

While I Was Gone Study Guide

While I Was Gone by Sue Miller

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Plot Summary

While I Was Gone is a story of how the forgotten past and lessons not learned come back to influence the present and future. Jo Becker has an almost idyllic life with a devoted husband and three grown daughters with talent and promise. She has not told the full story of her past, but it is a past that will return.

Jo has a successful veterinary practice in Adams Mills, a rural community in western Massachusetts. She and her husband Daniel, a minister, live in a picturesque farmhouse with plenty of land around to take their dogs on long walks. Jo enjoys her home and her career until one day mention of a person from her past returns and makes her remember events from more than twenty years earlier.

In the late 1960s, Jo had been previously married and been employed as a teacher in Philadelphia. She grows first dissatisfied with her job and then her marriage. She quits her teaching job and takes a job as a waitress in a bar. The environment in the bar is unlike any she has experienced, and she longs for more freedom and adventure. After lying to her mother and her husband about her intended destination, Jo takes a bus to Boston. Once there she answers an ad regarding a vacancy in a house inhabited by several other people her age. She uses a fake name but is accepted as a new housemate, and soon Jo finds the life she had been seeking in the free-spirited lifestyle of the house.

Jo enjoys the company of all the housemates, and she enjoys the endless string of parties. She grows particularly close to one resident, a young woman of similar age named Dana. Dana is in many ways the kind of person that Jo wants to become. She is free in her granting of affection without becoming entangled in traditional expectations of a young woman. Jo's happy life at the group house is cut short after the brutal murder of Dana.

Years later in Jo's life in Adams Mills, she reencounters one of the group house residents, Eli, who needs veterinary care for his dog. Jo is at first delighted to see an old acquaintance, and then she finds that she is attracted to Eli. Jo increasingly fantasizes about having an affair with Eli, and when the two agree to meet to discuss old times and the tragedy surrounding Dana's death, Jo's fantasies only grow. For their second meeting Jo chooses a hotel bar. The setting and opportunity seem right for the start of an affair, but Jo's attraction to Eli abruptly ends when he shocks her by confessing to having murdered Dana all those years ago.

Jo tells her husband about the confession, and in doing so informs him of her intention to have an affair. Jo then has to find a way to repair her marriage. She must also decide what to do with the information Eli has given her, and she must do so in a way that minimizes further damage to her family.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

While I Was Gone tells the story of Jo Becker, a wife, mother, and successful New England professional, who discovers that the nearly forgotten past can return and drastically affect the present. The action begins as Jo and her husband enjoy a day off together.

The narrator and her husband are in a rowboat on a lake. Her husband asks if she is in pain. The narrator suffers from hip problems. Daniel, the husband, decides to return to shore. Daniel is a preacher, and the couple lives in Adams Mills, a small community in Massachusetts. They live in a farmhouse and use the barn as a garage.

Once the couple arrives home, dogs greet them. The narrator is a veterinarian. While Daniel cleans the fish at the kitchen sink, he listens to the telephone messages. Afterward he goes to his office in the barn, and the narrator goes upstairs to her daughters' room. The couple has three grown daughters who do not live at home. The narrator thinks about a time when the girls were younger and still lived at home. While the narrator stands before a mirror, she contemplates middle age. She thinks that while she was never beautiful she was considered attractive. Now, despite her arthritis, she is in good health. Her mother is eighty-years-old and still healthy and living in Maine.

Daniel returns to the house, and the couple makes dinner. While eating, Daniel notices a troubled expression on the narrator's face, and he asks what is wrong. She says she has been feeling odd ever since being out in the boat. She suspects maybe she misses her daughters. She also poses the possibility that her feelings are a sort of premonition. She mentions a time when the girls were young and she had a premonition that they were in danger on the roof. She then looked out onto the roof and saw that her daughters were indeed there. Daniel says that the incident is perhaps a trick of memory in that later after the incident she remembers it as if she knew beforehand that the girls were on the roof. The couple then talks about aging, and Daniel addresses his wife as Jo.

After dinner one of Daniel's colleagues telephones to discuss a parishioner that is dying of cancer. Daniel leaves to comfort the person and her family. Sadie, the couple's youngest daughter, telephones. Jo thinks about how different Sadie is from her twin older sisters, and she thinks about how different the twins are from each other. Sadie attends college in Massachusetts, and Nora lives in New York with a boyfriend and attends film school. Cass plays guitar in a band and tours often. Sadie says that one of her professors lives in Adams Mills and needs a veterinarian for her dog. Sadie has given her mother's name to the professor.



Chapter 1 Analysis

The story is told by a first person narrator. Though the narrator does not give her name until well into the chapter, clues give the reader some indication of the narrator's life and profession even before the narrator explicitly states certain details. For instance, the narrator's statement about "tightening a stitch or giving an injection" reveals that the narrator works in some medical field. Later she reveals that she is a veterinarian.

It is curious to note that Daniel, the minister, does not believe in premonitions, but Jo, the veterinarian and person of science, does. The couple seems to have a strong and happy relationship as revealed by their conversations and by the fact that they have three grown daughters and are still together.

The chapter concludes on a cryptic and perhaps ominous note when the narrator refers to a particular night as "that Monday night before everything changed, before my other life caught up with me."



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Jo arrives at work on a Tuesday and thinks about how Tuesdays are always busy days. She thinks back to how she got her start in veterinary medicine. She was separated from a husband she had before Daniel, and she had moved back home to Maine and taken a job at a veterinary clinic. Though she had never had pets while growing up, Jo discovered that she had a talent for caring for animals. She began taking classes at a university.

After unsuccessfully trying to convince a client to allow her to neuter a cat, Jo talks with her receptionist, Beattie. Beattie tells about her sister that is addicted to shopping, and then she asks about Jo's family.

Jean Bennett, Sadie's professor, arrives, and she brings a mixed breed dog. The dog cannot walk, and the symptoms have been going on for a few days. Jo performs some tests and concludes that the dog must have had some sort of spinal injury. Jo says that had she seen the dog sooner, surgery might have been possible, but now there is little that she can do. Bennett is distraught, and to comfort her Jo says that they can try a treatment involving steroids, but she cannot promise results. Bennett agrees to try, and she says that the dog actually belongs to her husband who is traveling. She says her husband's name is Eli Mayhew. Jo recognizes the name and says that she lived with someone by that name in a group house near Harvard. Bennett and Jo decide that they must be talking about the same person, but Jo says that at the time she went by the name Felicia Stead. Bennett seems confused, but Jo does not explain.

Jo instructs Bennett on how to care for the dog, Bennett agrees to bring the dog in again the following day. After Bennett leaves, Jo begins remembering a time in her life that she hadn't thought about for many years. She remembers living with a group of people in a house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She remembers how Eli had been the only resident of the house that studied science. She remembers other residents of the house, particularly one named Dana who died.

Jo met Eli and the other residents of the house at a time when she was trying to change or run away from her then current life. She was in her first marriage and unhappy with it and her teaching profession. She quit her teaching job and took a job as a waitress at a bar where she wore revealing clothing. The bar called The Ace of Spades presented what Jo regarded as a seedier side of life, and she felt attracted to it. The environment at the bar was completely different than the life she had previously known. At the bar Jo witnessed a violent altercation for the first time. Her husband, Ted, did not understand her attraction to that type of life. During this time, Jo saw how another waitress departed without telling anyone where she was going, and this gave Jo an idea. She told Ted she was going to Washington, and she told coworkers that she was going to Maine. She



went instead to Boston. Three days later she interviewed to share a house with several other people.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The visit by Jean Bennett and the mention of Eli Mayhew prompts an extended flashback. It seems that though Jo's current life seems stable and constructive, she has many different layers to her history, or several versions of her past. In her current life she is a wife and mother of three grown daughters, but at some time in her past she was part of another marriage. It seems that there was also at least two other stages in between marriages, that when she lived in some group house under a different name and a time when she lived in Maine and attended veterinary school.

The vagueness and the ominous statement at the end of the previous chapter give the narrative a sort of sinister tone. Jo has also mentioned that someone died in her past. Death is not uncommon, but combined with the other statements it might be perceived as yet another questionable element of Jo's murky past.

Jo also mentions the excitement she felt at seeing a violent altercation, and this is not compatible with the image of wholesome mother, devoted wife, and successful professional. The narrative has raised more questions than provided answers.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In the early summer of 1968, Jo adopts the name Felicia Stead, but tells people she is called Licia. She works at a bar and lives at the YMCA. After finding an advertisement for a room in a house, she interviews for the room. Dana, one member of the group that interviews Jo, now going by the name Licia, asks most of the questions. Licia notices that her and Dana share a resemblance. Dana explains the rules of the house and some of the things that Licia can expect to witness, such as recreational drug use. Licia waits outside while the group makes its decision.

The group decides to allow Licia to rent the room, and both Licia and Dana are delighted. Licia immediately finds that she enjoys the bohemian lifestyle. Nearly every weekend the house had a party, and Licia quickly forms friendships with the other residents.

In addition to Licia and Dana there are five other residents in the house. Duncan is a guitarist. Licia feels an instant friendship with Larry, who teaches history at Harvard. Sara is a lawyer who works for an organization that provides legal counseling to the poor. John is a novelist, but Licia notices that he does not spend much time writing. Licia finds Eli the most attractive, but finds that he also seems the least interesting.

After a month of living in the house, Licia feels happier than ever before. She enjoys the constant presence of people to talk to, and Licia attributes much of her happiness to the affection she and Dana feel for each other. Licia and Dana talk often, and once while helping Licia paint her room, Dana admits that she has had sexual relations with two of the men in the house, Duncan and Eli.

Dana wants to hear more about Licia, and Licia tries to invent a history, but she often makes mistakes. Dana often catches the mistakes or contradictions, but she does not force Licia to clarify. Instead Dana tells her own history, including coming from a Polish family and being the youngest of eight children. Currently Dana is a part-time art student.

Some of the residents of the house have definite career goals, but most live, like Licia, for the moment. Even some of the professionals, such as Sara, the lawyer, seem as much interested in experimenting with recreational drugs as furthering her career. Licia loves the constant sense of both excitement and leisure.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The entire chapter consists of a flashback.

Despite being informed of the presence of what some would consider unsavory activity, such as recreational drug use and casual sex, Licia is still enthusiastic about moving into the group house. Dana and Licia seem to form an almost instant affection for each other and possibly a physical attraction.

It seems odd that Licia, previously known as Jo, would feel most at ease in a situation where she has invented an identity that requires frequent lies in order to perpetuate the identity. Licia seems to want to escape a past without having to think about a future, and the overall lifestyle of most of the other residents seems to conform to this desire for an unconditional escape from the concerns of a present and a future. The residents that she seems to find the most interesting, such as Dana, also have the least defined plans for a future.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The evening after meeting Jean Bennett, Jo goes home and climbs up into her attic. She finds a box with photos and looks at two of them. One is a photo of the entire group in front of the house, and another is a photo of Dana alone. Looking at the photos makes Jo remember.

Dana and Licia walk home from a movie, and Licia asks Dana why she seems to like her. Dana says Licia has dignity, but Licia says that might just be part of her defensive wall. Licia remembers a time when Dana appeared to become jealous when it seemed that Licia might like another house resident as much as she liked Dana. After that Dana began giving Licia occasional gifts.

One night Dana stops by the bar where Licia works, and witnesses Licia claim to be married in order to get a man to stop flirting with her. On the way home Dana says that Licia is good at lying, and this leads to Dana questioning Licia about her identity. Caught off guard and on the defensive Licia tries to cover lies with more lies. Dana notices that the lies are unraveling and asks Licia if she is a fugitive. Licia admits that she has told some lies but promises to tell the whole truth one day.

In the fall some of the other housemates return to school, and Licia finds that she spends more time alone. She sends postcards to her husband and mother telling them that she is okay. One morning Licia encounters Duncan, and he is angry that there is only a couple of dollars in the community fund, and he is supposed to go buy groceries for the house. Licia, who has a constant supply of cash from her tips at her waitress job, offers to lend some money. This leads to a strange conversation and some mild flirting.

Despite having to dedicate more time to studies, the housemates still maintain their fun-loving ways. Once when Larry's department at work gets rid of some office supplies, he brings them home, and the housemates use the telephone message forms to leave fake messages for each other. On a lark Dana cuts her own hair and is unhappy with the result. Licia promises to fix it once she returns from work.

Only Licia and Sara remain in the house for Christmas. All other members have family obligations for the holiday. Licia calls her mother to wish her a happy holiday, but her mother says she does not want to hear from Licia again until she returns home or returns to her husband. Licia does the best she can to put aside her pain after what her mother said so she can have a pleasant dinner with Sara. Later in the evening Eli and Larry arrive, and the four have a celebration with wine and dessert.

One Tuesday night in January, business at the bar is unusually slow, and Licia gets to go home early. When she arrives in the house she calls out, but no one answers. She sees Dana lying on the floor in a pool of blood. Dana has many wounds and is covered



in blood. She does not appear to be breathing, so Licia tries to offer artificial respiration. Licia hears a noise and thinks she may not be alone in the house. She panics. First she tries to drag Dana away from the house and possible danger, but she is too heavy. Licia flees to a neighbor's house.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The chapter begins with Jo's examination of photos, and the rest of the chapter is a flashback.

It is interesting to note that Dana finds Licia dignified when it is a lack of feelings of this sort about herself that prompts Licia, or Jo, to invent a different life. Licia probably correctly identifies her habit of building emotional walls as what Dana misinterprets as dignified behavior, but knowing that she is playing her assumed role well may or may not make Licia feel good about herself.

Dana's lack of patience at listening to Licia's constant contradictions about her past is not borne of a lack of caring or a nature of mistrust. On the contrary, Dana has lost patience with Licia because she has grown to care about her. She wants to know the real Licia, and her willingness to believe that Licia is a fugitive and her desire to help Licia shows that Dana is a genuinely caring person.

With the arrival of fall many of the house residents have to return to their studies, and the festive nature of the house diminishes as the escapist carefree attitudes and activities are restricted to weekends. Licia still finds happiness.

The conversation Licia has with her mother on Christmas day reveals much about Licia's motives, which up to this point may have been difficult to understand. Rather than desire to hear what has caused her daughter to take such drastic action, Licia's mother simply says she would prefer not to hear from Licia until she has returned home. With a cold and uncaring reception like that, it is little wonder that Jo transformed herself into Licia.

Dana's violent murder ends the fantasy like environment at the house. Cruel reality has invaded what was an idyllic wonderland of perpetual youth. The tragedy is even greater because the victim, Dana, was a loving and caring person.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The police arrive and question Licia. A detective asks Licia to return to the house and explain everything she saw. He asks her to go slowly and take him step by step through events. While Licia is being questioned, Larry and Sara arrive. The police say that all of them must come to the station for further questioning.

At the station, the police take Licia's blood soaked clothes as evidence. The police bring all of the other house residents to the station. Some officers speculate that Dana had the misfortune of surprising a burglar and was killed. The group is kept at the station all night, but the police are kind and understanding. In the morning, Licia and Sara go with Larry to stay at his parent's house in Boston

The following day the police are no longer nice and understanding. They have discovered more information that makes them suspicious of the group. They have discovered that Licia is an alias. Larry has an arrest record. The police found drugs in Sara's room, and they discovered the cash that Licia makes from tips and assumed it was somehow related to the drugs in Sara's room. The police also consider Dana promiscuous in that she had sex with two residents of the house. Though he has an alibi, the police are most suspicious of Duncan. While they are conducting their investigation, the police call Licia's mother and husband to confirm her identity.

Licia and Eli go to the house to clean up the blood at the murder scene. Eli finds that he cannot go through with it, and he leaves it to Licia. That night Licia is unable to sleep alone, and she sleeps in Larry's room.

The group begins to drift apart. Each member of the house is traumatized by the violent loss of Dana, and the newspaper's sensational stories further aggravate their sense of loss and fear. Licia still has trouble sleeping and again asks to sleep in Larry's room. He says he thinks it is a bad idea, but he stays up and talks to Licia to help her relax.

As the police investigation progresses, they return to thinking that the most likely scenario involved a random burglary. Dana's sisters arrive to pick up her belongings, and they are visibly angry. They say that the funeral is for family only, and when Licia says that the house members would like to attend, the sisters say that that they are to blame for Dana's death and even call the house residents scum.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter is another that is entirely a flashback.

The police are initially kind and understanding to the group, but as they learn more they become increasingly suspicious. At the time this event occurred, early 1969, the youth



culture of the 1960s that has become familiar with its iconic images was still new and threatening to mainstream America. The police understandably became suspicious once they uncovered instances of an alias, drugs, arrest records for political protests, and even innocent but unexplained amounts of cash. The newspapers, ever on the lookout for sensational stories to sell copy and fuel fear, simply printed the story that had the most impact regardless of the truth.

The tragedy seems to have killed the spirit of the house, and with Dana's death the bond that held the individuals together has also died.

While hurtful to Licia, the sister's reaction is entirely understandable. They lost their youngest sister who was living a lifestyle they did not approve of. The most natural reaction is to blame the lifestyle and those involved.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

At the airport, Jo learns that her flight has been overbooked, and the airlines asks for volunteers to give up their seats in exchange for free airline tickets. Jo volunteers, and in the process she meets Daniel. The airline provides hotel accommodations for the night, and Jo spends the evening in the hotel bar talking to Daniel. She learns that Daniel had been in the Peace Corps and currently attends divinity school. Jo tells her personal history, and unlike her time at the group house, she is honest about her past. The two see each other briefly as they wait in line to board the plane the next day, and then three years elapse before they speak again. Jo calls Daniel after having gotten his contact information from the divinity school he attended, and the two begin long telephone conversations. They meet for dinner in New York, and six weeks later they marry.

Once again in the present time, Jo helps Daniel provide comfort to a family that has recently lost a member. Jean Bennett contacts Jo to say that Eli will contact her soon. Jo realizes that it was the mention of Eli that caused her recent vivid memories. After work on a Thursday evening, Jo goes to talk to Daniel in his study. She is in a good mood because she completed some complicated surgery that helped a cat. The two discuss the guests that will be staying while attending a funeral.

The next morning at work Jo realizes that the date is Halloween. She uses her lunch break to go and get candy for the trick-or-treaters that will visit her house in the evening. When she arrives home she sees that kids in costume are already making the rounds. Jo spends the evening handing out candy, and Daniel arrives home exhausted from conducting a funeral and comforting people.

On Saturday Jean Bennett contacts Jo to report on the dog's progress and say that Eli plans to contact her sometime the following week. That evening before bed, Jo wants to talk to Daniel, but he is tired and wants to go to sleep. Jo is impatient and not understanding about Daniel's fatigue, and they argue.

The following day in an effort to make up for the argument the night before, Jo decides to go to church. Despite being married to a minister, Jo rarely attends church. Daniel's sermon about grieving and loss makes Jo think of Dana, and after the sermon Jo feels closer to Daniel.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Jo immediately trusts Daniel. She goes from living in an environment where everything about her, including her name, is fiction to meeting a preacher in training and telling him everything with complete honesty. Even though more than three years elapse between meeting Daniel and marrying him, the sharp contrast between becoming the wife of a

minister and living the bohemian life makes one wonder if she is not once again running between opposite worlds.

The extended flashback has ended, and once again in the present time, Jo's life seems to proceed as normal for her.

Jo's anger toward Daniel for being too tired to discuss her concerns at a time of her choosing seems misplaced, and her thoughts of rage after the argument seem excessive. Her choice to attend Daniel's sermon the following day does repair the peace, but it is uncertain how long it will last if Jo is indeed harboring serious dissatisfaction with her current life.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Eli brings the dog to the office, and he and Jo have a pleasant conversation. Then Jo begins to explain the options regarding the dog. She explains that in order to keep the dog alive, he will have to dedicate more time and care. Eli worries about this because he says he spends so much time and work. He thinks he is leaning toward euthanasia, but he wants some time to decide. As he is leaving, he asks if Jo would like to meet some time and talk. A week passes and Eli does not call or visit the office.

On Tuesday, Jo's receptionist Bailey says that Eli has called and made an appointment for that afternoon. Jo looks at the file and sees Eli's address. He and Jean live in a newer addition of homes. Eli arrives and wants to remain in the room while Jo performs the procedure. Jo cautions against this because some pet owners find it traumatic. Eli remains, and the procedure goes smoothly.

On her way home, Jo thinks that Eli seemed much like he did the day she said goodbye many years previously.

Chapter 7 Analysis

It is unclear if Eli chooses euthanasia for the dog because of concerns for the dog's quality of life or because caring for it would be an inconvenience to Eli's busy work schedule. Eli does seem to genuinely care for the dog. Jo seems happy to see Eli, but at times the interest seems to be that of old friends, such as noticing that the sad and vulnerable look of Eli with the dog reminds Jo of how Eli looked the day she said goodbye after Dana was murdered. At other times Jo's interest seems to be based on a physical attraction.

Once again, Jo handles the hard part. Just like when she cleaned Dana's blood while Eli was unable, she conducts the euthanasia procedure while he watches.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

When Jo wakes and goes into the kitchen, Daniel is already up, and he informs her that Cass arrived during the night and is now sleeping. Jo is annoyed that when Cass arrives she does so without any advance notice, and rather than stay and spend time with her daughter Jo must go to work.

Jo arrives home and finds that dinner is already prepared. Cass enters the kitchen, and Jo is delighted to see her daughter. She notices that Cass has short dyed hair, multiple earrings and several other pierced jewelry, but Jo is particularly concerned with Cass's low weight. Cass talks about growing disillusioned with life in a band. She says the band has a few more scheduled performances, and then she intends to quit. Jo is momentarily delighted. Then Cass says she has been offered a job modeling by a photographer that specializes in thin unhealthy looking young women. Jo asks if Cass got so thin intentionally for the job, and Cass answers that she got thin by not eating enough and partying too much.

Later Cass asks to borrow the car in order to visit a local bar. She arrives home late at night, and this reminds Jo and Daniel of times when all the daughters lived at home and stayed out too late worrying their parents.

The following day Cass offers to take the car to get Sadie at school and to do the shopping. That evening after dinner Cass sings, and both Cass and Sadie dance. The sisters take the dogs for a walk in the snow.

Jo wants to have a party once all of the daughters are at home, and she wants to invite additional guests. Daniel suggests inviting Jean Bennett and Eli. When Jo telephones, Jean answers and is delighted to accept the invitation to the party. Nora telephones to say that she is on the way home. Both Jo and Daniel look forward to having all of their daughters at home, but they also remember previous holiday disasters as a result of rivalry between the sisters.

Nora arrives in the afternoon, and Jo and Daniel are happy to see that so far the sisters all seem to be getting along. The sisters get along well all day and into the evening. Jo goes to her clinic to tend to the dogs that are staying overnight, and when she returns she sees that the sisters are throwing a party of friends their age. Jo joins Daniel in his study.

Chapter 8 Analysis

After such stormy memories, it seems that Jo's life has returned to focus on family, and perhaps with the coming holiday season she can have some happiness with all of her family together. Jo's concerns about Cass's lifestyle are understandable for multiple



reasons. She has lived a carefree life herself, and she knows the excitement and the temptations as well as the choices that may not be the best for a healthy future. More importantly, Jo is a mother and she worries about her daughter. Cass seems to take a delight in saying shocking things, such as she does when she says that her weight loss is the result of not eating properly and doing "naughty" things.

The retelling of the previous holiday arguments provides some much needed comedy. Surely, at the time of these events they were not humorous, but in their retelling they seem hilarious. Daniel is more cautious perhaps because he knows that future holiday disasters are still a possibility.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Jean Bennett and Eli attend the party. Eli compliments Jo on her house and says that it is what he and Jean envisioned buying when they decided to move to New England, but they could not find one for sale and in good condition. Eli is surprised to discover that Daniel is a minister. Eli also thanks Jo for assisting with the dog, and he asks Jo if she would like to talk about Dana someday. Before Eli and Jean leave, Jean invites Daniel and Jo to have dinner at their house sometime the following week.

After the party guests leave, Daniel goes to bed, and Jo joins her daughters in the kitchen. Shortly after Jo's arrival, the daughters begin arguing, and the comments between the twins Nora and Cass are particularly viscous. After Nora and Cass leave, Sadie tells Jo that the arguments are usually the result of Cass and Nora competing for Jo's attention. Jo does not understand, and Sadie explains that they vie for Jo's attention because Jo is secretive and they think they have to prove themselves to Jo. This upsets Jo, and Jo denies that she is secretive.

Sadie asks Jo questions about her history, and Jo explains, but she does not mention Dana.

A week later Jo and Daniel are on their way to see Cass and her band perform at a bar in Providence. Jo tries to make polite conversation, but she has been irritated with Daniel ever since the dinner with Eli and Jean. After the dinner, Daniel tells Jo that if she wants to continue to see Eli, she should do it alone.

Jo and Daniel find seats in the bar, and Jo thinks about the dinner at Eli and Jean's house. First Jo notices that Daniel is being polite, but his expressions seemed forced and insincere. During the dinner, Eli asks Daniel how he became a minister, and the more questions Eli asks the more irritated Daniel becomes. To avoid any further awkwardness or potential for argument, the women take over the conversation.

Cass and her band enter the stage, and Cass sings. Both Jo and Daniel are impressed with the performance.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The holiday disaster that Daniel feared has occurred, but he has the good fortune to already be in bed. The incident reveals something more significant than sibling rivalry. According to Sadie, the twins fight in order to compete for Jo's attention. This troubles Jo because the implication is that Jo is not as candid and honest with her daughters as she might be.

It is unclear why Daniel dislikes Eli. Certainly, as a minister Daniel is accustomed to non-religious people with healthy curiosity about his beliefs, and he likely would not react to everyone the way he did to Eli's questions. It seems likely that Daniel's reaction to Eli is because he has sensed his wife's attraction to Eli.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Jo spends much of her time preparing for the upcoming holiday, and Daniel is busy with preparing for his ministerial role in the Christmas celebrations and religious observances.

Jo and Eli have an appointment to meet for coffee. As the appointment nears Jo feels excited and fantasizes about the possibilities. Jo picks a location in another town, and when the two meet, they discuss the state of their respective marriages. Eli says that he and Jean give each other a great deal of space. They got married late and knew that the only way the marriage could work is to give each other plenty of space to lead individual lives. Jo says her marriage is the opposite. She says that as the years have passed she and Daniel have become more and more involved in each other's individual lives, perhaps too involved.

The conversation turns to memories of life at the group home. Eli and Jo have very different perceptions. While for a time it was the happiest Jo had ever been, Eli says that for the most part he felt constantly miserable and tormented. He says he felt like he never fit in. They discuss their lives before and after the group home, and then they notice how much time has elapsed. Before parting, Eli says that he would like to talk again, and Jo agrees.

Jo thinks back to a time when Cass had frequent nightmares. To get Cass's mind off of her nightmares, Jo would sit up at night and tell Cass stories about a fictional character that Jo invented. Jo based the character on Dana, but after a time Cass said she believed the character was actually Jo.

Jo goes to meet her mother in Boston. They have lunch and her mother tells her about the people in Maine that Jo knows, including the veterinarian that helped Jo get her start in veterinary medicine. Jo is sad to learn that the man has recently died. After lunch Jo and her mother go to a church to hear a performance of Christmas music, and then they go to a museum. At the museum Jo's mother buys gifts, and then they watch a movie about African lions.

As Christmas nears and the house gets busier, Jo finds that she is still thinking about Eli, but her fantasies have become sexual in nature. Jo wonders what she will do if Eli proposes an affair. She remembers times that she was previously tempted to have extramarital affairs, but each time she rejected the opportunities.

By Christmas Eve, the entire family is present, and they attend a church event. At home they each open a single gift. The following afternoon, Jo and Daniel go ice skating.



Chapter 10 Analysis

Jo's decision to choose a location "two towns over" for a meeting with Eli demonstrates that she has already acknowledged that she wants more than a reconnection with an old friend. This decision to open the conditions to the possibility of adultery may not yet be on a conscious level for Jo, and that makes the situation all the more dangerous. In a way it seems that Jo is playing a dangerous game with her marriage and family. If there was nothing to hide, there would be no need to pick a location so far away from her home.

Jo's use of the word "mired" in her description of her marriage is telling. She seems to envy the freedom that Eli's marriage allows, but it does not seem that Jo has yet asked herself what she would do with added freedom.

Toward the end of the chapter, Jo's fantasies have become overtly sexual, and she should be aware of the dangers she is nurturing. She acknowledges that she does not know what she will do if Eli offers the possibility of an affair, but she does nothing to halt unfolding events.

The scene of skating at the lake seems symbolic of Jo's predicament. As she watches Daniel effortlessly glide while she struggles just to maintain balance, this mirrors her feelings that others are carefree and mobile while she is stuck, and she longs for freedom.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Jo tells Daniel that she plans to meet a female friend, but in reality she plans to meet Eli in Boston. They meet at bar at the Ritz Hotel, and as Eli talks about his job Jo finds she is getting aroused. That feeling ends when Eli asks to talk about Dana.

Eli says that he and Dana had a sexual relationship, a detail that Jo already knew, but she is surprised when he says that he was in love with her. He tells Jo that Dana was the reason he moved into the group house, and he tells her how their relationship began.

Eli often ate lunch at the Peabody museum where Dana often went to sketch. The two eventually began talking, and soon thereafter a sexual relationship began. As quickly as the sexual relationship began it abruptly ended, and Eli was hurt. Still, he decided to move into the group house in hope of restarting the intimate relationship with Dana. When the relationship did not restart, Eli grew frustrated and accused Dana of toying with him in a cruel way. She said that in time he would no longer be interested in her, so Eli got Dana to agree to discuss the relationship again in one year.

The one-year date for the discussion fell on the day that Dana was murdered. Eli had reminded Dana of the date a week prior, but when he arrived home for the discussion, Dana was not present, and Eli began to grow angry. As he was about to leave the house, he thought to check her room, and he found her sleeping. This further angered Eli because he believed she was not talking the meeting seriously. When Dana came downstairs, Eli was in a rage. First he verbally attacked, and then he attacked her with the knife.

Eli went back to work at his lab and disposed of his blood stained clothing. He was still at work at the lab when the police arrived to tell him of Dana's murder.

Jo has been stunned throughout the entire story. Eli says that he ruined one life, but his work since in scientific research has helped thousands. He believes this creates a sort of balance and that his bad deed has been cancelled out.

Jo is stunned and horrified. She leaves the bar and takes an out of the way route to make sure Eli has not followed her. When she arrives home, she immediately begins to blurt out what has happened. The first things she says to Daniel is that she lied and that she went to meet Eli.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Of all places that Jo could have chosen for a meeting, a hotel bar is perhaps the most inappropriate if her intentions are merely platonic. By this time surely Jo knows that she

hopes for a sexual encounter. The intense attraction Jo feels for Eli abruptly ends when he confesses to murder, and she is left in a state of shock and horror.

Perhaps part of what disgusts Jo the most is the fact that Eli seems to portray himself as the victim, and when he does acknowledge that he has committed a crime of the worst sort, he truly believes that he has made amends since by merely being good at his job. Asked why he confided in Jo, Eli answers that he thought it would help him put the past behind him. The idea that Eli feels entitled to be absolved of the past must be bewildering to Jo.

The shock and fear Jo feels makes it difficult for Jo to get home safely and directly. A police officer even stops to see if she is all right as she parks her car by the side of the road. This confusion and shock possibly explains why Jo so suddenly told Daniel of her recent encounter when her usual behavior is to be secretive and elusive.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

In the days following her meeting with Eli, Jo's relationship with Daniel suffers. He avoids speaking to her when possible, but when he must speak to her he keeps the conversation brief and civil. Jo is so filled with guilt and self-loathing that she cannot find joy in her work. She tries to decide what to do with the information about the murder. For days she thinks about whether to report Eli.

Jo replays the memory of telling Daniel about meeting Eli. At the time Jo was focused on the horror of having learned that Eli killed Dana. She fails to see that equally important from Eli's perspective is the fact that his wife intended to have an affair. Eli asks Jo to admit that she went to meet Eli for sexual reasons, but she cannot voice an admission. She does not deny it either.

One Saturday after work Jo goes to the library to read an article about veterinary medicine. After reading the article, she searches the newspaper archives and reads the old stories about Dana's murder. When she looks up from her reading she sees Eli and Jean across the library. Eli sees Jo, seems to contemplate approaching, but then leaves. Jo feels rage.

At home Jo tells Daniel she thinks she ought to inform the police, but she wonders if a lengthy trial and investigation might harm her marriage to Daniel further. Daniel says that she should not be concerned about an investigation, and that she has already done the worst thing she could have done to him.

Later while Jo washes dishes, a tomato explodes against the wall near her. She turns and sees Daniel behind her. She knows he threw the tomato, and she also knows he intentionally missed her.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Predictably, Jo and Daniel's interactions cool. It shows a great deal of character on the part of Daniel that he resists the desire to vent anger and is able to keep conversations to a minimum and civil. Jo truly seemed to forget for a time that her planned adultery would upset Daniel. In her mind, the news of the murder overshadowed everything else, and she failed to realize that Daniel might focus equally on the news that his wife intended to have a sexual relationship with another man.

Jo finds the incident with the thrown tomato oddly comforting. It is a mildly violent act, but it is also the only passion that Daniel has shown since she gave him the painful news.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Jo decides to go to the police and inform them of Eli's confession. Though she has ample opportunity to inform Daniel of her intentions the morning before she departs for Cambridge, she declines to do so. On the way to Cambridge, Jo wonders what impact a lengthy investigation and trial will have on her marriage.

Jo meets with a detective and informs him of Eli's confession and tells him about the events of 1969. The detective seems skeptical, and he wants to know why Jo waited three weeks since hearing the confession to report it to the police. Jo does not seem to have an answer. The detective says they will look into the matter, and he tells Jo to contact him again if she hears from Eli. He also says that sometimes, even years later, people feel a need to confess.

After leaving the police station, Jo drives by the group house.

When Jo informs Daniel that she went to the police, he does not respond as she expects. He appears weary and disappointed. Jo asks why Daniel is upset, and he says that she could have told him that morning what she intended to do. However the way she handled the situation makes her seem sneaky as usual.

Jo remembers a time when Cass was furious at her because Cass believed that Jo's method of checking on Cass's behavior was dishonest.

Days later the telephone rings, and Jo hears Daniel on the telephone talking in a stern voice. He gives the telephone to Jo, and Jo hears Sadie in a disturbed state. Her favorite professor, Jean Bennett, wife of Eli Mayhew, has informed her that she can no longer work with Sadie because of Jo's accusations. Sadie demands to know what is going on, and though Jo tries to explain, Sadie has difficulty believing Jo. Sadie asks why she has never heard of Dana previously, and she even asks if her mother has recently been under the influence of alcohol.

Chapter 13 Analysis

On the way to Cambridge, Jo seems to be under the impression that all she has to do is inform the police of Eli's confession and then an investigation, trial, and conviction will follow. It does not occur to her that more evidence than hearsay decades after a crime might be needed to convince police that a murder has been solved.

Much like Sadie tried to once tell Jo that she comes across as intentionally elusive, Daniel tries to explain to Jo that the biggest part of the current problem is Jo's behavior. She does not see the significance of having failed to inform Daniel of her decision



beforehand. She believes there was no course of action that she could have taken that would not have disappointed Daniel.

Jo failed to remember Sadie's relationship with Eli's wife, and Jo's failure to have informed Sadie of recent and past events leaves Sadie in a state of shock with an inability to believe her mother.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Jo has not heard from Sadie in over a week, and she writes a letter to Sadie in an effort to apologize and explain. Jo receives a telephone call from the detective she spoke to regarding Eli's confession. He wants to know if she can come to the station to go over a few more details. She agrees to come the following Monday. The next day at work, Jo decides that she does not want to wait until Monday. She goes to Cambridge the following day.

The detective Jo met with previously is unavailable, so she meets with another. He explains that the police will not pursue an investigation of Eli. Eli denied the murder and the confession. He instead claimed that Jo made sexual advances, and when he refused she became vengeful. The police believe Eli. Jo is furious at being called a liar, so the detective asks Jo why she used an alias while living at the group house.

After leaving the police station Jo first feels rage and nausea, then she feels a sense of relief. She is glad the ordeal is over, and she thinks that the only people that will believe Eli's version of the story are people she does not care about. Jo believes she has plenty of time to repair the relationship with her family.

When Jo informs Daniel of events at the police station, he too at first seems relieved the ordeal is over. As Jo recounts the conversation with the detective, Daniel's demeanor becomes more sullen. The discussion reminds him that his wife did initiate what she hoped would turn into a sexual affair. Jo wonders if Daniel believes Eli's version of the story.

Chapter 14 Analysis

In the discussion with the detective, Jo perhaps for the first time realizes how her choice of meeting places with Eli might affect her credibility with others. Additionally, her track record of secrecy and deception have cast further doubt on her integrity.

Jo assumes that only people she does not care about will believe Eli's version of the story. She assumes that her own family will believe her, and this may be a far-reaching assumption given her track record of a lack of candor with her family. She also assumes that she has plenty of time to repair the relationship with Daniel. In this case she takes for granted that Daniel will want to grant her the time and opportunity.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Jo tries to concentrate on her family life. Sadie decides not to come home for Spring Break, and Jo realizes Sadie is still angry. Daniel goes out of town for a few days, and while he is gone, Jo wonders if the easiest course of action would be to get a divorce.

Jo's mother injures herself, and Jo decides to go to Maine to help her mother for a week. While driving Jo to the airport, Daniel says it will be good to spend time apart. Jo wonders if while she is gone whether Daniel will contemplate divorce as she did while he was away.

The time spent with her mother is peaceful. They have the opportunity to talk. Jo's mother expresses concern that she has taken Jo away from Daniel, and Jo says they are having a bit of difficulty, but that is to be expected from time to time. Jo's mother is pleased to hear Jo say that, and she says that she used to worry that Jo would never learn that hard times are a fact of life and that one cannot simply run away.

When Jo arrives at the airport in Boston and meets Daniel, he hugs her with an intensity that surprises her. They begin a long and slow process of reestablishing trust. Occasionally Jo sees Eli in Adams Mills, but they are always able to avoid speaking. Once when looking at an old newspaper article about Dana's murder, Jo notices a photograph of the group leaving the police station. She notices that only she and Eli are without coats.

Chapter 15 Analysis

In contemplating divorce, Jo is once again thinking of the easiest option, the one that involves running away.

When her mother tells of how the affair with Jo's father began before the first wife died and how she always meant to tell Jo, Jo can understand why her mother could fail to do so but still always feel the need to confess. Somehow this makes her think of Eli and makes her feel pity for him.

Though it is mentioned only briefly, the newspaper photo provides a clue into whose version, Jo or Eli's, is the truth.



Characters

Josephine Becker (a.k.a. Felicia Stead)

In the opening of the novel, Jo, the protagonist and narrator, is a middle-aged woman. She is a successful veterinarian, a wife, and the mother of three grown daughters. She has a wonderful relationship with her husband, and they own a beautiful home that was once a New England farmhouse. The image of Jo in the opening of the novel would include the descriptive terms happy, successful, stable, and happy. A chance encounter with someone connected to a person from Jo's past sparks a series of memories that recall a time of a very different Jo.

In the late 1960s, Jo was in a marriage that she found unexciting, and she worked as a teacher and found that work unfulfilling. One day she quit her teaching job and soon thereafter took a job as a waitress at a bar. The bar exposed her to a life she had not previously experienced, and it created a desire for more adventure. Soon she moved to the Boston area without telling anyone of her true intended destination. Under an alias she moved into a group house inhabited by other young, free, and adventurous people. A violent tragedy involving a friend ended Jo's time of a carefree life.

The middle-aged Jo still retains some of the traits of the young Jo. She still longs for a break in the monotony of routine, and through the course of the novel her longing for adventure puts the relationships Jo holds most dear in jeopardy. As Jo's mother once says, Jo has difficulty understanding that boredom and unhappiness are occasionally inevitable, and one cannot simply run away and become someone else.

Dana Joblonski

Dana and Jo could pass for sisters. They have a strong physical resemblance, and upon meeting they have an instant mutual affinity. Despite coming from different backgrounds, Dana is in some ways the kind of person that Jo wants to become. She is passionate yet refuses to be tied down by conventional obligations. Dana is outgoing and free to do the things Jo has always wanted to do.

Dana is the youngest daughter of a large Polish family. She came to Cambridge to study art. She embraces the unfettered lifestyle of the time. She has multiple sexual partners, and the otherwise free-spirited fellow residents of the group house have to pass a rule forbidding sexual relationships between residents. While Dana's actions may be hurtful to some who misinterpret her affection for more conventional promises of monogamy, there is nothing intentionally malicious in her behavior. On the contrary, Dana is the type of person that sees goodness in all people. Dana is free with her goodwill and affection. If she has a fault besides her tendency to forget that others may misinterpret her affections, it is that she wants to be loved as much as she loves others. Soon after Dana witnesses Jo (at that time Licia) being friendly with another resident of



the group house, Dana begins showing added affection for Jo by giving her occasional gifts.

Dana is the type of character that everyone loves. Sadly, this turns out to be a liability for Dana.

Eli Mayhew

This character appears in two different versions in the novel. First he is a young man living in the group house in Cambridge. In the house he feels like something of an outsider because of differences in personality and career focus as compared to the other residents. Eli's career is in the sciences whereas most other residents are involved in areas of the humanities or arts. Also, while other house residents often engage in activities such as the use of recreational drugs, Eli remains focused on his work and studies. Despite all this, Eli's sense of being an outsider is more in his own mind than in the minds of the other residents. The other residents like Eli a great deal.

The second version of Eli is a middle-aged man who meets Jo again when Eli needs the services of a veterinarian. Eli is still a likable person and a person well respected and successful in his field, and he has retained what Jo perceives as his good looks. Eli does have one notion that many would find peculiar and self-serving. He seems to believe that the success he has had in his career has somehow countered a horrible deed he committed in his youth.

Daniel

This person is Jo's second husband. He is a minister. He first met Jo at the airport in Boston in 1969 when they both gave up seats on a crowded flight. Jo immediately noticed that he was a good listener and instilled trust. Daniel keeps those traits throughout his life, and both his parishioners and his family value him. He has a much more amiable relationship with his daughters than Jo does. When his patience and devotion to his marriage is put to the test, Daniel manages to remain a civil and kind person.

Sadie

This is Jo's youngest daughter. She attends college in western Massachusetts.

Cass

This is one of Jo's twin daughters. She is a professional musician and tours the country with her band giving concerts.



Nora

This is one of Jo's twin daughters. She attends film school in New York City.

Sara

This is one of the group house residents. This person is also an attorney.

John

This is one of the group house residents. This person claims to be writing a novel.

Larry

This is one of the group house residents. This person also teaches at Harvard.

Duncan

This is one of the group house residents. This person is also a professional musician.

Jean Bennett

This person is married to someone Jo lived with in the group house in Cambridge.

Beattie

This person is Jo's receptionist at the veterinary clinic.



Objects/Places

New England

This is a region of the northeastern United States. All of the action in the novel takes place at various locations in this region.

Adams Mills

This small community in Massachusetts is where Jo and Daniel live.

Ace of Spades

This is the name of the seedy bar where Jo takes a job after she leaves her teaching position in Philadelphia.

Red Brown's Blues

This is the bar where Jo finds a job after moving to the Boston area.

YWCA

The Young Women's Christian Association is where Jo stays after first moving to Boston and while looking for more permanent lodging.

Harvard University

This renowned university is where some of the residents of the group house study and work.

Cambridge

This city in Massachusetts located near Boston is location of Harvard University and group house where Jo finds a room.

Lyman Street

This is the specific location of the group house where Jo finds a room.



Ritz Hotel

This hotel contains the bar where Jo arranges to meet Eli.

Peabody Museum

This museum is part of Harvard University, and it is where Eli first meets Dana.



Themes

Running Away

Jo's mother does a good job of describing Jo's character when she says that she has long worried about Jo. She worried that Jo seemed to not understand that difficult times are an inevitable part of life and cannot be escaped. From childhood through early adulthood and even into middle age Jo has never seemed to realize that difficult or unsatisfying times are inevitable, and there is no easy solution. Certainly, there is no way to run away and start over as if being born a completely different person.

As a child of eight or nine, Jo was unhappy with events at home and decided to run away. She did not get far from home before being returned by a neighbor, and the incident could have been forgotten as just one of the silly things that many children do, except that it seemed to mark the beginning of a trend. Faced with a marriage and a career that did not deliver what she hoped, Jo first escapes by quitting her teaching position and taking a job at a seedy bar. This experience inspires her to go several steps further and move to a different city under an assumed name. This drastic action gave Jo several happy months until the time ended with the murder of a close friend.

The murder seems to have obscured the lesson Jo should have learned because well into middle age Jo contemplates a course of action that could have disastrous consequences for many people around her. Because life at home has become too predictable, too routine, she contemplates having an affair. This is yet another instance of Jo running away from reality.

Balancing the Past With the Present

While *I Was Gone* presents a story of how events from the past, decades ago, can still have a profound effect on characters. Two middle-aged characters, Jo and Eli, find that their current lives are drastically altered by events from their youth. These events and their lingering effects also impact the lives of the characters associated with Jo and Eli. Jo and Eli have different approaches to dealing with the past.

Jo by nature is not a forthcoming person. She has had many experiences in her past that she could share with her daughters as a warning and as a means to show her daughters that she is a credible source of guidance and not merely some conservative woman who has led a charmed and uneventful life. Jo claims that she does not share information concerning her younger years is because she wants her daughters to enjoy their own time of youth, but another possible reason might be that Jo simply has not learned from the past. Certainly Jo thinks she has changed after experiences, but her behavior shows otherwise. She is still afflicted with the naïve notion that when bored or dissatisfied one can take risks without consequences.



Eli's way of dealing with the past is just as transparent and every bit as naïve. He believes, or at least desperately wants to believe, that his years of success and contributions in his scientific field can erase or counter the horrible deed he committed in 1969.

Honesty and Identity

Jo struggles with honesty. Jo has difficulty being honest with others, and she has difficulty being honest with herself. Both methods of honesty have significant effects on how she is perceived by others and how she regards her own identity.

Jo's youngest daughter describes her as secretive and elusive. This description upsets Jo, and she rationalizes reasons for not being entirely forthcoming with her daughters. But her daughters are far from the only people Jo has failed to be honest with. In fact, Jo is not entirely honest with anyone. She can for limited periods be honest, as she was with Daniel at their first meeting in Boston, but generally Jo is prone to intentionally deceive, as in the case of adopting an alias, or she gives incomplete truths through her habit of not fully disclosing details. Jo is never fully known by the people who would like to know her.

Perhaps even more harmful to Jo's desire for happiness than her tendency to be secretive, is her tendency to lie to herself. Her internal lies are borne from understandable reasons, but her methods are never effective. She adopts the name and identity of Felicia Stead simply out of a desire to be someone other than Jo. Even when she believes she is Jo, she does not examine herself and her thoughts. Told in advance that she would willingly jeopardize the happiness of her spouse and daughters, Jo would have rejected the notion. Yet her failure to be honest with herself about her feelings and intentions for Eli hurt many people. Jo's lack of honesty with herself affects her identity every bit as much as her failure to be honest with others.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in the novel *While I Was Gone* comes from the perspective of the first person narrator, Jo Becker. Though Jo tells the story entirely from a vantage point well after all of the action in the novel, she does so in such a way to keep readers engaged in the moment. From the opening of the novel, through her flashbacks to her time at the group house on Lyman Street in Cambridge, through her resolution of the marital disaster she created, she creates tension and keeps the reader wondering how she will get past seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Though Jo as narrator gives a great deal of description of her thoughts, she never explicitly says whether or not she learned a lesson, and in this way her narration consists of more showing than telling.

The tone of narration in the early part of the novel, the chapters covering her home life and veterinary practice before she becomes reacquainted with Eli Mayhew, shows a happy, satisfied life. The flashback chapters also present a vivid image through the first person narrative. In these chapters Jo, or Licia, is in unfamiliar ground, and her sense of first wonder and then horror translates well through her method and pace of storytelling. After the flashback chapters, the first person narrative captures Jo's thought process and makes readers aware that Jo's decisions could lead to disaster. The narration accomplishes this by telling of events as they happened and then describing the outcome rather than giving clues to the outcome before the series of events is described.

Setting

The majority of the novel takes place at various locations within New England. The action in the present, or most recent action in the timeline, takes place in the rural community of Adams Mills in western Massachusetts. Jo and her husband, Daniel, live in an old farmhouse. Daniel has a study in the barn, and Jo's veterinary practice is nearby in town. The semi-rural setting is pastoral, allowing the couple to take their dogs on long walks, and it is sharp contrast to the other physical settings of the novel that are all urban. Jo's mother's home in Maine is another of the rural environments.

The Boston area is the closest urban setting to Adams Mills. When younger, Jo traveled to the area and found residence in the group house in Cambridge. Years later she returns to Boston to first visit her mother and then to meet Eli Mayhew at the bar in the Ritz Hotel. Other visits to the Boston area included meetings at the Cambridge police department. In addition to the Boston area, other urban environments included, Philadelphia, New York City, and Providence, Rhode Island.

Physical location is not the only significant aspect of the setting of *While I Was Gone*. Time also plays an important role in the setting. The two primary settings in terms of



time are the late 1960s and the early years of the present century, estimating time based on the age of Jo's daughters. Time plays an important role in the plot both in terms of experience of the characters and in their evolving opinions on youth, exuberance, and naivety.

Language and Meaning

The language of *While I Was Gone* is contemporary English spoken by an educated person to an educated audience and fellow characters. All of the principle characters are well educated. Jo came from an educated background. Both of her parents were employed in academia. Jo's first husband was a medical doctor, and her current husband, Daniel, holds graduate degrees. Jo's daughters, with the exception of Cass, the professional musician, are university educated or completing college studies. Jo herself worked as a teacher before entering a second career as a veterinarian. Other major characters include Eli Mayhew, a scientist of some renown, and his wife, a university professor. Most of the residents of the group house are either working professional or students, and some are employed by Harvard University.

The effect of such an educated cast has a direct impact on the language of the novel, particularly in terms of dialogue. If another novel included dialogue with such a varied vocabulary, the dialogue might come across as stilted or unbelievable. Yet in this novel it is completely believable. Even the lighthearted games the residents of the group house play often contain terms not commonly found in everyday language.

The vocabulary also affects the narrative portions that do not contain dialog. Jo is a keen observer of her environment, and she describes things in a vivid and precise manner. Regardless of the actions or thought processes she is describing, Jo presents them in detail.

Structure

The overall structure of the novel *While I Was Gone* consists of fifteen chapters that each cover a cohesive portion of the story.

As might be expected from a novel that deals with how the past can unexpectedly return and wreak havoc on the present, *While I Was Gone* does not proceed in a strictly linear progression. First an event prompts the narrator to remember a person from long ago. This memory, presented in the form of a short flashback, leads to other memories, and longer flashbacks. Flashbacks become extended to the point that they occupy entire chapters.

The first chapter of the novel takes place entirely at the current time, Jo's life with Daniel in Adams Mills. In the second chapter the action begins in the current time, but a visit from a client who is married to someone from Jo's past prompts an extended flashback that occupies the remainder of the chapter. The third chapter is entirely a flashback. The fourth chapter returns briefly to the present time and then resumes a flashback. The fifth



chapter is another that is entirely a flashback, and the sixth chapter continues the flashback before returning to the present time. The remainder of the novel takes place in the present time except for occasional and very brief remembrances of past incidents.

Despite the back and forth nature of the narrative between the past and the present, the story line is easy to follow because the breaks between present and past are clearly identified and well organized.



Quotes

Chapter 2, p. 37

I left on a Monday. I'd called Anita a day or two before and told her that my mother was ill, that I had to go to Maine and didn't know when I'd be back. I told Ted I was going to Washington for a few days to see a friend from college who'd ended up there. I got on a bus for Boston with a one-way ticket.

Chapter 2, p. 38

The first lie I told was my name, "Felicia," I said. And then, because this was, I suddenly realized, a seriously ridiculous name, I also said, "As in happy to be here," and dipped my head slightly. "But my friends call me Licia. Or Lish."

Chapter 3, p. 48

I had been in the house for over a month at this point, and I felt transformed and opened out—so altered it seemed nearly chemical to me, as though I was the one taking drugs. It was so much what I had wanted that I was sometimes frightened by it.

Chapter 5, pp. 85-86

Before he came home, he stopped and bought the Herald, too, because he knew it would be even worse there. And it was. "Neighbors reported being regularly disturbed by parties which lasted into the wee hours, by drunken and drugged revelers urinating or vomiting into bushes." The quantity of drugs found was vastly exaggerated.

Chapter 5, pp. 85-86

Before he came home, he stopped and bought the Herald, too, because he knew it would be even worse there. And it was. "Neighbors reported being regularly disturbed by parties which lasted into the wee hours, by drunken and drugged revelers urinating or vomiting into bushes." The quantity of drugs found was vastly exaggerated.

Chapter 7, p. 128

And then I realized that the Eli who floated somewhere close by was this image in my mind, the Eli who bent over his dog, was the young Eli, the Eli standing alone on the porch as I pulled away in a cab from the house on Lyman Street. Consciously I tried to focus on the older Eli face. And I could not quite get it.

Chapter 8, p. 138

But here's what I thought: If I had a crush, it was on the earlier Eli, the one who didn't exist anymore, and the real Eli was just a vehicle for it. Or, perhaps even more complicated, that the crush—if you could call something so psychologically distorted by such a playful name—was on myself.

Chapter 9, p. 156

I'd been feeling irritated with Daniel for the last few days, ever since out dinner at Eli and Jean's. The evening there had been uncomfortable, so much so that Daniel had



announced afterward that if I wanted to see Eli Mayhew again, I should do it on my own. I blamed Daniel for the way it had gone, I was annoyed at him.

Chapter 9, p. 166

And then I realized with a shock that snapped me wide awake that what I was feeling as a bitter sorrow with my life, a sharp envy for Cass. That I wanted to have what she was having—to have had, anyway, what she was having. That I wanted to be standing at the center of my life in hot lights, moving in ecstasy to music that crashed around me, that came from me, that linked me to others.

Chapter 10, p. 178

We didn't know what would happen next: that was our great gift. The gift of youth. The thing we miss, it seems to me, no matter what we've made of our lives, as we get older. When we do know what will happen next. And next and next, and then last.

Chapter 12, p. 216

I sat there, tensed, shocked, and then, in a palpable wave of emotion, abruptly rageful. His very being—his health, his evident prosperity, his smile, his lifted hand—all of this was an offense to me. It seemed unbearable that he should exist in the same world I did. In a world where Dana was dead.

Chapter 14, p. 246

I started the car. I drove across Cambridge toward Route 2. I was going down Brattle Street, between rows of widespread, splendid houses, the vast yards opening on either side of me. I was thinking again of Dana, as I so often had in these weeks and months; but this time with such ease and familiarity that it seemed I could hear her hoarse, ugly voice speaking to me. Sudden tears spilled from my eyes. I signaled and pulled over to park.



Topics for Discussion

Eli seems to believe in some sort of "balance," in that his horrible action of the past has been erased by the many he has helped since. In the case of Eli, do you think he has in any way atoned for his crime? Is that even an appropriate question given the nature of his crime?

When her daughters point to Jo as one who has had an easy and uneventful life, might those instances provide the opening Jo needs to tell her daughters of some of the dangerous things she has witnessed in order to caution her daughters? Or is it better for Jo to keep quiet and let her daughters think of her as an example of someone that has always been responsible?

The author often goes into great detail in describing some of the actions of characters, for example even telling in order how a character removed a coat, gloves, and scarf. Do you find that this kind of detail gives you a more vivid image of the story, or do you find it tedious and an interruption in the unfolding action?

When Licia calls her mother on Christmas, her mother says she would rather not hear from her daughter until her daughter has returned home. What is your personal opinion of this? Is it an effective way to express disapproval and correct her daughter's actions, or does the unwillingness to even try to understand her daughter explain why Licia took such drastic action in the first place?

We, the readers, can see disaster coming a mile away when Jo is letting her thoughts of Eli run rampant. Is this realistic? Do you believe a character or a person in real life can be caught up in the moment and not see what is obvious to outsiders?

What might the title *While I Was Gone* refer to?

Time and time again other characters mention that Jo has created problems or made relationships more distant than they need to be by her habit of being secretive and elusive. Do you think Jo ever fully understands this, and do you think she ever sees the need to change that behavior?