

White Oleander Study Guide

White Oleander by Janet Fitch

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Plot Summary

Astrid is a twelve-year-old girl who lives with her beautiful mother, Ingrid, a poet. Her mother is the kind of beauty who turns people's heads. Ingrid sees herself as a Valkyrie who would rather rule in Hell than serve in Heaven. She sees herself stronger and tries to live her life in simple elegance. Astrid's delicate balance crumbles when her mother falls in love with Barry Kolker, who is the type of man Ingrid deems unworthy of her. When Barry, after wooing her and slipping into their lives, drops her without warning, Ingrid becomes quite psychotic, resulting in his murder.

While her mother is in prison, Astrid has the first-hand experience of the foster care system. The first foster mother is Starr, an ex-stripper and alcoholic. She professes to believe in Jesus Christ but her lifestyle and attire suggest otherwise. As Astrid turns fourteen, she finds herself falling in love with Starr's hippie boyfriend, Ray. The lure of Astrid's innocent beauty is too much for Ray to resist, and they cross over the line and start a sexual relationship. Starr, noticing this, goes off her abstinence from alcohol and even breaks her son's arm. Finally, everything ends in bloody violence as Starr shoots Astrid three times and runs away. Ray, the man Astrid loves so much, does not stay to help her. The only person who stays is Davey, Starr's son, who is now thrust into the foster care system, because of Astrid.

Astrid's next foster mother is Marvel Turlock who only wants Astrid as a wage-free servant. She is also an avowed racist who wastes no opportunity to slur insults at her neighbor who is an elegant black woman. Her name is Olivia Johnstone. Despite Marvel's warning not to associate with her, Astrid is drawn to Olivia's elegance. Olivia used to be a loan officer with an MBA, but she now makes a living by pleasing men. Through Olivia, Astrid learns the pleasure of luxury. However, Olivia is not as beholden to Astrid. One night, on her walk to calm her restlessness about Olivia, vicious dogs attack Astrid, leaving scars on her face, arms and legs. Christmastime comes, and Astrid escapes to Olivia's house, where they both get drunk. There's a great uproar when Marvel catches her coming out of Olivia's house. Marvel hits her, despite her stitched wounds, and calls the police. Astrid manages to protect Olivia but has to leave without being able to say good-bye when Marvel calls the Children's Service while she's at school.

All this while, letters from Astrid's mother continue coming. The letters are always full of her mother's news, hardly ever asking after Astrid. For Ingrid, Astrid has always been an extension of herself, someone who shares in her feelings.

Astrid's third foster mother, Amelia Ramos, is an aristocratic woman from Argentina. She lives in a beautiful house with several foster girls, but her true purpose is to appropriate the government subsidy for her own use. She starves them, by feeding them nothing but dinner during weekdays. In her hunger, Astrid is forced to rummage through trashcans and panhandle. Ms. Cardoza, the caseworker who brought her to Amelia's house, is in awe of Amelia and considers her complaints groundless but her new caseworker, Joan Peeler, takes her words seriously. She can finally escape.



Astrid's fourth foster home seems like a dream come true. Her new foster parents are Ron and Claire Richards. Ron is a television producer and Claire is an actress. Claire takes genuine interest in her, which unsettles her at first, but she begins to blossom under her attention and encouragement. Astrid loves Claire but finds weaknesses in her foster mother. Claire is extremely insecure, especially when it comes to Ron, and unable to draw boundaries and stand up for herself. Astrid feels protective of Claire and watches over her. Unlike her previous foster mothers, Astrid has tried to keep Claire in the background from her mother. However, her mother finds ways to correspond directly with Claire, culminating in a visit at the prison. Ingrid manages to poison Claire's mind by insinuating that Ron is having an affair. She knows that Astrid loves Claire and she'd rather see her daughter in the worst kind of hell than have her happy with a weakling like Claire. Her mind poisoned by Ingrid, Claire becomes even more suspicious of Ron, further driving him away. It ends one day with Astrid discovering Claire dead from an overdose of sleeping pills. Ron, who has been unable to express how much he loved his wife, sobs in grief, and they comfort each other. Astrid no longer believes in the future.

As Astrid awaits her next placement at the infamous MacLaren Children's Center, she meets a kindred spirit named Paul Trout. She sees past his bad skin and finds beauty of soul. He asks to keep in touch as he leaves for his new placement. Astrid does several interviews with prospective foster parents. She meets a genuinely nice couple, Bill and Ann Greenway, but she's come too far to blend into their normalcy. Instead, she chooses Rena Grushenka's home as the place to wait out until her eighteenth birthday.

Rena Grushenka runs a thrift shop. She's a pragmatic woman whose primary interest is money. At her house, Astrid gets deeper into drugs and learns to help an expectant mother. About this time, her mother's followers and her lawyer visit Astrid. Apparently, there are people who believe her innocent and willing to fight for a retrial. Astrid drives a hard bargain with the lawyer who wants her to testify on her mother's behalf. When she sees her daughter again, Ingrid is shocked at the changes in Astrid. Gone are her tenderness and transparency, replaced by hardness. Breaking down from her usual pose, Ingrid performs a truly selfless act of maternal love. She is willing to give up her freedom to have her daughter of old back. She will tell her lawyer to leave Astrid alone. The truth exposed, they are reconciled at last.

Another three years have passed. Astrid now lives in Berlin with Paul Trout, who has become popular with European art students for his graphic novels. She and her mother write a couple of times a month, and she's even met her father, Klaus Anders. One day, she finds a headline trumpeting her mother's freedom. Ingrid has numerous offers, and Astrid can feel her beckoning back to the States. Paul wants to stay in Europe, but California will always call out to her.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Astrid Magnussen is a twelve-year-old girl, living with her mother, Ingrid, in Los Angeles. Her mother is a beautiful woman with long, white blond hair who dreams of a carefree, refined life but is grounded by the reality of a teenage daughter and a low-paying job. Astrid is in awe of her mother and longs to be like her someday but is also terrified that she might leave her. She feels guilty that she is the anchor that is keeping her mother from living the life of her dreams.

It is the time of the oleander, a flower that blooms when the hot Santa Ana winds blow in from the desert. It is the beginning of summer. Ingrid meets Barry Kolker at a poetry reading. She first dismisses him as a "fat goat of a man," but he continues to pursue her until she agrees to go to a gamelan concert with him.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Here, the reader sees a glimpse of Ingrid Magnussen through the eyes of her daughter, Astrid. Ingrid is a beautiful but selfish woman who cannot accept the dichotomy between where she thinks she should be and the reality that grounds her. We get a picture of their relationship, which is unlike a normal interaction between a mother and a daughter. Astrid worships her mother like a distant queen and tries to make herself as unobtrusive as possible, intuitively understanding that Ingrid tolerates her presence and will not hesitate to leave her at a moment's notice.

One senses a subtle cruelty that has conditioned Astrid to be grateful for her mother's infrequent attention and feel guilty that she might be grounding Ingrid from living her life to the fullest. She knows that something is amiss from her observations of other mothers and daughters but does not know enough to question her arrangement.

It is the beginning of summer, signaled by the Santa Ana wind blowing from the desert. A time when lovers will kill each other and blame it on the wind, according to Ingrid. These words foreshadow what will unfurl with Barry Kolker who, despite Ingrid's initial haughty disdain, persists in courting her and finally succeeds in getting her to a concert. He somehow figured out that one thing she can't resist is a gamelan concert.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Astrid waits for her mother in Crossroads of the World, where her mother's office is located. She is drawing sketches of figures from books such as *Carmen* and *Gretel*. This is how she spends the summer. One morning, Ingrid leaves her office at eleven or so. Astrid assumes that she's taking her to an early lunch and is astonished to find that her mother is going on a date with Barry Kolker. She thought the gamelan concert would be the last time to see him.

Barry, Ingrid and Astrid are going to the racetrack in Santa Anita. Ingrid is disdainful of Barry's attire until she realizes that everyone else at the tracks is dressed like him. Her horse, *Medea's Pride*, wins. Uncharacteristically she laughs and hugs Astrid and Barry. Astrid's never seen her like this, excited and laughing. She seems so young. During the meal, Barry tells them of his travels in the Orient, including Bangkok and Angkor Wat. He's forgotten all about Astrid as he concentrates on Ingrid. On the way home, she lets him touch her waist as she gets into the car.

Barry asks them to dinner at his house, offering to cook some Indonesian dishes. Astrid excuses herself, saying that she isn't feeling well. She hopes that he'll be the one to feed them, hold them and make them real. Ingrid spends an hour trying on clothes. Astrid has never seen her mother so indecisive. All that weekend, her mother says nothing of her date with Barry but writes poems and crumples them up.

On the evening of the day when Barry calls her at work, someone knocks on the door. It is Barry with a bottle of wine and a bag that smells of something wonderful. After considering him for a long moment, she invites him in, something Astrid has never imagined her mother doing. He looks around the elegantly bare room and asks whether they've just moved in. They've been living there over a year. Barry has stayed the night. After that night, the changes are startling. Her mother goes to the farmer's market for vegetables instead of flowers. She writes tiny haiku poems that she slips into his pockets. She's proud that a magazine dubbed her Barry's new ladylove when she normally hates a woman being called a man's anything.

Astrid has never imagined that her mother could be ruled by passion. Ingrid laughs at the women who approach Barry when they go out. She's the only one he wants, as she tells her daughter. Ingrid never sees his faults anymore - his physical goatishness, his need for dental work, his flabby physique, his squalid taste in clothes and the wretchedness of his English - and in the morning, her room is full of the scent of their lovemaking.

Astrid imagines calling Barry *Dad*. She's never told her mother that she wants a father. She once asked her mother the question when she was in kindergarten. Ingrid told her that she has no father. "Fathers are irrelevant. Believe me, you're lucky. I had one, I



know. Just forget it." Since then, Astrid has watched fathers who seem to provide an anchor to their world, unlike those who drift. Astrid prays that Barry Kolker would be that man. Barry takes them to the Fourth of July baseball game and Catalina. They feel like a family.

Then something happens. Barry promises to come but doesn't show up. He goes out of town on assignments and cancels their dates. Ingrid is clearly anxious and agitated. One day, she decides to drop by his house. Astrid has a foreboding feeling. When Ingrid returns to their car, she is crying. He's made love to her but asked her to leave, because he has a date. Now Astrid understands why her mother has clung so hard to her rules. Once you break one, then you end up breaking all of them, one by one. His date is a very young blond girl. She's not as pretty as Ingrid is, but she is simpler.

The next day, Kit, the editor of Ingrid's magazine, maliciously enjoys telling Ingrid about seeing Barry with a young blond half his age. Ingrid tells Astrid that they are leaving. They are not coming back.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter, one can see Ingrid's complicated nature. She obviously disdains a man like Barry Kolker but falls head over heels in love with him. What eventually won her over—was it his cheerful ignorance of her invisible boundaries? We sense that, underneath her frosty exterior of superiority, she is a woman who's been hurt and disillusioned by men, starting with her father.

Apparently, for Barry, Ingrid is an object of conquest. He single-mindedly pursues her; however, when she has completely fallen for him, he's no longer interested in her. For a woman as proud as Ingrid, it is devastating. For Astrid, who has never seen her mother in such a state, it is unnerving. Did he break up with her because she is complicated? The reader sees another side of the seemingly genial Barry, whose casual disregard for Ingrid is almost cruel.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Ingrid doesn't leave the darkened apartment. Astrid needs to go back to school but cannot leave her. She vows never to fall in love and hopes that Barry dies a slow, lingering death. She wants to reach out to her mother, but Ingrid is lost in her own world. Then she seems to be back to her normal self. She asks to come back to work and takes Astrid to school to start the eighth grade. However, it is not over. She follows him as he has done, so she can feed her growing hatred of the sight of him. It makes Astrid uncomfortable to watch.

It is a school night, and Ingrid comes home after three. She has followed Barry to a party, where he grabs her by the arm and hisses at her to leave. She seems elated that her ploy is working. A Saturday afternoon, they are sitting in the car down the block from Barry's house. Astrid hates the way her mother watches his house with an almost insane coolness, but she can no longer reach her. When they see Barry leave, they enter the house. She wipes out his computer and backup disks and slashes a shirt to pieces. She leaves a white oleander behind.

Someone is pounding on their door. It is Barry, swearing he will kill Ingrid. She is calm, almost happy. He unintentionally breaks a windowpane. When he thrusts his arm in to open the latch, Ingrid stabs him in the hand. Barry swears at her as he goes away. "You don't know what I can do," she says softly. After that night, he doesn't show up at his favorite hangouts and changes his locks. Ingrid still manages to get in and puts oleander everywhere, even making an arrangement of white oleanders. Astrid senses that her mother has crossed a line, and her actions have gone past even revenge.

A police officer shows up at their apartment. Inspector Ramirez informs Ingrid of Barry Kolker's accusation. She twists the story to make it sound as if Barry is stalking her after she broke up with him. Astrid is uncomfortable at being put on the spot as her mother's witness.

The next time they see Barry is at the flea market; he is conciliatory, offering to bury the hatchet and be friends. Ingrid accepts. He seems a bit suspicious but also relieved. Astrid thinks that he still doesn't know her mother at all. That night, they show up at his house. His windows have bars now. He doesn't want to let them in, but she flirts with him.

Astrid is glad that her mother is happier, but she's uneasy that Ingrid is happy in her hatred. They drive down to Tijuana where her mother buys DMSO, a medicine for arthritis, for eighty dollars, enough food money for two weeks. When they return home, Ingrid cooks strange things, and the kitchen smells like green and rotting leaves. Astrid



is relieved to learn from Michael that DMSO is harmless. It merely helps to absorb drugs through one's skin into the bloodstream. Astrid calls Barry to warn him, but when he answers, she cannot say anything. She thinks about her mother's face when she left his house that night. She doesn't want to arouse Barry's suspicion and get her mother arrested. Thinking it a crank call, he swears and hangs up. Astrid doesn't call again.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Ingrid becomes completely unhinged. Her despair seems to stem mostly from being rejected by a man whom she deems unworthy. Her behavior is borderline psychotic and even more disturbingly, she is quite calm as she carries out her acts of intimidation against Barry. She's not hysterical or angry but quite deliberate. Astrid senses that her mother is doing something wrong, but her young loyalty prevents her from speaking out. After all, if it comes to be a choice between her mother and Barry, there's no contest.

Barry doesn't seem to understand how dangerous Ingrid can be. He thinks her a jilted, jealous woman and tries to placate her, but he doesn't know how deep her hatred runs. We feel pity for him as we have a foreboding sense of things to come.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Astrid dreams of her mother being arrested. It is very early, still dark. Many cops burst in through the door, and the manager of the apartment building stands in the doorway, his head in a shower cap. The policemen pull Ingrid out of her bed, and she calls them Nazis in German. She is naked. She promises Astrid she will be back in an hour, but a week goes by, and she still doesn't come.

When caseworkers come to get her, they give Astrid only fifteen minutes to decide what to take from her apartment. She takes her mother's four books, a box of her journals, the white kimono, her tarot cards and her folding knife. Michael wants to but is unable to keep her. Astrid feels like Persephone who was snatched by Hades and taken underground. Astrid is taken to a group home run by a woman named Mrs. Campbell. Astrid is brought to see her mother behind glass. Ingrid wears an orange jumpsuit and her eyes are clouded over. Astrid tells her that she loves her, but, just like in her dreams, she doesn't seem to recognize her. Astrid wants to help her mother but doesn't know how.

When Astrid is awake, she tries to remember her mother's teachings but can't remember. One day, Astrid finds the girl in the other bed going through her drawer and flipping through her book. When Astrid tells her to leave her things alone, she grins, tears out two pages and stuffs them in her mouth. Astrid falls on her, knocking her down. Her mother's blade jabs at her spine. She's tempted to cut her with her mother's knife. She looks at the hand expertly handling the knife. It's not her hand. She tells her not to touch her stuff and tapes the torn pages together. When Astrid starts talking, they send her to school where her name is White Girl. She is seen as an albino, a freak. She draws pictures in every class.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Through Astrid's words, the reader learns that Ingrid is arrested. It is not yet clear for what, but we sense that it has something to do with Barry. We keenly sense the lost feelings Astrid experiences as she goes through the motions of life without her mother. It's interesting that Astrid is classified as disabled, probably because of her refusal to speak. From her nickname, White Girl, it is easy to guess she has been sent to a school where white kids are in the minority. She is adrift in a strange world, all alone. One also sees that her mother's teachings may have taken hold from the way Astrid very calmly forces her roommate into submission. It is a glimpse of Ingrid's strength, which Astrid didn't know she possessed.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Astrid is taken to her permanent placement in Tujunga. It is a house that is part trailer. The woman's name is Starr, and she lives with four children. Davey and Carolee are Starr's real children, and Owen and Peter are foster children like Astrid. Davey is very smart and is interested in studying wildlife. Carolee, a sullen sixteen-year-old girl, mocks her mother as the children listen to her making love with her hippie boyfriend. She hangs out with a wild crowd.

Starr talks constantly about how Jesus saved her life. However, her actions and clothing do not match her fervor to be free from the "sin virus." Astrid is thirteen now. One year has passed since her mother's trial and all the sessions, questions, medication and caseworkers. Starr is taking Astrid and Carolee clothes shopping. Carolee is embarrassed by her mother and her raunchy talk.

On Sunday morning, Carolee skips out early to avoid going to church. Astrid pretends to be sick. Only when Starr is gone does she come out. She runs into Ray, Starr's boyfriend who doesn't care for God that much, either. Astrid has never thought much about God. Although she has learned a lot about deities from world mythology, her mother banned the least mention of Christ. It turns out that Ray is married to a woman whom he has not seen in two or three years. His nonchalance throws her off. It hits her then that she may not see her mother again for years.

Ray comes over and consoles her when he sees her crying. He correctly guesses that she misses her mother. He holds her as she cries and wipes her cheeks with the back of his hand. She shows him a picture of her mother in which Ingrid looks like a Lorelei. He tells Astrid that she will be prettier and calls her the sweetheart type, not the lioness her mother is. No one has ever said such things to her before, and it makes her feel good to hear those words. When she tells him that her mother is in prison for killing her boyfriend, he shrugs it off as if it were an everyday occurrence.

As Astrid finishes the eighth grade, she keeps to herself. She doesn't know anyone and doesn't want to. She eats lunch with Davey, and they quiz each other using flash cards he has made for himself. Her caseworker, who tries to look handsome for Starr, tells her that her mother can now receive visitors. After the last visit, she is afraid. She wonders about her mother's life in prison and about her feelings toward Astrid. It has been eight months since her visit.

Thursday comes, and Astrid is taken to see her mother. Astrid cannot imagine her mother in prison. The prisoners wander around behind the covered area of the visiting yard, their faces like masks. One woman makes lascivious gestures at her and others laugh, sounding like the crows. Her mother looks more beautiful than ever despite her carelessly hacked off hair. Astrid trembles as Ingrid comes over and hugs her. Ingrid



kisses her all over and tells her not to cry. When a woman calls out, saying something about Astrid and her mother, Ingrid silences her with a look. Prison agrees with Ingrid. There's no hypocrisy - it's kill or be killed. She's in the grounds crew, because she refuses to serve by teaching. She won't feed their machine. She asks Astrid to send her drawings and her face turns stony when she learns that Astrid hasn't been receiving any of her letters. She will write to her directly instead of going through social workers. She calls Starr and Uncle Ray the ex-topless dancer and the clumsy carpenter. Her disdain hurts Astrid's feelings.

Ingrid wants to know everything about Astrid. It is strange, as she never wanted to know about her before. The long repetitive days of prison life have made Ingrid remember her.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Astrid is placed in a working-class environment that she has never experienced. Starr, despite her constant talks about being saved and knowing Jesus, still lives the sinful life. One wonders how she managed to be approved as a foster parent. Her daughter, Carolee, fully knows this and is already quite cynical at the ripe old age of sixteen. We see Astrid keeping to herself, not bothering to get to know others except Davey. Astrid seems to have developed a defensive shell, afraid of letting anyone in, because they will be taken away from her just like her mother was. Ray, whom Starr encourages the kids to call Uncle Ray, comforts Astrid and tells her things in which she finds great solace.

The reader learns here that indeed, Ingrid killed Barry. As can be seen from Ray's observation, she is a lioness whose beauty intimidates. In prison, her natural predatory instincts keep her on top, even against hardened criminals. It's not surprising that prison's harsh rule for survival - kill or be killed - agrees with her.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The next Sunday, both Carolee and Astrid are reluctantly dragged to church. Starr sits very straight when the Reverend appears on stage, hoping he will notice her. He is good at playing the crowd. As he talks about a kid in the sixties who ends up being one of the Manson killers but has a revelation in prison, Astrid sinks back in her chair as far as Carolee is. Starr's perfume and the Reverend's hissing words make her sick to her stomach.

As she listens to the Reverend drone on about sin being a virus, Astrid remembers the day she tried to warn Barry. She realizes that she's infected, and that there's blood on her hands. She thinks about her mother who believes in anything but herself. She has no conscience.

In July, Astrid is baptized into the Truth Assembly of Christ. Afterwards, they throw a little party for her, which is the first for Astrid. Everyone gives her a little present, even Uncle Ray, who thinks she is crazy to be baptized. He gives her a tiny gold cross on a chain, which he fastens around her neck. Astrid realizes that he wants to kiss her. He reddens and looks away. Ingrid writes to her, forbidding her to accept baptism and call herself a Christian. She tells her that God is dead. Astrid prays for her redemption.

Uncle Ray teaches Astrid how to play chess from a book. He learned in Vietnam. That night, they play chess as the boys watch a nature show on TV. They discuss God, and that he has never quite resigned himself to her becoming a Christian. She senses that he finds her beautiful, and it makes her feel beautiful. She's never felt beautiful before. They hear Starr's car pulling into the yard. When she comes home, Astrid becomes just one of the kids. When Starr sees them together, she stops for a moment at the door then sits on the arm of his chair, kissing him and draping her self all over him. He's not paying attention to the game anymore. Starr takes him to her bedroom.

All night long, Astrid hears their lovemaking, their laughter. She imagines a man like Uncle Ray looking at her the way he does at Starr. She compares her slender, still-developing body to Starr's full-breasted figure. Astrid misses Carolee, who would have told her about Ray being old at almost fifty and how he met Starr at a sleazy club where she worked as a waitress. However, Carolee is never home at night anymore. Astrid is hurt that Carolee doesn't invite her along, but Astrid doesn't like Carolee's friends - girls with mean laughter and boastful and awkward boys with shaved heads. Astrid caresses her own body as she listens to the banging of the headboard.

Ingrid sends Astrid a reading list of four hundred books. Unlike Ray, Starr is never patient when she takes them to the library. He's busy with a job and Astrid misses having him at home all day. He hasn't had a steady job since he quit as a shop teacher



at a high school after getting into a fight with the principal. Astrid sends her mother drawings instead of letters. She paints pictures for everybody that summer.

One day as Uncle Ray cleans his guns, he asks whether she wants to shoot and hands her a Beretta, a small gun. He never lets the boys touch his guns, and Starr hates even to look at them. He teaches her about the different guns. Astrid feels like an Israeli girl soldier and feels him watching her taking aim. She feels beautiful but also interrupted. She isn't used to being so complicated.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Astrid is reluctantly dragged to the church but is overcome by the Reverend's sermon about sin. She feels guilty for not following through with her call to Barry and feels responsible for his death. Ingrid's philosophy is interesting. She is very proud and would rather rule in Hell than serve in Heaven. Serving anyone, even God, is a dirty concept in her dictionary. She's not pleased at her daughter becoming a Christian and tells her that God is dead. One realizes the depths of Ingrid's influence: she has taught her child that there is no God and that Astrid is dependent only on herself. Uncle Ray is beginning to look at Astrid as a woman, not a child. The reader fears for Astrid as she develops feelings for this older man, because we know how starved she has been for attention in her beautiful, overpowering mother's shadow.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In November, Astrid turns fourteen. Starr throws her a party, and she receives a present from everyone. Ray's gift is a wooden jewelry box, in the pattern of an art nouveau moonflower, the cover motif of her mother's first book. He must have done it late at night. She merely says thanks, afraid to show how much she loves it.

One day Ray asks her about her father. She only knows his name, Klaus Anders, which she learned through her birth certificate. Her mother told her that she sprang from her, fully formed, like Athena. In a picture of her parents, he smiles fully, unlike Astrid or her mother. Ray muses about his son, Seth, but he thinks Seth's mother influences him and Ray hates him for it. Astrid talks about meeting her father someday. Ingrid told her otherwise, but her journal shows that she wanted him to notice her. Astrid can relate to her mother's feelings as she watches Ray.

Starr interrupts them and sends him off to the stores. She tells Astrid that she knows her game, that she's after Ray, and she'll call Children's Services. Astrid tries to appeal to Starr's Christianity to no avail. Then Astrid insinuates that men don't like jealous women, and Ray will end up hating her if she clings to him too much. Finally, Starr makes her swear on the Bible that she's not interested in Ray.

From then on, Starr watches Astrid's every move, every gesture. She stays close to Ray, even missing church. One day, Ray asks whether something is wrong between them and comments that it must be hard on her to be getting older and having prettier girls nearby. Ingrid warns Astrid to find a boyfriend her age, someone mild and beautiful, but Astrid is beyond caring.

It is spring and Astrid asks Ray to show her the new development in Lancaster where he's been working on the custom cabinetry. After he shows her around, she makes her move, hugging him close. He tries to resist, saying that she's a kid, but gives in when she disrobes in front of him. "I never wanted this to happen," he says, looking mournful. "You're a liar, Ray," she tells him. They make love.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The reader wonders if Astrid in some way is repeating mistakes that her mother has made. We learn that her father is alive and lives in Venice Beach, California. It is telling of Ingrid's character that she denigrates the role of father in her daughter's life, making it sound as if he was merely a tool for her to have Astrid. However, her journals and pictures tell a different story, that of a young woman in love. We wonder what happened. Did he cause Ingrid some sort of pain that has affected her character ever since?

It is surprising and disturbing to see the way Astrid convinces Starr not to send her away. She shows a certain level of womanly cunning a girl of her age shouldn't possess. Has she learned more from her mother than she realizes? For once, one can agree with Ingrid's warning, but Astrid doesn't listen. The reader empathizes with Ray's sadness as Astrid's innocence is lost forever.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Ray is Astrid's singular obsession. They spend a lot of time together making love. One afternoon, Astrid asks him why he stays with Starr, and he replies that she is the only woman who lets him be himself. She tells him that she loves him as they make love, but he shushes her.

Starr is edgy and she accuses her daughter of all the things she wants to accuse Astrid of. Carolee barely ever comes home anymore. One day Astrid comes home to find Starr curled up on the porch swing. She wants to talk to her, which is rare. As she rambles on about Carolee, Astrid realizes that Starr is drunk. Starr has been sober for eighteen months. Starr talks about how Ray is crazy about her, how she does things for him that his proper wife never did. It makes Astrid queasy to think of Ray in some strip club. Starr is busy convincing herself that there's nothing between Astrid and Ray.

Carolee is again ready to go out on her night cruise. Starr accuses her of being promiscuous, but Carolee is defiant. Finally, Starr slaps her, and Carolee slaps her back. It turns into a brawl until Ray stops them. Starr tells her to leave, and Carolee promises that she will. Davey implores his sister not to go, but Carolee doesn't want to stay.

When Carolee leaves, Starr loses something essential, something that anchors her. Astrid knows that she is the cause of Starr's breakdown, but it's not enough to stop her. One day, Starr yells at the boys for their mess in the living room and throws things around. Then she marches over to Davey and crushes his exhibit, a painstakingly accurate model of Vasquez Rocks and the fossils. He tells her that he hates her, and Starr starts to beat him. Astrid tries to stop her but it's no use. Starr goes and makes herself a drink. Davey has dislocated his arm. When Starr comes to her senses and realizes what she has done, she is contrite. Davey is taken to the emergency hospital. They concoct a story because he still wants to protect his mother after everything she has done.

It is Easter. Everyone goes to church, even Ray. Astrid tries to pray, but she can no longer feel God's presence in that church or in her soul. During the meal, Ray and Astrid try best to avoid looking at each other. They haven't been together since they took Davey to the emergency room. She walks outside. Ray shows up. The moment she touches him, she knows that they can never be apart, no matter how much they tried or who gets hurt. "Baby, what are you doing to me," he whispers into her hair.

Starr and Ray are having a huge fight. The last time Astrid heard two adults fight was the night her mother stabbed Barry in the hand. Starr accuses Ray of having sex with Astrid. Astrid hears crashing and yelling, and then suddenly the door to her room flies open. Starr strides in, waving the .38. Astrid will see that sight for years in her



nightmares. Starr fires without aiming. Ray wrestles her out of the room. As Astrid gets ready to leave, Starr comes back, shooting at her. Pain blooms in Astrid's shoulder; fire races across her ribs. Starr fires again, and Astrid's hip explodes. She falls to the floor.

Astrid awakes as she is being loaded into an ambulance. Davey has saved her life by calling the hospital and her caseworker. When people ask who shot her, Davey imperceptibly implores her not to tell. The two hold hands tightly as the painkillers knock her out. Astrid asks for the wooden jewelry box. Davey grabs it for her, his face twisted in pain as when he dislocated his shoulder. As the ambulance door closes, Davey is swallowed by the night.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Did everything crumble because of Astrid or was she merely a spark lighting the fuse of an explosive situation? Astrid cannot stop loving Ray, because he is her first love, but she also knows that what she is doing is wrong. Astrid is to blame, but she is a victim of the circumstances as well. Had she grown up in a stable family with normal parents, this may never have happened. She clings to Ray because he is the first person to show interest in her. All she wants is to be loved, and that novelty makes it impossible to let go.

It is bitter to note that Ray, the love of her life, abandons her now when she needs him the most. It is also ironic that Davey saves her when she's the cause of his entry into the foster care system.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Whenever Astrid wakes, Demerol, doctors in masks and nurses with soft hands await her. Astrid thinks about Playa del Carmen in Mexico where she and her mother spent time during the tourist season. As she slips in and out, she tries to understand Starr. Starr has been caught trying to see her son by the police. Ingrid has written several letters. It warms Astrid to see her mother imploring her not to leave her alone in the world. She's also grateful that her mother never once says I-told-you-so.

Astrid is recovered enough to watch a magician who came to the hospital to entertain. She tries not to think about Ray who ran away when she needed him the most. Perhaps he felt guilty for ruining her life. Perhaps he's been pleading with her to leave him alone, knowing the inevitable end. She also learns that Davey chose to stay behind. He refused to leave her bleeding to death. Astrid is deluged by fresh waves of shame and regret at the way she ruined innocent Davey's life.

Ingrid sends her a poem, "For Astrid, Who Will Live After All," which talks about how a woman's mistakes are "written by fire on stone," how they are a trait not an error. It is worse than I-told-you-so. Astrid is only fourteen and wants to believe that she can be saved.

She could have been released after two weeks, but, because she has nowhere else to go, she recuperates on the county dollar until she can walk with a cane and the bandages come off. Then she is given a new placement and sent off.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Astrid has been taught a costly lesson. Because she acknowledges her culpability, she tries to understand Starr and Ray. She's truly sorry about Davey, who is innocent and conscientious. She can only hope that he will end up well, able to pursue his dreams and study to his heart's content.

Ingrid's motherly concern seems to be a double-edged sword. Does she want her daughter to live because she loves her, or because she's afraid to be all by herself in this world? Her poem is quite cruel, telling Astrid that she'll have to live with the consequences of her actions for the rest of her life.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Astrid's second foster home is located in Van Nuys. Astrid experiences her first real family life at Ed and Marvel Turlock's house. She is expected to be a babysitter, pot scrubber, laundry maid and beautician. She sees it as a deserving punishment as she thinks about Ray, Starr and Davey. Her fractured hip is the slowest to mend. Her shoulder is already functional and even the chest wound that cracked her rib has stopped burning.

Astrid hates the role of beautician the most, as she is expected to wash and color Marvel's hair. Marvel thinks she's doing Astrid a favor by letting her practice to become a beautician. She is also a racist, refusing to watch the Oprah Winfrey Show because Oprah is black. Ingrid tells Astrid to feel lucky that these people are not beating her and to cultivate her loneliness, because one never outgrows loneliness.

The worst is yet to come when Astrid's pain prescription runs out. All she can think about is how alone she is and contemplates dying. When she can't sleep, she goes out in the backyard and listens to the jazz music coming through the closed shutters of the house next door. She plays with her mother's knife. Her mother encourages Astrid to endure and remember everything. In life, knowledge of poison is essential, she tells her. Without Percodan, she cannot stand the incessant whining and demands of the children. She buries herself in after-school library shelves. She works her way through her mother's book list. One day, a book, *The Art of Survival*, jumps out at her. After reading it several times, she realizes that she needs to pull herself together to survive at the Turlocks.

Marvel suggests the army as a career. Astrid realizes how little Marvel knows her despite her good intentions. In addition, she's very far away from the city, with no access to culture. As she prepares dinner, she sees the mysterious neighbor, a striking black woman. Marvel glares at the neighbor, calls her a whore and complains about the quality of the neighborhood going downhill because of all the non-white people. She warns Astrid never to talk to the woman. The next day, as Astrid walks home, she spies the neighbor cutting some lily of the Nile. She calls out in greeting and introduces herself. She tells Astrid to go inside, because Marvel will burn a cross on her lawn. However, she says Astrid's name.

Chapter 10 Analysis

It is appalling to realize that there are many unfit foster parents. Although the Turlocks have the appearance of a normal family, that togetherness doesn't extend to Astrid. The Turlocks seem to have signed up as foster parents to get easy access to free labor. Marvel is a crass, bourgeois woman and a shameless racist. It is ironic that all of the



people who have volunteered to take in a homeless child are no better fit to be parents than the parent from whom she was taken away. Astrid feels trapped, but her mother encourages her to embrace loneliness. It is interesting to note that Ingrid tells her that loneliness never goes away in life. The reader is intrigued by the story unfolding as Astrid finally meets her mysterious neighbor.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The mysterious neighbor's name is Olivia Johnstone. She reads elegant magazines and is always getting packages. She has many visitors, always men. Astrid refuses to consider that Marvel may be right about Olivia and lives for the sight of her. Once, she is gone for many days. Astrid imagines her in an elegant place like Paris and offers the UPS man to leave Olivia's package with her.

When Olivia returns, Astrid visits her on the pretext of returning the package. Olivia, seeing through her, invites her in. Her house is very elegant. Miles Davis's 'Seven Steps to Heaven' plays in the background. In the backyard, they have iced tea. Olivia has visited New York and Washington. Astrid asks her about her men and ends up pouring out her story. Olivia comforts her, telling her that things will get better, that beautiful girls have certain advantages. "It's a man's world," she tells her. Astrid isn't quite sure what that means. Olivia tells her that she is artistic and sensitive and not to fight the world. Astrid thinks about her mother who fought the world, considering it the essence of cowardice not to. Olivia gives her advice about pleasing men, but she is cynical about love and the notion of "happily ever after." When Astrid is ready to leave, Olivia hugs her lightly and invites her to visit again.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Astrid finally has a close encounter with Olivia. She is just as elegant and fascinating in person as Astrid has imagined her. We're not yet clear about her occupation. Despite Marvel's many faults, she may be right in this case. What is clear is that Olivia has excellent taste and has a wonderfully rich life. Astrid glimpses another way to survive in the world that is quite different and not as hard as her mother's ways. Olivia, in her own way, seems to use men. She certainly doesn't believe in love, thinking it will end eventually in divorce and bitterness.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Astrid wonders about her life as a woman. She imagines herself being rich and having three lovers, Ray being one of them. She's reluctantly pulled back to her reality by the incessantly shrill voice of Marvel calling her. The Mary Kay party is in full swing, and Astrid needs to serve them. Then they decide to make up her face. Astrid likes being the center of so much attention. When she's finally taken to a mirror, she almost cries. She looks garish, like a thirty-year-old hostess at Denny's.

School is out for the summer, but Astrid has no time to visit with Olivia, as Marvel keeps her busy with housework all the time. Her mother's letter is full of news about herself and no word about Astrid. She is once again relegated to the shadows to share in Ingrid's triumphs and defeats. She writes to her about Olivia, in a way saying that Ingrid is not the only beauty in the world.

Astrid is at the park watching over the kids when her mother's letter arrives, full of criticism and harsh words. She says Olivia is shamelessly prostituting herself instead of fighting against the injustice and asserting pride and criticizes that her daughter should be intelligent enough to know better. She ends with suggested books for Astrid to read.

Astrid decides that she wants to smoke pot and approaches the boys she would normally avoid. It costs five dollars a gram, and Astrid has only three dollars. Conrad, one of the boys, offers to give her half a gram in exchange for oral sex. It feels different from the way things were with Ray. This feels like work, cutting the heart out of lovemaking. Afterwards, as she watches Olivia, she understands. For Olivia, the men are customers, and she's just making a living.

One day, Astrid manages to sneak out to see Olivia. Astrid tells her about what she has done. They smoke a joint together. Astrid asks her whether she enjoys sex, and she nonchalantly replies that one enjoys anything at which one is good. When Olivia asks Astrid to come along on her errands, she has a momentary doubt. Perhaps her mother is right and she should run. They go shopping on Rodeo Drive, where Olivia buys her a French-blue cashmere sweater that costs five hundred dollars. Olivia treats Astrid to lunch in an elegant restaurant. Astrid learns that Olivia used to be a loan officer and even has an MBA.

Astrid watches Marvel's family eat. They are engrossed in television, oblivious to what they are eating. Astrid tells Marvel maybe she'll become a cook, another good occupation for a woman. Astrid is gaining weight and filling out nicely. She now has time to grow whereas before, she was too hungry to become a woman.



Chapter 12 Analysis

Now that Astrid is back in health, Ingrid goes back to her normal self-absorbed self. To her, Astrid is her own private cheerleader to laugh with her or console her. She doesn't see her as an individual, a child in need of unequivocal love from her mother.

The reader is crestfallen when Astrid sells herself for pot. We see her action as impulsive, probably driven by her mother's harsh criticism. It is easy for Ingrid to criticize her daughter for being foolish, but she's not there to guide her. Ingrid doesn't think about her own actions that have driven her daughter to this brink.

Learning that Olivia used to be a loan officer and even has an MBA, one realizes some important things about her character. This is not a woman who fell into prostitution out of desperate circumstances, but someone who made a business decision in order to make money.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The summer is in full swing, and Olivia takes Astrid on drives, or they have leisurely afternoons at Olivia's house, drinking rum punch. Olivia wants to take her to Carnival in Brazil where people dance for three days straight. Olivia tells her that she is glad to have found Astrid now instead of one or two years later. She's open to possibilities and can go in many directions.

When Astrid sends her mother pictures of Olivia, Ingrid's reaction is blistering. She calls Astrid retarded and accuses her of attaching herself to anyone who shows her the least bit of attention. She announces that she is disowning her.

October comes but Olivia doesn't talk about leaving for Carnival. Astrid doesn't write to her mother, because she couldn't bear her gloating over her loss of Olivia, but she writes to her about herself. Nothing pertains to Astrid except the caution about taking care of her teeth.

In her restlessness, Astrid takes a walk at night around the neighborhood and dogs attack her. She is rushed to the emergency room. She begs them not to throw away the shredded cashmere sweater, her present from Olivia. Thirty-two stitches later, Ed asks whether she can be taken home. He needs to go to work in the morning. Marvel rails at her for walking around at night. Astrid thinks Marvel would have smacked her had it not been for the stitches. She is glad that there will be scars.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Olivia seems wistful as she talks to Astrid. She sees Astrid as a blank canvas on which life has yet to make an indelible imprint. She talks about taking her to exotic places, but all seems to change when summer is gone. Has she changed her mind, or was Olivia's attention only for a fleeting moment? Ingrid makes at least one correct observation. Astrid is starved for affection and she will cling to anyone who shows the slightest bit of kindness and attention.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Seams trace Astrid's jaw and cheek, arms and legs. Everyone at school stares at her, and Astrid likes being considered a freak instead of a baby hooker. Olivia is still gone. This time, Astrid does not look after her packages or mail. Astrid thinks about her as she sits under the bleachers with Conrad and his friends, getting stoned.

It is Christmastime and Olivia is back, although Astrid has yet to see her. As the Turlocks celebrate the holidays with their relatives, Astrid is not asked to participate in their family activities. She is merely there to serve things. She escapes them and sits alone drinking. Astrid remembers how her mother hated Christmas most of all the holidays. The Turlocks have given her cheap presents from a 99-cent store. She thinks about how easily one can kill oneself when one is drunk and revels at people's reaction to the scars on her face. Astrid's one Christmas wish is for her mother to come get her.

Astrid is horrified to realize that Marvel's racism has begun to rub off on her thinking. She heads next door to Olivia's where things are quiet. Olivia asks what happened when she sees Astrid. She's been in England. Astrid sulks as she talks about just having turned fifteen and wanting to get drunk. Olivia has gotten her a bottle of the Penhaligon perfume from England. The next morning, she wakes up in Olivia's house. Olivia is still passed out. As Astrid leaves Olivia's house, Marvel catches her. Marvel slaps her face and beats her. Ed tunes out by turning up the volume of his game. Then Marvel heads over to Olivia's house, calling her a whore and nigger with everyone in the neighborhood hearing. She's even called the police, but Astrid manages to make everything sound innocent, and they go away without Olivia. Things are quiet for the rest of the Christmas break, with Marvel watching Astrid like a shoplifter. She's not yelling at Astrid, but she is back to treating her like a slave. Astrid leaves messages on Olivia's machine, but she never picks up.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Most girls - for that matter, most women - would be in hysterics if their faces were scarred, but Astrid seems perversely proud. Perhaps it's because she feels ugly inside whereas everyone only sees her beautiful, sweet exterior and now she feels liberated as her look now reflects how she truly sees herself.

Astrid seems to have wanted a surrogate mother in Olivia, which Olivia cannot or is unwilling to be. Things come to a head when Marvel catches her coming out of Olivia's house. The friendship-cum-mentorship seems over.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Suddenly, Astrid is yanked out of school and taken to a new home. How like Marvel to do that while she's away at school, she thinks. She doesn't have a chance to say good-bye to Olivia, but on some level, Astrid thinks Olivia probably will be relieved. Olivia will miss her a bit, but ultimately she likes her life uncomplicated.

Amelia's third foster home is located in Hollywood and the house looks too nice for foster care. Her new foster mother is Amelia Ramos, who looks authoritative in her fitted suit and high heels. She explains the rules of the house. At the dinner table, all of the other girls speak in Spanish and stare at Astrid. Once again, she is the White Girl. After dinner, Amelia calls her into the sitting room where she shows her pictures from Argentina, her home country. She finds it creepy that Amelia took a picture of her maids slaving away and looks at it fondly but decides she doesn't want to know.

Her new roommate is Silvana, who warns her against Amelia. Other girls are subtly mean. Astrid finds that Amelia locks up the refrigerator while she is out. The girls call Amelia "Cruella De Vil." In the beautiful house, they go hungry all the time. During the weekdays, they are fed only dinner. Cesar, Amelia's son, feels sorry for them but seems unable to help. At school, Astrid can hardly concentrate because she is so hungry. The girls steal food for others during kitchen duty and warn her of reprisal if she doesn't do the same. The fact that Amelia likes her and gives her tea and cookies doesn't sit well with other girls.

Hunger dominates Astrid every moment. She drifts the streets of Hollywood where she sees homeless kids. She sees herself in them. She finds herself wandering toward her old apartment, but nothing is the same. She and her mother are gone and so is Michael.

At school, Astrid learns to rummage through the trashcans for uneaten lunches until other girls catch her. "Look at that nasty girl. Eating garbage." Astrid knows how she looks to them - her scarred face, gobbling up thrown-away food with her fingers. She would have stopped going to school, but there's nowhere else to get food. She's unable to read anymore, the words refusing to stay still. She receives a letter from her mother's cellmate, asking her to write of cheerful things, because her letters are making Ingrid sad. Her mother is more pragmatic, ordering her to call Children's Services every day and yell until they change her placement. However, Astrid knows that she's just another file, a corpse with a tag on her toe.

Astrid even panhandles but she won't allow herself to slide into prostitution. Amelia finds out and rages at her for being ungrateful. Astrid has fallen out of favor. She loses even more weight, her ribs sticking out like the staves of a boat. Astrid overhears Amelia boasting to a friend about fostering being easy money and how she's renovating a bathroom.



Finally, in the darkness of March, after weeks of near-daily phone calls, Astrid gets a new caseworker named Joan Peeler. She asks to be taken to a coffeehouse. She learns that Ms. Cardoza, who always ignored her and preferred to have tea with Amelia, recommended that she not be moved. She has made her complaints sound trite. Astrid shows her ribs and tells her that the kids are starved. Joan wants her help to revoke Amelia's license, but Astrid doesn't want to lose the chance to be transferred out. She cannot think about others - she just wants to eat regularly again.

Joan Peeler finds her brilliant. "You should be in college already," she tells Astrid. She visits Astrid regularly on a weekly basis and buys her a good meal. Astrid learns that Joan is an aspiring screenwriter. Astrid knows the game. Joan wants her story for her screenplay. Astrid hates the need to strip herself bare for meager food.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Astrid deteriorates in her new home. The elegant home of Amelia Ramos hides so much cruelty and evil. Amelia signed up as a foster parent so she can use the government subsidy for her own income. What kind of person was she in Argentina that she feels nothing about starving people just because she deems them unworthy? She brings to mind the pictures of the military junta who committed such atrocities.

The reader feels for Astrid as she is forced to stoop to begging and rummaging through garbage for food. A girl of her age should never have been forced into such a position in the first place. One compares Ms. Cardoza and Joan Peeler. Was Ms. Cardoza at one point so eager to help like Joan Peeler? Will Joan lose her enthusiasm and become indifferent like Ms. Cardoza?



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Astrid finally leaves Amelia's house. The other girls are resentful, but she is just thrilled that she's escaping. She is taken to the residence of Ron and Claire Richards. She likes the environment already. While she looks around, Joan discusses Astrid's case with Claire. Joan and Astrid say their tearful good-byes, complete with hugs.

Claire seems more nervous than Astrid does, even though it is her house. Claire has never been around kids, and she takes Astrid everywhere as if she were five, not fifteen. They share stories about each other. Normally very shy, Claire looks transformed in pictures of her performances. Claire is an actress, but she doesn't act much anymore because she no longer fits the right profiles. She laughs easily when she is happy but also when she is sad. It all seems too good to be true, and Astrid is afraid of everything being taken away.

Ron Richards is coming home from Nova Scotia, and Claire is in a frenzy of activity to get the house ready. Ron is a television producer. Over dinner, the couple joke and tease, but something seems off about Claire. Claire urges Astrid to show Ron her paintings. She is resentful, because she considers them private between her and Claire. Ron compliments her on her talents. Astrid thinks about them. Women always put men first. That's how everything gets so screwed up.

Astrid is relieved to be going to Fairfax High so she doesn't have to face kids who saw her eating out of the garbage. Claire waits for her at home with something to eat and asks about her day. This is a novel experience for Astrid, someone waiting for her. As she describes her school life, she keeps out the ugly realities of modern school with abortions and metal detectors. She wants to keep the world beautiful for Claire.

On Sunday while Claire is at her ballet class, Ron asks her about Claire. "How does Claire seem to you?" He tells her that she can always reach him at his pager number. One day, Claire confides in Astrid her suspicions about Ron having an affair. After then, Ron's things, such as his keys and pen, keep disappearing. Astrid doesn't want Ron to suspect her but she cannot betray Claire. She discovers a box under their bed.

Chapter 16 Analysis

This is, by far, the best foster home in which Astrid has been placed. The people are affluent and cultured. Claire takes an interest in Astrid, which has never happened before. Claire seems to be sweet; but like many actors and actresses, insecure. Claire's relationship with Ron lacks confidence, and she tries too hard. Why is she so suspicious about Ron?



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Astrid finishes the tenth grade, and she has done incredibly well, considering the circumstances. To celebrate, Ron takes them to Musso and Frank, a famous restaurant, where they see movie stars. Ron introduces Astrid as a friend, which disappoints her, but he's better than Marvel, who wouldn't even have bothered, and Amelia, who starved her. They give her an amethyst pendant. Astrid feels tears coming.

Ron is gone most of the summer. Claire has framed a picture of hers on her bureau, next to one of her and Ron. Nobody has ever done that before. Claire is afraid of many things, even more so than Astrid. "Actors are always superstitious," she says, but one can tell that she's completely serious. Claire believes in numerology.

Claire takes Astrid along on her photo shoot. The photographer suggests taking Astrid's picture as well, but she resists. She marvels that he cannot see the ugly scars on her face. Astrid passes an old hippie panhandler, but Claire stops and gives him money. He keeps talking, but she's too polite to turn away. She's like that, unwilling to offend and unable to set boundaries. They finally manage to get away.

In the fall, Astrid signs up for honors classes again. Claire makes her feel that it's worth trying; that she's worthy of wearing jewelry and being treated nicely. Claire even finds and signs her up for an advanced art class. Astrid carefully edits what she writes to her mother. She doesn't talk much about her mother to Claire. She wants to keep Claire separate from her mother. Claire admires Astrid's mother's poems and sighs that she is not a true artist. Astrid sees Claire's movies and finds her transparent and heartbreaking. She's so vulnerable.

One sluggishly warm and hazy day, Astrid comes home to find Claire happily telling her that she has a part. It is a small role - only five lines - and she got the part, because the director is a friend of Ron's and the original actress injured herself. They practice extensively. On the day of the shoot, she comes home at 8:20 and runs into the bathroom to throw up. She cries. She's done seventeen takes and feels humiliated for having made hundreds of people wait because of her. Astrid comforts her to sleep. "I love you, Claire," Astrid says softly. She's never cared about a person so much that she can feel her pain before.

On Tuesday evening, Claire doesn't show up to pick her up after the art class. Astrid finds Claire reading her mother's papers - letters, journals, personal papers. She reacts guiltily when she sees Astrid and begs her not to hate her. She was depressed and Ingrid felt like a role model for her, so strong. Astrid cannot stay angry with her. She doesn't know how to explain her mother to Claire, how Ingrid doesn't want Astrid to be happy, because that means she doesn't need her. She doesn't want her mother to find out about Claire. Claire is the one who discovered her.



Chapter 17 Analysis

The reader finds out how brilliant Astrid is and how much further she might have blossomed had life not thrown so many curveballs at her. Claire, despite having no experience with children, is the perfect mother for Astrid. She encourages her to take care of herself and try her best. One can understand Astrid's jealousy of anything that comes between her and Claire, even Ron and especially her mother. The reader is made to feel somewhat anxious for Claire who is so sweet but so vulnerable. She is easy prey in this harsh world, as can be seen in the brush with the homeless man. Despite being younger, Astrid is clearly the stronger one.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Ron and Claire are fighting again in their room. It is rare to hear Ron raise his voice. He accuses Claire of having no life, dropping all of her friends and not understanding what it's like to work all day and come home exhausted. Astrid hates him for upsetting her only to leave again.

Ingrid has written a letter to Claire. She is inviting Claire and Astrid to come and visit. Astrid feels betrayed, helpless and anxious that the two have been corresponding. They visit her in February. Astrid hasn't seen her mother since Starr. Ingrid's hair is long again. She is startling in her beauty. With all excess fat melted away, muscles, and a tan, she looks less like a Lorelei than an assassin from *Blade Runner*. Astrid is astonished to find that they are the same height now. Their hands are growing into the same shape. Her mother looks older than the last time.

Claire shares confidences with Ingrid, not realizing that the other woman is looking for cracks in her personal history. Claire is innocent and doesn't realize that someone like Ingrid can use truth to destroy her. Ingrid doesn't like the way Claire and Astrid understand each other. As Claire talks about her life with Astrid and her husband, Ingrid strokes the side of Astrid's face with her work-roughened finger, deliberately scraping her skin. Astrid has betrayed her master. Ingrid knows now that Astrid kept Claire in the background, because she loves Claire and Claire loves her.

Ingrid wants to speak with Claire alone. Astrid sees that Claire is upset. Astrid demands to know what Ingrid said to her. Ingrid taunts her but Astrid is ready for her. She hisses that she's rather see Astrid in the worst kind of foster hell than with a woman like Claire and advises her to keep her bags packed.

Claire weeps as they drive home. Ingrid told her that Ron is indeed having an affair. Claire skips an audition, calling in sick. She falters whenever Ron's schedule changes. Astrid intercepts a letter from her mother to Claire, advising a love potion. Everything in the formula suggests poison. She returns the letter in a new envelope with a drawing of serpentine curves.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Ingrid's controlling nature rears its head in full force now that her daughter is fully grown and she is no longer swayed by her words. Astrid now recognizes her mother's cruel, predatory nature. Claire, in a way, is a mother Astrid should have had. Ingrid, whether out of jealousy or spite, sows the seeds to ensure that Astrid's happiness doesn't continue for too long. Even from prison, Ingrid exerts her destructive influence.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

It is April. Claire is examining her jewelry collection, many of which are heirlooms from her ancestors. Claire's illustrious lineage makes Astrid feel ill bred and insubstantial. Ron is away again, twice in one month. Astrid tries to assure her that Ron will be back soon. "If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?" she asks. Astrid tries to demur, but Claire is persistent. Claire says she'll gas herself, just like going to sleep. Astrid realizes that Claire's like a woman who is going to sleep in snow. She's tired and just wants to surrender. Claire kisses Astrid on the mouth, which confuses her; however, Astrid is willing to let her do anything to her. Claire wishes for a child. She talks about having been pregnant at Yale. After then, she could no longer have children. Claire has lost so much weight that she now wears Astrid's clothes. Astrid wants to rouse her from despair.

It is a relief when Ron comes home. Claire tidies herself and cleans the house. Early one morning, Astrid overhears him on the phone with a woman. He is laughing. He is startled when he sees her. Astrid asks him to take Claire with him on his next trip but he explains the impossibility of it. She concurs with his points but still is unwilling to let him off the hook. She tells him that Claire talked about killing herself. Ron looks afraid. He suggests that the three of them go away together. He puts his hand on her shoulder and he says, "I know it hasn't been easy for you." For a moment, Astrid wonders about making love to him but disciplines herself. This man is causing Claire so much misery.

Chapter 19 Analysis

The reader is disappointed to realize that Ron is indeed having an affair. He seems to be a very contained man with very little real emotion. He is urbane and polite but expresses no real passion or feeling. We pity Claire, who clings to him, as she has no other anchor in life. If she had a child, she would have been a wonderful but overprotective mother whose sole purpose in life is for that child. Because Ron is not a child, but a man, he feels stifled by so much love and attention. Maybe that's why he flies around the world so much to get away from her suffocating love. Still a young girl, Astrid carries so much responsibility.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

In June, true to his promise, Ron rents a cabin in Oregon. There is no phone, no electricity and he even leaves his computer at home. Astrid knows that Ron is interested in her but does nothing to encourage it. She can live without Ron but not without Claire.

Astrid has never spent so much time with Ron before, and she finds it irritating the way he's always running the show. *A man's world*. It bothers her. Claire looks healthy again. When Astrid goes fishing, she catches a fish. She doesn't even want Ron's help, as she wants it to be all her own. Claire wants her to throw it back again, but on this issue, she sides with Ron and whacks the fish on the head. Claire doesn't talk to her again for the rest of the afternoon, but Astrid feels like a real kid and refuses to feel guilty.

When they return to L.A., the house is full of projects and options. Ron's male friends are too interested in Astrid, and the women ignore her. Astrid stays close to Claire as she serves her *guests*. Astrid realizes something that Claire doesn't. To these people, she's not a hostess but merely a wife, an out-of-work actress, a drudge. Finally, Claire goes on Prozac, but it gives her too much energy.

In September, Astrid starts the twelfth grade, and Ron goes back to work. Now Claire doesn't have enough to do in the husbandless house. She has headaches and believes someone is listening in on the phone. In October, Astrid comes home to find Claire commenting on her face. As December arrives, Claire cheers up. She loves the holidays. Ron humors Claire as she sets out to get the perfect Christmas tree, but he complains that he doesn't get it. Wasn't Jesus born in the middle of a desert? At home, Claire instructs Ron in the hanging of lights.

The morning of Christmas Eve, Ron gets a call about a vision of the Virgin Mary seen in Bayou St. Louis. He has to go film it. They have a big fight. Claire throws away the stuffed goose she prepared, and they skip out on the midnight *Messiah*, to which they have tickets. Instead, Astrid eats ham sandwiches and watches *It's a Wonderful Life*. Claire cries on and off and finally passes out on the couch after taking a couple of sleeping pills. She wakes up at Christmas noon with a terrible headache and refuses to open Ron's presents. Later Astrid finds her in the bathroom with the water running. She's blinking back tears. Astrid makes her lie down on the couch.

When Ron comes home from New Orleans, she doesn't do her normal tidying up to greet him. She's been sipping sherry steadily all day long, listening to opera. The themes of opera suit her - hysterical loves and inevitable betrayals. Ron tells her that she embarrasses him. She accuses him of flying around with a girl, and then jumps up and slaps him. She sags back to the couch and starts to cry. Ron asks Astrid to leave. Astrid opens her door slightly when she hears them talking again. Ron is saying that Astrid should be let go if having a child is not helping. Apparently, she promised him that



she'd be better if she had a child. It strikes Astrid that he's talking about her like a dog one gets from a pound. She pleads for him to change his mind, but he sounds so reasonable. She sobs that he takes everything away, and his face twists in disgust. He calls her a bad actress. He suggests that she think it over. Astrid wants to tell him how much Claire needs her, but his eyes are shuttered like steel doors. Claire pleads him not to go, but he merely tells her to work it out and leaves.

Astrid hates herself for understanding Ron's feelings. She hates herself for her feelings of disgust at Claire's weakness. She remembers how Claire has given her back her future, even taking her to see Cal Arts, but is repelled afresh at the sight of her crawling and begging. Finally, her gratitude and love for Claire win, and Astrid goes to her door. It is locked, which is unusual. Claire's voice sounds slurred, as if she's been drinking, and she tells Astrid to stay away from broken people. Claire tells her that her mother is right. Claire is a fool and she can't even stand herself. Astrid realizes that Ingrid has been sending Claire other letters.

Astrid feels like an accident victim. Despite her feelings of drowning, she tries to console Claire. Claire tells her that Ron is not coming back; he is going to divorce her. Astrid loves Claire but realizes that she cannot save her anymore. After a while, Claire lets her in. She is cold, so Astrid gets in the bed with her, holds her cold hands and rests her head against hers as Claire falls asleep. Astrid tells herself that things will turn out all right.

Chapter 20 Analysis

The brief respite in Oregon doesn't last long. During the trip, we glimpse one of the problems in the marriage. Ron, whether he does it knowingly or not, takes control of every situation, without giving room for others to offer opinions. Claire is a weak woman, but being in Hollywood seems to exacerbate her insecurity. We see a glimpse of the film industry in which people are discarded as soon as they cease to be useful. Claire tries to gain approval but being a wife is not enough. One wonders if Ron loved Claire at some point. He must have been attracted to her enough to leave his first wife, but perhaps the same qualities that attracted him now repel him.

Once again, we see Astrid caught between feuding adults. To Ron, she is like a dog he no longer wants. She has ceased to be useful to him and he doesn't care what happens to her anymore. Ingrid's malevolence lingers in the background.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

As Astrid gets up and goes about the day, she believes Claire to be asleep, but, after a while, realizes that she's no longer snoring or moving. Astrid tries to shake her awake. Claire has taken many sleeping pills and is dead. Astrid screams and throws things until she is exhausted. Claire's hand is so cold.

Astrid dresses Claire and arranges her carefully on the pillow. After a while of remembering the times with Claire, she finally calls Ron's pager. Ron sits next her on the bed, blaming Astrid. "You were supposed to watch her." "You were the one who left," counters Astrid. He breaks into long, shuddering sobs, and, in spite of her self, Astrid feels sorry for him. They hold each other in shared grief. Ron tells her that he has been dreading this for years and that he loved Claire very much. He offers to let Astrid stay, which is what she wanted, but now that the chance is there, Astrid realizes that she cannot stay there without Claire.

It takes longer to pack than when she left Amelia's. Astrid takes everything, ultimately filling seven bags. It is almost midnight when a caseworker pulls in. Joan Peeler left one year before to work at Fox. Ron gives her two hundred dollars. Ingrid would have thrown the bills in his face, but Astrid takes them. Astrid doesn't care what happens to her any more.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Claire is dead. It's not clear whether it was an accidental overdose or a deliberate suicide, but the result is the same. The reader feels sympathy for Astrid as she struggles with a dead woman all alone. There is also sympathy for Ron. He did love Claire but perhaps his love was worn down by her neediness. From his words, it seems that she has attempted suicide before. Having a child was the last attempt to keep her in check. Surprisingly, he offers to let Astrid stay, maybe because she is now the closest link to Claire.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Astrid is taken to MacLaren Children's Center. Now she finds it easy to imagine her mother's life at the Frontera prison. She gets a call from Ron, who is taking Claire's ashes back to Connecticut. He offers to pay for her ticket if she wants to come. She tells him that he did not know Claire at all. Claire didn't want to be cremated. Instead, she wanted to be buried with her pearls in her mouth and a jewel over each eye. Ron never knew what Claire wanted but always thought he knew best. Astrid also realizes that she was taken in to be the suicide watch, not the baby.

The next day, Astrid meets a boy in the art room. His name is Paul Trout and, like her, he's always drawing things. He stares at her all the time; this doesn't bother her, because his is an artist's stare. He watches her paint, and she doesn't try to cover up. He tells her that she's good. This is the fourth time he's been at Mac. Astrid finds the rules, regular meals and professional care safer. She thinks ex-cons who keep going back to prison feel the same way.

Paul asks why she cut off her pretty hair. When she replies that it was to avoid attention, he doesn't quite understand. Because of his bad skin, he's used to people not taking care to see deeper into his lucid eyes. She tells him that sometimes attention hurts more than it helps. He tells her that she's beautiful anyway and talks about how women treat him like disease and make him pay in the weak moments when they let him touch them. He knows he has said too much. He asks whether she'd let someone like him touch her. She doesn't find him ugly. Bad skin can happen to anyone. "I don't let anyone touch me," she finally replies. He asks why. She doesn't verbalize but thinks her response. *Because I'm tired of men. Because I remember all those women who did crazy things for love.* He asks whether she is gay, and she shrugs. When he asks whether anything matters to her, she replies survival.

They walk the Big Field together when he gets his privileges back. He's the only person at Mac with whom she can talk. He wants to see her on the outside and gives her the name of a comic book shop in Hollywood. He'll check for letters from her. She's sorry to see him go when he is placed. He's the first kid with whom she's enjoyed spending time since Davey. He gives her a drawing of her as a superhero.

Astrid's interviews begin. She doesn't want to be placed. She'd rather stay at Mac until she is eighteen than to get involved with anyone ever again. Her first prospective foster parents are Bill and Ann Greenway. They are kind people and Astrid likes them. However, she doesn't want her memories to dim and fade away, and, with these kind people, they will. As she walks away, she knows she has given up the illusion that she can be saved, that she can start again. She sits at the tables again, waiting for her next interview. She sees Rena Grushenka and knows that she'll be going with her.



Chapter 22 Analysis

Astrid ends up at the infamous Mac, about which the girls at Amelia's had talked, but the reality isn't so bad. After her trials, the prison-like routines are rather comforting. She meets Paul Trout, with whom she forms a bond. A girl of Astrid's beauty with normal upbringing might have turned up her nose at his bad skin and limp hair, but Astrid has gained wisdom beyond her years and is able to see past his face into his soul. He, who has never been beautiful and makes women turn away in disgust, doesn't understand how someone with her beauty could find attention hurtful. In addition, Astrid is quite jaded about men and love, but we do not sense the harsh cruelty of her mother. Whereas Ingrid lashes out, Astrid has learned to protect herself by building walls around her.

Bill and Ann Greenway would have been perfect for Astrid when she was twelve, but now she's experienced far too much to mesh into their normal, kind life. All she's looking for is her eighteenth birthday, when she can be free.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

As Astrid goes with her new foster mother, she tells herself that it's less than a year until she is eighteen. This is just a place to live rent-free until she can decide what she'll do next. She'll forget college - she won't let herself get disappointed again.

Rena's house is a glum cocoa-brown Spanish bungalow. Rena doesn't help carry Astrid's things. Her house is an unbelievable mess. Astrid drinks beer and smokes with Rena and the other girls, Yvonne and Niki. Yvonne is her roommate. Later she walks toward the bridge, looks down at the L.A. River and finds a beautiful view.

The next day is Thursday, and Rena wakes up everyone before dawn. They pile into Rena's van at five in the morning. They rummage through the city's recycling bins, rescuing usable goods. Nobody cooks at Rena's - every night is takeout. There are four women in the house, but nobody knows how to do anything nor wants to learn.

It is quarter to eight when the van pulls up in front of Marshall High, Astrid's new school. Rena gives Astrid money for the morning's work. Niki suggests skipping school altogether, but Astrid is afraid to let one more thing fade away in her life.

Chapter 23 Analysis

It is hard to categorize Rena as a foster parent. She's blunt but doesn't seem cruel. The two other girls give her space but are not mean. Each person does her own thing and no one cares. Rena runs her home almost like a business than a foster home. She doesn't pass judgment on her charges' personal lives - she even makes a fake ID for Niki so she can work in a club. We almost feel relieved, as this might not be bad for Astrid - she will be left alone as long as she pitches in her part.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Everything in Ripple Street is rock 'n' roll. Astrid tries to recall the melodies of Debussy, the gamelan, Miles Davis, but the Who bass line pounds it right out of her head. She misses the beautiful moments of the years past.

Astrid wonders what her mother will say if she were to see her now. Rena makes Astrid sell her clothes from Fred Segal and Barney's New York. Rena ignores sentimental attachment, asking what use those clothes were in her present circumstance. She tells her that money is money. Therefore, Astrid marks up the prices high, but people still buy them. She makes three hundred dollars, and Rena demands one hundred dollars as payment. She doesn't understand that for Astrid, it's not just money.

Misha, Rena's friend, stumbles into her room, drunk. He tells her that he's lonely and attempts to kiss her. Astrid manages to get away from him and goes downstairs to tell Rena about Misha. Rena is with Sergei, her boyfriend. She laughs and tells her just to hit Misha on the head with something. When Astrid returns to her room, Misha has passed out. He has a bloody cut on the head where she hit him. Astrid moves to Yvonne's empty bed to sleep. She has one or two hours of restless sleep.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Rena's house is a chaotic place with no rules. Actually, there's one rule, which seems to be that money is everything. Rena is pragmatic and unsentimental. She'll never understand a sensitive soul like Astrid. Astrid always seems to attract unwanted attention from men, despite her attempts to hide her beauty.



Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

They sit in the kitchen on a dreary Saturday, sewing leather bags for crystals. It is Rena's latest moneymaking idea. They are smoking hash under glass while they work. Stoned, Astrid traces a pattern into a scrap of leather with an X-Acto blade. She's even better than her mother used to be. At first outraged that she's ruining the bags, Rena notices that the design is good and asks her to do all the bags.

Astrid spends whatever she makes on art supplies, food and dope. College has already vanished. She has lost too many pieces to make something elegant of her life. Sergei is visiting again. He smells the delicious broccoli-and-cheese casserole Astrid is cooking for Yvonne. Everyone eats except Rena, who smokes and drinks vodka. When she leaves the room for a moment, Sergei flirts with Astrid. Niki calls him a sleazebag and tells him that Astrid has a boyfriend in New York.

Astrid has finally picked up Paul's letters from Yellow Brick Road in Hollywood, the comic book shop he told her about. She has been afraid to try, thinking he forgot and moved on, but there are two letters for her. She leaves one for Paul. Apparently, he moves around a lot. She finds inside his letters a series of ink drawings done in Paul's unmistakable comic book style. The first set seems to be about his search for her, and the second about pieces of his life. Not wanting to encourage Sergei's attention, Astrid keeps her eyes on her casserole. He asks her to come see him when she gets tired of waiting.

Astrid meets her latest caseworker, Mrs. Luanne Davis. Mrs. Davis passes a wad of letters from Ingrid. Astrid doesn't even want to pick them up. She hates the sight of them. Mrs. Davis advises her to write - after all, Ingrid's in segregation - and frowns when Astrid's response is less than enthusiastic. She tells her that she's lucky to have a parent to write to. As she finishes, she notices a teenage mother who is too busy talking to her friend to help her screaming small boy. It is Kiki Torrez. They look at each other a little longer than a casual glance, and Kiki goes on talking to her friend. Astrid thinks prisoners must exchange just such glances when they meet on the outside.

Ingrid is in Ad Seg, a prison within prison. She asks why Astrid doesn't write and tells her she is not to blame for Claire Richards' suicide. She is behind the fence and handcuffed even to shower. Astrid likes that idea. Ingrid can't hurt her from there. Astrid doesn't believe her mother for a second. She thinks about the story about the Vikings' idea of heaven - where warriors slash each other to ribbons in battle each day and then are put back together each night. It is eternal slaughter.



Chapter 25 Analysis

Astrid has found some measure of peace when letters from her mother destroy her equilibrium. Astrid is not in the best of situations, but at this point, she has experienced too much to hope for something unattainable. She knows that college is out of the question and is just marking time until her eighteenth birthday.

Paul Trout, contrary to her expectation, remembers Astrid and thinks about seeing her again. Disappointed so many times by men, she puts off going to the comic book shop for a while, but this time, a man doesn't disappoint her. In spite of Astrid's dreary circumstances, we feel that Paul is a single ray of hope for her.



Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Yvonne has only eight weeks to go in her pregnancy, and Astrid can't imagine her getting any larger. Sometimes Astrid imagines having a father who works nights for the railroad. Then her mother would be someone who waits for his return and then they would laugh and speak softly together. She has put her mother's unread letters full of fluid lies under the bed.

Yvonne talks about her babies only late at night when they are alone. Rena doesn't let her and tells her not to think about them, but Yvonne needs to talk. She thinks it's a girl and hopes that her daughter will have all the good things. When Yvonne dozes off, Astrid's thoughts drift to her mother. *I am your home*, she has once said, and it's still true. She pulls out her mother's letters from under the bed and goes into the living room to read. She hates her mother but also craves her. She wants to understand how her mother can fill her world with such beauty but can also say that Claire was born to OD.

Ingrid describes her horrific surroundings in graphic detail and how she dreams only of freedom. Astrid marvels at how her mother is able to transform the world to her point of view. She refuses to allow her mother to fool her. The next letter admonishes her to stop crying and be strong and how it is a burden to love her. Ingrid says she sometimes wishes Astrid were dead so she would know she's safe. Her mother's words are like bombs she seals up to leave her daughter ragged and bloody weeks later. Astrid thinks that her mother wants her dead because she can no longer control her. She is no longer hers to command. "I am a girl you didn't know, Mother," she replies silently. Her mother only sees the surface of people like Yvonne and judges them inferior but she never really sees them. She refuses to see through her mother's eyes any longer.

She takes up scissors and cuts up the complicated strings of her mother's words, creating a poem of her feelings about her. Astrid tells her that she is overblown with self-importance and she wishes her dead and forgotten. She tells Ingrid that her arms cradle poison and how she takes everything from her.

Chapter 26 Analysis

It is finally the time of reckoning. Astrid acknowledges the fact that her mother has never known her or seen her. This is a woman who wishes her daughter dead because she can no longer control and influence her. There is no end to Ingrid's selfishness. However, Astrid is ready to make a clean break and move on. Astrid crafts a brilliant response, using her mother's own words against her.



Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

How clear it is without her mother behind her eyes. Astrid is reborn, a Siamese twin who has finally been separated from its hated, cumbersome double. Her mother has sent her another letter. She tells Astrid that she cannot dismiss her that easily. She made Astrid and she lives inside her. Ingrid tells of her "new children," young admirers who make pilgrimage from all over the world and willingly forgive her anything. Her case is generating interest from people like Susan D. Valeris, an attorney for the "feminine damned." From jail, Ingrid and her work are generating more attention than ever possible had she remained free.

Astrid thinks about the possibility of her mother being freed. She killed a man, albeit a flawed man and she would do it again, next time with even less reason. She cannot believe that any attorney would consider representing her.

When Astrid learns about the Civil War in her history class, she thinks about the seven thousand men who died at Gettysburg. How could God watch them pass without weeping? How could he have allowed the sun to rise on Gettysburg? She remembers the time she and her mother visited a battlefield in France. Her mother sent her off to buy milk, even though Astrid was reluctant to go. She was lost on her way back and wandered around in circles, too frightened to cry. Astrid was hungry but afraid to open the milk, thinking Ingrid would be angry. Someone asked where her mother was, and she replied that she's coming back but didn't believe it. Her mother jumped out of a taxi. She screamed at her and grabbed her. The milk bottle slipped from her hands, leaving the sidewalk shiny white with sharp pieces of glass.

After school, Astrid is sewing shadow puppets cut out of old magazine covers, onto bamboo skewers from Tiny Thai restaurant. There's a knock on her door. It is Sergei and he has come to see her. She has imagined this moment several times. He proposes that Rena doesn't need to know and he'll never give her a baby. Astrid wants him but is afraid that once she lets him touch her, she'll never be able to stop. He gives her a stolen diamond necklace as a present. When she laughs at his attempt to buy her off, he pulls a sad face. He hooks the chain around her neck and begins to undress her. He stops when he sees her dog-bite and bullet scars and asks who did that to her, but she says it'll take too long to explain. He knows how to touch her, what she likes. Astrid isn't surprised. She is a bad girl, lying down for the father again.

Astrid's mother tells her of an interview she had with a girl from *Contemporary Literature*. Ingrid has spun a lie about herself and Astrid. She tells Astrid to burn her past and emerge like a phoenix. As Astrid does laundry, she remembers how her mother hated doing everyday chores, especially those that had to be performed in public. Ingrid felt that they were not the same as everybody else and should not be seen doing anything mundane like laundry.



When Astrid comes back, she finds two fresh-faced college girls waiting for her named Hannah and Julie. They are her mother's new children - students at Pitzer College who visit her every week. Astrid is aware that she looks hard and streetwise. She envies Hannah's ability to blush. She cannot blush like that anymore and feels old. They came to see whether they can help her with anything, but she knows that she scares them. They came expecting someone more like them, gentle and wide-open. It amuses her to find that they find her scary but not her mother.

They brought Astrid a copy of *Contemporary Literature* with Ingrid is on the cover. Her mother looks beautiful, smiling, her teeth still perfect, but her eyes look weary. Astrid looks at Hannah and Julie and feels the gap between them, all the things she won't be because she is who she is. She is the old child and they are the new children. They believe that Ingrid didn't kill Barry and is shocked when Astrid affirms that she did. They still defend Ingrid, saying that he must have beaten her, and that sometimes they feel like killing someone. *They are willing to forgive her anything.* When they drive away, Astrid throws the magazine in the trash.

Chapter 27 Analysis

Astrid feels free without her mother influencing her every thought, every decision. However, Ingrid is not ready to relinquish her grip on her daughter yet. Apparently being in jail has made her and her poems even more famous and now there is a movement of people interested in freeing her. The media's ability to distort the truth is apparent; they have made a murderess a martyr for feminist causes. Ingrid calls these her *new children*— young, impressionable women full of idealism. It is a form of hero worship, and these girls are not willing to believe anything negative about Ingrid, even from her own daughter. It is chilling to observe the cult leader-like hold Ingrid has on these girls. Astrid, who was just like them, has grown into a tough, street-hardened young woman. She has lost her innocence in her struggle to survive.



Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

Niki teaches Astrid how to get high on acid. She has a bad reaction to the drug; she is trembling and nauseated. They go to the art museum to soothe Astrid. She feels restored as they look around the Impressionist rooms. Astrid is high as the acid keeps coming on. She feels like she could have painted everything herself. They go to the museum café to get something to drink, and everything looks and feels funny and out of sync. In the bathroom, Astrid catches a glimpse of herself. She looks very red-faced, her eyes black as a magpie's and hair tangled. She looks feral and it scares her.

Next, they go to the Contemporary wing, to which Astrid has never gone. When she came with her mother, she never could quite understand when her mother explained a Rothko. Now she stands next to Niki. They stand together at the painting and mourn as they sense loss - grief, sorrow, wordless and unfathomable. Astrid then takes Niki into the Permanent Collection. She has to see the goddesses now. It takes a long time to come down.

Chapter 28 Analysis

Astrid's drug usage has progressed from pot to acid. Her reaction to the drug is bad, and it's interesting that she goes to a museum to cool down. Even in the drug-induced distortion, her artist's soul speaks out.



Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

As she promised, Astrid accompanies Yvonne to baby class at Waite Memorial Hospital. Yvonne pretends that she has a husband named Patrick and Astrid is her sister-in-law.

Rena is tanning herself in the fierce April sun. Astrid warns her of skin cancer, but she says, "We're dead long time, kiddo." Astrid sketches Rena. It is comforting for her to be around someone as confident as Rena is. She has only two months until graduation, and then a short fall off the edge of the world. At night, she dreams of her mother already leaving her. Astrid has other nightmares, such as losing an invitation to a party with Paul Trout. She doesn't even like drawing, but she needs to do something to occupy herself. Niki thinks her foolish for continuing to go to school, but it is something to do. Rena tells Astrid that she is a Russian. A Russian always asks about the meaning of life, unlike Californians who play beach volleyball, get cosmetic surgery and buy things.

Susan D. Valeris is finally here to see her. She must have bribed Rena, for Astrid sees her giving Rena a check. Astrid has been avoiding her calls. Susan attempts to sound sympathetic but her mentioning Claire's death only angers Astrid. As she listens, Astrid becomes scared. The two of them could pull it off and her mother might go free. Susan realizes that Astrid is not so easily swayed. Her sympathetic veneer falls off, and Astrid sees that she is a cold and clever strategist, not unlike Ingrid Magnussen herself.

They go for a drive in Susan's Jaguar. Susan is trying to turn the guilt on Astrid, telling her that she's resentful of Ingrid not being there. She tries to tell her that Ingrid, too, is a victim. Astrid sees that Susan is in the process of becoming a caricature of herself. In five, ten years, she will look drawn and frightened. Susan asks Astrid to talk to her mother; that she really needs Astrid to believe in her. Finally, Astrid agrees. Now Susan is all business. She asks whether Astrid needs anything in the meanwhile. Astrid hates Susan. Astrid's six years of suffering mean nothing to her. Astrid is merely a means to an end, her quest for publicity. "I'll take a couple hundred," Astrid says.

After Susan leaves, Astrid walks along the river in the last afternoon light, Susan's money crumpled in her fist. She coughs the dry hacking cough she's had all spring, from smoking pot and the perennial mold at Rena's. She wonders about her life if her mother were to get out. Would she be able to resist her if her mother were to say, "I'm back. Pack up, Astrid, we're leaving." Is she still in her bones, in her every thought? It makes her tired to think about her mother.

That night, Astrid dreams the old dream about the Paris streets and her being lost. It is getting dark. She rings all the buzzers to the apartments. Women come to the door, looking like her mother, smiling, some even calling her name. However, none of them is she. Astrid knows that her mother is in there and bangs on the door to be let in.



However, when she pushes in, she sees her mother leaving, a passenger in a small red car. She runs after her, crying, begging.

Yvonne shakes her awake and takes her head in her lap. Yvonne comforts her.

Chapter 29 Analysis

Susan D. Valeris, her mother's attorney, seems to be cut from the same cloth as Ingrid. She is intelligent but cold and calculating. Susan seems to have thought Astrid an easy target, being so young, but Astrid is no easy prey for her calculated charms, so Susan bargains. She doesn't really care about Ingrid and certainly not about Astrid. Astrid's six years of horror and sorrow are nothing more than statistics for her, and Astrid a mere means in her quest for bigger publicity.

It is sad to watch that the central figure in Astrid's nightmare is her mother. A mother should be a source of comfort, but for Astrid, she is a source of torment.



Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

Yvonne is going into labor in the maternity ward of Waite Memorial Hospital. Astrid has brought everything they've learned to use in baby class, but all Yvonne wants is to suck on the white terry cloth, let Astrid wipe her face with ice and sing to her in her tuneless voice. Rena doesn't stay long after dropping them off. Whenever Astrid begins to like her, something like this happens.

"Mama," Yvonne whimpers, tears rolling down her face. She squeezes Astrid's arm as another contraction comes. They've been there for nine hours, through two shifts of nurses. Astrid's arm is bruised from hand to shoulder. Yvonne implores her not to leave her. Women's bravery, Astrid thinks as she continues to nurse Yvonne. It puzzles Astrid to hear Yvonne calling out for her mother when she hates her so much. It's not just Yvonne, but all the women in the ward call out for their mothers. Astrid wonders about her mother and can't imagine her crying out for anyone. Her grandmother was a classical actress and drunk who drowned in the cow pond when Ingrid was thirteen. Astrid realizes that these women are not calling out for their own mothers but the ideal version of Mother who can take all the pain away.

The baby comes four hours later. It is a girl, a Gemini. They go home the next day. The baby is already gone. Rena says it's better to walk away before getting attached, but her motives have less to do with Yvonne than not wanting to be a foster grandmother. Rena has never had any kids and doesn't want any. Yvonne leans against Astrid and asks her to sing 'Michelle.'

Weeks go by and there is no call from Susan. It is Astrid's graduation day but she sees no reason to attend. Her mother would never have come even if she weren't jailed. The truth is that Astrid is very scared. She doesn't know where her future will lead. Who am I, really, she asks herself. Mrs. Davis suggested applying to City College, but Astrid has already lost faith. She thinks about the lies the valedictorian is telling the graduates now, about the *exciting future that lies ahead*. Astrid wishes she'd tell the truth - how the half of them have gone as far in life as they'll ever go. How life is full of disappointments. She is crying. She thinks about how she came to be so lost, about the future she might have had.

Yvonne has come to lie down next to her. She tells Astrid that at first, the girls were suspicious of her, a gringa, but now they realize that they need her. She squeezes her hand. She has Yvonne and Niki. She has five hundred dollars and an aquamarine from a dead woman and a future in salvage. What more could a girl want.

That summer, Yvonne tells Astrid that Benito, her boyfriend, has asked her to move in with him. Astrid tells her that she'll miss her and they hug each other. Yvonne tells her that she can be her maid of honor if she gets married. Astrid imagines the wedding party



where no guest is over eighteen and everyone plans a life along the course of the lyrics of popular songs. It makes her sad to think about it.

The next night, Yvonne packs a few things. Rena gives her some money, rolled up in a rubber band. They all wait on the front porch with her until Benito comes by. Then she is gone.

Chapter 30 Analysis

Astrid is helping Yvonne as she gives birth. We imagine the sad scene: two girls, neither yet adults, in the maternity ward. Yvonne's baby, just like her other ones, is given away as soon as she is born. Yvonne suffers mind-numbing pain for over thirteen hours, and she doesn't even get to say good-bye.

Rena is not a cruel woman but she is insensitive. She doesn't want to care about anything or anyone, and maybe that's why she only takes in girls near eighteen. That way, she doesn't have to be a real foster mother to anyone.

The reader learns a bit more about Ingrid's childhood. Her mother was an actress and alcoholic who drowned when Ingrid was only thirteen. One wonders about the impressions left on the young Ingrid, as she must have observed her mother's drunkenness and then death. Did her cruelty begin then? Is she who she is today because she, too, had to survive?

As Yvonne goes to live with Benito, we think about Kiki Torrez who ends up being an indifferent teenage mother, repeating the cycle of abuse. We hope that things will turn out better for Yvonne.



Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

It is August and there is still no call from Susan. She is playing a chess game, so Astrid suppresses the desire to call Susan and ask. She will use the time to secure her defenses. There's a new girl at Rena's. Her name is Tasha and she is thirteen years old. She has a just-healing scar on her upper lip and flinches if people move too fast near her. Astrid makes her lunch and takes her to school. She stays until Tasha is inside. She feels helpless to prevent Tasha's likely future.

Ingrid's letter commemorates the six years she's spent in prison. Astrid is surprised to learn that at times her mother felt excluded from her. She always seems so beautiful and confident. Her mother reminisces about the time they were in Guanajuato. Astrid, too, wishes that they had stayed in Guanajuato.

September comes, and Susan finally calls. Astrid will see her mother the day after tomorrow. Astrid is tempted to balk but in the end agrees. Her mother still looks wonderful, thin and wiry, her pale hair twisted up in the back with a pencil stuck in it. It has been a year and a half. She looks wary as she approaches. Her tanned skin is getting more lined, looking leathery, but she hasn't changed as much as Astrid has. For the first time, she doesn't smile. Instead, she looks shocked, and Astrid is glad.

Ingrid promises to make it up to her when she gets out, but Astrid tells her that she's here to bargain. Astrid might cooperate if Ingrid tells her a few things she wants to know. Her mother counters that Susan can discredit her testimony, but Astrid knows that her mother needs her. Her mother comments that her look of certain delicacy, transparency, is gone. She is now opaque and heavy.

Astrid asks about her father, Klaus Anders. Ingrid tries her usual breezy evasive answers, but Astrid is not easily dissuaded. Her father was forty when Ingrid met him, much older than she was. He was very easy and physical, making friends easily. Ingrid angrily insists that it was her decision to have her and Astrid was no accident. She tells Astrid that her father was rather a child himself and loved her as a boy loves his pet or toy. He would take her to the beach but once left her all alone. She would have been burned alive had Ingrid not shown up. Apparently, her father came to see her once or twice, but her mother told him clearly that they didn't need him. She talks about ancient times when women needed no fathers, using men only to get pregnant. He tried again when Astrid was seven or eight, but Ingrid told him to go to hell. It strikes Astrid across the throat like a blow with a pipe, the way her mother denied her the chance to know her father without asking her.

Then Astrid asks her about Annie, a woman whose name she keeps remembering. She learns that her mother abandoned her for a year with Annie who was a neighbor. Her mother was in love with her father, Klaus, and thought their family of three would be



happy together forever. However, she soon found him weak and selfish and could no longer stand him. In addition, she found Astrid's childish need for her constant attention repulsive. It now makes sense, Astrid's anxiety whenever she left her mother. It makes sense why Astrid was always worried that her mother was going to leave her one night. Her mother points out that she came back, implicitly asking her to forgive her, but it is too late. Astrid tells her that she should have been sterilized. Her mother wants to slap her but can't. They'll end the visit immediately. She is as tall as her mother now and bigger-boned. She probably can beat her in a fair fight.

Ingrid tells Astrid that she lost herself, her dreaminess, that tender quality. "I would have thought you'd approve. Wasn't that the thing you hated about Claire? Her tenderness? Be strong, you said. I despise weakness," Astrid taunts her. Her mother wanted her to be strong but intact. She finds in her daughter devastation like a bombsite, and she is afraid of Astrid. Astrid tells her about always waiting for her. She stopped waiting when Claire showed her what it felt like to be loved. Her mother looks tired, every day of forty-nine years.

Astrid asks her whether she regrets her actions and is surprised to hear her admit so. Ingrid tells her that there's no end to her regrets and she's thought about that question more than Ingrid can imagine. When Astrid asks her what she'll do when she gets out, Ingrid replies that she'll be a household icon by the time Susan is done.

It is almost time to go. Astrid wants to hurt Ingrid the way Ingrid hurts her. Astrid asks Ingrid how she feels about having Astrid lie for her when she doesn't give a damn. "If I could take it all back, I would, Astrid." "Then tell me you don't want me to testify," she says. "Tell me you don't want me like this. Tell me you would sacrifice the rest of your life to have me back the way I was." Suddenly Astrid panics, thinking she overplayed her card. She doesn't want to know her mother's answer. She offers to fulfill her part of the bargain. Then she hears her mother say quietly that she'll tell Susan to leave her alone. Astrid can't quite believe it. Her mother has returned to her. She puts her arms around Astrid, rests her cheek against her hair. "If you could go back, even partway, I would give anything," she says into her ear. Her large hands gently stroke her hair. It is all Astrid ever wanted, this revelation, the possibility that her stars could change.

Chapter 31 Analysis

The scene between Astrid and Ingrid is heartrending. This is the most honest moment between the mother and daughter. Now that Astrid is on an emotional equal footing, she is able to cut through her mother's veneer to discover the woman within. Through Astrid's eyes, we see a woman who was very much in love, only to be disappointed by the man she adored and unable to cope with the incessant demands of an infant. We finally understand the source of Astrid's anxiety about her mother leaving. She did indeed leave her for a year, and such things leave an indelible mark on a child.

The moment Ingrid decides to sacrifice herself for her daughter for the first time is a turning point in their relationship, and it's bittersweet. For the first time, Ingrid seems to

understand the damage she has wrought on her daughter and decides that her freedom is not worth turning her daughter into a jaded, empty woman. It seems to be too little too late, but it may be the start of a long healing process.



Chapter 32

Chapter 32 Summary

When Ingrid's trial is held in bitter cold February, Astrid is living in Berlin with Paul Trout. His graphic novels have become popular among European art students, and they've made friends in every city.

Astrid likes Berlin where one can trace the past, unlike America where people mistakenly think they can scrape the earth clean and start again every time. Astrid has begun to turn to sculpture, an outgrowth of her time with Rena Grushenka. Oskar Schein, a professor at the Hochschule der Künste, likes her work and even lobbies for her acceptance as a bona fide scholar, but in a perverse way, her status suits her. Her classmates think of her and Paul as wild children with great talent and wish to be *free birds* like them.

All winter long, she creates her personal museum of all her mothers who, each in her own way, taught her about life. She and her mother write a couple of times a month, using the comic book shop near the university as a letter-drop. Sometimes she has her lawyer send Astrid money. Her letters boast of offers lined up - Amherst, Stanford, Smith. She is still coaxing Astrid home, with the lure of roaming the green campus as a professor's daughter.

Astrid still hears from Yvonne at Christmastime. She is living with an ex-Marine named Herbert and has a son with him. Paul comes home about nine with food and a newspaper. It is tomorrow's *International Herald Tribune*, and on page three, she finds the headline: "JAILED POET FOUND INNOCENT AFTER NINE YEARS." Ingrid has made it without her. Astrid is appalled that the defense theory of Barry committing suicide worked. Ingrid has numerous offers, including marriage to an ice-cream millionaire and pose for *Playboy*, and she'll accept them all. Astrid imagines her mother in a luxury suite and picking up an impressionable young man. It is "too much to imagine her tempering her joy with a moment of grief, but she has seen her genuine remorse." Despite her flaws or the hurt she inflicted on Astrid, her mother loves her unquestionably. Paul asks whether she wants to call her, but it is too cold to go outside. They don't have a phone and use Oskar Schein's.

Astrid knows that Paul fears her going back to the States, to a life of college and comfort and leaving him with the foster kid bag. She has never told him how sometimes she feels old, how the way they live is depressing. Oskar Schein is showing interest in her, and she finds him attractive. Had it not been for Paul, she would have given in already. However, Paul is more than her boyfriend. They are as one.

Astrid can feel her mother's siren calls. Astrid knows that she can play the role to perfection, answering questions about her mother and trading on her tragic past. She contemplates being her mother's daughter again. She remembers her visit to her father.



He's living with his third or fourth wife and two half-siblings of Astrid's. He is a man who never took anything seriously, least of all himself, an ordinary sixty-one-year-old man. He wants to make up for the lost time and offers to let them stay. Astrid felt like her mother, judging him and his surroundings. She told him that she'd be in touch. It was the first time she'd ever wanted to move on, be the first person to leave.

Now she takes Paul's hand in bed and laces her fingers through his. Their palms are the same size but his fingers are two inches longer. Astrid finds his hands beautiful and hopes if they ever have children, they'll have his hands. They draw close, warming each other and murmuring softly into each other's necks. As they make love, Astrid knows she's making a choice. This, now, her life with Paul. It is her life, "a trait and not an error, written by fire on stone."

Afterwards, Astrid lies gazing at the stained walls. It is three in California. She would never tell Paul, but she misses L.A., that "poisoned place, gulag of abandoned children, archipelago of regret." She craves it even now. No matter where she goes, her compass points west. She will always know what time it is in California.

Chapter 32 Analysis

Astrid is now twenty-one. She has come a long way since that fateful reunion with her mother. We learn that another three years have passed. We are glad to see that she has reunited with Paul but do not feel secure that their relationship will endure. Paul seems to need her more than she needs him. To the reader, it seems that she stays with him because he's so much like her rather than out of overwhelming love. We hope she won't give in to her attraction for older men and betray Paul with Oskar. She finally meets her father, who turns out to be as ordinary as Ingrid described. In spite of everything, we see that Astrid is very much her mother's daughter.

Paul may not be able to hold onto Astrid too long if he continues to resist her desire to go back to the States. For Paul, the States hold many painful memories but Astrid has California in her blood. She has come full circle.



Characters

Astrid Magnussen

She is the protagonist of the novel and Ingrid Magnussen's daughter. She is twelve at the beginning of the story. She has ice-blue eyes and pale blond hair like her mother. She likes to sketch and draw things. She's introspective and wise for her age. Ray, Starr's boyfriend, tells her that she will be prettier than her mother. He tells her that, unlike her mother who looks like she can take a bite out of someone, Astrid is a sweetheart type who will make men fall down like flies.

Ingrid Magnussen

Astrid's mother. She has pale blond hair that is white as glacier milk and cornflower blue eyes with a peculiar mix of beauty and cruelty. Hers is a beauty that makes people stop and stare. She is a writer and also works at *Cinema Scene*, pasting up the copy of other writers. Beauty is her law, her religion. Her belief is that one can do anything she wants as long as she is beautiful, as long as she does things beautifully. If one is not beautiful, one does not exist. She makes up rules and suddenly they are set in stone, completely immutable. She thinks of herself as the Valkyrie, the stainless warrior. She speaks several languages, including German and French.

Barry Kolker

Barry Kolker is a chunky man, his "dark hair pulled back in a curly ponytail, pushed in." Originally, Ingrid dismisses him as a "fat goat of a man." He's a quite famous writer who does assignments for magazines. He has traveled in the Orient, including Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Bangkok, Thailand. He's only thirty-two when Ingrid kills him.

Michael

A neighbor of the Magnussen's. He is about Ingrid's age," a gentle soft man "from drinking and being inside all the time." He is an actor, but he doesn't work that much, and he will not do TV, so he makes most of his money reading for Books on Tape. He has to do it under a pseudonym, Wolfram Malevich, because it is nonunion.

Mrs. Campbell

She's the woman who runs the group home in which Astrid is first placed. She is thin and raisinish, dusted with a yellow T-shirt.



Starr

She is Astrid's first foster parent. She is busty and leggy, with a big smile, and her teeth are white and shallow, all in the front. Her nose is flat at the bridge, like a boxer's. When she speaks, she moves her whole body, "throwing her head back to laugh." A small gold cross glitters between her breasts. She wears heavy perfume, Obsession. She has remained sober for eighteen months and is a member of the Alcoholics Anonymous.

Davey

He is Starr's real son. He is a skinny freckled boy and wears glasses. He's a bit younger than Astrid is. When he smiles, his teeth slightly pushed back, he looks vaguely like a rabbit. He is a boy who should have been in front of a TV or in a library, but he can read the pale dust the way another kid can read a comic book or her mother can read cards.

Carolee

She is Starr's real daughter and Davey's older sister. She's sixteen years old and tall as Starr. She's a sullen girl with pouty lips. She smokes, does drugs and hangs out with a wild crowd. She wears an ankle bracelet, a present from her boyfriend.

Ray

He is Sta

rr's hippie boyfriend. He is almost fifty and served in Vietnam. His chest is lean and hairy, sandy threaded with gray, his shaggy hair in ponytail. He smokes. The hand with which he smokes is missing one finger and the fingertip of the next. He is a carpenter by trade. He is a plain man, lean-faced, sad hazel eyes, long graying hair. The children are supposed to call him Uncle Ray.

Marvel Turlock

She is Astrid's second foster parent. She is a wide, hard-faced blond woman. She sells Mary Kay, and, although she doesn't make much money at it, she feels important. She is also a racist and calls non-white people names.

Ed Turlock

He is Marvel Turlock's husband. He is tall and red-faced, quiet, with sandy hair going bald. He works in the paint department of Home Depot.



Caitlin and Justin Turlock

The Turlocks' two children. Caitlin is a little blond girl toddler with large transparent blue eyes. Justin is a little boy.

Olivia Johnstone

She is the Turlocks' neighbor. She is a striking black woman and her skin is like burned caramel. Her eyes are large and almond-shaped, the color of root beer. She wears a thin scar on her left cheek and a gold watch on her narrow waist. Her hair is marcel-waved and her nails are short, white-tipped. She has a slight overbite. Up close, she has an impish quality, and she is very easy to talk to, sympathetic. When she frowns, two vertical lines slice between her eyebrows and cut into her rounded forehead. She was a loan officer in a bank and even has an MBA. She drives a Corvette.

Amelia Ramos

Astrid's third foster mother. She is chic and straight-backed, with a dramatic streak in her dark hair. She wears fitted suit and high heels. Her English is lightly accented. She is originally from Argentina where she lived well. The foster girls call her Cruella De Vil.

Cesar Ramos

Amelia's son. He lives in a room over the garage. He has AIDS and smokes pot all day.

Kiki, Lina, Silvana, Micaela, Nidia Diaz

Girls under Amelia Ramos's care. Kiki Torrez is a petite girl with long glossy hair. Silvana is an older girl, eyebrows plucked to a thin line and her lips outlined in lip liner but not filled in. Micaela has a long braid, and Nidia is a wiry, tough-looking girl with a crescent-moon scar on her forehead.

Ms. Cardoza

One of Astrid's caseworkers who takes her to Amelia Ramos. She is an ugly young woman with a broad, rough-skinned face and a set look about the jowls.

Joan Peeler

She replaces Ms. Cardoza as Astrid's caseworker. She is young, wears black, and has long hair dyed rock 'n' roll red. She has four silver rings on each hand. She looks more like a poet than a government drone. She is an aspiring screenwriter. She has a



boyfriend, Marsh, who is also an aspiring screenwriter and works for Kinko's Copies. They have a white dog named Casper.

Claire Richards

Astrid's fourth foster mother. She is an actress of thirty-five years. She reminds Astrid of Audrey Hepburn. Dark hair, long neck, wide radiant smile, about thirty. She has an old-fashioned kind of voice, velvety, her words completely enunciated. Her teeth are the blue-white of skim milk, translucent. Claire went to Yale together with Ron.

Ron Richards

Claire's husband. He is a paranormal show producer for television. He is an attractive but not stunning man. Medium height, trim, small features, closely shaven. He brushes his steel-gray hair back without a part. He wears rimless glasses and his cheeks are rosy for a man's. Hazel eyes, hands smooth with trimmed nails, smooth wedding band. Everything about Ron is smooth, calm, underplayed. He doesn't overwhelm people, because he doesn't seem to need anything. He was married before but left his ex-wife for Claire.

Paul Trout

A boy Astrid meets at MacLaren Children's Center. He has lank hair and bad skin, and his hands move without him. Like Astrid, he cannot sit without drawing something. He has the intense stare of an artist - attentive to details, taking in the truth without preconceptions. He has lucid brown eyes.

Rena Grushenka

She is Astrid's fifth foster mother. She runs a thrift shop. She is a skinny brunette with coal-black hair, completely matte. High breasts push into a savage cleavage framed in a black crocheted sweater unbuttoned to the fourth button. Her dream-catcher earrings touch her shoulders. She has a deep throaty voice flavored with Russian soft consonants. Her hands are grubby and full of rings, the nails chipped red.

Yvonne and Niki

They are girls who live with Rena Grushenka. Yvonne is pregnant. She is plump with dark hair and dark eyes. Her mother abandoned her and her brother and sisters six years ago, locking them in their Burbank apartment. Niki is a magenta-haired girl with brown eyes. She was abandoned at six by her mother at a Thrifty drugstore in Alhambra.



Mrs. Luanne Davis

Astrid's latest caseworker. She is a middle-aged black woman in a white blouse tied in a bow at the neck and relaxed hair in a pageboy.

Hannah and Julie

Ingrid's "new children." They attend Pitzer College out in Pomona. They study Ingrid Magnussen in Women's Studies and visit her every week.

Tasha

She is a thirteen-year-old girl who becomes Astrid's new roommate when Yvonne leaves. Grave and silent, she has a vertical scar on her upper lip just healing. She flinches if people move too fast near her.

Susan D. Valeris

She is Ingrid's attorney and often represents imprisoned feminists. Her hair is an explosion of black curls, and she wears bright red lipstick. Her short red nails are garish against her white skin. She is shorter than Astrid is. She wears a good, green-scented perfume, a hint of citrus, almost like a man's aftershave. Her teeth are unnaturally white. Her hand is very small and dry. She wears a wide wedding band on her forefinger and an onyx intaglio signet on the pinky of the other hand. She has a genuine Hermès Kelly bag and smokes cigarettes with a gold lighter.

Klaus Anders

Astrid's father. His birthplace is Copenhagen, Denmark and meets Ingrid in Venice Beach, California. He's fifty-four when Astrid turns fourteen. In a picture of her parents together, he and her mother look like brother and sister. A leonine blond with sensual lips, he smiles all the way and his eyes turn up at the corners. His shoulders are broad and slightly slouched. He is a painter.

He now lives in Copenhagen with a wife and two children under five, Astrid's half sister and brother from his third or fourth marriage. He is sixty-one when Astrid finally meets him.

Karin Thorvald

Ingrid's mother and Astrid's grandmother. She may or may not have been a distant relation of King Olaf of Norway. She was a classical actress and drunk and could recite



Shakespeare by heart while feeding the chickens. She drowned in the cow pond when her mother was thirteen.

Annie

A neighbor of Ingrid's when Astrid is young. She is small and talkative and wears Dr. Scholl's sandals. She has dark straight hair with little bangs. She raises Astrid for a year when Ingrid goes away to Ensenada.

Oskar Schein

An art professor at the Hochschule der Künste. He likes Astrid's work and lobbies for her acceptance as a bona fide scholar working toward a degree. He is a bearish man with a cropped silver beard.

Bill and Ann Greenway

They live in Downey, and they are prospective foster parents of Astrid's. They are kind people with well-meaning faces and sturdy shoes. Bill has graying blond crew-cut hair and wears silver-rimmed glasses. Ann has snip-and-curl beauty shop hair.

Inspector Ramirez

He is the police officer who investigates Barry Kolker's complaint against Ingrid Magnussen.

Bob

He is the publisher of *Cinema Scene*. He is interested in Ingrid, but Ingrid loathes him. One day, he pays her too much unwanted attention, trying to touch her surreptitiously, and is cut on the forearm with a razor-edged X-Acto.

Kit

She is the editor of *Cinema Scene*. A thin woman with overbright eyes and the nervous gestures of a frightened bird. Her hairstyle is geometric, dyed an inky black and shaved at the neck.

Miles

He is the photo editor of *Cinema Scene*. He is a gaunt, stubble-chinned Englishman whose fingers are stained with nicotine.



Owen and Peter

Foster children under Starr's care.

Derrick

Carolee's boyfriend.

Benito

Yvonne's boyfriend.

Herbert

Yvonne's latest boyfriend with whom she lives in Huntington Beach. He's an ex-Marine. She has a son with him, Herbert Jr.

Camille Barron

Susan D. Valeris' assistant.

Reverend Thomas

Starr's pastor. Carolee calls him a phony-ass con and Reverend Creephead. He wears a dark suit and tie with shiny black shoes, like a businessman. His short, side-parted brown hair glistens like cellophane under the colored lights of his church. When he speaks, he has a sort of speech defect. He swallows his /s, so "alive" comes out as "alyive."

Tricia Day

She is an art teacher at the art museum. She is small, middle-aged with cropped gray hair.

Conrad

A teenage drug dealer in Van Nuys. He gives Astrid half a gram of pot in exchange for sex.



Brian, PJ, Big Al, Mr. Natural

Teenage drug dealers and friends of Conrad's.

Seth

Ray's son.

Sergei

Rena's boyfriend. He is as handsome as a Cossack, a milky Slavic blond with sleepy blue eyes. By profession, he is a thief.

Misha

Rena's friend. He has a dog named Chernobyl. He hits on Astrid.

Connie Hwang, Melinda Meek

Nurses at Waite Memorial Hospital. Connie is nice to Yvonne - smiling and touching her gently with her plump hands. Melinda is efficient with bony fingers. She snaps at Yvonne for whining.

Werner

A supposed German rock promoter who takes Niki to his place.

Lydia Guzman

Ingrid's cellmate at the prison in Chino.

Lunaria Irolo

A woman who shares a cell in Ad Seg with Ingrid. Ingrid calls her as mad as her name.

Eduardo

He is a young man with whom Ingrid dances on the hotel rooftop in Playa del Carmen. He owns that hotel. He drives a black Volare and, at night, he plays guitar and sings gypsy songs with hotel guests. When the weather turns, he closes the hotel for the season and goes back to Mexico City, where his parents live.



Jesus

He is a poet. He is a handsome young man whose dark curls trail halfway down his back. Ingrid comes home one night with him, holding his hand.

Sasha

Rena's cat.

Medea's Pride

The horse on which Ingrid bets at the racetracks. It is a white horse and its number is seven.



Objects/Places

Ad Seg

It is a prison within prison of Frontera. People in segregation are sent here.

Amsterdam

Astrid and Ingrid live in the city when Astrid is seven years old.

Bavarian Gardens

Niki, one of Rena's girls, works here three nights a week with a fake ID, because she's not twenty-one.

Berlin

Astrid lives with Paul Trout in this city after she turns eighteen.

Cinema Scene

The place where Ingrid Magnussen works.

Crenshaw Boulevard

Where the group home, run by Mrs. Campbell, is located.

Crossroads of the World

The complex in which the movie magazine, Cinema Scene, has its offices. It is a 1920s courtyard with a streamline-modern ocean liner in the middle occupied by an ad agency.

Dark Green Jaguar

The car Susan D. Valeris drives.

Fairfax High

This is the school where Astrid finishes out her tenth grade.



Ford Panel Van

Rena's car.

Ford Torino

Starr's car.

Frontera

Ingrid's prison located in Chino. The prison complex is aluminum-sided, like Starr's trailer. The prison's low brick buildings are widely spaced and landscaped with trees and roses and acres of green lawn. It is more like a suburban high school except for the guard towers and the razor wire. One passes the California Institution for Men on its way.

Hochschule der Künste

Art school in Berlin. It is German Cal Arts.

Hollywood

Astrid's third foster mother, Amelia Ramos, lives here in a big wooden Craftsman with a deep eaved porch. It looks too nice for foster care.

Hollywood High

Astrid studies her tenth grade at this school.

King Junior High

The school attended by Tasha, a new girl at Rena's.

Le Conte Junior High

Astrid's school in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles

The city where the Magnussens live before the incident with Barry Kolker changes their lives.



Madison Junior High

The school in Van Nuys where Astrid finishes out the ninth grade.

MacLaren Children's Center

Astrid is sent here to stay after leaving the Richards.

Marshall High

This is where Astrid finishes out her high school. This is her eighth school in five years.

Mount Gleason Junior High

This is the school at which Astrid finishes out her eighth grade. This is her third school she's attended that year when she's thirteen.

Old Ford

Uncle Ray's truck. It is high and aqua green with a feather roach clip hanging from the rearview mirror and a bumper sticker that said, This Property Protected by Smith & Wesson.

Old Gold Lincoln

Barry Kolker's car.

Playa del Carmen

The town in Mexico where Astrid and her mother spend time during the tourist season.

Ripple Street

Where Rena's Spanish bungalow is located.

Santa Anita

The racetrack is located here. Santa Anita sits at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, a sheer blue granite wall like a tidal wave. Bright banks of flowers and perfect green lawns breathe out a heavy perfume in the smoggy air.



Silver Alfa Romeo

Ron Richards's car.

Sunland

The town next to Tujunga. The Clothestime and Payless stores are located here.

Truth Assembly of Christ

Starr's church where Reverend Thomas ministers.

Tujunga

This is the town in which Starr, Astrid's first foster parent, lives.

Van Nuys

Marvel Turlock, Astrid's second foster parent, lives here: "The air is thicker than Sunland-Tujunga. It is a kingdom of strip malls and boulevards a quarter-mile across, neighborhoods of ground-hugging tracts dwarfed by full-growth peppers and sweet gums fifty feet high."

Venice Beach

Ingrid meets Klaus Anders, Astrid's father, here in July, 1972.

Waite Memorial Hospital

Yvonne takes a baby class and gives birth to her baby at this hospital.

White Oleander

The flower that blooms when the Santa Ana winds blow in hot from the desert. The flower is poisonous with dagger-shaped green leaves.

Yellow Brick Road

It is a comic book shop in Hollywood. The shop is tiny, more crowded even than Rena's is. Comic books everywhere. This is where Paul Trout and Astrid Magnussen correspond by leaving each other letters.



Social Sensitivity

Told through the eyes of young Astrid Magnussen, who is twelve years old at the beginning of the story, this novel is a coming-of-age narrative. Striving for autonomy, any young adult must find a fine balance between separating from and loving his or her mother. Astrid, however, has been separated from her mother prematurely after her mother kills her lover for being unfaithful. Even as a younger child, surrounded by her mother's own self-absorption, Astrid assumes more responsibility than her mother did. Fitch convincingly depicts the additional conflict and turmoil in the lives of children of jailed parents who have committed violent acts.

In addition, Fitch addresses the need to find adequate foster care, as we see Astrid passed from one poor choice of a foster family to another. Repeatedly she is victimized by being ignored, used, or abused.

Fitch's character development of the foster care placement staff indicates the inconsistencies and ineptness of even well-intentioned bureaucratic interventions. The caseworker who places her with Amelia is so impressed by the lovely house and hospitable welcome of the hostess that she overlooks the underlying abuse of the system, wherein a foster parent might financially benefit from taking in foster children while the children suffer. Although the next social worker rescues Astrid from the situation and recognizes Astrid's talents, she overlooks the reasons that Claire and Ron choose to look for an foster child who is older than most. Once again Astrid arrives in another unstable environment in which she must assume the maturer role.

Not only does Fitch document the psychological scars that a young girl develops in the foster care system, she also documents the physical ones. Astrid's physical relationship with Ray ends in the tragedy of her being shot by her foster mother Starr.

The jarring reaction of others to the ugliness of her wounds affects her relationship to everyone. As she becomes more of a loner, Astrid's psychological state worsens. Her luck, too, does not change and the dogs attack her. The scars that Astrid accumulates include not only the gunshot wounds and dog bites, but also those left by her mother. She writes, "Yes, I was tattooed, just as she'd said. Every inch of my skin was penetrated and stained. I was the original painted lady. . . . Hold me up to the light, read my bright wounds." Astrid recognizes that through her mother's selfish needs and impulsive reactions her own life has been permanently altered.

Fitch also develops a characterization pattern that suggests that a woman's relationship with men can be greatly affected by her own mother's relationship with men, particularly when the mother continually attempts to be the center of attention. Astrid knows little about her father because of her mother's refusal to discuss him. The men whom she encounters as her mother's lovers remain focused on her mother's need for constant attention. Attracted as much to the feminine power that she wields over them, much like her mother's, Astrid develops sexual relationships with Ray and Sergio to further discover her own strengths. Ironically, when she first meets Paul Astrid avoids any

sense of sexuality, even though she enjoys his company. His caricature of Astrid when they first part will later blossom into a loving relationship of mutual respect.



Techniques

The first person narrative effectively depicts the turmoil and conflicting emotions of an adolescent girl trying to make sense of the world in which even her parents let her down.

Astrid's memories of her mother are full of visual, auditory and olfactory sensations, mostly because of her mother's exaggerated need to be surrounded by such strong impressions. The first chapter begins with the sleepless nights during the Santa Ana winds immediately after her mother has poisoned her lover. Astrid awakens to find her mother on the rooftop where, "She held up her large hand and spread the fingers, let the desert dryness lick through. My mother was not herself in the time of the Santa Anas. I was twelve years old and I was afraid for her." As she moves closer to her mother, she recalls the scent of violets.

This intimate moment is broken by the presence of the rest of the world: "Down below us in the streets of Hollywood, sirens whined and sawed along my nerves." Astrid knows it is only a matter of time before the world outside separates the two of them.

Continually Astrid recalls these Santa Ana winds and the fires that ignite, and so she dreams of herself as an ash girl, who is the charred manifestation of the fire's remains. This fire imagery reappears throughout the novel when Astrid thinks of her mother. Near the end, when Ingrid finally shares the secrets of her father with Astrid, that she discovers how her father unintentionally almost killed her with his neglected painter's turpentine, a smell that she strongly recalls.

Even though Astrid claims the visual arts to be her creative expressive outlet, the lyrical poetics indicate another skill she has inherited from her mother. One of her first literary analogies involves how she feels as the caseworkers escort her away from the life she knew with her mother: How it was that the earth could open up under you and swallow you whole, close above you as if you never were. Like Persephone snatched by the god. The ground opened up and out he came, sweeping her into the black chariot. Then down they plunged under the ground, into the darkness, and the earth closed over her head, and she was gone, as if she had never been.

Astrid continues to remember the time of her mother's trial, when she should have testified, but could find no voice.

The whole truth and nothing but the truth. I wanted to lie, but the words deserted me.

She was the one who always spoke for us.

She was the goddess who threw out the golden apples. . . . I had nothing to protect her with. . . . I had condemned her by my silence, condemned us both.

Unable to escape, Astrid inherits her mother's penchant for literary allusions.



Once Astrid rediscovers her voice she begins her reassimilation with the rest of society, but it will be through words and drawings on paper that she most clearly expresses herself.

The letters to Astrid that her mother writes from jail are long-winded and self-absorbed manifestations. When she does address her daughter's needs, she tells her about her failures and mistakes and provides advice. Always, she demands superior thinking to that of the small-minded foster parents who threaten her hold over Astrid.

After a number of poor foster care experiences and time to sort out her feelings, Astrid can articulate how she differs from her mother. One of many examples is her analogy to distinguish between her and her mother: "my eyes aren't ice blue, tinted with your [Ingrid's] peculiar mix of beauty and cruelty. They are as dark as bruises on the inside of an arm, they never smile."



Themes

Poisonous Love

Not all love is created equal. Ingrid loves her daughter in her own self-absorbed way, but her love suffocates Astrid, because Ingrid sees her as an extension of herself rather than an individual. Ingrid is a strong, beautiful woman whose overwhelming presence casts a long shadow on her young, vulnerable daughter, and it takes a long time for Astrid to outgrow her and find her own voice.

Astrid's first love is Ray, a man more than old enough to be her father. She loves him almost desperately, and he, knowing better, gives in to her young innocent charm instead of setting boundaries. Their relationship sets off a chain of disastrous events, first causing Starr to return to abusing alcohol. In her erratic, drunken state, Starr lashes out at her children, driving Carolee away from home and injuring young Davey. It all ends in a bloodbath when Starr shoots Astrid and runs away. Ray, Astrid's great love, abandons her in her direst moment.

We see another such example in Claire Richards' relationship with her husband, Ron. Although Ron loves her, he is also repelled by her neediness and insecurity. Claire, instead of finding her inner strength, clings desperately to her husband, and her mood swings depending on Ron's reaction. Her lack of inner balance and reliance on another person for her measure of sanity culminates in suicide.

Lost Children in the Foster Care System

Through Astrid's experience, we see how innocent souls are corrupted by the carelessness and sometimes-downright cruelty of adults. Throughout the book, examples of bad foster parents abound. Starr is an ex-stripper and a recovering alcoholic who lives with a married man despite her profession to believing in Jesus. Marvel is a racist and wants foster children for the free labor. Amelia is milking the system for her personal gain. In her twisted thinking, the foster children are like the servants she had in Argentina and she doesn't care that they are nearly starving to death. Rena's redeeming quality is that she's not abusive or cruel, which is not saying much. There are decent people like Bill and Ann Greenway, but they seem too far in between.

Amidst all these scarred and twisted adults, children suffer. We see Davey whose creative brilliance being stifled by his uncaring mother. We see a girl like Kiki Torrez who becomes a teenage mother after escaping Amelia's home. The cycle of abuse is perpetuated in the next generation. We see Yvonne, who has given up several children even before she turns eighteen. She still goes on to have another baby with her boyfriend. There is also Tasha who has clearly been abused. She flinches when people



move too fast near her. In a household like Rena's, where the foster mother doesn't care for kids, she has no one to turn to.

Search for the Inner Self

Astrid is a sensitive, artistic soul, but her innocence is quickly shattered in the harsh world when she's left to fend for herself while her mother is in prison. At the tender age of fourteen, she learns carnal pleasures with Ray but also finds the same love betrayed by his weakness. She understands her culpability as she ponders on the impact of her action on innocents like Davey who will now wander through the same foster care system that has proven so indifferent to her plight. Astrid is influenced by Olivia's sophistication but ultimately understands that she holds only a small part of Olivia's mind and will quickly be forgotten. Someone like Olivia who lives for luxury doesn't want the burden of caring for someone.

Astrid matures during her time with Claire. Her mother has always cast a long shadow, influencing her even from her prison cell. Her beautiful and overwhelmingly charismatic mother has always been larger than life for her, but when she finds true motherly love in Claire, she is able to put her relationship with her mother in perspective.

The defining moment comes when Claire kills herself, driven by particularly poisonous words from her mother. After her grief is spent, she's able to think about the destructive influence of her mother. She cuts up her mother's letters, arranging the words into a poem of her feelings for her and declaring herself freed. She is now able to find the real Astrid without her mother casting her shadow.

Astrid's conflicting hatred and love for her mother remain the central focus of this first-person narration. Because of her varied responses to her mother, Astrid's own sense of self is continually thrown off balance. Astrid distrusts language's ability to depict emotions accurately. In an early conversation with Paul Trout she muses, "That was the thing about words, they were clear and specific—chair, eye, stone—but when you talked about feelings, words were stiff, they were this and not that, they couldn't include all the meanings. In defining, they always left something out." As much as Astrid resists her mother's success with language as a poet, Astrid develops an affinity for lyrical language, as the narrative reveals. For example, her choice of imagery of the oleander flower that represents the poison that lurks beneath the superficial beauty of the object perfectly reflects the power that Ingrid holds over her daughter. Astrid's nostalgic longings for the Santa Ana winds suggest her conflicting feelings for her mother will always be with her because they are forever bound together by their past. By the end, however, Astrid is strong enough to resist the lure of her mother's destructive presence.

As Astrid attempts to discover her own identity while moving from one foster family to another, her exploration of her past with her mother uncovers many missing pieces, including not only her father's identity but also that of her extended family. As Claire shares the family heirloom jewelry, Astrid muses, "In comparison to this, my past was smoke, a story my mother once told me and then denied. No onyxes for me, no



aquamarines memorializing the lives of my ancestors. I had only their eyes, their hands, the shape of their nose, a nostalgia for snowfall and carved wood."

Her mother's faithful followers, who even seek out Astrid and become surrogate daughters to Ingrid, bewilder Astrid. In response to one of her mother's letters that twist the truth with its craftily stated words, Astrid responds in thought: Nobody took me away, Mother. My hand never slipped from your grasp. That wasn't how it went down. I was more like a car you'd parked while drunk, then couldn't remember where you'd left it. You looked away for seventeen years and when you looked back, I was a woman you didn't recognize. So now I was supposed to feel pity. . . . Save your poet's sympathy and find some better believer. Just because a poet said something didn't mean it was true, only that it sounded good.

Astrid ably takes her mother's words and reforms them by cutting and pasting them into a poem that indicates that she can clearly think for herself and knows that the truth remains somewhere other than what her mother chooses to portray.

Style

Point of View

Janet Fitch's *White Oleander* is told in the first person from the point of view of Astrid Magnussen. As she grows from twelve to eighteen in the foster care system, we experience everything through her. We feel her complicated feelings for her beautiful but cruel mother and her anxiety as she sees her mother's relationship with Barry Kolker taking a dark turn. We feel her numbness in the days of her mother's arrest and trial. As she moves from one foster home to another, we learn about the various people, their strengths and shortcomings through Astrid's sensitive eyes.

Astrid is a well-drawn character, and she sounds mature even when she is only twelve. By the time she is eighteen, it is hard to believe her still so young, because she sounds so wise in the ways of life.

Setting

Most of the story takes place in modern day California. Although Astrid has moved around the world with her mother, from Amsterdam to Mexico to France to Spain, when the story unfolds they live in Los Angeles. It is the season of the oleanders, a flower that blooms when the hot Santa Ana wind blows in from the desert. The blossoming of oleanders provides the timeframe when the story starts and the major motif that runs through the book. All the foster homes where Astrid is placed are located in large and small places in California. Only at the end, the story shifts to Europe as Astrid ends up in Berlin. Even so, it is clear that the heart of the story is in California.

Language and Meaning

The language of *White Oleander* is poetic and beautiful. The words flow together like music, and there is a dreamy, lyrical quality to Astrid's narration. There is a high degree of sophistication as various exotic places around the world are described from Astrid's point of view. When Ingrid speaks or writes, her poetic tendency springs to the fore, every word nuanced with hidden meaning. The overall tone of the book has an undercurrent of sadness and resignation, making the hard journey Astrid has endured even clearer.

Structure

White Oleander is composed of thirty-two chapters. The story mostly progresses chronologically, except for a few flashbacks as Astrid remembers. The story starts with the time Ingrid meets Barry Kolker. There is no explicit mention of Ingrid's murder of Barry, but it is interwoven throughout the subsequent chapters as Astrid begins her



journey through the California foster care system. She starts at Starr's where she falls in love and consequently, she is almost killed. Then she moves to Marvel's, where she endures life as a drudge and has moments of escape with the elegant Olivia. After leaving Marvel's, she is placed at Amelia's where she starves to the degree that she is forced to rummage through trash and panhandle. Her life takes a turn for the better when she is placed with Ron and Claire Richards but her happiness does not last due to her mother and Claire's insecurity. After Claire's death, she goes to MacLaren where she meets Paul Trout. She then spends the remaining year at Rena's. The story ends in Berlin where she is living with Paul.



Quotes

"Oleander time. Lovers who kill each other now will blame it on the wind." Chapter 1, pg. 1

"Fathers are irrelevant. Believe me, you're lucky. I had one, I know. Just forget it." Chapter 2, pg. 38

"Honey, this is what happens when you fall in love. You're looking at a natural disaster." Chapter 3, pg. 44

"My hatred gives me strength." Chapter 3, pg. 45

"I'm enjoying my hatred so much more than I ever enjoyed love. Love is temperamental. Tiring. It makes demands. Love uses you. Changes its mind. But hatred, now. That's something you can use. Sculpt. Wield. It's hard or soft, however you need it. Love humiliates you, but hatred cradles you. It's so soothing. I feel infinitely better now." Chapter 3, pg. 54

"Don't cry. We're not like that. We're the Vikings, remember?" Chapter 5, pg. 90

"*I will not serve.*" Chapter 5, pg. 92

"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." Chapter 6, pg. 105

"You had no father. I'm your father. You sprang full-blown from my forehead, like Athena." Chapter 7, pg. 117

"In life, knowledge of poisons is essential. Nobody becomes an artist unless they have to." Chapter 10, pg. 175

"It's a man's world." Chapter 11, pg. 195

"Help you, darling? I'd rather see you in the worst kind of foster hell than with a woman like that." Chapter 18, pg. 347

"Take my advice. Stay away from all broken people." Chapter 20, pg. 386

"I don't let anyone touch me." Chapter 22, pg. 410

"Money is *money*. You want remember, so just remember." Chapter 24, pg. 443

"I am your home." Chapter 26, pg. 471

"Because we're not everybody. We're not even remotely like everybody." Chapter 27, pg. 499

"If you could go back, even partway, I would give anything." Chapter 31, pg. 589

Adaptations

Selecting *White Oleander* for her book discussion prompted Oprah Winfrey to narrate an abridged reading of the novel, produced by Maja Thomas and released by Time Warner Audio Books. The unabridged version, read by Alyssa Breshahan, was released by Recorded Books.



Key Questions

First-person narration allows the reader to intimately observe the complicated and often conflicting workings of another's mind, particularly effective when developing characterization of a young adult determining her self identity. Relationships between mother and daughter can affect the daughter's self image as well as future relationships.

1. Why is the title fitting? 2. What is Astrid's greatest success? 3. How is Astrid like her mother? 4. Astrid's creative outlet is her drawing.

Do you think this is her natural talent or what she was driven to because of her mother's success with words?

5. What functions do the letters from her mother play?
6. What character was Astrid's greatest support?
7. Is Astrid doomed in her future relationships?
8. How important is the setting of Los Angeles to the story?



Topics for Discussion

Analyze Ingrid Magnussen and discuss her influence on Astrid.

Does Ingrid really love her daughter? Why or why not? Discuss your reasons and provide examples.

Research and discuss the current foster care system in the U.S. What are the criteria for becoming foster parents? How could people like Starr or Amelia have been approved as foster mothers?

Think about Starr and Davey. Does he have a better chance without his mother? On the other hand, despite all her faults, would it have been better for him to stay with her?

Discuss Ingrid's followers. Why are some people so fascinated by jailed celebrities?

Discuss who has the most positive influence on Astrid.

Excluding Ingrid, discuss who has the most negative influence on Astrid.

Literary Precedents

Relationships between mother and daughter have appeared in literature repeatedly.

The guilt and crimes of Sethe, the mother in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, are different from Ingrid's. Whereas Sethe's decisions are largely dictated by the unhappy historical circumstance of having a child while escaping slavery, Ingrid's choices are totally self-centered. Both Astrid and Denver, however, find it necessary to find coping strategies to survive their mother's unstable mental states. Their coming-of-age is forced upon them by their circumstances. In Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie shows her daughter Pearl how to claim the present and future, regardless of the past. Astrid, on the other hand, must figure out how to do that on her own.

Having acknowledged her admiration of Joyce Carol Oates' work, Fitch would be familiar with the many coming of age stories that Oates has written over the years.

Unlike Fitch, however, most of Oates' characters grow from a distant relationship with their mother. In *Man Crazy*, Oates presents the character Ingrid, who also learns to live with an unstable, self-absorbed mother.

Abandoned by her father, whom she adored, Ingrid faces countless men who befriend her mother and eventually she enters an unhealthy relationship of her own. Oates' young woman descends further into a wrecked emotional state than Astrid before she recovers.

Related Titles

Fitch's well-received first novel parallels the success of other contemporary titles dealing with mother/daughter relationships. Mona Simpson's *Anywhere But Here* has received a high profile because of its movie adaptation. Another child wiser than her parent, Ann is dragged along from Wisconsin to Los Angeles by her mother, Adele, who continually lives in a fantasy world of her own making. Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons*, the Newbery winner for young adult literature, also depicts a child picking up the pieces of her life that is dictated by her mother's self-centered, whimsical ways. Rebecca Wells provides another view of mother-daughter relationships in a wealthy Southern family in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. Sidda and Vivi, daughter and mother, also discover that the truth of their past is somewhere between what the two of them recall and portray for others.



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