

After the First Death Study Guide

After the First Death by Robert Cormier

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Plot Summary

After the First Death is a novel by award winning writer Robert Cormier. In this novel, Miro, a Middle Eastern teenager, and a small group of his fellow countrymen hijack a bus filled with five-year-old children on their way to summer day camp. These hijackers believe they are fighting for their homeland, a country they have never seen. Kate, the teenage bus driver, finds herself drawn into a drama with a bunch of kids she barely knows. Ben Marchand, another teen, finds himself drawn into the drama as well, destined to experience events that will color the rest of his life as well as his relationship with his own father. After the First Death is a complicated story that shows how violence changes and ruins all lives touched by it, even those who perpetrate it.

Ben Marchand sits in his room anticipating the visit of his father with much trepidation. Ben has not seen his father since the bus hijacking and worries about seeing his father with the knowledge of how he let him down that fateful day. Ben thinks of committing suicide, but hopes to seek forgiveness from his father first.

At the same time Ben tells his story, the reader learns about the events of the bus hijacking from Miro, the youngest member of the terrorist group. Miro had recently turned sixteen, at least by the birth date assigned him in the refugee camp, and his leader Artkin promises to treat him like a man during the hijacking. In fact, Miro is to kill the bus driver, his first act of manhood.

The driver is instructed to drive onto an old railroad bridge while Artkin feeds the children candy laced with a drug meant to keep them quiet. Unfortunately, with the accidental drug overdose of one of the small children on the bus, Miro is cheated of the murder he is to commit. Instead, Artkin orders the young female bus driver to help keep the children calm. The child's death provides Artkin with the threat he needs to use against the officials being notified of the hijacking at that very moment.

Once parked on the bridge, Miro is ordered to gain the bus driver's confidence and to encourage her to keep the children calm. The frightened girl is convinced the hijackers will eventually kill her because she has seen their faces. However, the girl, Kate, keeps her wits, even trying on several occasions to win Miro's confidence, or at least force him to see her as human so he would hesitate to kill her. When Miro tells her his story, and confesses to other crimes he and Artkin have committed, Kate is mortified by his monster-like behavior.

Kate finds a spare key to the bus in her wallet. Kate hides the key in her shoe until she finds the right moment to attempt to drive the bus off the bridge. Kate makes her attempt, but the bus stalls and she is forced to give up. Kate is more convinced than ever that she will die, but Artkin insists she must help with the children.

As the night comes, Miro learns that their leader, Sedeete, has been captured. Artkin demands an item from Sedeete's rooms to prove his capture. The military leader sends his own son, Ben, to deliver the item. When Ben arrives he is tortured and eventually



gives up the time of a planned assault. However, the assault comes earlier than anticipated and Artkin is killed. Miro manages to escape with Kate. As they hide from their pursuers, Kate tells Miro that she thinks Artkin is his father. Miro kills Kate with the thought that she is attempting to deceive him. Miro escapes.

Ben Marchand learns in the hospital as he recovers from a bullet wound sustained during the assault on the bridge that his father had used him to mislead the hijackers. A short time later Ben dies in what the reader believes is a suicide. This death has driven the general, Ben's father, insane, leading to his status as a mental hospital patient.



Parts 1-2

Parts 1-2 Summary

This novel is set in the seventies, an era in American history that saw multiple terrorist hijackings nationally as well as around the world. Many of these hijackings have aspects similar to the one in this novel.

Part 1. Ben Marchand is at boarding school, the same school his father once attended, anticipating the visit of his father and mother. Although his mother has visited him many times since September, this will be the first time Ben has seen his father since the bus hijacking. Ben grew up at Fort Delta, a military base where his father had served as a Brigadier General, in charge of a secret group referred to as Inner Delta.

Part 2. Miro has trained for many years for this moment. Finally Artkin has promised to treat Miro as the adult he has become at the age of sixteen. Miro has passed every one of Artkin's tests and will be allowed to commit his first kill. This excites Miro even after the death of his older brother and the realization that he is not expected to live past the age of eighteen. Miro waits early in the morning for the arrival of an orange school bus. It will stop to pick up its final child and then Miro and Artkin, along with two other men, will hijack it. When they finally board the bus and begin the hijacking, Miro is shocked to discover the driver is a young woman, not much older than himself.

Artkin goes down the aisle of the bus, talking calmly to the children and offering them candy that Miro knows is spiked with a drug meant to sedate the children. At the same time, Miro keeps the driver calm and orders her to follow the van being driven by the rest of Artkin's team. The bus is led to an abandoned railroad bridge where it will be widely visible, but protected from the same visibility. When they arrive at the bridge, Miro notices that one of the children is turning blue. Artkin attempts to resuscitate the child, but it is clear he is dead. For this reason, Artkin decides it would be better not to kill the bus driver just yet as planned. Instead, Artkin wants to keep the girl alive to help keep the children calm as they debate the safe use of the drug. Miro is disappointed.

Parts 1-2 Analysis

In part 1, the reader meets Ben Marchand, a young boy who discusses a bullet wound with shame. The boy appears to carry around a great deal of guilt for a reason the reader is not completely sure about at this point. The guilt has something to do with Ben's father, however, and a bus hijacking back in the summer. Ben is clearly contemplating suicide, but has decided to wait to see his father in hopes of gaining his forgiveness first. All the reader knows about Ben's father is that he is a Brigadier General and that he is in charge of a group of secret operatives called Inner Delta. This suggests to the reader that perhaps young Ben interfered in some sort of military operation, but does not give a clear idea of the situation.



In part 2, the reader meets Miro, another teenager who is about to become a man by committing murder in the name of freedom. It is clear to the reader that Miro has grown up in a terrorist cell and knows nothing else but murder and mayhem. Miro is anxious to prove himself in the eyes of his leader. This is not unlike the father and son relationship described in the previous chapter, without the act of betrayal that so haunts Ben Marchand.

The hijacking begins and one little boy dies of a drug overdose. This saves the life of Kate Forrester, the driver. It is ironic that Kate is even on the bus because her uncle normally drives this route but had been sick that morning. Now Kate is fighting for her life and the lives of the children on the bus, convinced no matter what she does she will die. It is a premonition that will haunt the reader as the novel continues to unfold.



Parts 3-4

Parts 3-4 Summary

Part 3. Ben recalls falling in love with Nettie Haversham outside the YMCA in Hallowell. Ben thought the love went both ways, but soon it did not when he called to ask Nettie on a date. Ben is still thinking of this when the bus hijacking takes place, forcing his father to place him under guard. Ben recalls his father coming to the house and explaining that the hijackers wanted money to free some political prisoners, and planned to expose Inner Delta, a secret covert group of which his father was in charge. As Ben types this, he realizes his parents are late and he hopes they do not show up so he does not have to face his father.

Part 4. Miro remains on the bus with Kate and the children, waiting for something to happen. As he waits, Miro thinks of his older brother and their experiences living on the streets as small children. When Miro hears the helicopters, he knows it is about to begin. Kate hears them and hopes for rescue, but soon realizes there will be no rescue for now. Miro has taped off the windows except for small slits through which he watches the military snipers move into place in the woods around them. As they watch, Miro expresses concern to Artkin about the trap in which they appear to have placed themselves. Artkin assures Miro what they are doing is important to their cause.

Now that the military and local police have arrived, Artkin takes the dead boy, Kevin McMann, outside where they can see him as proof of their promise to kill the children should they come to harm. Artkin then lowers the child over the side of the bridge to the waiting officials below. Kate finds all this grotesque even as Miro admires Artkin's intelligence.

Parts 3-4 Analysis

Ben talks about the morning of the hijacking, making it clear that the two sets of narration take place in different places in time. For Ben, months have passed, while Miro continues to live the fateful day of the hijacking. For Ben, it was a normal day. Ben was grieving a broken heart, but he was living a normal American life. Miro, by contrast, was preparing for a hijacking in order to fight for the freedom of a homeland he has never seen.

Miro has taken part in other terrorist acts before, showing the reader that this is not just a whim for Miro, but a way of life. This one is different, however, leaving Miro afraid for himself, Artkin, and the others involved. However, Artkin assures him that dying will promote their cause just as surviving will. This is an odd mentality that underscores the dangers of this situation and suggests that the hijacking will not end well for everyone involved.

Parts 5-6

Parts 5-6 Summary

Part 5. Ben's father has arrived, but all they can seem to do is engage in small talk. Ben's father leaves to take a blood pressure pill and call his wife. Ben sees him walking across campus with the dean of the school, aware he is soon coming back. Ben thinks of going to the bridge, but once again he hopes to ask his father's forgiveness. Ben has the courage to ask if Inner Delta had been saved. The first he had ever heard of Inner Delta was the day of the hijacking when his father told him what the hijackers wanted. Ben's father has never really talked about this work before.

Part 6. Kate asks to take all the children to the bathroom and is given a pail by Artkin for the children instead. Artkin brings the children more candy despite Kate's objections. The children quickly settle into a restless sleep, all except one. Kate discovers that Raymond, one of the boys, has not eaten the candy because his mother says they are bad for his teeth. Raymond is alert, but pretends to be asleep in front of Miro and Artkin. This little deception gives Kate a small spark of hope.

Kate has a weak bladder and her thighs are chafing where the wetness has accumulated. When she thinks Miro is not looking, Kate removes her jeans and panties to relieve the discomfort. Kate looks up and finds Miro looking at her. Kate files this memory away, hoping it might help her later. Kate puts her jeans back on and finds her wallet on the floor. The wallet contains a spare bus key about which she has forgotten. Kate places this key in the toe of her sneaker with the thought that she might use it to rescue the children at the right opportunity.

Artkin summons Miro to the van and tells him that their leader, Sedeete, is in charge of negotiations with the military. Artkin explains what they hope to gain, focusing on the idea of freeing political prisoners and the money that will help continue their fight along with the exposure of Inner Delta. Artkin tells Miro that Sedeete is supposed to signal them three times between then and nine o'clock the next morning. If one of these signals does not come, Artkin is to kill all the children at nine the following morning.

Kate tries to keep her spirits up by clinging to the few secrets she has from the hijackers. When Miro returns to the bus, Kate begins encouraging him to talk, taking hope from the idea that if he sees her as human he might hesitate when it comes to killing her. Miro tells her about his childhood living on the streets, of the deaths of his parents and his brother, and the lengths he will go to to return to his homeland. Kate suddenly realizes that Miro is a monster who is trapped in the innocence of never knowing another life. This frightens Kate.



Parts 5-6 Analysis

Ben reveals to the reader some of what happened to him the morning the bus hijacking began. Ben's father spoke to him for the first time about Inner Delta, the ultra secret group he commands. This makes Ben feel almost like an equal to his father even as he struggles with teenager angst. The author then contrasts Miro's childhood and life to Ben's by revealing more about Miro's past. Their lives are so different, the reader has no trouble imagining how they ended up on opposite sides of this struggle.

Miro, like Ben, is struggling to grow up and deal with adult problems. Miro is very eager to be treated as an adult and to be a bigger part of his terrorist group, just as Ben is eager to find love and to make a normal life for himself. Kate, too, is struggling within herself to find who she really is and what the future will hold for her. These three teenagers are so similar it is almost painful for the reader to see how their lives will each turn out after this one terrible event inspired by the adults in their lives.

Kate harbors secrets from the hijackers giving her hope that there might be an escape from this terrible situation. Kate has a key she hopes to use to drive the bus off the bridge, but she worries she does not have the courage to use it. At the same time, Kate knows that Raymond has fooled the hijackers into thinking he is asleep. These things help Kate hold on to hope and keep trying to fight for her survival. Kate is a strong girl despite her own doubts and could possibly change the course of events.



Parts 7-8

Parts 7-8 Summary

Part 7. Ben's father has taken over the narration because Ben has disappeared. The general thinks about the day of the hijacking, all they knew and all they needed to know. They had to wait for policy from Washington and when it was received, the general called Ben to his office. As the general worried and waited for Ben, he thought of all the things he knew about Ben which he had learned not because he was his father, but because he was the commander of Inner Delta. The house phones had been tapped and the general often listened to Ben's private conversations. The school Ben attended was designed by the general and he often got detailed reports on Ben's activities. The general regrets his actions with Ben during the hijacking and wishes he would return so he could ask forgiveness.

Part 8. Kate sits behind the steering wheel of the bus, practicing how she will start it and escape. Kate knows she must wait for Miro to step out for air before she can try it. Kate watches Miro and he watches her, curious about her. Kate is aware of his curiosity and wonders if she can use it against him. Artkin boards the bus again to give the children more candy. Again Kate protests. Artkin notices Raymond's alertness and Kate finds herself forced to encourage Raymond to take the candy, to lose her only ally. Kate gives in for a time and sleeps with the children.

There finally comes a time when Kate knows she must act. Kate once again sits behind the wheel and waits for Miro to step outside. After more than an hour, Kate suggests it is hot and he should open the door. Miro does, but does not immediately step outside. Eventually, however, he is outside and Kate silently starts the bus. Kate concentrates hard on keeping the motor going, on keeping the bus moving. They are moving; Artkin and his other men chase her, Miro screaming beside the door. Kate keeps moving, concentrating on keeping the accelerator down. Then the bus stalls.

Kate thinks they will kill her, but Artkin only searches her and takes away her wallet. Artkin yells at Miro, but he takes part of the blame himself for not searching Kate earlier. Miro is humiliated and angry. Darkness comes and silence fills the bus. After a time, Kate moves beside Miro and apologizes. Miro again talks to her in the darkness, but more guardedly this time.

Miro is called to Artkin and learns that Sedeete has been captured. Artkin explains how he has asked for proof of Sedeete's capture in the form of a stone that Sedeete keeps in his rooms. Artkin explains to Miro that it is not the stone that is important, but the person who is sent to deliver it. Artkin hopes to get information from this person. When Miro returns to the bus, Antibbe, one of the other men, is shot on the bridge by an overzealous sniper. In retribution, Artkin drags Raymond from the bus and shoots him despite Kate's plea that he shoot her instead.



Parts 7-8 Analysis

The reader finds the general narrating the odd chapters now. Something has happened and Ben is gone, but the general seems to be as much at a loss about this as the reader. The general's thoughts are rambling, but he does tell the reader that he knows a great deal about his own son based on his work with Inner Delta. As the leader of this covert group, the general has his own phones tapped and the school designed to report on behaviors as well as academics. For this reason, the general knows a great deal about his own son's private life as well as his emotional reactions to specific stimuli. These are odd things to know about one's own son and leave the reader wondering what the general is doing with this information.

Kate attempts to escape with the children, but her attempt fails. Kate is more convinced than ever that she will die, but Artkin continues to need her help with the children. This appears to be Kate's only salvation at this point. Miro too is surprisingly saved by Artkin's uncharacteristic decision to take part of the blame for Kate's actions even though Miro is in charge of the bus. This gives the impression of affection between Artkin and Miro even though the reader has yet to see any other proof of this up to this point. This is an important turn of events the reader will recall later in the novel.

Artkin's team learns that their leader, Sedeete, has been captured. This could be a problem since Sedeete had been in charge of negotiations. If it is true, Artkin will kill all the hostages in the morning, a fact the military more than likely does not know. Artkin is asking for proof and will soon have a messenger to interrogate. The reader begins to wonder if perhaps Ben will not be this messenger, thus explaining his involvement in the entire situation.



Parts 9-10

Parts 9-10 Summary

Part 9. The general continues to search for his son, asking the dean about him. At the same time, the general recalls the orders that finally came down from Washington during the hijacking and the conversation he had with Ben when he told him he wanted him to deliver the proof to the hijackers. The general recalls taking a phone call and writing down nine-thirty as the time for the assault on the bridge. The general recalls driving up to the command post with Ben and learning he would have to remain with the hijackers until the negotiations were concluded. The general wonders now if he might have changed any of the events if he could have. The general also recalls the screams he heard over the bug placed on the bottom of the van.

Part 10. Miro watches as Artkin tortures the general's son, the boy who brought the stone. Miro thinks the boy must be his own age, or maybe a year or two younger. The boy held out an admirable amount of time, but soon told Artkin the time of the planned assault. Nine-thirty; they would be done and on their way out by then. However, the assault began an hour early.

Miro is on the bus when the assault begins. He grabs Kate and uses her as cover as he escapes the bus. Miro can see Artkin outside the van, holding the boy as a human shield. Through the gas the soldiers have detonated all over the bridge, Miro can see the soldiers coming from behind Artkin. Miro raises a hand to warn Artkin and Kate takes the opportunity to try escape. Miro grabs her rather than warning Artkin. Artkin is shot by soldiers on the hovering helicopter. Artkin shoots the boy as he falls. The helicopter then crashes into the top of the van.

Miro watches the soldiers flood the bridge and rush to the bus. Miro takes the opportunity to escape into the woods with Kate. As Miro and Kate hide in a nestlike enclosure, Kate tells Miro that she believes Artkin was his father. Miro denies this, clinging to the idea that his father died when he was a small boy. However, Kate pushes the idea, claiming that Miro and Artkin looked alike and that Artkin would not have cared so much for two boys he happened to find on the street. Miro is already suffering the guilt of Artkin's death, convinced it is his fault for choosing to recapture Kate rather than warning Artkin of the approaching soldiers. Now Miro believes Kate is deceiving him in order to trick him. Miro kills Kate.

Parts 9-10 Analysis

The general tells the reader how Ben found himself on the bridge the morning of the assault on the hijackers. The general listened as his son was tortured and gave information about the assault to the hijackers. This must have been difficult for the general, perhaps explaining the need for forgiveness the general keeps asking to have.

This also explains Ben's need for forgiveness as he expressed in the first chapter of the novel.

The hijackers are assaulted sooner than expected. This causes mass confusion. Miro abandons the children and takes Kate with him as he attempts escape. Artkin is killed, Ben injured. Miro escapes. The reader hopes that Miro will allow Kate her freedom now that her usefulness is done. However, Kate makes a mistake. Kate underestimates how guilty Miro feels about Artkin's death. Kate tells Miro that she believes Artkin is Miro's father. Miro, a confused and frightened teenager who is now devastated by the guilt of Artkin's death, does not take this news well. Brave, caring Kate is killed.

The author of this book has chosen to fill his story with characters whose death is made doubly tragic by the fact that they are only children. Raymond is not only an only child, but he is a child who came late in his parents' lives. Kate is an only child who is just a short time from adulthood when she is killed. Ben too appears to be an only child. Death of a child is tragic, but the author has made these deaths even more painful, even more hurtful. It is an impact on the reader that will not soon be forgotten.

Parts 11-12

Parts 11-12 Summary

Part 11. The general has a conversation with Ben. During this conversation, the reader learns many things about their relationship. First the reader learns that the general sent Ben to the hijackers with the knowledge that he would be tortured and that he would give them information. The general made sure Ben had false information to share. Second, the reader learns that Ben had been filled with guilt for telling the hijackers the information about the assault so his father told him the truth. This apparently led to Ben committing suicide some time after he recovered from his wounds. Finally, the reader learns that the general has had a mental collapse and is not at Ben's boarding school, but in a mental hospital.

Part 12. Miro leaves Kate's body where it lies and makes his way to the nearest road, careful to elude his would-be captors as he makes his way through the woods. Miro steals a car and hopes to continue his terrorist acts.

Parts 11-12 Analysis

The general chose his country over his own son, sending Ben to the hijackers knowing he would be tortured and that he would tell the hijackers what they wanted to know. The general needed to mislead the hijackers in order to make the assault work. His choice to use his own son may have been a sound tactical move, but it devastates his son to the point of suicide. This causes the general to break down from the guilt. A strong, determined man is now in a mental hospital because of what he has done.

At the same time multiple families have fallen apart because of his actions, Miro survives to fight another day. It is ironic that the one person who caused all this devastation should be the one to survive it.



Characters

Benjamin Marchand

Benjamin 'Ben' Marchand is son of Brigadier General Marcus L. Marchand. Marchand is the commander of Fort Delta in Massachusetts. Despite his father's role in the military, Ben is an ordinary teenager with normal teenage problems. Shortly before the hijacking of the bus, Ben falls in love with a local girl and is heart broken when she treats him cruelly. During the hijacking, Ben is placed under guard because of his relationship to his father, but his safety is never truly in danger until his father calls upon him to play a role in the hijacking.

In the middle of the night, Ben is called to his father's office and asked to complete a very important task. The hijackers have asked for proof of their leader's capture. Ben is to deliver this proof. At first it appears that Ben's task will be a simple one, but the military soon learns that Ben will be kept with the hijackers until their demands are met. This places Ben in danger. Not only is Ben tortured into giving the hijackers information, but he is shot during the military's attempt to overtake the hijackers and rescue the children on the bus.

Ben appears to be the narrator at the beginning of the novel within the first chapter. However, the reader soon learns that Ben has committed suicide and his father has had a mental breakdown as a result. Ben's father often speaks to his son within his mind in hopes of gaining the forgiveness he does not truly believe he deserves.

Brigadier General Marcus L. Marchand

Brigadier General Marcus L. Marchand is commander of Fort Delta as well as a highly secretive organization within the base referred to as Inner Delta. As leader of Inner Delta, Marchand is called upon to deal with the hijackers because one of their demands requires the disbanding of Inner Delta. As General Marchand works within the laws of the military to deal with the demands of the hijackers, he comes up with a perfect way to keep the hijackers unaware of the military's planned assault. General Marchand sends his son to the hijackers with the understanding that the hijackers will torture the boy to get information on the assault. However, the information his son has is inaccurate and gives the hijackers a false sense of security.

After the attack, General Marchand's son is badly injured. In the hospital, Marchand tells his son how he used him. The son is tortured by this truth and eventually commits suicide. As a result, General Marchand has a mental breakdown and finds himself struggling to gain forgiveness for his actions.



Miro Shantas

Miro Shantas is a teenager who thinks he is about sixteen, but he is unsure of his real age. Miro was born in a Middle Eastern country where he and his brother were left alone after the reported deaths of their parents. Miro and his brother lived on the streets, often stealing or begging for what little food they were able to get. Then one day they were approached on the street by a stranger who took them to a refugee camp where they were put through a school teaching them to be terrorists. Miro and his brother came to America with this stranger who was now their leader. Miro's brother died in a terrorist attack.

Miro is one of the hijackers who hijack a bus filled with four- and five-year-old children on their way to a summer day camp. Miro's job is to kill the bus driver, an act that will finally make him a man in the eyes of his fellow terrorists. However, this task is delayed when one of the children dies from a drug overdose. Miro is then assigned to watch over the children and the bus driver, a young girl approximately his own age. Miro finds himself talking with this girl, sharing information about himself. In the end, however, Miro kills this girl after he believes she has tried to trick him by suggesting his leader, Artkin, is his father.

Artkin

Artkin is the leader of the hijackers. Artkin is a cold, calculating man who believes what he is doing is justified and will someday free his homeland. Artkin is cold, but he is also possessed of a charm he can use to trick children and innocent people into trusting him. Using this charm, Artkin gets the children on the bus to believe they are not in danger even as Artkin kills one with an overdose of drugs and another with a bullet to the head.

Artkin has taken Miro under his wing, teaching him all he knows about being a terrorist. As Kate watches these two men together, she begins to realize that Artkin is Miro's father. Miro has been told his father died when a mine exploded under him, but Kate can see things in Artkin's features that suggest this is not true. However, Artkin dies on the bridge during the assault by the military and cannot confirm or deny this suspicion.

Kate Forrester

Kate Forrester is the driver of the bus that is hijacked by Artkin and his crew. Kate is the niece of the regular bus driver and has taken the route that day because her uncle is sick. Kate has a weak bladder and is deeply ashamed of the fear that causes that weakness to become a problem during the hijacking. Despite this, Kate gathers the strength to attempt to drive the bus off the bridge with a key she had forgotten in her wallet. However, this attempt fails.

Kate attempts to befriend Miro, hoping by appearing human to him he will not kill her. Kate is somewhat successful in this attempt. However, when the military assaults the



bridge, Miro uses Kate as a human shield and runs into the woods with her in the confusion of a helicopter crash during the assault. In the woods, Kate tells Miro her suspicion that Artkin was his father. So upset by Artkin's death and the lies he believes Kate is telling him, Miro kills her.

Kevin McMann

Kevin McMann is a small boy on the bus. In the first hour of the hijacking, Artkin feeds the children candy that has been injected with medication designed to sedate the children. Artkin believes this medication is safe. However, Kevin McMann stops breathing and dies before anyone notices he is having trouble. Kevin McMann's death initially protects Kate from being killed as had been planned. Kevin McMann's body is used to prove to the police and military that the hijackers are serious, instead of the body of the bus driver.

Raymond

Raymond is a little boy on the bus. Raymond does not eat the candy the first two times Artkin passes it around because his mother has told him not to eat candy. Raymond pretends to be asleep during most of the hijacking, only allowing Kate to know the truth. However, Artkin eventually figures out that Raymond is too aware and forces him to take several pieces of the drugged candy.

Sedeete

Sedeete is the leader of the terrorist group of which Artkin and his crew are a part. In fact, Sedeete is supposed to be running the negotiations related to the bus hijacking. However, the military locates and captures Sedeete in the first few hours of the hijacking. It is an item kept in Sedeete's rooms that Artkin asks the military to deliver to the bridge to prove Sedeete has been captured.

Brigadier General Rufus L. Briggs

When the hijackers take the bus, they send a message to the local police that is addressed to Brigadier General Rufus L. Briggs. Ben later realizes that Briggs is the name his father uses in relation to Inner Delta.

Nettie Halversham

Nettie Halversham is a local girl living in the town near Fort Delta. Ben meets Nettie one afternoon outside the YMCA and believes they have fallen deeply in love with one another. However, when Ben calls her a few days later, he realizes that Nettie not only

is not in love with him, but wants nothing to do with him. This girl is still on Ben's mind days later when the bus is hijacked.



Objects/Places

Stone

As proof of Sedeete's capture, Artkin asks to have a stone from his rooms delivered to him on the bridge.

Tape

Miro uses masking tape to cover the windows to keep them from being visible to the snipers.

Phone Taps

The general has his personal home phones tapped to keep track of Inner Delta communications. Among these taped conversations, the general hears many of his son's private conversations.

Drugged Candy

Artkin has bags full of candy that has either been injected with or dipped in a drug meant to sedate the children during the ordeal of the hijacking.

Lunches

Kate has the kids eat their packed lunches on the bus to help keep them occupied during the hijacking. This later becomes a problem when the children become ill from the drugs.

Pail

Artkin gives Kate a pail to have the children use as a bathroom during the hijacking.

Key

Kate finds a key to the bus her uncle had given her weeks before. Kate hides the key in her sneaker until she finds the right time and the courage to use it to drive the bus off the bridge.



Typewriter

Ben and his father type out their thoughts on a typewriter that is used as the narration in every other chapter of the novel.

Monitor

The military has a monitor through which they can hear the activities on the van through a wire tap of sorts. It is through this the general hears the screams of his son as he is tortured.

Bus

Hijackers board and take control of a bus carrying thirteen four- and five-year-old children headed to a summer day camp.

Van

The hijackers drive a van to the site where they will hijack the bus. This van is then used as a command post on the bridge by the hijackers.

Bridge

The bus is driven to an old railroad bridge in the middle of the woods outside Hallowell, the town bordering Fort Delta. This bridge leaves the bus exposed, but protected by this same exposure.

Gun

Miro carries a gun with which he is to kill the bus driver. Miro looks at this act as an act of manhood and is disappointed when it is delayed.



Themes

Fathers and Sons

The novel begins with Ben talking about an impending visit from his father, the first since the hijacking and the aftermath. Ben says he has been away at boarding school since the September after the hijacking, which would have been just a few weeks after the hijacking. Ben also claims to have been shot, therefore the reader knows some of that time was spent in the hospital. Ben is clearly nervous about this meeting with his father, clearly afraid he has let his father down because he did something wrong during the hijacking. The reader does not learn until late in the novel that Ben feels as though he let his father down because he told the hijackers the time of an impending assault on the bridge under torture.

As the novel continues, the reader learns that Ben's father also feels guilt. Ben's father regrets sending his son to the bridge to deliver a stone to the hijackers. It is soon revealed that Ben's father fed his son false information with the hope that he would tell the hijackers under torture. This information, it is later revealed, has caused Ben to commit suicide. The conversations Ben's father has been having with his son are all in his own mind. The guilt involved in choosing his country over his son have driven General Marchand insane.

At the same time, Miro has worked and lived with Artkin for several years. In fact, Artkin saved Miro from the streets of a Middle Eastern country. Artkin is like a father to Miro and Miro feels as though he caused Artkin's death by not telling him soldiers were coming in his direction. This guilt is compounded when Miro learns from Kate that Artkin could possibly be his father. Miro is so devastated by this idea that he kills Kate. This leaves the reader convinced that Miro believes Kate's assertions down deep, but he is too emotionally fragile to allow himself to admit it. Instead, Miro clings to Artkin as leader and teacher, determined to honor him.

Terrorism

Artkin is a terrorist. Artkin believes that by attacking America he will be able to restore his homeland to the free, happy place he wants it to be. Artkin has convinced Miro of this and surrounds himself by others who also believe this. As part of his attempts to restore his country, Artkin has bombed multiple locations in America, including a Brooklyn post office and a Detroit car factory.

Artkin and his crew have hijacked the bus full of children in the hopes of having a group of political prisoners released, getting millions of dollars, and shutting down Inner Delta. Artkin does not truly believe he will be able to stop Inner Delta, but is counting heavily on the first two demands. Unknown to him, the general believes Artkin is hoping only to stop Inner Delta.



Artkin believes it is his duty to die for his country. However, Artkin believes that he should die in terrorist acts, not by honorably fighting for his country. It is for this reason that Artkin has hijacked the bus and why he keeps pushing Miro to do everything he has taught him in the name of his homeland.

Mental Stability

The reader believes the characters of the novel are clear cut, sane characters in the beginning. However, as the reader gets to know the hijackers, it quickly becomes clear that they are willing to die for a homeland they have never seen. This suggests some mental instability.

As the novel continues to develop, the reader gets to know the bus driver of the hijacked bus. Kate is a normal teenager who does not know what her true character is. Kate thinks about all the different people she can be and wonders who she really is down deep. Kate appears to be mentally unstable, thinking of herself as many different people. However, the reader soon realizes that Kate is the sanest person in the novel.

At the end of the novel, the reader learns that Ben has committed suicide. The reader also realizes that the narrations in Ben's voice are not really Ben but his father. General Marchand has had a mental breakdown and he has conversation with Ben in his mind in an attempt to receive forgiveness for the actions that led to Ben's suicide.



Style

Point of View

The novel is seen from many points of view. The novel begins in the first person point of view. This narrator appears to be Ben Marchand, the son of Brigadier General Marcus Marchand. As the novel continues, it moves into the third person omniscient point of view of Miro, one of the hijackers of the bus. This melts into the third person point of view of Kate Forrester, the bus driver, Raymond, one of the children, and Monique, another child on the bus. Finally, the reader is introduced to the general himself when he takes over his son's first person point of view narration. This narration eventually reveals that he is an unreliable narrator because it has always been his first person point of view, never Ben's.

The varying points of view of this novel work with the plot because it allows the reader to see not only the motives and emotions of the hijackers, but those of the victims as well. The third person point of view gives the reader multiple perspectives of the hijacking even as it is taking place. The first person point of view gives the reader insight into the aftermath of the hijacking as well as foreshadowing certain events that will forever impact the lives of those involved. For this reason, each point of view in this novel is important to the plot and works to make it more suspenseful, more entertaining.

Setting

The novel is set for the most part on an old railroad bridge outside of the Massachusetts town of Hallowell. On this bridge sits the hijacked bus and a van that is being used as the command post for the hijackers. This setting adds to the tension of the novel as the reader watches both Miro, a hijacker, and Kate, a victim, battle their emotions even as they attempt to battle one another. The other setting of the novel appears to be a boarding school, but is later revealed to be a mental institution that simply reminds a patient of his old boarding school.

The settings of this novel are used in tandem with one another to not only build suspense in the novel, but to expose the aftermath of that same suspense. The author expertly uses his setting, a simple, small town in America, and turns it into something dark and sinister. The author does the same thing with a boarding school that should be safe and quiet, turning it into a mental institution where one man fights demons in his own mind. Both are prisons of sorts, one inside a bus, the other inside a man's head. These settings fit the plot perfectly, leaving the reader with much to think about when the novel comes to an end.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The novel's intended audience is young readers, therefore the language is suited to that age. However, the novel deals with a group of difficult situations, therefore its language occasionally uses language designed to disguise the vulgarity of the situation while continuing to be accurate to the plot. At the same time, the novel was written in the 1970s; therefore, some of the language may be unfamiliar to the modern reader. However, it is simple language that is not hard for a reader to comprehend.

Although the hijackers are foreign born and speak a different language, their language in the novel is clear and precise. This helps the young reader understand the plot without difficulty. The language of the novel also supports some of the characters of the novel. For instance, both Ben and Kate are teenagers; therefore, most of their dialogue is common to that of any American teenager.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve parts. The odd parts are narrated by General Marchand. In the beginning it appears that the narrator is Marchand's son Ben, but this proves to be false. In fact, the narration in the first section of odd parts turns out to be what General Marchand imagines his son would say. The even parts are seen through the eyes of Miro, one of the hijackers, and Kate, the bus driver. These sections reveal the actual events of the bus hijacking as they take place.

The novel contains two main plots. The first follows the relationship between Brigadier General Marchand and his son, Ben. This relationship is filled with guilt and grief that has caused the general to have a mental breakdown. The other plot follows the actual hijacking of the bus. There are a few subplots in the novel that include Kate's attempts to save her own life as well as that of the children. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"I keep thinking I have a tunnel in my chest. The path the bullet took, burrowing through the flesh and sinew and whatever muscle the bullet encountered (I am not the macho-muscled type, not at five eleven and one hundred eighteen pounds)." Part 1, pg. 3

"There I've said it: Inner Delta. Like pulling a bandage off a festering sore. Or a diseased rabbit from a soiled magician's hat." Part 1, pg. 9

"Miro's assignment was to kill the driver." Part 2, pg. 17

"Without the mask, he was Miro Shantas, without even a real name to identify him to the world. With the mask, he was Miro Shantas, freedom fighter. He often wondered which person he really was." Part 2, pg. 41

"My father, the phantom." Part 3, pg. 56

"This is why Miro did not like waiting. It gave him too much time to think, to ponder, to wonder about things he should leave to Artkin." Part 4, pg. 60

"All the Kate Forresters. Were other people like that, she wondered, not simply one person but a lot of them mixed together?" Part 4, pg. 65

"The spinning was building momentum now, and Kate feared Artkin would lose his hold on the child, who would go spinning off into the air, over the side of the bridge, falling to the river below. But the child was dead, of course. The child could no longer be harmed, thank God. He was beyond the reach of Artkin's madness." Part 4, pg. 76

"Raymond lifted his face toward Kate. One eye opened and closed. The wink made Kate smile." Part 6, pg. 100

"I am sorry, Ben. I apologize. For the preaching. Or maybe this is an apology for something else." Part 7, pg. 134

"He felt the lash of Artkin's words. The sting." Part 8, pg. 164

"The boy cracked after thirty-two seconds. But thirty-two seconds of the fingers can be a lifetime, Miro knew." Part 10, pg. 205

"He moved out of the bushes and into the world that was waiting for him." Part 12, pg. 233



Topics for Discussion

Who is Ben Marchand? Where is he in the opening chapters of the novel? For whom is he waiting? Why does he claim he has not seen his father since the bus hijacking and the bridge? What happened to Ben on the bridge? Why is Ben worried about the upcoming meeting? Where does Ben keep saying he wants to visit? Why is he delaying this trip?

Who is Miro? Why is he with Artkin? Who is Artkin to Miro? What happened to Miro's brother? What are Artkin and Miro planning to do? For what reason? What is the intended conclusion? What is Miro's assignment? Why is he given the assignment? How does Miro feel about this assignment? Who is Kate to Miro? How does he feel about her? For what reason?

Who is Artkin? What does he plan to do? What has he done in the past? How did he lose his fingers? What has Artkin trained Miro to do? What was Artkin's role in Miro's training? In the death of Miro's brother? What does Artkin want from Miro? What does Artkin expect the result of his actions to be? For what reason?

Who is Kate Forrester? Why is she on the bus that morning? Who should have been on the bus? What is Miro supposed to do to Kate? Does he? Explain. Why does Kate have trouble dealing with the children? How does Kate feel about the children? What does Kate find in her wallet? What does she plan to do with it? For what reason? Does Kate succeed in her plan? Explain.

Who is Brigadier General Marchand? What is his role in the hijacking? Why does Marchand send his own son to the bridge? What is his son to do on the bridge? Does he do what he was told? What happens to the general's son? How does the general feel about his son's role in the hijacking? What happens to the general in the aftermath of the hijacking? Why?

What is a hijacking? What is the intended result of this type of action? Have there been famous hijackings in real life? What are these? What were the intentions of the hijackers? What might have inspired this novel for the writer? What is important about the time period in which this novel is set? What recent events might give the hijacking in this novel a new twist for modern readers?

What is an unreliable narrator? Is there one in this novel? How does the reader come to learn the narrator is unreliable? What impact is this meant to have on the reader? Does it? What is third person omniscient point of view? What is first person point of view? Why does the author use two different points of view in the novel? What impact does this have on the reader?