

A Synopsis of *The Year of The Dahlia*

I. Harvest

Four seasonally based sections frame this novel, which spans one year.

The story is told primarily through journal entries and school assignments. Each section of the book opens with a freewrite exercise by WINNIE MORIN, an English teacher at the middle school. The first describes a field of dahlias and the fact that they're the last flowers to bloom.

Winnie journals because she aspires to write her own novel.

When we meet fourteen-year-old OLIVE, she finds *Happy Birthday* balloons in the trees and interprets them a sign from her older sister, SOPHIE, who drowned the previous year. Sophie's death prompted ELLEN, Olive's mother, to move them to the damp northwest town of SELKAH, along with their two dogs and three horses. Olive's job is to care for the horses. She resents the work and the fact that they tie her to memories of the Colorado town they left behind.

Sophie's signs are also a constant reminder for Olive and her mother.

Ellen journals about her grief as instructed by her therapist. Her journal entries reveal her deep sense of grief, loss, and her struggle to move forward.

MIKE, who's Salish Indian, also lives in their neighborhood, and he rides the bus to school with Olive. He's intrigued by her and discovers they share a favorite author: Stephen King. Mike wants to learn more about Olive.

MAXINE's family also resides in this neighborhood. We meet Maxine through her senior paper, which is about a hunting experience she had with her father, NICK. They both love to hunt and are deeply committed to responsible hunting and reverence of animals.

While journaling, Ellen realizes that she has barely noticed the horses even though she brought them here. She feels guilt and schedules a horse-shoeing appointment for them. Here, we meet THE FARRIER who's friendly to Ellen. Once the horses' hooves are attended, Ellen is compelled to ride for the first time in months. In riding, she finds a momentary escape from her grief.

Winnie's journal entries describe her writer's block and the frustrating fact that her writing always seems to come back to her own life. She berates herself and makes to-do lists as she tries in vain to accomplish her goal of starting her novel.

At school, Winnie talks to her friend JULIE in the teacher's lounge where Julie invites Winnie to a past-life regression. Reluctantly, Winnie agrees, realizing that maybe she needs some inspiration.

II. Rotten

We open with dahlias dying and decomposing.

The weather is turning; winter is coming. Winnie muses about her ex-husband and her feelings about the past-life regression. Olive and Mike are invited to a special advanced after-school program taught by Ms. Morin (Winnie). Because Mike's being raised by a single father, PETE, who works long hours, Olive offers that she and Mike could carpool.

We gain insight into Maxine's parents' struggles to raise dahlias and earn a living. Maxine asks Mike about his Salish Indian roots in order to research facts for the second draft of her senior English paper.

Olive journals about Sophie, missing her deeply. In a dream, she experiences intimate, first-person details of the drowning and wonders if it's another sign.

Winnie encounters Ellen riding a paint horse on their shared dirt road; she's shocked to recognize the horse from her past-life regression. She wants to learn more about Ellen and the horse.

The Farrier returns to tend the horses' hooves again, but this time he inadvertently offends Ellen, and she storms off.

One afternoon, Maxine takes her boyfriend, CODY, into the woods for target practice, and he accidentally shoots Ellen's horse STORMY while Ellen is riding. This bloody accident sends Cody running but connects Maxine to Olive and Ellen.

As a punishment, Maxine starts helping Olive with the horses in the mornings. Olive is cold and distant at first, but slowly they reveal secrets to each other and become friends.

Winnie finds the courage to walk down to Ellen's house and is surprised to find that her student, Olive, lives there. They talk and meet the horses—spending time with Stormy, but Ellen never shows.

Winnie reflects on Native American history and visits Snoqualmie Falls. She wonders if it's true that ancestors live in the mist.

III. Dormant

Part three begins with the digging and storing of dahlia tubers.

Olive stays home from school to help her mother, who has fallen into a deep depression, and Mike wonders if she's okay. Mike walks down to the house to check on them, and Olive assures him she's fine and agrees to have him over to help with the horses.

Mike discovers a deep bond with the horses, finding a peace and calm he's never felt before. The horse care brings him closer to Olive. Olive sneaks out one night and brings Mike to the barn where they talk and spend time with the horses.

Ellen meets Nick when he comes down to the house to discuss Stormy's accident. Through their discussion, we gain insight into Nick's motivation for hunting and his philosophy about the elk and deer herds in the area. Thanksgiving and Christmas pass, the first holiday without Sophie.

Winnie and Julie attend a second event with their past life-regression host, and Winnie learns that she should try again to befriend Ellen and get closer to the horse in her neighborhood. With this advice, she tries again to visit Ellen, and this time they begin a tentative connection.

Maxine turns in her revised senior paper. It follows her teacher's expected format but is devoid of heart.

Meanwhile, Olive notices that Sophie's signs seem less frequent. Maxine invites Mike and Olive to use the Ouija board to talk to Sophie. They seem to communicate, and Sophie gives some advice.

On the bus after the break, Olive invites Mike to ride for the first time. He's excited but scared.

IV. Spring

The final section begins with the planting of the dahlia bulbs. Although they won't bloom until late summer, Winnie writes about the process of laying them into the dirt.

Olive teaches Mike to ride, and he's surprised to feel content and natural on a horse. Winnie and Ellen grow closer, even sharing stories about motherhood, and Ellen teaches Winnie to ride. Winnie experiences a comfortable, secure feeling in the saddle even though it's new to her.

Ellen finds peace in the increased sunshine and lessening rain. Her journal entries show that she's finding a way to move forward in their new town, and her grief for Sophie is loosening its hold. Her new friend Winnie, her horses, and the garden where she plants vegetables and dahlia tubers are bright spots for her now. Sophie's signs have faded, but Olive and Ellen are no longer distressed by this.

As spring continues, we learn that Mike and Olive have been riding in the woods together, and Olive has decided that maybe they are more than friends—she asks him to the eighth-grade dance.

Through riding and an increased connection to nature, Winnie begins to take the pressure off herself to write. Instead, she opens herself to the story and the process that comes most easily.

After a celebratory dinner for the after-school writing class, Olive and her mother share a special bonding moment. Ellen's final journal entry shows her evolved growth and beginning acceptance of loss.

The epilogue of the book is Winnie's final freewrite exercise, which is about dahlias in bloom. The late summer blooming of the dahlias finishes both the year and the story.