

# **All the Birds, Singing Study Guide**

**All the Birds, Singing by Evie Wyld**

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## Plot Summary

In current-day England, a sheep farmer named Jake began to find several of her sheep murdered. The former owner of the farm, Don, suggested it was foxes, but Jake originally believed it to be local teenagers, and then began to suspect a man she saw loitering around her property and who she eventually found sleeping in her barn. Jake begrudgingly allowed the stranger, Lloyd, to stay and help on her land, but only because she continued to hear strange noises around her property and find more dead sheep. She learned Don's son, Samson, had a history of mental illness and of attempting to burn down the house, though she no longer believed it to be a human. Jake began to see what she believed to be a large animal on her property, though she remained uncertain of what was real and what was imagined, since she was paranoid about her past catching up to her.

Meanwhile, there are various flashbacks to Jake's past, which unwind backward as the story progresses. Back at her hometown in Australia, Jake is in love with a boy at her school named Denver, but discovers he loves another girl instead. Trying to play it cool, Jake begins lighting and dropping matches and inadvertently sets fire to her hometown, killing some people and destroying homes and businesses. Jake is run out of town and begins to work as a prostitute, moving from place to place. She befriends another prostitute named Karen, who daydreams about moving to England one day.

Jake eventually moves in with one of her customers, a man named Otto, whom Jake initially believes is kind. However, as she spends more time with him, Otto becomes possessive and domineering, and Jake begins to believe that he may have killed his ex-wife. She manages to escape and starts a new life as part of a sheep shearing crew, where she begins a relationship with one of the other workers, Greg. However, Greg's friend Clare is suspicious of Jake and digs up dirt about her past. He tries to blackmail her into giving him sexual favors, but Jake knocks him out and takes off, moving to England.

In modern-day England, Jake continued to be paranoid about the noises she was hearing and the things she was seeing, especially since Lloyd never seemed to hear or see them, too. However, as they drove into town, Lloyd spotted the same animal as Jake, suggesting that she wasn't out of her mind and that something truly had been killing the sheep, though it is never explicitly named.



## Section One: Chapters 1-4

### Summary

In England, Jake found one of her sheep dead. She went into town and saw some local kids and assumed it was them. Don, the man who sold her the house, stopped by and gave her a hard time for not being more social. She told him it was the kids who killed her sheep but he argued it was a fox, even though he'd never seen them do that to a sheep before. Jake warned him she'd shoot anyone who came near her sheep.

In Australia, Jake works a job on a sheep farm. She feels someone peering in on her while she showers and sees a man named Clare walking away. She worries that he's figured out her past and that someone's found her. She finds Greg, the man she's been sleeping with, and asks him to leave with her, trying to get him away before he finds out the truth. Clare corners Jake and tells her someone named Otto told him the whole story about her. He offers to keep silent if she'll give him a sexual favor. Jake knows that won't be the end of it and knocks him out cold.

In England, Jake called her family in Australia but didn't say anything, just listened to her mother talk. She fell asleep but woke up to strange noises, like someone was trying to get into her house. She took her Dog and drove off. When they came back, the house seemed normal again, making Jake wonder if she imagined it all.

In Australia, Jake and Greg are enjoying getting to know each other as lovers. One of the other workers, Alan, tells Jake he doesn't care about her past but warns her that Clare has a problem with her. He encourages her to play nice with him. Later when Greg and Jake are alone, she thinks she sees something in the room, but there's nothing there. Later, when she thinks Greg is asleep, she goes outside but feels him watching her. When she comes back, they both pretend it didn't happen.

### Analysis

The novel sets up a unique structure, with each chapter rotating back and forth between Jake in present-day England and past Australia. The structure is further unique in that the Australian chapters progress backward instead of forward, with each move back into the past revealing more information about what the reader already knows is the outcome, but may not yet completely understand the context. For instance, in chapter two, Jake is cornered by Clare who has learned something about her past. In chapter four, Jake is warned that Clare has a grudge against her, which leads to him seeking out her past in chapter two and trying to blackmail her. Small clues--such as the location of where Jake is working, and an incident with a prank played on the flour bin--establish this movement backward.

The symbol of Jake's dog is established in this section. Rather than give her pet a name, she called him Dog. This gives insight into Jake's solitary lifestyle and her desire



to keep everyone and everything at a distance. Giving the dog a name would suggest some kind of attachment to it, and would further suggest some kind of personal meaning to the name chosen. Though Jake wanted the companionship of the dog, she was also afraid of becoming too emotionally connected, which ties into the hints offered that she was on the run from something in her past.

One of the recurring motifs in the novel is that of birds singing, the importance of which is suggested in the title of the novel itself. The first instance of this occurred in chapter one as Jake discovered the slaughtered carcass of her sheep, and pops up again throughout the novel, often when something particularly emotional, stressful, or frightening is happening to Jake. As the sections taking place in Australia continue to move backward, it is finally revealed that Jake first notices the singing of the birds when she sets the fire that starts her on the path which eventually leads her to her cottage in England, constantly watching over her shoulder.

This ties to another recurring theme in the novel, which is that of uncertainty. Through various points in the novel, Jake believes that something is coming after her, trying to get revenge on her for something that has happened in her past. This is first established in chapter three when Jake believed she heard something trying to get into her home. She left the house and came back to find it almost completely unchanged, making her question if she imagined the entire thing, although she also found something that looked like a handprint but which was too small to be her own. The novel constantly plays with this back and forth, causing not only Jake but the reader to question whether or not anything is actually happening and her reliability as a narrator.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some clues in the text that indicate Jake was living on her own? Did she choose to live that way? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Jake so insistent on leaving with Greg before he talks to Clare? What clues are given about what secret she might be hiding?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jake pretend not to see Greg watching her the night she goes outside? Why does he pretend to not have seen her? What does this indicate about their relationship?



## Vocabulary

mangled, innards, flaring, carcass, gust, lobed, warped, leeks, till, stoically, grappling, mounted, lasso, peer, fringe, hob, eyeballing, singlet, reckon, ewe, prolapsed, isolation, crevices, pallet, suds, knot, incredulous, distributed, ambles



## Section Two: Chapters 5-7

### Summary

In England, Jake found cigarettes on her property, which she took as proof of teenagers being responsible. As she walked the grounds, she spotted a man watching her. She went home and loaded her gun. She went in to report her sheep to the local police but was put off by the sergeant speaking condescendingly to her. He worried about her living alone and encouraged her to be more social. She went to a local teahouse and had scones and cream tea. At home, she found a wounded pigeon and called its owner, who was rude to her and didn't seem to particularly care what happened to the bird. The pigeon died and Jake set it loose in the ocean.

In Australia, Jake lies about where she came from to one of the men working on her team. Clare goads her into arm wrestling one of the younger boys, Bean, which Jake wins, even though she knows the other men will give him a hard time. Greg and Jake have just begun sleeping together. She avoids telling him about the scars on her back. Bean loses his hand trying to sharpen tools for Clare. The other men turn against Clare and Jake gets his old spot on the team.

In England, Jake found a man sleeping in her shed. At first, she thought he might have been the one to kill her sheep. She tried to run him off but he was too drunk. She told him he could stay there for the night, but in the morning if he was still there she'd shoot him. In her house, Jake gathered all the knives and weapons and watched the shed.

### Analysis

Jake's visit to the teahouse might not seem to have much meaning, but later on in the text it proves to be another connection to her past that takes on more meaning once this past is revealed. Jake comes across as fairly tough and unsentimental, so her desire to sit in a fancy teahouse with an elaborate display of cutlery, napkins, etc., may at first seem fairly strange. Later, she recalls her friend Karen describing her desire to escape from Australia to England and have scones and cream tea. Jake carried Karen's dream with her as a way to maintain her connection to a woman who was one of her only close friends, and also as a symbol of a better life. In Australia, she is forced to work as a prostitute, sleep outside and in apartments overrun with bugs, and be held at other peoples' mercy; in England, she wanted to feel as though she was safe and in charge of her own life, and part of doing so was allowing herself the comfort and luxury of scones and tea.

Jake encounters many animals throughout the course of the novel, some of which are friendly to her, some of which are antagonistic, and some which are neutral. In this section, Jake found a wounded pigeon, which she rescued from being eaten by her dog but which ultimately died. Jake took the time to "bury" the pigeon at sea, which was



another surprisingly sentimental moment for someone who chose to live such a solitary lifestyle. Part of this may be because when Jake called the bird's owner, he seemed unconcerned with its well-being. Jake was estranged from her family and has been living on her own, and seemed to feel a deep sense of empathy for a creature that nobody else seemed to care about.

One important symbol introduced in this section is that of Jake's scars, which she does not fully explain to Greg. These scars will appear repeatedly throughout the rest of the novel, with Jake often lying about where they came from, or allowing other people to believe what they want to believe about them. To others, particularly men, they seem to represent a vulnerability that sometimes incites a feeling of protectiveness, sometimes a feeling of disgust. To Jake, they ultimately represent a sense of guilt as a constant reminder about her past that she cannot escape.

## Discussion Question 1

Why did Jake react so negatively to the way the police sergeant talked to her? Was he being condescending or friendly?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jake beat Bean at arm wrestling, even though she knows the other men will give him a hard time for it?

## Discussion Question 3

What does it suggest about Jake that she lies about where she's from? What clues can be gathered about Jake so far about what she's running from?

## Vocabulary

sashayed, forecast, perimeter, pricked, pellets, grit, compare, stile, mulched, fossicking, trespasser, temples, jumper, regulation, swagger, logistics, requisite, gauge, haranguing, grievances, lolled, mellow, disposal, blokes, liable, goon, fend





## Section Three: Chapters 8-11

### Summary

In Australia, Jake makes it away from Otto and sells his truck. She get a job as a roustabout and introduces herself to the team. She worries they won't like her because she's a woman; for some people it seems to be a problem, but most try to help her out. Jake gets her own separate living quarters. She observes her fellow workers, noticing a man named Greg, who seems kind, and his friend Clare, who seems obnoxious. Greg offers to let her have a try shearing the sheep and she does a surprisingly good job. A new boy named Bean arrives to take her job. Jake finds \$50,000 in her account and calls home to learn her father has died and left it to her. She decides not to use the money unless she has to.

In England, Jake found the shed empty. She found one of her sheep stuck in the mud and struggled to get her out. The man who stayed in her shed introduced himself as Lloyd, sober, and Jake asked for his help with the ewe. Don arrived and watched them work to get the sheep out, but didn't offer to help. As the sheep started to move, Lloyd panicked so much Jake thought he was having a heart attack. He admitted he might be afraid of sheep.

In Australia, Jake makes sure Otto is watching television and that Kelly the dog is distracted, then sneaks out to take apart his truck. That night, Kelly keeps guard over the house. The next day, Jake fills her pockets with all of her belongings that she can carry. At breakfast she is nervous and throws up her food; Otto thinks she might be pregnant and offers to get her something the next time he goes into town. When he goes to the bathroom, Jake takes off, getting into the other truck that isn't sabotaged and driving away. Otto tries to chase after her, and in the frenzy Jake accidentally runs over Kelly and kills her. Afraid Otto will come after her, Jake hides out at a hotel, looking for a job. She drives further and accidentally hits a kangaroo, then gets out to kill it. A truck passes by her parked truck and takes off the mirror.

In England, Jake gave Lloyd some water and told him someone's been killing her sheep. She offered to take him into town, bringing Dog along with her. The truck got stuck in the mud, so they went back to the house. Lloyd showered off and Jake was nervous about having him in the house. They ate together. Jake asked him about where he was from. Jake realized she took the knives upstairs the night before and lied about not having any.

### Analysis

At this point, all of Jake's encounters with Lloyd have been marked by a sense of ominousness. The reader may be unclear on whether or not to trust Lloyd, since Jake herself did not seem entirely certain. On the surface, Lloyd seemed to be presenting a



friendly, affable front, but some of Jake's decisions--such as hiding the knives, questioning him about his background, and keeping Dog with her at all times--suggested that she was wary of having him in her home. This ties into the theme of uncertainty, which runs throughout the entire novel.

Jake's tendency to see danger even where it may not exist begins to make more sense as more and more of her past is revealed. Otto has been hinted at up until this point in the novel, but makes his first appearance in this section, in which he seems to be trapping Jake on his farm--locking her in her room, using his dog to keep watch over her, and forbidding her from going into town. Jake has to resort to extreme measures in order to escape him, and is certain that he will follow after her. Understanding these details helps to clarify why Jake spends so much time looking over her shoulder.

An important symbol first referenced in this section is that of cigarettes. One of the first things that Jake does after she escapes Otto is to purchase a pack of cigarettes and smoke them one after one. Later, the reader will learn that Otto forbade Jake from smoking cigarettes, which have made them become a symbol of freedom for Jake. The ability to purchase and smoke them helps her believe that she has actually escaped Otto since he no longer has the power over her life to prevent her from doing so.

The motif of animals continues in this section, with Jake accidentally killing two creatures: backing up over Otto's guard dog Kelly, and hitting a kangaroo with her car. In both instances, Jake regrets it. Although Kelly has proven to be an antagonistic force against Jake, helping Otto to keep her a captive in his house, Jake still wishes it hadn't happened; Kelly was only a dog, after all. She feels so bad about hitting the kangaroo that she stops her car in the middle of the interstate to go mercy kill it. Both instances connect Jake's relationship with animals with a sense of guilt, of harming something that is defenseless and doesn't deserve its fate.

## Discussion Question 1

Why didn't Don help with the sheep in the mud, just watched and let Jake and the stranger take care of it?

## Discussion Question 2

Why was Jake so wary about having Lloyd in her house? What has been shown of her relationships with men so far that may have caused this?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Jake escape from Otto? Does this provide a new insight into the chapters before that have referenced her running away from him?

## Vocabulary

curdle, disintegrated, roustabout, facility, fleece, delusion, wages, intact, sod, payroll, marina, sternum, wail, jabbed, mew, squelching, puncture, lurch, huffing, spewing, paddock, carcasses, veranda, loo, stall, hull, flits, capable, itinerary



## Section Four: Chapters 12-14

### Summary

In Australia, Jake rides her bike as far and as fast as she can before passing out from the heat. She wakes up with Otto standing over her. Back at the house, she sees that he has destroyed it. Otto tries to have sex with her but she refuses him. Otto locks her in her room. Otto takes her to the shed and makes her watch him kill one of the sheep. Jake begs him not to, and he forces her to do it as well, but loses his enjoyment once Jake does it. Kelly gnaws at the bodies and Otto and Jake have sex. The next morning Jake swallows some of his ear drops to make herself throw up. She asks to see the doctor but Otto goes into town on his own to get her some medicine. Jake looks through his things and finds the belongings of his ex-wife, including pictures, a shoe, bracelets, a driver's license, and earrings. Jake looks under the sink and finds a knife and some money, which she hides again when Otto returns home.

In England, Lloyd told Jake that she'd been screaming in her sleep. Jake saw foxes on her land but couldn't bring herself to kill them, not believing that they were actually the ones to kill her sheep. She found Don and asked for his help in towing out her car. Don noticed Lloyd was still around. He offered to help Jake cut down a tree that fell on her land, but she refused. Jake got her chainsaw ready. Lloyd offered to help but she made him go back to the house. When she returned, she saw he cleaned up. Jake felt like someone was watching them. Someone tried to come in the door. They opened it to find Samson, Don's son, who accused Jake of having an affair with his dad and seemed confused about him still living there. He tried to come inside and Lloyd hit him in the nose, shoving him out. He left. Jake and Lloyd went to the pub. Jake thought the townsfolk didn't like her, but Lloyd told her that they were curious--they'd been asking about her. Jake still didn't believe it was foxes that have been killing her sheep. She and Lloyd got drunk and tried to drive home. Jake saw an animal in the headlights and swerved to miss it, crashing the car.

In Australia, Owen makes Jake watch his soap opera with him. Jake sneaks outside to smoke. She sees Kelly under the house, chewing a woman's shoe. Otto teaches Jake how to drive but gets angry when she tries to sweet talk him, telling her not to talk like a slut. Jake wants to learn more about driving but Otto shuts her down. In town, Jake runs into her old friend Karen, who has gotten married. Otto doesn't like it and locks her in her room that night. He goes into town the next day but doesn't take her with him. When he comes back, he locks up the car and locks her in her room again, leaving Kelly at the door to keep watch.

### Analysis

Jake's bike symbolizes hope and freedom in her life with Otto. Jake is isolated out on Otto's farm, unable to go into town unless he takes her or see other people unless he



allows it. She originally gets the bike as part of her job to check on the sheep around the property, which is the only time Otto lets her out on her own. At the beginning of the section, Jake tries to use the bike to escape, but ends up falling off and passing out from the heat. Otto then destroys the bike as a way to punish her. Without the bike, she has no freedom to move around without him, and is meant to lose the hope of ever escaping from him.

Another important symbol introduced in this section is the box of Carole's things. Jake snoops through Otto's belongings and finds some important things belonging to Carole, some of which might ostensibly be left behind by a person--such as a photograph, some earrings, etc.--and some of which seem to indicate something more ominous, such as her driver's license. In addition, Jake finds one of Carole's shoes in the box, whose partner she recognizes from under the house, where Kelly has been gnawing away at it. This on its own may not seem too menacing, but combined with another chapter in which Jake notices Kelly gnawing on the body of a sheep that Otto has killed, may suggest that Carole was murdered.

This continuing theme of uncertainty appears not only with Carole--who may or may not have simply left on her own, or who may have been killed by her husband to keep her from leaving--but also with the creature that Jake believes she sees at the end of the section. It is dark outside, Jake is drunk and tired, and Lloyd is asleep and can't confirm whether or not the creature was actually there. Because of this, it remains unclear whether Jake saw something, just as it is unclear if Carole was actually murdered, or if all of these things are delusions caused by paranoia.

There are also two instances when "suspects" presented themselves as potentially having killed her sheep. The first was when Jake saw foxes on her land, which various people--including Don--suggested as the probable culprits. Despite this, Jake believed them to be innocent and refrained from killing them. Later, she was visited by Don's son, Samson, who insulted her and made vague threats before attempting to come into her home. Again, Jake let him leave without pursuing him and didn't seem to believe he was the one to hurt her sheep. Though Jake seemed to be wary of many people--men in particular--and automatically assumed their guilt, she seemed to have a soft spot for animals and young people, again foreshadowing a sense of guilt toward both that would be revealed as her past continued to unravel.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Otto make Jake watch him kill the sheep? Why does he lose his enjoyment once she kills the sheep too?

## Discussion Question 2

What does it suggest about Jake that she refused help from Don with the fallen tree? And again from Lloyd when he came with her to help do the same?



## Discussion Question 3

What makes Otto change his mind about letting Jake go into town with him?

## Vocabulary

mirage, waterhole, sulking, bleat, hoisting, animated, spewing, permed, extravagantly, accounted, skittish, vixen, starlings, bogged, gouged, scruff, flung, ambiance, spittle, obstacle, transaction, jolt, slopes, heaving, stocking, larder



## Section Five: Chapters 15-17

### Summary

In England, Jake thought about the animal she saw on the road. Lloyd attempted to train Dog despite Jake's warnings, and Dog eventually snapped at Lloyd. Jake rewarded him with a treat. Jake trained Lloyd to help her guide the sheep. Jake walked the property with some fox bait and ran into Marcie, a girl she recognized from the shop in town. Marcie also knew Samson from school. She berated Jake for laying the fox bait and, when asked, claimed not to know anything about Jake's murdered sheep. Jake told her about the creature she saw in the woods and Marcie said Samson had seen something similar.

In Australia, Otto takes Jake to the homestead for the first time and introduces her to Kelly. He shows her to her room and tells her he always wanted a daughter. Jake is uncertain what her relationship with him will be. Otto tells her there's a spare truck he's fixing up that will belong to her. They have sex and Otto notices her scars for the first time. Jake says they came from a previous customer. She realizes Otto doesn't have a phone. Otto takes her to the store and she kisses him for being so kind to her, but he berates her, reminding her she's his "niece." He gives her some driving lessons. Otto asks Jake not to smoke because Kelly doesn't like it; it reminds her of his ex-wife. Jake goes to take care of the sheep and when she returns, Otto has gone through her things and found her cigarettes. He makes her get rid of them. Otto teaches Jake how to shear a sheep. Jake asks him about Carole, but Otto avoids the question.

In England, Jake went to visit Don and told him Samson had come to the house the night before. Don told her about his dead wife. Don admitted he wouldn't have had a child if he'd known his wife would die; he didn't know what to do with his son. Margaret knew how to handle Samson's moods but Don was at a loss with what to do with him. Don found Samson trying to burn the house down once. He believed it was because the house was haunted by her ghost and Samson wanted to get rid of the memories. Jake thought Samson came over to find Don; Don thought he was probably off his medication.

### Analysis

Jake's first impressions of Otto and Kelly are wildly different than what they are gradually revealed to be. Jake pities both for being old and seeming helpless, particularly Otto, whom she believes to be a nice old man who's just lonely. Eventually, both prove themselves to not only be quite capable of taking care of themselves, but of being quite dangerous. This further elucidates why Jake is so wary of the men she meets in the present, even those--like Lloyd and Don--who seem to be friendly and to genuinely want to help her. Jake's aloofness may have seemed paranoid before, but in this light it begins to become much more justified.



Jake quickly learns with Otto that she will have to maintain a careful balancing act with Otto to keep him happy. Otto, himself, seems uncertain of the relationship he has with Jake, referring to her sometimes as a daughter figure, making her call herself his niece in public, but also having sex with her and hoping that she'll become pregnant with his child. Otto begins his relationship with Jake by being kind to her--nurturing her, grieving over her scars, promising her a truck and other nice things--but also turns on her at the drop of a hat--snapping at her, snooping through her things, locking her in her room, etc. This may have paved the way for much of the uncertainty which plagues Jake throughout the rest of the novel, in which she is never certain if she is safe or not and sees danger lurking around every corner.

This uncertainty continues as Jake learned that Samson had also seen some kind of creature in the woods, although he may or may not have been stoned at the time. In her discussion with Don, she also learned that Samson believed his mother was haunting the old house and attempted to burn it as a result. Samson might have seen the same things as Jake, or he might have been inebriated; even if he did see something, he also has a history of seeing things that may or may not be there. All of this adds to the dramatic tension of the novel, suggesting that something ominous is building, even if it is only in Jake's mind.

## Discussion Question 1

What did Marcie say Samson saw in the woods? Does this mean that Jake was right about what she believed she's been seeing?

## Discussion Question 2

How is Otto different in this section than he's been presented in other sections? How is Jake also different?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Otto want to pretend Jake is his niece? Why does he sometimes treat her like a daughter, sometimes a lover?

## Vocabulary

lapped, hackles, imperative, wheezed, sundial, sloe, interfere, bustling, invigorating, pranced, rubbish, intrigue, vendetta, lot, muzzle, self-sufficient, slaughter, drought, liable, puny, resigned, sway, trim, trough, lobs, snarling, bin, bulges, brutalized, loopy





## Section Six: Chapters 18-21

### Summary

In Australia, Jake learns from her friend Karen that an Aboriginal prostitute has been killed. Karen is stressed out and insists that they have other options and will be able to escape from this life. Jake has a customer, Otto, who is much nicer than the other men who pay to have sex with her. Otto tells her about his sheep station and Jake thinks it sounds nice. Otto invites her to come along and Jake leaves some money and a note behind for Karen. She knows she'll understand--they're both just looking for a way out.

In England, Jake realized she was missing another sheep. One of the sheep got caught in the fence so she cut it free. She noticed Lloyd digging and found him burying apple seeds. He confided that he had gone from place to place, burying the ashes of his dead lover, a man. Jake realized she felt safer in the house with him.

In Australia, Jake arrives in Hedland and hears that prostitution customers will be much tamer, though she doesn't find this to be true. She shares an apartment with a girl named Karen, who also works as a prostitute. Karen teaches her the ropes. Jake meets Otto and thinks he's a nice old man. Karen confides that she thinks their kind isn't meant to be in Australia--they should return to England, where their ancestors are from. They work out a system for using their room with their customers. Jake is with one customer who hits the headboard and lets out a bunch of spiders. He refuses to pay her. Jake has nightmares about home and Karen tries to help her work through them.

In England, Jake and Lloyd ate dinner together. Lloyd tried to persuade her to get a haircut. Jake went into the sheep shed and found a hoof from a sheep that's been eaten. She decided to sleep in the shed that night.

### Analysis

Most of the novel to this point has indicated that what Jake has mainly been running from is Otto. However, even now that Jake's timeline has moved to before she was trapped at Otto's place, it is clear that she is still on the run from something. Some old questions remain to be answered (such as where her scars came from and why she is estranged from her family) and some new questions have come up (such as why she is working as a prostitute and moving from city to city). Though it originally seemed as though Otto was the main antagonist she was escaping from, this section introduces the idea that Jake may be attempting to escape from herself more than any one particular person.

Jake has had a difficult time trusting anyone she encounters, including Lloyd, whom she originally found sleeping in her shed and whom she initially seemed to believe may have been sent by someone in Australia to come after her. Lloyd's friendliness and kindness didn't seem to do much to assuage this; however, upon learning that Lloyd



was gay, Jake finally admitted to herself that she felt safer having him around--that she, in essence, trusted him. Paired with the revelation that Jake worked as a prostitution in the past--and was badly treated by many of her customers--along with her history with Otto, this begins to make much more sense. Otto at first seems to be a kinder alternative to many of Jake's previous customers, yet he eventually turns on Jake and becomes possessive and controlling during the course of their sexual relationship. Jake may have feared that the same would happen with Lloyd, but because he had no sexual inclinations toward her, she no longer feared that their relationship would take such a dramatic turn. This allowed her to feel safe with him when she could not with so many others.

Many of Jake's habits now become clearer that her past with Karen has been explained. Karen is the one to idealize England to Jake, talking about eating scones and drinking Devon tea, which is why Jake insists on going to the teahouse and having the same. Karen also introduces the brand of cigarettes to Jake that she prefers from thereon out: Holiday cigarettes. These cigarettes come to symbolize a sense of freedom to Jake. When she is still with Karen, she is desperate to get out of her life as a prostitute; later, after being trapped by Otto, she recalls those times with Karen fondly, and smokes as a way to remember a time when she got to make her own decisions and had a true friend.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Karen claim that she and Jake have a choice in being prostitutes? Do they really?

## Discussion Question 2

When Jake first meets Otto, she believes he's one of the most decent of her customers. How does this change over time? What is the effect of reading this section from the past, already knowing what will happen between them in the future?

## Discussion Question 3

Why did Jake begin to trust Lloyd? How was he different from the other men she's encountered?

## Vocabulary

aboriginal, sloppy, sprouting, proposition, bustling, unearthed, wobbled, reincarnation, after-life, shoal, bloke, slunk, grimaces, alight, rile, muddle, commotion, jangles, dainty, pelting, puffy, visualize, eases, corridor, pulsates



## Section Seven: Chapters 22-25

### Summary

In Australia, Jake services a man who is her first "lie-down" customer. They drive out in his truck and have sex. The man notices scars on Jake's back and originally believes them to be a sign of AIDS, though Jake assures him they're not. The man refuses to pay her because she's damaged goods.

In England, Jake remembered her family. She called home to have one of her younger brothers answer the phone. She didn't say anything, and he seemed to assume she was some kind of loan shark and promised to repay the money owed. He hung up the phone when his other sister approached, and the sister traced the number back and called, though Jake didn't answer. Lloyd informed her that one of her sheep was going into labor. They deliver the lambs. One of them died. Jake went to take a bath. Inside, she heard something in the house. She called out to Lloyd but he didn't answer. Jake passed out and woke up several hours later when Lloyd burst into the room.

In Australia, Jake works odd jobs to live. She sleeps in the YHA but is afraid when she notices other people in the room watching her in her sleep. She buys a sleeping bag and sleeps outside, bathing in the sea. She gets offered money to give someone a blow job and realizes she can make better money that way.

In England, Jake learned she got a concussion. Lloyd asked her what happened. She confided that something was in the house--something she believes wasn't human. They went home and cared for the baby lambs. Don came over and brought Marcie and Samson, who he found trespassing on Jake's land. Marcie said they were just there to look at the lambs and didn't hurt anything. Samson had firefighters, but Jake decided to let them go. She didn't believe it was them, or foxes--there was something else out there.

### Analysis

Jake's scars have played an important role throughout the novel, representing her guilt for some past indiscretion that has yet to be named. For Greg and Otto, these scars seem to inspire a sense of protectiveness; both men seem to believe some man did something to harm Jake--Otto believing that they were caused by one of Jake's old customers, Greg believing that they were given to her by one of her old lovers. Jake doesn't directly lie to either of them, but allows them to believe what they wish. In the case of the customer who finds Jake's scars, she does lie, claiming it was an accident at sea. This indicates that whatever the truth behind Jake's scars actually are, they've come from something worse than anything she or anyone else has claimed them to be.

In present day, Jake seems determined to find the bad in most people that she encounters, her life experience having taught her that people cannot be trusted. As her



previous timeline continues to move backward, Jake is far more innocent, instead seeking to find the good in the men who are her customers, even those who are cruel to her. For instance, with her first lie-down customer, Jake imagines that even though he's short-tempered and rude to her, deep down he's a nice man. This mirrors the way she initially views Otto, despite the red flags she sees that indicate he might have a violent past. These experiences help to form the person Jake has become and explain her wariness in opening up to anyone.

The theme of burning is hinted at in this section when Samson was caught with firelighters on Jake's property. With his past history of attempting to burn down the house, Don seemed to believe that he meant to burn down Jake's house, potentially with her inside, though Jake let him go. Despite the fact that Samson had proven himself to be aggressive on multiple occasions, Jake seemed to have a soft spot for him--or rather, for what he reminded her of. Jake's own history (which will soon be revealed) as a cocky teenager who let something get out of her control without fully understanding the consequences made her more sympathetic toward Samson than she might have been otherwise.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jake stop going to the fish stand when the owner stops giving her chips?  
How is this an embarrassment to her?

## Discussion Question 2

What did Jake now believe was killing her sheep? What clues led her to think this?

## Discussion Question 3

For most of the book, Jake has been threatening teenagers from staying off her land. Why did Jake take pity on Samson and Marcie when Don found them on her place?

## Vocabulary

pockmarks, infused, pickling, indulgent, ultimately, midriff, haunches, tethered, stale, cartridges, recoil, derelicts, withhold, disbelief, iodine, umbilical, wriggled, muffled, hunkered, submerged, assess, luminous, pelting



## Section Eight: Chapters 26-32

### Summary

In Australia, Jake attends a memorial service for a girl named Flora Carter in her hometown. At home, her father talks about the half-Aboriginal boy, Denver, who is thought to be responsible; he's in a coma, but it might be better for him never to wake up. Jake insists it wasn't him. Jake goes back to the scene of the fire and goes swimming afterward. Jake goes to visit Denver in the hospital. She tells him she's sorry and that it's all her fault; a policeman overhears her and tries to stop her, but she escapes. Jake walks through town and believes people are staring at her. A man named Andy Carter holds her down and whips her.

In England, Jake woke up to Dog barking. She ran out in the dark and thought she saw something in the dark. She shot it. Lloyd came out to see what was going on. They realized Jake accidentally shot a sheep and Lloyd finished it off for her.

In Australia, Jake returns to her house after a fire and scatters ice and water as best she can, though everything around her is burned. She stuffs towels and sheets in the doors and windows to try to keep smoke and hot air from coming in. She goes upstairs and gets in the bathtub.

In England, Lloyd took Jake back to the house and told her he'd take care of the dead sheep. Jake wanted to bring her sheep into the house to protect them, but Lloyd told her not to. Jake asked Lloyd if he thought she was crazy. They realized the baby lamb they brought inside to nurse was missing.

In Australia, Jake has a crush on a boy named Denver and is bullied at school by some girls. Another girl named Flora Carter sticks up for her, and Denver notices. He begins to walk Jake home from school to get the bullies to leave her alone. Jake believes this means he has feelings for her. Denver confides to her that he's been secretly seeing Flo and they're going to run away together. He asks Jake to stash some stuff for them. She gets angry and lights a joint, threatening to tell about him and Flora. Denver shoves her. Jake puts out her joint on a leaf and watches it burn, then pulls out her lighter and suddenly everything is up in flames. Denver runs toward Flora's house to try to save her.

In England, Jake asked Lloyd to cut her hair. He did a bad job and told her to go to a hairdresser to fix it, but she didn't want to. They drove into town to do some shopping but Jake saw something and told him to stop the truck. They get out and Lloyd saw something, too. They held hands as it moved deeper into the woods.

In Australia, Jake watches sharks wash up onto the shore and thinks about going home to be with her family.



## Analysis

The motif of animals continues in this section at various points. After the fire, Jake notices a dead wombat, which may be the beginning of her sense of guilt toward animals, as she knows the wombat would not have died if not for her actions. To cleanse herself from this, Jake goes to swim in the ocean, dropping to the bottom and swimming up amongst the sharks. Sharks are a source of fright for most people, since they are known for attacking and sometimes killing people, but Jake remains completely unafraid of them, drifting up through them and trusting that they will not harm her. Jake even attempts to reach out to touch them, but they are the ones to turn and swim away, which continues to play into the sense of guilt that connects Jake to animals. It's almost as though the sharks know what she has done and don't want to be near her anymore.

This sense of guilt toward animals can further be found when Jake attempted to shoot the creature on her land and instead killed one of her sheep, one of the animals she was trying her hardest to protect. Jake contemplated bringing the sheep into the house to keep the creature from harming them any further, but realized the baby lamb she brought inside had gone missing, most likely taken by the creature while she was distracted outside; there was no place that was safe.

Another important encounter with animals that ties to the title of the novel is the birds that Jake notices singing just before she initially sets the fire in her hometown. Jake continues to hear the sound of the birds as she returns to her house to escape the fire, and later on in her life whenever there are moments of particular stress, danger, or guilt. For instance, the novel begins with Jake hearing birds sing as she examines the dead carcass of one of her sheep.

Fire is another motif that occurs often throughout the novel, and usually in conjunction with some kind of submersion into water afterward. For instance, after she sets the fire and returns to her home, Jake gets into the bathtub to escape the heat. Later, when she sees the dead wombat on the side of the road, killed by the fire she started, she goes swimming. At other points in her life when she feels distressed, she runs a bath as a way to cope. Tying back to the first incidence when Jake gets into the bath after setting the fire, this bathing ritual in times of stress can be viewed as a sort of symbolic baptism. Jake has done something terrible and so gets into the water to save herself from what she's done. This does not always prove to be successful--such as when she swims with the sharks and they turn away from her, or when she takes a bath and the creature gets into her home, menacing her to the point of blacking out--but it is a ritual which seems to bring Jake some measure of comfort in situations that otherwise seem out of her control.

The source of Jake's scars are finally revealed: she received them by a whipping that someone gave her after discovering she had actually been the one to set the fire. The man who does the whipping is never referenced before or again, and seems to primarily signify how everyone in town feels about Jake after what she is done, which is why she leaves home and never returns. This eventually leads her down the path that results in



the Jake introduced at the beginning of the novel: tough, jaded, and in essence as emotionally scarred as she is physically scarred. As Jake's timeline continues to before the whipping, she becomes progressively more innocent, so that she ends the novel the complete opposite of how she is introduced at the beginning of the novel: young, hopeful, and innocent.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Jake visit Denver in the hospital?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Jake start the fire? Was it an accident or not?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What did Lloyd and Jake see in the woods? The author never states what it is explicitly, but what can be guessed based on the clues in the text?

## **Vocabulary**

wombat, swollen, charcoal, headway, motes, swell, urgency, grazes, alien, moist, inhalation, appropriate, sympathetic, scalding, squalling, guttural, mucus, whinnying, eucalyptus, doused, embers, fossil, triumphant, calves, disintegrated, dunes, carrion, canopy



# Characters

## Jake

Jake Whyte is a woman on the run from her past. She begins the novel as a young girl who has a crush on her schoolmate, Denver, and tries to impress him by being cool and detached; when she learns that he likes somebody else, she gets stoned and accidentally sets her town on fire. The fire is blamed on Denver, but Jake eventually admits the truth and is run out of town.

Jake tries working random jobs--such as picking fruit and cleaning toilets--but eventually becomes a prostitute to make ends meet. In the process, she meets another prostitute named Karen who becomes her closest friend. She and Karen both seek to find ways to escape their lifestyle, and Jake eventually finds this in a man named Otto, who seems nicer than her other customers, and wants to take care of her.

Jake goes with Otto to his homestead, where she pretends to be his niece and learns how to tend sheep. Though Otto seems kind at first, he begins to grow possessive, locking her in her room, running over her bike so she can't escape, and forcing her to watch him kill sheep. Jake also begins to suspect he may have killed his ex-wife. She schemes for ways to escape and eventually manages to make it out, killing his dog in the process, which she regrets.

Jake joins up with a sheep shearing crew and initially gets on well with the others, especially a man named Greg who becomes her lover and is kind to her. Jake genuinely likes Greg but doesn't tell him the truth about her past or her scars. However, a man named Clare becomes jealous of her and discovers what she did to Otto and that she used to be a prostitute. Afraid of becoming exposed, Jake takes some money left to her by her dead father and starts a new life in England on a quiet, secluded sheep farm.

Jaded and deeply suspicious now, Jake is content to live a solitary life, keeping people at an arm's length and refusing to get to know the people in town. When she begins to find her sheep dead and to hear noises in her house, Jake at first suspects the local teenagers, but then begins to fear something from her past has caught up to her. She begrudgingly befriends a man who sleeps in her shed, but keeps him at a distance as well, until she learns he's gay and therefore poses no sexual threat. Jake begins to believe it is an unspecified creature that is killing off her sheep, though because of her paranoia, she (and the reader) remain unclear for most of the novel if she's actually seeing/hearing things or not.

## Lloyd

Lloyd is a vagabond who is traveling from place to place, spreading the ashes of his dead lover. He gets drunk one night and passes out in Jake's shed. She begrudgingly allows him to stay and keeps telling him he'll have to leave, though gradually Lloyd





manages to instill himself as a part of Jake's life, to the point where she doesn't want to live in the house without him.

Jake is initially suspicious of Lloyd, believing he may have been sent from someone in her past, or that--like other men in her past--he may eventually turn on her, but this suspicion is eventually allayed once she learns he's homosexual.

Lloyd is friendly and affable and quickly makes himself at home with Jake. He cleans up the house, cuts Jake's hair, and attempts to train her dog. He also manages to befriend some of the locals, making up for Jake's surliness. He begins by being afraid of the sheep, though he warms to them as he helps Jake deliver some lambs and helps to care for them.

## Don

Don used to own the farm which Jake buys in England, though he leaves after his wife dies and he believes the place to be haunted by her memories. Don has one son, Samson, whom he doesn't know how to raise without his wife to help him. He is a friendly man and gives Jake a hard time for being so anti-social, encouraging her to spend more time at the local pub and make more friends. Don agrees that the death of Jake's sheep is somewhat suspicious, but believes it is most likely foxes or teenagers.

## Samson

Samson is Don's son and a troubled youth. He was very close to his mother, who was the only one who could really handle his tempers and believed he was capable of great things. After her death, Samson goes on and off his medications and mostly lives out in the woods. He also attempts to burn down the house, as it is haunted by his mother's memories. After his father sells the house, Samson continues to return there, getting confused sometimes that his father still lives there and accusing Jake of having an affair with him. Don discovers him on the land with firefighters, but Jake lets him go, not believing that he is responsible for what's been happening with her sheep. Though Samson is clearly troubled, he also possesses a vulnerability that causes Jake to relate to him.

## Otto

Otto is one of Jake's customers who takes her home to live with him on his homestead. Jake initially believes him to be kind and lonely. At first, Otto treats her as a mixture of a daughterly figure and a lover, having sex with her but also giving her teddy bears and asking her to call herself his niece in public.

Things begin to change when Otto instructs Jake to stop smoking, then goes through her things to find her additional cigarettes. He begins to keep a close watch on her. In town, when he spots Jake talking to her old friend Karen, Otto questions her about her.



Later that night, he begins to lock her in her room. After Jake tries to ride off on her bike, Otto destroys it, then forces Jake to watch him kill one of the sheep. Jake begins to grow suspicious of what happened to his ex-wife; Otto claims she left, but some of her important belongings remain at the house, and Jake eventually believes he may have murdered her.

Otto keeps a close watch on Jake, leaving his watchdog Kelly to look after her when he isn't around and no longer allowing her to go into town. He chases Jake down when she tries to escape him, and she believes he would murder her if he caught her. Afterward, Otto meets up with one of Jake's new co-workers, Clare, and tells him that Jake robbed him and killed his dog, painting himself as the victim in the situation. Though Jake fears he will come after her, there is no indication that Otto ever actually makes any attempt to do so.

## Kelly

Kelly is Otto's pet dog who he refers to as being like a "sister" to him. She is old and Jake initially pities her, though she soon proves to be quite fiercely protective of Otto. She is also suspicious of Jake, and watches her around the house, growling when she seems to be doing something out of line. At night, she guards the house and eventually begins to guard Jake's room to make sure she doesn't escape. When Jake does leave, Kelly tries to follow her and gets run over in the process.

## Greg

Greg is briefly Jake's lover as she works as a roustabout as part of a sheep shearing crew. He is big and amicable and observational. Other men, like Clare, sometimes try to goad him to confrontations, but he always refuses to engage. Jake notices him for a while before he becomes her lover; afterward, he is kind to her and they seem to be building a future together, though Jake can still not trust him enough to tell him the truth about her past.

## Clare

Clare is another man on the sheep shearing crew and is said to be Greg's best friend, though they have very different temperaments. Clare is spiteful and likes to lord his power over those "below" him, such as Jake and another roustabout named Bean. After Clare forces Bean to sharpen his kit for him--which results in Bean losing his hand--Clare loses status in the sheep shearing crew and retaliates by turning on Jake. He seeks out Otto to learn the truth about her past and attempts to blackmail her into giving him sexual favors, though Jake refuses and knocks him out instead.



## Karen

Karen is Jake's best friend when she moves to Hedland and also works as a prostitute with her, showing Jake the ropes. They share a small apartment and take turns bringing their customers there. Karen introduces Jake to a the brand of cigarettes--Holiday--she continues to smoke afterward; she also dreams about moving to England and having a more refined life, which Jake eventually emulates for herself. Karen and Jake both scheme for ways to escape their lifestyle. After Jake moves in with Otto, she runs into Karen at a store and learns she has married one of her customers. Though they never meet again, Karen's influence on Jake remains; their time together remains one of Jake's fondest and safest memories.

## Denver

Denver is a half-Aboriginal boy who goes to school with Jake. Many of the girls have crushes on him, including Jake. One day he sees her being bullied by two other girls and offers to walk her home. Afterward, they make a habit of it, and Jake believes he may have feelings for her, too. Eventually she learns that Denver has secretly been seeing another girl at school and asks for Jake's help so they can run away together. Upset with him, Jake accidentally sets the town on fire. Denver attempts to save his girlfriend, though she dies and he ends up badly burned and in a coma. In addition, he is blamed for the fire before Jake finally comes clean.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Cottage

Jake chooses the cottage in England because it represents safety to her. She remembers seeing it tucked into the hills with no one else around it for miles. To others, this might seem like a lonely, solitary existence, but Jake likes the idea of having nobody nearby to "peer" in on her. Having had to learn to be afraid and suspicious of so many people around her, Jake believes she can only truly be safe by keeping other people at a distance, which the secluded cottage can help her accomplish.

## Dog

Instead of giving her pet a name, Jake calls him simply "Dog." This symbolizes Jake's desire to keep others at a distance. Jake may fear that giving the dog a real name would make her become more attached to it; though the dog is her only true companion, Jake holds it at arm's length, just as much as she does with everyone else. Owning the dog suggests she still desires some kind of companionship, but fears becoming too emotionally connected.

## The Teahouse

Jake regularly visits a local teahouse, which is dressed with an elaborate display of silverware, napkins, etc. This might seem like a strange decision for someone who seems so jaded and tough, but to Jake, the teahouse holds sentimental value. One of her only true friends, Karen, describes her ideal of going to England and drinking a particular type of tea. Going to this teahouse makes Jake feel connected to Karen.

## Scars

Jake's scars pop up various times throughout the narrative, and she often lies about where she got them from. Many men that she encounters--including Otto and Greg--seem to see them as a sign of vulnerability. To Jake, however, they serve as a constant reminder of her guilty past which she is trying to escape, in which she accidentally burned down her town and was whipped as a result.

## Cigarettes

Cigarettes represent a sense of freedom to Jake. They remind her of when she lived with her friend Karen, which she looks back on as one of the happiest times of her life. Otto snoops through her things and destroys all of her cigarettes. As soon as she



escapes from Otto's place, the first thing she does is to buy some more and smoke them whenever she likes, showing that she is truly free from him.

## Freddie the Frog

After escaping from Otto, Jake visits a shop and buys some food. The woman who runs the shop teases her about taking so long to pick out her food and adds a Freddie the Frog candy to her children's meal. Freddie the Frog is a character from a line of children's books, and represents childhood and innocence. Because of everything that Jake has been through, she refrains from eating the candy, which she feels "represents something I'm not sure I understand" (81). Jake's childhood was snatched away from her early and she no longer feels a connection to the innocence and hopefulness it represents.

## The Bike

Jake is essentially being kept as a prisoner on Otto's homestead, but her bike allows her to travel around the property and have a few moments to herself outside of his watchful gaze. For that reason, the bike symbolizes freedom. The bike also offers Jake a hope for escape, even as meager as it might be; though she rides the bike as long and as far as she can, she still can't manage to make it off the property. When Otto discovers what she has tried, he runs over the bike to destroy her freedom and any hope she might have for escaping.

## Carole's Belongings

One day while Otto has gone into town and left Jake behind, she snoops through his things and finds a box of items that used to belong to his ex-wife Carole, who is supposed to have left him a year before. However, some of the items she's left behind--including her driver's license--suggest that she might not have left of her own free will, or even left at all. Carole also left a pink heel behind in the box, the matching pair which Jake has seen underneath the house, where Kelly was chewing on it, near where she takes dead sheep bones and hooves to chew on. These items combined together suggest that Carole may have been murdered, which further suggests to Jake that Otto intends to do the same to her.

## Movement

When Jake was young, her dad taught her how to shoot and instructed her that "the human eye senses movement before all else" (182). This mantra continues to ring through Jake's mind throughout the rest of the novel at various points, but usually when she feels a sense of danger, as though something or someone is watching her. At many points in the novel, Jake remains uncertain on whether or not she is actually seeing anything, or whether she is merely imagining things; yet because she has been taught



to trust this sensing of movement, she holds onto a tentative belief that she hasn't entirely lost her mind. Thus, this belief in sensing movement comes to represent a tie to Jake's sanity.

## **Jake's Haircut**

When Jake moves to England and buys the sheep farm, she gives herself a haircut, which is a source of contention between her and Lloyd, who thinks it is hideous. Jake's terrible haircut most likely stemmed from two reasons: she meant to give herself a bad haircut to keep people (and men specifically) from becoming too interested in her; and/or she gave herself a haircut to avoid having to go in town and interact with a hairstylist. Ultimately, the haircut symbolizes Jake's desire to keep people at a distance and to show that she doesn't need anybody.



# Settings

## The Farm

Jake lives on a small sheep farm in England, which she chooses because the sight of it, tucked away in the hills, makes her feel as though it will be safe. Jake purchased the farm from a man named Don, who lived there with his wife and son before his wife died. Both Don and Samson believe the place may be haunted by her memories, if not her actual presence, which is why Don sells it. Jake lives on the farm alone and draws quite a bit of attention to herself, because she is the only woman sheep farmer in the area, she lives on her own, and she keeps to herself. The local town is relatively small, though people still notice Jake and gossip about her. Many meet up at a local tavern to drink and talk about their farms; Don encourages Jake to do the same, though she prefers to be on her own. Jake hears noises in the house and finds many of her sheep beginning to go missing. Originally she suspects some of the local teenagers, but begins to believe there is some kind of unspecified, large creature living in the woods.

## Boodarie

Boodarie is the main location where Jake works as a roustabout and then a sheep shearer, though she travels in this position from place to place. In Boodarie, Jake has her own hut, as her supervisor is required to give Jake her own accommodations as a woman, which includes a cot and a rudimentary shower. Supplies for the workers are also stored in the hut, which means people sometimes walk in without knocking; in addition, there are holes in the walls, so people sometimes peer in on her (such as Clare). In addition to Jake's hut, there is a bunk house where the other men sleep, and a mess hall where the cooking and socializing takes place.

## Otto's Homestead

Otto's Homestead is located close to Marble Bar, several miles away from anything else. His house is built up on stilts so some animals dwell underneath; Kelly also drags things into the mud underneath to chew on, such as parts from dead sheep and Carole's old shoes. There is a separate shed where Otto does all the sheep shearing and slaughtering in one place, so they won't know which will happen to them; he believes this will have a calming effect. The property is fenced and has two trucks--one for Otto to use, and one that he starts out fixing up for Jake to use, though he never finishes it. Otto hides various things around the house, including Carole's belongings, money, and knives. Jake begins her stay there by having free reign of the house and the property, including a bike to ride out over the property, but ends up being locked in her room whenever she isn't with Otto. There is also a dunny, or outhouse, located outside.



## Karen's Apartment

Jake and Karen share a one-bedroom apartment in Hedland, located above a chicken rotisserie shop. The apartment is small and sparsely furnished, though Karen tries to spruce it up by looking up feng shui to arrange the furniture and hanging a wood shaving of a cattle ranch above the bed. Jake and Karen both work as prostitutes and take turns using the apartment; they hang a beaded necklace on the door to signify that they're inside with a customer. The apartment has a nest of spiders, which a customer of Jake's accidentally knocks loose during sex. Jake searches for ways to get out of the lifestyle she's living, but ultimately looks back on this place as where she remembers being happiest.

## Jake's Hometown

Jake lives in a house with her family. They live close to the beach; her father works at the marina, and many of the people in the town seem to make their living off fishing and the ocean. The town has a school, a hospital, a pub, a bakery, shops, and a postal office, though it is also close enough to the outback that various animals cross Jake's path in town, including wombats, wallabies, and various kinds of birds. The land is so dry that Jake nearly sets the entire town on fire when she sets a small patch aflame with her lighter. After the fire, many of the buildings --such as the bus depot--are no longer operational, as they have burned down.





# Themes and Motifs

## Animals

Jake encounters many animals throughout the novel. Some of these are friendly to her, some are neutral, but most seem to be wary if not outright antagonistic. In most instances, animals seem to represent a sense of guilt for Jake, who often ends up inadvertently hurting or even killing them. This is particularly grievous to her, since animals often are associated as innocent creatures that aren't responsible for what happens to them.

Some of these animals that Jake kills include Kelly, the guard dog that Otto uses to keep her trapped in his homestead. In Jake's haste to escape, she ends up accidentally backing up over Kelly and killing her. As she continues to drive away, she also hits a kangaroo while traveling down the highway, and has to stop to finish it off. When Jake sets the fire to her town, she sees several birds on fire, trying to fly away, and later spots a burned wombat on the side of the road which has been killed as a consequence of her actions.

To make reparations for this, she sometimes spares the lives of animals that other people might have killed, such as when she allows the foxes to roam on her land instead of shooting them and doesn't put out the fox bait that she has with her. Jake also shows a sense of trust toward animals that other people fear, like the sharks she swims with in the ocean. The sharks, which are known for being dangerous predators, actually swim away from Jake when she tries to reach out to them, adding to this sense of guilt; Jake is so dangerous to animals that even the most dangerous creatures don't want to be near her.

Jake originally believes her sheep are being killed off by the local teenagers or perhaps someone from her past, but soon begins to spot some unnamed large, wild creature on her land that she believes is killing them off one by one. In attempting to stop the creature outside her home, she shoots at it but ends up killing one of her own sheep instead. Jake may have taken over the sheep farm as a way to make atonement to the animals she's killed in the past; however, instead of keeping her sheep safe as she meant to do, she ends up accidentally harming them. Even when she brings one of the sheep inside of her home, the creature still manages to get to it. Nowhere is safe on her property, but furthermore, no animal seems to truly be safe with Jake, despite her best intentions.

## Haunted by the Past

As Jake's timelines alternate backward and forward, it readily becomes apparent that she is haunted by her past, which reveals itself in various forms. First and foremost, Jake has a tendency to see danger even where it may not exist. Once more of her past



is revealed, this begins to make more sense, since Jake has been battered, betrayed, and harmed in ways that most people never have to suffer. For example, her experiences with Otto--who she originally believes to be kind and lonely--make her wary of the men she encounters later, including those who seem outwardly friendly, such as Don and Lloyd.

When Jake first meets Lloyd, she seems to suspect him of having been sent after her from someone in her past. Lloyd is affable and tries to make himself useful around the farm, though this does little to relieve Jake's anxieties about him until she learns that he is gay. Jake's past experiences have shown that men she has encountered often begin acting kindly toward her, but become more and more aggressive once their sexual relationship progresses. Since Lloyd does not pose a sexual threat to her, Jake can overcome her past experiences with men and trust him in a way that she has not been able to trust anyone for a very long time.

Many of Jake's current-day habits can be traced back to her time when she lived with Karen, a fellow prostitute and one of her only true friends. When Jake wants to relax, she longs for a cold Coke, just like she used to drink with Karen; she continues to smoke Holiday cigarettes because that was the brand Karen introduced to her; she regularly goes to a teahouse to drink the tea that Karen used to daydream about having; and she even moved to England because Karen used to romanticize how wonderful it would be there. Because she felt safe and happy with Karen in the past, Jake continues to replicate some of these memories and experiences with her to feel safe and happy in the present.

Jake is not the only one haunted by the past. Other characters reveal to her ways that they continue to be shaped by their past. Don tells Jake that both he and Samson have a difficult time in the house because of memories of Margaret, Don's wife and Samson's mother. Don even believes that her ghost might continue to haunt the place, which is why he decided to leave. Lloyd reveals that the reason he's been traveling around, sleeping in peoples' sheds, is because his lover was killed and he wants to spread his ashes as a way to honor his memory. Even Otto is haunted by his memories of Carole, whom he may or may not have killed, and whom he continues to compare all women to, for better and for worse.

## Burning

One motif that occurs often throughout the novel is that of fire. As Jake's past slowly unwinds, it is finally revealed that the reason she left home was because she started a fire that killed some people and nearly destroyed her entire town. Jake was stoned at the time that she started the fire, and also reeling from the revelation that the boy she liked was in love with somebody else. Jake snuffs out her joint on a leaf which burns up, and which Denver smothers out before it can get out of control. Jake doesn't remember clearly how the big fire starts, but she is playing with her lighter and the area is very dry, and the next thing she knows everything is up in flames. Jake later recalls waiting out



the fire in her house, using sheets, towels, and bathwater to keep herself safe as the town burns down around her.

As Jake deals with the fire throughout a few chapters of the novel, she usually turns to water as a way to cope. Jake gets into the bathtub in her house while the fire rages around her. Later as she walks through town, she sees the devastation she has caused and jumps in the ocean. Fire can be said to represent a sense of guilt to Jake; submerging herself in water is a way to cleanse herself again, to "baptize" herself for her past misdeeds. Jake continues this process later on in life in times of high stress, running a bath as a way to feel safe and to give herself a sense of control as her world symbolically burns down around her.

At one point, Don catches Samson with firefighters on her property. Samson has a history of trying to burn down the house to erase the memories of his mother, so Don jumps to the conclusion that he meant to do the same again, this time with Jake inside. Despite the fact that Jake has previously believed teenagers are responsible for killing her sheep and harassing her in her house, she lets Samson go without any repercussions. This is in part because she now has seen a creature on her property that she believes to be responsible; but it may also be because Jake recognizes herself in Samson, and knows what it means to not fully understand the repercussions of the kind of destruction a fire can bring.

## Birds

Jake notices birds singing often throughout the novel; the importance of this recurring motif is referenced in the title of the novel itself. This often occurs when Jake experiences moments of high stress and danger. For example, the first incidence in the novel of Jake hearing birds singing occurs in the first chapter, when she finds her sheep murdered.

This ties back to the first chronological moment in Jake's life that she recalls hearing birds singing, when she sets her town on fire. She originally notices the birds as things begin to go up in flames and the birds try to fly away and escape, some catching on fire. Later as she tries to escape the fire in her house, she continues to hear the birds above all the other noises around her. In both instances, the situation has gone out of Jake's control, and she feels powerless to stop the events that are unfolding around her.

Another important moment occurs with Jake and birds when she finds a wounded pigeon on her property. Jake saves the bird from being killed by her dog and finds a phone number attached to it. She calls the number, but the owner shows very little concern for the bird and tells her to send it back once it's healed. The bird ultimately dies, and Jake releases its body into the ocean, showing more care for it than its owner did. As someone who is living on her own with no friends or family, Jake seems to feel a strong empathy toward a creature that ended up lost and broken on its own.



## Uncertainty

One of the main themes of the novel is that of uncertainty. Because of the way the novel unfolds, many things are kept hidden from the reader and are not fully explained until the end of the novel; in a few instances, some things are never fully explained and left to the reader to determine.

This uncertainty mainly centers around the creature that Jake may or may not see in the land around her home, which may or may not be haranguing her in her home and killing off her sheep. Part of this uncertainty stems from the fact that Jake seems to believe that people are after her for the majority of the novel, long before she spots the creature in the woods. For example, she seems convinced that Otto will follow her and try to take his revenge on her, even though when he learns from Clare that she's nearby, he makes no move to come after her or even call the police.

Furthermore, Jake seems convinced that Otto has killed his first wife, Carole, and will do the same to her. There is some evidence to suggest this may be the case, but nothing definitive, which means the reader can never be entirely certain whether it actually happened, or whether it is all part of Jake's paranoia.

In most of the instances where Jake believes she has spotted the creature, there is some hindrance that blocks her from definitively being able to determine what she has seen. For instance, it is sometimes dark, she is sometimes drunk, and the creature often moves too quickly for her to be able to put a name to it. Sometimes she'll be certain she heard something in her home, only to find it almost completely unchanged when she searches it. It isn't until Lloyd also sees the creature at the end of the novel that it is confirmed there is even a creature there, although the reader is still left without a concrete name or definition that would explain what the creature is, and must determine for him or herself what it might be.

# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is told from the third-person perspective, from Jake's point of view. The chapters alternate between Jake's current life in England and her past in Australia, with the chapters in England told in past-tense and the chapters in Australia written in present-tense. The third-person perspective is useful in the unusual structure of the novel, in which Jake's past is revealed backward, with the last events occurring first and the earliest events being written last. If the novel were told in first-person, it might be more difficult to hide some of the details that are slowly revealed through the backward progression of the text. This also creates a stronger sense of uncertainty in the creature that seems to be killing off Jake's sheep, since the reader can never be entirely certain that Jake is actually seeing and hearing what she thinks is happening.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is sparse but poetic, using a great deal of symbolism, imagery, and foreshadowing to build up the tone. The use of language is constructed in such a way that not all details are made clear, but are left intentionally vague, allowing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. For example, the creature that Jake spots in the woods is never concretely described, but detailed in non-specific terms that allow the reader to speculate on multiple options.

The author also uses a great deal of Australian/English slang--such as ute, loo, bin, etc.--which are not explained for non-Australian/English audiences but can generally be surmised by the context surrounding them. Some readers may benefit from looking up the terms in a dictionary or online in order to better understand their social and cultural context.

## Structure

The novel alternates chapter by chapter between past and present. All the present-day chapters take place in England, and are written in past-tense. The past chapters take place in Australia, and are written in present tense. In addition, the past storyline moves backwards, with each chapter moving back in time. The book is split into thirty-two chapters, sixteen of which take place in the present in England, and sixteen of which take place in the past in Australia.



## Quotes

Here we go, I thought. 'Not my sort of place, Don.' I pictured the men who would be there, leaning up against the bar and talking in low voices, their eyes flicking up when a woman walked by. The same sort as the three who had showed up in the first week, whistling farmer-wants-a-wife. Don was different. I'd called on him with my first breech birth and he'd come with me, calmly sewed the prolapsed innards back into the ewe and saved her triplets, poured me a drink and said lightly, All gotta learn one way or the other.

-- Jake, Don (One)

**Importance:** This quote establishes early on Jake's wariness of strangers, and particularly of men. Don constantly encourages her to socialize so she doesn't have to be on her own on the farm, but Jake seems to like that solitariness, and to do everything she can to maintain it even when an alternative is offered to her. Jake's previous experience with men is foreshadowed by this quote in how she bristles at receiving what others may term as relatively harmless notice from the other farmers. Though she does not entirely trust Don, Jake puts up with him because he has never shown any kind of romantic or sexual interest in her and treats her as a fellow farmer. In the past, Jake's trouble with men has generally begun one they start to become sexually entangled with her; so long as she keeps men at a distance, she can remain safe from them.

I hate myself for the lie, not because it's a lie but because it's a stupid one and I should have been prepared.

-- Jake (Six)

**Importance:** Jake has had to live much of her life on the run, escaping from multiple pasts. She has had to concoct many lies along the way to maintain this lifestyle, and feels that she should be experienced at it by this point. Most people might berate themselves for having to lie in the first place, but Jake is angry with herself for not being prepared with a lie when she should have. Because she is on the run from so many people, Jake cannot afford to allow minuscule slip-ups such as this. Though at this point in the novel, the entirety of Jake's past hasn't been revealed, the reader can catch a glimpse into her state of mind from this quote and understand her motivation.

Clare pulls a stool up opposite me and gestures for Bean to sit. 'Let's see who wins a wrestle between you and Alice the Goon here.' Mostly the men laugh, but not all of them. There's a quiet moment when Bean and I look at each other. I would like for this not to happen, and when Bean sits opposite me with a look of drunken determination coming over him, it breezes through me that if I let him win, then maybe he'll get less of a hard time. But I won't do that, I know it as I settle my elbow on the table. Bean will have to fend for himself; he might be small and awkward, but I am a woman on a sheep station.

-- Jake, Clare, Bean (Six)

**Importance:** This quote establishes Jake's precarious position as a woman, not only on



the sheep station, but also in life in general. She is constantly having to prove herself in an occupation generally dominated by men. Even though she can sympathize with Bean's plight in being beaten by a woman, she knows that her own status will be more at stake if she lets him win. In her past as a prostitute, Jake has often allowed men to believe they are stronger than her and can dominate her, though this nearly always leads to them treating her badly and taking advantage of her. Jake no longer wants to be seen as a creature to be dominated, but one who can take care of herself and fight her own battles.

I wonder in what way Otto will come after me, because I am certain that he will. There's a possibility that he might call the police, I guess, but the idea of a cell is not so bad. They don't know me out here.

-- Jake, Otto (Ten)

**Importance:** This references two of Jake's past hardships that she is attempting to escape: her time spent with Otto, in which she was virtually kept as a prisoner in his home, and the fire she started in her hometown that caused her to be exiled. Jake has been looking over her shoulder ever since she escaped Otto's place; but even before then, she was afraid to return home because the last time she was there, she was whipped and driven from town. Jake has had to live under so much fear that Jake would prefer to be arrested and thrown in a cell, where at least she will be safe from having to come face-to-face with what she has tried so hard to leave behind.

I can feel my strong arms floating from my shoulders, as weak as feathers. I want to do something to make him understand that it is important that this doesn't happen. I am sorry for my bad behaviour, I want to tell him, I want to say I won't do it again, I promise. I will take the beating with a brush, but not this. But all I can make is the word 'Please'.

-- Jake (Twelve)

**Importance:** In this scene, Otto forces Jake to watch him butcher one of his sheep as a punishment for attempting to escape from his homestead on her bike, then forces her to kill the next one. Many people might be horrified by such an action, but to Jake, this is worse than most. Jake feels a strong sense of guilt in connection with animals, having accidentally killed many in the past, including the wombat and birds that get caught in the fire. These animals were innocent of any crime and were an accidental repercussion of the fire that Jake set. They are also likely connected with the accidental death of Flora, a girl who tried to defend Jake from bullies and who ended up being burned to death by the fire Jake set. To have even more blood on her hands is one of the worst things that Jake can imagine, as is evidenced by the fact that she refrains from killing Otto even though he keeps her prisoner, and feels guilty for killing Kelly even though she does the same.

That night I hear Otto padding down the hall to my room, and I start to make myself ready. He likes to be able to see my scars these days, says it makes him feel protective over me which I guess can't be a bad thing. So I yank my T-shirt over my head, and I've hooked my thumbs into the sides of my shorts to pull them off too, but his footsteps stop outside my door, and he doesn't come in. Instead there's a scraping noise, and the



doorknob rattles. Still he doesn't come in and I'm looking at the door expecting him to walk through it, but then his footsteps go down the hallway, and I realize he has locked the door to my room. Right, I think.

-- Jake, Otto (Fourteen)

**Importance:** This is the first time that Otto locks Jake in her room, and marks the downward spiral of her relationship with him. When Jake initially meets Otto, she notes that he is one of the kindest of her clients; she believes him to be a sweet, lonely old man. By the time Jake ends her relationship with Otto, she is deeply afraid of him, resorting to theft and even inadvertent murder (of Kelly the dog) in order to escape him. Though Jake has had bad relationships with men in the past due to the nature of her work, this perhaps begins her deep distrust of all men, even those who appear to be friendly and affable on the surface.

Well, he we are then!" Otto says brightly, and I can tell he's excited to show me the place. An old dog, far older than the photograph he showed me from his wallet, lumbers up to us. "This must be Kelly?" I say in a voice I reckon a dog would like. The dog looks at me blankly through clouded eyes. She's got a grey muzzle and patches of dry skin show through on her flank. Poor old thing, I think.

-- Jake, Otto, Kelly (Sixteen)

**Importance:** Much like with Otto, when Jake first meets Kelly, she believes her to be a wizened, harmless old dog. Kelly soon turns on Jake, however, and helps Otto to keep her captive within the house; it is suggested that she also may have eaten Carole to help dispose of her body. In contrast to her time after living with Otto, where she is wary of all strangers, Jake arrives on the homestead with a willingness to believe the best in people. In earlier chapters, Jake displays the same tendency by believing her customers to be kinder than they give any evidence of being. Having received very little love since being forced to leave home, she is quick to find it, even when it isn't present.

You don't need to worry about Carole," he says and wheezes out of his nostrils loudly, because there is detritus up there. "She was a slut. Not like you. You're a little girl in a slut's skin. She was the other way.

-- Jake, Otto (Sixteen)

**Importance:** Otto has a complicated relationship with Jake, treating her both like a little girl and like a whore. He tucks her in and night, gives her a teddy bear, and tells her she's like the daughter he never had, but he also has sex with her and tries to impregnate her. The reader never definitively learns what happened to his ex-wife Carole, but there are some suggestions that she may have been having an affair, which is why Otto is so disgusted when Jake exhibits "slutty" behavior. He is most drawn to Jake when she seems innocent and when he feels the need to protect her--such as when he discovers her scars and believes they were caused by a man who treated her badly. This is most likely because he believes he can control Jake when she is this way, unlike his ex-wife, who either left him or whom he felt compelled to murder because she was behaving in ways he didn't approve of.





When other people order for me, like they either worry I'd be too shy or too greedy, they always get me the beefburger and chips. They don't think for a moment I might be a vegetarian, as if I'd be allowed to have those choices.

-- Jake (Eighteen)

**Importance:** In becoming a prostitute, Jake has had to make herself a blank slate, able to become whatever her customers want her to be. For instance, Otto wants her to be innocent and sweet; another customer pays her extra money for giving him a saucy smile after servicing him. Here, Jake indicates that she has even lost the ability to be able to order what she'd like to eat; she is completely at the mercy of the men whose money she must rely on to survive.

Remember," he'd said close to my ear, soft gust of beer on his breath, "the human eye senses movement before all else.

-- Daniel, Jake (Twenty-Three)

**Importance:** Jake often references back to this moment and the idea of the human eye being able to sense movement, though it isn't until nearly the end of the novel that the reader learns where she originally heard the idea. Her father took her on a hunting trip and taught her to trust the eye's ability to detect motion, even when it can't make out whatever is making that movement. Jake most often returns to this idea in thinking of the creature that is killing off her sheep. Though Jake only catches glimpses of the creature, she trusts her own ability to sense danger. Many times in the past, she has ignored warning signs that have eventually led to her life being threatened. Now she has become jaded that she might be sensing danger even where it is not, but would rather be safe than sorry.

For an hour I walk the blackened main street, and people turn to look at me in a way that I can't read. I try to smile back at some of them, some sympathetic sort of smile that would be appropriate, but they turn away if I do that. There's a silence of so many people looking. No one asks questions. No one says anything, they just look and all of them see me. And all of them look that quiet look.

-- Jake (Twenty-Six)

**Importance:** This is one of the first times that Jake begins to exhibit signs of paranoia. She is guilty of burning down her town, a fact which up until this point she has kept to herself, though she goes to visit Denver in the hospital and reveals the truth of it there. It is unlikely that so many townsfolk could have learned the truth so quickly, though at least some of them have, since a man named Andy Carter (presumably related to Flora Carter, who died in the fire) tracks her down and whips her. Because Jake is uncertain who actually knows the truth about her and who doesn't, the reader remains uncertain; this sense of uncertainty continues in various forms throughout the rest of the novel, such as whether or not Otto killed his wife and whether or not Jake is actually being harassed by a creature on her property.

The sheets I hang over the windows, and I keep one to wrap myself in. The water has stopped running into the mop bucket, there's just a soft trickle now, so that's it, that's my



water. While I'm thinking, a tree falls nearby, and it sounds like something is smashing its way through the bush toward me.

-- Jake (Twenty-Eight)

**Importance:** Jake has inadvertently put her life in danger by setting the fire to the town, both literally and metaphorically. Literally, Jake has to sequester herself inside her house and trust that it won't burn down, since there is little water inside and only a few sheets and towels to stuff in the doors and windows to keep smoke from coming in. Symbolically, Jake has also essentially destroyed her future; if she owns up to the crime--as she eventually does--she will be forced to leave town. Without an education, she resorts to prostitution, which leads to her being at the mercy of various men. Jake doesn't actually hear the sound of any monster breaking through the bush to get to her, but this begins the symbolism of her past becoming some dark, monstrous force from which she cannot escape.