

# **About Grace Study Guide**

**About Grace by Anthony Doerr**

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# Plot Summary

About Grace, a novel by Anthony Doerr, revolves around David Winkler and the profound impact his dreams have on his life. In the past, David had dreamed of a death that came to pass. So, when David dreamed that he accidentally drowned his infant daughter, he feared that it would also come true. To prevent the dream from becoming a reality, David abandoned his wife and infant daughter Grace. Now, twenty-five years later, he returns to apologize and make things right.

Indeed, David seems to have the gift of precognition, or clairvoyance. He is able to envision and dream things before they happen. Much of the early part of the novel weaves back and forth between the past and the present, blurring the lines between time, what is real, what is prophetic, what is memory, and what is a dream. As the novel begins, David boards a plane from his home on the island of St. Vincent to his former home in Cleveland. David spends much of the flight recalling memories, until the novel shifts into the past.

The story flashes back to the 1970s. David, a weather forecaster, meets a woman named Sandy, and he is instantly attracted to her. A married bank teller, Sandy gently rebuffs David's romantic advances, but ultimately decides to begin seeing him. Sandy is married to a man named Herman, who is very work-oriented and enjoys garlic salt too much for Sandy's liking. Still, she knows he is a good man and loves her. As time passes, David and Sandy grow closer, and begin sleeping together. Sandy becomes pregnant. She decides to run away with David, and the two leave Alaska by car for Ohio. There, they take up residence in a beautiful house on Shadow Hill Lane and soon have their daughter, Grace.

One night, David has a dream in which the house is flooded and his attempt to rescue Grace results in her death. Having seen in other dreams the deaths of others that later occurred, David worries this dream will also come true. During a bad storm, the river floods, and David refuses to stick around. After reporting on the weather, David flees to New York. He boards a ship to flee the country, and he disembarks in St. Vincent. David writes home frequently to explain what has happened. He tries to call, but he never receives a response. In St. Vincent, he befriends a local family. The family includes husband Felix, wife Soma, and daughter, Naaliyah. The family senses unhappiness in David, and they take him under their wing. David tries to contact Sandy to explain why he had to leave. He never makes contact. Eventually, David learns that Sandy has gone back to Alaska.

For the next twenty-five years, David lives and works in St. Vincent. While living with his new found family, he works to instill a love of science in their daughter, Naaliyah. When David dreams of Naaliyah's death by drowning, he intervenes in time in real life to save her. The family is very grateful, and David learns his dreams are not fate. They are by choice. Naaliyah goes on to study at a graduate school in Alaska, while David decides to return home to find Sandy and Grace. In the library, he learns Sandy has died a few years before of cancer. David is devastated. He travels across America, seeking out



young women who have the name Grace and who also have either his or Herman's last name.

After no success, David heads to Alaska to stay with Naaliyah a short time. While there, he learns from Soma where Herman now lives. David contacts Herman. Much to Herman's surprise, David has forgiven the past. Herman helps David reconnect with Grace –and Grace's son, Christopher. Grace is enraged that David has come back into her life so suddenly after abandoning her. However, David is determined to make things right. When he has a prophetic dream about Herman dying of a heart attack, David and Christopher rush to Herman's office and save his life. Herman decides he will retire, while Grace decides to allow David back into their lives. In a dream, David is visited from Heaven by Sandy, who makes peace with David for the past.



# Book One

## Summary

Chapter 1 – A man boards a plane as he considers that human body is made of seventy-five percent water, which upon death is released back into the world. The plane takes off as the man sees great clouds in the distance.

Chapter 2 – The man, David Winkler, is a fifty-nine. He is a husband and a father. He is flying home for the first time in twenty-five years, from Kingstown, St. Vincent, to Cleveland, Ohio, with a stopover in Miami. David wakes up with a start, saying the overhead compartment over a blonde man is not latched tight. The man insists it is. When the plane hits some turbulence, the compartment pops open, and a woman's bag falls out. The bag's owner looks at David in surprise.

Chapter 3 – David calls his premonition-like visions, presentiments, and sensations, dreams. He has had them all his life, and they have always predicted impossible things.

Chapter 4 – David recalls a dream he had twenty-five years before, in which he heard his daughter, Grace, crying during a flood. He found her in the family room in her bassinet on the highest shelf of the plant stand, still dry. David recalls seeking to save Grace by getting her out of the house, but the waters becoming higher and higher until they both go under, resulting in Grace drowning.

Chapter 5 – David recalls how, in 1975, he was thirty-two, living in Anchorage, Alaska, where he worked as a weatherman. He remembers how one March day, when he went on break for lunch at the Snow Goose Market, he noticed a woman who dropped a magazine. He picked up the magazine for the woman. He remembers how, as time passed, the memory of the woman grew stronger in his mind until he saw her again in June. He found out that she worked at First Federal Savings and Loan. He remembers wondering if people choose whom they love. He also remembers going with a box of Apple Jacks to see the woman at work. He took the Apple Jacks because he knew she wanted some to eat. He learned that her name was Sandy Sheeler and that she was married.

Chapter 6 – The novel now shifts back in time to 1975. In September, Sandy calls David, and the two go out on a date even though Sandy is married. Sandy tells David that she had this instinctive idea that he would be at the market the day she dropped the magazine, as if she had lived through it once before already. David tells her she is not crazy. She and David begin seeing movies regularly. Sandy is two years older than David, and has been married since the year after she graduated high school. She is not happy in her marriage for many reasons, including that her husband loves garlic-salt. In December, Sandy learns of David's habit for writing everything down – his thoughts, his feelings, his ideas, his intuitions – in a notebook. They begin sleeping together, and David falls in love with Sandy. By January, Sandy has second thoughts, knowing her



husband loves her and is trying. She explains that she and her husband, Herman, cannot have a child because Herman has no sperm. In March, Sandy tells David she is pregnant.

Chapter 7 – Sandy is devastated by the news, and pushes David away. David is distraught, wanting only to talk to her, but she does not wish to speak to him. David then goes to see Sandy at her house when her husband is not at home. She agrees to meet him for coffee. David tells her they can leave and go anywhere, but she informs him she is thirty-four and has been married for over fifteen years. David takes work in Cleveland, hoping Sandy will come with him. She decides to do so at the last minute.

Chapter 8 – The novel blends together scenes of David flying to Ohio, as well as David and Sandy driving to Ohio. Then, the novel transitions back to 1976. In Ohio, David continues work as a weatherman in Ohio for Channel 3. Sandy takes to making industrial art through scrap metal, found objects, and welding. Sandy proposes to David, and David says yes. Ohio is a beautiful place to David, full of little miracles, and David considers his soon to be born child a miracle as well.

Chapter 9 – Pending parenthood causes David to recall his own Finnish-born mother, who loved the Alaskan cold. He remembers being close to his mother, gaining his interest in snow and weather from her, and leading him to study it in college. He also remembers this first gave him an interest in water itself, causing him to reflect on how wild and uncontrollable it can be.

Chapter 10 – David, soon to become a parent, remembers how, as a child, he began to realize his dreams would come true, such as one when he was nine where he dreamt a man would be cut in two by a bus three blocks from where he lived –something which came to pass. David remembers how his mother came to accept he could have such visions, and that the visions and dreams kept coming.

Chapter 11 – It is now October 1976. David tells Sandy about the dreams he has, which come true. David wonders how anyone could possibly believe him.

Chapter 12 – Grace, named after Grace Creek, Alaska, (a place Sandy had visited with her father while he worked on the pipeline) is born on November 4, 1976. David and Sandy are thrilled to have Grace. Life goes well until David has the dream about Grace dying in March.

Chapter 13 – For three nights in a row, David has the same dream. David tries not to sleep so that he does not have to dream, but this becomes very difficult to do. David urges Sandy the family should travel, should do something to get away from home for a while, but they cannot afford it. The lack of sleep wears on David, who sleepwalks and begins believing he sees Herman everywhere. David tells Sandy about his dream, but Sandy tells him it is just a dream. A storm front comes in with heavy rain. David is now panicked because their house is so close to a river. The basement floods. David tries to bail water, but is unable to get ahead. They decide to take a motel room on Eaton Road, located six miles away. David sleepwalks, but Sandy catches him outside. After work,



David is panicked when he cannot find his wife and daughter anywhere. David must return to work where he goes on television and tells viewers they will have to keep their fingers crossed, watch the sky, and pray about the flooding.

Chapter 14 – David imagines that by returning home, he will bring about the death of his daughter. He cannot accept this, so he decides to leave. He drives to New York.

Chapter 15 – David takes a cheap apartment and calls back to Ohio to see about Sandy and Grace. He also sends home a telegram to Sandy explaining and apologizing. David dreams that Grace is still alive, meaning she has been saved. Still, he worries he can never get far enough away, and that he will only end up causing his daughter's death. He hastily boards a ship to leave the country.

## Analysis

As the novel gets underway, readers are introduced to David, a man who has the gift of precognition –a gift both a blessing and a curse, to him, for it allows him to see even unhappy futures. David, the reader notes, is headed home to Cleveland to make things right and reconnect with his wife, Sandy, and his daughter, Grace, twenty-five years after leaving them after dreaming of causing Grace's death. David's precognition, and his specific dream about Grace, are what drive him to flee Ohio so as not to cause Grace's death. David's return flight to the United States primarily encompasses his remembering events of the past, until the novel fully transitions into the past, being told as though it was concurrent with the present. The blending together of the past and the present in the novel creates a dream-like atmosphere, which causes readers –in addition to David's precognitions, actual dreams, memories, hopes, and thoughts – to question what is really real, and what is not. So, too, does David attempt to discern the same due to his precognitive dreams. The remembering of the past becomes an important theme in the novel, as it is the past that contextualizes the present, and makes sense of the present.

That David has left and is now returning to his family underscores another important thematic point –that the love of family inspires incredible and sometimes heartbreaking things. Under normal circumstances, it could certainly be argued that David abandoning his family is indefensible –but here, there is a degree of sympathy and support for David, given David's sense of precognition and his desire that no harm should come to Grace through his own actions. David's dreams, so central to his own life, becomes central to the novel as well, as they are the catalyst for his leaving –and, as readers will learn much later –his catalyst for returning. As such, dreams become symbolic of the future.

Despite David's gift of precognition, much of the future is uncertain. This is among the reasons why David is so anxious to return to Ohio and why he was so anxious to depart in the first place. The other primary reason includes the thematic argument that one must always try to do the right thing. Again, though David may be faulted for leaving his wife and daughter, the reader must see things through David's eyes: his dreams of



precognition terrify him. He does not want to be the cause of the death of his daughter, and so by removing himself from the situation, he hopes to save Grace's life although he may forever change it by not being in it. The choice for David is not easy, but it is one he knows he must make. There is something to be said for David abandoning Sandy and Grace, after Sandy abandoned Herman for David. There is a turnabout here that is ironic, as the person Sandy left Herman for has now left her. Nevertheless, the wrongs done to Herman must also stand –and be reckoned with later in the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does David choose to leave Sandy and Grace? Can David be faulted for leaving Sandy and Grace? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do David's dreams matter so much to him? Do you believe his dreams truly can predict the future, or do you believe David is simply astute and perceptive? Explain.

## Discussion Question 3

What is David's dream about Grace? Why does it scare him so much? In turn, what does this compel David to do? Why?

## Vocabulary

perpetually, hydrology, turbulence, awhurioes, phalanxes, articulateness, capricious, infinitesimal, unremitting, indissoluble, continuum, intractable





# Book Two, Chapter 1 – Book Three, Chapter 8

## Summary

Chapter 1 – The novel returns to the present day. David's flight home continues. The novel then shifts into the past to David's ship passage aboard the Agnita, in which he wonders how Sandy and Grace are getting along. David does his best to avoid talking to anyone else on the ship. The Agnita makes port several times on the way to Caracas, but at Kingstown, St. Vincent, David gets off.

Chapter 2 – St. Vincent is beautiful to David, who immediately attempts to call home, but no one answers. David dreams of Grace being trapped beneath ice, and of darkness. It is now April, 1977. David wonders if Grace is indeed dead, and if she has been buried. He calls the Channel 3 station and speaks with friend and coworker, Kay, asking her if she has heard from Sandy, but the connection is bad. It has now been three weeks since David has left home.

Chapter 3 – David calls Herman's house in Anchorage. Sandy is there. She has gone to stay with Herman, won't answer questions about Grace, tells David to get help, and tells him not to call back. A bus passes by with the words PATIENCE AND GOD painted across it, while David attempts to consider what to do next. He realizes that everything he knows, such as about weather, is useless to him in this moment.

Chapter 4 – David meets a man and his wife. The wife has not slept all week, saying Easter is for forgiving. The man, formerly a famous chef, introduces himself as Felix. Seeing that David is obviously homeless, Felix brings David home to his wife and children. His wife is Soma, who works at the post office and who helped David make his calls back to the States. David is fed and allowed to stay with the family.

Chapter 5 – Felix explains to David that he was born in Punta Arenas, while Soma was born in Santiago. David takes on construction work for Nanton, who is working on his inn. It is for Nanton that Felix works. Nanton offers to keep David if David can prove his worth. David continuously thinks of Sandy, but especially about Grace. David also begins to teach Felix's daughter, Naaliyah, about clouds and the weather. Each day, he must force himself not to think about Grace, which makes getting through each day easier. David comes to enjoy working with his hands, and realizes he now has a new existence.

Chapter 6 – David writes to Sandy, wanting to know if Grace is still alive. He also writes to Grace. He imagines Herman destroying each letter as they come in. David comes to learn all his American bank accounts back home have been closed.



Chapter 7 – David has a dream where Naaliyah, now in her twenties, commits suicide by tying herself to a cinder block and plunging into the water. He is so startled by the dream that he goes to sleep at the construction site.

Chapter 8 – David continues to write letters to Sandy asking about Grace.

Chapter 9 – David reflects on life in the past and how his mother preferred nighttime darkness. He continues to write letters to Grace.

Chapter 10 – It is March 1978. David has been gone for about a year. The inn is completed, opens, and does well. David saves as much money as he can, hoping to fly home in June. A package of all of his letters, unopened and unread, arrives with a note that tells him to stop writing and not to come home. The note says David is dead. David wades out into the sea to drown himself, but the waves pitch him back up to the surface where he gasps for air. He then drifts back to shore.

Chapter 11 – In ill-health after the drowning attempt, David is cared for and nursed back to health. Naaliyah especially keeps a close watch over him. When he recovers, he is overcome with the knowledge that Grace has died in the flood.

### Book Three

Chapter 1 – David does his best to settle into life on St. Vincent. Felix offers to help him meet girls, but David gently refuses. Felix likens David to a hermit crab. David, as the years pass, finds few joys. Now a teenager, Naaliyah talks about running away, and asks David about life in America. Naaliyah knows David misses home. Sometime later, she drops out of school. Meanwhile, Felix and Soma begin to drift apart.

Chapter 2 – Naaliyah runs away from home. The inn falls into disrepair. David comes to realize he misses, and worries about Naaliyah.

Chapter 3 – It is December 1999. David receives a thesis Naaliyah has written about shrimp and marine life and asks him to critique it. David reads through it, making notes in the margins. David wonders if Naaliyah is in trouble, if his dream will come true. David sees Naaliyah go past in a boat, and wonders how many times she has done so that he has not seen.

Chapter 4 – The novel steps back in time twenty-four years. David and Sandy are driving to Ohio, and David is amazed by how different things are between Ohio and Alaska, from the landscape to the wildlife. The novel then returns to 1999. Naaliyah comes to see David, asking about her thesis. She asks him to write her letters so that she can apply to graduate school. David dreams of Naaliyah committing suicide once more that night.

Chapter 5 – In the present day, as David travels home, he continues to remember the past, wherein he was looking forward to the future. The novel shifts back to 1999. David continues working as a repairman for the inn. David tells Naaliyah's parents that he has seen her over in Kingston, and that she has an apartment somewhere near the



marketplace. Still worried about Naaliyah from his dream, he begins watching her as she collects coral and marine life, fearful she will commit suicide. He even buys diving flippers and chain cutters. David explains why to a disbelieving Soma. Soma thinks it is kind but unreasonable for David to follow Naaliyah around, believing it is fear born from losing Grace. Nanton threatens to fire David, while Naaliyah refuses to see her mother, Soma, worried that Soma will force her away from doing what she loves at David's behest.

Chapter 6 – David completes his letter of recommendation for Naaliyah, praising her intelligence and curiosity. It is the first letter he has been able to complete in twenty years.

Chapter 7 – Soma warns David against pushing Naaliyah, because Naaliyah will only push back harder.

Chapter 8 – While watching Naaliyah dive with a cinder block to help keep her waited down, David realizes now is the time. He rushes into the water after her to discover the chain has looped around her ankle twice, and she is scrabbling to deal with it. David manages to free her, and saves her life.

## Analysis

The novel now focuses itself primarily in the past. While the reader is given brief insights and visits to the future beyond the 1970s, much of the novel is now rooted firmly in the 1970s. This helps to contextualize what will become the future, but it also helps to dimensionalize David. He is not simply someone who has left his wife and daughter lightly. He is as terrified of his dream as he is terrified for his daughter's life and heartbroken at having to leave them. The love of family, after all, inspires heartbreaking decision-making. There is very little that David believes he can do apart from putting as much distance between himself and his daughter as possible. His constant attempts to get in touch with Sandy and Grace are demonstrative proof of how much he loves them, and how he considers that what he is doing is for their best interests, not his. The reader should note that David has left them not because he has grown tired of them, has had an affair, or has become selfish, but because he believes he is doing the right thing for them.

Sandy, understandably, cannot come to this same point of view. She believes David is crazy, and her note back to David is clear: David is dead to her, and she never wishes to hear from him again. This devastates David, who emerges as something of a tragic figure: he is human, very much flawed, and has done something which he believes is right but cannot bring himself to reason is right –and for this he now aspires to make up, having obviously realized either that he was wrong, or after which some change has inspired him to return to Ohio. Indeed, whatever has happened that has inspired him to return to home will soon be unveiled to the reader. One does not leave home for twenty-five years and then suddenly decide to return without a good reason.



At the same time, the reader is treated to an interesting and critical theme revolving around the important symbolism of dreams representing the future. David dreams of Naaliyah committing suicide –or seemingly committing suicide. David, who becomes almost something of a father figure to Naaliyah, comes to save her life when she gets caught up in a chain attached to a cinder block while out doing underwater research. This demonstrates to the reader, clearly, that the future is not fate, but choice. This important symbolic recognition will be manifested in coming chapters of the book, but for now, it is critical that the reader recognize this. This is the first dream David has had where he has conclusive evidence that the future is not fated, and can indeed be changed from what is dreamt. David's act of saving Naaliyah becomes a symbolic, representative act of David saving his daughter, Grace. David may not have been able to save Grace, but he can save Naaliyah.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you fault Sandy for reacting the way she does to David, despite David's explanations? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does David seem to develop such a quick and close, fatherly relationship with Naaliyah? Why is this so important to David?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does David's dream of Naaliyah terrify him so much? What does he choose to do about it? What important information does this give to readers, even though David has not yet recognized it?

## Vocabulary

simultaneity, furtively, conjecture, unfathomable, nonplussed, irony, luminous, reprieve, indignities



# Book Three, Chapter 9 - Book Four, Chapter 10

## Summary

Book Three, continued

Chapter 9 – Naaliyah recovers in the hospital while Soma thanks David for saving Naaliyah's life. Feeling better about things, David begins going to the library, and begins learning things again. Each day, he feels entire segments of himself waking up. He begins writing again earnestly, stories he hears and information he learns. Naaliyah comes to visit David. She brings him out to catch eels for one of her professors. Naaliyah reveals she has been accepted to graduate school, and will not have to pay tuition. She thanks David for everything.

Chapter 10 – Nanton's inn becomes the center of a celebratory party for Naaliyah. Three days later, Naaliyah heads off to school. David gives her a stoppered glass bottle full of local seawater, so Naaliyah will not forget home. Naaliyah hugs him and tells him to come and see her.

Chapter 11 – David continues writing thoughts and facts in his notebooks, while beginning to dream again of snow and ice. He befriends a butcher and tells the butcher about his dreams about Grace. The butcher thinks that perhaps Grace is not dead because David has altered things. David begins to wonder if Grace might actually be alive, as Sandy never said anything about her being dead.

Chapter 12 – Before David leaves to return to America, he thanks Soma and Felix for everything. They tell him he is welcome to come back.

Book Four

Chapter 1 – The novel now returns to the present day. The woman and the man named Dirk argue about the fallen suitcase. The flight stops over in Miami, then lands in Cleveland. There, David buys a cheap, used car (a Datsun) and takes a hotel room. It is now August, 2002. David does not have a driver's license.

Chapter 2 – David drives toward home. Ohio is both familiar and different as memories come rushing back. He drives to his old home on Shadow Hill Lane, to find a family called the Lees living there.

Chapter 3 – David goes to the Chagrin Falls Public Library where he meets with Gene, the archivist, about finding out about Grace and Sandy. David gives him four-hundred dollars to skip the red tape. Gene runs some searches, but cannot find anything solid in Alaska. He can find numerous people with the first names Grace Sheeler, Grace Winkler, Sandy Sheeler, and Sandy Winkler, across the country however, and promises



to find every last one. When David return to the library later, an envelope with the information –and his four-hundred dollars –is waiting for him. An obituary for Anchorage resident Sandy Winkler is included, who died on May 19, 2000 due to complications from ovarian cancer. The obituary also mentions “her family.” David is stunned and devastated. He puts back all information relating to Sandy in the envelope, along with the money, and taking only the information about Grace. David wonders who “her family” includes.

Chapter 4 – David tapes Sandy’s obituary picture to the inside of his car. David first decides to head to New Jersey to follow leads about Grace. The Grace Winkler he finds in Middletown, New Jersey, is not his Grace, but a black woman who, along with friends, is drinking heavily. Her son, Jed, has a future machine he has built which she says tells her that David will always be searching, that he will see fire and he will die, and that to enter a world of shadows is to leave this world for another.

Chapter 5 – David next heads to Petersburg, Virginia, to another Grace Winkler. It is not the right Grace, but she wishes David luck. The Graces in Dyersburg, Tennessee, and Walton, Nebraska, are not the correct Graces, either. He then heads to Austin, Texas, to another Grace Winkler, who is also not the right Grace. As he travels, David writes letters to Soma, keeping her up to date on his progress. The Grace Winkler of Socorro, New Mexico, is not the right Grace, either. As he visits the Graces, he leaves them hundred-dollar bills, or small gifts. He calls the two Graces in Southern California, but neither are the right Grace.

Chapter 6 – The final Grace Winkler, in Boise, Idaho, does not pick up her phone when David calls. He decides to drive to see her.

Chapter 7 – David arrives at the last Grace’s house in Boise before she gets home from work. When she gets home, David sees she looks a lot like Sandy. David knocks at her door, but when no one answers, goes inside. The woman smashes his leg with a ceramic potted ficus, then calls the police, with David realizing the Grace he has seen is not his daughter. David rushes off, and abandons his car. He thinks his leg may be broken.

Chapter 8 – David takes to the hills above Boise. There seems to be no end to the hills. He walks for days, thinking sadly about how none of the Graces he has visited have been his daughter.

Chapter 9 – David is caught up in a storm and in a river, where loses his glasses, and scrambles out. He continues on, unable to see things clearly around him. Six days in finds him far to the north, with the Salmon River Valley ahead of him. He grows weak and hungry, imagining he sees people in the shadows around him, like Grace and Sandy. Finally, he comes upon a road.

Chapter 10 – A truck driver picks David up and tells David he can take David as far as Ninety-five. David then takes a ride with another truck driver named Brent Royster. David later makes a call to Anchorage to see if Naaliyah is around, but learns she is out



in the field near Eagle City doing research on insects. Back on the road, Brent drives up toward Alaska through Canada with Brent. Before heading to Alaska, David sends money to the Grace in Boise for her trouble.

## Analysis

The future is not fate, but a choice. David learns this after speaking to a butcher about his dreams. David realizes, because of the butcher's simple but life-changing considerations, that he has altered one of his dreams by saving Naaliyah. Perhaps leaving has altered reality at home, and perhaps Grace is still alive. The idea that the future is not fate becomes central to the novel at this point, as David decides he will return to Ohio to see about Grace. Indeed, as the reader herein comes to recognize, David has lived his entire life for the past twenty-five years about Grace. Everything he has done has been for, and about Grace. From this, the novel draws its title (About Grace). Yet, at the same time, David will be seeking to live his life about grace – forgiveness. The love of family inspires incredible and sometimes heartbreaking things, and now David's love of family is bringing him back to America to make things right. It is both an incredible, and a heartbreaking thing on David's part. Forgiveness is critical in life, and David is seeking forgiveness.

Herein as well, as the novel continues to progress from the past toward meeting with the present on the airplane, David is aware the one must always try to make things right. This also becomes a core thematic component of the novel moving forward. David's whole life is now not only about Grace and grace, but about making things right. As such, he is willing to do whatever is necessary –especially with the devastating news learned at the library that Sandy is no longer alive. The reader should not the especially tender moment when the librarian who helps David refuses to accept money for the help he provides –but David leaves the money anyway.

Now fully in the present, the future is open to any possibility. David understands this as he undertakes the quest to find Grace. As the reader will now note, the novel now entirely takes place in the present, though David continues to remember the past in smaller and smaller portions, reflective of the fact that the future and not the past now holds sway over David's life. The language that is used as David continues his quest continues to be pensive and wondering, as the future is truly uncertain. However, each Grace that David visits turns out not to be his daughter, and the final visit is so disastrous that David heads up into the wilderness outside of Boise. Believing the future has been lost to him, David decides that he will travel to Eagle City, Alaska, to see Naaliyah. David is lost and reeling having been unable to find his daughter, so he will now turn to the one person he knows loves him in America. The future has never seemed dimmer to David, but at least he has done what he must to make things right. Whereas David may not have been able to affect Grace's future, he has affected Naaliyah, who has chosen to study in Alaska based on David's descriptions of it throughout her life.



## Discussion Question 1

How does David come to learn that his dreams (and the future). in general. are not fated? What does this compel David to do? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Do you believe the future is fated, or is open to choices made by people? Explain.

## Discussion Question 3

Why is David so devastated by news of Sandy's death? What does this in turn motivate him to do? Why does this now become so important to David? Is he successful in his quest? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

disjointed, cribbed, purling, bemused, vacillating, panorama





# Book Four, Chapter 11 - Book Six, Chapter 9

## Summary

Book Four, continued

Chapter 11 – Now in Eagle City, David asks locals if they have seen Naaliyah Orellana, or if they know of her. David is ultimately directed to university-owned land. Weak and tired, David collapses. He has a dream of a woman on a horse coming to take care of him while he is lifted and buckled into a truck. It is Naaliyah.

Book Five

Chapter 1 – Naaliyah drives David 145 miles south to the medical clinic in Dawson City, Alaska. David has every imaginable problem, from dehydration to fatigue to fever. He is treated. Naaliyah tells David how much she loves Alaska, though locals do not think she will survive the winter. Naaliyah brings David to the cabin in which she has been staying. It is full of insect specimens and some furniture.

Chapter 2 – David sleeps for two days. Naaliyah watches over and cares for David just as she did many years before. Naaliyah is now thirty-one, and happier among insects than she is among people. Her thesis will focus on overwintering of insects. Naaliyah does not believe David should give up, despite Sandy's obituary. Naaliyah heads over to Fairbanks for a few days to pick up supplies, while David stays behind to care for the insects.

Chapter 3 – David, still unwell, lapses in his caring of the insects. The insects break out, go to war with each other, starve, and die. David goes to sleep in the woodshed, where the insects stored there are quieter. Naaliyah returns with the supplies, including new glasses for David.

Chapter 4 – David takes to helping out around the cabin however he can, from hauling water to splitting wood. He takes to sleeping in the shed to give her privacy, and for his own quiet.

Chapter 5 – It is now November. The winter is beginning. Naaliyah continues studying patterns of insect life as the nearby Yukon River begins to freeze. As it gets colder and the snows come on, Naaliyah abandons work almost entirely to secure firewood to survive the winter. Naaliyah tells David she has come to see what he has always told her about snow, about how each flake can be a prism and full of light. David takes to wandering around in the snow, studying the flakes. Naaliyah suggests David use her photomicrography kit to photograph snowflakes. David sets to work doing so, trying to learn how to properly make exposures.



Chapter 6 – For Christmas, David receives the address of Herman Sheeler from Soma. He is angered by this, saying it is none of their business. Naaliyah tries to explain that they just wanted to help, and tells David Merry Christmas.

Chapter 7 – David tries not to think about the address, doing his best to focus on the labor of photographing snow. As the weather gets colder in January, David takes to spending more time collecting firewood and hauling water.

Chapter 8 – Naaliyah urges David to write to Herman in Anchorage. David is hesitant. In February, he makes his first real successful photography print of a snowflake. In the dark, the Northern Lights are visible. Meanwhile, Naaliyah's studies of her insects reveal that, despite being given plenty of food, light, and warmth, many still go through the seasonal activity of hibernation. One day, while taking a walk, a raven passes above David and a moose stands near the cabin. It causes him to remember the wildlife of Ohio driving with Sandy many years before. He then goes inside to write a letter to Herman.

Chapter 9 – David's letter includes both an apology to Herman, a request for information about Grace, and a print of a snowflake. One letter follows another. David writes about how snowflakes grow, as though something is growing both within and outside of David relating to his life. David goes on to talk about having read a pamphlet by Kepler about how something inside everything in nature seemed to have a key, or a soul, as a blueprint to their external nature, what would later be realized as a nucleus inside a cell.

Chapter 10 – It is now April. Birds and aircraft begin reappearing in the skies. With the winter ending, Naaliyah begins going into town to see people, dance, and enjoy getting out of the cabin.

Chapter 11 – David writes to Herman once more, summarizing how he and Sandy began seeing one another at the movies, begging him to write back.

Chapter 12 – The snow and ice melts while insect life reemerges. A letter finally arrives back from Herman. Herman has let go of the past. He gives David Grace's address (she is now Grace Ennis), reveals Grace got married early, had a son, and got divorced. He warns David that Grace may not want to see him. Herman invites David to stop by if he is ever in town. Herman also thanks David for the snowflakes, and apologizes for not writing back sooner, saying he has been out of commission. David is overwhelmed. It causes him to remember when he was thirteen, and he and his father discovered his mother had died.

Chapter 13 – David and Naaliyah drive to Anchorage.

## Book Six

Chapter 1 – Naaliyah keeps an apartment in Anchorage, and allows David to stay there as long as he needs. David takes on a job at LensCrafters. David takes a bus to Apartment C, 208 Sixteenth Street, in Anchorage. Unable to bring himself to knock on



Grace's door numerous times, David always leaves gifts and then goes across the street to sit in Raney Playground.

Chapter 2 – David visit's Sandy's grave, bringing daffodils to leave. Unable to cry, David smiles recalling good memories with Sandy, toasting marshmallows. He realizes he still loves her.

Chapter 3 – David goes to see Herman. Herman invites David in right away. David brings him a gift of wrenches. Herman invites David to stay for dinner, prays for David, and the two begin eating. David notices pictures of Grace's son. David sees a picture of Sandy from four years before, just before she was diagnosed. David goes to apologize for what he and Sandy did, but Herman says everything is in the past. Herman brings David to the bus stop. There, David apologizes for the past. They shake hands, and Herman drives away.

Chapter 4 – Herman and David become friends. Herman reveals that after Sandy came back, she did not live with him, and confirms the drawings in the house have been made by Christopher, Grace's son.

Chapter 5 – Naaliyah learns her father has been seriously injured while cooking, but he is now recovering. She is very worried about him. David goes to Gottschalks, where Grace is working. He finds her behind the cosmetics counter. She is very thin with dark hair and dark eyes. David begins to introduce himself, but she tells him she will meet him at the Chevron station at four o'clock. She then tells him to leave. When she meets him, she is angry at having been abandoned as a child, and she tells him not to come by the store again. She then drives off.

Chapter 6 – Herman asks David to babysit Christopher one day when Herman has to do work on his computer upstairs. David shows Christopher how to crystallize water with Kool-Aid and crushed ice. Herman explains to David he has a lot of work, and so will need David to come back again.

Chapter 7 – David writes to Soma to tell her about his grandson. David continues to visit with David, while Herman tells Grace that David is a trusted friend who has been helping to watch Christopher during periods of busy work. David comes to learn more about Grace, from her love of bicycling to her failed marriage to salmon boat captain Mike Ennis. David also comes to learn that Herman has a girlfriend, and comes to love Christopher, seeing him as a bright and beautiful grandson. David shows the five year-old Christopher a picture of his father.

Chapter 8 – David admires Christopher's intelligence and curiosity, which seem to grow each day. David and Christopher go out to explore the insect world with Naaliyah, such as listening to spruce beetles, and learning the cocoon that Christopher has found in the plants at the mall is that of a luna moth, which books claim does not live in Alaska. Herman does his best to keep Grace in the dark about David's spending time with Christopher, but knows Grace is getting more suspicious. Eventually, Grace figures out



what is going on, and announces she is going to put Christopher in daycare. Herman says he will try to take the blame for everything.

Chapter 9 – August comes on. David begins leaving apologetic gifts, such as flowers, at Grace's door. He wonders if Christopher misses him. In October, David, while on a bus, sees Grace out biking. David finds himself thinking about having different lives, now – such as being romantically involved with Naaliyah or being Herman instead of himself.

## Analysis

The future is not fate, but a choice. David fully understands this as he comes to live with Naaliyah. He does not know if Grace is dead, but he believes it will be impossible to find her. Yet, even though it is possible that Grace is beyond being found by David, that does not mean she cannot be found. It is Soma who comes through with critical information for David, which in turn leads David to write to Herman. Here, the core themes of the future not being fate, and forgiveness being essential in life, come to manifest themselves through Herman. Herman proves himself to be a good man with a good heart –who, despite what Sandy considered to be flaws (such as loving garlic salt), demonstrates how important forgiveness is. Herman, although he has every right to be bitter about the past, to be angry toward David, and to refuse to help David, chooses the exact opposite. Herman even goes above and beyond to help put David in touch with Grace and Christopher –though Grace currently wants nothing to do with David.

David's photographs of snowflakes –indeed, his study of snowflakes –reflect patterns in nature. They become symbolic of patterns in life. For example, doing something wrong is followed by atonement and, hopefully, forgiveness. David's entire life continues to revolve around making things right and making peace with Grace. David has forgiveness from Herman, but David does not have forgiveness –grace –from Grace. The future is not fate, but a choice. David hopes that the future will include Grace's forgiveness, and being a part of both her life, and Christopher's. David's relentless determination to make things right with the understandably angry Grace demonstrates as well that the love of family inspires incredible and sometimes heartbreaking things. David is trying to make things right, and the thought that he might not be forgiven after all is heartbreaking. As the reader will note, David's life becomes a series of passing vignettes and occurrences. They are represented by short, sometimes very short chapters, as everything is incidental in his quest to secure Grace's forgiveness, or at least be allowed to be enough of a part of her life to make things right. Only with the past does the present make sense. Once Grace learns and accepts the past, forgiveness will be possible –though not necessarily guaranteed.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you think Grace is right to want nothing to do with David after his return into her life after twenty-five years? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 2

Despite everything that Herman has been through, he is ready to forget and forgive the past, especially when it comes to David. Why is Herman ready to forgive and forget? What does this say about Herman's moral character? If you were in Herman's position, would you be as forgiving? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Herman's forgiveness so important to David and to David's efforts to locate Grace? Do you believe forgiveness is just as important to Herman as it is to David? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

torpor, fatigue, lexicon, abominable, tediousness, aquiline, equinox



# Book Six, Chapter 10 - Chapter 17

## Summary

Book Six, continued

Chapter 10 – David thinks about how many people pray to God with help or to know how things will turn out. David wonders just what it means that he should have some sort of foresight with his dreams. David begins sleepwalking again, unhappy and worried about Grace and Christopher. He imagines conversations with Grace about the past and his dreams. Among his most recent dreams are Christopher walking underneath snowy lights, and Herman crawling under his desk, his chair overturned.

Chapter 11 – Herman plans a surprise party for Grace, at which David will be present. Naaliyah talks to Christopher as preparations for the party are underway, telling Christopher he should keep looking for luna moth chrysalides. When Herman runs late with work, David must leave, as he does not know how Grace will react to him. David waits across the street in the snow. When Grace gets home, she invites him over. Grace then tells Christopher that David is his grandfather, and her father. David is stunned and overwhelmed. Grace tells Christopher to go play in his room. She then speaks with David, wanting to know if leaving was hard, and beginning to cry as she asks. David confirms he is not looking for a pardon, but wants to be here, now, for Grace and for Christopher. Grace tells him that leaving flowers and gifts does not make him a father. Suddenly, Grace realizes Christopher is missing.

Chapter 12 – On the other side of town, Naaliyah learns her father has passed away. Herman, still working, has had a heart attack. Grace and David rush outside to find Christopher. David finds him at the mall, and the two head back home, moving from one lamppost to the next in the snow. Grace is not home when they arrive, and Christopher begins to cry. David begins to realize that recent dreams he has had are more than just dreams. David leaves a note for Grace, then rushes out into the car with Christopher. They rush to Herman's office, where they find him and call for help.

Chapter 13 – Herman is rushed to Providence Medical while David and Christopher wait for Grace to find the note and come. Naaliyah sets out for home in St. Vincent. Over their hospital meals, Christopher prays for the food and for Herman's life. Grace arrives later, while Christopher continues to pray for Herman. Herman, they are told, has stabilized. Grace speaks with David, telling him that her mother wanted her to write to him before she died. Grace goes on to compliment David's photographs of snowflakes. David goes on to pray for Herman, and Grace kneels to pray beside him.

Chapter 14 – Naaliyah has her father cremated. She writes to David, asking him to tell her professor why she will be away for awhile. She also sends greetings to Christopher and David, whom she calls family. Christopher says his family includes David, his mother, and Herman as well as Naaliyah. A few days later, Herman walks out of the



hospital. He is sixty-six and decides it is time to retire and enjoy life. He increases his time share in La Jolla, and heads out for a vacation.

Chapter 15 – Grace brings David and Christopher to Heavenly Gates Perpetual Care Necropolis. David and Christopher decide to purchase an aspen sapling to plant at Sandy's grave. They wish Sandy a Happy Thanksgiving.

Chapter 16 – David moves into his own apartment which has a wonderful view of Ship Creek. He receives a letter from Soma, who has since moved in with her friend, Violetta. She has purchased a Honda. She is happy to be alive and to have seen all the things she has in her life.

Chapter 17 – David dreams he is in the cabin near Eagle City, Alaska. A figure appears at the window and raises her hand to the glass. David realizes he is looking at Sandy, and she smiles at him.

## Analysis

The past is essential to understanding the present. This is clear for Grace, as Grace comes to experience her father's precognitive abilities firsthand by way of the prediction of Herman's heart attack. Herman forgave David because it was the right thing to do and because he is a good man at heart. Making peace with David also means that the future is not fate. Had Herman not made peace with David, he might well have died under his desk in his office. Having made peace with David and having let David into his life means that his life is saved. The pattern of wrong, forgiveness, and atonement has come full-circle. It is as if God has used David in a long, roundabout way to bring a number of lives together as a family decades later. The scene where Grace and David pray together for Herman's recovery at the hospital is proof of this. The language and structure of the story becomes confused as David's depression and dreams confused reality, prediction, and the past. Only walking home with Christopher does David realize Herman is in trouble. Only then does the confusion inherent in David's struggle to reconnect with Grace make sense.

Grace being alive, and Herman surviving, are all proof that the future is not fated. Life is the choices people make, though David's dreams may serve as precautionary warnings about what could happen if choices are not made before then. It is possible that Grace may have died as a baby had her father not left; but it is also possible that she might not have. Grace understands this. The past, in this situation, cannot truly be known, but the present is clear. David's precognition has saved a life, and brought together father and daughter. Sadly, just as David's relationship truly begins with Grace, Naaliyah's own father passes away. Still, Naaliyah will have her father-like relationship with David to fall back on. The letter written to David lists him and everyone else as family. Christopher himself comes to consider Naaliyah family as well. David thus comes to be part of a symbolic six-sided family snowflake, around which the six sides –David, Grace, Christopher, Naaliyah, Herman, and Soma, are arrayed. At the very end of the novel,



Sandy visits David in his dreams from Heaven, where she makes peace with him for the past.

## Discussion Question 1

How does David come to recognize that his dreams are actually precognitive? What happens as a result? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Herman's forgiveness and David's desire to be forgiven by Herman come to have important life-or-death consequences for Herman. What are these consequences? What happens? Why does forgiveness matter so much not only in Herman's life, but in life in general?

## Discussion Question 3

In what way does David's love of the patterns in nature come to reflect his own life and family? Why is this so important, especially for all those involved in that family pattern?

## Vocabulary

malleability, offertory, permutations, trajectory, diminutive





# Characters

## David Winkler

David Winkler is the main character of the novel. A former weather forecaster presently in his sixties, David has the gift of precognition. Precognition means that he can see the future through his dreams. He struggles with accepting this gift itself and with accepting that his dreams are not always accurate.

David begins seeing Sandy, even though she is married. After Sandy's divorce from Herman, David and Sandy move to Ohio and marry. There, Sandy gives birth to David's daughter, Grace. After a dream about Grace drowning due to his own failure, David leaves Sandy and Grace for St. Vincent. He leaves because he does not want Grace to die because of him. David writes to Sandy to let her know what has happened, but Sandy refuses to have anything else to do with David.

In St. Vincent, David befriends Felix, Soma, and Naaliyah. Their family takes him into their home. He comes to enjoy something of a fatherly relationship with Naaliyah, family's daughter. He inspires Naaliyah to study science. When David dreams of Naaliyah drowning, he manages to save her.

Speaking with a butcher, David realizes that his dreams do not necessarily seal fate. They represent choices that can be made concerning the future. As such, David decides to return to America where he learns Sandy has died before. He tracks down Herman and Grace. David apologizes to Herman for the past, and Herman forgives him.

David goes on to strive for Grace's forgiveness. David learns that he is a grandfather to Christopher. When David dreams of Herman having a heart attack, he and Christopher intervene in the nick of time. Herman's survival also helps to bring David and Grace closer together. It ensures a solid family connection.

## Sandy

Sandy Sheeler is the wife first of Herman. Later, she marries David, and they have a daughter, Grace. Years later, David and Sandy become the grandparents of Christopher.

As a backstory, Sandy was married to Herman when she met David. The marriage was strained because Sandy disliked things about Herman, such as his love of garlic salt. As such, she began dating David. Finally, she divorced Herman and married David. She did not know quite what to make of David's assertions about his dreams, but she was open-minded. However, when he left her and Grace because of a dream, she had enough. She refused to answer any of his letters. At one point she told him that he was dead to her.



When Sandy is diagnosed with cancer years later, the past is now long behind her. She urges Grace to contact David. After Sandy dies, she visits David in a dream to make peace with him.

## Grace Ennis

Grace Ennis, nee Winkler, is the daughter of David and Sandy. She is the mother of Christopher. Grace is described as very thin with dark hair. She harbors great resentment toward David, her father, for leaving her and her mother many years ago. Grace, married too early and to the wrong person in life, is now herself living alone with her son. She is enraged when David comes back into her life. However, she realizes over time he is genuine and wants to make things right. When David saves Herman's life, it brings the two together in ways unlike before. Grace and David ultimately commit to having a solid father-daughter relationship by the end of the novel.

## Christopher

Christopher Ennis is the son of Grace, the grandson of David, and the step-grandson of Herman. At five years old, Christopher is bright, kind, and compassionate. He quickly takes to David and speaks eloquently both on faith in God and respect for science.

## Herman

Herman Sheeler is the first husband of Sandy. He is a stepfather to Grace and a step-grandfather to Christopher. Herman is an unfailingly good and kind man who is quick to forgive. He always works toward bringing good to those in his life. When David visits him years later, Herman is kind and inviting, forgiving and friendly. When Herman has a heart attack, it is David and Christopher who save him. Herman survives the attack and goes on to retire.

## Felix

Felix is the St. Vincent local who first comes across David and offers him a place to stay with his family. His family include his wife, Soma, and his daughter, Naaliyah. Felix is a kind man who helps David find work, and he tries to get David into the dating scene. A wonderful chef, Felix falls into alcoholism and grows distant from his wife. Collapsing on the stove at work one day, Felix dies of his injuries.

## Soma

Soma is the wife of Felix and the mother of Naaliyah. Extraordinarily kind and gentle, Soma is happy to take David into the family's home. It is Soma who finds Herman's address and passes it on to David.



## Naaliyah

Naaliyah is the daughter of Felix and Soma. Naaliyah grows up with David around, coming to think of him as something like a father. She learns much about science from David, for she is curious and has a thirst for knowledge. She comes to study science in college. Later, she goes on to graduate school in Alaska because of David's own history there.

When Naaliyah almost drowns, David saves her based on his dream. Naaliyah considers David family. As such, she lets David stay with her after David's unsuccessful attempt to find Grace. Naaliyah, ever kind and thoughtful, allows David to stay with her in Eagle City and in her apartment in Anchorage. At the end of the novel, Naaliyah must return home to cremate and bury her father.

## The Butcher

The butcher is a minor, but important, character in the novel. David befriends the butcher in St. Vincent, telling the butcher about his dreams. The butcher reveals that David does not actually know if Grace is dead or alive. This, in conjunction with saving Naaliyah after dreaming of her death, means that David's dreams are not fate. They are choices and potential futures which can be changed. It is the conversation about dreams with the butcher that helps David decide to return to America to find Sandy and Grace.

## Gene

Gene is the kindhearted librarian and archivist who works at Chagrin Falls Public Library. He compiles a list of women named Grace for David. Gene refuses to accept money for his efforts because he feels bad for David. It is also Gene who sadly finds out that Sandy has died of cancer some years before.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Snowflakes

Snowflakes represent patterns in nature, patterns in life, family, and the idea that patterns do not always have to repeat themselves exactly. David loves snowflakes, having gained an admiration of them from his mother. No six-sided snowflake is ever exactly the same beyond that basic six-sided pattern. Patterns of past dreams do not mean these things have to happen in real life, as David comes to find out when he saves Naaliyah. Things can indeed change. Patterns in life –a father walking out on his family and never coming back –is changed when David comes back. At the end of the novel, the snowflake becomes symbolic of the six-parts of David's family: Grace, Christopher, Naaliyah, Herman, Soma, and himself.

## Dreams

Dreams symbolize what could happen in the future, not what necessarily will happen in the future. David has precognitive dreams. At first he believes that his dreams predict unchangeable fates. But, as David learns from the butcher after saving Naaliyah despite dreaming of her death, his dreams show a potential future, not an unavoidable one. This means Grace may still be alive.

## David's Notebook

David's notebook is a physical manifestation of his mind. David writes down important and interesting facts, thoughts, ideas, dreams, and information he comes across in his life. The notebook becomes a tool for David to use to make sense of things in his life, from the informational to the emotional. The notebook helps him to work out thoughts and fears, ideas and considerations

## David's Dream of Grace's Death

David's precognitive dream of Grace's death is the reason why David leaves home. In the dream, David attempts to save Grace from drowning, but he slips, falls, and accidentally drowns her instead. Worried this means that Grace will actually die, David flees home, not wanting to be the cause of his daughter's death.

## David's Dream of Naaliyah's Death

David's dream of Naaliyah's death symbolizes the fact that his precognitive dreams do not mean the future is fated. The future is open to choice. In the dream, David sees Naaliyah drowning as she is caught on a chain and a cinderblock. At first, he believes



this means she will commit suicide. In reality, when this happens, it is because the chain gets caught around her. David manages to free Naaliyah, defying the future in his dream and leading him to learn that his dreams speak about things that could happen, but dreams do not seal fate.

## Naaliyah's Rescue

Saving Naaliyah from death symbolizes the defiance of dreams. David manages to save Naaliyah from drowning, unlike he is able to do in his dream. Because of this, David recognizes that his dreams do not present an unchangeable future. Saving Naaliyah prompts David to return to the United States with the hope that Grace might not be dead after all.

## Records on Grace and Sandy

Records on Grace and Sandy symbolize the future David never thought possible. The records are pulled up on the archives at the library by Gene. They reveal that Sandy has died, which devastates David, but also reveal that Grace is probably still alive. The records on Grace set David off on a cross-country trip to find his daughter.

## Sandy's Obituary

Sandy's obituary symbolizes grief and sadness for David. David is heartbroken to learn that Sandy has died because he still loves her. The obituary also causes him to face the fact that he has missed out on such a large part of his life and the years that had remained in Sandy's life after he left her. His choice to leave was based on his fears. Sandy's obituary instills in David the desire to find Grace.

## Herman's Letter to David

Herman's letter to David symbolizes forgiveness and strong moral character. Herman writes back to David after David writes to him and apologizes for the past. Herman is forgiving and kind. He urges David to visit if he is ever in the area. The letter reveals as well that Herman is a good man. He is willing to help David in his efforts to reconnect with Grace, though he later warns David Grace may not respond well.

## Grace

The name Grace symbolizes forgiveness. As the title of the novel. David is seeking not only his daughter Grace, but grace as well in the process. David's life thus comes to be about Grace and grace (hence the novel's title, About Grace). By the end of the novel, David has his daughter Grace back in his life, and the gift of grace from Grace.



# Settings

## Anchorage

Anchorage, Alaska, is where the novel begins and ends. Anchorage is a major city in Alaska, and is where David lives and works as a weather forecaster. Mild summers and cold winters are typical. Anchorage is also where Sandy and Herman live and work, and where David and Sandy begin an affair before leaving Anchorage for Ohio. After David leaves Sandy, Sandy and Grace return to Anchorage, where they come to live until Sandy's death. David returns to Anchorage to make peace with Grace, and to apologize to Herman. It is in Anchorage that David also meets his grandson for the first time, and in Anchorage that he earns Grace's forgiveness as the novel comes to an end.

## St. Vincent

St. Vincent is an island in the Caribbean where David flees from Ohio after his dream. It is from St. Vincent that David travels to Cleveland to see about Sandy and Grace. It is in St. Vincent that David has lived for twenty-five years, and has essentially become family with Felix, Soma, and Naaliyah, who live nearby. St. Vincent is where David gets his life together and where he decides to return to the United States after coming to realize his prophetic dreams do not imply an unchangeable future.

## Cleveland

Cleveland, Ohio, is the city to which David and Sandy travel after Sandy leaves Herman, and Sandy and David decide to leave Alaska. Cleveland becomes their American dream, as David and Sandy marry, take a house on Shadow Hill Lane, and have Grace. However, bad flooding after David's dream of Grace's death compels David to flee Cleveland for New York. Sandy and Grace stay on in Cleveland for a short while before deciding to return to Alaska.

## Eagle City

Eagle City, Alaska, is a small town on the Yukon River where Naaliyah heads to study for graduate college. She takes a cabin in the woods beyond the town. Once there, she studies insects. She is joined by David for the winter after David's ill-fated search to find Grace. He remains with Naaliyah in Eagle City until word comes that Herman and Grace are still living in Anchorage. From Eagle City, Naaliyah and David set out for Anchorage.

## The State of Grace

The state of grace is a state of existence, in which David has found peace and forgiveness. David spends most of the novel in states of distress, depression, panic, and fear, never truly finding a genuine peace. Only after finding and being forgiven by Grace does David enter a state of grace –of fulfillment, of quiet, of acceptance, and of redemption.



## Themes and Motifs

### **The future is an outcome of the choices made..**

The future is an outcome of the choices made. The future is examined and contemplated in the novel by way of David's two dreams and the events of his life. In each situation, the future is an outcome of choices made, not fate in defiance of choice.

David's precognitive dream about Naaliyah drowning demonstrates this. David is able to save Naaliyah's life, preventing her from drowning, and altering the future. David makes a choice to save her from drowning, rather than standing by helplessly. David's action demonstrates his dreams do not have to come true because he makes a choice to change things.

David did not believe this twenty-five years before when he left Ohio after his dream about Grace's death. He believed, if he stayed, he would bring about Grace's death accidentally as in his dream. Only years later does he learn Grace is still alive, and that just because he dreams a particular future, does not mean this future will come to pass if he so chooses to change it.

As far as David's own life is concerned, he truly is the master of his own life. It was not fate that made David choose to leave Ohio in the hopes of saving his daughter. It was David's own free will. Likewise, it is not fate that Grace is still alive. She is alive because of many choices and circumstances in life. Additionally, it is not fate that Grace should stay forever mad at her father. It is her choice to forgive and begin to rebuild a life with him in it. The call to readers is clear. Every person's life is in his or her own hands.

### **The love of family inspires incredible and, sometimes, heartbreaking acts**

The love of family inspires incredible and, sometimes, heartbreaking acts. The love of family is a kind of love unlike any other, except romantic love. In the novel, the love of family motivates different characters in important ways.

David leaves Ohio because he worries he may bring about Grace's death. His decision to leave is heartbreaking, but it is one that he believes must be made in order to protect his family. David's dream of Naaliyah's death many years later prompts him to risk his own safety by rescuing her from drowning because he considers her and her parents to be family. Naaliyah, in turn, takes David in when she goes to study in Alaska and he follows because she considers him to be family.

Herman, who looks at Grace and Christopher as family, knows the importance of having family in one's life. It is one of the reasons why he forgives David for the past, and helps him to reconnect with Grace and meet Christopher. David's compassion for Herman, as





well as the knowledge that dreams do not mean fate, help David to save Herman's life. David has come to consider Herman family.

The greatest act of family love in the novel is forgiveness. Forgiveness comes by way of Grace, who finally forgives David for leaving her twenty-five years before. Grace has a difficult time coming to forgiveness –and this is understandable given the situation –but she still manages to forgive her father. This is an incredible act given everything that has happened, but one that is owed entirely to the love of even distant and prodigal family.

## **The past is essential to understanding the present.**

The past is essential to understanding the present. The past is so important in the present that the novel's author often blends memories and actual past events with present events. Then, the novel shifts back in time so the reader can understand David and his decision-making. This helps the reader to figure out who David is in the present.

To help in figuring out why David has not seen his wife and daughter in twenty-five years, the author uses a flashback. The reader learns about David's dreams and his dream about Grace. The reader learns these things were enough to drive David away from the very people he loved in order to protect them. Whether David's dreams truly had any bearing on events will never be known, as David did not in real life repeat the events of the dream itself.

David reveals his past to anyone who meets him. Soma is a perfect example. She comes to sympathize with David for wanting to protect his family. It is because of understanding David's past that Soma later comes to help David by sending along Herman's address as a lead. It is understanding David's past –and that David is not a bad person –that Naaliyah comes to help him so much, in addition to his help in making her dreams come true by way of graduate school in Alaska.

Only Grace is the holdout. Understandably, Grace is very angry about David leaving in the past. Only when she comes to understand his life at the time, as well as his gift of precognition, does she begin to relent. When David saves Herman using the gift that cause him to walk away from her, Grace chooses to let David back into her life in a larger way. She does so because she now understands the past, and why David made the decisions that he made so long ago.

## **One must always try to make things right.**

One must always try to make things right. No person is perfect, and mistakes, accidents, and doing the wrong thing happen in life. In the novel, David attempts to right two of his largest wrongs in life by way of apology and involvement.

David's decision to romantically pursue Sandy, despite her being married, and Sandy's decision to leave her husband, are wrong. Despite Herman's flaws, he did not deserve



to be cheated on and abandoned. After leaving Ohio, David comes to feel terribly about what they did to Herman, as David himself has now done something similar to Sandy.

David's decision to leave Sandy and Grace he, Sandy, and Grace all consider to be a wrong. This is so despite the reasoning David has for leaving. David causes Sandy and Grace decades of heartache and uncertainty, as David believes he is doing the right thing by doing the wrong thing of staying away from his family. Sandy and Grace, understandably, do not believe David has done the right thing.

David, however, decides to make things right as best he can. He contacts Herman, not only to learn about Grace, but to make peace with him and to apologize. David's path to peace with Herman is easy. Herman, a good man, readily accepts David's apology, knowing David is doing the right thing. The road with Grace is more difficult, as David continually apologizes, leaves small gifts, and gets to know Christopher. David tells Grace he wants to make things right, and to be an active part of her life, and Christopher's life. Only after Herman is saved by David doing the right thing does Grace herself do the difficult, but right thing –and that is to let her father into her life.

## **Forgiveness is essential in life.**

Forgiveness is essential in life. Forgiveness makes peace, and allows for a better future. Forgiveness is not always easy, but it is very much necessary.

When David and Sandy run off on Herman, they create a terrible situation for Herman. Herman is heartbroken, but he manages to get by. While it is imagined that Sandy asks for forgiveness following David's abandonment, David does not do so for many years. David ultimately comes to apologize to Herman for the past, and Herman, though it must be hard, readily accepts the apology. He knows times have changed and that David has changed, and that David has a right to see his daughter and grandson.

When David finally meets Grace, Grace is still enraged with him for leaving twenty-five years before. Grace's anger is understandable, but so is David's effort to receive her forgiveness. Grace's coming to forgiveness takes months, but eventually, she does come around. She does come to forgive David, and this, in part, leads to a relationship between father and daughter, the kind that had been missing for the previous twenty-five years.

The only person David seemingly cannot gain an apology from is Sandy. This is because Sandy has passed away some years before David's return to Alaska. After making peace with Herman and Grace, and visiting Sandy's grave, Sandy visits David in his dream. Sandy comes down from Heaven to see David, and the two touch hands through a window. Sandy forgives David for the past, which sets David down a better path in life.



# Styles

## Point of View

Anthony Doerr tells his novel *About Grace* in the third-person, limited-omniscient perspective from the point of view of an unnamed, unidentified narrator. The narrator focuses primarily on revolving around David, the events in David's life, and the content of his thoughts, musings, and dreams through the course of the novel. David thus emerges as the central figure in the story, around which all other characters orbit like a pattern in nature. The narrator, though capable of reading David's mind and revealing his dreams, rarely ventures beyond David in the novel. (Quick asides to Naaliyah's burying her father, for example, are exceptions rather than the rule.) This is to help create a sense of hope, despair, and anxiousness as the reader, like David, does not know what is true or not, and does not know what the future actually holds, or what is going on in the lives of other characters beyond David's direct personal knowledge. This is in direct keeping with David's gift of precognition as well, in that it is often difficult to separate genuine dreams from visionary dreams and to separate the past from the future.

## Language and Meaning

Anthony Doerr tells his novel *About Grace* in language that is heavily poetic and heavily reflective. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the reflective nature of the novel's language comes from David's own reflective nature due to his genuine dreams, brilliant mind, remembrances of the past, and premonitions. He is constantly thinking about things, reflecting on them, and trying to determine important aspects of life. Consider for example in Book One, Chapter 5, on page 17 where David wonders, "Do we choose who we love?" Secondly, the poetic aspect of the language –beautiful descriptions and rich, soft language devoid of foul words –denotes David's nature as a wonderer, as he can sense things in the world no one else can, and that he stops to admire beauty and consider things as few others do. It also couples with the reflective language to create a dream-like atmosphere, which is in keeping with the importance dreams have in David's life. Consider, for example, on page 157 from Book Three, Chapter 5, where the narrator uses soft, poetic and reflective language to blur time and reality together: "A trend recurred over and over: Winkler was on an airplane, returning home after twenty-five years; Winkler was on an island, dreaming of the future." The gentle language – especially the absence of foul words –further denotes David as a gentle and kind person.

## Structure

Anthony Doerr divides his novel *About Grace* into six primary parts, with each part of the book representing one side of a six-figured snowflake. Each side of the snowflake



reflects upon David, Grace, Christopher, Naaliyah, Herman, and Soma as family. Each part of the novel reflects a different phase of the plot of the novel. For example, Part One denotes David's present state and his return to the past both by going home, and remembering the past, while Part Six features the resolution of the novel in which David directly seeks forgiveness for the past. Each part of the novel is further divided into numbered chapters, some only a page or two long, each dealing with a specific set of scenes, circumstances, or situations relating to the overall plot of that part. As such, the chapters are arranged, step by step, as though snowflake by snowflake, leading up to the overall plot and the overall snowfall that occurs in the winter in Alaska.



## Quotes

He called them dreams... All his life it had been like this. His dreams predicted crazy, impossible things..."

-- Narrator (Book One, Chapter 4)

**Importance:** Early in the novel, the reader learns David is gifted with precognitive dreams. These dreams show David what the future will be like. At first, David believes the dreams show a fated future. Later, he learns that the things he dreams can still be changed. They do not necessarily have to come to pass.

Memory gallops, then checks up and veers unexpectedly...

-- Narrator (Book One, Chapter 5)

**Importance:** Here, the narrator describes how the past and how memories can confuse life in the present. This makes it difficult for David especially to determine the line between reality and genuine dreams, precognitive dreams and reality. This only adds to David's fear when he later flees his home in order to save Grace.

Do we choose who we love?

-- David (Book One, Chapter 5)

**Importance:** David is prone to many thoughts and considerations regarding life. This is one of many. Here, he wonders if people choose who they love, or if they are simply drawn to someone like fate. Early in the novel, David would respond that love, like his dreams, is fated; later in the novel, David will contend that love, like his dreams, is a choice. This is especially important when David seeks out Grace's forgiveness when he returns to America after learning the truth about his dreams.

Water was a wild, capricious substance: nothing solid, nothing permanent, nothing as it appeared.

-- Narrator (Book One, Chapter 9)

**Importance:** Here, the narrator talks about the water that forms into snow. Water is compared to the choices that people make in life. Water can lead to a limitless number of snowflake patterns when frozen. The same is true of human choices, as David learns through the course of the novel.

These were the beginnings of a new existence; Winkler could feel it gestating.

-- Narrator (Book Two, Chapter 5)

**Importance:** In St. Vincent, David begins to recover from the shock and sting of his life. Having left his family in order to save his daughter, David is depressed and despondent. Only in St. Vincent, as time goes on and he begins to settle into life, does he begin to get better. This is the beginning of a change in David's life that will lead to his seeking out Grace.



Don't come back. Don't write. Don't even think of it. You are dead.  
-- Sandy, in a note to David (Book Two, Chapter 10)

**Importance:** Sandy's letter to David presents a small setback. Having experienced a period of personal growth, David is stunned when he receives Sandy's only response to all the letters he has written. The letter demonstrates the extent of her anger, and it demonstrates how hurt she is that David has done what he has done. It demonstrates just how much David will have to overcome to make things right.

A trend recurred over and over: Winkler was on an airplane, returning home after twenty-five years; Winkler was on an island, dreaming of the future.  
-- Narrator (Book Three, Chapter 5)

**Importance:** Here, the past and present blur together. David's flight home to America serves as a fixed point between which the past and the present compete for control of the novel. Here, the past and present blur together as the trip home becomes a metaphorical trip into the past for David. The novel itself wholly shifts over into the past as the road to David's flight home becomes apparent to readers.

Every day he could feel whole segments of himself waking.  
-- Narrator (Book Three, Chapter 9)

**Importance:** As David continues to recover from his shock at Sandy's letter on St. Vincent, he begins to read and write again in his notebook. His mind and his heart are returning to life. He is determined to someday get back in touch with Sandy, and to see whether or not Grace is still alive –though he suspects that she is not. Nevertheless, David's waking up becomes symbolic of his beginning to move beyond the past, and seeking to atone for it by way of apology.

Even before he reached the end of the first sentence, the air went out of him.  
-- Narrator (Book Four, Chapter 3)

**Importance:** In the United States, David receives some heartbreaking and unexpected news. Sandy is dead. Sandy has been dead for a few years, having passed on from cancer. David is stunned and devastated, knowing he has missed out on a large portion of her life because of his own fears and concerns. Because of this, he did not have the chance to be with Sandy before she died.

A hollowness settled into him. A feeling like the corridors of his body were cobwebbed and vacant.  
-- Narrator (Book Four, Chapter 5)

**Importance:** As David reflects on the death of his wife and on his failure to find Grace so far, he feels sad, guilty, depressed, and despondent. He is deeply heartbroken, blaming himself for not coming home sooner –and for leaving at all. This galvanizes David's desire to want to do the right thing, to justify Sandy's death by making peace with Grace.



Family – every pattern in a life derived from it.  
-- Narrator (Book Four, Chapter 7)

**Importance:** Here, the narrator explains that some life patterns owe themselves to family. For example, Sandy leaving Herman, then David leaving Sandy and Grace, then Grace's wife leaving her and Christopher, are reflective of family patterns of the past. The past repeats itself in patterns and similar trends, like six-sided snowflakes, but each particular snowflake and each experience in life are unique. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the future must be like the past. David, Grace, Christopher, and Herman have the choice to make it different by choosing to live differently.

But what was family? Surely more than genes, eye color, flesh. Family was story...  
Family was time.  
-- Narrator (Book Six, Chapter 5)

**Importance:** Here, David reflects on the idea of family and the past. Family is not just a fixed point in time, but is something continually growing, evolving, changing, and renewing itself, all in many different ways. David has entered a time of renewal in family, as his family has grown to include many different people, all forming a pattern like a snowflake. Family is not only about blood, but about love, loyalty, and togetherness.