

SYNOPSIS

The Sorrows of Gathering combines the intrigue of a murder mystery and the excitement of a courtroom drama with the eloquence and sensibility of literary fiction. The prologue takes place in 1957 when two precocious adolescents, Rebecca Martin and Nolan Gathering, discover a body in rural Massachusetts. But the mystery of that death will not be solved until twenty-five years later when, as adults, these two lead characters become embroiled in a controversial murder trial, one based on a missing person who is presumed dead. The trial frames the major events in this six-part novel.

The year is 1983, and Republican conservatism reigns. The governor of Massachusetts has initiated a tough-on-crime policy, with mandatory sentencing, and has signed legislation reinstating the death penalty. President Reagan prepares for re-election while ignoring the emerging AIDS crisis that is fomenting nationwide bigotry.

When Rebecca, now a nationally renowned defense attorney in San Francisco, learns that her childhood friend Nolan has been arrested for murder in Massachusetts, she reluctantly ventures cross country to defend her old friend. Part one of the novel describes the criminal case against Nolan and the life-and-death stakes of the trial, while establishing the backgrounds of the principal players, including an earnest, no-nonsense prosecutor.

Part two develops the relationship of Nolan to the missing young man, Matthew. Nolan has returned to his hometown after the deaths of his parents. He is an architect, and Matthew apprentices with him as a landscaper. The relationship between them is strained at first, but, over time, the two develop a fervent bond. Matthew is injured saving Nolan's life, and, during the convalescence, we learn that Matthew, whose father deserted him as a child, is the caregiver for an alcoholic mother. After Nolan celebrates Matthew's restoration to good health and his acceptance of a business partnership, Matthew mysteriously disappears.

Part three returns to the present and preparations for the trial. Rebecca hires a private investigator and a local attorney to sit second chair. Motions are readied, pleas are discussed, and potential witnesses are lined up, including the eccentric, eighty-something Allerton sisters, who harbor a dark secret they've kept hidden for half a century. As the trial approaches, Rebecca learns of a campaign designed to enrage the gay community and draw national attention to the trial. The revelation forces her to rethink her allegiances and defense strategy.

In part four, Nolan finds love. We hark back to the early 1970s and Nolan's Harvard grad-school days when he meets Jessamine Beneteau, an Oxford-educated professor and classical musician of French and Chadian heritage. Their whirlwind courtship is set against the backdrop of racial tensions caused by the attempted desegregation of Boston schools. As Jessa's fame as an opera singer grows, the couple struggle to balance the demands of their careers with raising a young son. Eventually, Jessa's desire to return to France creates a dilemma for Nolan. After seeking guidance from his parents, Nolan resolves his predicament, only to face the news of a horrific accident.

Part five provides a blow-by-blow account of the trial from the defense's perspective. Rebecca challenges the jury "to see past the prejudices and political agenda coloring the prosecution's case, one that fabricates a courtroom narrative at odds with reality." She chisels away at each of the prosecution's witnesses and masterfully constructs her narrative with defense witnesses. Against conventional wisdom, Rebecca decides to have Nolan testify. After spending the night with him, she is even more desperate to reveal the truth – no matter the cost. The trial climaxes with Nolan's testimony and the final verdict.

Part six, the denouement, brings resolution to the main characters, each forever changed by the ordeal of the trial. Sometimes one wins; sometimes one learns, and as Rebecca says, "Not everything has a solution – just an outcome." The novel ends with a short epilogue – a letter sent by Nolan to Rebecca, who has returned to San Francisco. Case closed, mysteries solved, and life moves on.