Swallow the Air

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TARA JUNE WINCH

Born in Wollongong (where parts of *Swallow the Air* are set) in 1983, Tara June Winch is an Australian of European and Aboriginal (Wiradjuri) descent. After dropping out of high school Winch hitchhiked through Australia and traveled to India before returning to attend the University of Wollongong. *Swallow the Air*, her first book, won the David Unaipon Award, which honors emerging indigenous writers. More than ten years later, in 2016, she published her second book, a collection of short stories called *After the Carnage*. Besides writing, Winch is an activist for indigenous rights and works for Australia's Indigenous Literacy Project. She currently lives in the countryside outside Paris with her husband and daughter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Traveling by boat from Southeast Asia, the first indigenous Australians arrived in the continent between 30,000 and 60,000 BCE. When James Cook, an English explorer, arrived in 1770, hundreds of thousands of Aboriginal Australians lived in settled and nomadic communities; however, Cook "claimed" the continent for the United Kingdom and a colonial government soon took hold. British settlers appropriated arable land and water resources, making it difficult for indigenous communities to survive; they were further decimated by infectious and venereal disease, which the settlers brought with them. The colonists also introduced alcohol and tobacco, creating a substance abuse problem that persists today. Since its inception, the Australian government has often been hostile to Aboriginal Australians and actively suppressed their traditional culture, which it considered detrimental to white Australian society. Between 1900 and 1970, approximately 100,000 Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in government institutions, which attempted to inculcate Anglo-Australian values and prevented children from speaking their own languages or having contact with their families. Currently, the Aboriginal population experiences high rates of suicide (especially among children), incarceration, and domestic violence, "tracking near the bottom in almost every economic and social indicator," according to Reuters.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a number of prominent Australian Aboriginal writers have emerged, whose works document the historical mistreatment of the population and denounce the dire consequences of colonization Aborigines still experience today. Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* conjures a dystopian future in which indigenous communities live under a hostile government in a wasteland fundamentally damaged by climate change. Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* returns to the past to reimagine the first interactions between the Noongar people and British colonists. Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, which chronicles the lives of three mixed-race girls who are taken from their families by the government, has become a widely-known classic. The chronology and concerns of Aboriginal and Native American literature track similarly, as the Native American population faced a comparable pattern of colonization and faces similar problems today. Like *Swallow the Air*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* meditates on the relationship between native people and the society that marginalizes and mistreats them.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Swallow the Air
- **When Written:** 2003
- **Where Written:** Australia and France
- **When Published:** 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Australian Literature
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Aboriginal communities in northern and eastern Australia
- **Climax:** May's journey to find the remains of her tribe culminates in the realization that it has disintegrated and no longer occupies its traditional lands.
- **Antagonist:** Racism and colonialism, the rapist
- **Point of View:** First person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Young Mother. Winch became a single mother at age 21 but insists she wasn't daunted by the challenge, even when she and her daughter immigrated to Paris. The city has a "generosity of spirit," Winch says, which made it easy to write and parent there.

Art follows life. While there are over 500 different tribes, or "nations," of Australian Aborigines, *Swallow the Air's* protagonist May Gibson shares her creator's Wiradjuri heritage.

PLOT SUMMARY

Swallow the Air's narrative takes place in a series of vignettes. In the first, May, the protagonist, recollects her memories of her mother's suicide. Mum tells May and her older brother, Billy, to

go fishing and to return to Aunty's house when it gets dark. The children race down to the **ocean**, where May spots a dead stingray. Neither child catches much, and when they arrive at Aunty's house they see a police car in front; they run inside and find Aunty crying. She tells them that their mother is gone forever.

Next, May describes Aunty's descent into gambling. One day, she wins a raffle at the local supermarket and gets to take home cartloads of free groceries. Aunty is elated by the prospect of feeding May and Billy a real Christmas turkey for the first time. In hopes of paying off their many bills, she starts playing the lottery and eventually becomes addicted to poker. As her losses pile up, Aunty becomes addicted to alcohol as well.

In their free time, May and Billy go "cloud busting" at the beach, where they look at the sky, explore the dunes, and collect shells and sometimes small fish. When she was alive, Mum used to fry the fish in her own mother's saucepan, which always reminded her of the same story. As a child, Mum lived in a dismal **government housing project** with her mother Alice. One day, a white traveling salesman arrives and shows all the women in the complex the beautiful cookware he's selling. All the women laugh, since they can't afford any of it, but Alice is enraptured and agrees to pay for the pans in installments. Over three years, while she saves up the money, she befriends the salesman, Samuel; when she finally pays for the pans, Samuel brings packages of meat and food along with them. Now, the pots belong to Mum and she uses them to cook for her children.

Now, May is eighth grade. Although her family is poor and Aunty is still gambling, she feels content, since she's won an art prize at school and Billy has a coveted job delivering milk. One day May goes walking on the beach. Once she was familiar with this part of town, but now it's popular with surfers who are racist and hostile towards people like her. May sees a fistfight ahead of her and tries to hide. However, one of the men sees her and pursues her through the sand until he catches her. Drawing a knife on May and calling her a "dumb black bitch," he rapes her and then leaves.

When May is fourteen, she receives a postcard from her long-absent father, apologizing for having been out of contact so long and telling her that he's been living near Darwin and picking mangoes. May looks at the postcard's idyllic description of a mango tree and imagines her Dad living in this perfect world. She remembers how he taught her to fish when she was a child. Her memories are so strong that it seems like he never left. Billy has a different father. Unlike May's father, Billy's father was Australian Aboriginal; because Billy had a heart condition and required a lot of care, he left Mum to join a band and eventually committed suicide. Billy was a sickly baby and learned to walk late, but once he did he hated to sit down, convincing Mum that he's a "fighter."

When Billy turns eighteen, Aunty gives him a flask of liquor. Billy invites May to see *Terminator* with him and a friend, and she's delighted to be included. However, when they get home, they find Aunty's abusive boyfriend, Craig, pushing her face toward the hot stove. Billy leaps on Craig, but Craig punches him in the chest and Billy falls to the floor. Watching him gasp for breath, May worries that his fragile heart will fail. After a few moments Billy gets up and walks out of the house, saying he's leaving for good. Although she knows all his usual hiding places, May can't track him down.

Shortly after Billy runs away, May decides to leave and look for her father, whom she imagines can't be a worse caretaker than Aunty. First, she goes to a squat where one of her friends once lived. Its inhabitants welcome her in and introduce her to "poppies," an addictive drink made of opium. After grocery shopping one day, May finds that Billy has arrived in the squat in the company of several heroin addicts. He's happy to see her, but she's worried because he's clearly been using drugs. That night, May goes to the bathroom and finds the dead body of a girl who has overdosed. The others abandon her body at a nearby train station and May, horrified, leaves the squat.

May hitches a ride with a friendly trucker heading towards Darwin. On the way, they stop at a rodeo, where May witnesses a brutal prizefight. She surveys the men who are watching the violence and realizes that one of them is her father. Seeing him in this context forces her to remember not just good times but also his constant abuse of Mum. She decides not to go looking for him in Darwin.

Instead, May reaches Sydney and lives on the streets. One night, an old Aboriginal woman named Joyce finds her and takes her home. Her house is small, decrepit, and located in a poor neighborhood, but Joyce is proud of her large family. May moves in with her, her daughter Justine, and Justine's son Johnny. She loves the warm atmosphere of the house, where the women sit up all night smoking and telling stories. Joyce talks about her family and encourages May to learn about her own people.

While she lives in Sydney, May works at a carwash with an African immigrant named. They both dislike their tyrannical and racist boss, Mr. Tzuilakis. Neither Charlie nor May share their backgrounds, but they become good friends. May even starts to think of him as a father figure. One day, the police arrive and deport Charlie; it's clear that Mr. Tzuilakis has turned in his own worker. Later that day, some boys from the neighborhood sneak into the chemical room to steal. Thinking that May has let them in, Mr. Tzuilakis fires her and calls the police, who come to Joyce's house. It's only because of Joyce's furious defense that May doesn't get arrested.

May's best friend is Johnny, who's about her age. In their free time, they walk the city and talk about the traditional lands of their tribes, even though neither has ever been there. In their daydreams, they paddle around their islands in canoes, dance to traditional music, and sleep in cabins under tropical storms.

Johnny reminds May of her brother.

One day, May is arrested for staying with some friends in a squat, and she spends the night in jail. In the morning, she realizes she needs to leave this grim city behind. She finds Johnny and tells him they should leave to look for their families in the country. Johnny refuses to come, saying their daydreams were just fantasies. Enraged, May tells him he's a "nobody" with no ambitions, and storms out of the house.

May hitches a ride to Lake Cowal with another trucker, who tells her that a mining compound has recently set up operations in the town she's looking for. When May arrives, she sees their compound bordered by a barbed wire fence. She remembers Mum's stories, which always centered around this place, the land of their ancestors.

In the town, May meets an Aboriginal elder named Issy, who is leading protests against the mining company. She says that while the mining corporation sees the land as empty and useless, the Aborigines whose people once lived here have a deep connection to the land. In a flashback, May remembers sitting around a fire as Mum told stories and Billy tended the fire. May remembers these as the best times in her life.

Issy instructs May that in order to find the remains of her tribe, she should walk along the river for four days. As she walks, surviving on fish she catches in the river, May tries not to worry about what she'll find. Eventually, she reaches the road and walks towards Eubalong, the town where her relatives live.

May hitchhikes to a mission outside Eubalong. She meets an old man sitting on his front porch, and tells him she's looking for the Gibsons. He tells her that the inhabitants of the mission have become alcoholics because of their bleak prospects and discrimination by the government, which is still trying to "kill off us fellows." He directs her to an old woman, Betty, who knows more about families living in the area. Betty's daughter, Jo, agrees to drive May to Lake Cargelligo, where the only Gibsons she knows live.

May finds herself at a neat white house and knocks on the door. Inside, she finds her distant cousin, Percy Gibson. He asks her skeptically if shes wants money, and laughs at her when she says she's looking for "stories." He tells her she's just like her grandmother, who left the town "looking for…meaning" and returned destitute with several children. Percy says that when he was growing up, people "weren't allowed to be Aboriginal," so the old stories don't exist anymore.

Percy leaves to play golf, but his wife Dotty feeds May before she sets out again. At first, May is crushed by her cousin's behavior, but as she walks down the highway she has an epiphany and realizes that "this land is belonging, all of it for all of us." Her new connection to the environment makes her feel closer to her mother.

May finds another trucker to give her a ride away from the town. Before leaving she buys some food in a supermarket and sees in a newspaper that Johnny has been killed in a police chase. While she's devastated, she's also happy that he died with his dreams intact, having never chosen to test them.

In a flashback, May remembers the jacaranda tree that stood in the backyard of Mum's house. It bloomed briefly each year, and Mum always threatened to chop it down but secretly loved it. When Mum finally committed suicide, her body was found under the jacaranda tree, and May finds peace in imagining her lying there.

When May returns to her town, she imagines that Mum knows she's there. She also knows that she has to stop running away and embrace what remains of her family. May arrives at Aunty's house only to find her aunt crying at the kitchen table. Aunty informs her that they're being evicted. However, May is delighted to see that Billy is there and that he's not using drugs. May knows that one of Aunty's few pleasures is buying a new tablecloth for her kitchen table; as a child, she always visited Aunty's house to celebrate one of these purchases. To cheer Aunty up, she suggests that they go the store and buy a new tablecloth. Aunty agrees, excited.

Outside, May sees gulls drifting over the ocean and hears an excavator starting in the distance. She wonders what it would take to stop them from digging up Aunty's backyard, "digging up a mother's memory…digging up our people."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

May Gibson – The novel's protagonist, a fifteen-year-old Aboriginal Australian girl. May grows up in an impoverished **housing project** in the coastal city of Wollongong. Her Dad abandons the family when she's a young girl and her Mum commits suicide a few years later, leaving her to be raised by Aunty, who is an alcoholic and gambling addict. Due to the instability of her parent figures and family life, May is incredibly self-sufficient and astute, leaving home and acting as an adult even though she's very young. Her traumatic childhood also informs her craving for a more functional and loving family, leading her to set off across Australia in search first of Dad and then of Mum's relatives. As the novel progresses, May becomes more curious about her Aboriginal heritage, which she views as an escape from the urban poverty and addiction she observes everywhere she visits. In this sense, her journey is a failure; instead of the thriving Aboriginal society she dreams of, May finds that her mother's family has all but died out and her remaining relative, Percy, is intent on assimilating into Anglo-Australian society and uninterested in a relationship with her. However, over the course of the novel May grows more mature, learns about Aboriginal culture and her connection to the land around her, and becomes reconciled to the childhood memories that have caused her so much pain. Her eventual

return to Wollongong shows that she's finally able to face her childhood without pain, and that she's newly committed to keeping her family intact, despite its flaws.

Mum – May and Billy's beloved mother. Mum is a source of traditional Aboriginal stories that delight and inspire her children; she encourages them to explore the **beach** near their house and cultivate a connection with nature, even though they live in an overdeveloped and impoverished **housing project**. Her emphasis on the importance of Aboriginal heritage provides the impetus for May's quest to find her family and tribe. However, Mum is mentally ill and sometimes an unstable caregiver. Even as a child, May notices the sadness that stalks her; she's unable to stand up to May's abusive father, and after Dad leaves she becomes increasingly paranoid about the government and "conspiracies." Eventually, Mum commits suicide, leaving May and Billy in Aunty's hands. While Mum isn't alive during any of the novel's present action, May is dogged by memories of their life together, and Mum's principles inspire her actions throughout her journey.

Billy Gibson – May's brother. Older than May by some years, Billy has a different father, and is born with a heart condition; as a baby he goes through multiple surgeries, and he's sickly for much of his early life. Eventually, Billy triumphs over his disability by learning to walk and run, a development that Mum views as evidence of his fighting spirit. Billy and May are extremely close during childhood; they both love to explore the beach and go fishing in the **ocean** near their home. It's Billy as much as Aunty who takes care of May after Mum's suicide. Accordingly, when Billy runs away after an altercation with Craig, May too becomes dissatisfied and restless, and soon leaves home. During his wandering, Billy starts to use drugs, and it seems as if he's going to repeat Aunty's mistakes and succumb to the substance abuse that menaces many Aboriginal communities. However, he stops using and returns home at the end of the novel, triumphing over his circumstances just as May does by coming to terms with her Aboriginal identity.

Aunty – Mum's sister and May's aunt, who takes in May and Billy after Mum commits suicide. While Aunty is loving and affectionate, she's not a very reliable caretaker. She's addicted to drinking and gambling, and often vanishes to the casinos or spends the family's little money on her addictions. Aunty reflects the substance abuse that characterizes many Aboriginal communities, largely due to a long history of colonial mistreatment and the current lack of opportunity within Anglo-Australian society. It's partly to escape the instability of family life with Aunty that May leaves home in search of more functional relatives. However, as she matures throughout the novel, May learns to appreciate Aunty despite her weaknesses. When she finally returns home and consoles Aunty about her imminent eviction, May emerges as the caretaker of the person who once took care of her, showing her renewed devotion to her family.

Dad – May's father, a white man who abandons the family long before Mum's suicide. At first, May remembers her father as an ideal parent who played with her patiently, taught her to fish, and repaired her bike. When he sends her a postcard after years without contact, she decides to leave her unsatisfactory home with Aunty in search of him. However, when May finally comes across him, he's a cheering spectator at a brutal prizefight. The violent context of this encounter forces May to remember the violent tendencies he exhibited during her childhood. Far from being a responsible parent, he was addicted to marijuana and abused Mum. While revisiting these memories is painful, the experience allows May to move past her father and come to terms with his abandonment. Her disillusionment with Dad also causes May to become more connected and committed to her Aboriginal heritage.

Alice / Old Mum – Mum's mother, who frequently figures in the stories she tells May. Percy Gibson tells May that Alice left home as a young woman hoping to find meaning, just as May does. However, she ends up having several children with abusive partners and lives in poverty for the rest of her life. In many ways, May's sense of hope and self-actualization at the end of the novel is a redemption of her grandmother's suffering.

Samuel – A kind traveling salesman who visits the housing project where Mum, a young girl, lives with her mother Alice. Alice longs for the beautiful pots and pans he's peddling but doesn't have the money to buy them, so she makes payments every month for three years, becoming closer friends with Samuel each time he visits. When he finally delivers the cookware, Samuel brings gifts of food as well, showing his generosity.

The Man / The Rapist – A white man who rapes May while she's walking along the beach near her house. This is a traumatic event, which informs May's disillusionment with her childhood and her decision to leave home. May feels a deep spiritual connection to the **ocean**, because she's always lived there and because her tribe, the Wiradjuri, have an affinity for water; however, the rapist tells her that she doesn't "belong" there and assaults her to assert his ownership of the land and control of the people who live there. This reflects the broader relationship between Aboriginal and Anglo-Australians, who enforce their control of the land by brutal oppression of its original inhabitants.

Joyce / The Old Woman – An elderly woman who finds May living on the street in Sydney and gives her a home. Joyce lives in a crowded urban neighborhood, nicknamed the Block, and populated mostly by people of Aboriginal descent. While the neighborhood is impoverished and substance abuse is rampant, there's also a strong sense of community, of which Joyce is the center; the old women of the Block frequently gather in her house to drink wine and tell stories. While she faces many of the same hardships, Joyce is a much more capable caregiver

than May's own parents and Aunty, and her example shows May that one can live amid poverty and oppression while maintaining a strong character and a devotion to one's family.

Johnny – Joyce's grandson and May's best friend while she lives in Sydney. Initially, Johnny wants May to be his girlfriend, but after she briskly rejects him they become good friends; May even says he reminds her of her beloved brother, Billy. The two teenagers bond over their common interest in their Aboriginal heritage and spend afternoons daydreaming about life in traditional Aboriginal societies, fantasizing that such societies still exist and that one day they'll be able to escape the Block and return to them. However, it's May who has the courage to pursue this dream, while Johnny refuses to leave the Block; her determination contrasts with Johnny's fatalism. At the end of the novel Johnny dies in an altercation with the police. While she mourns the loss of her friend, May is also relieved that he died with his dreams intact, without discovering that the life they always dreamed of doesn't exist.

Charlie – May's coworker at Mr. Tzuilakis's car wash, who is eventually deported. May becomes deeply attached to the gentle older man, even envisioning him as her father, showing her intense longing for a more stable and loving father figure than the one who abandoned her years ago. Charlie is an immigrant from an unspecified country in Africa, but his extreme reluctance to discuss his origins suggests that he fled bad circumstances in his homeland. Charlie's brief appearance in the novel links Aboriginal Australians to other marginalized groups and shows that displacement is a global issue, rather than one specific to Australia.

Issy – A Wiradjuri elder living in **Lake Cowal** and organizing protests of the mining company that wants to set up drilling operations there. May meets Issy when she arrives at the lake (the center of traditional Wiradjuri lands) during her quest to find her Gibson family. Issy takes the young girl under her wing, teaching her about their common heritage; it's Issy's principles that inspire May's later epiphany about the spiritual connection between humans and nature. While May's Gibson relatives prove a disappointment, meeting Aboriginal mentors like Issy make her journey instructive and worthwhile.

Mr. Tzuilakis – May's arrogant boss when she works at the car wash in Sydney, who helps the police deport Charlie, another employee who is an undocumented immigrant. The novel doesn't divulge much about this character, but by giving him a Greek name it implies that he's an immigrant, in which light his behavior towards Charlie takes on a distinct tinge of hypocrisy. Through Mr. Tzuilakis, the novel points out the hypocrisy of all European Australians who act as if they own the land, when in fact they are all immigrants to its shores.

Uncle / Graham – An old man May meets while looking for her Gibson relatives in the **mission** outside Eubalong. Like Issy, Uncle is an Aboriginal elder who helps May gain more knowledge about her people by telling her about the history of the mission and the people who live there. His depiction of the government's forcible relocation of Aboriginals from desirable property in Sydney to dismal settlements in the dry countryside illuminates the connection between the public housing projects that are ubiquitous throughout the novel and the historical displacement Aboriginal Australians have experienced since European colonization.

Percy Gibson – Mum's cousin, and the one relative May finds at the end of her journey. Living with his wife Dotty in a tidy suburban house and devoted to golf, Percy has moved away from his Aboriginal roots and is intent on assimilating into Anglo-Australian society. His lifestyle is a marked contrast to the thriving, traditional society May had hoped to find. Percy shows May that she can't resolve her dissatisfaction with her own life and the situation of Aborigines in Australia by recreating the pre-colonial past; rather, she has to honor and preserve her heritage while moving forward into the future.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sheepa – A man who lives in the squat, or abandoned building, where May goes after leaving Aunty's house. Sheepa is kind to May and provides her with food and a safe place to sleep, but he also introduces her to opium.

Craig – Aunty's abusive boyfriend. Craig's disruption of the equilibrium of Aunty's house, and his eventual fistfight with Billy, provide the impetus for Billy's flight from home. Craig is one of the novel's many examples of brutal domestic violence, and shows the destabilizing effect such violence has on family relationships.

The Overdose Girl – A girl who overdoses and dies in Sheepa's squat while May is living there. Shocked by this incident, May soon leaves the squat and hitchhikes to Sydney.

Betty – An elderly woman living in the mission outside of Eubalong, who tells May where to find her Gibson relatives.

Jo – Betty's daughter.

Gary – A man who gives May a ride from Sydney to **Lake Cowal**.

Pete – A kindly truck driver who gives May a ride from her Wollongong to Sydney.

Justine – Joyce's daughter and Johnny's father, a well-meaning woman who succumbs to drug addiction.

Vardy – Billy's friend.

Billy's Father – Mum's first partner, an Aboriginal man who leaves her just after Billy is born and later commits suicide.

Dotty – Percy Gibson's wife.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE POWER OF MEMORY

Swallow the Air, a novel about an Aboriginal girl's struggle to come to grips with her troubled childhood in the wake of her mother's suicide, makes frequent gestures to memory and the role it plays in influencing characters' actions. With its fragmentary style—the protagonist, May often narrates both happy and disturbing memories concurrently with present action, or as abrupt interjections to that action—the novel presents memory as both guiding and complicating May's life. While May often wishes to escape her memories or avoid reckoning with them, by the end of the novel she's able to move past the memories that trouble her and draw on positive memories to find strength and confidence for the future.

The constant interjection of past recollections into current action illustrates how memories play a key role in shaping the present. The narrative is often difficult to navigate due to May's tendency of shifting back and forth between memories and current events without distinguishing between them. This technique attempts to replicate the slippery nature of consciousness, showing that memories aren't just confined to the past. Instead, memories are always present, influencing May's course of action. Even at climactic moments of trauma or decision, May often finds recourse in a memory. Early in the novel, a stranger pursues May down the beach and presumably rapes her. To escape from this trauma, May says that the rapist's "popping buttons [...] take me elsewhere," to a happy memory of May popping bubble wrap with her brother, Billy.

Sometimes, memories prove traumatic and misguiding; in order to function and move on with her life, May has to learn to let them go. One day, May's long-absent father sends her a postcard whose cavalier tone—"sorry it's been a long time [...] from Dad"—indicates, if anything, his irresponsible attitude towards fatherhood. However, because of her deep desire to have one functioning parent, May invents a loving father out of the few memories she has of him. Recalling vague instances of eating watermelon or repairing a bike together, May forgets her father's abandonment and abuse and says, "he might as well have been right there."

This selective memory spurs May to leave home in search of her father, only to run into him at a rodeo, eagerly cheering an appallingly brutal wrestling match. When she finally sees her father, she's struck by his "hand like a claw [...] full of engorged veins," and finally remembers that he is not the parent she "made myself imagine" but in fact "the monster I'd tried to hide." Abruptly, May recollects the entirety of his character, remembering that after Dad fixed her bike he went inside and attacked her Mum with the very tools he'd just used. Leaving the rodeo without acknowledging her father, May says that "only when I remembered, could I finally forget." In this case, clinging to bits and pieces of old memories of her father is detrimental and misleading. By confronting the truth about her father, May is able to let her memories go, and consequently gain clarity and resolution.

Although memories can be misleading or painful, memory also emerges as a grounding and empowering force by the end of the novel. By constantly retelling and insisting that her children remember important Aboriginal myths, May's mother instills a reverence for memory and asserts that a conscious effort to remember can preserve important tribal knowledge that is in danger of disappearing. This teaches May that it's "all right not to forget."

At the novel's end, May returns to Aunty's house only to find her aunt sobbing and Billy distressed, because the family is facing imminent eviction. Sitting at the kitchen table, which is layered with different tablecloths, May remembers that throughout her childhood, whenever Aunty wanted to do something special she bought a new tablecloth. May, Mum, and Billy would always come over to admire the new purchase and share dinner. May suggests that they shop for a new tablecloth now, and Aunty immediately revives at the prospect, exclaiming that she can't be evicted "with a tablecloth to wear in!" In this case, shared memories facilitate May's reunion with the family she left at the beginning of the novel. For May, the memory about tablecloths creates a sense of continuity with her mother and allows May to overcome feelings of separation and loss. Most importantly, the memory allows the family to move into the future with renewed confidence, even though they're facing more challenges than ever.

Always present in the novel's non-chronological narrative, memory is neither an unequivocally positive nor negative force. At times, reliance on memory proves a hindrance to May, leading her on misguided quests. However, drawing on memories—particularly positive ones—also allows her to face an uncertain future with equanimity and courage.

ABORIGINAL IDENTITY

Swallow the Air's protagonist, May Gibson, is a descendant of the Wiradjuri Aboriginals, who have lived in Australia for millennia. However, several centuries of colonial rule has attacked and suppressed Aboriginal culture, which means that May's heritage is largely a mystery to her. For May, the allure of traditional Aboriginal culture contrasts starkly with the marginalization of Aborigines by the dominant Anglo-Australian society. To cope with her

disheartening reality, May dreams of an intact and powerful Aboriginal society to which she can one day return. This dream fuels her quest to find her remaining family members, only to be shattered when she discovers that the society of her imagination doesn't exist, and her relatives live in **housing projects** much like the one in which she grew up. While this experience shows May that lost Aboriginal cultures can't ever be fully restored, it also leads her to define herself in terms of her identity as an Aborigine, and commit to protecting the remains of her heritage.

In order to demonstrate the precarious and endangered state of Aboriginal culture, the novel associates that culture with nature, while setting the novel in an overdeveloped and hostile urban landscape. Mum, who gives May all her knowledge of Aboriginal culture through stories, always encourages May and Billy to go fishing and immerse themselves in the little nature that exists around their housing project. May's mother commits suicide under her beloved jacaranda tree; her choice to die in a natural setting reflects her affinity for her Aboriginal heritage.

In contrast, the narrative is located in bleak urban housing projects, which are associated with threats to Aboriginal identity. Mum grew up in a complex filled with women whose children had been taken away from them by the government in an effort to prevent an Aboriginal upbringing and make them more "Australian." In an important incident, May walks down the bike path of her own development, reminiscing that it used to be connected to a beach where she went fishing as a child. Now, she's pursued and raped by a white Australian man, who says he's assaulting her to "show ya where ya don't belong dumb black bitch." This horrifying moment emblematizes the dichotomy between a highly positive Aboriginal identity connected to nature and the suppression and hatred of Aboriginal identity in modern Australian society.

While living in the slums of Sydney, May and her friend Johnny dream of an intact Aboriginal society to which they can eventually return. While this dream helps them cope with the grim realities of their lives, it ultimately heightens the sense of tragedy when May discovers that her culture, in its original form, has been annihilated and can't be recreated. May describes these daydreams as though they're a present reality, saying that "we scramble up the palms [...] we run down to the rocky beaches and cast off our canoe [...] we visit other islands and trade food and sing songs." May combats the degradation of her people by imagining an alternative universe in which their proud way of life still exists—and even thrives—and their identity is embraced instead of suppressed.

Of course, these fantasies prove illusory when May actually tries to pursue them. When May returns to the ancient lands of the Wiradjuri tribe, instead of a big family to give her a "feed" (May's word for a hearty meal, usually shared with family or friends) May finds a dilapidated public housing project similar to her own. Her one living cousin, Percy, has actively distanced himself from his Aboriginal identity in order to fit in among the Anglo-Australian middle class. At first mocking May's desire to hear "stories," or learn about her heritage, May's cousin later tells her more seriously that "there is a big missing hole between this place and the place you're looking for." By informing May that the place she's searching for is "gone," Percy suggests that it's impossible to restore Aboriginal culture to its former state after centuries of oppression.

While this realization is crushing for May, it ultimately causes her to identify even more strongly as Aboriginal, and reaffirms her commitment to safeguarding her heritage. Her cousin proves a disappointment, but May meets Aboriginal elders who increase her knowledge of Aboriginal culture and show her that, even in a modern world where this culture is endangered and severely undervalued, her identity can still be a source of personal pride and strength. Soon after leaving her cousin's house, May recalls the words of an old woman named Issy, and realizes that "these tears are not only my own. They belong to the whales, to Joyce; they belong to Charlie, to Cary, to Johnny, to Issy..." Even though May hasn't found the family she longed for, she has acquired a strong sense of connectedness to her culture. May puts this newfound commitment to her heritage into practice by returning to her family and refusing to let it disintegrate, even in the face of eviction. By fighting for cohesion and continuity, she's working at a microcosmic level to restore the damage that centuries of colonial rule have inflicted on Australian Aborigines.

The novel is hopeful about the prospects of Aboriginal culture, but only cautiously so. At the novel's end, May notices an excavator starting up outside Aunty's house and says it's "digging up our people." Her remark shows that development, and the oppression associated with it, is still a lurking menace; yet her use of the plural "our" shows that she's acquired a sense of cultural identity and strength that was lacking at the novel's outset.

DISPLACEMENT

Swallow the Air follows Aboriginal protagonist May Gibson as she searches for a sense of belonging after her mother commits suicide. As the novel progresses, May travels from the small town where she grew up to inner-city Sydney and finally rural areas where her tribe, the Wiradjuri, once lived. In every place she visits, she describes the lives of poor members of minority groups living on the margins of Australian society, people who are systematically oppressed and then reviled for their poverty and desperation. The novel creates a strong sense of displacement through its disjointed style and the structure of its narrative, which leaps erratically from place to place. Through these techniques, Winch emphasizes the plight of Australian Aborigines, who are excluded from and oppressed within modern contemporary society, while also noting that this unjust phenomenon isn't

limited to them but applies to other disadvantaged groups as well. Closing with Aunty's imminent eviction from her house, the novel promises no end to this exclusion and oppression; however, by stressing the Gibson family's emotional strength in the midst of crisis, the novel suggests that the family will prevail over the constant displacement it experiences.

Frequent use of the literary technique of estrangement—describing commonplace things or events in such a way that they seem strange or even difficult to comprehend—creates a sense of uncertainty and volatility in the narrative. For example, when May witnesses the brutal prizefight at the rodeo, she gives a highly disjointed description of the event, skipping from the "jawbone [that] crunches" to the "bloodied eyeballs [that] throw blank expressions." She never explicitly names the event she's watching, leaving the reader to deduce what's happening. By using estrangement to create a fragmentary and sometimes confusing tone, Winch prevents the reader from developing complacency or even security within the narrative. The reader's experience of instability and confusion reflects May's attitude toward her own unsettled, transitory life.

Creating an additional sense of transience by following May as she moves frequently from place to place, the novel reflects the inability of Australian Aborigines to find a meaningful place in society. Just as the narrative rejects stylistic security, May lacks a stable or satisfying home for most of the novel. Instead, she moves from place to place to escape drugs, domestic violence, or demoralizing poverty. Her journeys frequently involve danger and prevent her from considering any particular place a home. Such displacement reflects the tragically ironic experience of Australian Aborigines. Although they've inhabited the land for tens of thousands of years, colonial rule has not only destroyed their traditional society and abolished their lands, but it has also prevented them from settling anywhere else or finding meaningful occupation.

It's also important that this phenomenon of exclusion extends beyond Australian Aborigines to marginalized groups of all sorts. In one of the novel's poignant incidents, May's coworker Charlie, an undocumented African immigrant, is deported unceremoniously by the police. His displacement from his native country and subsequent expulsion from Australia mirrors May's displacement, both from her traditional land and from modern Australian society.

While the novel ends on a moment of familial reunion and solidarity, it promises no end to this cycle of displacement. May eventually returns home, but there she finds Aunty facing imminent eviction. Although May cheers Aunty up by taking her to buy a tablecloth—a cherished memory for them both—this isn't a real solution for the problem at hand, and it's clear that the family will soon have to uproot itself and try to establish a new life elsewhere. May's modest triumph is that, while the stress and instability of displacement can cause family units to disintegrate, May refuses to let this impinge on her family's cohesion now.

In the last paragraph, May watches an excavator prepare to dig up Aunty's backyard, a tangible signal that their home will soon be lost, and she uncertainly imagines in a future in which "maybe" things like this won't happen. It's a sign of May's personal strength that she can conceive of a future in which she's no longer displaced. However, given the word "maybe," her inability to truly envision such a future is an indictment of her oppressive society.

Examining May's itinerant and unsettled lifestyle, *Swallow the Air* meditates on the suffering of Australian Aborigines, who undergo not only physical displacement from their land but also the psychological displacement that occurs when they are excluded from any meaningful role in society.

FAMILY

In *Swallow the Air*, families are usually unreliable and often violent. At the outset, they seem to be causes of distress rather than sources of strength. In fact, May's dissatisfaction with Mum and Dad, who have abandoned her, and Aunty, who is an imperfect caretaker, drives her to leave home. May's growing fascination with and long search for her Aboriginal tribe reflects a poignant desire to be situated in a family that is exempt from the flaws and struggles that characterize her actual relatives, while the anticlimactic end to this quest shows that such a family can't exist in real life. However, by showing May returning to and embracing the relatives she left, the novel argues that even deeply flawed families can provide peace and fulfillment unavailable in other aspects of life.

Especially in her early life, May's experience paints a picture of an unstable family that perpetuates cycles of violence and abandonment. May and Billy are born to different fathers, and both have abandoned them. At one point, May receives a postcard from her Dad apologizing halfheartedly that "it's been a long time that you haven't heard from your old man," and saying that he "might send you some treasure." Such a missive is a mockery of the serious obligations fatherhood entails. While Mum is loving and well-intentioned, her deteriorating mental health, culminating in suicide, prevents her from being an effective guardian. Mum's sister Aunty takes in Billy and May, but she's an alcoholic, and her boyfriend Craig abuses her and eventually attacks Billy as well. Billy feels betrayed by the fact that Aunty has allowed violence into their home rather than protecting her niece and nephew, and this drives him and eventually May to run away.

While the novel rarely discusses this explicitly, its many portraits of broken families reflect the damage inflicted by the Australian government's policy of family separation, in which Aboriginal children (especially children of mixed-race heritage)

were taken from their parents and raised in public institutions, in order to indoctrinate them with Anglo-Australian culture and values. Affecting many children of Mum's generation, including some of her own siblings, this policy destroyed family structures and left its victims unable to form healthy, stable families of their own.

However, families—especially unconventional ones—can provide safety and strength in the midst of an otherwise unstable environment. While May can't rely on her parents, she has an extremely close relationship with her brother, Billy. Remarking on their strong sense of unity, she says that "Billy and me were like shadows [...] We'd move on the same tides." When May is living on the streets of Sydney, a woman named Joyce takes her in and May assimilates into her family, an impoverished but loving clan that provides May with a model of family life unmarked by the violence she's grown up with.

May's disillusionment with both her biological parents and her adoptive one (Aunty) inspires her journey to the Wiradjuri lands, where she hopes she'll find an intact tribal family that has escaped the ravages inflicted by the Australian government on most Aborigines. When it proves fruitless, this quest further emphasizes the tragic collapse of Aboriginal families under colonial rule. However, it also causes May to recommit to her existing, imperfect family. When she returns home, even though she still faces significant challenges, her renewed unity with Aunty and Billy gives her enough courage to face them.

By portraying families who love but can't take care of each other, the novel highlights the effects of Anglo-Australian oppression on the character of Aboriginal families. Thus, the novel urges its readership to consider not just the behavior of individual families, but the extent to which that behavior is governed by political and cultural circumstances.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Swallow the Air is rife with examples of substance abuse. Most of the adults who are supposed to take care of May and Billy fall prey to drugs or alcohol, and as the children grow up, they too seem at risk of derailing their lives by using drugs. The novel does not shy away from portraying the ruinous effects of addiction, which causes not only overdose deaths but psychological crises and violence within families. At the same time, it's clear that characters turn to substances in order to cope with their harsh lives; the novel contends that substance abuse is not a personal moral failing but the result of systemic poverty and oppression. In doing so, it delivers a deeply humanizing portrait of people who suffer from addiction, and an indictment of the society that drives them into it.

From the outset of the novel, there's a clear link between the crushing poverty that most of the characters experience and the widespread phenomenon of substance abuse. Every week, Aunty engages in a contained form of gambling, entering a supermarket lottery to win a free shopping spree. When she finally wins, she's elated at the prospect of finally having enough food and being able to feed Billy and May expensive things, like fresh turkey. In order to replicate this "high" and pay some of their other bills, Aunty turns to gambling at the local casino and then to drinking. Her addiction is thus a direct result of her feelings of shame and despair at being unable to provide for her family.

Similarly, May finds comfort to an opium-infused drink when she has to flee Aunty's abusive boyfriend, Craig, and live in a squat, or abandoned building. For May, the opium high is a way to cope with her dangerous and uncertain new life. May and Aunty's experiences both illustrate how characters turn to substances in situations of high pressure. In this way, addiction is a reflection of the circumstances around them, rather than a sign of moral inadequacy.

In its blunt but non-judgmental descriptions of addiction, *Swallow the Air* emphasizes the serious ramifications of substance abuse while simultaneously encouraging empathy towards its victims. The novel strips the topic of remote or complicated language. May describes her opium water as "little black dots" submersed in a cola bottle, and describes Billy "[unwrapping] the small package of foil" when she sees him using hard drugs for the first time. Framing substance abuse in terms of everyday actions, Winch makes it a disturbingly relatable prospect and thus prevents harsh judgment of the characters.

The novel is also unsparing in its descriptions of the casualties of drugs. When Billy and his friends use heroin, they have "sunken brown and yellow stones" for eyes. Later the same night, May stumbles upon a girl who has overdosed and died, "wilting in a puddle of peach-tiled water" in the bathroom. May watches Billy carry the girl's body outside, saying that her brother "was vacant [...] He did not wake." This moment highlights not only the death toll of drug use, but the psychological toll it takes on the normally close relationship between brother and sister.

Swallow the Air is deeply critical of substance abuse, which it presents as dangerous not only to individuals but to the fabric of society. However, the novel also seeks to separate addiction from its victims, arguing that while drugs are terrible and destructive, those who use them are complex people facing harsh circumstances. In this way, the novel urges its readers to view those struggling with addiction with empathy, sensitivity, and respect.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WATER

Water and bodies of water are present at many important parts of the novel, reminding May of her important but tenuous connection to her Aboriginal identity. During her childhood, she and Billy play constantly in the ocean and explore the beach; a refuge from their chaotic, sometimes abusive home, it provides not only psychological fulfillment but physical sustenance, as they often catch fish for dinner there. May says that she's not scared of the ocean until she grows up, showing her primeval connection with the water. Issy, an Aboriginal elder, tells May that their tribe, the Wiradjuri, are "people of the river and the lakes." Mum, who transmits the little knowledge of Aboriginal culture May possesses, often tells stories about the lake where the tribe used to live and "where all Wiradjuri would stop to drink." In their stories, bodies of water are manifestations of the individual's connection both to tribal culture and to nature itself.

However, many of these bodies of water are endangered or becoming inaccessible to their Aboriginal inhabitants. The lake that Mum spoke about is threatened by mining operations when May visits it, and although May's neighborhood is close to the beach, she predicts that it will soon be developed into expensive real estate and its occupants pushed somewhere else. Throughout the novel, Aboriginal characters' spiritual affinity for water contrasts with their imminent or remembered loss of the water. Thus, water symbolizes not only the beauty and power of traditional Aboriginal culture but the extent to which that culture is undervalued and destroyed in the dominant Anglo-Australian society.

HOUSING PROJECTS

Much of the novel takes place in impoverished housing projects or "council estates"—apartment complexes that are funded and controlled in the government. May lives in a project whose name, Paradise Parade, seems blatantly ironic given its complete dereliction. A generation earlier, Mum grew up in an equally depressing project in Gouldburn. The novel makes clear that the choice to live in these projects isn't voluntary but mandated by the government. May suspects that her beachfront neighborhood will soon be turned into expensive houses and the government will "move us mob out to the western suburbs." In talking about her own childhood, Mum says that she and her mother were "sent to Gouldburn from the river." The housing projects are part of a system in which the government pushes marginalized populations away from coveted land (like the beachfront) to less-desirable locations, depending on the needs and desires of its more valued citizens. This phenomenon is strongly reminiscent of the generations of forced relocation and displacement that Aboriginals endured under Anglo-Australian colonial rule; from their first arrival, settlers pushed Aboriginals away from arable land and bodies of **water** to dry and inhospitable land where, naturally, they had difficulty surviving. The housing projects symbolize the pattern of colonial rule; through them, the novel makes clear that the historical injustice doesn't just exist in the past. In fact, its legacy stretches into the present, influencing the behavior of governments, contributing to the poverty and instability of Aboriginal communities, and informing the sense of rootlessness that May feels deeply, and which inspires her quest across Australia.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Queensland Press edition of *Swallow the Air* published in 2006.

1. Swallow the Air Quotes

❝ I thought about Mum's pain being freed from her wrists, leaving her body, or what was left […] And I knew it was all right not to forget.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Mum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This quote encapsulates May's feelings when she finds that her mother has committed suicide. While suicide is both common and stigmatized within the Australian Aboriginal community, May is very sympathetic towards her mother and her opinion of Mum does not change after she kills herself. May's thoughts in this passage recall her experience just paragraphs earlier when she discovered a dead stingray lying on the shore. Saddened by its bloated corpse, May pierces its body, remarking afterward that it looked "not longer whole" but "free." Similarly, even though Mum is dead, May imagines her as "freed"; to May, freedom is more important than wholeness or even, in some cases, life. Comparing Mum to the stingray establishes both May and Mum's connection to the natural world, a motif that will reoccur throughout the novel. Moreover, May's statement that it was "all right not to forget" is the first of many assertions that Mum represents the positive and redemptive possibilities of memory.

4. My Bleeding Palm Quotes

❝ Paradise Parade, built over the old Paradise Abattoir, bore two long rows of housing commission flats, unregistered cars, busted prams and echoes of broken dreams, all crammed into our own special section of Woonona Beach. Paradise, ha!

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

As she walks through the housing projects in which she lives, May describes her neighborhood and reflects on the way it shapes its inhabitants. Despite its deceptively cheerful moniker, Paradise Parade is characterized by poverty and desperation, as the poor housing and illegal cars demonstrate. These material conditions are tied to the psychological state of the people who live there; describing the "echoes of broken dreams" that shape the neighborhood, May invokes both the present lack of opportunities and the past injustice that has created this reality. Moreover, ironically noting that the neighborhood has its "own special section" of the beach, May implicitly hints at the displacement of poor and Aboriginal communities from more desirable property and their marginalization from the general fabric of society. The novel's first of many descriptions of housing projects shows that these institutions both shape and emblematize the pernicious relationship between Aboriginal Australians and Anglo-Australian society.

❝ Soon they'd demolish all the fibro and move us mob out to the western suburbs. For now we were to be satisfied with the elitist postcode and our anonymity.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

After discussing the many flaws in her neighborhood, May predicts that the worst is yet to come—it's likely that the government will sell the land to wealthy developers and force its inhabitants to move inland. Importantly, May is spot on in her prediction—by the end of the novel, Aunty is facing eviction and apartments are being torn down, presumably to make way for larger houses. Her prescience reflects the repeated episodes of displacement the Aboriginal community faces, both as a result of current housing discrimination and because of the historical tendency of pushing Aboriginals off desirable land in favor of white settlers. The possible removal from the beach is especially painful for May because the ocean is central to her few positive childhood memories, and proximity to water helps her feel closer to her Aboriginal identity. Thus, the potential loss of the neighborhood reflects both a personal tragedy and a larger pattern of injustice.

5. Bushfire Quotes

❝ It is their land, Mum would say, so we have to help look after it for them in exchange for our staying here. Be respectful, she'd say.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Mum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

As May retreats to one of her favorite escapes, the forest outside her town, she notices the leeches all around her and remembers how Mum once said that they were sacred to the Aboriginal tribe that originally lived here and used them for medicine. Even though the leeches frighten May, and even though they're not special to her particular tribe, Mum says she has to respect and help protect them. The behavior Mum models is a direct contrast and rebuke to the behavior of Anglo-Australian society. From the first arrival of white settlers to Australia to the government in existence now, Aboriginal lands have been treated with marked disrespect, and their cultural practices with indifference or outright hostility. Although Mum often seems like a haphazard parent, it's clear that she deliberately teaches May important lessons that both put her in touch with her Aboriginal identity and allow her to identify the injustice occurring all around her.

6. Leaving Paradise Quotes

❝ Billy and me were like shadows; we could merge into the walls without being noticed. We'd move on the same tides; when we were laughing we couldn't stop each other, when we were talking neither of us could get a word in, when we were fishing, being sad, or being silent, we were both empty cups.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Billy Gibson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

After a violent confrontation with Aunty's boyfriend, Craig, Billy runs away from home without even telling May where he's going. Unable to track him down, May has to contemplate life without Billy for the first time. This lyrical passage highlights the poignancy of sibling relationships, which are foundational but also inevitably change over time. It's notable that May uses the metaphor of tides to describe their bond, which both links her love for Billy to their shared heritage and shows how much Aboriginal culture is grounded in the family. Moreover, passages like this invite the reader to more closely examine a family that often appears to be irrevocably fractured and conclude that meaningful and life-defining love can exist even along serious dysfunction. It's May's appreciation of these bonds, increasing over the course of the novel, that allows her to heal and support her family at the end.

7. To Run Quotes

❝ *If you could be any fruit what would you be?* I would be the mango that breaks off the stem into my dad's fingers, the apple of his eye before I slide into the picking bag.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the novel's most strikingly poetic passages, as well as a significant illustration of May's relationship with her absent father. The juvenile, almost silly question she poses to herself reminds the reader how young she is, while her contrastingly lyrical answer shows unusual wisdom—a maturity that is both impressive and tragic, since it stems from all the trauma she's undergone in her short life. May can only imagine what Dad is like, but her focus on this small, quotidian gesture shows her longing for a stable parent. At the same time, the image is slightly troubling because May casts herself as the fruit Dad picks from the tree—the relationship between harvested and harvester isn't at all equal or mutual. At this point, May craves familial intimacy at all costs, even if a relationship with Dad is unhealthy for her.

8. Territory Quotes

❝ My old man isn't though; his family are from the First Fleet and everything. Rich folk they were, fancy folk from England.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Dad, Pete

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

As May drives toward Darwin with Pete, a friendly truck driver, she explains a little about her origins. May tells the truth about Mum, saying that she's Aboriginal; but she lies about Dad, giving him a much more conventionally prestigious background than he actually possesses ("First Fleet" refers to the first set of ships that arrived in Australia from England, and has the same social cachet as the Mayflower in American history). In part, this expresses May's wish to know more about the father she's heading towards—after all, she left home in search of her dad, and she barely knows any details about his life. It's also an attempt to fit into the dominant society around her by imitating a heritage more valued than her own. May's Aboriginal heritage marginalizes her, enmeshing her in poverty and exposing her to violence. At this point, the quickest way to improve her grim reality is to play up her white heritage. This experiment will end shortly when May sees Dad and remembers his abusive past; by the end of the novel, she turns away not only from her father but the heritage he represents, finding a sense of belonging in her Aboriginal culture even though it isn't valued by the society around her.

A jawbone crunches under a slice of bare knuckles. Bloodied eyeballs throw blank expressions. Mouths fling spittle streamers about the dirt red ring. Frantic, finger-bitten punches claw tangled in the shiny skin.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Pete, Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

While May is hitching a ride to Darwin, the truck driver, Pete, decides to stop at a rodeo. May is horrified to see that alongside the official events brutal prizefights are taking place, and even kind-hearted Pete seems to enjoy them wholeheartedly. To describe the carnage around her, May uses extremely disjointed, almost stilted language; only through close reading is it possible to discern exactly what is going on. This stylistic technique, known as estrangement, reflects May's state of shock, and her inability to think coherently at this time, forcing the reader to share in her confused repulsion. This passage also shows that she's not accustomed to violence. One of the novel's sources of tension is the possibility that May could become hardened to the grim dangerous circumstances of her difficult life, as other young people, like Johnny, so clearly are. However, passages like this make clear her resistance to that fate; by the end of the novel she's definitively turned away from this kind of violence, instead carving out a modest sense of fulfillment through her bond with her family.

I remembered now, when that anger face became his always face and the world ceased to be real, to be able to be understood, so I had left it behind. I couldn't remember the endings to the memories of him. But here they were laid bare—the bones of him that I had hidden.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

By an extraordinary coincidence, May recognizes her father among the spectators at the rodeo. Instead of the stable, First Fleet parent she conjured in her imagination, he's chomping on a cigar and eagerly betting on the prizefight that May abhors. In her shock, May suddenly recalls violent memories of Dad that she had previously suppressed, in which he abuses both her and Mum. May has been using her memories as a guide, but now it turns out her memories have been untrustworthy, leading her to seek out a man whom she's never going to have a loving or secure relationship with. However, instead of losing trust in the power of memory after this incident, May learns that she can't "leave behind" the ones that aren't easily understandable. Rather, she has to plumb her memories in order to create the most truthful version of the past possible. A notable contrast to this incident is May's imagination of Mum's death under the jacaranda tree, in which she unflinchingly describes Mum's suicide. In this case, she uses her memories to come to grips with a past tragedy even though she can't entirely understand it.

The screams must have been so deafening, the river of tears so overflowing that the current could only steal her. The flood breaking so high, that she had to leave us behind. We couldn't swim either.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Dad, Mum

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

After May comes to grips with Dad's true character, she imagines the effects of a violent and abusive relationship on Mum. Eventually, she concludes that Mum's marriage was a large factor in her deteriorating mental state. Previously, May didn't like to dwell on her mother's illness or suicide—if anything, she felt resentful of Mum for leaving her and Billy without a parent. Although she's lost faith in Dad now, this experience helps her develop more empathy towards Mum and begin to imagine the trials that characterized her mother's life.

Interestingly, although water is a positive force throughout the novel, appearing often in conjunction with May's positive memories of her mother, here it emerges as something insidious, sweeping Mum away in its power. The unusual use of this metaphor perhaps expresses that it's the very strengths Mum's character—her sensitivity, her ability to connect with those around her—that also contribute to her mental illness.

9. The Block Quotes

I didn't see the color that everyone else saw, some saw different shades—black, and brown, white. I saw me, May Gibson with one eye a little bigger than the other. I felt Aboriginal because Mum had made me proud to be [...] but when Mum left, I stopped *being* Aboriginal.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Mum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

By the time May has arrived in Sydney, she's become very aware of the people's tendency to make assumptions based on her skin—from the rapist's declaration that she doesn't belong in her own neighborhood to Pete the truck driver's offhand remark that she doesn't look Aboriginal. Now, she's beginning to realize that other people's perceptions matter less than her own conception of herself as Aboriginal. Previously, she hasn't thought much about her Aboriginal heritage—she's even sought to avoid it by seeking out her white father. This moment marks a turning point, after which May will be more interested in learning about Aboriginal culture and defining herself as Aboriginal, both as a way to retain her connection with her lost mother and as a way to find meaning and purpose in her troubled life.

She told me about the history of Redfern, about the housing corporation stealing everyone's money and homes, about how it used to be a real strong community. "And now," she says shaking her head, "*it's the young fellas taking our money as well and the drugs stealing our community.*"

Related Characters: Joyce / The Old Woman, May Gibson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Joyce is the first of many mentors May will meet along her journey—people who are able to increase her knowledge of Aboriginal culture, especially in the context of historical oppression. Here, she explains that government-controlled housing projects both spring out of and perpetuate poverty. Interestingly, Joyce references an episode in which the "housing corporation" deceived its inhabitants—her stories help May become aware of the systemic biases that determine how she's lived her life thus far. It's especially important that Joyce mentions crime within the community—in doing so, she acknowledges the stereotype of Aboriginal people as naturally inclined to crime or substance abuse. However, she makes clear that such tendencies are results of external attempts to destabilize the community, rather than an expression of inborn traits.

"May, you got people that you gotta find, things you gotta learn. You will learn them ere, but I don't want you to. Luck at Justine, smack the only thing teachin her now!"

Related Characters: Joyce / The Old Woman (speaker), Justine, May Gibson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Joyce rescues May from homelessness on the streets of Sydney, and even though the Block is a tough place to live, it provides the most secure and affectionate home she's known for a while. However, Joyce discourages May from becoming too settled here, telling her Sydney is just one stop on a longer journey. Even though Joyce has devoted her life to stewarding and protecting the tenuous community around her, she still acknowledges that the housing projects in which they live are poisonous environments; just as Justine has succumbed to drugs despite her mother's best efforts, there's no way May can stay here and thrive. Since housing projects are so often manifestations of intangible government oppression, Joyce's outburst here implies that there's no way to live a meaningful life within the dominant Anglo-Australian society. This argument is stark and compelling, and ultimately causes May to leave the city behind; by the end of the novel, although she realizes it's impossible to live in complete detachment from the society around her, she's become much less invested in its values and culture.

10. Chocolate Quotes

❝ He'd never tell you about Africa, and I never asked. It was his secret—his past, that someday, revisited, would become his home again. He never asked me where I was from either—it was an unspoken understanding.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Charlie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

While she lives in Sydney, May gets a job at a local carwash. The work is hard and her boss, Mr. Tzuilakis, is arrogant and demanding; but she forms a profound bond with Charlie, another worker who is an African immigrant. Charlie never talks about his heritage or what pushed him out of his country to a bleak and difficult existence in Australia, but he clearly values his culture because he plays his *mbira*—a traditional instrument—whenever he has a spare moment. Similarly, May finds it difficult to talk about her own culture, because right now it's closely linked to the trauma of her youth and her fractured family. However, just like Charlie, she's deeply invested in her Aboriginal identity; her culture allows her to retain a sense of self in the midst of a society that is often dehumanizing. Their parallel circumstances show that the plight of displaced people and devalued cultures is not limited to Australia but similar the whole world over. On one hand, this is a powerful image, because it creates a sense of solidarity between disparate and scattered ethnic groups. However, as Charlie gets abruptly deported at the end of this chapter, the comparison also emphasizes their common vulnerability to systemic injustice.

11. Wantok Quotes

❝ He takes my hand like always and we scramble up the palms and hack down coconuts with a machete, we run down to the rocky beaches and cast off our canoe, we fish all day, following the reefs and tides and winds […] We rest in the houses as warm tropical storms light up the bruised sky.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Johnny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

In Sydney, May's best friend is Johnny, Joyce's grandson. Together, they roam the city every day and daydream about one day leaving it. In their fantasies, May and Johnny follow the traditional lifestyle of their ancestors, which they've heard about through the stories of their parents and elders like Joyce. The images they conjure are poignant, contrasting their wholesome simplicity with the grim poverty that besets them in their supposedly modern and advanced society.

However, these images also foreshadow May's greatest disillusionment of the novel. May and Johnny become convinced that the life they dream about still exists somewhere, and eventually May leaves Sydney in search of it. When she finds her last remaining Gibson relative and he tells her definitively that their culture has been destroyed, May is forced to reevaluate her aspirations and her plan to create a meaningful life. May's triumph is that she can find some fulfillment within her flawed society, but the novel's greatest tragedy is that society she longs for has been annihilated.

12. Painted Dreaming Quotes

❝ The sky showing the journey the waters make, the tracks, the beds balancing liquid from cloud to crevasse. Follow the leatherback turtle through tide, the waterbirds fly between currents. I knew I had to get out of the city, get out of the boxes they put you in.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Mum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in this chapter, May is staying with some friends in a squat, or abandoned building, when the police arrive and arrest them for trespassing—even though most of the teenagers have nowhere else to live. She spends the night in jail and dreams that she's looking out the small window into a beautiful and pristine natural landscape—the kind of landscape that doesn't exist anywhere around Sydney. When May left her family behind, she left the beaches of her hometown as well; the reappearance of water here, in the "currents" and "tides" of her imagination, foretells that her thoughts will soon turn back to them, as she reaches the conclusion that their dysfunction is a result of the corrupt system in which they live, rather than their innate flaws. Paradoxically, although Sydney is the novel's most urban environment, it helps May realize the strength of her

connection to nature and the extent to which she links nature to a meaningful life and meaningful Aboriginal identity.

13. Mapping Waterglass Quotes

❝ Mum's stories would always come back to this place, to the lake, where all Wiradjuri would stop to drink. Footprints of your ancestors, she'd say, one day I'll take you there.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Mum

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

After leaving Sydney, May hitchhikes to Lake Cowal, a body of water located in traditional Wiradjuri territory that figured strongly in Mum's stories. When she arrives, she finds the lake is dry; her driver offhandedly tells her the water has been gone for decades. Moreover, a mining company is planning to drill under the lakebed, and a small group of Aboriginal protestors is the only thing currently preventing the lake's destruction. At first, this episode seems to point out that Mum's stories—and May's memories—are impractical, creating expectations that can only lead to disappointment. May's confusion here foreshadows her disappointment when she meets Percy Gibson and discovers he's far from a scion of traditional Aboriginal culture. However, in even arriving at the lake, May shows courage and determination, traits that will help her survive in her tough environment. Moreover, among the protestors, she will soon meet Issy, an elderly woman who teaches her and inspires her to continue on her search. Just as the lake is emotionally important to May even though it lacks water, May's journey helps develop her character and ideas even if it's not a superficial success.

14. Just Dust Quotes

❝ Issy says they don't understand that just because you can't see something, don't mean it's not there. She says that under the earth, the land we stand on, under all this is water. She says that our people are born from quartz crystal, hard water. We are powerful people, strong people.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Issy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Issy is a Wiradjuri elder who lives in Lake Cowal and devotes her life to stymieing the mining company's proposed project. While May stays in the town, Issy takes her under her wing, teaching May about their shared cultural heritage. Here, Issy makes explicit the connection between water, which appears in positive contexts throughout the novel, and May's identity as a Wiradjuri. Moreover, using the metaphor of the lake, Issy explains that they need to identify and live out their own values, rather than unthinkingly adopting society's precepts—especially when the society in which they live is so prejudiced against them. This reflects May's pattern of development—she's already progressed from idealizing her father and the white heritage he represents to disowning his violence—and encourages her to continue distancing herself from the oppressive society that surrounds her.

18. Country Quotes

❝ There is a big missing hole between this place and the place you're looking for. That place, that people, that something you're looking for. It's gone. It was taken away. We weren't told, love; *we weren't allowed to be Aboriginal*.

Related Characters: Percy Gibson (speaker), May Gibson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

After a long search, May finally locates her remaining Gibson relatives. But rather than a "head dress"-wearing tribe waiting to welcome her, she finds her cousin Percy Gibson living in a neat house with a white picket fence, trying as hard as possible to assimilate into the Anglo-Australian middle class—he even plays golf. On one hand, Percy is unpleasant; he's terse with May and overtly scornful of her desire to learn more about her heritage, and he harshly criticizes her mother and grandmother. At the same time, when he opens up and makes this speech, it becomes clear that he too has grappled with the loss of his heritage; the only way for him to cope with this tragedy is to completely move away from his Aboriginal identity. This passage shows that May's disappointment isn't Percy's

fault—he's just a manifestation of Australia's total suppression of Aboriginal culture. Percy also forms a notable foil to May; while he copes with the loss Aboriginal culture by putting it out of his mind, she will try to resurrect it in her daily life.

> This land is belonging, all of it for all of us. This river is that ocean, these clouds are that lake, these tears are not only my own. They belong to the whales, to Joyce [...] they belong to the spirits. To people I will never even know. I give them to my mother.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Joyce / The Old Woman, Mum

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

When she leaves Percy Gibson's house, May has experienced the biggest disappointment of the trip so far. She realizes that it's impossible, as she's long hoped, to escape the realities of her life by retreating to a strong and functional Aboriginal society. While this is a moment of loss and disillusionment, May meets it with strength, emphasizing her connection with other Aboriginals and the land around her even as she's forever cut off from the society she imagined. Notably, water resurfaces as a strong motif in this passage, the medium through which May expresses her strong sense of Aboriginal identity. Moreover, while her quest for her Gibson relatives is ostensibly a failure, she feels closer to Mum right now than she has in a long time. In making this journey, she's been able to move past grief for her mother while still retaining positive memories and being guided by Mum's principles—and this, in itself, is a triumph.

20. Home Quotes

> My mother knows that I am home, at the water I am always home. Aunty and my brother, we are from the same people, we are of the Wiradjuri nation, *hard water*. We are of the river country, and we have flowed down the rivers to estuaries to oceans.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Billy Gibson, Aunty, Mum

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

When May finally returns to her home town of Wollongong, she's relieved and joyful to see the ocean that she's missed so much during her journey. Throughout the novel, water has symbolized both May's connection to Aboriginal culture and her sense of rootedness in her home, but here the metaphor shifts in an interesting way. Instead of emphasizing her connection to the ocean, May points out that this land *isn't* her original home—traditional Wiradjuri territory is among inland lakes, not the coast. However, her inherited sense of connection to those lakes is what has allowed her to feel at home here, despite the danger and poverty of her neighborhood. In a novel that's largely about displacement, any stated connection to the land implies the danger of being pushed off that land. Here, May turns this lurking vulnerability into a strength—no matter how much she is pushed around, this passage suggests, her connection to the land as an Aborigine will allow her to put down roots and make a home.

> An excavator starts its smothering engine over the torrent of each barrel. Over the sun. Over the blue. And I wonder, if we stand here, if we stay, if they stop digging up Aunty's backyard, stop digging up a mother's memory, stop digging up our people, maybe then, we'll all stop crying.

Related Characters: May Gibson (speaker), Aunty

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Although May is joyful and exuberant when she returns home, Aunty quickly sobers her mood by revealing the family is facing imminent eviction. Just as May predicted at the beginning of the novel, their housing project is being demolished to make way for a more expensive development—some of the houses have already been torn

down. May comes up with a distraction to lift Aunty's spirits, but the intrusive presence of the excavator outside shows that this is only a temporary relief, not a solution to their problems. The novel's final passage is a reminder that May still has to live within an oppressive and unjust society, even though she's mentally disowned its values. Here, May's individual growth and development contrast with the world around her—May can "wonder" about a future in which she's treated fairly, but she can't quite conceive of it.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. SWALLOW THE AIR

May remembers the day she realized her mother was "head sick," or mentally ill. That morning, Mum makes helmets for May and her older brother, Billy, out of ice cream boxes, and sends them to go fishing in the **ocean**. She reminds them to go to Aunty's house when it gets dark, and tells them that she loves them. When May looks back from the road, the door is closed, and Mum has disappeared.

Throughout the novel, Mum will be a central but elusive character. May's love for her mother is evident here, as is the devotion with which Mum makes silly costumes for her children; however, May's final remark that her mother has vanished from the place she expected her to be reveals the distance in their relationship, as well as Mum's unreliability

May rides fast to keep up with Billy, who is carrying the fishing gear. Both children ditch their bikes on the dunes and run to the point, where they can see the **water** and the surfers. Last summer May saw a turtle from the same spot. It reminded her of Mungi, the "first turtle ever" according to the stories Mum tells. Mungi was a tribesman who suffered a fatal neck injury, but a watching ancestor gave him a shell to save his life. Mum has a lot of strange stories, some of which are about "the government and the 'conspiracies,'" but the one about Mungi is May's favorite.

It's important that May's knowledge of her heritage—such as the ancient myths she's reciting here—stems directly from Mum. Mum is both May's only real representative of Aboriginal culture and the reason that May respects that culture. Mum's preoccupation with "conspiracies" reflects the understandable mistrust with which Aboriginal characters view the government throughout the novel; however, although May doesn't realize this at the time, it's also an indicator of Mum's precarious mental state.

Exploring the tide pools, May finds a dead stingray draped across a rock "like a plastic rain coat." She wonders how it died and says it has "swallowed its struggle." May runs her hands over the swollen body and wonders what to do. In the end, she pierces its skin so that the fluids inside can be released, and feels she's done the right thing. Although it's no longer "whole," the stingray looks "free."

Even as a young child, May is highly attuned and sympathetic towards nature—she's touched, rather than repulsed, by the dead stingray. For May, freedom can exist despite death; in this case, even though the stingray might have looked better when its body was intact, it's actually more "free" now, when its body is broken.

Neither Billy nor May catches any fish, only some small shellfish called pipis. Billy says they should go to Aunty's house and see if she has any food for them. Together, they wash their feet at the public tap; Billy makes fun of May because her feet are so light, calling her "coconut."

Billy's comment points out implicitly what May will later explain: that unlike her brother, she's of mixed race heritage. For the children, the difference between their skin color is a joke, but Billy's teasing is poignant in light of the racial injustice and trauma the novel will proceed to address.

When May and Billy arrive at Aunty's house, they find a police car outside. In the house, Aunty sobs as she hugs them and makes them sit down at the table before she tells them what's wrong. Finally, she announces that Mum is "gone" and "had to leave us," sounding unsure of what she's saying.

It's important that while Mum has committed suicide, no one ever uses that word to describe her death. Stripping the event of clinical language, the novel turns a highly stigmatized event into a very sympathetic and individual tragedy.

May takes off the makeshift helmet and thinks about the dead stingray she saw before, and about "Mum's pain being freed from her wrists." She feels that her mother has instructed her to "remember," and knows that it is "all right not to forget."

May imagines Mum's body in much the same way she describes the stingray's. However, while it's easy to see that the stingray's corpse was better off pierced than bloated and whole, it's unclear (but still ominous) why Mum might be more "free" in death than she was in life.

2. GRAB

Aunty believes that she is fundamentally unlucky. She's lived in the same poor suburb her whole life and now her sister, the one person who always held her up, has died. Her mind finally changes when she wins the Tip Top Bread Grocery Grab, after which she feels that luck is always possible.

Even though Aunty is often an unreliable caretaker, it's clear from her descriptions of her sister that family is of the utmost importance to her. The novel often points out that love and empathy can exist even when family circumstances and behavior are less than ideal.

Every time she goes to Woolies (the supermarket), Aunty enters the Tip Top lottery, in which the winners have an allotted amount of time to stuff anything they can into their shopping carts. One day she comes home elated, having won the contest. She promises May and Billy that this year they'll have a real Christmas turkey.

While Aunty's faith in the lottery demonstrates her optimism, it's also a reflection of the lack of opportunities in her life. She's fixates on improbable methods of providing for her family because there are so few realistic ways to do so.

At the Grocery Grab, Billy and May watch and cheer while Aunty runs down the aisles frantically throwing food into her cart. They yell out the names of all the candies they want. At the very last second, she makes it to the frozen food aisle and grabs several turkeys and chickens.

Aunty's expensive chicken and the children's brand name sweets both reflect their longing to be part of the middle class in which such things are taken for granted. While they've succeeded for the day, Aunty's frantic rush shows that this is only a temporary gain, essentially a mockery of the true stability they crave.

After the contest is over, Aunty laughs when she realizes they don't even own a freezer to store all the food. After counting all the money in her purse, Aunty takes a taxi to a secondhand store and buys an enormous freezer, smiling the entire time. She finally feels lucky.

The family can mimic prosperity by buying a fridge, but their inability to restock it indicates the lack of opportunities their society provides them to improve their lives.

This feeling lasts through Christmas, until the food runs out and they have nothing to put in the freezer. Aunty's feeling of luck is like a "scrounging leech," driving her to buy scratch lottery cards in droves and eventually to become addicted to poker. Aunty often lies to the children about visiting the casino or losing money. May imagines that the bright machines at the casino represent her desperate wish to pay their mounting grocery and electricity bills. Even when she loses money, the game—and the drinking that comes with it—is a distraction from their pressing circumstances.

At first, Aunty's optimism is something that cheers the children up, but now it's a threat to the entire family. Aunty is one of the novel's first characters who succumbs to substance abuse, but it's important that this occurs not as a result of her weakness but because of her desire to improve things for her family and her inability to do so in a meaningful way.

3. CLOUD BUSTING

In a flashback, May describes her childhood habit of "cloud busting" with Billy, biking down to the beach in order to explore the dunes and look at the sky. They collect many different kinds of shells, dance in the waves, and dive in the **water**. They're too young to be afraid of the ocean, and they both feel perfectly at ease.

Being at the beach is one of May's only positive childhood memories. To her, the water represents both harmony with her family and a strong connection to nature that she'll later come to associate with her Aboriginal identity.

When May and Billy get home, they decorate the house with shells and Mum fries any fish they've caught. While she cooks, Mum tells them the story of her saucepans, even though they've heard it a million times already. She says it starts in "Gouldburn, 1967 [...] a Gouldburn that doesn't exist anymore."

Mum grounds her life in the frequent repetition of familiar stories. Even though her life and society often deny her stability and security, she can provide those things herself by the wealth of memory she cultivates.

In 1967, Mum lives with her own mother, Alice, in a dismal **housing project**. The rest of her siblings had been put into missions by then, but she stayed with Alice because her skin is very dark. Alice works for a nice family and Mum plays in their yard all day. When they return home, Alice smokes her cigarettes outside. Sometimes she chats with women from the **project**, but many of them have also lost children recently and they are "trying to forget," not to be sociable.

For Mum, housing projects are associated with the Australian government's practice of separating Aboriginal children, especially those of mixed-race heritage, from their families for "assimilation" into white society. Thus, they represent both government suppression of indigenous culture and the ruinous effects of this policy on individual family structures.

One day, a white salesman arrives in a suit, trying to sell saucepans. Alice puts out her cigarette and asks to look at them. The man opens the box and shows off beautiful stainless steel cookware, expounding on its many merits. The women all laugh, because they know they can't afford even one of the pots. However, Alice makes a deal with the salesman, Samuel, that she'll buy the pots and pay him in installments every month.

Just like Aunty's grocery store lotteries, the cookware represents a level of prosperity and conventional success that Alice won't ever really be able to obtain. However, rather than stressing the limitations of her life, this episode actually highlights her inherent determination and dignity.

Alice starts taking on extra hours at work in order to save up more money. When he visits every month to collect payments, Samuel brings sweets and chats with the women until after dark. After three years and seven months, Alice has finally made her last payment and gets to collect the cookware. When Samuel brings the set over, he's filled each pot with dry goods, meat, vegetables, and new knives. He even bakes them a cake. Alice bursts into tears at this gesture.

Even though Alice is an impoverished woman of color and Samuel is a white man peddling the goods of a society which will never accept her, they're able to connect over time, demonstrating empathy and even generosity.

When Mum finishes the story, she always cries too. She's inherited the pots and pans from Alice, and May knows that she would sell everything they owned before she gave them up. May believes that to her grandmother and Mum, "Samuel was much like a cloud buster," a spot of friendship in her dark life. For them, being around him was like experiencing "a cleansing rain."

The story of Samuel has entered Mum's lexicon of oft-repeated tales, just like the myth of Mungi. Even though this story occurs in the context of oppression and poverty, it ends up expressing the same pride and human connection that Mum's Aboriginal stories do.

4. MY BLEEDING PALM

Despite their many hardships, the family has good times, too. When May is in eighth grade, she wins the school art prize and Billy gets a job delivering milk. Sometimes Aunty has good days at the poker table and brings home Chinese food. It feels like everything is a celebration.

While the novel is unsparing in its depictions of dysfunctional family life, it also insists that such dysfunction does not preclude love and affection, and should be viewed in the context of the social ills that cause it, rather than as a sign of personal weakness.

One day, Aunty dresses up in stilettos and goes out to visit her new boyfriend. May wanders into the bathroom and looks at the "cocksucker red lipstick" she's applied to her dark lips. Although Aunty likes her new boyfriend, May remarks that she cries all the time and she doesn't seem like their "real Aunty" anymore. May decides to go for a walk. On her way out, she passes Billy, smoking a bong on the couch.

May's unusually graphic description highlights the gender power imbalances that will recur several times. The possibility that a man or a bad relationship can transform a woman into something less than her "real" self is one of the novel's key preoccupations, as well as one of May's fears as she matures into adolescence.

May walks through their dilapidated **public housing neighborhood**, ironically called Paradise Parade. The neighborhood is near the water, but all the other beachfront property is slowly being turned into expensive homes, and May knows it's only a matter of time before the government demolishes the housing project and moves its inhabitants to some less desirable suburb.

Derelict as it is, May's neighborhood sits on valuable land, which the government will soon hand over to developers and other powerful interests, even if it means forcibly dislocating the inhabitants. The inevitable loss of valued land makes the housing project a perfect microcosm of the phenomenon of displacement that has dogged the Aboriginal community ever since the first settlers arrived and appropriated the best and most arable land for themselves.

The cycleway is the only thing that connects May to the expensive real estate on the other side of the beach. The **ocean** spray flies in her face and makes her feel calm. From behind a tree, May examines the cycleway and the "hard glow of suburbia" beyond. She hears screams and knows that "the lads are out" tonight.

May's unimpressed appraisal of middle-class suburbia makes it clear that her discontent doesn't stem from a desire to be included in Anglo-Australian society. Rather, she's beginning to realize and resent that the dominant society won't allow Aboriginals the freedom to live and respect their own culture.

When May was younger, she often rode down the cycleway with Billy to reach the creek where they could find crabs. As they grow older, they don't feel they "belong on that side of the creek," where the cycleway is painted with graffiti slogans like "fuck off, coons."

The intrusion of new and hostile inhabitants has disrupted May's harmonious connection with nature, just as the arrival of white settlers shattered Aboriginal society.

May decides to run alongside the path in order to reach the creek, where she won't be seen. Up ahead, two gangs of men are fighting; one man spots May and shouts out to his friends, but they pay him no mind and May slips into the dunes to hide, telling herself that "I am invisible, I am earth, I am sand."

Although May is cognizant of the danger she faces, she trusts in the power of nature, and her affinity with it, to shield her from harm. Its complete failure to do so is a serious challenge to her feeling of belonging within a larger natural order.

The man finds May and drops the bottle he's carrying. She runs toward the **water** but trips and falls. The man puts his knife against her throat. Telling her that "this gunna show ya where ya don't belong dumb black bitch," he rapes her. As he takes off his shirt, the popping sound of the buttons remind May of playing with bubble wrap with Billy as a child. After the man gets up and leaves, May lies in the sand for a long time without moving. "I do not nourish," she says.

This is a jarring scene, and it's especially disturbing and infuriating that the rapist tells May she doesn't belong, when in fact he is the intruder. Here, May has to grapple with the fact that her connection with nature is not impervious to brute force, a grim reality that Aboriginal Australians have lived with for generations. In fact, the rape makes her feel isolated from the nature around her; saying that she's not "nourishing," she emphasizes her distance from it at this moment.

5. BUSHFIRE

Near May's **apartment complex** is an escarpment from which she can view all the surrounding landscape. When she was younger, she rode her bike there through old mining trails, feeling hidden among the ferns. No matter how hot and dry the beach is, it's always wet and cloudy up in the mountains.

No matter how grim her environment is, May is adept at finding an escape through nature. This tendency highlights the primacy of nature, even when human society seems to have overrun it.

After Mum dies, the summer forest fires intensify and the whole coast is dry and smoky. An entire national park between the town and Sydney is burned out, and the news constantly shows falling ash and birds.

Mum's loss coincides with a human-induced natural disaster, showing implicitly that Anglo-Australian oppression has warped the lives of many indigenous people just as it has destroyed much of the environment in which those people were once rooted.

Around this time, May receives a postcard from her Dad. She puts it in her pocket and rides to the quarry at the foot of the escarpment. Even here, she can smell the fires. She sits down in a small clearing. Normally, the clearing is damp and home to many leeches. According to Mum, leeches are prized by the Dtharawahl people, who used to live here, and they have to respect that because this is "their land." Now, there are no leeches because the land is dry from the fires.

Mum teaches May respect for Aboriginal culture—the opposite of what she learns from the society around her. It's important that, in May's mind, understanding and having respect for nature are almost always linked to understanding and having respect for Aboriginal culture.

In his brief postcard, Dad apologizes for being out of contact for so long and informs May that he's picking mangoes near Darwin for a living. On the front of the postcard is a picture of a mango orchard, with a white man standing on a ladder next to one of the trees. May imagines that the man is her father and that he's in the orchard right now, even though by now the mango harvest is over, the mangoes have been eaten or gone bad, and the laborers have dispersed.

Dad's long absence and his cavalier postcard show that he's a derelict father—even if he's more mentally stable than Mum, he's a much less committed parent. May's idealistic fantasies of him, notwithstanding this obvious reality, highlight her poignant desire for a more secure family life.

To May, it feels as though Dad has never left and is sitting beside her. She remembers eating watermelon with him when she was five, or learning to fish from him a year later. She can still see him digging in the backyard or rolling a cigarette. She wonders how she could have stopped thinking about him, "allowed the memory of my father to […] cease existing." Now, all her memories of him come back like "shiny little bubbles."

Here, memory emerges as an incredibly powerful force—May almost feels as if she's living in the past by remembering it. As in many other cases, memories keep May afloat in the midst of great difficulty, and they also influence her actions—rekindling her interest in her father and leading her to look beyond her own narrow world.


6. LEAVING PARADISE

Mum once told May that although "no one taught Billy how to fight," he was tough ever since he was a baby, "before he could even swallow air." Mum was very young when she became pregnant with him, and the doctors told her that he had a heart condition and might not live very long. Overwhelmed by the prospect of providing for a sick baby, Billy's father ran away to join a rock band. A year later, Mum discovered that he'd rented a cabin in the mountains outside of Sydney and one morning jumped off a cliff.

Just like Dad, Billy's father has left the family. His flight is a reflection of the difficulties surrounding family life in Aboriginal communities. At the same time, it highlights Mum's strength: even though she ultimately commits suicide as well, she's able to singlehandedly raise two children as a young woman with few resources.

Feeling that her son needed a father figure, Mum found another partner, this one a white man, and gave birth to May a few years later. Billy was still sickly, often fainting or weak, but when he finally learned to walk, he was full of energy and never sat down. From then on, Mum knew he would survive. One day, May traces a scar left on his chest by childhood surgery; Billy says he can't remember any of it, and they never speak of his heart again.

It's important that Mum doesn't teach Billy to feel ashamed of his physical weakness, but to work around it and eventually surmount it. Mum's faith and pride in her children is essential when the society around them considers them lesser citizens.


When Billy turns eighteen, he and May are still living with Aunty. Along with her boyfriend Craig, Aunty is a serious alcoholic and the house no longer feels like a stable home. May hates Craig because he's violent and often hits Aunty, but Aunty rarely remembers the fights and won't break up with him. Every night, May lies awake and listens for them to come home and start yelling at each other.

Aunty is replaying some of the tragedies of Mum's life—she's staying in a relationship that makes her life less, not more, stable. The only relationships May sees modeled around her involve absent or abusive male partners.

On Billy's birthday, May buys a cake and Aunty gives him a flask filled with bourbon. She tells him that Mum would be proud of them both. Billy invites May to see *Terminator* with him and his friend Vardy; he even pays for her ticket, and May thinks he's "the best brother in the world." On the way home, the boys get drunk from the flask and imitate the Terminator while jumping over fences. May has a sip too and feels dizzy and happy.

While Craig's presence hints at the troubles May will have to face as she grows up, she's happy to retreat into childhood and tag along with her older brother. May's wary approach to the alcohol shows that, despite the substance abuse that surrounds her, she's still a child with little experience or knowledge in these areas.

When Billy and May get home, they find Craig holding Aunty's face next to the red-hot stovetop. Billy grabs Craig's arm and Aunty falls safely to the floor, but Craig punches Billy in the chest. As he falls open-mouthed to the ground, May remembers his weak heart. For several heart-wrenching moments, Billy lies still on the floor. Finally he gets up and, looking at Aunty, yells "miles and miles of hatred upon her." He kicks a hole in the flimsy plaster and says he's leaving this house and this town forever. He tells May to come with him, but she's too stunned to move, and he leaves alone.

Billy's love for Aunty is evident in his unthinking rush to her defense. At the same time, he's furious with her—and understandably so—for staying with Craig and creating a home life that puts them all in danger. Billy's attack on the wall locates this traumatic incident within the flimsy housing project, and all the social ills it represents, pointing out once again that domestic violence doesn't spring from individual dysfunction but from external oppression.

From then on, whenever May walks through **Paradise Parade** or to the beach, she feels Billy's absence acutely. She's always been close with her brother, sensitive to his emotions and rarely fighting with him, commiserating in their shared misery without needing to talk about it. Although May knows all his usual hiding places, she can't track him down and he never returns to Aunty's house. As she spends more time without him, May realizes that without Billy, "we were all gone."

Although May thinks about Mum more than her brother, it's Billy who provides the most stability in May's life. Even the beach, the happiest place in her memory, means nothing without him. While the novel often focuses on the importance of certain places, especially in nature, moments like this show that these places are important primarily because they represent and facilitate indispensible human relationships.

7. TO RUN

Tired of waiting for the situation to improve, May "[takes] the mango into my mouth" and decides to search for Dad. Aunty can't appreciate the postcard as May does; she is too consumed by alcoholism. If she were a fruit, May imagines, she would be "the mango that breaks off the stem into my dad's fingers."

This is one of the novel's most poignant images. May's tenderness is especially notable given the unthinking callousness of her father's postcard. This passage shows May's capacity for love and longing for a stable parent figure, but it also builds a sense of foreboding in light of Dad's obvious deficiencies as a father.

May packs her backpack and leaves for a squat, or abandoned building, that she knows of through a friend. Squeezed between the highway and the train tracks, the house is decrepit, and a man and woman are arguing bitterly in the front yard. Inside, she finds a man sitting on the couch and introduces herself. The man remembers meeting May before and tells her she can stay as long as she likes, finding her a piece of foam to sleep on in his room. He tells her his name is Sheepa and that the house is a "community."

In some ways, May is fleeing home to a place much like it, characterized by dereliction and domestic discord. At the same time, Sheepa's conviction that the squat forms a "community" is an invitation to examine the ways in which its inhabitants do support each other, despite perceptible and serious issues.

Sheepa asks May if she likes "poppies." She doesn't know what to say, but decides it probably doesn't matter. Sheepa fills an old soda bottle with water and small black pellets of opium. He strains the water into a glass and tells May it will "take the hurt out of her eyes." After May drinks it, she feels soothed and calm. Her bed of foam is like water and she feels the warmth of an open sky.

This is May's first experience with drugs. Her feeling that it "doesn't matter" what she does reflects the inevitable descent into substance abuse she sees all around her. This is a tense moment, as a developing addiction will derail not only her search for Dad but her ability to live a thoughtful and meaningful life.

The opium causes May's memories to replay like distorted movies. She remembers being with Dad in the garden, except that he's crying as he shovels dirt and blood is spilling down his legs. Then she imagines she's swimming in the ocean with Mum and neither of them need to breathe. She closes her eyes, and when she opens them again she's standing in a lake. There's a mango tree on the shore and a kangaroo standing next to it. The kangaroo stands still and looks at May. May wonders if she is gaining understanding or "losing grip, like Mum."

This dreamlike sequence of memories mixes the idyllic—swimming and not needing to breathe—with the disturbing—Dad bleeding in the garden. While drugs make memories captivatingly accessible, they also prevent them from making sense. Normally May derives strength and guidance from consulting her memories, but now she's afraid that they will lead to a mental illness like Mum's.

One day, Sheepa gives May some money and tells her to buy lunch at the grocery store. May shoplifts some extra snacks while she's there; she thinks the clerk sees her but takes pity and lets her get away with it. May walks home in the intense heat, feeling as if she can "taste the dirt."

Throughout the novel, May will find it difficult to obtain food. There's a marked contrast between moments when she has to steal to survive, and later scenes in which she's able to sustain herself off the land.

When May arrives home, there are two new men and a woman in the house. One is Billy. She's elated, but horrified to see that he's clearly high. Billy sloppily hugs May and then hums to himself, unwrapping a package of heroin while the others watch hungrily. Their eyes are "sunken" and look like "golf balls." Not wanting to watch them shoot up, May goes up to Sheepa's room and stares at her few possessions.

While May remains wary of drug use, Billy has obviously embraced it. His overwrought happiness is a mockery of the last happy night she spent with him, on his birthday. Interestingly, May's comparison of the people's eyes to "golf balls" links this incident to May's meeting with Percy later in the novel, who will repeatedly mention golf.

In the middle of the night, May wakes up and goes to the bathroom. There, she finds a girl she's never seen before lying inert and half-dressed on the floor. May rouses Sheepa, who dumps the girl in a cold shower and slaps her gently, to no avail. Sheepa and the others, including Billy, drag her corpse downstairs and abandon it "like evidence" on one of the waiting train cars. May feels like she doesn't truly know any of these people, even her own brother. She packs up her backpack and heads to the highway to hitch a ride.

This is a moment of deep dehumanization. Although they're just trying to be practical, Sheepa and Billy, perhaps dulled to the horror of overdose deaths, treat the girl as less than human. To May, their actions distance them from her, and prevent her from seeing even her brother as a deep and complex human. It's important that May leaves when she realizes this—forced displacement is an evil repeated throughout the novel, but for May, voluntary relocation is essential to finding meaning in her life and preserving her sense of self.

8. TERRITORY

May finds a ride with a trucker who is heading towards Darwin, which he says is a big town with "nice people and good pubs." As they leave the **ocean** behind, May feels that she can breathe freely and finally stop thinking about the overdose girl. She wonders if Billy will ever wake up from his drug trance.

It's notable that while the ocean is normally soothing for May, now she feels better when leaving it behind. Sometimes human ills overwhelm the power of nature to correct and resolve.

May rides in friendly silence with Pete, the truck driver, listening to his country music and sharing his energy drinks. He's delivering racecars to Darwin and is excited for a weekend at the races. In order to drive for a longer stretch, he snorts some cocaine in the middle of the night. May falls asleep in the cab's bunk bed. As she dozes, she remembers her father repairing her bike outside their old house.

Pete's cocaine habit—both casual and incredibly dangerous—shows how pervasive substance abuse is among people who have to work hard jobs for little money. It's certainly not endemic to the Aboriginal community.

The next day, May wakes up achy and nauseous. She knows she's experiencing opium withdrawal. If she can make it through this, she won't crave the drug anymore, but she can barely swallow breakfast. Pete asks May about her ethnicity, unable to guess by her skin color. May tells him that Mum was Aboriginal, but lies that Dad is descended from "fancy folk from England."

It's interesting that May lies to make Dad seem more conventionally respectable. Right now, she's less invested in her Aboriginal heritage and more interested in pursuing social inclusion and stability through a fairytale vision of her father. Later, instead of playing up her white heritage she'll move towards disowning it.

Pete decides to take a detour to a local rodeo. They walk through a crowd of parked cars and May is happy to feel the wind blowing about her. However, when they reach the fairground, May is horrified to see men crowded around a brutal prizefight. They're all watching the violence eagerly, even Pete. The smell of blood and dirt is revolting to May. She notices the big hats of the spectators and their "money shuffling hands."

One of the worst things about this scene is that no one except May seems to find anything wrong with it—even mild-mannered Pete is enthralled. On one hand, this is a challenge to the strength of May's instincts against the opinions of many others. Ultimately, it helps affirm her individuality and her ability to discern when something is wrong, even if no one else is objecting.

Suddenly, May recognizes that one of the people "watching the men bleed faces" is Dad. She says that some things are impossible to forget, and that she will never forget the day she encountered her father not as "the stranger I'd wished for" but as "the monster I'd tried to hide." Dad has claw-like hands clutching a cigarette, and he hunches over as he watches the fight angrily.

May calls Dad a monster, and her description of him evokes an almost literal transformation from the man of her imagination to his actual self. Removed from the novel's usual realistic tone, this scene highlights the unreliability of May's memory, especially when it leads her into fantasies.

Dad's angry face reminds May of all his angry moments in the past. She remembers standing with him by the side of the house, watching him repair her bike. He tells her to stay outside and play and enters the house. Soon, May can hear him yelling and hitting Mum with the very same tools he used to fix the bike. May remembers watching her parents fight in the middle of the night. One time, he even poured boiling water on Mum's face.

While May's positive memories of Dad weren't necessarily false, they were notably incomplete. This scene is one of the major challenges to the power and veracity of memory—especially since it's May's faulty memories that have led her on a pointless quest.

Now, it seems to May that Mum was "a beaten person," unable to stand up to Dad or even scream at him. All her pent-up rage must have come out the day she committed suicide. After Dad left, Mum became "paranoid and frightened of a world that existed only in her head." May still remembers the "madness and fear" that descended on their household during this time.

Although May often thinks of Mum as stronger than Aunty, it now appears that she too was adversely affected by her relationship with an abusive man. Not only does May become disillusioned with her father, she has to come to grips with the grim reality of her mother's life.

Finally, having truly remembered Dad, May can "let him go." She walks back to the truck and waits for Pete, who apologizes for the roughness of the fights. He asks where she wants to be dropped off in Darwin, and she tells him to leave her on the highway, since she's decided to head somewhere else instead.

Although memory seems to be at fault in May's disillusionment, it also provides a sense of resolution. By discovering Dad's real character, May is able to stop fixating on him and start thinking about her own development instead.

9. THE BLOCK

May sits aimlessly in a park in Sydney, imagining she's in "a castle where I wait for a carriage made of baked pumpkin," although she actually has nowhere to go. After the rodeo, she hitchhiked with some backpackers, still revisiting the bloody fights in her head. She ended up in Sydney and made her way through the chaotic streets until she stumbled upon Belmore Park. It has a gazebo where she can sleep, just like a castle—except that the castles she sees on TV aren't populated by drunks or visited by the police.

May's ironic comment about her life being part of a fairy tale reflects the contrast between the city's veneer of sophistication and excitement, and the squalid and dangerous underbelly in which the impoverished exist. May is becoming more and more conscious of the large discrepancy between the way her society presents itself and the way it behaves towards people like her.

One day, an old woman walking through the park sees May and coaxes her out of the gazebo. She tells May not to be ashamed of being homeless, and invites her to come home to her house and eat. May, who hasn't eaten since a meal in a soup kitchen the day before, agrees.

In times of danger or despair, it's often a generous individual who steps in to help May. While this pattern demonstrates faith in human empathy, it also points out the lack of social structures to aid the poor and marginalized.

In the train station, May washes her face and looks at herself in the mirror. The old woman's kindly reassurance that "you got family in the city too girl" makes her think of the hostility with which others have treated her, like the rapist on the beach. When May looks at her face in the mirror, she doesn't see the "different shades—black, and brown, white" that everyone else seems to see. Instead, she feels Aboriginal "because Mum had made me proud to bed." However, without Mum to hold her up, she no longer feels like she belongs in the world around her.

May is so conditioned to expect mistreatment and prejudice that it's hard to trust the woman's apparent kindliness. However, looking in the mirror May is able to reckon with this history for a minute. She puts aside the classifications many people—notably, the rapist—assign to her, and starts to recover the whole and complex identity she had before Mum died.

May and the old woman, who introduces herself as Joyce, take the train to a crowded suburb lined with narrow buildings. Lots of people call out greetings to Joyce, but she keeps walking until they reach her house, which is tiny and decorated with pictures of her large family. She says that everyone in the family comes from different places "but we're all one mob." The kitchen window looks onto a dirty shared terrace filled with trash, where they can hear neighboring families yelling or fighting. Joyce calls it the Block.

Home to underprivileged Aboriginal people, the Block is reminiscent of Paradise Parade. Joyce's remark that everyone comes from different places implies that they were forcibly relocated here or pushed off their original land. The pattern of displacement that May observed in her home town is evidently widespread across the country.

May says that life in her own impoverished town is nothing compared with her stint on the Block, which makes her toughened and more mature. She lives with Joyce, Joyce's daughter Justine, and Justine's son Johnny. At night, Joyce and other neighborhood women stay up late playing card games and drinking wine, while sirens scream outside. May loves watching them.

Although the Block is a harsher environment than home, she feels part of a family here, instead of isolated and alone. Joyce's strong sense of community—especially with other women—shows that people can retain dignity, empathy, and joy even amid grim poverty.

During the day, Joyce tells May about growing up on the Block and working in a nearby factory. She says that the community was strong until the "housing corporation [stole] everyone's money and homes." Now, they don't just face danger from the outside but also from the drugs and violence that tear apart the community from within.

Like Mum, Joyce transmits knowledge of Aboriginal history through storytelling. However, while Mum focused on myths and family stories, Joyce seems very aware that the history of the Block is emblematic of wider trends of government oppression and substance abuse.

Joyce takes care of May, making sure she doesn't stay out late and has enough food, even finding her a job at a local carwash. Still, May doesn't like when Joyce pries about her own life and the whereabouts of her family. When May tells her that she's of Wiradjuri descent, Joyce laughs and says her relatives are probably "out ere in the park drinkin'." But when May laughs along with her, she becomes serious and tells May to respect her people. Joyce tells May that the Block isn't a good place to live, and that she is too old to worry about her safety. Joyce's own daughter Justine is succumbing to drugs, and Joyce believes that May has "sumthin to find" away from the city.

Joyce is very aware of the huge problems—especially regarding substance abuse—that plague the Aboriginal community. At the same time, she doesn't want May to view those problems as an excuse for disrespect. Joyce shares Mum's reverence for Aboriginal heritage, but she's much more practical and able to cope with the world around her. Because of this, she's able to provide guidance to May and help her grow in a way that Mum couldn't.

May feels that Joyce doesn't want her in the house anymore and is ashamed. She stands in silence until Joyce goes to bed, and then she goes to her room and cries. Even with all her hardships, this is the first time she's cried since arriving in Sydney.

Although she's thick-skinned in most respects, May is acutely sensitive to perceived slights, probably because her family life has always been so precarious.

10. CHOCOLATE

Every day, May and Charlie share fruit for a snack at the carwash where they both work. After their "ritual" Charlie lines his mouth with tobacco, which he chews the rest of the day while they wash and vacuum fancy cars. When business is slow, Charlie plays his small hand piano, called a *mbira*, whose music May loves.

Even though May is scarfing down a snack in the midst of a difficult job, she elevates it by calling it a "ritual." Throughout the novel, sharing a meal, however humble, is an almost sacred occasion because it represents human connection and harmony.

However, May and Charlie are both wary of their boss, Mr. Tzuilakis, who "waddles" out from his office several times a day to inspect their work or make sure they're not stealing. He's constantly suspicious of Charlie, whom he calls "boy" even though Charlie is fifty-four and works harder than everyone else at the carwash. Charlie is an immigrant from Africa and May imagines that he was "a chief or a hunter" there, but he never talks about his homeland, and May understands that he doesn't want her to ask. He doesn't ask May about her origins either.

Mr. Tzuilakis's name suggests that he is an immigrant, making his way in a new place like May and Charlie. Rather than recognizing this similarity, he uses his slight position of authority to put them down. The power dynamic at the carwash suggests that oppression is often perpetrated by people who are themselves insecure of their place in society.

One day, May surprises Charlie with watermelon, a fruit they both love. Seeing his approving smile, she wishes that "Charlie could have been my father" and imagines him wiping sweat off her forehead and telling her that she's his child.

May's readiness to look at Charlie as a father after a small display of kindness shows how much she longs for a family. Although she seems independent and tough, she's still a teenager who craves guidance from adults.

Suddenly, Mr. Tzuilakis yells out, "Hey Chocolate," and appears with several police officers, who quickly arrest Charlie and take him away in a car after shaking the boss's hand. May stands in shock, looking after him, until Mr. Tzuilakis says Charlie will be deported and orders her to get back to work. May thinks back to the police cars outside Aunty's house that announced her mother's death; to her, it seems like the police are always taking away the people she loves.

When May was a child, the arrival of police signaled Mum's death, and now they herald the loss of someone she was starting to consider family. The uniform vehicles characterize the social oppression that leads to both of these losses as impersonal, even more sinister because it's difficult to describe or comprehend.

When May returns to work, she sees some young men hanging around by the carwash. They want her to let them into the storeroom to steal chemicals, which they can use to get high. She tells them to go away or she'll lose her job, but they convince her to bring them a bottle of petrol, which they promise to pay for. When she returns with the bottle, she finds them in the storeroom. Soon, Mr. Tzuilakis appears on the scene, and the men run away. The boss assumes that they're May's friends and that she's let them inside. In retaliation, he fires her and threatens to call the police.

Mr. Tzuilakis's suspicions of everyone around him suggests a strong sense of paranoia. While May connects with other people by observing and appreciating idiosyncrasies, he alienates people by generalizing and insisting on viewing people as members of groups rather than as individuals.

May grabs Charlie's thumb piano and runs to the Block. She sees a police car outside Joyce's house and waits for it to leave before sneaking inside and begging Joyce to believe she didn't steal anything. Joyce assures her that she knows the truth and that the cops and Mr. Tzuilakis are racist. Still, as she makes lunch she's worried, and seems to think May will have to hide for a while.

This is the third appearance of a police car in the narrative. In this case, it signals the loss of May's newly secure life at the Block, since she won't be able to earn money at the carwash or even live in Joyce's comfortable house.

11. WANTOK

In the midst of all her worries, when May spends time with Johnny, she can escape to daydreams of beautiful beaches where they can pick fruit and live off the land. Even when they're sitting in the park on the Block, they have "escaped with each other." Together, they often explore the city while Johnny tells her about Waiben (one of the Torres Strait Islands). He's never been there, but it's "his real home, where his father lives." Johnny wanted to return there to be "initiated," but Justine was in jail so they couldn't go.

Although their lives are physically restricted, May and Johnny experience freedom and well-being by mentally exploring their Aboriginal heritage. In doing so, they're repeating a behavior they've both seen modeled by their elders—cultivating knowledge and strength through storytelling. However, it's notable that Johnny's optimism about life on the Torres Straits corresponds with the harshness of real life, in which his mother is incarcerated.

When May first arrived at Joyce's house, Johnny tried to flirt with her, informing her one day that she was his girlfriend. May rejects him flatly, telling him that "all men are bastards." Now, they're good friends.

May's childhood has taught her that the only way to preserve freedom and even sanity is to reject romance altogether. While this may not be an entirely correct assumption, her determination to resist the relationships that Mum and Aunty endured is a sign of strength.

Johnny tells May all the stories about the Torres Strait he's heard from visiting uncles. There, he says, people live on stilted houses next to mango trees. In their imagination, he and May fish all day in canoes before singing and dancing at night and sleeping in cabins under tropical storms. In turn, May tells Johnny about "Mum's country" and the lake that was once her tribe's home. In May's stories, they "become snakes, silting through the swampy streams, creating mouths and rivers."

It's clear that such an idyllic lifestyle can't actually exist—otherwise Aboriginal people wouldn't migrate to the dismally poor cities. May and Johnny's fantasies are both simple—a wholesome life in connection with nature—and futile, since Anglo-Australian society has all but eradicated that way of life. This contrast makes their daydreaming especially poignant.

When Johnny and May return to Joyce's house after these long talks, they feel immune to the grim poverty of the Block because "anytime we can leave in our minds." They can't quite imagine the families that are waiting for them in the places they imagine, but they promise that one day they will "go to our homelands for our people." Johnny tells May that she is his *wantok*, or "black girl ally," and May says he reminds her of Billy.

May and Johnny conjure up large extended families in order to compensate for the actual dysfunction of their family lives. This tactic reflects both their disillusionment with their parents and their reluctance to give up on the possibility that an intact and stable family structure can exist. However, as May's comparison of Johnny to Billy shows, they've already started to develop that structure though their friendship.

12. PAINTED DREAMING

For a while, May goes to stay with some of her friends in an abandoned building, which they decorate with graffiti scrawls. However, soon the police arrive to eject them. May says ironically that, "living, making camp, was no right of ours." Some of her friends spray paint in the policemen's face and they all get arrested and spend the night in jail.

May's description of the eviction shows that for Aboriginals and other marginalized communities, the result of government oppression is that there's no way to live in peace, whether they try to do so within society or at its fringes.

In her cell, May dreams of Windradyne, a 19th-century Wiradjuri resistance leader. In the dream, he is angry and ready to fight for all his people. It seems to May that Windradyne "visited the polished cement freezer box where I lay" and looked out onto the city with her. When she wakes up, she knows she has to find Johnny and get out of this city, where the people are "only faintly dreaming."

Although Windradyne's rebellion ultimately failed, he's still a powerful symbol to May. Her connection to him allows her to feel proud and purposeful, even when she's at the nadir of her stint on the Block.

In Joyce's house, May finds Johnny smoking a bong. He laughs when he finds she has been arrested, telling her she's a "criminal like the rest of us." When May tells him excitedly that she wants to leave, he seems uninterested. She urges him to join her, but he seems uncertain and tells her he has "stuff to do here," and that people from the Block "don't go nowhere."

May's faith in her dreams and ability to act on them, even when they're unsubstantiated, is impressive. It puts her in contrast to Johnny, who is fatalistically unable to act even when someone else is motivating him.

Angry, May yells at Johnny that he's not going to change or move for anyone's sake, not even his own. In fact, he's just a "nobody like everyone else." Johnny yells back that if he's a nobody he doesn't need her. He tells her to get out.

In some ways, May and Johnny are having a teenage spat. However, since they've both had to take responsibility for their lives at a young age, the stakes are very high. May's determination means that she might escape a life of urban poverty, while Johnny's uncertainty means he likely won't.

13. MAPPING WATERGLASS

May buys hot chips at a dusty rest stop before setting out to hitchhike; she can see a summer storm in the distance. Soon, a man in a pickup truck named Gary offers her a ride toward **Lake Cowal**, the lake she's always heard about from Mum. He tells her about his pregnant wife and plays Van Morrison tapes; May loves the song "Brown Eyed Girl," which reminds her of sitting in the car and watching her mother drive on the road along the sea. Mum always took her to the ocean so that she could "show" her stories about the animals, instead of just telling them.

Again, May relies on memories to direct her course of action—she feels she's doing the right thing now because she remembers doing something similar with Mum. While her memories of Dad were untrustworthy, her time with Mum—fresher in her mind and less tinged with abuse—is still a useful guide.

As they drive through the flat land, dotted with small towns, Gary complains that people never leave places like these. Soon, they're approaching **Lake Cowal** and Gary gives May his number, telling her that he and his wife would be happy to have her if she ever needs a place to stay. May thanks him but says she wants to stay by the water; she's full of "daydreams of Windradyne."

By now, May's interest in her Aboriginal identity is almost as much a guiding force as her memories of Mum. She's determined to reach the water that was so important to her ancestors and links her to her heritage, even though it means giving up a meal and a place to stay.

As they draw near to the town, Gary offhandedly asks May if she knows about the mining compound. Soon, she sees that a large area is enclosed in barbed-wire fence with a mining company banner strung along it. Gary says that there's a lot of money to be made here and no one can stop it, not even "the black fellas out there at the blockade." May asks why there's no water in the **lake**, and Gary laughs, saying it's been dry since he was a child.

Just as her search for Dad turned out much differently than she expected, this destination isn't the untouched paradise she'd hoped for. Almost all of May's quests are superficially "failures," but even as they don't achieve the original objective, they increase her knowledge and maturity.

May gets out of the car and walks to the dusty edge of the **lake**. All the stories Mum told her centered around this place, "where all Wiradjuri would stop to drink." The lake represents the "footprints of your ancestors," Mum said. May touches the banner and then watches it fade away in the twilight, thinking of the Van Morrison song she heard in the car.

This scene is poignant—May has to balance her individual reverence to this lake through its associations with Mum, her connection to it through her Wiradjuri heritage, and its current imperiled state. Because the lake is so important to May, the mine's encroachment is a threat to all the memories she holds dear.

14. JUST DUST

At the **lake**, May meets an old woman named Issy, who lives near the lake and has dedicated herself to protesting the mining company that is intruding on "her mother's land and [May's] mother's land." She is trying to make enough of a nuisance that the company shareholders get frustrated and back out of the operation, which would be detrimental to the surrounding environment. According to Issy, the mining companies can't grasp that "just because you can't see something, don't mean it's not there." This is the land that created the Wiradjuri, who are "powerful people, strong people." Even though the name Wiradjuri comes from the words for "no" and "having," Issy believes that the people have plenty.

Issy is part of a struggle between Aboriginal groups who feel deeply rooted in their traditional land, and the Anglo-Australian society that wants to exploit the land and displace its people. Essentially, they're replaying the conflicts between Australian Aboriginals and the first white settlers, and the battle that Windradyne fought in the 19th century. It's notable that even though Issy represents the side that's always lost these conflicts, she's characterized by deep dignity, wisdom, and pride in her heritage.

Issy tells May that the **lake** "works like a heart, pumping its lifeblood from under the skin." Everything is part of the life of nature, and if they listen closely they can feel it around them. The mining company wants to "dig up the hearts" and destroy nature's life in order to increase their own life. Eventually, she says, they will always fail in this quest.

Issy's comparison of the water to a body part illustrates her conception of the intimate relationship between Aboriginal people and the ecosystem in which they reside. This is one of the reasons that displacement is so traumatic to Aboriginals—they lose not only economic and political security but the spiritual connection to the land that gives their lives meaning.

Issy draws a circle in the ground and tells May that everything is sacred, both inside and outside the circle. Both areas should be cared for in the same way. She draws several other circles inside and outside the original circles. Issy advises May that if she wants to find her family, the other Gibsons, she should follow the Lachlan **river** to Eubalong. May asks her about the meaning of her drawings, but she cryptically says they're "just dust."

Issy uses the land to illustrate her philosophy. At the same time, by calling her ideas "just dust," she stresses that her principles are derived from the land, rather than superseding them.

15. COCOON

In a flashback, May remembers sitting by the fire pit in her backyard and watching Mum pull up in her bike, carrying food. May always loved nights around the fire pit, which she and Billy built themselves. While Mum told stories, she carved small animals and flowers in the rocks they used as stools. Billy sat by the fire and kept it going; he's very adept with the fire. Billy and May distract Mum with requests for stories so that she forgets it's a school night. These are the best memories May has about her family, even though they never talked about the sadness that pervaded Mum's life. In retrospect, May thinks she probably wasn't aware of that sadness then.

Perhaps this memory is so powerful to May because it's the closest her real life has come to approximating the traditional lifestyle that she and Johnny daydreamed about. In this sense, May is seeking out this lifestyle not just because she wants to embrace her Aboriginal identity but because she wants to hold on to her memories of her broken family.

While he was normally quiet, Billy talked volubly, telling them about finding a canoe in the garden and bringing it home to fix up, promising he would catch red snapper for dinner. When he finally brought home a big fish one day, Mum was incredibly proud and cooked the fish on the fire pit. Billy said he was happy on the **ocean**, and May felt that they shared his happiness.

This scene is an interesting contrast to Aunty's lottery win at the supermarket. She tries to create a veneer of middle-class prosperity, but this attempt actually ends up fracturing the family further. On the other hand, when Billy brings home dinner in the same way his ancestors did, the family feels unified among themselves and at peace with the world around them.

16. BILA SNAKE

The morning after speaking with Issy, May stands looking at the sleepy **river** and its slow-moving, dusty water. It seems to her that dust is everywhere. Issy points along the river and tells May to follow its course for four days, crossing when the water gets shallow. She'll know she's reached the right place when she finds a tourist sign. To feed herself, May can catch fish. Issy places her hand on May's shoulder and tells her she'll be back soon. Then she turns and walks away. May starts off down the **river**.

May has always felt happiest when near the ocean; now, the water is an explicit guide, leading her to her mother's family. Providing her meals along the way, the river also literally sustains her. May's ability to undertake this journey shows her growing comfort with her Aboriginal identity.

May remembers that Mum always said that "when we worry […] we should take a walk." Indeed, walking now helps her soothe the "crying inside me" that she can never resolve elsewhere. Each day as she walks along the **river**, she wonders "why I'm here? What I'm doing?" Even though she can't find the answers, she still feels better.

May's description of her inner turmoil as "crying" matches earlier description of Mum's declining mental state. However, she's looking for answers and meaningful life, not spiraling out of control. In doing so, she's redeeming some of her mother's deep suffering.

May catches a carp in her jumper. It's hard to cook and she wishes to be at her familiar beach, with the shellfish she's used to eating. The next morning, she reaches the big sign Issy told her about and knows it's time to leave the **river** and follow the highway.

Although May finds it difficult, her ability to sustain herself off the land is impressive. It's a notable contrast to the way she flounders within mainstream society, and shows the extent to which that society is set up to disadvantage people like her.

May buys a hamburger with her last bit of money. She's not worried about her next meal, because she knows when she reaches Mum's family they'll give her a big dinner. She imagines them telling her the same stories her mother shared years ago, sitting around a fire in head-dresses, "matching my odd looking eyes with theirs." Finally, she'll feel that she's among her own people. She imagines them greeting her in the ancient language they share.

May's reverence for shared meals—from the iconic bonfires of her childhood to the watermelon she shares with Charlie—all contribute to her expectations of how she'll be received by her long-lost family. She's combining the traditions that have marked her lived experience with those she's only been able to imagine.

17. MISSION

When May arrives in Eubalong and asks at the general store where to find her family, she's told to go to the **mission** outside town and ask around, so she hitches a ride there. It's incredibly hot and May feels queasy in the back seat, which smells like cigarette smoke and dust. When she gets out of the car, she looks around the barren land and can't imagine anyone living near here. A tiny sign directs her to the mission.

Essentially, missions are rural equivalents of the urban housing projects in which May grew up. Founded and often mismanaged by religious authorities, they were supposed to house displaced Australian Aboriginals and "reeducate" them to participate in mainstream society; however, inhabitants were often mistreated or abused.

As she walks towards the **mission**, May feels increasingly less hopeful—all she thinks about is the possibility of getting a meal there. Soon, she sees houses along the road, just like the ones she's used to in her own neighborhood. She imagines that "they rose up like the estate homes [...] a hasty construction of identical walls, devoid of emotion." To May, they look like "fancy concentration camps." In the distance she can see a **river** tributary that's almost dried up; instead, water tanks supply water to the settlement.

May's description of the mission as a "concentration camp" is her harshest depiction of the public housing complexes scattered throughout the novel. Accordingly, it's also her strongest indictment of the system of displacement Aborigines there, categorizing it not just as social oppression but a deliberate attempt to eradicate her people's way of life.

Children run around the street, and people come in and out of houses. May wonders if they think about the world outside their "forgettable" town or if they themselves forget that "there exist places beyond the highway creases."

This place seems miserable and insignificant to May, but it's so similar to the place where she has spent most of her life that her feelings reflect her disillusionment with her own origins as well.

Suddenly, an old man in a cowboy shirt waves to May and tells her to come over to his porch. He tells her that his name is Graham but she can call him Uncle. May asks if he knows any Gibsons, but the only ones Uncle remembers live far away. She'll have to ask old Betty, who knows everyone in the area, when she gets back from running errands. Uncle says that Betty is "one of the only ones here that knows what's what," but she has a hard life because her husband and sons are all alcoholics. The entire **mission** is falling apart, according to Uncle, and only "bad spirits" remain here. He says that the bad spirits live by the **river** and that's why no one goes there anymore.

Like Issy, Uncle is an Aboriginal elder with whom May shares a sense of kinship regardless of the fact that they're not really related. It's interesting that Uncle associates the community's decline with the river, since water is usually a positive force. However, as May has noticed before, the river is mostly dried up, which can represent both the misuse of the land and oppression of its inhabitants by Anglo-Australian society.

Uncle tells May about the history of the mission. In 1947, the government built the **mission** and "shifted plenty of station blacks out ere." The mission was run by Catholics, whom he dislikes because they claim to be an authority but can't actually cure the "bad spirit" that afflicts people in the mission. On the contrary, they let pain fester and pass from generation to generation. That's why there's so much drinking and anger in the town now.

In the novel, personal discontent and even degeneration is often the result of inherited trauma—for example, Mum's suicide seems partly caused by her intense consciousness of her people's lost way of life. May has let go of some of her inherited trauma by confronting the difficult memories of Dad. It's interesting that Uncle asserts that Anglo-Australian society (in many cases, the cause of this trauma), has no real methods of addressing it.

Uncle says that May must have observed this pattern in Sydney as well. Without any meaningful outlet for their anger, people act out through violence and get sent to prison, where their mental state deteriorates even further. The government doesn't care about this issue, and in fact prefers to lock people up so as not to think about them.

Here, Uncle contextualizes many of May's observations within a political framework, helping her make sense of them and direct her anger. He's acting in direct contrast to mainstream society, which denies its Aboriginal citizens a logical framework for events that affect them or a useful way to express anger.

"Our people," Uncle says, have "seen forty bloody millenniums" and the government, which has been around for much less time, still mistreats them. The only time the government even pretends to respect Aborigines is when they want to display them for tourists. Uncle believes that the government and the churches are "all one evil," working together against the Aboriginal community. After this statement, he becomes dejected and says he wishes someone could tell him he was wrong.

Earlier in the novel, May refers to Mum's talk about "conspiracies" as the product of her confused mental state. Here, Uncle is basically outlining a large conspiracy against Aboriginal Australians, and his explanation makes sense. Through him the novel points out that radical doubt of mainstream society, so easily labeled as fringe insanity, is both valid and necessary.

Betty's car pulls up across the street and Uncle wishes May good luck, telling her to take off her hat when she talks to Betty. When May tells the elderly woman what she's looking for, Betty says the only remaining Gibsons live at **Lake Cargelligo**. Betty's daughter, Jo, can drive May there. Soon, May is speeding away from the mission in Jo's car.

Uncle's injunction that May respect her elders is similar to Joyce's principles, and reflects a desire to maintain a dignified and cohesive community even in the face of serious outside pressure.

18. COUNTRY

Jo drops May off in front of a white house with a small lawn bordered by a fence and a flowerbed. The street "smells of mothballs and farming." This isn't the house May imagined, and as she knocks at the door she feels that "this is not how it is supposed to be."

Instead of traditional practices, the house is characterized by the blandest and most conventional hallmarks of middle-class life. Already, it seems clear that like its predecessors, this quest won't turn out as May expected.

A woman with a cigarette comes to the door, and May tells her she's looking for the Gibsons. The woman, Dotty, says that she and her husband are the Gibsons. She lets May inside. The woman bears no resemblance to May at all, but when she calls her husband into the hall May sees that the man, Percy, looks just like Mum. When May says that her mother is June Gibson, the man says that she was his cousin, but he hasn't seen her since they were both children.

Finally, May has found what she wanted—someone who is related to, and even once knew, Mum. However, by presenting this reunion in a jarring context, the novel prevents both May and the reader from experiencing the expected feeling of resolution and security.

Puzzled by the unexpected visit, Percy invites May to sit down and pours her a drink. He asks after Mum and May tells him that she's dead. Percy says that "all your Gibson family" are "gypsies," from May's grandmother to Mum to her, from the looks of her backpack. Smiling "cruelly," Percy asks if she's come here for money.

Instead of reaffirming the character traits May most valued in Mum—like her unconventionality—Percy denigrates them. He even makes fun of the poverty that May has only just learned to stop feeling ashamed about.

Surprised and angry, May says that she didn't come "for friggin money." Percy tells her to "spit out" the reason for her visit, as he has to leave for golf soon. Uncertainly, May tells him that she wanted to know about her family and learn more about the stories Mum always told her.

Percy's mention of golf highlights the absurd contrast between his bourgeois values and the traditional Aboriginal lifestyle May hoped to find. Earlier in the book May describes the drug users' eyes as "golf balls"; the description connects the psychological emptiness caused by substance abuse to the spiritual emptiness caused by Percy's attempt to assimilate into mainstream society.

Percy laughs and derides May for wanting to know "ya tribal name, ya totem, ya star chart, the meaning of the world." Angrily, May gets up to leave, but Percy relents and, in a kinder voice, tells her that just as May did, her grandmother Alice left home on foot looking for meaning. Thirty years later, she came back to the **mission** with several children in tow, one of whom was Mum. Just out of an abusive relationship with a white man named Jack, she was "desperate" and "sad." Percy's parents gave her some food and money, and she left the next day. May remembers that Mum once said a man named Jack was "the first white man to destroy us." May wants to be free of white men.

Percy is the opposite of what May has been longing for throughout the novel. Rather than affirming her emerging attraction to Aboriginal culture, he has completely disowned his heritage in an attempt to fit into the dominant society around him. At the same time, she learns that she has much in common with her grandmother—they both set out from home on idealistic quests, even if their journeys didn't proceed according to plan.

Clinging to her original purpose, May asks what it was like growing up in the **mission** and learning from the elders. Percy tells her that she's just like her grandmother Alice, who "died of hope." He says that "we weren't allowed to be what you're looking for," and they didn't learn from the elders or from anyone. He says that May won't find any of the things she's looking for in this place. The people here haven't been "allowed to be Aboriginal" in a long time, and now the things she's looking for are gone.

It's easy to blame Percy for turning away from his heritage, but he points out that from a young age he was essentially forced to do so by the culture around him. Not only has Anglo-Australian rule physically displaced Aborigines from their land, it's mentally displaced them by dismantling all traditional practices.

May thinks Percy is on the verge of tears, but he looks around his neatly furnished living room and Dotty smoking at table and tells May that he has a "good life" now. He thinks that Mum probably got her stories from books and May too should read books if she wants to learn. He gets up to leave for his golf match, but says that Dotty will make her some dinner before she leaves. As she shakes Percy's hand, May feels like crying but forces herself not to. Both know that they won't see each other again.

May's family reunion is over as soon as it started. Although Percy and Dotty are more conventionally "functional" than the adults among whom May grew up, it's clear that they're far from the perfect and loving alternative to her flawed family that she's been looking for.

May walks away from Percy's house on the highway, which is windy but still full of dust. It will take a long time, but she knows eventually she'll reach the shore where she started. Everything seems to make sense to her now. She remembers Issy's drawing; now, she knows that it illustrated the lack of boundaries between the land, the **water**, and the people that inhabit it. For May, "this land is belonging, all of it for all of us." All the features of the land are intimately connected, and they belong to everyone equally, from the animals to the people on the Block to May's own family and ancestors. May wants to "give them to my mother."

May's most important quest has "failed" more notably than any of the previous ones, but it's also led to her most important epiphany. The dreams she's shared with Johnny have been dashed, but May has learned about her heritage from elders like Issy and Uncle, and she's grown in wisdom and self-confidence. She even feels closer to Mum, whose loss provoked the discontent that led her to leave home.

May finds a trucker who will give her a ride. They pull into a truck stop to buy snacks for the ride. Its brightly lit aisles remind May of the Block. Just then, she sees Johnny's face on the front of a newspaper, under the headline "BOY, 16, DIES IN POLICE CHASE." In the picture all his "beautiful dreaming" is hidden behind his smile.

It's ironically fitting that May discovers Johnny's death at the same time she loses faith in the life they dreamed about together. His death represents the ultimate unfeasibility of this method of creating a meaningful life.

May feels that she can't really cry for Johnny because of the angry way in which they parted. At least, she thinks, he died with his dreams intact. Now he can go fishing and swimming in the Torres Islands, just like the turtle Mungi that Mum always talked about.

May is right in pointing out that Johnny hasn't suffered the disillusionment that she has. On the other hand, May has experienced great person growth and has the opportunity to change her life, while Johnny, mired in urban poverty, will never experience those things.

19. THE JACARANDA TREE

May says that she has "jagged recollections," which both allow her to feel immersed in previous times of her life but also remind her how far away she is from those times. She tries to use her memories to feel close to Mum, but mostly her mother's "real face is lost."

The term "jagged recollections" is an excellent way to describe the narrative's choppy style. In its structure, the novel emphasizes the extent to which memory is always influencing the present even while the past remains fundamentally inaccessible and mysterious.

One of the memories May always return to is the jacaranda tree in Mum's backyard, bare for most of the year and then suddenly blooming without warning and "heaving in all its purple-belled loveliness." May always gathered the fallen flowers and used them to decorate her bed. All too soon, the flowers vanished and "no evidence of its beauty" remained until the next year. One year, Mum hangs a tire swing from a branch, but later they see the ropes have left a bruise on the tree and take it down out of respect. Mum always complains about the tree and pretends to hate it, but she always smiles when it blooms.

The jacaranda tree is something that isn't of utilitarian use, much like Lake Cowal, which the mining company argues isn't valuable in its current state. However, the family prizes it because of its beauty and the positive memories attached to it. Similarly, while Mum's life wasn't conventionally successful—she endured much hardship and succumbed to mental illness—it's still meaningful because of her love for her family, and her children's prized memories of her.

To May, a backyard is "an odd thing"—a piece of nature in the middle of so much that is not natural. May remembers that Mum commits suicide in the summer, when the jacaranda tree would have been blooming. She was told that Mum was found underneath it, and despite the tragedy of this image she finds it deeply peaceful.

Here, May finally comes to terms with the memory of Mum's death. She does so not by turning away from the unpleasant aspects of her life—as she once did with her memories of Dad—but by integrating both beautiful and tragic moments to form as truthful a conception of her mother's life as possible.

20. HOME

When May arrives at her **neighborhood** the tide is coming in. She walks to the **water** and when she feels the salt on her shins, she knows she's truly home, feeling and smelling the air that she has always loved. She can tell that a storm is coming in and pulls her hood over her face. The ocean is "gray and sad," except for the beautiful waves breaking quietly against the shore. The familiar escarpment lies behind her.

Previously, May regarded her neighborhood as a place of exile, somewhere her family was forced to move after being ejected from the land that once belonged to them. In calling this place home, she's not forgetting about her heritage but learning how to live with it.

May walks back up the beach towards the road, feeling that she understands the meaning of the word "home" for the first time. She feels that somehow Mum is conscious that she's made it here. Moreover, she knows that she'll always be at home wherever there's **water**—after all, she, Aunty, Mum, and Billy are all of the Wiradjuri, or "hard water" people. Even though this beach isn't her tribe's native land, she feels that she and all her family are intimately connected to its water.

May is combatting her feelings of displacement not by forgetting about the traditional lifestyle she once dreamed of but by learning that she can feel connected to the land wherever she is. In a highly empowering moment, she's claiming the right to belong alongside of—if not within—a society that has always pushed her to the margins.

May knows she could run away again and try to escape her family and its painful past. However, she knows that no matter how far she goes or how much she drinks or what drugs she uses, she'll never be able to leave her family behind. It occurs to May that when Mum died, she and Billy both became lost. It was as if they were in the **ocean** and "forgot to come up for mouthfuls of air," losing trust in the thing that had always supported them.

No perfect family waits for May, just as no traditional way of life persists undisturbed. However, rather than being discouraged by this realization, May decides to recommit herself to taking care of the family she does have and prevent it from fracturing more than it has in the years since Mum's death.

When May reaches her neighborhood, **Paradise Parade** is "warring"—many of the houses are in the process of being demolished, and construction machines sit in the street, paused during the rainstorm.

The displacement that May predicted at the beginning of the novel is actually coming to pass. This is a reminder that patterns of injustice aren't limited to the past, but are still playing out and affecting lives in the present.

In high spirits, May walks through the broken fence and shouts that Aunty should get it fixed. She runs into the house to find Aunty drinking a beer in the kitchen; when her aunt sees her, she starts crying. Billy comes in from the living room and supports Aunty, as she sobs to May that she's being evicted from the house. Although May is worried about Aunty's tears, she's relieved to see that Billy's face is clear and he obviously hasn't been using. Even though the house is crumbling, it still feels like home, and she's happy to be here for the first time in years.

This is a moment of crisis—the family is about to lose its house, one of the few elements in May's life that has always remained stable. However, it's also a moment of great tenderness and solidarity; May is able to understand and appreciate Aunty as she didn't before she left home, and it's clear that Billy, who ran away under such violent circumstances, has come to a similar understanding as well.

May sits down at the table and flips through the dozen tablecloths that are layered over each other on the kitchen table, all different colors and materials. She remembers visiting the house with Mum every time Aunty bought a new tablecloth. As a young girl, she was always excited to see the new purchase emerge clean and new from its shopping bag. Inspired by this memory, May suggests that they all go out and buy a new tablecloth—an orange one, she specifies. Billy looks up from the table and Aunty smiles. Suddenly, she cheers up and slaps the floor in delight, saying that they can't kick her out when she has "a new tablecloth to wear in."

Here, May explicitly and successfully uses memory to handle a present crisis, showing that she's been able to come to grips with her childhood, sorting out which memories are useful to her and which are not. It's also notable that strong and positive memory emerges here as an antidote to displacement, which threatens the individual Gibson family as they face eviction as well as the larger Aboriginal community.

May looks outside at the gulls that are whirling over the **water**. The wind has changed and for a moment the ocean appears clear. May can see surfers paddling for the next wave, and she hears an excavator starting up in the street. Its noise rises "over the sun" and "over the blue" of the sky. May asks herself what will happen if they stay in the **neighborhood**, if the excavators stop "digging up Aunty's backyard" and "digging up our people." If that happens, she thinks, maybe "we'll all stop crying."

The novel's final image is enigmatic, integrating the nature that has always sustained May, the suburban surfers who are appropriating it, and the excavators that foretell the end of the family's life in this place. The novel doesn't resolve its many preoccupations or even promise happier times. However, May's new cohesion with her family and her strength in her Aboriginal identity mean that she's much better equipped to handle these challenges than she was at the outset.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Connelly, Irene. "*Swallow the Air.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 27 Sep 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Connelly, Irene. "*Swallow the Air.*" LitCharts LLC, September 27, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/swallow-the-air.

To cite any of the quotes from *Swallow the Air* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Winch, Tara June. Swallow the Air. University of Queensland Press. 2006.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Winch, Tara June. Swallow the Air. Queensland: University of Queensland Press. 2006.