All Over but the Shoutin' Study Guide

All Over but the Shoutin' by Rick Bragg

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

All Over But the Shoutin' is the autobiography of Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Rick Bragg. It begins in Piedmont, Alabama, around the time of the Korean War, in the year 1959, when Bragg was born. Bragg's father, Charles Brag, was a veteran of the Korean War and was rarely home. He was a raging alcoholic with a deep mean streak who beat his wife, Margaret Bundham Bragg, in front of their children; Bragg remembers being three years old and attacking his father with his brother Sam, then age six, to stop him from hurting her.

When Charles was not at home, Margaret did her best to support Sam and Rick and their younger brother Mark, working odd jobs like cotton picking and cleaning houses for rich people in town. Bragg grew up in the Possum Trot area, which is close to Jacksonville.

While Charles was absent, Margaret and her children had no shortage of family members. Bragg's maternal grandmother, Miss Abigail, and his aunts and uncles supported the family when they could not support themselves. Other than his father, Bragg claims that he had a happy childhood. While they were incredibly poor, Bragg never knew until he was in high school and the girls he dated would break up with him when they saw his house.

All Over but the Shoutin' focuses on Bragg's childhood, his interactions with his brothers, being young during the Civil Rights movement, class relations in northeast Alabama and the regular challenges of teenage life. While Bragg cut up in school, he took a journalism class that changed his life. Due to a murder in town, Bragg and other poor, black or mentally handicapped boys in town were rounded up as suspects simply because of their race and class. Bragg was so furious and humiliated he vowed to get out of his hometown and started taking night classes at Jacksonville State and sports writing for local newspapers, the Talladega Daily Home and the Jacksonville News.

The second half of the book covers Bragg's adulthood up until 1996. In 1980, Bragg took a job as a reporter for the Anniston Star, and from 1986 to 1989 he wrote for the Birmingham News. In March 1989, Bragg moved to Tampa to write for the St. Petersburg Times, first as a foreign correspondent, which took him to then war-torn Haiti and then as a national correspondent, which led him to cover the race riots in Miami. In 1992, Bragg won a Nieman fellowship at Harvard, and in 1994 Bragg was hired briefly at the L. A. Times and then as a foreign correspondent for the New York Times. He was quickly promoted to regional correspondent for the South and moved to Atlanta.

Bragg explains how his brothers grew up, how Sam turned out fine but how Mark became an alcoholic like Charles and how much Margaret worried about him. He often describes his visits home and how little people were impressed by his accomplishments, which he didn't mind. He describes in horrible detail the carnage and extreme poverty during his two trips to Haiti and gives his unique Southern perspective on Harvard and the New York Times.

In the final part of the book, Bragg wins the Pulitzer and takes his mother on an unusual and deeply moving trip to New York City, where she saw Bragg receive the Pulitzer Bragg had also made enough money to follow through with his vow to "get even with life" by buying his mother a nice house. While the house didn't fix all of their problems, it was a symbolic victory over the hand they had been dealt in life.

Prologue

Prologue Summary and Analysis

In the brief prologue, Bragg explains the All Over But the Shoutin' is something like a memoir of growing up in the South around the time of the Korean War. He will introduce the reader to all of his family, making one laugh and cry. The story is one of a strong woman, a tortured man and three sons who lived near cotton fields in northeastern Alabama, in the thick of racism. His father was a raging drunk and terrorized his family, but this was due in large part to the horrors he witnessed during the Korean War, a story he only told Bragg on his deathbed. His mother endured his father until he died. Bragg claims to tell the story because his mother and grandmother permitted him to write it down so that there would be a record of what occurred. He also tells the story to vindicate his mother, who believes that she failed her three sons.

Part I, The Widow's Mite, Chapters 1-7

Part I, The Widow's Mite, Chapters 1-7 Summary and Analysis

In chapter one, "A man who buys books because they're pretty," Bragg begins by explaining that his mother and father were born on the Appalachian foothills on the Alabama-Georgia lines, about 120 miles west of Atlanta. Whites were poor and blacks were even poorer. But it was, in Bragg's opinion, the most beautiful place on earth. He was born in the summer of 1959, just on the cusp of the massive social change brought on by the Civil Rights Movement. While Bragg was never ashamed of being a Southerner, he also felt a need to explain himself. The only thing that didn't change in the South was religion; everyone was affected, even those who refused to believe. Even Bragg's father found God in the end.

Bragg's father had abandoned his family, and he had been a wild and fearsome man, with a terrible temper and always willing to fight. He drank himself to death and got tuberculosis. In 1974, he was only forty years old and had just turned to God because he believed he saw a demon waiting for him at his death bed. When Bragg's mother, Margaret Bundrum, heard he was sick, she went to see him, and then he asked to see Rick. For that bit of day they spent together, Rick's father tried to act like his dad. They made small talk until he gave Rick a collection of old leather-bound books of classic literature, books Bragg still has to this day. His dad had only bought them because they looked pretty. Bragg's father never apologized for anything he did, as it wasn't characteristic for Southern men to talk about their feelings. But before he did, Bragg pushed him to talk about what happened in Korea, despite his resistance.

In chapter two, "A killing, and a man who tried to walk on water," Bragg describes his father's time in Korea. As a young man, Bragg's father enlisted in the Marines because he wasn't sure what else to do with his life. He enjoyed boot camp, loved the free food, fighting and chasing women on the weekends. When he got to Korea, he said he'd fought in a number of long, drawn out battles. But the experience that traumatized him happened one night when he woke up to find a man inches away from him, dead by the hand of an assassin. Bragg's father got up and found the killer on the ice, lying down so as not to break it. Bragg's father walked out on the water, cracked the ice but caught the killer, and they fought for their lives. Eventually Bragg's father pushed the killer into the water and forced his head down with his foot over and over and over again until the man stopped struggling.

Bragg isn't sure whether that was the reason that his father was so terrible to them, but he needed to believe it. His father hadn't told the story to anyone but his mother. He came home from the war to marry Bragg's mother and he seems to have loved his wife and three sons because it saved him from his demons.

In chapter three, "Fake gold, other people's houses, and the finest man I never knew," Bragg tells the story of his mother, Margaret Bundham Bragg, and his mother's parents. His mother, born in 1937, was a beautiful blond with blue eyes who grew up so poor that she never had a doll in her whole life. Her parents were incredibly poor and her father, Charlie Bundham, made his living selling whiskey, which was illegal in the area, even when whiskey was just prohibited in Alabama. She was tall and strong like her father. Bragg never met his grandfather. His grandfather was also a tricky man, full of jokes and always giving the police a run for their money trying to catch him. He and his wife, Miss Abigail, had eight children in all. Charlie's drinking ultimately killed him at fifty-one, though he was himself until the very day he died. He lived to see Margaret get married and to see the evil in her husband; he even met Samuel, their first child.

Chapter four, "Dreaming that a crooked man will straighten up and fly right," explains how Bragg was born and his life up to age six. His mother went into labor while she and her family members were at a drive-in movie theater. At that time, his father was nowhere to be found and had been gone for months. During Bragg's infancy and early childhood, his father would pop in and out, sometimes being a decent father, sometimes being a raging drunk and gone the rest of the time. Margaret did all the heavy lifting for her three sons and was a wonderful, strong mother, so strong that she even partly was a male role model to Bragg. Their family was very poor, but they were helped by their family and people around town. Bragg's Uncle John and Aunt Gracie Juanita owned the land where their house was located, and his uncles John and Ed would often play the role of dad from time to time. The last time Bragg saw his father before he died was in 1965 when he randomly showed up to the house and promised, as always, to straighten up and fly right.

Chapter five, "When God Blinks," notes again that there was a time in Bragg's childhood when his father would come home regularly and they would be a family, but when he left again, Margaret had to take the kids to a giant old house on a hill where Uncle John and Aunt Gracie owned the land. The house frightened the boys and it must have disappointed Margaret terribly, though she never would have said. The rest of the chapter explains how Bragg would sometimes visit his father's family in those days. The whole family was a bunch of alcoholics and eccentrics who believe that drinking enough whisky could cure anything. They also talked about "the nigger trouble," though Bragg couldn't understand it since blacks had their own community and were never around. That said, blacks were tired of living in their own world and wanted to be part of society.

Chapter six, "The free show," opens with George Wallace coming to a PTA to tell the people there, who were in rapture over him, that they were better than blacks. Bragg didn't understand it because he had never learned he was better than anyone. Bragg also describes the times when his father would beat his mother and how, when they were only little boys, he and his brother Sam would attack his dad to try and stop him. When Bragg's father would leave town, Margaret did the best she could to get by on welfare rations, but it was next to impossible. Bragg also notes that the whole of Alabama was on fire and drunk with hatred in that year of 1965. Wallace flamed racial tensions, but despite it all, one day a little black boy came by their house to offer them some leftover corn. Bragg remembers, horribly, throwing rocks at poor little black boys,

one of whom was mentally handicapped. Bragg also recalls how one day, when his father was passed out drunk, he, his brothers and his mother packed their things and left.

Chapter seven, "No papers on him," has Bragg asking whether Margaret ever thought about his fourth brother, who died at childbirth. Apparently she thought about him all the time and remembered his birthdays. The conversation made Bragg feel connected to his lost brother for the first time.

Part I, The Widow's Mite, Chapters 8-15

Part I, The Widow's Mite, Chapters 8-15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter eight, "In the mouth of the machine," focuses on Margaret. While the Braggs were extremely poor, Margaret did back-breaking labor all the time. She picked cotton until the cotton threshing machines came, then she did laundry, picked tomatoes and anything she could find. She rarely left the house, in part because she was afraid that her sons would be ashamed of her and in part because she didn't want to explain where her husband was. She didn't go to church for the same reason. Twenty years after Bragg's youth, she got her GED but had no education to speak of. Bragg claims that Margaret was trapped by the cultures and conventions of the South in that day. She couldn't remarry because divorce was so frowned upon. Bragg also notes that she had some shred of love left for her husband, since she kept letters and pictures of him from the time before he went to Korea.

Chapter nine, "On the wings of a great speckled bird," discusses Bragg's experience with Christianity. Eventually his mother decided that he should go to church. Initially he didn't want to go, but after church they had Dinner on the Ground, which was such a festival of delicious food and community that Bragg couldn't get enough of it. Some parents forced Jesus on their kids, but not Bragg's mother; she was content to ask him, excitedly, how everything went, though she was too afraid to go with him. Bragg enjoyed the Preacher, who was kind and spoke of lovely things and invited people to salvation. Many came.

Bragg said the most amazing experience of his life was viewing the one baptism he ever saw; the faces of the baptized were so enraptured and genuine that Bragg has never seen so much sincerity since. As for Bragg, he wanted to feel what they were feeling, but the feeling never came and eventually he stopped going to church. Now he thinks you just have to be a good person to go to heaven and he knows Margaret will get in.

Chapter ten, "If you got to kill somebody, better it ain't family," notes how in the 1970s, Bragg thought he and his brothers had a rich and fulfilling childhood. They fought each other and others mercilessly, though, and only stopped when they made their mother cry. Bragg then relates some of their antics. He also notes that he never really realized how poor they were. He then notes one occasion where he ran across some frat boys that were fairly well-to-do but were still Southern. He figured he'd never be like them.

Chapter eleven, "Under a hateful sky," Bragg notes that he and his brothers worked very, very hard in their adolescence, doing backbreaking work just to bring in a little bit of money. Bragg hated it but it made all the other jobs he'd had seem easy in comparison. When he started junior high, he notes that word got around quickly that he

and his brother "ain't got no daddy". Sam, his older brother, worked for the school to earn his "free lunch" and missed out on a lot of learning as a result.

Chapter twelve, "Getting above your raising," is about Bragg's embarrassment over the impoverished life his family led. He dates a girl once who was from a well-respected and wealthy family in town; when she and her friends came to his house to invite him to a picnic, they saw how dilapidated his home was. A few days later she broke up with him and from then on he always brought his girls home. If they turned up their nose, he ended the relationship. Almost all the girls turned up their noses.

In chapter thirteen, "Fine qualities," Bragg notes that his dad died at the age of forty-one on January 29th, 1975. He thinks his dad was probably sober. They didn't go to the funeral, but Margaret visited him at the funeral home anyway. Years later Bragg met a man who knew his father and said he had fine qualities if you took away alcohol. Bragg wished he could have known that man.

In chapter fourteen, "100 miles per hour, upside down and sideways," Bragg got a car his senior year of high school, a 1969 GM convertible muscle car with a V-8 engine. Bragg loved it and raced it; it made him more popular at school. One day he raced a guy at over one hundred miles an hour. When he saw a cop he slammed on the breaks, sending the car tumbling. Bragg survived with no injuries and everyone said God was his co-pilot. He then notes that he didn't really try in high school, that he had no real ambitions. He took a journalism class to get out of regular activities, but it would one day get him out of poverty. When he graduated, he went back to work for his Uncle Ed.

Chapter fifteen, "The usual suspects," opens with a murder in town of a young college couple. Bragg was rounded up with all the poor, black or retarded boys in the area. Bragg was furious at the accusation and had his first realization of his place in the order of class and power. He vowed right then to get out of poverty and went to school at Jacksonville State. He got a job as a sportswriter, covering the Gamecocks, and eventually got a job at the local weekly newspaper, the Jacksonville News; the job paid, though not too well. Bragg worked on his writing and improved and gained respectability. He didn't expect writing to take him anywhere, but it did.

Part II, Lies to My Mother, Chapters 16-24

Part II, Lies to My Mother, Chapters 16-24 Summary and Analysis

Chapter sixteen, "In the temple," finds Bragg in New York in 1994. He was working as a journalist in midtown and covered a number of crime stories; he reprints one of his stories, concerning a murder, and notes that he still wants to rewrite it but that a journalist can't think that way. He notes that he'd often call his mother and tell her how he was doing. She didn't really understand what his job was, just that he was doing well. She'd never heard of the newspaper he worked for and sometimes reminded townspeople who Rick Bragg was. Bragg also notes that he travelled far and wide and had seen every kind of poverty; he didn't tell his mother about any of that.

Chapter seventeen, "Saturdays in October," describes Bragg's early career as a sports writer that continued until he was twenty-three. He loved riding around the South, watching games and writing about them. He even got to watch Bear Bryant coach in person (the University of Alabama football coach who had legendary status in Alabama). Eventually Bragg got a news writing job at the Anniston Star where he worked with Yankees with big degrees who he eventually decided were alright. He put up with some guff from one of his bosses, who told him he was too unsophisticated to be a city reporter, but had to take it because he had gotten married.

Chapter eighteen, "White tuxedos," tells of Bragg's first wife. She was pretty and smart, a woman he met in Jacksonville. He proposed when he got the job at the Anniston Star, which was a good job. His wife didn't care about reputation and was respectful to his mother. When they got married and she walked down the aisle, it took his breath away; he also got to see his mother dressed up. They then settled into a nice home, and in 1985 Bragg got a job at the Birmingham News, the largest paper in Alabama, with great pay.

Bragg and his wife then had a pregnancy scare that destroyed their marriage. Bragg didn't want anyone to have to rely on him; it terrified him. Plus, he loved his work more than anything else. Bragg left eventually but he wasn't mean like his dad. His wife married again years later.

In chapter nineteen, "The price tag on heaven," Bragg starts making enough money to buy things for his mother that she never had. He bought her all kinds of food and furniture. He even bought her dentures, but she wouldn't use them for reasons he couldn't quite discern. He promised he'd buy her a house one day, but his income was too low. He and his brothers were all men by then. Sam married Teresa, a nice woman who cooked well. They had a daughter, Meredith Marie. Mark was a stranger to him, though. He drank too much and had a mean streak. When Bragg cared enough to look

up Mark, he couldn't find him. For ten years, Bragg hoped that Mark would change. Bragg notes that he never drinks alone.

Chapter twenty, "Under Vulcan's hammer," covers Bragg's time working for the Birmingham News. He was there for three years. Most of his colleagues had degrees from Alabama and Auburn, and while Bragg felt more at home, he still pissed people off and was something of a prima dona. He admits that he had a lot of fun but was a bad boyfriend to many women and a bad friend to many men. After three years, he sent out some applications and got a dream offer from the St. Petersburg Times but rejected it to stay with his mother, who was sick.

Chapter twenty-one, "Running hot," is about Bragg's younger brother Mark, who was born three years after him. Mark had something like the same anger that their father had but none of the cruelty and meanness. However, he was always getting in trouble with the law or engaging in some reckless activity. Margaret was always worried sick, and it was so stressful that it was killing her. She felt helpless and responsible for passing on the anger she felt towards her husband to Mark. Bragg expresses guilt over not helping Mark more when he needed it and not being a better brother, but he doesn't know how to connect with a man who has so much anger that is so mysterious.

Chapter twenty-two, "What if," is about Bragg's older brother Sam. Sam grew up to be a good man with a good wife. He was stuck laboring away in the local cotton mill, but he and his wife made a good, functional life for themselves. Sam is very talented, able to fix anything and when he and Bragg see each other, Sam's only request is that they stay up late and that Bragg tell him stories of the places he's been and the people he's seen.

Chapter twenty-three, "Paradise," notes that Bragg only spent a few months back in Calhoun County in late 1988 and early 1989. The time was productive, but he was twenty-nine and wanted to get out. The job in St. Petersburg was still available, so Bragg moved to Tampa and found a place on the beach. He was so good he was quickly promoted. He wrote a number of odd stories, such as a story about a bobcat serial killer of chickens, or of an illegal alligator hunt. He would sometimes risk his life for a good story. One of his most moving stories was about the struggles of the family of a pair of conjoined twins. Ultimately Bragg thinks Florida is a magical place. Eventually Bragg was offered a job in Miami and left Tampa.

In chapter twenty-four, "Miami, in madness," Bragg had only been in Miami a short time when racial tensions flared up between Hispanics and blacks again in late June, 1991. A Miami police officer had been exonerated for shooting a black man. For two days the black community protested, but when another black man got shot, a violent series of riots broke out. Fires raged, buildings were destroyed, and Bragg and his friend Sean Rowe were assigned to cover the riot. When they got there, two rocks flew into their car and one hit Bragg in the head. The next day, Bragg put together a story about the riots. One black man told him that the black community was angry because they had been oppressed by whites and then oppressed by Hispanics who weren't even born there. They rioted to get even.

Part II, Lies to My Mother, Chapters 25-33

Part II, Lies to My Mother, Chapters 25-33 Summary and Analysis

Chapter twenty-five, "Eating life," notes that one doesn't merely exist in Miami, but the city makes you live and die. Life is pushed to extremes. Bragg loved Miami, but almost all of the stories he covered were dark. For instance, he wrote about a migrant worker town called Immokalee and how the workers were badly mistreated. He wrote a story about a six-year-old boy falsely accused of molesting a seven-year-old girl and cleared the boy's name. Bragg thinks he did some good but not much changed because of him. While by and large he was allowed to cover what he liked, and his bosses eventually sent him to Desert Storm in 1991. The horrors there were much worse than in Miami.

Chapter twenty-six, "Tap-tap," has Bragg's bosses send him to Port-au-Prince, Haiti in October 1991. The people there were miserably impoverished; violence was a fact of live. At the time, a Catholic priest named Aristide was in the process of coming to power because he claimed to be a man of the poor. The events were a bit stressful for Bragg, who was then thirty-two, overweight and feeling arthritis in his joints. He had a capable translator and aide, Daniel Morel, however. Bragg explains some of Haiti's history of suffering and the terrors wrought by Doctor Duvalier and his son, Baby Doc. Aristide was an improvement, but he was quickly exiled and opposed both by the rich and by the middle class.

Chapter twenty-seven, "Snow in a can," takes Bragg home to Alabama to see his family. His mother was still worried about Mark and Mark still didn't know the pain he caused her. Only his grandmother, Miss Abigail, had changed. She was once full of energy, but now she was tired. They spoke briefly. On Christmas Eve the family got together and on Christmas day they had a wonderful dinner.

Chapter twenty-eight, "The interview for the Ivy League," shows Andrew growing tired even of St. Petersburg. He applied for a Nieman journalism fellowship at Harvard in 1992. His interview made him nervous; the interviewers wondered whether his accent was a shtick, but ultimately he got it and the lead interviewer, Kovach, became a guiding force in his life. Before leaving, he said goodbye to his friends in Miami, and then they all dispersed to escape Hurricane Andrew. He spent a few days in Alabama with family. His mother was very proud, but Sam wasn't that impressed.

Chapter twenty-nine,"Perfume on a hog," takes Bragg to Harvard. He only had one bad day when a Harvard man insulted him by condescending to him and Bragg threatened to "whip his ass." By and large, Bragg loved it. He studied hard and read constantly. He loved the snow. The Nieman fellows were from all over the world and he made good friends with many of them. The people there were fascinated by him; he was like a "field

trip." After all, he had seen George Wallace in person. While there, Kovach helped him a great deal; it was a total gift. The time flew by fast, but Bragg had his Harvard degree.

Bragg returned to St. Petersburg and became a national reporter. Eventually he got offers from the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times. He went to the LA Times because he was intimidated by the New York Times. But the job was not what he thought, so after three weeks, he called the New York Times and they gave him a job.

Chapter thirty, "New York," finds Bragg writing his second story, which was very much him—dark, gothic, warm. His editor liked the story. The reputation of the New York Times is all wrong; he learns that they really are out for the best stories, and there are stories everywhere in New York City. Bragg made friends and wrote a story about murders in downtown bodegas. One time he went to Harlem in March 1994 with his photographer, Franco, and they witnessed a heist at one of the local bodegas. Bragg wrote and Franco photographed all while guns were brandished. Bragg explained that for the poor immigrants in the area, owning and running a bodega was a form of liberty that they would take enormous risks to hold onto their business. Many people liked the story, saying it was true New York.

Chapter thirty-one, "Coming home," takes Bragg from the New York Times office back to Piedmont, the town where he was born. A tornado had collapsed a church there and killed a number of people, including children. The story was a bad one and the people were filled with more than grief. In Piedmont, people just didn't die in church. What the people felt was doubt. No one said that people died, just that "God took them," and while the faith of many was shaken, Bragg doubted that it was lost. Few people there cared about his job, but the story he wrote moved many people. It was republished in many papers in Alabama and letters flowed into him. He hadn't just gotten it right, he had "gotten it true". A year later, Bragg returned to watch the people build a new church.

Chapter thirty-two, "Dining out with no money, and living with no life," starts Bragg at his New York Times job officially. He wrote a story about Gangaram Mahes, a man from Guyana who spends his days eating out at moderately expensive restaurants, getting arrested and going to prison for ninety days. There he gets three free meals a day and a place to sleep. He has been to prison thirty-one times. Bragg notes that while he was doing the story, he settled in to a small apartment on the Upper West Side in a 'real neighborhood' with homeless and shootings. As soon as he unpacked, the New York Times sent him off to Haiti again. Bragg made sure not to tell his mother any of the bad stuff.

In chapter thirty-three, "Buying bodies, eating lobster," Bragg finds that Haiti hadn't much changed. A dictator was still in power, police were still killing the poor and selling their bodies back to their families at high prices. "Body merchants" would visit the media and try to get paid to take them to a dead body. Aristide was expected to return, but no domestic uprising came. Only Clinton could change things. Jimmy Carter came to negotiate a return for Aristide and the military government organized counter protests by paying people. Eventually US soldiers came, but the killing didn't immediately stop. The young soldiers were unprepared and were horrified by the violence and shocked by how

they were practically worshipped by the natives. Bragg befriended a few of them and wrote a story about them all, how they handled the stress and how difficult they found the gravity of the crimes committed.

Bragg left Haiti when he was promoted to national correspondent with the New York Times. He would cover the Southern United States from Atlanta. He was coming home.

Part III, Getting Even With Life, Chapters 34-42

Part III, Getting Even With Life, Chapters 34-42 Summary and Analysis

Chapter thirty-four, "Gone South," takes Bragg to Atlanta. He notes that people in the South don't care for the New York Times. Bragg is challenged by covering his home for strangers and finds it odd to cover the Southern rich, who he finds boring. One of his best stories was written about a poor cleaning lady, Miss Oseola McCarty, who saved money her whole life until she was eighty-seven, then endowed a scholarship fund in Hattiesburg worth $150,000.

In the fall of 1994, Bragg moved to Atlanta. The city really wasn't very Southern but it was a good place. Bragg was rarely there and was often alone travelling around the South. When he got there, he kepts thinking about buying a house for his mother; he'd saved $40,000, but he regretted that it isn't more. He notes that another girlfriend left him, a good woman, but he didn't have time for anything but work. Bragg desperately wanted a Pulitzer. He notes that he can go home easily but still couldn't protect his mother from worrying about Mark.

In chapter thirty-five, "Abigail," Bragg's grandmother, Miss Abigail, died of pneumonia. Bragg went home for the funeral and saw his brothers at the funeral, along with much of the rest of his family. His mother didn't go because she thought she might not be able to handle it. Bragg felt very lonely there, and thought he was paying the price for pretending he didn't need anyone. He left early in the service to see Margaret.

In chapter thirty-six, "Mrs. Smith, and family," Bragg explained how he covered the abduction of two young boys from their mother, Susan Smith, in South Carolina in October 1994. It turned out later that the twenty-three-year-old textile mill secretary killed her sons by running her car with them in it into the water. Everyone wondered why. In the trial, some said she killed her sons to get with a rich man who didn't want the baggage of her children. When the police dredged up the car, they found a letter from the man she loved ending their relationship. The story showed the South in its worst light and Bragg hated it.

Bragg notes the surprise of the testimony of the bald, average looking love of Susan's life, Tom Findlay. Smith's estranged husband wanted her dead. The jury couldn't kill her, though if she were a black carjacker, things would have been different. Bragg couldn't make sense of the tragedy.

Chapter thirty-seven, "Monsters," notes that Bragg couldn't understand the Oklahoma City Bombers and that some of the victims thought the reporters didn't care about the deaths. Bragg explained that they did. He was never ashamed to be a reporter, no

matter how often people thought as those victims did. Journalism pulled him out of poverty and saved him. Bragg also explains that Mark's house burned down, and when Bragg finally got home he decided he would build his mother's house.

Chapter thirty-eight, "Validation," is the climax of All Over But the Shoutin'. Bragg had won journalism awards before, and he spent all his time trying to win more. Bragg was in DC when he got the call that he had won the Pulitzer. When he won he thought of his mother, of how it validated his mother's sacrifice. Of course, Bragg was thrilled too, and felt a sense of relief. He then called his mother, and then every newspaper in Alabama called her up for interviews.

When it was time to fly to New York for the award, Bragg had begged his mother to come with him for a week. She had refused but finally agreed. They flew to New York and she asked him a million questions about the flight, such as what kept them in the air. The taxi drive in the city was stressful, as was the elevator ride, which she had never experienced either. Margaret was blown away by the skyscrapers and loved the dessert buffet. The New York Times editors were incredibly kind to her, and when Bragg won the award, she cried for joy, the first time Bragg had seen that. When she got home, she enthralled her kinfolks with stories.

Chapter thirty-nine, "1.3 acres," has Bragg buy his mother a four-bedroom house. On November 2, 1996, Bragg bought his mother a good house with all the money he had. She now had a 1.3 acre plot of land with a wonderful house that Bragg bought with cash. She picked out the house herself and had no mortgage payments. Sam fixed up the house for her, and the yard. It was still hard for her to leave her old house, that refuge from their father, but she didn't cry. Bragg went back to the house and found memories everywhere. He worried that he had bought the house for her as a selfish act; when he asked his mother about it, she got mad at him.

Chapter forty, "The same," is written to Bragg's father. He tells his dad that he did for his mother what his father never did. He made up for some of the pain, but of course he couldn't make up for it all. In the end, he admits, the main difference between the two of them is luck. He had the same meanness, but he channeled it instead. He used his father's coldness in his work. Like his father, he took on no responsibilities, no home, no children. Bragg doesn't hate his father; he knew there was good in him. He still wonders whether his father thought of them when he was gone. He notes that Momma is happy in her house and that if he wanted, there would have been room for him.

Chapter forty-one, "Who we are," is written in Mid-November, 1996. Moving his mother wasn't hard; she didn't have much. After she moved him, Mark came to visit, despite the family asking him not to come. Sam drove up behind him and they faced off because Mark had been drinking. A forty-year-old man and his thirty-three-year-old brother fought in that front yard. It was dirty and somewhere his father was laughing. The fight made Bragg sick. Margaret was angry at Sam, though, not Mark. Bragg felt that he had only built a stage for another sadness. He wanted to believe that he had created a new place for happiness.

After the fight, Margaret went back to her little old house; Sam, Mark and his mother wouldn't go back. Bragg felt sorry for everyone, even himself. Though, things got better. By Thanksgiving, things were good; Sam and Margaret had reconciled and she had fixed Bragg a room. They had a delicious and happy Thanksgiving, despite the fact that Mark wasn't there. While Margaret worried about Mark, since the fight with Sam he was sober and rebuilding his house, sleeping in his truck.

Bragg knew that he couldn't change the past but they had still "won." She had a castle that was hers. One day, Bragg hopes, Mark will come back. The house in the end is just a house, but it really is a symbol. The chapter ends with Bragg telling the reader about a woman he met after a writing seminar who had a past just like his. He wanted to tell her that she didn't need to put her life on hold until she had proven anything to herself like he did. He thinks he will tell her in the end.

In chapter forty-two, "Safe in the dark," Bragg tells the reader that he used to have a big problem sleepwalking when he was a child. They lived in their grandmother's house at the time, but when he woke up, even outside in the yard, he knew his way around. Sometimes he'd wake up in front of a tree and she'd be right beside him and say, "You're okay, little man. You just been travelin'."

Characters

Rick Bragg

The author and main character of his autobiography, Rick Bragg is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who, against the odds, rose from a humble birth to a poor family in Piedmont, Alabama to regional correspondent for the New York Times for the Southeastern United States. Bragg was born in 1959 to Charles Bragg and Margaret Bundham Bragg. His older brother, Sam, was born three years earlier and his younger brother, Mark, was born three years later.

Bragg's early childhood was difficult due to his seriously alcoholic father coming in and out of their lives seemingly at random. Charles often beat Margaret and never contributed financially to the family. Consequently, Bragg grew up very poor, with his family relying on help from family members and government welfare. While Bragg grew up poor, he didn't really notice it until high school.

Bragg became fully and totally aware of the disadvantage his poverty put him in when a murder was committed in town and the police rounded up all the poor kids, black kids and mentally handicapped. He was so furious that he vowed to get his education and escape from Calhoun County. Bragg thus began his journalism career working for local newspapers as a sportswriter and taking night classes at Jacksonville State University. Eventually Bragg was hired at the Anniston Star and then the Birmingham News.

As time progressed, Bragg moved to newspapers in St. Petersburg, Miami and Los Angeles until he was hired by the New York Times. After working as a foreign correspondent, Bragg was promoted to regional correspondent for the Southeastern United States and won the Pulitzer Prize, which brought him enough money to finally fulfill his dream of buying his mother a nice home.

Margaret Bragg

Margaret Bundham was born in 1937 near Calhoun County in Floyd County, Georgia. She had beautiful blond hair and blue eyes, which followed her throughout most of her life. He father was a tall, powerful man with a deep inner strength that she undoubtedly inherited from him. Because her father was a bootlegger, family income was unstable. As a result, Margaret never had a doll. Margaret's mother was Miss Abigail Bundham, who the Bragg's called Miss Ab. She was a creative but a little bit odd. The poverty of her childhood shaped Margaret. She spent most of her life doing back-breaking work for very low pay.

When she married Charlie, Margaret Bragg believed that she would have a happy life, but Charlie's alcoholism shattered that dream. Charlie did give her three sons, Sam, Mark and Rick, but her husband was rarely around, not even for Rick's birth. Margaret

bore the pain of her husband's physical abuse and absence with resilience and continued to work as hard as she was able to support her family.

Bragg always admired his mother for being the best mother she could possibly be. But Margaret always felt responsible for how her son Mark turned out and was so ashamed of the deep poverty she lived in that she rarely left the house; while she was religious, she never went to church and spent most of her time alone or working worried about feeding her family and the increasing trouble Mark was getting into. When Rick left home, she worried about him too.

Bragg vowed that he would help his mother "get even with life" because of how unlucky she had been. He saved money for years to buy her a home of her own, though as a journalist he didn't make much. When he won the Pulitzer, he took Margaret on her first trip over three hundred miles away from her house. She flew on her first plane, rode in her first taxi, and took her first elevator ride. Margaret was overwhelmed by New York City's skyscrapers and by how kind Rick's editors and work associates were to her. In the next years, Bragg was finally able to buy her a new home which she came to love.

Charles Bragg

Bragg's half-Cherokee father and a raging alcoholic, Charles and his wife Margaret eventually had a genuine romantic relationship. But Charlie quickly fell into alcoholism, which led him to both physically abuse Margaret, neglect his sons, refuse to contribute financially to the family and disappear for long periods of time. Charles died at an early age due to his severe degree of drinking, but made no effort to atone for his sins.

Despite it all, Bragg spent some time with Charles before he died, and his father gave him some famous works of literature that he bought because they were pretty. When Charlie died, Bragg still thought of him and writes directly to him in the book. Ultimately, Bragg admits that he had many of his father's personal qualities, but states that he channeled them into constructive success rather than destructiveness and pain.

Mark Bragg

Bragg's younger brother, born three years after him. Mark was troubled as a youth and fell into alcoholism as an adult. While he lacked his father's mean streak, his unstable life led him to constantly worry his mother.

Sam Bragg

Bragg's older brother, born three years before him. Sam grew up well, married and did construction of all sorts in their hometown.

Miss Abigail

Margaret's mother, strong though a bit eccentric.

Uncle John and Aunt Gracie Juanita

Uncle John and Aunt Gracie were Bragg's aunt and uncle. The Braggs lived in a small home on their property.

The Working Class in Possum Trot

Bragg's family was working class, and Bragg grew up admiring all the strong, hard-working men and women in his social and economic group; it was harder for Bragg to identify with the rich, as they often had different accents, styles of dress and went to different churches.

The congregants of the local Baptist Church

Bragg's mother didn't go to church, but Bragg spent two years with the congregants in his local Baptist Church. He enjoyed church despite not having the religious experiences the other congregants did. However, he very much enjoyed their weekly pot luck after church called Dinner on the Ground.

Bragg's first wife and his girlfriends

Bragg was an attractive young man and had a wife and many girlfriends, but he didn't stay with any of them because of how devoted he was to his career.

Fellow Reporters

All Over but the Shoutin' names many of Bragg's fellow reporters at the papers he worked at, though none were memorable to feature very prominently in the book.

Nieman Fellows

Harvard's Nieman Journalism Fellowships were given to people all around the world; the fellowship paid Bragg's expenses to study at Harvard for a year, which he very much enjoyed. The fellows were largely friendly to him and he made a number of friends.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide

The one time president of Haiti, Aristide was a priest who became a politician who defended the working class. A number of coups led to his exile, one of which he accused the United States of supporting. Bragg's trips to Haiti led him to see the incredible poverty and violence caused by Aristide's enemies, though often by his followers.

Objects/Places

Piedmont, Alabama

The town where Bragg was born.

Possum Trot, Alabama

Bragg's hometown.

Jacksonville, Alabama

The mid-sized city near Bragg's hometown, Bragg went to college in Jacksonville.

Bragg's Home

Bragg's family lived in a small, two-room home on his Aunt and Uncle's land. Margaret lived there until Bragg bought her a new home.

Margaret's New Home

Margaret's four bedroom, three bathroom home that Bragg bought for her after saving his money for over a decade. Bragg felt that she deserved the house to help her and her family "get even with life." Bragg worried, however, that he only gave her the home for himself. While the home initially caused the family some tension, they came to love the home.

Church

Bragg comments that religion and Protestant Christianity specifically was a completely ubiquitous feature of life in Calhoun County, Alabama. No one doubted that God existed, that Jesus rode from the dead or that He would save your soul if you wanted. Bragg went to church for a few years when he was young but never shared the religious experiences of those around him.

Bragg's '69 GM Convertible

When Bragg was in high school, he got this car that he crashed while racing it.

Sports Writing

Bragg got himself out of Calhoun County by sports writing for local newspapers and eventually the Anniston Star.

Tampa, Miami, L.A., New York City, Atlanta

The order of major cities where Bragg was employed as a journalist.

Alcohol/Likker/Whisky

Alcohol and whisky in particular consumed Charles's life and then Mark's.

Bragg's Pulitzer

After working hard for years, Bragg won the Pulitzer Prize for his ability to tell stories about unique and often poor individuals around the United States.

Haitian Brutality

Bragg's two trips to Haiti brought him face to face with extraordinary human brutality.

The Nieman Fellowship

Harvard's Nieman fellowship pays for journalists around the country and world to study journalism at Harvard for a year. Bragg's experience with the Nieman Fellowship allowed him to study harder than he ever had before and learn an enormous amount.

Serial Diner, Miss McCarty, etc.

The Serial Diner and Miss McCarty are two of the many people Bragg wrote stories about that led him to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Themes

Poverty

Rick Bragg's childhood was characterized by impoverishment. Neither Charles nor Margaret Bragg had high school or college educations. Calhoun County was a poor county in Alabama as well. It didn't help that Charles was an alcoholic and had no job. He was never home and brought only stress and pain to the Bragg home. Margaret could only find jobs doing back-breaking labor for low wages. She picked cotton until the cotton picking machines took over; afterwards, she picked tomatoes and pecans off the ground. She would also wash clothes.

The Bragg home had two rooms, with Margaret, Sam, Rick and Mark crowded together. Margaret didn't own the home they lived in, as it was owned by Bragg's aunt and uncle. The family was also reliant on family and the government from money, food and clothes.

Bragg didn't realize how poor he was until high school when his girlfriend broke up with him when she met his family and visited his home. From then on, he wouldn't date women who turned their nose up at him. When Bragg was rounded up with the other poor, black and mentally handicapped kids as suspects for a murder that was obvious none of them committed, Bragg realized that he was being discriminated against and vowed to get out of poverty.

Throughout Bragg's rise to win the Pulitzer, he would often return home and enter the world of poverty in Possum Trot. Bragg committed to save his money and get his mother out of poverty by buying her a nice new home. He also discusses the social effects of poverty, how it adjusts the impoverished to working long hours and how his mother initially refused to go to New York because she was embarrassed in front of the rich, among other examples.

Social Hierarchy

Life in Calhoun County left Bragg with a great amount of insight into a number of different social hierarchies. He understood the hierarchy within the Christian community, with poor Baptists at the bottom. He was a child during the Civil Rights movement and realized that however bad his family had it, plenty of black people had it worse.

Bragg suffered because his mother was scorned in the community due to her divorce, placing those who maintained their marriages despite serious dysfunction over those who got away. Most of all, Bragg experienced the hierarchy of class in Calhoun County. He never got along with the rich, who often spoke differently and dressed differently than he did.

When Bragg left Calhoun County, he carried the chip on his shoulder of someone at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Many of the journalists he worked with had degrees first

from Alabama and Auburn and then from Harvard, Yale and the like. He was often initially looked down on because of his southern accent. When Bragg won the Nieman fellowship, some at Harvard condescended to him. Once Bragg got far enough along in his career, class was not as big of an issue.

Nonetheless, class remained an issue for his mother and brothers, who still lived a thoroughly working class life. In the end, Bragg's buying his mother a house was a symbol of their overcoming their hardship. When her son won the Pulitzer, Margaret finally got acknowledgment from people of every social class.

Getting Even With Life

The third part of All Over But the Shoutin' is called "Getting Even With Life," and the phrase represents maybe the deepest theme of the book. Margaret Bragg spent most of her life suffering. She was poor as dirt from birth to old age, and the only man she ever loved physically abused her and abandoned her and their children. Even after her husband was dead, she lived in shame over the fact that she was divorced, the poverty she was in and the pain over dealing with a son, Mark, who was turning out too much like his father.

Bragg always felt responsible for his mother. She thought she was a failure and he was out to prove her wrong, to show that he could amount to something and that he could take what was bad in his father and turn it into something good. He was determined to escape poverty and spent years saving up whatever extra money he had in the hopes of one day buying his mother a brand new, giant house. Bragg knew that he couldn't fix the past, but he intended the house to be a symbol, a representation of how the Bragg's were "getting even with life." Margaret Bragg's life had not been kind or easy but she bore its burdens with grace, strength and unfailing love for her sons. To Bragg, it would be unjust for such a good woman to die with so little.

Of course, when she got it, the house didn't fix everything; in fact, it even caused some conflict in the family, such as a nasty fight between Sam and Mark and a temporary estrangement between Margaret and Sam as a result. But in the end it meant something, and it did, just a bit, help the Bragg's get even with life.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of All Over But the Shoutin' is the author's, Rick Bragg. It is written from the first person, save the few occasions in which Bragg is retelling stories of events that he wasn't around for. Bragg's perspective is deeply shaped by being born on the tail end of the baby boomer generation. Calhoun County in northeast Alabama was deeply socially and financially stratified in Bragg's youth at a time when such stratification was coming under serious criticism. Bragg remembers that his town was largely segregated and the fact that black people lived only a few miles down the road didn't mean he ever saw them or talked to them.

Bragg was most affected by his childhood poverty. While he was too young to realize how poor he was until high school, the fact that Bragg lost one of his girlfriends when she visited his house made an impression on him. Later, when he was put under suspicion for a murder he couldn't possibly have committed just due to his social class, he vowed to rise out of poverty.

The fact that Bragg was not only poor but Southern and poor gave him a chip on his shoulder when he made his way to other parts of the country and drove him to work harder than his colleagues. Bragg's sense of his poverty and his determination come through strongly in the book. His sensitivity to poverty also convinced him that "rich people are boring," and helped him to cover the forgotten poor that led to his Pulitzer Prize.

Perhaps the most important feature of Bragg's perspective, however, is his determination to fix the pain his father caused his mother. Like so many children of divorce, Bragg felt somehow responsible and took it upon himself to help his mother "get even with life." This latter element pervades the book in a strong and explicit fashion.

Tone

Rick Bragg is perhaps one of the great Southern writers of the last half of the twentieth century. As with so many Southern writers, he has an earthy, gothic style with a profound charm and wisdom characteristic of a life in a place with a profound sense of both its worth and its own failings. Thus, the tone has both happy and sad elements that function perfectly in tandem. The book is written in such a way that the very same page can make the reader laugh or tear up.

When Bragg describes being three years old and biting his father's leg to stop him from beating his mother, the tone is brutally honest and when Bragg describes threatening to kick the ass of a Harvard man who condescended to him, the reader finds honesty, embarrassment and humor in the tone all at the same time.

Anyone who reads All Over But the Shoutin' will find the tone both moving and loving. Bragg went through a lot, but his mother went through even more. He has a deep and profound love for her that comes through throughout the book. Bragg combines his love for his mother with a grit and determination that reflects Bragg's deep anger at his father for hurting his mother. The tone seamlessly mixes not only the sad and the happy but a sense of love, determination and anger.

Structure

All Over but the Shoutin contains forty-two chapters divided into three parts. Part I, "The Widow's Mite," begins with Bragg's childhood and follows him through adolescence until he becomes a sports writer. Most of the chapters are shorter and focus on various themes, such as Bragg's relationships with his brothers, certain tragic events and interactions with his father, his childhood experience with the Civil Rights movement, descriptions of the deep poverty he lived in and the way it affected his family and his mother in particular, among other things.

Bragg describes himself as initially indifferent to his studies and says that he only took a journalism class so he could wander around school. Nonetheless, the class changed his life. When Bragg was accused of a murder he couldn't possibly have committed just because he was poor, Bragg vowed to get out of Calhoun County and enrolled in college at Jacksonville State. Afterwards he got a job as a sports writer for local newspapers.

The next part of the book, "Lies to my mother," is comprised of the many different events that led to Bragg getting a job at the New York Times, which includes events during Bragg's adulthood from 1980 to 1996. Bragg worked for the Anniston Star and the Birmingham news. In 1989, Bragg moved to Tampa and wrote for the St. Petersburg Times; he then had a job in Miami until he won the Harvard Nieman fellowship and took at brief job at the LA Times in 1994. That same year, Bragg came to work for the New York Times. Along the way, Bragg's journalistic ambitions took him to many dangerous places which he rarely told his mother about, so as not to worry her.

Bragg also shows how his brothers turned out, Sam well and Mark much less so. He reviews his returns home and explains at length the horrors he experienced in Haiti, his Southern experience at Harvard and his accomplishments at the New York Times.

In the third part of the book, "Getting even with life," Bragg receives validation for his work and his mother's suffering. When he won the Pulitzer, Bragg took his mother on a powerful trip to New York City, and afterward he bought his mother a nice new home to help her "get even with life." The house, despite causing some additional problems, was a symbolic victory for the Bragg family.

Quotes

"I know that even as the words of George Wallace rang through my Alabama, the black family who lived down the dirt road from our house sent fresh-picked corn and other food to the poor white lady and her three sons, because they knew their daddy had run off, because hungry does not have a color."
Prologue, xvii

"No, this is not an important book. The people who know books call it a memoir, but that is much too fancy a word for me, for her, for him. It is only a story of a handful of lives, in which one tall, blond woman, her back forever bent by the pull of that sack, comes off looking good and noble, and a dead man gets to answer for himself from deep in the ground. In these pages I will make the dead dance again with the living, not to get at any great truth, just a few little ones. It is still a damn hard thing to do, when you think about it. God help me, Momma, if I am clumsy."
Prologue, xxii

"He talked about y'all, a little. But mostly he just wanted to talk about the Lord."
Part I, Chap. 1, p. 8

"It's all over but the shoutin' now, ain't it boy."
Part I, Chap. 1, p. 10

"The only thing poverty does is grind down your nerve endings to a point that you can work harder and stoop lower than most people are willing to."
Part I, Chap. 3, p. 25

"They were sick and tired of living in their world. They wanted to live in our world, too."
Part I, Chap. 5, p. 59

"We had not known we were better than anybody."
Part I, Chap. 6, p. 61

"I just sat there. I could have pretended—I think some did pretend—but what good would that have done. I sat, as the Sundays drained away. I never felt so alone before. I don't think I ever have, since."
Part I, Chap. 9, p. 88

"They ain't got no daddy."
Part I, Chap. 11, p. 104

"The Lord was riding with you, son. You should be dead."
Part I, Chap. 14, p. 113

"The Lord was riding with you, son. You should be dead."
Part I, Chap. 14, p. 113

"I am not a romantic figure but I have not led a humdrum life, either."
Part II, Chap. 24, p. 185

"Then they started to talk about the mill, about layoffs and slowdowns, and, for reasons I am not quite sure of, I was ashamed."
Part II, Chap. 28, p. 222

"I had called the New York Times, told them I had made a big mistake, and I would love to come to work for them if they would have me. I expected them to tell me to enjoy the sunshine, palm trees and unemployment. Instead, the hiring editor, Carolyn Lee, said I could start in January, start fresh."
Part II, Chap. 29, p. 233

"We are trained from birth not to question God. But why? Why a church? Why those little children? Why? Why? Why?"
Part II, Chap. 31, 244

"I knew they killed people but I didn't know they done that. I never seen nothing like that."
Part II, Chap. 33, p. 263

"I felt lonely then. This is the time when you need somebody. This is the time when it is good to have a wife, and children, to absorb your grief, to hold on to you. This is when you pay, and pay and pay, for pretending that you don't need anybody."
Part III, Chap. 35, p. 277

"I have never been ashamed of being a reporter. I have been afraid, and angry, and heartsick, but never ashamed. I lay awake a long, long time that night, sorry about what had happened, but not ashamed."
Part III, Chap. 37, p. 290

"Now, people will speak to her when they see her on the street."
Part III, Chap. 38, p. 296

"Ricky, what keeps us in the air?"
Part III, Chap. 38, p. 302

"I kept my promise to my mother on November 2nd, 1996. I took every dollar I had and bought her a house, a good house, the first thing of any real value she has ever owned."
Part III, Chap. 39, p. 308

"It was just us getting even with life, one more time."
Part III, Chap. 39, p. 311

"So here we are, Daddy."
Part III, Chap. 40, p. 317

"You're okay, little man. You just been travelin'."
Part III, Chap. 42, p. 329

Topics for Discussion

Is there any significant sense in which Bragg has reconciled with his father? With his idea of his father?

What even drove Mark to become a journalist, and why?

Explain three experiences of Mark's that illustrates his experience with poverty and class in his youth.

Why is the book called "All Over But the Shoutin',"? Where does the title come from?

Why didn't Bragg raise a family? Why didn't he keep any of his girlfriends?

What did Haiti teach Bragg about poverty and human brutality?

Is there anything truly political about All Over But the Shoutin'? If so, why is it?

Explain Bragg's unique perspective on Harvard and the New York Times.

What is the significance of the house Bragg bought for his mother? What did it symbolize? What did it compensate for about their lives? What are the things it couldn't fix? What conflicts did it cause?