and she takes the keys to his Plymouth, promising to have it fixed up before their meeting. Meanwhile, he wanders around Santa Rosa, New Mexico, until seven, when he goes to the high



school. Jolene is late, but she brings along \$218. Before they drive off, Willy kisses Jolene, making sure to tongue her gums where she has no teeth. As they drive, Willy asks Jolene if she is a virgin. She says she isn't, but he knows better. He feels her breast, and he tells her they will handle her virginity, just as police lights come on behind them. Jolene tells the Sheriff that she and Willy are going to see a movie, but the Sheriff knows who Jolene is, and he makes them step out of the car. Willy opens his trunk at the Sheriff's request. The Sheriff discovers fourteen cartons of Winston cigarettes. Willy is placed under arrest.

At the station, the deputy reveals that the 7-Eleven in Puerto De Luna had been robbed of fourteen cartons of Winston 100s on Wednesday morning. Willy explains that his girlfriend can tell them where he was on Wednesday, but he is forced to admit ditching her in Sequoyah, Oklahoma. He is given one call, and he attempts to call the Wal-Mart, but the store is closed. He smashes the phone on the wooden desk, splintering it, while the Sheriff and his deputy tackle Willy.

Part 1, Chapter 4 – Novalee has been sleeping in a sleeping bag in a tent in Wal-Mart. She wakes up very early, cleans up, and gets dressed in the bathroom. She hides in the hot water heater closet, when the store opens and when it closes. After the workers arrive, she slips out the employee exit. She heads to the library on Main Street, looking for information on how to care for her buckeye tree. She swings into a café for some water and watches a parade pass by. Novalee writes down what she eats, drinks, and uses from Wal-Mart in an account book, so she can repay Wal-Mart.

Part 1, Chapter 5 – Novalee goes to the library. She is filled with a sense of wonder at all the books. She feels that something is different about this place. A man in a brown cap asks Novalee what she wants and tells her that the librarian isn't there. Novalee wanders around the library, looking at displays and books. She stops before a painting of a naked girl putting on a stocking. The man in the brown cap explains the painting is by Renoir. The man races to the card catalogue to look up trees. He brings Novalee one of the books. The man quotes poetry and unknown things to Novalee as he brings her more and more books and pieces of information on trees. Novalee discovers she has been watering her tree too much.

Part 1, Chapter 6 – Novalee goes to Sister's house on Evergreen Street. As she heads over, she thinks about the strange man she has met in the library. Novalee explains to Sister that she is not Ruth Ann. Sister apologizes and invites Novalee to come inside. Novalee is introduced to Sister's boyfriend, Jack Sprock. Sister insists Novalee stay for buttermilk and cornbread. Much of the inside of Sister's house is yellow. They pray before they eat, during which time Sister asks forgiveness for the fornication she and Sprock have committed. Sister explains the man at the library is Forney Hull, a brilliant man who came back from school to tend the library for his alcoholic sister, who is the real librarian. Novalee asks Sister if she can plant her tree in her yard until she settles somewhere permanent, and Sister readily agrees. When Novalee returns to Wal-Mart, she is so exhausted she doesn't notice the man watching her go into the store.



Part 1, Chapter 7 – Novalee goes to the truck stop on East Main to shower and shampoo her hair whenever she can. She does this before meeting Forney for a birthday dinner. She even wears a new maternity dress from Wal-Mart for the dinner, putting the figure down in her account book. Forney finds Novalee to be beautiful, and Novalee believes Forney looks handsome in the old suit he is wearing. In the reading room, Forney has set up candles and flowers. Novalee is amazed and impressed. Forney explains that the building used to be their house. For her birthday, Novalee receives the book “Gardner’s Magic and Other Old Wives’ Lore” from Forney. Forney, who has studied cooking on his own in the library, prepares an incredible meal of beef biscuits and soup and sauce. Suddenly, there is a crash upstairs, and Forney tells Novalee to stay in the room while he races upstairs. Novalee follows. She helps Forney pick up his sister, who looks very aged and very sick. She realizes that there is the smell of whiskey and soiled clothing in the air. Forney then introduces Novalee to Mary Elizabeth Hull, his sister.

Part 1, Chapter 8 – After her birthday, Novalee feels as if each passing day she is heavier and slower. Her daily trips to the library often end with Forney offering to drive her home. However, Novalee refuses to let him know that her home is Wal-Mart. Novalee has been reading up on delivery, and she figures she will be delivering her own baby. She has gathered together everything she will need, but she is too tired to go and get the supplies where she has left them. She thinks of Forney, who feeds her daily.

Novalee jolts awake as she feels pains in her stomach. Her water breaks, and she cleans up after herself. The pain is unbearable, and she goes reeling around the store. Out front, Forney Hull breaks through the plate glass window to get to Novalee so that he can help her. The pain makes Novalee delirious, and Forney explains he is going to call an ambulance. But, it is too late. The baby comes, and Forney helps to deliver it as Novalee experiences more pain than she ever has in her life. Forney tells Novalee she has a daughter, and Novalee decides to name the baby Americus.

Analysis

When the novel *Where the Heart Is* by Billie Letts begins, Novalee Nation is a pregnant, seventeen year-old girl who has dreams of a better life in California. She is heading there with her boyfriend, Willy Jack, an abrasive and impatient man. Willy Jack abandons her at Wal-Mart, setting in motion a chain of events that will ultimately give Novalee a home and a life of her own. However, the immediate future for Novalee is uncertain. She is an incredibly sweet, thoughtful, and morally just individual, but she lacks self-confidence. Her story is absolutely heartbreaking, because the one man -indeed, the one person- she was counting on has abandoned her. With nowhere to go and no one to turn to, she decides to secretly live in Wal-Mart.

Novalee's plight is indicative of that of thousands of pregnant teens, many of whom have no one to turn to or to depend on. For whatever reason, they have ended up unwed, pregnant, and alone. That does not necessarily imply that they are bad people or that they are beyond help. Novalee is one such individual. Fortunately, Novalee's



good nature earns her quick friends, from Sister and Forney to Moses Whitecotton. Sister, who is a devout Christian, extends her love of others to Novalee. Forney proves to be a steady rock and friend for Novalee as she finishes her pregnancy. His worry and concern for Novalee lead him to discover she is living at Wal-Mart. He helps to deliver her baby at Wal-Mart.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Novalee's situation as a pregnant seventeen year-old. Is she to be blamed for her situation? Is she beyond help? Or, is she worthy of love and help? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

What is it about Forney that so endears Novalee early on in the novel? Why do the two of them seem to bond so quickly? Justify your answer with details from the book.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Novalee feel that the number seven is unlucky for her? Is this mere superstition, or is there some truth to her fear of the number seven?

Vocabulary

superstitious, traipsing, cadence, inflection, gabardine, brackish, bedraggled, tarnished



Part 1, Chapter 9 - Part 2, Chapter 16

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 9 – The hospital where Novalee is staying is swamped with reporters and the media. Forney comes to visit. Novalee wants to know what is so special about having her baby in Wal-Mart. Forney says it is his fault for setting off an alarm at the police station by breaking the window. The police and the ambulance came. Novalee is not mad at all, but incredibly happy and grateful that Forney was there to help her. As Forney leaves, Novalee's nurse comments that Forney is a strange one. Novalee goes to sleep, and when she wakes up, food is being brought to her by Lexie Coop, another nurse. She is young and pretty and has four kids. Lexie explains her first kid came around when she was fifteen, and that she just kept having them as she was looking for a good husband. Later, as calls pour in and reporters build up, Lexie helps Novalee use a breast pump to fill up a jar with milk for Americus.

Later on, a man comes in to visit Novalee. It is Sam Walton, owner of Wal-Mart. Novalee intends to pay back Sam Walton all of the money she owes him through used goods. But, Sam Walton, out of kindness and a sense of business, forgives her debt. He even offers her a job in his store in town, which Novalee accepts. He gives her five hundred dollars, then leaves. After Novalee falls asleep, Forney comes to visit again, and he tucks Novalee in before he leaves.

Part 1, Chapter 10 – Novalee gets a host of letters from people around the United States, some sending money and prayers. Some of the letters are mean and horrifying, wishing death on Novalee and her baby. A doctor comes in to tell Novalee that her baby is fine and doing well. Nell, Novalee's mother, suddenly arrives, charging into the room. Nell has changed during the past ten years. She was once round and soft, but now she is thin, angled, and haggard. Nell explains she found Novalee by watching television. Novalee asks about Fred, and Nell laments that Fred lied about being a major league baseball umpire. Nell explains she has come because Novalee seemed as if she needed some help. Nell explains she will help Novalee get on her feet. She will rent an apartment or a duplex and stay with them for a little while. Nell says she has a little money, and Novalee tells her mother that she also has some money. They begin planning on a nice place and things for the baby, such as booties and bibs. Nell takes Novalee's money, almost six hundred dollars, and tells her not to worry about anything. Nell promises to be back the next morning by 9.

But, by noon the next morning, Novalee is still waiting for her mother. She realizes that her mother isn't coming. Novalee continues to wait, unsure about what to do. Relief comes in the form of Sister Husband's Toyota in the parking lot. Sister picks up Novalee and Americus and takes them home with her.

Part 1, Chapter 11 – Within a month, interest in the Wal-Mart Baby wanes. Thereafter, occasional letters or calls from reporters come in. A couple from Midnight, Mississippi,



comes to the door one day, saying they have traveled all that way to bring the word of God to Novalee. Novalee is something of a celebrity in town, admired by some and made fun of by others. But, Novalee doesn't care. She is too happy falling in love with her baby. Sister is overjoyed to have Novalee and Americus living with her. At first, Novalee is shy and quiet, but after crashing into the stove in the dark one night and being tended to by Sister, Novalee begins to feel more and more at home. Novalee even goes so far as to tell Sister all about Mama Nell and Willy Jack.

Sister tells Novalee to always trust in God, and things will indeed work out. Novalee doesn't quite see how that is possible, that things will always work out, but she is comfortable enough for the moment. She has her own room at the back of Sister's trailer. The room has a bed, crib, and chest of drawers. Novalee begins working at Wal-Mart to help Sister. After he closes the library each night, Forney comes by with books for Novalee. He also reads to Americus every night for exactly thirty minutes. Forney becomes a good friend to both Novalee and Sister. Mr. Sprock visits as well, but at unpredictable times. He is always bringing fresh tomatoes or peppers. Mr. Sprock also helps Novalee with a garden she is planting. Dixie also becomes a very good friend, coming over to visit. The neighbors, the Ortiz family, are also friends and visitors. Novalee also falls into the role of protective mother, worrying about the tiniest symptoms or actions of Americus. Since Americus's arrival, Novalee thinks that every mosquito carries malaria, kitchen knives are deadly weapons, and gentle breezes are dangerous storms. But the scariest times for Novalee are coming. Those times will be the seventh week, the seventh month, and the seventh year.

Part 1, Chapter 12 – Willy Jack is transferred to the New Mexico State Prison for fourteen months on good behavior, but Willy Jack is combative and prone to trouble. He fights with guards and has been raped by two brothers. Willy Jack's cellmate is an old Navajo named Turtle, who doesn't speak. One night, Willy Jack's heart stops beating, following a scuffle where he is hit in the chest. Turtle tells him to be patient as the pain builds. In the panic, Willy Jack remembers Novalee's voice and the request to have him put his hand on her belly. Then, Willy Jack's heart begins to beat again as Turtle taps out the rhythm of a heartbeat.

Claire Hudson, the sixty-one year old prison librarian, is a kind but sad woman. She dresses in stiff clothing that are all grays, blacks, and blues. She wears no jewelry, not even a watch, but keeps Band-Aids with her wherever she goes. She uses them to cover moles, warts, eczema, and numerous other problems with her body. After seeing Willy Jack for the first time, Claire collapses, and she is revived by the doctor with smelling salts. It turns out that Willy Jack looks exactly like Claire's son Finny, who was killed by a drunk driver after performing a show as a musician at a dance hall in Carlsbad. Willy Jack reveals himself to be a musician as well. Claire tells Willy Jack he can have his guitar with him in his cell, but Willy Jack pretends his guitar and everything he owned was burned in a fire. So Claire gives Willy Jack her son's Martin guitar. Willy Jack teaches himself three chords. In three months, he has written a song called "The Beat of a Heart" which would go on to top the country charts and sell over a million copies in three years.



Part 2, Chapter 13 - When Novalee drops off Sister's Toyota at Wal-Mart's automotive center, she meets Troy Moffat, a slim, blonde twenty-six year old. Troy offers to give Novalee a ride to work, but Novalee explains she works there at Wal-Mart, too. She is unhappy that Troy is so short with her for parking in front of the automotive center, but she's glad to feel his eyes on her as she walks away.

Lexie Coop brings her kids to Wal-Mart two or three times a week. She says that it is cheap entertainment for her kids. Lexie shops for crafting items, such as cotton balls and fabric, so she and her children can make things. She and Novalee have lunch there, and Lexie gives her kids chopsticks to use. This forces them to eat slowly, meaning that they will be thin, or so Lexie believes. Lexie explains she has lost eight pounds that way. Lexie tells Novalee she has met someone named Wood Sams at the late shift in emergency. He is a motorcycle rider. He is good with Lexie's children, even bringing them gifts. He is also unable to have children, for he had the mumps when he was a teenager. Unfortunately, Woody is an atheist and chews tobacco. Lexie explains to Novalee that girls like them don't get the pick of the litter.

Novalee goes to pick up the Toyota and finds out that Troy isn't finished. The Toyota needs more work than just brakes. As Novalee walks home, Troy rushes to catch up to her in his beat-up Ford pickup. He apologizes for being short with her that morning and lights a cigarette, which causes Novalee to cringe. He tells her the Toyota will be done by noon the next day. He has fixed some things inside the truck, including the radio and the dome light. Novalee accepts the ride from Troy. But, she worries that the books Forney has loaned her will be in the Toyota overnight. Troy assures her that they will be safe. He asks her out on a date. Novalee is unsure, and Troy tells her to give him an answer the next day. As they pull up to the trailer, Novalee sees Forney with Americus on the front porch.

Part 2, Chapter 14 – Novalee meets up with Moses Whitecotton. She tells him about Americus. Moses is very happy with the name "Americus," telling Novalee it will withstand a lot of bad times. Novalee goes home happy. She begins trying outfits on Americus to have her picture taken. Moses is delighted to see Novalee and Americus the next day. He wonders how a picture will be able to live up to the name Americus Nation. For Americus's photo, Moses uses one of his own old-fashioned cameras, a Rollei. Novalee is in awe of Moses taking pictures.

Part 2, Chapter 15 – Novalee begins to date Troy, so she starts taking birth control pills. She is not sure whether or not she will sleep with him, but she decides to be safe in any event. Novalee does sleep with Troy, but it isn't like she imagined. She doesn't enjoy it, and she feels the urge to be clean. She also curses herself for not taking more birth control pills. Novalee is worried, so she goes to see Lexie the next day. Lexie lives in the low-income section of town in an apartment. Novalee tells Lexie she is worried she is pregnant because Troy didn't use any protection. She has only been on birth control a few days. Lexie tells her it is possible to be late while on the pill, because pills can throw a cycle off.



Over the next few weeks, Novalee takes great pains to avoid Troy. She loses sleep, worried she is pregnant again. She reads about girls who have gotten pregnant, have had abortions, or have been kicked to the side by their societies for being pregnant. Her room is full of books, all of them from Forney. But, thankfully, Novalee is not pregnant. She realizes how much she has had in common with the people whose lives she has read about in books. Now, she understands why Forney loves books so much. She also hates that she won't be able to tell him that until in the morning. She is beginning to understand what books truly mean.

Part 2, Chapter 16 – Novalee goes to visit Moses with Americus. Moses lives far out in the country on a beautiful spot of land. Moses introduces Novalee to his father, Purim Whitecotton, and Moses's wife, Certain. Certain and Father Whitecotton look after Americus while Novalee and Moses go outside to an old cabin that was built by Moses's father. It is where Moses was born and where he now has a darkroom. Novalee asks Moses if he and Certain have children, but Moses ignores the question. Novalee senses she has touched upon a difficult subject. While there, Novalee looks through old pictures, some taken by Moses, some even older. Novalee realizes she wants to be a photographer.

Moses later recounts to Novalee that he and Certain had a daughter named Glory, but they lost her when she was three. She drowned in nearby Sticker Creek. Moses had to carry his dead daughter home.

Analysis

Americus becomes known as the Wal-Mart Baby, and Novalee has her fifteen minutes of fame. It is interrupted by her mother, who runs off with all of the money that Novalee has accumulated. Sister and Forney help Novalee through her stay at the hospital. Novalee and Americus settle into life with Sister in her trailer. It was at the hospital that Novalee met a nurse named Lexie who is a few years older. She, too, is a single mother, with several children of her own. Lexie will become Novalee's best friend in time.

While Novalee has at least sorted out her immediate situation, she hasn't matured enough to the point where she is making intelligent decisions about her romantic life. For instance, she has unprotected sex with a mechanic at Wal-Mart. But, she resolves to go on birth control and to be much more selective in the future.

Simultaneously, Novalee and Forney continue to grow closer. Forney exerts a very positive influence on Novalee, introducing her to books and knowledge. Novalee loves reading about anything and everything, courtesy of Forney. Her education helps to give her maturity, and Sister's beautiful Christian faith helps Novalee to grow spiritually. She is able to better understand emotions.



Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe that Sister decides to take Novalee and Americus in, considering that Sister barely knows Novalee at all, and given all of the media hype around Novalee? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Novalee begin to mature between chapters 9 and 16? Make a list. What are the reasons for this maturation?

Discussion Question 3

As the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent that each of the characters Novalee has come into contact with has experienced some sort of tragedy. What sort of tragedy have the Whitecottons experienced, and how has that tragedy affected their lives? What does Americus mean to Moses Whitecotton?

Vocabulary

Stabilized, brittle, disposition, foretell, abrasions, irony, reverence, fainting, inquisitive, palsied



Part 2, Chapter 17 - Part 3, Chapter 24

Summary

Part 2, Chapter 17 – Novalee finds a Rollei camera at a yard sale. It is old and battered, but is in working order. Novalee buys it for thirty dollars. Moses repairs the camera for her. The next day, Novalee goes out with Americus and photographs everything she can find. She works in the Whitecottons' dark room late into the night, developing her photos. Friends and neighbors love her work and begin giving her film as gifts. They ask for photos and beg to pay her. Novalee refuses. Forney brings her books on photography and books about photographers, and Novalee consumes them.

In late November, Novalee goes up to Rattlesnake Ridge to capture the sunrise. In the early dawn light, she notices movement nearby, but she decides to go on, imagining there must be a deer. She photographs the sunrise in all its beauty, and she discovers the movement had been Benny Goodluck. He had been running down the hill because he was naked.

Part 2, Chapter 18 – It is Christmas time. Novalee doesn't remember much of Christmases from her past, except that they were usually problematic, either due to flooding or due to being in a foster home after Momma Nell left. Novalee is determined that Americus will have a good Christmas. So Novalee and Forney go looking for the perfect Christmas tree, but every tree they come across has something wrong with it.

Novalee wonders about Forney's age as she asks him to climb a tree to obtain some mistletoe. He is older, but seems very boyish whenever he looks at her. Novalee asks about Forney's past. Forney explains he wanted to be a history teacher before his father died, and then he came home because his sister was already sick. She is twenty years older than Forney and already drinking. They stop for lunch a short while later. They eat bologna sandwiches that Novalee has prepared. Novalee asks Forney to be patient with her as they continue a search for a tree, because she has never had a real tree before. At last they find a blue spruce that is perfect by Novalee's accounts, and they head back to Sister's. While there, they discover that Americus is gone.

Part 2, Chapter 19 – Sister reveals to the police that she had gone out back to the shed for just a moment, during which time someone must have come through the front door to take baby Americus. The police ask Novalee about whether or not she thinks there could be a connection between the publicity of the birth and the kidnapping. Novalee explains some people wished death on her and Americus. The police ask where the baby's father is, and Novalee is surprised to think that she has not once thought of Willy Jack as the baby's father, but that Willy Jack is probably out in California. Meanwhile, Novalee, Sister, and Forney make a list of people who might be responsible. Lexie comes to see Novalee, and Mr. Sprock arrives later. They all go over the events of that week, trying to figure out what happened. Sister remembers a woman in sunglasses and a scarf who came in to use the phone, saying her car had broken down. She



explained that she had just had cataract surgery. Sister says she just knows the woman had something to do with the baby being kidnapped.

Novalee is horrified her baby is gone. She goes through Americus's things and holds the baby's clothes close her face. That is when she sees a small silver-gray Bible under the sheets in the baby crib, and Novalee comes rushing out to the others. Sister says it is the mysterious woman's. She says there was also a couple from Mississippi that had come to see Novalee right after she got out of the hospital, but Sister sent them away.

Part 2, Chapter 20 – At three in the morning, Novalee decides she just has to drive around, ask questions, do something, and Forney agrees to go with her. Novalee lets Sister and Mr. Sprock know they are going out. They go by the local motel, and they go talk to the police. But, there is no news. They drive past the Risen Life Church, past a life-sized nativity scene. Then they go up Main Street. Novalee begins crying, and Forney pulls over to hold onto her. They go to another motel, and as they head back onto Main, they hear sirens. Forney heads back toward Risen Life Church, where baby Americus is found in the manger. The couple has been pulled over in Arkansas across the state line. They revealed where they had left Americus.

Part 2, Chapter 21 – Claire, in remembrance of her son, gives Willy Jack money to get to Nashville. Willy arrives by bus. He stays at the Plantation Hotel where he hires a hooker and buys some alcohol. He focuses then on music, on getting “The Beat of a Heart” and other songs he has written into working order. He has studied tapes from Claire of country music performers, and he imitates them in front of the mirror. In prison, Willy had performed for the inmates. He hits up all of the music agents he can find, but he cannot get past the reception desks. After ten days of such failures, he goes to the old Boston Building on Jefferson, to the Ruth Meyers Agency. Willy Jack is admitted to see Ruth at once. Ruth's office is messy and disorganized. She is unimpressed to see Willy. Ruth tells Willy he can play her one song. Willy chooses “The Beat of a Heart.” Ruth is impressed. She tells Willy it will cost about twelve-hundred dollars to get him cleaned up and to get him photographed and that Doc Frazier, a dentist, will have to work Willy into the schedule. Ruth tells Willy she takes fifteen percent, and he'll work night clubs until it is time for a record deal. She decides Willy's new name is Billy Shadow. She tells Willy to never ever lie to her.

Part 3, Chapter 22 – Three years after Novalee has been in Oklahoma, she gets to go to Santa Fe because she has won the Kodak contest for Southwest photography. Her photograph of the boy on Rattlesnake Ridge is the contest winner. The prize is a weekend in Santa Fe. Sister believes Novalee will be famous. The next week goes incredibly well for Novalee, from having an article about herself in the paper to being employee of the week at Wal-Mart to Lexie treating Novalee to Pizza Hut. Novalee even asks Forney to go with her. Sister will cook for his sister, and Retha Holloway, president of the Literary Guild, will handle the library.

As they drive to New Mexico, Novalee tells Forney she has never left Americus alone for so long. Forney reassures Novalee that Americus will be safe and sound with Sister. Their first day in Santa Fe, Novalee shoots eleven rolls of film and eighteen the next.



That night, they get ready for the awards banquet at the Fairmont Museum. Novalee looks beautiful. Forney is taken aback. Novalee addresses the audience at the awards ceremony, and then later, orders dinner with Forney in the hotel. Noalee asks Forney if he's ever felt like he's playing grown-up, like he is only a kid doing adult things, like packing a suitcase and going to an awards ceremony. Novalee then talks to Sister and Americus on the phone. Forney also listens in as Americus sings "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." After Novalee hangs up, he almost tells Novalee something incredibly important.

Part 3, Chapter 23 – A storm comes across Oklahoma. A middle-aged man, a Vietnam veteran, tells Novalee at Wal-Mart that a big storm is coming. Novalee gets off work at three, and the sky continues to darken. Novalee's new used car, a Chevy, seems to take much more gas than Sister's Toyota, but Novalee is proud of it and proud to be able to drive it. At home, Sister says there is a tornado warning, that the reporters on TV say a funnel cloud was spotted in Vian. Sister and Novalee gather up emergency provisions and head over to Dixie Mullen's storm cellar with Doughboy, their little dog, and their new kitten. The air outside is utterly still. The neighborhood appears abandoned. Mrs. Ortiz and her girls are already in the cellar, and Sister is on her way. The wind picks up tremendously, and Novalee looks out to see if Sister is coming. Mr. Ortiz is painting a house somewhere, and Mrs. Ortiz has been unable to get in touch with him. Hailstones rain down, then stop. A tornado warning siren sounds out. Just as Novalee is ready to go and find Sister, she sees a funnel cloud. Novalee is almost sucked up by the wind, but Mrs. Ortiz grabs her hand; Americus is almost sucked out by the wind, but Novalee grabs Americus. Another gust of wind allows the three into the cellar, and the doors slam shut.

Part 3, Chapter 24 – Leona and Henry, neighbors and friends, are buried three days after the tornado. Sister Husband has also perished, having been found by Forney, broken and crumbled up in the street. She lives for five days on life support. Novalee spends as much time with Sister as possible before Sister dies. Mr. Sprock is also there to visit Sister. Forney buys Americus a little doctors kit. For a broken heart, Americus prescribes two M&Ms. Novalee stays with the Whitecottons. Novalee is plunged into handling Sister's final affairs. More bad news comes. Wal-Mart has been destroyed. A new supercenter is going to be built fifty-four miles away in Poteau. Wal-Mart will pay moving expenses for all those who relocate for guaranteed jobs at the new store. Forney begs Novalee to stay, but Novalee is through depending on other people. Novalee has no idea what else she can do except move. Mr. Ortiz comes by to see Novalee later on, bringing some things that survived the storm that destroyed Sister's trailer –such as her Bible. She looks at the Bible's entries of births and deaths, and she enters in Sister's death: Thelma Idean Husband, October 9, 1922 to May 6, 1991. Then Novalee cries.

Analysis

Just as things seem to be settling down into a normal routine for Novalee, Americus, Forney, and Sister, Americus is kidnapped. She is found safely a short time later. The incident completely upends Novalee's life, and she becomes especially concerned and



protective thereafter. Through it all, Sister and Forney prove to be rocks for Novalee. From one situation to the next, Forney grows closer and closer to Novalee. Indeed, she even goes so far as to ask Forney to attend the Kodak awards banquet with her in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Things take a dramatic turn for the worst when a tornado sweeps through Sequoyah, Oklahoma, and Sister is killed.

No matter what happens, Novalee cannot seem to catch a break. While she has moments of sunlight -such as the awards ceremony- there are numerous traumatic events that she must deal with, from the kidnapping of Americus to the tornado and the death of Sister Husband. However, a handful of bright spots continue to prove everlasting for Novalee, including Americus, Lexie, and Forney. The three of them continue to bring love and comfort to Novalee, who returns the same to the three of them.

Discussion Question 1

Novalee quickly develops a knack for photography, but she refuses to commit to charging anyone for her work. Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Novalee choose Forney to come with her to Santa Fe for the awards ceremony? Why can she think of no one else she would rather ask? Is it possible that Novalee is very much in love with Forney? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe that it takes so long for Novalee to cry following the death of Sister Husband? What finally makes her cry? Why do you believe this is so?

Vocabulary

indelicate, inquiries, convulsed, flamenco, gravity, vigilante, benediction, menagerie



Part 3, Chapter 25 - Part 4, Chapter 32

Summary

Part 3, Chapter 25 – Novalee and Americus head to McDonald's for lunch and a playdate with Lexie and her kids. Certain and Moses are saddened that Novalee and Americus will soon be moving out. Certain tells Novalee before she leaves that a man named Ray has called again. At McDonald's, Lexie asks how Forney is taking the news that Novalee is leaving. Novalee says Forney is sad, as any best friend would be. Lexie tells Novalee she is blind, that Forney is in love with her. But even then, Novalee doesn't believe Lexie, because she believes Forney is not like them. He is sophisticated and educated. He has come from money, and "girls like her and Lexie don't get the pick of the litter."

Novalee goes to meet Ray where Sister's house once stood. Ray explains he and Sister were members at Alcoholics Anonymous together. Ray explains he is the executor of the estate, and Sister had a will, leaving everything she had to Novalee, including eight thousand dollars insurance for the trailer, eight thousand dollars for the contents, and ten thousand dollars for life insurance. Novalee decides she is going to stay where she has planted her roots. Ironically, Americus discovers that Novalee's buckeye tree is still standing out on the property.

Part 3, Chapter 26 – Willy Jack, as he sings, not only notices lots of attractive women in the club, but he also looks out for Johnny Desoto, one of the biggest music agents. Billy Shadows's band is called Night River. Cowpokes, the club they are playing, is at the upscale end of town. Willy is unhappy with slow progress with Ruth. He wants a record deal and TV time. He explains this to Johnny Desoto. Desoto doesn't like that Willy is tied up with Ruth, but if Willy is prepared to have Ruth as an enemy instead of an ally, Desoto will help. When Willy calls Ruth later on, Ruth is angry: Claire Hudson insists her son has written "The Beat of a Heart," and Willy has lied about ever knowing her. Ruth has also heard about Desoto. Ruth tells Willy to go to Desoto for help against Claire and hangs up.

Part 3, Chapter 27 – Snow and sleet fall, and Novalee has to clear off her car to get home. The commute from the Wal-Mart supercenter, more than an hour, is rough in bad conditions. Forney and Moses have weighted the truck down with cinderblocks and new snow tires. Despite offers elsewhere, Novalee commits to the Wal-Mart in Poteau, one of few who do. She is the only one who makes the commute. She doesn't know why exactly, but she feels a connection to Wal-Mart. Meanwhile, the Ortizes, the Whitecottons, and Forney take care of Americus. Novalee especially enjoys coming home to see Forney taking care of Americus. Novalee has had a new house constructed with the money from Sister. The house has four rooms, a bathroom, and a deck that circles the buckeye tree. Moses, Mr. Ortiz, the Goodlucks, and others have helped to construct the home, which is fixed to the ground. Novalee herself has even helped to build the house, at every stage.



At home, Forney has already cleared off the porch and drive and sprinkled salt. He has a fire going,. He gets Novalee some coffee. Novalee talks to Lexie on the phone and learns that Sam Walton has died.

Part 3, Chapter 28 – Novalee takes her first paid photography job for Carolyn Biddle's wedding. Carolyn is the teacher of Benny Goodluck. To prepare, Novalee looks through magazines about weddings and brides. Moses tells Novalee a story about his Aunt Effie, who was married in 1932 during the middle of the Great Depression. Her husband is killed at Midway ten years later, during World War II. When Effie is in her eighties, her house catches on fire, and she runs into the burning building to save her wedding photos, but she dies.

The next morning, Lexie calls Novalee to tell her about the man she has met, Roger Briscoe, a CPA, who has money, a new car, and dresses very well. She has met him at the Texaco station, coming back from doing laundry with her kids. Briscoe buys them all lunch at Golden Corral. He then says that he will take them all to Six Flags very soon. Meanwhile, Forney's sister begins falling and doing worse and worse. Benny Goodluck attends the wedding with Novalee, acting as her assistant. At McDonald's on the way home, Benny asks Novalee if she is in love with anyone, and Novalee responds that she thinks she is.

Part 3, Chapter 29 – In the two months since Carolyn's wedding, Novalee has accepted other jobs. Looking through her photos, Novalee finds a picture of Forney she has taken. She begins to trace his face with her fingers. The phone rings, and it is Brummet, Lexie's four year-old, who asks Novalee to come over because they need help. Novalee discovers that Lexie's apartment is in order, but silent. Some of the children are naked. Little Praline is naked and rocking herself in the corner. She discovers Lexie in bed, brutally beaten and bloody. The children say Roger is responsible.

Part 3, Chapter 30 – Novalee moves all of Lexie's kids into her house, and then she brings Lexie home from the hospital to stay with her. Lexie has had her jaw broken, her ribs cracked, and her lip almost ruined. Mr. Sprock brings over plenty of vegetables, and all of the neighbors commit to helping care for the children, as well as bringing over food. Months later, Lexie explains what happened. She had come home early, skipping her lunch break, because Roger was coming in from Fort Worth. She arrives home to find he has gotten in early, and she discovers him in the process of raping her children. She flies at him and attempts to stop him, but she is savagely beaten herself. Lexie knows they will all never be the same. Lexie blames herself for not seeing that Roger was evil. Novalee tells Lexie she will get through this, that she will make it, just as she has always made it. Novalee tells Lexie to tell her children that they must always stand up against evil and make sure goodness carries on.

Part 3, Chapter 31 – Novalee joins a college seminar on photography. Jean Putnam teaches the class. They head out to take photos and then come back to the darkroom to develop the film. There, Putnam instructs everyone on using bleach to lighten photos. As she is working on her photo, Novalee realizes that she is learning the secret to seeing into shadows.



Part 3, Chapter 32 – Willy Jack listens to Wayne Deane singing “The Beat of a Heart” on a jukebox. Willy tells the bartender that he wrote the song, and it was stolen by Claire Hudson. After being fired by Ruth, Willy can’t get a gig to save his life. Lawyers had verified Claire had filed a posthumous claim on the song, and John Turtle had been there to witness the creation of the song. But, Turtle had died, and Claire had disappeared. Willy Jack descends into alcoholism and drugs. They go from bar to bar, making enough to pay their tabs. Willy has also been going with a girl named Delphia. With his guitar in hoc, Willy is desperate for cash. He goes on a drinking and drug binge, driving around with Delphia. In such times, he always ends up hearing Novalee’s voice about the heartbeat of their baby. Delphia parks at a café for food and coffee, and Willy stumbles out of the car. He stumbles into a Union Pacific rail yard and remembers very few things –such as someone picking up one of his legs.

Analysis

Lexie can even see that Forney is in love with Novalee, but Novalee refuses to accept it, because she believes that Forney is too good for her. At the same time, Forney is heartbroken that Novalee and Americus will have to move away in order for Novalee to continue working at the new Wal-Mart. But, it is revealed that everything Sister had -though not much- has been left to Novalee. Novalee uses the money left to her, in addition to help from her friends, to build a house fixed to the ground. Just like others have helped Novalee, she opens up her own home to Lexie and her children following the vicious assault on the family by Roger Briscoe. At the same time, justice catches up to Willy Jack, whose burgeoning musical career is shattered by his overreach.

Late into the second half of the novel, things finally appear to be on the right track for Novalee. Things have finally settled down into a pattern uninterrupted by any major catastrophe on her part. Rather than being a victim of forces beyond her control, Novalee has become a refuge against such events for those closest to her, including Lexie and Forney. Novalee also moves into her own career, using her talents for photography to her advantage. She begins to shoot paid jobs, such as weddings.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe that Novalee takes in Lexie and her kids so readily? Do you think it truly matters to Novalee that she is able to do this? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Although it is clear to the reader and to Lexie that Forney is in love with Novalee, Novalee cannot accept that fact. Why not? Do you believe Novalee is justified in thinking this way? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

What happens to Willy Jack? Is there any irony in this? Do you believe what happens to Willy Jack is deserved? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Clout, coalesce, menacing, mercy, conquer, enameled, grotesque, majestic



Part 4, Chapter 33 - Part 4, Chapter 38

Summary

Part 4, Chapter 33 – Lexie's jaw has been wired shut, and she has lost sixty pounds,. She and Novalee are scouring yard sales for skinny jeans. Lexie's children, Brummet and Pauline, are still recovering, and Lexie is told they need a strong male role model in their lives. Suddenly, they smell smoke. The library is on fire. Forney's sister is killed. He goes to stay at the old, rundown Majestic Hotel on the day of the funeral. That night, Novalee goes to see Forney. He relates how, when their father didn't come to pick him up at school on a rainy day, Mary Elizabeth came. She sang and danced to make Forney smile. That was the last time he remembers her smiling. He couldn't bring himself to go to the funeral, he explains. He had four white roses for her, but by the time he had reached the church, they had turned brown. She wraps Forney up in her arms, and he kisses her.

Part 4, Chapter 34 – Novalee handles photography jobs over the next few days, but she cannot stop thinking about Forney. She is in love with him, but she doesn't know how to tell him. She tells Lexie, and Lexie is ecstatic. Novalee explains after she and Forney made love in his hotel room, he told her he loved her, and she didn't tell him anything back. She just left shortly thereafter. Now, she regrets not telling him that she loved him. With Forney in Maine to bury his sister, she regrets it even more. Retha Holloway, president of the Literary Guild, is surprised to learn that Forney will be coming back at all to Sequoyah, figuring he will stay in Maine. She explains the Hull family is originally from Boston. It turns out Forney is thirty-six. With the Hull mansion destroyed and Mary Elizabeth gone, Holloway suspects Forney will go back to college at Bowdoin, for he is still a young man. Meanwhile, the library is being rebuilt.

When Forney gets back, Novalee rushes to see him. She asks how everything went, and Forney replies that it was a long trip. Forney explains he has forgotten how beautiful Maine is, and he stayed on a few more days to see his old professors. Novalee explains the new library will be run by the mayor's daughter and that Lexie and her kids are moving out into a nearby duplex. Forney declares his love for Novalee again, saying his new dream in life is to be with her and Americus. Novalee tells him he is her best friend. He asks her if she even cares for him, but she can't tell him. She says she doesn't love him, not in the way he needs to be loved.

Part 4, Chapter 35 – Forney leaves. Novalee is miserable without him the first few weeks. She cries at random times, in random places. She is lost without Forney. So is Americus. In her prayers at night, Americus asks God to bring Forney back home. Forney writes Americus a letter, urging her to keep up on her studies and to get through her Latin Primer. Months go by. Letters come in bursts, and sometimes not at all. The letters come in from all parts of the country. Novalee tells Lexie the truth. She doesn't think she deserves Forney. Lexie reminds her of what has happened to her in her life and everything she has done has been good. Several letters arrive from Forney from



Chicago. Novalee imagines that is where Forney must be staying. He ends up working at a bookshop called Chaucer's Book Store. Novalee calls him up, only to hang up before saying anything.

Part 4, Chapter 36 – Lexie gets married to Leon Yoder, red-faced, grinning, and a good man. He marries Lexie in the hospital chapel. Leon has two children, and with Lexie's, seven altogether. Novalee takes the pictures. Leon is a pediatric nurse. Their romance is slow but honest. Lexie tells Novalee that she finally decides Leon is the one, when she learns that his daughter, Carol Ann isn't his real daughter. She is from a former marriage and another father. One day, the woman announces she is going to Mexico and taking Carol Ann. But, Leon sees that she is a horrible mother and wants to keep raising Carol Ann. So, the woman trades Carol Ann for Leon's 1967 red Camaro. Leon has never seen the car or the woman again. That is when Lexie realizes Leon is the pick of the litter.

Part 4, Chapter 37 – Just before midnight, Novalee wakes up to find Benny Goodluck sitting on her porch in a tuxedo. She wonders why he is not at the prom. Benny is upset because he didn't have a date. Benny feels as if he is nothing. Novalee reminds him that he is a track star. He has awards, and he is a good person. He will be going off to school in the fall. Novalee even tells him he will probably meet a beautiful girl. Benny then asks Novalee for a kiss, which she grants him.

Part 4, Chapter 38 – After Americus turns seven, Novalee is on guard constantly. She is scared that sevens will bring unlucky events once more. Bad news comes in way of the newspaper. A legless man named W. J. Pickens, an article explains, has had his wheelchair stolen. Pickens explains he is hitchhiking to California, searching for his child and the child's mother, unseen since 1987. She goes to Woods County General to see him. Willy explains he wanted to see if she was all right. Willy looks horrible. Willy explains he has been in jail. Novalee accuses Willy of coming back to steal Americus. Willy responds by throwing off his sheets, exposing his body, legless below the knees, asking Novalee if she thought he would run away with Americus.

Novalee demands to know why Willy is there. Willy explains he has only done two good things in his life –to father a good child and to write a good song. He explains he has come back to see her to tell her something about Americus, about the day she asked him if he could feel the heartbeat. He explains he lied about not being able to feel it. Willy says that lie has eaten away a part of him. Willy wonders if Novalee has ever told such a lie, and if she will ever get the chance to set it right. Novalee then calls Forney at Chaucer's. She tells him she lied. She tells him she lied because she thought he deserved someone better. Forney tells her there isn't anyone better than she. Novalee explains she is taking someone back home, but she isn't staying in Tellico Plains. Novalee asks if it is not too late. Forney asks if he is dreaming, and Novalee tells him that it is real. In the rain outside, Novalee imagines herself at seventeen, pregnant and alone. She remembers meeting Sister, Moses, Benny Goodluck, Forney, and Americus. Novalee realizes that home is where the heart is, and her history has begun to unfold.



Analysis

Lexie finally finds the right man in Leon Yoder, a man who unflinchingly gave up a car to take care of his stepdaughter. The two of them are married, and Novalee handles the photography. Lexie also takes the opportunity to talk to Novalee again about Forney. Novalee at last realizes that she is utterly in love with Forney and decides that she must finally tell him. But her own self-confidence, which has grown in every respect except her understanding that she deserves to be loved by even the pick of the litter, stops her short from finally telling Forney that she loves him. This causes a rift between the two, during which time Forney simply does not return home. He travels around the country instead. Ultimately, the two reconcile when Novalee admits that what she and Forney have is real. She does love and want Forney.

Perhaps, the most poignant episode at the end of the novel occurs when the strong and courageous Novalee decides to bring Willy Jack back to Tellico Plains, Tennessee, before reuniting with Forney. The symbolism should not be lost: When the novel begins, Willy Jack is driving, and Novalee's life is out of her hands. Now, Novalee is completing the circle. She is driving Willy Jack back to his home. Then, Novalee will be returning to her own home with Forney and Americus. She is completing a journey that was begun some seven years before. She is also closing a major chapter in her life.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Forney fall in love with Novalee? What reasons does Forney give Novalee for wanting to be with her? Do you believe Forney? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does it take Novalee so long to finally declare her love for Forney? What finally prompts Novalee to declaring her love for Forney? How is this a reflection of Novalee's character?

Discussion Question 3

Explain the importance of Novalee driving Willy Jack back to Tellico Plains, Tennessee. Why is it important that Novalee does this? Why do you think she does this?

Vocabulary

decrepit, aristocratic, imperative, curriculum, disciplinary



Characters

Novalee Nation

Novalee Nation is the main character and principal protagonist of the novel *Where the Heart Is* by Billie Letts. When the novel begins, Novalee is pregnant and seventeen, heading out west to California with her boyfriend, Willy Jack, so Willy can take a job working on the railroad with his cousin. They are both natives of Tellico Plains, Tennessee. Novalee has a fear of the number seven, stemming back from when her mother abandoned her at the age of seven. Novalee is a sweet, kind, patient, and beautiful girl, who dreams of a warm home and family. But, Willy Jack has other plans in mind, and he ditches Novalee at a Wal-Mart in Sequoyah, Oklahoma. Novalee is heartbroken. She starts living secretly at Wal-Mart. She is given a buckeye tree by young Benny Goodman as a gift. Next, she meets Sister Husband, who serves as the town's welcoming committee. Novalee, fearing for the health of her buckeye tree, seeks out information at the town's library, where she meets Forney Hull. Forney worries about Novalee, and he discovers she is living at Wal-Mart. When Novalee goes into labor, Forney crashes through a window to deliver the baby, whom Novalee names Americus.

Over the next seven years, Novalee undergoes a series of tragedies and triumphs. Americus is kidnapped, but found safe. Sister is killed in a tornado. Novalee gets into photography and wins a first place prize from Kodak. Photography ultimately becomes a job for Novalee. But, as Americus turns seven, Willy Jack comes back into Novalee's life. Willy Jack has seen his musical aspirations slip away from overreach, only to descend into drugs and alcoholism. He has had his legs below the knees severed by a train, and Novalee decides to bring him back to Tennessee. Novalee also, after seven years, decides to confess to Forney that she is in love with him.

Forney Hull

Forney Hull is the primary love interest of Novalee Nation. Descended from an aristocratic family in Maine and Boston, Forney is incredibly intelligent, sophisticated, and well-rounded. These are all attributes not heavily valued in rural societies. Having gone away to study to become a teacher, Forney returns home when his sister's alcoholism means that she can no longer run the town library, which is the bottom floor of their massive home. Forney passes his time reading and caring for his much older sister, passing into his early thirties. When he meets Novalee Nation, he worries for her and discovers she is living in Wal-Mart. He crashes through a plate glass window to deliver her baby girl Americus. He soon after falls in love with Novalee, becoming a major part of her life. He instills in both Novalee and Americus the love of reading. He is there for them through all of their ups and downs. When Novalee makes love to him, but doesn't declare her love for him, Forney ends up leaving town, only to come home to a second refusal from Novalee. He then leaves, traveling the country, until he ultimately



settles in Chicago. There, Novalee tracks him down and calls him, finally declaring her love for him.

Americus Nation

Americus Nation is the daughter of Novalee Nation and Willy Jack. She is born during the novel, and she is seven when the novel ends. She is kidnapped as a baby and nearly killed by a tornado. She grows up feeling safe and secure, knowing her mother and Forney are around, as well as Lexie, the Whitecottons, the Ortizes, and many other friends and neighbors. When Forney leaves, Americus prays to God that Forney will come back.

Sister Thelma Husband

Born in 1922, Sister Thelma Husband is a devout Christian and a recovering alcoholic. She is sweet, kind, quirky, and friendly. She forms the one-woman welcoming committee of Sequoyah, Oklahoma, and she welcomes Novalee and Americus into her home. Sister is dating Mr. Sprock. She asks God daily for forgiveness for fornication with him. She instills faith and love in Novalee's life and helps to raise Americus. Sister is ultimately killed in 1991 by a tornado that rips through Oklahoma. She leaves behind everything she has, including some \$26,000 in policies to Novalee. This allows Novalee to truly begin her own life.

Lexie Coop

Lexie Coop is a nurse at County General Hospital who tends to Novalee during her stay there after giving birth to Americus. Novalee and Lexie become fast friends. A few years older than Novalee, Lexie had been pregnant at fifteen. She went on to have five more children while searching for the perfect man.

Moses Whitecotton

Moses Whitecotton is a kind baby photographer, who travels around to different stores for shoots. He lives with his wife Certain out in the country. Moses is the darkest black man that Novalee has ever seen, and the two become fast friends. After Americus is born, Moses and Certain are happy to babysit when they are needed. When the tornado destroys Sister's trailer, the Whitecottons take in Novalee and Americus. Moses instills in Novalee a love of photography. Moses and Certain have no children of their own because their only child was drowned in a nearby creek.



Certain Whitecotton

Certain Whitecotton is the sweet and caring wife of Moses Whitecotton. Certain, like her husband, takes an instant liking to Novalee and Americus. Certain and Moses have had to deal with the accidental drowning of their own daughter, years before, in a nearby creek.

Willy Jack

Willy Jack is a short, abrasive, and impatient man who impregnates seventeen year-old Novalee Nation, his girlfriend. When the novel begins, Willy Jack and Novalee are bound for Bakersfield, California, so Willy can take a job working with his cousin on the railroad. What Willy intends to do, though he doesn't tell Novalee, is lose his finger in an "accident" to receive compensation and lifetime benefits, just like his cousin. Willy is impatient with poor Novalee, and so he ditches her at Wal-Mart when she goes to use the bathroom. He picks up a thirteen year old girl. He is convicted of a robbery that the thirteen year old commits. Willy Jack goes to jail, where he meets the jail librarian, Claire Hudson, who says Willy looks like her own musically inclined dead son. She gives Willy his old guitar, which he learns how to play. He writes a song called "The Beat of a Heart." After he gets out of jail, he travels to Nashville and signs with agent Ruth Meyers, who puts him on a multi-year circuit of bars and clubs. Willy becomes unhappy, and when he tries to jump ship to a different agent for a record deal and TV time, Ruth dumps Willy, as does everyone else.

Willy descends in to alcoholism and drug addiction, failing again and again to revive his burgeoning musical career. One night, he stumbles into a rail yard, where he has his legs severed by a train. Willy goes on to the hospital, where Novalee, reading about it in the paper, goes to see him, demanding to know what he wants. Willy apologizes for what he has done and for lying to her. Novalee brings him back home to Tellico Plains before reuniting with Forney.

Ruth Meyers

Ruth Meyers is a no-nonsense, cutthroat agent who signs Willy Jack. She has Willy touring bars and clubs, building up to a record deal and TV time. But, Willy Jack is impatient and tries to ditch her. Ruth then pulls out all the stops, drops Willy, and uses her influence to force others not to hire him.

Claire Hudson

Claire Hudson is the librarian who works at the jail where Willy Jack is incarcerated. Since she sees her son in Willy Jack, she gives Willy Jack her son's guitar.. She sends Willy Jack to Nashville after he is released. When Willy Jack's song "The Beat of a

Heart" makes it big, she files a posthumous copyright on the song in her son's name and wins the case against Willy Jack. Then, she disappears.



Symbols and Symbolism

Scrapbook

Novalee Nation keeps a scrapbook as she grows up. She puts pictures and photos from magazines of houses, colors, and decor that she would like to use for her own house one day. For example, she wants to put a Mickey Mouse lamp in the baby's bedroom. When Willy Jack ditches Novalee, he takes along her scrapbook, which is also metaphorical for Novalee's dreams of a better life, a stable family, and a secure home.

Rollei

Rollei cameras are used by Novalee Nation and Moses Whitecotton throughout the book. Moses uses a Rollei camera to take photos of babies, and this is how Novalee learns about them. Novalee buys one at a yard sale. She has Moses fix it up. She then uses it throughout the rest of the novel.

Bible

A Bible is what is read and kept close by Sister Thelma Husband. She gives out chapters of the Bible to friends, newcomers to town, and to those whom need faith. The Bible forms Sister's moral worldview and helps to make her a better, stronger person. Sister's Bible survives the tornado that kills her and falls into the possession of Novalee, who keeps it safe.

Books

Books are read by Forney, Novalee, and Americus throughout the novel. The books come mostly from the library and cover all manners of subjects, from history and Latin to poetry and fiction. Novalee, who is not much of a reader when the novel begins, takes to reading when Forney turns her on to the world of books.

Buckeye Tree

A buckeye tree is given to Novalee as a gift from Benny Goodluck while she is staying in Wal-Mart. Hoping to care for the tree properly, Novalee goes to the library seeking information. During her visit to the library, she meets Forney. She plants the Buckeye tree at Sister's house, and the buckeye tree survives the tornado that wipes almost everything else away. When Novalee builds her new house, she includes a deck which is built around the buckeye tree.



Settings

Tellico Plains, Tennessee

Tellico Plains, Tennessee, is the hometown of Novalee Nation and Willy Jack.. They have left the town behind on their way to Willy Jack's potential railroad employment in California. From all indications, Tellico Plains is an impoverished area, and jobs are scarce, hence the trip to California. At the end of the novel, Novalee brings Willy Jack back to Tellico Plains.

Wal-Mart

The Wal-Mart where Novalee uses the bathroom is located in Sequoyah, Oklahoma. It is where Willy Jack ditches her and where Novalee secretly lives for a few months. Wal-Mart is also where Americus, her baby, is delivered with Forney's assistance. The tornado that rips through town in 1991 essentially destroys Wal-Mart, and it is so badly damaged that it is torn down rather than rebuilt.

Sequoyah, Oklahoma

Sequoyah, Oklahoma is the town where Wal-Mart is located and where Willy Jack ditches Novalee. Sequoyah becomes the home of Novalee. It is the home of Sister Husband, Mr. Sprock, Lexie Coop and her kids, Forney Hull and his library, as well as the Goodlucks. Much of Sequoyah is destroyed or severely damaged by the tornado that rips through the town in 1991.

The Library

The library is located at the old Hull Mansion, where Forney Hull and his older sister, Mary Elizabeth, live upstairs. Mary Elizabeth is unable to work at the library, so Forney takes her place. Mary Elizabeth is killed when the library burns.

Santa Fe, New Mexico

The site of the Kodak Awards Ceremony, Santa Fe, New Mexico, is where Novalee and Forney spend a weekend as the result of Novalee winning first prize in a photography contest. Santa Fe is a beautiful southwestern town, and Novalee takes hundreds of pictures there.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Coming of age is a major theme in the novel *Where the Heart Is* by Billie Letts. Coming of age involves the spiritual, emotional, moral, mental, and overall character growth of an individual based on real-life experiences of various kinds. Coming of age in the novel specifically deals with Novalee, who makes the transition from a teenager to a young woman.

When the novel begins, Novalee is a seventeen year-old girl, pregnant, and totally dependent upon her boyfriend, Willy Jack, for survival. When Willy Jack ditches Novalee, she is totally on her own. Novalee is a very sweet, kind, and caring girl, but she lacks self-confidence. She demonstrates quickly that she is fairly self-reliant, managing to live secretly in Wal-Mart for months. She has a very nurturing nature, as evidenced by her desire to care for the buckeye tree she has been given as a gift. But, she is very unsure about herself.

After giving birth to Americus, dealing with Americus's kidnapping, and weathering the death of Sister Husband, Novalee has become a stronger, more courageous person. She has grown spiritually and morally, thanks to Sister and Sister's love of Christianity. Forney has helped Novalee grow intellectually. Moses has expanded her mind culturally with photography. But the one area of her growth that takes the longest is her belief in herself and the realization that she is worthy of being loved. This is a process that takes seven years and ends with her commitment to Forney.

Christianity

Christianity is a dominant theme in *Where the Heart Is* by Billie Letts. Christianity is religious faith which, at its center, recognizes belief in God and a commitment to Jesus Christ, Son of God. Christians believe that Jesus came into the world to save mankind. Christianity also teaches and encourages the practicing of virtues and ideals, such as charity, kindness, and above all, forgiveness. Christianity is fully embraced and practiced by Sister Thelma Husband, who passes on her love of God, Christ, and her fellow man to Novalee.

Sister, as a character, is very kind and forgiving. She might well be considered born-again, for she is a former alcoholic, and takes care to distribute chapters of the Bible to her fellow man. When she discovers Novalee has nowhere to live, she takes it as a sign from God and takes Novalee and Americus into her home, where she cares deeply for them. Through Sister, Novalee comes to a deeper understanding of Christianity, and Americus is given a good upbringing.

As the novel progresses, Novalee and Americus each turn to God for help for various reasons. Americus, for example, asks that God will bring Forney back home after he



leaves. After Sister's life is taken in the tornado of 1991, her Bible becomes Novalee's, and Novalee essentially assumes Sister's role. When Lexie and her kids are in need of protection and a home, Novalee unhesitatingly takes them in and cares for them. She has lived the example of the life that Sister has led, just as Sister has imitated the life of Jesus Christ.

Tragedy

Tragedy is an underlying theme that percolates every aspect of *Where the Heart Is*. Despite the hope, optimism, and faith of the novel's characters, tragedy is ever present. As a theme, tragedy involves some sort of traumatic or heartbreaking loss, situation, or event that affects the lives and decisions of individuals. *Where the Heart Is* shares many tragedies.

Novalee experiences more than her fair share of tragedies. She is abandoned at an early age by her mother and forced to live in various foster homes. Then, at seventeen, she is abandoned by Willy Jack, the father of her unborn child. She experiences further tragedies when Americus is kidnapped and when Sister Husband is killed in the tornado of 1991. Her lack of self worth leads to another emotional tragedy. She feels that she is not good enough for Forney, and she cannot bring herself to tell Forney that she loves him. So, Forney leaves Sequoyah.

Other characters experience tragedies of their own. Moses and Certain Whitecotton are loving people who lost their daughter at an early age to an accidental drowning in a creek near their home.

Forney Hull's parents die early on, and when his sister becomes sick from alcoholism, Forney must give up his dreams of finishing college and teaching history to return home to care for her and the library. He has no life until Novalee appears.

Lexie Coop is unwed and has five children. She is beaten savagely by a child rapist.

In spite of all the life changing events, each character seeks and finds goodness where they can. Then, they cling onto that goodness. Tragedies bring Novalee, Forney, Sister, Lexie, and the Whitecottons together. Their happiness is found in the joys of one another. They are there for each other when pain and heartache appear.

Styles

Point of View

Billie Letts tells her novel *Where the Heart Is* in the third-person omniscient narrative. This is done for several reasons. First, due to the number of characters, places, situations, and events contained in the novel, a common thread by way of a single voice links all of these disparate stories together into a larger effort. Also, switches between Novalee's life and Willy Jack's life are not jarring or unsettling, as might have been the case if two people were narrating their own parts in one single novel. Finally, the narrator is able to explain things to the reader in an omniscient fashion. When characters narrate for themselves, they might not be aware of specific feelings, reactions, or motions of another character.

Language and Meaning

Billie Letts uses sweet, simple, and straightforward language in *Where the Heart Is*. The author's choice of words is suitable because the novel revolves around Novalee, a simple, uneducated girl whose heart is clearly her greatest asset. Letts' poetic prose fits the personality of Novalee. The language is also appropriate because it lifts the reader above the tragedies that percolate the novel. It appeals to the reader's emotions, which deepens the reader's interest. Finally, the straightforward approach makes the story line easy to understand.

Structure

Billie Letts divides her novel *Where the Heart Is* into thirty-eight chapters, divided into four parts. Each of the parts of the novel break at important and life-altering events, primarily focused around Willy Jack. The first two parts are a good example of the divisions. Part 1 ends with Willy Jack composing a song "The Beat of a Heart," and Part 2 ends with Willy Jack signing a contract with Ruth Meyers, an agent.

The breaks in the novel allude to seven years passing. Also, the different parts and chapters mimic life passing from one major event to the next, much like the characters' lives are passing in a similar way.



Quotes

Feel right there.” Her voice was soft, no more than a whisper. “That’s where the heart is.
-- Narrator/Novalee (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph p. 11)

Importance: Here, Novalee attempts to get her boyfriend, Willy Jack, to feel the heartbeat of their baby, but Willy Jack pulls away and says he can't feel anything. This lie will eat away at him for the next seven years. When things go badly, he will hear Novalee's voice uttering these words again and again and again.

Home is where your history begins.
-- Sister Thelma Husband (Part 1, Chapter 2 paragraph p. 19)

Importance: These words are uttered by Sister Husband as she speaks to Novalee when they meet for the first time. Sister is explaining that the history of a life begins at home. Novalee, however, does not yet have a home to begin her life's story. Yet in time, she will come to find that home is not necessarily four walls and a roof, but where one is loved, accepted, and needed.

Open your eyes and look at your daughter.
-- Forney Hull (Part 1, Chapter 8 paragraph p. 90)

Importance: Giving birth to Americus is a life-changing event that gives Novalee a reason to set down roots. Novalee does this symbolically with her buckeye tree. Seeing her daughter for the first time puts a face and a reality and a reason for the struggle that Novalee has been through.

But girls like us, Novalee... we don't get the pick of the litter.
-- Lexie Coop (Part 2, Chapter 13 paragraph p. 138)

Importance: This quote reflects the unmarried, impoverished, and child-raising single status of Lexie and Novalee as uneducated, young girls. They both believe that they have messed up their lives and are, in some way, unworthy of love. This quote will hang heavily on Novalee's shoulders for seven years, until she realizes she is worthy of Forney's love.

What was important to her was knowing that at the moment she took a picture, she was seeing something in a way that nobody else ever had.
-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 17 paragraph p. 171)

Importance: Novalee's love of photography is a vehicle which brings her to an understanding of herself. She begins to see just why she loves taking pictures. Seeing things through the lens of a camera is symbolic. Since her life has been filled with heartbreak and tragedy, Novalee is able to see people in ways that no one else can see them.



But right then, at that very moment, you don't feel like an adult. You feel like a kid playing an adult. You know you're just playing grown-up.

-- Novalee Nation (Part 3, Chapter 22 paragraph p. 222)

Importance: While on the trip to Santa Fe, Novalee utters these words to Forney. She is beginning to assume the courage and consciousness of an adult, though she still feels like a child. While the age of eighteen may legally mean adulthood, there is often much more growth that needs to come along with age to achieve, and fully understand oneself as, an adult. Despite all of the adult choices Novalee has had to make, she has not been able to see herself as a real adult. Yet, the reader can see the transition of her from a teenager into a young adult.

But Novalee was glad he was there. She liked seeing him when she walked into her house. No matter what kind of day she'd had, regardless of how tired she was or what kind of mood she was in, she always felt better when she saw Forney smiling his crooked smile as she came through the door.

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 27 paragraph p. 264)

Importance: Novalee begins to understand that she is falling in love with Forney, although she doesn't quite admit it. Forney has become an integral and necessary part of her life, one that she cannot do without. He makes everything better for her.

They say a woman's her most beautiful when she's in love.

-- Novalee Nation (Part 3, Chapter 28 paragraph p. 277)

Importance: Speaking to Benny Goodluck following the Biddle wedding, Novalee tells him that women in love are the most beautiful. They are beautiful because they know that they are in love, and that they are loved deeply in return. This makes a girl shine. Novalee, however, cannot see how beautiful she is yet, or just how in love she is with Forney, though she is drawing nearer to the truth.

She was in love for the first time in her life, had been for months, and just couldn't keep it to herself any longer.

-- Narrator (Part 4, Chapter 34 paragraph p. 318)

Importance: At last, Novalee has come around to understanding that she is in love with Forney. She is so happy about it that she has to tell somebody. So she tells Lexie, who tells Novalee that she is indeed worthy of love, especially Forney's love.

Maybe you never told a lie so big it can eat away a part of you. But if you ever do... and if you get lucky... you might get a chance to set it right. Just one chance to change it. Then it's gone. And it never comes again.

-- Willy Jack (Part 4, Chapter 38 paragraph p. 353)

Importance: While confronting Willy Jack in the hospital, Novalee listens to what has happened to him. He has struggled to set right a lie he told her seven years ago. This

encourages Novalee to apologize to Forney for the lie she told about not loving him. She decides to tell Forney the truth and commit to him.