A Year Down Yonder Study Guide

A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

A Year Down Yonder is about a Chicago girl's year-long stay with her grandmother in a rural town during the height of the Great Depression. The town is full of eccentric personalities, not the least of which is the grandmother.

The narrator is fifteen-year-old Mary Alice, who is forced to live with her Grandma Dowdel in a small rural town in southern Illinois because her parents cannot afford to keep her. Mary Alice dreads being stuck in a hick town, and she is afraid of her imposing, stern grandmother.

Grandma immediately enrolls Mary Alice in school, and she is placed in Miss Butler's class. A bully, Mildred, calls Mary Alice the "rich Chicago girl" and rides home with Mary Alice in order to force her to give Mildred a dollar. Grandma bullies the bully by unhitching Mildred's horse and forcing the girl to walk home without shoes.

At Halloween, Grandma pranks a gang of pranksters by dousing their leader in warm glue when they try to vandalize her cobhouse. Grandma then saves an otherwise boring school Halloween party by bringing a load of pecan and pumpkin pies. Next, Grandma and Mary Alice attend a turkey shoot on Armistice Day at the Abernathy farm. Grandma charges exorbitant fees for cups of burgoo stew at lunch, and it is only later revealed that all the proceeds from the stew go to Mrs. Abernathy to help care for her war-wounded, invalid son.

Next up is the annual Christmas program at school, and Mary Alice is chosen to play the Virgin Mary in the Nativity scene. Mary Alice doesn't think Grandma likes Christmas, and she doesn't expect any gifts. Grandma surprises Mary Alice by buying her new shoes, making her a beautiful tin halo to wear in the play, and paying for Mary Alice's cherished brother Joey's train ticket for a visit.

Around Valentine's Day, Grandma hosts a Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) gathering at her home, and puts the haughty DAR leader, Mrs. Weidenbach, in her place by indirectly revealing that Weidenbach does not have the noble blood that she claims, but the blood of the local, looked-down-upon hooligans, the Burdick family. Meanwhile, Mary Alice develops feelings for a new boy at school, Royce McNabb.

Grandma takes on a tenant, the artist Arnold Green. A woman named Maxine Patch poses nude for Arnold in Grandma's attic as a way to seduce him. The snake Grandma keeps in the attic to keep away birds falls on Patch, and she runs from the house screaming, wearing nothing but the snake. After that, Grandma and Mary Alice survive a fierce tornado, and then they go to check on and rescue a couple of the elderly residents of the town.

The end of the school year comes, and Mary Alice has to return to Chicago, even though she does not want to leave. Royce and Mary Alice agree to be pen pals, and in a brief Epilogue, the two are married several years later.

Prologue, and Rich Chicago Girl

Prologue, and Rich Chicago Girl Summary

Prologue: The narrator (a fifteen-year-old girl) and her mother are at the Dearborn Train Station in Chicago. They are very poor, and the train ticket (for just the narrator) has broken them. It is 1937, and they are suffering economic hardship from the Great Depression.

The narrator tells the reader that her father lost his job and her brother Joey has joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, a public works project. Until the family recovers financially, the narrator will have to live with Grandma Dowdel in an unnamed town the narrator dismisses as a hick town. The narrator laments having to live in a backwards town with no modern conveniences.

Rich Chicago Girl: The narrator (her name is Mary Alice) gets off the train in Grandma's town. Beyond a few clothes, her only possessions are her cat Bootsie and her radio. Grandma is there, and she offers no hug or even a greeting. Grandma moans that Bootsie is one more mouth to feed and that the radio will make a racket.

Grandma takes Mary Alice directly to high school to begin school. In a dank basement, they discover the principal, August Fluke, who is doubling as a janitor. Mary Alice is enrolled as a junior and taken to Miss Butler's class. Miss Butler is reading Shakespeare when Mary Alice enters the class. Before Grandma leaves, she warns Mary Alice about one of the students, Mildred Burdick. The Burdick family are notoriously bad people.

Mary Alice has to share a desk with Mildred, and Mildred dubs Mary Alice the "rich Chicago girl" because she is dressed slightly better than Mildred. Like a typical bully, Mildred demands a dollar from Mary Alice, surely a princely sum in the poor town. After school, Mildred, on a horse, follows Mary Alice, on foot, to Grandma's house at the other end of town. Mildred intends to collect the dollar from Grandma. A forlorn Mary Alice informs Grandma of Mildred's demand.

Grandma, acting quite polite, invites the girls inside. She has them take off their shoes, and then she gives the girls buttermilk and corn bread. While Mildred is eating, Grandma walks outside on the pretense that she is fetching jam from the cellar. Instead, Grandma unhitches Mildred's horse and hangs Mildred's shoes on the horse. The horse wanders away, and Mildred is forced to walk miles back to home barefoot.

Mary Alice figures Mildred will beat her up at school tomorrow, but Grandma reveals that she knew the horse wasn't even Mildred's: Mildred's father is a notorious horse thief, and the stolen horse likely trotted back to its rightful owner. Without a horse, and with no shoes, Mildred won't even attend school, being that the schoolhouse is many miles from her home.

Prologue, and Rich Chicago Girl Analysis

The Prologue briefly provides some exposition for the main story to follow. It firmly grounds the story in a specific time and place - Great Depression-era Middle America. Beginning pages also set up reader expectations for what is to come, with respect to Grandma Dowdel and the town. Mary Alice is dreading her visit; she expects the worst, and she is nervous about fitting in. Mary Alice's position increases identification with the intended audience, as likely the young reader has had a similar situation of being forced to visit an odd relative or being forced to move to a new town.

Grandma is initially true to Mary Alice's fears, being apparently gruff and unfriendly, and walking Mary Alice immediately to high school for enrollment. However, when Mary Alice is bullied at school by Mildred, Grandma takes care of the bully with odd behavior (treating Mildred to a nice meal, going outside to fetch jam from the cellar when the cellar entrance is actually not outside) that is only at the end of the chapter understood by Mary Alice and the reader. This begins a pattern that the novel repeats: Grandma appears unkind and her actions and behaviors cannot be explained. By the end, however, it becomes clear that Grandma actually acts out of love and concern, and her odd behavior must be reevaluated given new information.

Vittles and Vengeance

Vittles and Vengeance Summary

Halloween is a huge occasion in Grandma's town, and something that goes on for weeks instead of a single day. It is also Grandma's favorite holiday, because of its mischief and pranks. Mary Alice has a Halloween party at school, and Grandma decides to bake pumpkin and pecan pies for it.

Grandma does not like Bootsie the cat, and makes him live in the cobhouse out back. Bootsie had become a lean, independent cat, catching field mice and what not. One night, Mary Alice is shocked to discover that Bootsie had a rusty tin can tied around his tail, the result of pranksters. Wordlessly, Grandma stews up some glue on the stove, and she and Mary Alice go out to the cobhouse with the glue, a couple railroad spikes, and some picture hanging wire. Grandma drives the spikes into the ground near the cobhouse door and strings the wire between them. Then, they wait, hiding.

Some Halloweeners (pranksters), boys, come to the cobhouse. Their leader trips over the wire and falls. Grandma comes out of the cobhouse, frightening the boys, and covers the leader in the glue. They scramble out of there, leaving behind a knife and a handsaw (the tools of their pranking). The next day, there are a few less boys at school.

The next day, Grandma and Mary Alice drag a wagon to the home of farmer Old Man Nyquist. Nyquist told Grandma she could have any pecans that fell from his pecan tree, but hardly any are on the ground. Mad, Grandma affixes a spare tire to the front of Nyquist's tractor in the barn, and rams the tractor into the pecan tree, making it rain pecans. They now have plenty of pecans for pecan pie.

Next, Grandma and Mary Alice travel to the Pensingers' residence. The Pensingers are locally-known for their nice pumpkins. Using the knife from the pranksters, Grandma cuts two pumpkins from a vine and loads them into the wagon. Grandma dodges Mary Alice's question of whether or not they are stealing. Finally home, Grandma cuts the pumpkins open with the pranksters' handsaw and proceeds to make pies for the school Halloween party.

Grandma and Mary Alice take a load of pies to the party, and Grandma serves them herself. The pies turn the party from pathetic to fun, and they are a big hit. One of the last to be served is Augie Fluke, son of the principal. He has a bald, irritated head and a bandaged nose, indicating he was the prankster Grandma had covered in glue. Grandma makes sure to cut his pie slice using his own knife. Mrs. Pensinger comes back for seconds on the pumpkin pie, made from the pumpkins stolen from her own yard.

Vittles and Vengeance Analysis

Similar to the adventure in "Rich Chicago Girl," Grandma reacts to bullying (a tin can being tied to Bootsie's tail) with a series of strange behaviors that are not readily explainable. She fetches a railroad spike, some picture hanging wire, and she brews a fresh batch of glue. Like Mary Alice, the reader is left to wonder what Grandma is gathering these items for, increasing tension and compelling the reader forward so he or she can solve the mystery.

Grandma's behavior with respect to obtaining pecans and pumpkins demonstrates a kind of pragmatic morality that the novel condones. It is obviously illegal to ram Old Man Nyquist's tree with his tractor, or steal pumpkins from the Pensinger residence. But Grandma's actions are done for the good of the community; the pecans and pumpkins will be best used by Grandma in her delicious pies, and even Mrs. Pensinger applauds Grandma for her excellent pumpkin pie. Grandma's wisdom here trumps the narrow strictures of the law or of certain social mores. She knows what is best, in her eccentric fashion, and despite some bending of the law or some ruffled feathers, everything will turn out okay when Grandma Dowdel is in charge.

A Minute in the Morning

A Minute in the Morning Summary

Mary Alice sleeps alone in the upstairs of the home and becomes frightened of things scuttling behind the walls and bumps coming from the attic. To take her mind off her fears, she plays her Philco radio to help her sleep, listening to all the various radio programs and songs of the day. Her favorite singer is Kate Smith.

Armistice Day is here - commemorating the end of World War I - and every year the American Legion hosts a sharpshooting contest at the Abernathy farm. While Grandma is widely known as an excellent markswoman, she will not be competing. Instead, she helps the wives of the Legionnaires prepare burgoo stew, burgoo being made from scraps of whatever vegetables and trimmings happen to be available.

The day proceeds, and most of the Legionnaires are bad shots. Augie Fluke is there and is intent to prove to Mary Alice that he is a good shot. He lines up his shot for the paper targets the Legion has placed, but at that moment a rabbit hops out of a hiding place and runs in front of him. Augie can't help but aim his gun at the fleeing rabbit. The rabbit races underneath a parked car, and Augie winds up shooting out the new tire of the car. Augie panics and flees, as the car belongs to an irate Legionnaire. At eleven o' clock, everyone stops to observe a minute of silence for Armistice Day.

At lunch, Grandma becomes the unofficial cashier for the burgoo. Usually it's a dime for a cup, but Grandma intimidates all who can afford it into paying more for the stew (and she charges nothing for those who are poor and can't afford the dime). This includes the banker Mr. Weidenbach, from whom she squeezes a whole silver dollar.

After the shoot, Grandma unloads all the burgoo coins onto Mrs. Abernathy's table. It is revealed that a major reason for having the shoot at the Abernathy farm is to raise money (through burgoo) for Mrs. Abernathy. Mary Alice accompanies Grandma upstairs to see why Mrs. Abernathy is struggling; her grown son is sitting in a wheelchair, blinded and no doubt mentally ill from the effects of toxic nerve gas from World War I. Grandma says Mrs. Abernathy receives government money for her son, but it is not enough, and because of Grandma's intimidation tactics at lunch, Mrs. Abernathy will be able to survive the year financially.

A Minute in the Morning Analysis

"A Minute in the Morning" is a chance to inject some contemporary historical references into the narrative. Undoubtedly most everyone in the town had been affected by The Great War (World War I), the event having taken place twenty years prior, and the Armistice Day turkey shoot serves as a bittersweet reminder of the American sacrifice in the war. Grandma appears to be especially moved by the moment of silence observed on the day; Mary Alice observes that she had never seen Grandma stand up straighter.

And Grandma guilts Mr. Weidenbach into giving more money for his cup of stew by pointing out that he had never served in the war and that others had sacrificed for him.

Once again, Grandma appears mean and strange by charging exorbitant fees for the burgoo stew, but in the end a crucial piece of information is revealed to force Mary Alice and the reader to perceive Grandma in a different way. In this case, it is revealed that all the stew money goes to Mrs. Abernathy and her war-wounded son. Mary Alice's visit of the blinded, disoriented veteran is particularly poignant. The theme of "you can't judge a book by its cover" is strong in this episode, as everything about the turkey shoot and the dilapidated condition of the farm must be reevaluated in the context of a suffering mother struggling to care for her disabled son.

Away in a Manger

Away in a Manger Summary

Christmas time has arrived, and Miss Butler is having the kids make hot pads from bottle caps. By this time, Mary Alice has made a friend, Ina-Rae Gage, and is on better terms with several girls, though Carleen Lovejoy remains her biggest nemesis. Mary Alice has managed to shed the "rich girl" reputation.

The annual Christmas program at the school is coming. No student at the school can really sing, and the chorus practice sounds awful. The heart of the Christmas program is the Nativity scene, and to everyone's surprise, Mary Alice is chosen to play the part of the Virgin Mary. Carleen Lovejoy will play the leader of the heavenly angels, and she is intent on outshining all others.

Arriving home, Mary Alice is surprised to see Grandma tramping around in the snow in rubber waders, hauling a basket full of walnut shells. Only later will Grandma's actions be explained. At ten o' clock, a reluctant Mary Alice follows Grandma out into the cold. It turns out Grandma had been setting fox traps earlier that day. The rubber waders and walnut shells are used to cover up the human scent in order to confuse the foxes. Grandma also has a vial of fox urine to attract the foxes. Grandma shoots a fox that screams out when a trap closes on its leg. By the end of the night, the two have four foxes. The next day, Grandma negotiates a good deal for the fox hides with the local fur broker. This is how Grandma survives.

The Christmas program is getting closer, and while Carleen Lovejoy has a magnificent costume, including a halo, Mary Alice has only plain bedsheets. While Mary Alice thinks Christmas is not exactly Grandma's favorite holiday, Grandma surprises her by having her pick out a pair of new shoes to buy from the Sears catalogue. Also surprising, they go out and cut down a fir tree to act as a Christmas tree. As a last surprise prior to the Christmas program, Grandma presents Mary Alice with a halo she made from tin cans. It is beautiful and will surely outshine Carleen's halo.

It is finally the night of the Christmas program, and the whole town is abuzz. Mary Alice and the other girls frantically get ready backstage. After the chorus sings, the Nativity scene actors take their places and freeze in place for the audience. Frozen, Mary Alice watches Grandma arrive from the back of the theater. The big moment of the Nativity scene arrives, with a light being shone on Baby Jesus. Ina-Rae supplied her own baby doll for Jesus. But in a shock to all gathered, an actual baby is in the manger crib. Grandma comes up to the stage and examines the baby, and can tell from its one green eye and one blue eye that it's a Burdick baby. Mildred had a baby, and the Burdicks abandoned it in spectacular fashion because they could not afford it. The baby will hopefully have a good home through adoption.

In a final Christmas surprise, Grandma took all the money from the fox hides and bought a train ticket so that brother Joey could visit, and Mary Alice hugs Joey hard, having missed him terribly.

Away in a Manger Analysis

In "Away in a Manger," Mary Alice is still not convinced of the innate goodness of Grandma. Believing Grandma to be much more a "Halloween person" than a "Christmas person," Mary Alice figures Grandma will issue a hearty "Bah, humbug!" to the whole holiday, and will not celebrate or give any gifts. This belief influences the reader's expectations for Grandma as well, though by this time the reader has come to expect the unexpected from Grandma Dowdel.

Grandma behaves much like Mary Alice would expect her to; she does not mention any celebration of Christmas, or any gifts, and she reacts with seeming indifference to Mary Alice's inclusion as the Virgin Mary in the school Nativity scene. At this time, Mary Alice is still acting as a maturing teenager might, jealous of Carleen Lovejoy's beautiful angel halo and ashamed that she has only bedsheets to wear for her costume. Christmastime is also naturally an opportunity for Mary Alice to miss her family and especially her brother; in the first chapter, she explicitly dreaded the prospect of Christmas in Grandma's tiny town.

Grandma manages to defy all expectation and save the day on all fronts once again. She buys Mary Alice shoes as a Christmas gift, she makes a halo that outshines Carleen's halo, and she cuts down a fir tree so they can have their home decorated. Most importantly, Grandma sacrifices all of her hard-earned fox fur money to buy a train ticket for Joey to visit. This self-sacrifice is yet another pleasant side to Grandma the reader may not have expected, leading to a climax to the episode that is satisfying and touching.

Hearts and Flour

Hearts and Flour Summary

One day in the cold of January, Mrs. Weidenbach knocks at the door. Mrs. Weidenbach is the wife of the banker, and is the leader of the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). She is extremely prideful of her membership in DAR, as all DAR members trace their heritage back to aristocratic families from the time of the American Revolution. Mrs. Weidenbach has come to Grandma because of a problem. DAR is having its annual gathering to celebrate George Washington's birthday. Normally, this includes delicious cherry tarts made by Mrs. Vottsmeier, but this year, Mrs. Vottsmeier is completely out of sorts because of menopause, and she will not bake any tarts. Every DAR member looks forward to the famous cherry tarts, and it will be a terrible blow if tarts are not made. Thus, Mrs. Weidenbach went to the best cook she knew, Grandma Dowdel. For her part, Grandma is completely unimpressed with Weidenbach's plea, and she does not agree to bake any tarts.

Valentine's Day is coming. Around this time, Mary Alice has been secretly writing a brief column in the local newspaper, called "Newsy Notes," containing bits of gossip or other town-related observations. A new boy enrolls in school, named Royce McNabb. He is tall and handsome and the girls all swoon for him, including Mary Alice, though she is too shy to do anything about it.

Back at home, Mrs. Weidenbach makes another appearance. Clearly upset about the prospect of no tarts for her big gathering, she begs Grandma to bake them. Grandma agrees, but only on the condition that the DAR meeting take place at Grandma's own house. Mrs. Weidenbach is horrified, but her need for tarts wins out over her disgust at Grandma's rickety house, and she agrees to hold the DAR meeting there.

Valentine's Day arrives. Carleen Lovejoy only gets a valentine from the teacher, but Ina-Rae gets valentines from a "secret admirer" who she thinks is Elmo Leaper, a valentine from the Johnson brothers, as a well as a lovely valentine card with a message signed "R.MN." for Royce McNabb. Carleen is incensed that mousy Ina-Rae would get more attention on Valentine's Day than her. Later, it is revealed that Mary Alice and Ina-Rae conspired to make Carleen mad. Mary Alice actually crafted the valentines.

Grandma and Mary Alice get busy making cherry tarts for the DAR meeting. Grandma wears her best clothes for the event, and Mary Alice is struck by Grandma's beauty. Two ancient ladies arrive for the DAR event, Mrs. Wilcox and Aunt Mae Griswold, but they certainly aren't DAR ladies. They were invited by Grandma, and they are quite the opposite of the refined DAR ladies; they are hillbillies. Mrs. Weidenbach and the DAR ladies arrive and are horrified by the women's presence. The meeting proceeds, and Mrs. Weidenbach takes an opportunity to brag about her family lineage. Aunt Mae tells her that she was actually adopted, and that her true family blood is that of the hated Burdick family. Mrs. Wilcox turns out to be Mrs. Weidenbach's long-lost biological sister.

Mrs. Weidenbach is ready to faint at these horrible new revelations. Grandma had planned the whole gathering to put Mrs. Weidenbach in her place. The DAR meeting ends in disgrace, and the remaining women have a good time eating the cherry tarts.

Hearts and Flour Analysis

Pride is the sin that is attacked in "Hearts and Flour." Ina-Rae and Mary Alice conspire against Carleen with their fake valentines, knowing that the valentines would serve to infuriate Carleen, who feels she deserves to be the most loved girl in school. In the other plot of the episode, Grandma punishes Mrs. Weidenbach for her pride about her supposed nobility. Knowing Mrs. Weidenbach is mistaken about her family background, Grandma invites two people to the DAR gathering essential to exposing Weidenbach: Aunt Mae Griswold, who is old enough to know about Weidenbach's adoption; and Mrs. Wilcox, Weidenbach's long-lost twin sister.

In this instance, Mrs. Weidenbach is not true to herself, a clear fault in Grandma's eyes, who holds sincerity in the highest regard. Also wrapped up in Grandma's punishment is Grandma's belief that no one should look down upon anyone else; we are all equal. And Mrs. Weidenbach - with her elegant fur-lined clothes, insistence that the Daughters of the American Revolution remain an exclusive club, and generally condescending manners - clearly violates this principle. Grandma knows that snobbish Mrs. Weidenbach's will hate meeting in Grandma's dilapidated home and will hate conducting the meeting with two uncouth rednecks (Wilcox and Griswold), and this is precisely why Grandma organizes the meeting in that way, all as part of Mrs. Weidenbach's comeuppance.

A Dangerous Man

A Dangerous Man Summary

March comes, and Mary Alice turns sixteen. Mary Alice hadn't hardly seen Bootsie all winter, but come spring Bootsie returns to occasionally snuggle with her in bed. Bootsie brings little knick-knacks from the field, like a robin's egg, to Mary Alice, and one day Mary Alice discovers a kitten. She plans on keeping it inside and raising it, but Bootsie snatches it back up, and Mary Alice realizes Bootsie only brought her kitten to show.

One day in April, when Mary Alice and Grandma are helping each other wash their hair, a man with a strange accent comes calling. He explains he was sent to Grandma by Maxine Patch, the postmistress, and that he is in town to paint a mural on the post office wall. The man was sent by the government as part of the Roosevelt administration's ambitious public works project. The post office is a scrawny thing, and hardly worth any grand mural, and Grandma considers her tax dollars to have been wasted.

The artist, Arnold Green, explains that he is from the East, and that no one has had room in the entire town for him. Taking advantage of Arnold's desperation, Grandma charges him the princely sum of two and a half dollars a day for rent, based upon Arnold's confession that he was earning four dollars a day from the government. Knowing it is too much, Arnold reluctantly agrees, and he moves into the attic.

Grandma discovers Arnold is a single man, and she knows that man-hungry Maxine Patch will be trying to seduce him.

Final exams are coming up at school, and while a whiz at English and composition, Mary Alice struggled with math. Royce shows himself to be very good at math, and partly to romance him, Mary Alice invites him over to Grandma's house to have him tutor her. Grandma quickly realizes the real reason for having Royce over and agrees to make lemonade for the event.

Mary Alice works up her nerve and writes an invitation to Royce. Royce replies with the one-word handwritten response, "OK." They meet on a Sunday, and Mary Alice is terribly nervous, unsure of what dress to wear. Royce and Mary Alice awkwardly meet, and there is obvious chemistry. Things are just about to go great when an ear-rending scream from the attic fills the air. To everyone's consternation, Maxine Patch bounds down the stairs, naked except for a long black snake wrapped around her neck. Desperately trying to get the snake off, Maxine runs into the street, and all the neighbors see. After Maxine is gone, Grandma explains that she kept a snake in the rafters of the attic in order to keep the birds away. A terrified Arnold Green pads down the stairs and explains that he was painting a nude portrait of Maxine when the snake fell from the rafters onto Maxine.

Mary Alice figures her zany household has ruined all chances of romance with Royce. Meanwhile, the town seems to come down on the side of Maxine, and there are rumors of trying to run Arnold out of town as a corrupting influence. In response, Grandma plays matchmaker and hosts a dinner with Arnold Green and the English teacher Miss Butler. It is clear the two are kindred artistic spirits, and Arnold develops a keen interest in Miss Butler. Arnold cleans himself up and begins making visits to Miss Butler, and public opinion shifts against Maxine and for Arnold.

A Dangerous Man Analysis

The episode "A Dangerous Man" plays upon the seasonal stereotype of spring being a time for new romance and amorous activity after the stagnation of winter. The first instance of this is Bootsie the cat, who shows off her new kitten to Mary Alice. There is then the arrival of Arnold Green, and Grandma knows that the presence of a single man of marriageable age is "dangerous," insofar that he will spark some foolish and amorous behavior from Maxine Patch, whose own proverbial biological clock is ticking.

Arnold's job, as a government artist painting an unneeded mural for a post office that is too small to accommodate the mural, may be a gentle criticism of the "make-work" job creation philosophy of the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression.

"A Dangerous Man" is rare in that the comeuppance delivered in the episode is not the direct result of action taken by Grandma; the snake just happened to fall into Maxine's lap. Maxine herself is not punished for being amorous in and of itself, but for being insincere. Instead of declaring her intentions directly to Arnold Green, she attempted an indirect seduction by allowing the artist to paint her nude. On the contrary, Arnold and Miss Butler's courtship is much more direct and formal, more about love than lust, and so according to the values of the author/Grandma, it is condoned.

Gone with the Wind, and Ever After

Gone with the Wind, and Ever After Summary

Gone with the Wind: Summer comes, and Mary Alice receives a letter from her mom and dad stating that they will soon be able to take care of her again: she will be moving back to Chicago. School graduation comes, with senior Royce among the small handful of graduating seniors. Miss Butler is now engaged to Arnold Green.

While planning for the all-school party, the sky turns a strange yellow and a siren goes off. A tornado is coming. Students are hustled toward the basement for safety, but Mary Alice is too concerned for Grandma's safety, and she leaves the school to go home. Once at Grandma's, Mary Alice and Grandma huddle in their small cellar as the worst of the tornado comes and goes. Grandma managed to grab Bootsie to save the cat from the tornado.

Once they re-emerge from the cellar, they find that the house is still standing; they missed the brunt of the tornado. Grandma instructs Mary Alice to grab a crowbar, boots, and gloves, and the two take off toward Old Man Nyquist's home. Mary Alice uses the gloves to clear fallen tree limbs and other debris in their path.

Old Man Nyquist, who is too hard of hearing to hear the tornado siren, is found under his collapsed bedstead, pinned. Plaster from the ceiling had fallen and broken the bed. The women use the crowbar to pray Nyquist out of his predicament. Nyquist has only mean things to say in return, and Grandma returns the insults. Grandma is perhaps the only person in town kind enough to help such a mean old man.

The women next go to Effie Wilcox's house to check on her. She is nowhere to be found, and her privy (outhouse) has blown away, leading Grandma to believe Wilcox had blown away with it. But Wilcox appears, and confesses she had nearly blown away with the privy before seeking shelter. Wilcox had then left to use Grandma's privy. Mary Alice believes that Wilcox is Grandma's best friend, but Grandma won't admit it.

The school graduation comes and goes. Royce is valedictorian, and he gets a scholarship to a state university. That night, the school celebrates with a hay ride and wienie roast. Mary Alice rides next to Royce on the hay ride, and Royce says that he will write to her in college. Mary Alice responds that she will write back.

Mary Alice does not wish to leave Grandma to return to her parents, and she gets up the nerve to tell Grandma so when she gets back from the hay ride. Grandma acts like she wants to get rid of Mary Alice in order to have the room to rent for extra income, but of course inside she is very sad to see Mary Alice go, and she tears up. Grandma orders Mary Alice to leave to go back to her folks, but says that her door will always be open when she wants to come back.

Ever After: Presumably written a half dozen years or so after the events of the rest of the book, Mary Alice tells the reader what has happened. The United States is now in the thick of World War II, and brother Joey is flying missions over Germany. Mary Alice's father got work in Seattle for Boeing and her parents had moved there.

Mary Alice returns to Grandma's town in order to have her marriage to Royce McNabb, who had also joined the army. Grandma gives away the bride in the church ceremony. And they lived happily ever after.

Gone with the Wind, and Ever After Analysis

In "Gone with the Wind," Mary Alice has nearly completed her process of maturation that has been taking place throughout the novel. She now fully understands Grandma and how Grandma acts out of kindness and love, although in unexpected ways, and so she loves the old woman dearly and does not want to leave. She goes so far as to dangerously abandon the schoolhouse right before the tornado in order to check on Grandma's safety. After the tornado, the two have one more adventure, following the pattern of Grandma giving Mary Alice a strange item (a crowbar) that is only later revealed to have a valuable use (prying Old Man Nyquist from his collapsed bedstead). Additionally, Mrs. Wilcox's adventure with her blown-away privy provides a last bit of eccentricity and comic relief.

Grandma's last strange behaviors - giving the cobhouse a good cleaning and doing all sorts of domestic tasks - is finally revealed to all be directed toward making it easier for Mary Alice to leave. Grandma is even wise enough to foresee that Mary Alice can't make the decision on her own, and so Grandma orders the girl to go home. Mary Alice states that Grandma "had eyes in the back of her heart" (p. 128), meaning that Grandma possessed an uncanny ability to detect the emotions of others and do things to make them feel better.

The brief Epilogue, "Ever After," is a cute and bittersweet way to wrap up the storyline of Royce and Mary Alice's romance and is also a way to demonstrate that Mary Alice's affection for Grandma was permanent, and was enough for Mary Alice to insist on having the marriage with Grandma in attendance. It is also important to note that, even through the years and during another World War, Grandma never changed.

Characters

Grandma Dowdel

Grandma Dowdel is Mary Alice's elderly grandmother, and she serves as the heart of the novel. She is a larger-than-life presence, and not only because of her large frame. She has a wild history with the town, including her reputation as a crack shot and her willingness to use her firearms. Her husband, Grandpa Dowdel, died many years ago, and she has carried on as a single widow. She has very little formal schooling. She is extremely self-sufficient and has a tireless work ethic, and while she lives simply, she is never in need of basic necessities.

Mary Alice is initially fearful of Grandma Dowdel, much like the rest of the town. This fear is perhaps motivated by the fact that Grandma is a woman of few words, and rarely does she explain herself or her actions. She has a strong sense of justice, and several episodes in the novel involve mischievous people in town receiving their proper comeuppance at the hands of Grandma. Despite her seeming aloofness, Grandma cares deeply about her granddaughter, and she shows kindness and generosity for several people in town who have been hit particularly hard by the depression.

Grandma is full of folk wisdom, and she always seems to have a higher level of perception about situations or people than anyone else, even Mary Alice. In various episodes, Grandma unerringly provides unexpected but entirely appropriate solutions to problems that arise in the town.

Mary Alice

Mary Alice is fifteen years old at the beginning of the novel. Her parents are so poor that they cannot afford to keep her, and so she is shipped off to live with her Grandma in a rural town south of Chicago. Mary Alice dreads the time she will spend in the town, dismissing it as a hick town, and she dreads Grandma, whom she regards with a degree of fear and confusion.

Mary Alice is very attached to her older brother Joey, whom she idolizes. Joey had always been with her during their week-long stays at Grandma's, and so without Joey, Mary Alice feels very alone. Her only comforts are her Philco radio and Bootsie, her cat.

Mary Alice is "normal" and sensible, unlike many of the citizens of the town. Like any teenage girl coming to a new town, she is self-conscious and extremely nervous about how the girls and boys will perceive her at school. She has developed new romantic feelings for boys, and especially for the handsome new boy to town, Royce McNabb.

Mary Alice comes to appreciate Grandma's wisdom, and understand that Grandma acts out of kindness and love. Also through the course of the novel, Mary Alice matures and is more confident in herself. She writes "Newsy Notes," a brief blurb for the local paper,

and in the Epilogue the reader learns that she becomes a journalist. Unlike most of the other members of the town, Mary Alice speaks and writes in proper English.

Ina-Rae Gage

Ina-Rae is a mousy, rail-thin girl in Mary Alice's high school class. She is the one girl who treats Mary Alice with kindness, and they become good friends.

Mildred Burdick

The Burdicks are known around town as con artists and all-around bad people, and Mildred meets the family expectations. She is crude and mean, and tries to bully Mary Alice into giving her a dollar.

Augie Fluke

Augie is the son of the school principal. He is the leader of a gang of Halloween pranksters, and Grandma punishes him by tripping him with wire and pouring glue all over his head.

Old Man Nyquist

Nyquist is an ancient farmer who has a long and contentious history with Grandma Dowdel. He is a miser who only promises Grandma pecans that fell from his tree because he knows that almost no pecans fell.

Carleen Lovejoy

Carleen is the "most popular girl in school" type who antagonizes Mary Alice. She is vain and haughty.

Mrs. Weidenbach

Mrs. Weidenbach is the prideful wife of the local banker who flaunts her noble lineage. Grandma gets her revenge on Weidenbach by inviting Aunt Mae Griswold to Weidenbach's party. Aunt Mae informs Weidenbach that she was actually adopted, and she does not possess the noble blood she thought.

Maxine Patch

Patch is the postmistress who takes a liking to artist Arnold Green. As part of her seduction, she agrees to be painted nude by Green in Grandma Dowdel's attic. The

large snake Grandma kept in the attic rafters to eat birds happened to fall on her while posing, and she ran out of the house naked, with a snake wrapped around her, causing her own humiliation.

Royce McNabb

The new kid in town, Royce is a stranger who regards the townspeople with confusion. Mary Alice develops a crush on him, and when Royce goes away to college, he agrees to be pen pals with Mary Alice. In the Epilogue, it is revealed that years later the two married.

Objects/Places

Philco Radio

One of Mary Alice's cherished possessions is a radio. Mary Alice listens to the various musical and variety programs of the day on her radio to help her sleep and pass the time.

Bootsie

Bootsie is a female house cat who quickly has to learn how to survive as a country cat. She lives in the cobhouse, and eventually she gives birth to a kitten.

Halloween

Unlike in Chicago, Halloween is a major event in Grandma's town, lasting weeks. It is Grandma's favorite holiday, as it feeds into her mischievous side.

Burgoo

Burgoo is a stew made from whatever spare vegetables and meat happen to be available at the time. Grandma serves burgoo stew at the American Legion turkey shoot, and she charges a premium for cups of the stew in order to help financially support Mrs. Abernathy.

The Christmas Program

The Christmas program is performed every year at the high school, and Mary Alice plays the part of Mary in the Nativity scene. The program is ruined when an actual baby, the abandoned baby of Mildred Burdick, is found in the manger on stage.

Foxes

Grandma and Mary Alice frequently go on late-night travels across the countryside to trap and shoot foxes. Grandma derives her income from selling the fox pelts to a trader.

Newsy Notes

Mary Alice submits brief, gossipy blurbs about the town to the local paper, the Piatt County Call. She calls these small articles "Newsy Notes from Our Communities."

Valentines

Mary Alice creates fake valentines cards for Ina-Rae, so that Ina-Rae can open them in front of the class and make the other girls, especially Carleen Lovejoy, jealous.

Big Black Snake

Grandma keeps a large snake in the rafters of the attic to keep away birds. This snake is revealed in fantastic fashion when it falls upon Maxine Patch, who had been posing nude for the artist Arnold Green. Maxine Patch runs out into the town nude, with the snake draped around her, and is never able to live the event down.

Tornado

In the chapter "Gone With the Wind," Grandma and Mary Alice survive a fierce tornado. Afterward, they travel to rescue Old Man Nyquist, who had been trapped by falling plaster.

Themes

Coming of Age

The novel portrays an extremely formative year in the life of its narrator, Mary Alice, and several elements in the novel emphasize the notion that Mary Alice is growing up and becoming a woman during the course of the novel.

Mary Alice herself comes to Grandma's town dreading her time there and confused and fearful of Grandma Dowdel. She dismisses the town as a hick town that is not worth her time, and she can't envision spending time there without her brother Joey to keep her company. By the end, Mary Alice not only understands Grandma, but she loves her dearly and does not want to leave. Grandma forcing Mary Alice to leave is the girl's final step of maturation. By the end, Mary Alice also gains an appreciation for small town values, such as looking out for one's neighbor and living simply and within one's means.

This theme of maturation is echoed in several places. Bootsie the cat experiences a growth similar to Mary Alice's, going from a house cat dependent on canned food to an independent country cat who has a kitten of her own. Miss Butler falls in love and becomes engaged with the artist, Arnold Green, and Mary Alice falls for cute new boy Royce McNabb, her first crush. Importantly, however, Grandma begins and ends the novel precisely the same. The novel presents Grandma, despite her flaws, as a kind of ideal and fully-realized person we might all aspire to be.

You Can't Judge a Book By Its Cover

Grandma Dowdel's characterization proves the old saying that "you can't judge a book by its cover." Setting off the train platform and newly arrived to town, Mary Alice meets Grandma. Large and imposing, Grandma doesn't offer Mary Alice a greeting, and instead only scolds her for bringing her radio (it will make too much noise) and Bootsie her cat (another mouth to feed). Grandma then immediately takes Mary Alice to school to enroll her, saying she doesn't want to be legally accountable for Mary Alice not attending. It is also revealed that Grandma is known (and feared) in town for her marksmanship.

Mary Alice, along with the reader, is slowly able to appreciate another side to Grandma. Beneath her tough exterior, Grandma cares. This is first demonstrated when Grandma saves Mary Alice from the bully, Mildred Burdick, by making Mildred's horse wander away along with Mildred's shoes. Grandma also demonstrates uncommon kindness in the chapter "A Minute in the Morning," in which she bullies attendees to the shoot to pay more than the usual dime for a cup of burgoo stew. At the end of the chapter, it is revealed that Grandma's bullying was done in order to provide Mrs. Abernathy more money to care for her invalid son.

The structure of "A Minute in the Morning" is typical of the episodes in the novel as they relate to this theme that people are often more than they appear to be. Grandma Dowdel begins by acting strangely, and even apparently unkindly. By the end, the reader is treated to the motivations behind Grandma's behavior, and with this new information Grandma can be perceived in a new and more positive light.

Justice

Grandma possesses a strong sense of justice, and part of the fun of the novel is witnessing people receiving their "just desserts," usually at the hands of Grandma. Proverbially, this justice usually takes the form of someone receiving a dose of his or her own medicine. For example, Mildred Burdick bullies Mary Alice, and Grandma responds by bullying Mildred and depriving her of her shoes and her horse. Another example is Mrs. Weidenbach, who is hopelessly stuck up regarding her lineage and her association with the Daughters of the American Revolution. Grandma puts her in her place by indirectly revealing that Mrs. Weidenbach actually has Burdick blood, and not the "pure" blood she thought she did.

Grandma values honesty, humility, simplicity, kindness, and being yourself. Conversely, she punishes bullying (Mildred), meanness (Augie Fluke and the Halloween pranksters), stinginess (as when Grandma rammed Old Man Nyquist's pecan tree with a tractor), and pride (Mrs. Weidenbach and the Daughters of the American Revolution). Grandma shares the same values with Mary Alice, but while Mary Alice is usually too meek or powerless to effect a change, Grandma always has a clever scheme to achieve justice. Author Richard Peck imparts his values to the young reader through Grandma in an unexpected and amusing way.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told in first-person perspective, through the eyes, ears, and thoughts of fifteen-year-old Mary Alice. Mary Alice is a newcomer to the town, allowing the reader to discover the town and its eccentric residents along with Mary Alice. Mary Alice is a kind of "straight man," a normal girl dealing with her Grandma's strange behavior and the general zaniness of the town.

As a teenager in a strange town, Mary Alice does not have much control over her situation, whether that means enduring one of Grandma's escapades or dealing with catty girls at high school. She suffers through it all with a good-natured grace, making her a very sympathetic character.

Presumably, Mary Alice is writing many years after the incidents related in the book, and so a certain wisdom gained from hindsight pokes its nose into the narrative at certain points. Adult Mary Alice may briefly depart from the storytelling to explain how, in hindsight, the events turned out to be not quite as horrible as they felt to her at the time, for example

Mary Alice initially regards Grandma with equal parts fear and confusion, but as the novel progresses, Mary Alice comes to understand the motivations behind Grandma's behavior - as does the reader - and by the end, Mary Alice loves Grandma dearly and does not wish to move away.

Setting

Per the Prologue, the novel takes place in 1937 in an unnamed rural town in Illinois. As the reader is told, 1937 has been a particularly bad year in the period that would later be called the Great Depression, and the impoverished circumstances of Mary Alice's family prompts Mary Alice's move to Grandma's town. Mary Alice has grown up in urban Chicago, and so the change is quite jarring for her, at least initially.

Grandma's town is a kind of hyperbolic representation of small town America. It is a tiny, poor, backwards place where everyone knows each other. It is full of eccentric personalities, not the least of which is Grandma Dowdel herself. The town's economy appears to be agriculture-based, and many people are farmers or otherwise growers of their own food. The town is technologically deficient, and it features little of the modern conveniences Mary Alice was used to in Chicago.

While the town can be full of small-town gossip, jealousy, and pettiness, as embodied in the character of Carleen Lovejoy, it also features a softer side. It can be a place where neighbors care about one another and look out for each other, such as when Grandma raised money for Mrs. Abernathy. Severe poverty defines nearly everyone and

everything in the town, and much behavior is motivated by the need to save money, such as when Grandma hunts foxes to sell for pelts.

Language and Meaning

Characters in the rural town often speak with improper English, which lends a certain charm to the novel. For a couple examples of improper English, Grandma says, "Them's pecans," when referring to pecans in a tree, and she tells Mary Alice to "pick you out a pair," when referring to choosing new shoes from a catalog. This dialect is likely a realistic portrayal of how largely uneducated rural folks may have talked in such a town at such a time. In contrast, Mary Alice herself, as the calm and intelligent "eye" to the town's hurricane, not to mention a future journalist, speaks and writes in proper English.

The novel also features a series of folksy, witty colloquialisms, especially as provided by Grandma Dowdel. Skinny Ina-Rae is described as being able to rest in the shade of a clothesline, and Aunt Griswold is described as being so old you'd have to cut her head off and count the rings (like a tree). Besides these phrases' inherent value as amusing wordplay, the phrases serve to demonstrate the wisdom of Grandma, and more generally the wisdom of the rural, simple life. While Grandma may not have formal education, her many years of living honestly and living well have allowed her to concentrate her accumulated wisdom in brief but powerful nuggets.

Structure

A Prologue provides background exposition for the premise of the novel - that is, Mary Alice living with her grandmother in a strange town. The Prologue informs the reader that Mary Alice's family has suffered through hard times and that her parents are unable at the time being to financially support Mary Alice.

The bulk of the novel deals with various adventures Mary Alice has with Grandma Dowdel. These adventures are episodic in nature, and each chapter roughly corresponds to an episode. Episodes often deal with particular discrete events, such as the school's Christmas recital or the turkey shoot at the Abernathy farm.

The usual formula with each episode is that Grandma is acting strangely, and Mary Alice cannot explain her behavior. As the episode progresses, the motivations behind Grandma's behavior become clear, and by the end Grandma has rather cleverly provided the perfect solution to a problem or crisis through her behavior. Often this progression has an emotional component as well; Grandma appears cool and uncaring at the beginning, but by the end it becomes evident that she was actually acting out of love for Mary Alice or concern for a neighbor.

An Epilogue entitled "Ever After" takes place several years after the events of the novel, during World War II. Mary Alice reveals that she has just been married to Royce

McNabb, a boy she was fond of in the novel, and that she was married in Grandma's town so that Grandma could attend.

Quotes

"I had to go down to live with Grandma Dowdel, till we could get on our feet as a family again. It meant I'd have to leave my school. I'd have to enroll in the hick-town school where Grandma lived. Me. a city girl, in a town that didn't even have a picture show."
Prologue, p. 2

"The recession of thirty-seven had hit Grandma's town harder than it had hit Chicago. Grass grew in the main street. Only a face or two showed in the window of the The Coffee Pot Cafe. Moore's Store was hurting for trade. Weidenbach's bank looked to be just barely in business."
Rich Chicago Girl, p. 6

"At last [Grandma] said, 'Them Burdicks isn't worth the powder and shot to blow them up. They're like a pack of hound dogs. They'll chase livestock, suck eggs, and lick the skillet. And steal? They'd steal a hot stove and come back for the smoke.'"
Rich Chicago Girl, p. 17

"The fall was Grandma's favorite season. She liked laying in her supplies for cold weather. As soon as the first hard frost struck her garden, she foraged farther from home. She was like a big, bushy-tailed squirrel in an apron, gathering against the long winter."
Vittles and Vengeance, p. 22

"To Grandma, Halloween wasn't so much trick-or-treat as it was vittles and vengeance. Though she'd have called it justice."
Vittles and Vengeance, p. 38

"In Chicago it never really got dark, not like this. And the house was too quiet, though things scuttled in the walls. Once in a while a thumping sound came from overhead in the attic. I didn't think Grandma's house was haunted. What ghost would dare? But she slept downstairs to spare herself the climb, so I was miles from anybody."
A Minute in the Morning, p. 39

"But now Christmas was coming, and the annual school Christmas program, so we all had to pull together. The entire student body was to be the chorus, though half of us couldn't carry a tune if it had handles. When Miss Butler ran us through 'Angels We Have Heard on High,' we sounded like starlings in a tree."
Away In a Manger, p. 56

"But what I remember best about that evening is the three of us walking home from church. I see us yet, strolling the occasional sidewalks with our arms around Grandma, just to keep her from skidding, because she said she was like a hog on ice. And every star above us was a Christmas star."
Away In a Manger, p. 74

"I couldn't tell if Mrs. Wilcox noticed me. You could never tell where she was looking. But the ancient lady was sound asleep because somebody had parked her too near the glowing stove. She was alive, though. You could have heard her breathing all over the house."
Hearts and Flour, pp. 88-89

"Somebody was thundering down the stairs. When she came into view, it was Maxine Patch, the postmistress. Draped and coiled all over her was the biggest snake I've ever seen outside the Brookfield Zoo. [...] And though I couldn't believe my eyes - and heaven knows, Royce couldn't believe his - the snake was all that Maxine wore."
A Dangerous Man, p. 106

"I wanted to explain to Grandma how she needed me here. I'd fuss about her if I wasn't here to see how she was. But she'd just spent days working herself into the ground to prove I was only in her way. She'd been helping me leave for a week."
Gone With the Wind, p. 127

"[Grandma] handed me over. Then she looked aside, out the bay window, blinking at the brightness of the day. I know because I looked back for one more glimpse of her. Then I married Royce McNabb. We lived happily ever after."
Ever After, p. 130

Topics for Discussion

How does Grandma get revenge on the Halloween pranksters?

Why does Grandma invite Miss Butler to dinner?

How does poverty affect Grandma and the other residents of the town?

Why is the American Legion Armistice Day shoot held at the Abernathy farm?

Why does Grandma keep a snake up in the attic?

How does Grandma achieve justice with respect to Mrs. Weidenbach and the Daughters of the American Revolution meeting?

What sort of reputation does Grandma have among the townspeople? What is she notorious for?