

The question of  
choice: character  
paths in strange birds  
in the tree of heaven



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At the beginning of *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven*, Ruth says to Andrew, "There's a choice...You know that every time you head out like you do... With that boy" (5). *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven*, written by Karen Salyer McElmurray, takes place in Inez, Kentucky, following the three narrators, all belonging to the Wallen family: Ruth Blue Wallen, her husband, Earl Wallen, and their son, Andrew Wallen. Readers follow the wants of each character, learning about their entire lives. Ruth Blue Wallen longs for a connection with a God, the one escape in a world where she's found spiritual, emotional, and sensual defeat. Earl works as a coal miner, but he longs for his past of song writing, singing, guitar playing. Andrew Wallen longs to be with his childhood friend, Henry Ward, being in a love forbidden in Kentucky, especially in the 1980's. Andrew faces choices that mean life or death, and he must choose between uncertain love or nothing at all (UGA Press).

*Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven* explores the question of choice. Each narrator faces different choices, and they are shown the consequences, whether good or bad, of each choice.

Ruth spends a dozen years alone with her father, Tobias, during her younger years after her mother runs away to be a dancer. Tobias becomes "an itinerant preacher, gambler and drunk" (Publishers Weekly). Ruth attempts to remain loyal to her father, but she cannot stop herself from wanting to escape his unruly ways. Believing he will be a way out of Kentucky and a way to escape her father, Ruth chooses to marry Earl, an outsider and veteran from Ohio, which she later regrets (Miller). Instead of relying on her own fate, Ruth chooses to put her fate in Earl, who eventually comes to act more like her father, who was the reason for her want to escape. Ruth reveals, "Tobias

and Earl became the same to me, the same voices, saying Ruth do this and that, their shadows crossing each other on the kitchen floor” (176). Ruth realizes that she has married a man like her father, instead of the man who will whisk her away from Kentucky. Additionally, the Wallen family also becomes very poor, which forces Ruth to make her next choice. She becomes a maid for the Wards, who are directly responsible for her family’s poverty, so she loses her last shred of dignity by working them. Ruth’s choices force her to find an escape from the consequences, which in her case is religion. The intense religiousness of Ruth is a major driving point of the plot in the novel, particularly in the life of Andrew. Ruth’s religion leads her to believe that Andrew’s feelings towards Henry is an abominable sin, which is her reasoning for pushing Andrew to become closer to God and later pushing him to commit suicide after he refuses to stop seeing Henry.

Earl must choose to work in the coal mines, instead of following his dreams of being a singer-songwriter (Miller). While describing himself, Earl says, “Has-been singer and guitar player turned coal miner. Would-be song writer and radio star who stopped beside the road for a square meal and never left. Had to be coal miner who gave up and died” (280). Earl is constantly reminded by the music star he could have been, and it is part of the reason for his downward spiral. His choice to become a coal miner leads him to be a drunk and gambler, disappointing both Ruth and Andrew. Earl chooses to escape from his disappointing present by drinking moonshine and cheating on his wife. His choices heavily affect Ruth, since she was reliant on him to be her escape from Kentucky, and she is married to him.

Andrew Wallen faces multiple choices given by his family throughout the novel. His parents seem to want him to do different things and be someone he is not. Andrew could choose to follow both of his parent's wishes, becoming a different person, but he would likely become more depressed and hurt. Because of her deep religious beliefs, Ruth wants him to become closer to God. On the other hand, because of Andrew's lack of working, his father wants him to come work in the coal mines (McKee). When Andrew does travel into the coal mines, he finds them to be a pit of hell (Brownrigg). Ultimately, Andrew must choose whether to run away from Kentucky with Henry or to commit suicide. Ruth who believes his secret gay life is as an abominable sin, lays a twenty-two-rifle next to him on his bed, pushing that choice of suicide (Miller). After laying this rifle next to Andrew, he thinks to himself, " Act like a man," instead of thinking about the insane action of his mother (269). The novel flashes back to the events that directly lead to Andrew's choice, inching slowly towards it. At the end of the novel, Andrew explains, " You left in secret, left the house and the whole coal black world whispering no. You left that place and all those things that hurt, things you would nearly forget, a time you would no longer name" (287). Andrew finally chooses to leave, leaving Highway 23 behind alongside Henry, instead of killing himself. Before making this final choice, though, Andrew does seem to consider his choice of suicide. He says, " And so I picked up that gun, braced all its weight against my shoulder, aimed" (279). While trying to find the face of God, Andrew's contemplation with suicide and using the gun helps him in his decision of running away.

The choices Andrew faces, especially the one he chooses, affects himself and both of his parents. Throughout *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven*, the time the story takes places jumps around, covering decades about the family, but the story always come back to the day Andrew makes his big choice, August 16, 1983. Before Andrew makes his choice, all the narrators are paralyzed while struggling between the light and dark within them. Earl, who has already driven himself to be a drunk and gambler, cannot pull himself away from the shack or the coal mines. He also thinks of his days serving in the world, thinking about the men who have lost arms and body parts. Secondly, Ruth's mother, Little Mother, constantly appears in Ruth's dreams, even though she has run away long before and Ruth has not seen her since. In these dreams, Little Mother tantalizes Ruth with dreams of escaping from Inez, Kentucky that are never fulfilled. Lastly, Andrew himself is equally hindered as his parents. He unable to leave his lover, Henry Ward, and he is unable to comfortable stay in his extremely religious household (Brownrigg). Andrew additionally has the visions or dreams like his parents. He says, " The room was filled with dozens upon dozens of moths circling the light, wings folded against the mall" (278). The characters face a lot of stress and tension leading up to this day in 1983, and it shows through these images the narrators see. Ruth, Earl, and Andrew all feel trapped throughout the novel, and they each find escapes from this entrapment. At the end of the novel, all three characters become somewhat free from Andrew's choice. Andrew says, "[Y]ou sang, I am free now. Free" (287). By choosing to leave Kentucky, Andrew is free from his household, as well as the restrictions of the prejudice from his entire community. Ruth and Earl are additionally free from their worries and concerns about Andrew.

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Throughout the novel, the choices of each character affects another character, creating a butterfly effect. Not only do the narrators play an important role in this butterfly effect, but so do some of the other main characters. Little Mother's choice to run away from Tobias and Ruth can be held as the first choice that starts this butterfly effect. From this choice comes Tobias's choice to become a drunk pastor, which leads Ruth's choice to want to escape from Kentucky. Her hunger for escape leads to her marrying Earl, leading to Earl's choices that lead him to become more like Tobias, drinking and gambling. Ruth's disappointment from the failure of Earl leads her to chose God as an escape from the world that has fed her nothing but disappointment, and her strong religious beliefs lead her to believe her son's homosexuality is an abomination. Finally, Ruth's hatred for homosexuality leads her to place the gun on Andrew's bed, which finally leads to the big choice Andrew faces. *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven* truly shows the effects of just one choice and change the course of many people's lives.

During an interview, McElmurray herself summarizes that, " *Strange Birds* is a novel about breaking—breaking away, breaking inside, breaking free and choosing love" (Wade). Not only does the novel show choosing love, but it shows all of the choices that lead to the need to choose between love or nothing. The novel follows three narrators who face many choices in their lives. Although often not as extreme, these choices faced by the main characters of the novel are relatable to many readers. Life is full of choices, and *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven* focuses on mostly the bad choices. Yet, the novel ends on one good choice, which is perhaps also the most

difficult, Andrew's choice of uncertain love and escape from constant persecution, instead of ending his own life.

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