

American Rust Study Guide

American Rust by Philipp Meyer

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Plot Summary

American Rust is a bleak and unsettling novel that tells the story of two young men, Isaac English and Billy Poe, and the tragedies that follow after Isaac murders a homeless man in an abandoned car factory.

Isaac English, 20, and Billy Poe, 21, are best friends who live in Buell, Pennsylvania. The town has been gutted by the closure of the steel mill. Both young men are aimless and unsure of what they want in life. Isaac steals \$4,000 dollars from his invalid father and plans to escape to California, and Poe accompanies him part of the way. But before they can get far, three homeless men bully them in an abandoned car factory. One of the men, Jesus, gives Poe a knife wound and puts his hand down Poe's pants. Isaac throws a large ball bearing at the head of one of the bums, a Swede named Otto. Otto drops dead from the impact. Jesus and the other bum, Murray, run away.

Isaac and Poe believe the police will call Isaac's act murder, and not self-defense. They escape from the scene, but Poe leaves his football jacket there and Isaac leaves his pack in a nearby field. In the young men's attempt to evade arrest, a complicated set of relationships and secrets are revealed. Grace, Billy's son, is battling regret and getting older. Virgil, Billy's father, is neglectful and frequently absent. Bud Harris, a local policeman, has a sexual and romantic relationship with Grace. Because of his love for Grace, Harris hides Poe's football jacket from other authorities. Harris also has a past history with Billy Poe after Harris covered for a younger Poe when he beat another boy nearly to death. As for Isaac, he is caring for a disabled father, Henry, who was hurt in a steel mill fire. Isaac's sister, Lee, now lives in Connecticut with her husband Simon, and she returns to Buell. While in Buell, she rekindles a sexual relationship with the now-fugitive Billy Poe. Isaac, always smart and capable, resents that Lee was able to escape Buell while he never was.

Isaac takes his father's stolen money and runs east, battling the weather, hostile bums, and his own paranoia, starvation and mental disintegration. Meanwhile, the district attorney charges Billy Poe with the crime of the Swede's murder, given Poe's history of violence and the fact that Murray, the bum, came forward as a witness. Poe is sent to jail and then prison, and much of the narrative is spent examining Poe's time in prison, where death seems one wrong move away. Despite his predicament, Poe continually refuses to confess about Isaac's role in the murder.

As Isaac continues his western journey, Poe manages to anger every segment of the prison population by beating up a black man, failing to do a job for white supremacists, and beating up his cellmate, Tucker. But even on the cusp of being released back to the general prison population and a certain stabbing, Poe refuses to tell on Isaac in order to escape prison. Poe is released and indeed does get stabbed nearly to death after guards were bribed to not intervene.

At the same time, because of Harris' love for Grace, Harris intimidates and then kills Murray, the only witness who came forward, thus sparing Billy Poe a lengthy prison



sentence. It's clear Harris' career is over and he will be eventually discovered for his crime. Poe ends the story in the hospital, alive but probably paralyzed. Isaac's father Henry commits suicide by swallowing pills, believing himself to be a burden to his family. Isaac returns to Buell a new and stronger man after his wilderness ordeal. He confesses his part in the Swede murder to Harris, but a wounded Harris tells Isaac to keep quiet and move away.



Book One

Summary

Isaac English is twenty years old and is living in Buell, Fayette County, Pennsylvania. He is smart, small, wispy and easily mistaken for a boy. At the beginning of the novel, Isaac is leaving home after having stolen \$4,000 dollars from his father, whom he refers to as the “old man.” His father used to be a steelworker but was laid off as part of the historical disintegration of Pennsylvania's steel industry.

Isaac's plan is to travel to Pittsburgh and then on to California to escape his father and his own frustrating life in Buell. Because steel was at the heart of Buell's economy, the city is now dilapidated and decaying. Isaac first travels to the house of his best friend, 21-year-old Billy Poe. Unlike Isaac, Poe is big and strong and used to be a football prospect. Now, he is unemployed and drinking beers on the porch of his trailer park home. Poe is reluctant, but agrees to travel with Isaac.

To get out of the pouring rain, Isaac and Poe duck into an abandoned car factory. They start a fire. Poe is ill-tempered and constantly verbally sparring with Isaac. Three drifters show up – Otto, a seven-foot-tall Swede; Murray, an old man; and Jesus, a smaller Mexican man – and claim they own the spot Poe and Isaac have occupied. Isaac immediately senses danger and escapes by claiming he has to pee. Outside, Isaac hears fighting and he comes back. Murray is on the ground, knocked down by Poe. Isaac sees Jesus holding a shiv to Poe's neck and jamming his hand down Poe's pants. It appears the men intend to gang-rape or at least sexually assault Poe.

Isaac picks a baseball-sized ball bearing from the ground and hefts it at Otto. The bearing hits Otto in the face and presumably kills him. Poe flees and rejoins Isaac. They are both shaken up and they agree to tell no one about the incident. Poe instructs Isaac to go back home to his father.

Going into shock from the cold, Poe trudges back to his home alone. Poe reflects on his dysfunctional home life, including a violent father, Virgil, who disappears and reappears. Poe turned down a college scholarship and seems to have already ruined his life. Grace Poe, Billy Poe's mother, has her own dysfunctions as she struggles with growing older with gray hair and weight gain. Grace discovers Poe outside and brings him in to warm him up. He nearly died from the cold and from the gash in his neck made by Jesus. Grace nurses him back to health. Virgil arrives but is not told about Poe's ordeal. Poe realizes he left his custom high school football jacket at the scene of Otto's murder, something which could incriminate him.

Isaac returns home. His sister, Lee, comes home. Lee went to Yale, making Isaac a disappointment in comparison. Isaac grapples with the guilt of killing Otto. It's revealed that Isaac's mother killed herself and that his father is disabled, causing the family to



disintegrate. Poe and Isaac meet the next day. They agree to return to the car factory to both recover Poe's jacket and to submerge Otto's body in the river.

We learn that Grace has a low-paying job as a clothing maker, and that Virgil has been bounced around various dead-end jobs since the Buell steel mill closed. Grace and Virgil's relationship is complicated. Grace and Virgil have sex, but Virgil wishes to keep things casual rather than to get back together formally with his ex-wife. For her part, Grace has been seeing Bud Harris, the sheriff of Buell county.

Bud Harris receives an anonymous tip and the police discover Otto's dead body in the factory. Harris, getting there first, spies Poe's incriminating jacket and hides it from the other police, trying to protect Poe and his mother Grace. Harris and his young partner Steve Ho catch Isaac and Poe around the factory. Harris drives them back to town and while not accusing them of Otto's murders, slyly instructs them to stay out of trouble.

Lee comes to pick Isaac and Poe up, and Poe insists they have a drink at a bar. Poe and Lee flirt with small, secretive physical gestures, and it turns out they had a romantic dalliance in the past, though Lee is now married. Lee allows Poe to stay at her home for a while. Poe is angry that Lee married; Poe and Lee still love each other. They have sex, but both realize nothing more will come from it. Lee endures a loveless marriage with Simon, a rich man who has agreed to hire a nurse to care for Lee's father. Simon has cheated on Lee several times already in their young marriage.

Isaac, who heard Lee and Poe confess their love for each other, also heard them having sex. He is angry but conflicted at his sister for leaving town and for leaving Isaac with their father. Isaac is haunted by Otto's death. There's also another problem: Isaac left his backpack in the field near the car factory, and he feels he must go to retrieve it.

Analysis

The setting of *American Rust* is essential in understanding the characters, mood and overarching message of the novel. The author Philipp Meyer uses the real-life historical disintegration of Pennsylvania's steel industry to paint a picture of a town (and its inhabitants) who are broken, lost, impoverished, and decaying. As the steel mill was at the heart of Buell's economy, its demolition means that the heart has been essentially ripped out of the town. As such, Buell's inhabitants (most of whom cannot escape due to poverty and a certain fatalism that hangs over everything) are similarly bereft of energy. Everything and everyone in the town feels like it is dying rather than growing. There are constant reminders – from Grace Poe's dead-end clothing job that we're told could easily be shipped overseas, to a repeated emphasis that people in town are living off Social Security and pension benefits – that Buell is in a steep decline and that its best days are in the past.

Against this backdrop we have the semi-justified murder of Otto by Isaac after Otto was preparing to sexually assault Billy Poe. Tellingly, the murder happens in an abandoned car factory, just one more symbol of Pennsylvania's vanished manufacturing industry.



Isaac and Poe are, in some ways, the same as the drifters they encounter. Everyone in Buell is “drifting” in one way or another. There is no positive forward direction; there is simply existing and surviving until death claims you. At the time of the murder, both Isaac and Poe were in a state of depression, possessed of pent-up feelings they can neither articulate nor understand that are eating them up from the inside. Otto's murder – now a secret they share – becomes the literalization of that inner negative energy that is consuming them.

Fatalism plays a large part in the narrative. At the time of Otto's murder, Isaac had just stolen money from his father and was trying to escape his life in Buell by going to California. The murder prevents Isaac from leaving and the fatalistic message seems clear: Isaac cannot escape his dreary existence in Buell. Perhaps no one can. Grace Poe dreams of moving away or going to night school, but she seems fated to grow old with a deadbeat husband and deferred dreams. Billy Poe had a promising football scholarship, but he couldn't escape town either. Henry English, Isaac's father, is literally trapped in the town by his disability which was caused by the steel industry. For now, Lee appears to be the one person who has escaped Buell by getting a scholarship to Yale, but even she has been pulled back to Buell over concern about her brother and her love for Billy Poe. The city is practically its own character – an antagonistic force that eats away at its residents.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how the economic problems and depression in Buell relate to its inhabitants like Isaac English and the Poe family. How does the author use the real-life economic depression to make comments about his characters and their place in the world?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the type of narration used in *American Rust*. How do such things as run-on sentences, sentence fragments, tangential asides, and the choice of third-person limited narration contribute to the characterizations as well as the mood and themes of the book?

Discussion Question 3

Poe accuses Isaac of “thinking too much” and over-analyzing the predicament the young men are in. Describe Isaac's thought processes concerning the guilt he has over Otto's death. What justifications does Isaac invent for the murder, and how does he then shoot those justifications down?



Vocabulary

exasperation, tarnish, vandalism, lathe, interspersed, glaciation, fathom, hamlet, rancid, moratorium, trellis, remnant, assimilating, coroner, inclination, transient, trajectory, sumac, encroaching, errant



Book Two

Summary

Poe walks home from Lee's house after having sex with her. He has conflicted feelings about their sex. While it was good, Poe doesn't see a realistic way they can have a relationship, considering Lee is married and only in town temporarily. Poe gets home and washes his old Camaro, a rustbucket which for him symbolizes the failures of his past.

Poe takes his hunting rifle and goes into the woods for a couple hours, waiting for a deer to shoot. Instead, Poe discovers Harris coming toward him. Poe considers shooting Harris for a moment but then dismisses it as foolishness. Harris takes him to the police building and locks Poe up in a cell. Poe reflects on his life, including beating a boy with a bat until the boy had brain damage. Poe figures violence is in his blood and that he's destined to be a "fuckup" and criminal.

Meanwhile, Isaac returns to the car factory where the murder took place; he finds and takes back his incriminating backpack. On the way back, he meets up with Daryl Foster, who is spraypainting a Nietzsche quotation on the wall. Isaac knew Daryl in high school, but Daryl dropped out. From his dress and bald head, it's clear that Daryl is a member of Stormfront, a white supremacist group.

Moving on, Isaac keeps walking. He's starving and spacing out from lack of food. He goes to sleep in a warehouse and wakes up the sounds of people. It turns out that a group of young men, teenagers, had entered the warehouse, led by a teen named Hicks. Before Isaac can explain his presence, the boys beat him up badly. At the end, they apologize and say they mistook Isaac for someone else.

Harris goes to his house, cooks dinner, and reflects on the crumbling town. The police budget is being shrunk and he will have to lay off three of his full-time officers. There's also an investigation into Don Cunko, Harris' friend on the city council, who Harris knows is guilty of bribery. At work the next day, Harris gets word that the District Attorney has a witness in the murder of the Swede. A man named Murray Clark (the bum with the Swede seen earlier in the story) says he can identify the murderer.

Harris confronts Poe in his holding cell. Harris doesn't tell him that he found Poe's jacket (and hid it) at the scene of the crime. Harris knows that Poe and Isaac were at the scene. Poe confesses that he was in the machine shop, but he doesn't fully confess and he claims that he can't identify the men's faces. Harris tells Poe to go home, warns him not to run, and tells him to burn the shoes that might incriminate. Harris is conflicted between protecting Poe (for the sake of Grace, his mother) and achieving justice for Swede's murder.



Two days pass and Isaac doesn't come home. Lee searches the area with her father Henry for any sign, but they don't find him. Poe visits Lee late at night. He tells Lee about the murder of Swede, and he also tells her that Isaac murdered the man. Lee has a hard time believing it. Poe and Lee have a fight about how much Lee truly cares about Isaac. Lee's mind is racing with respect to how to protect Isaac and whether she has already failed him.

Isaac continues escaping by walking through small towns. He gets cleaned up in the bathroom of a diner and has a giant meal. His leg is hurt and his face is badly beaten up.

The narration switches to Grace's perspective. She considers sleeping with her boss to get money for a lawyer for her son Poe. She asks Harris to come over. Harris and Grace have it out over Poe. Harris says he tried to steer Poe right, and it failed. Harris also reveals that he has saved Grace's family several times, including letting Virgil go when Harris caught him stealing copper wire from a construction site.

The next day, Harris comes to arrest Poe. On the ride to the police station, Harris tries to get Poe to give him the whole story, but Poe won't rat out Isaac and tell the truth, that Isaac killed the Swede. Harris vacillates between berating Poe for his stupidity and treating him kindly. Poe is booked and fingerprinted, and then Harris escorts him to neighboring Uniontown where Poe is put in another cell.

Poe is then transported by van to the prison in Fayette. He is strip-searched in a humiliating fashion and given his prison jumpsuit. Other inmates make rape threats to Poe as he is taken to his cell. It's tiny and has two beds. Poe is informed by the guard that his cellmate is in "the hole" (solitary confinement) and so he has a few days to himself.

Isaac, meanwhile, continues to walk west with his hurt leg. The narration associated with Isaac is becoming more disjointed and nonsensical. He comes across junkies doing dope and he befriends one among them, nicknamed the Baron. Baron helps Isaac find the correct train to get further west, to around Detroit. Baron hops the train and so does Isaac. The stowaways head west.

Analysis

Now that the major players and the central event (Swede's murder) have been set up, Book 2 concentrates on the psychological states of the characters. American Rust is a place where nothing is black and white. The complicated backstories and intermingled relationships between the major characters create shades of gray which inform the emotional lives of the characters.

In Poe's case, he grapples with his ambivalent relationship with Lee – who, as a married woman, he can't truly have – along with the prospect of spending the prime of his life in prison. He knows that he's been given several chances in life to reform his violent ways, but in an extended internal monologue, Poe chalks up his fate to an innate propensity



toward violence and criminality, something he ascribes to his grandfather who took his life with a gun. Poe is also of two minds about his culpability in the murder of Swede. On one hand, he did not literally attack Swede. Isaac did. But Poe created the environment that led to the violence, and Isaac literally saved his life by intervening. So despite the fear Poe has for prison and being locked up, his personal code of ethics does not allow him to snitch on Isaac.

In Isaac's case, the author is carefully to gradually make his narrative sections disjointed and frantic. Isaac's narration goes on stream-of-consciousness tangents to a much higher degree than before. Isaac also begins to refer to himself as "the kid" as if he is developing a second personality. The author has chosen this approach to try to mirror Isaac's troubled mental state. It is evident from this approach that Isaac is torn to pieces by his guilt over Swede's murder and about the misfortunes he has accumulated, including his sister finding much more success than him, and including his having to care for his dying father.

Harris, who we see much more of in Book 2 versus Book 1, is another case of a highly conflicted character. Harris cares for Grace Poe (as a sometime lover) as well as Billy Poe (who he has saved several times in the past), and so he is weighing his duty as a policeman versus his concern for the Poe family. Harris can go from threatening Poe with the death penalty to instructing Poe to burn the shoes he wore during the murder because they could incriminate him.

The disclosure of secrets is also a large part of what makes Book 2 interesting. To wit: Isaac tried to kill himself by drowning and was rescued by Poe, and Poe beat a boy to the point of brain damage but was largely let off the hook by Harris calling in a favor. These secrets tie the characters together and make their relationships more complex and interesting. The disclosure of secrets also relates to the theme of these characters being unable to escape their town and their past. The past is catching up to all of these people in dramatic fashion.

Discussion Question 1

What is Harris' attitude toward Billy Poe? What behavior and actions from the book – particularly Poe's arrest and processing – can you cite to support your observations?

Discussion Question 2

What examples can be found from the "Isaac" chapters in Book 2 that demonstrate Isaac's mental disintegration? Why do you think the author chose to write in this fashion?



Discussion Question 3

Is Harris a good policeman, and by whose standards? Is he wrong or right in giving Poe tips and other assistance to aid in his legal defense? How does Harris justify his behavior in his own mind?

Vocabulary

transmission, alloy, lunatic, liability, consolidation, authoritarian, phosphorus, manicured, tannic, stifled, bayonet, ballistic, equivalent, infrastructure, taxidermist, libertarian, requisite, dilemma, empirical, crevice



Book Three

Summary

With Billy Poe hauled away, Grace has conflicting feelings about her son. She feels she has failed him, but she also blames Virgil for not being a father. She wonders how to hire a lawyer for Billy with so little money. On the other hand, she thinks, maybe Billy doesn't deserve it and maybe she should first look out for herself. Harris comes back to Grace and gives her the latest about Billy's incarceration. Grace and Harris have an intimate moment on the couch, touching, but they stop short of having sex.

In prison, Poe makes a belt for his pants from cloth and then goes to the cafeteria for breakfast. The cafeteria is segregated according to race. Poe sits alone, feeling isolated and not comfortable enough to sit with the whites. One black man comes to him, nicknaming him "Dirty," and then a second black man approaches, demanding a sausage from Poe's tray. After a staredown, Poe sucker punches the black man and beats him up badly. This earns the respect of the whites, who invite Poe to join their group. Poe meets the three leaders of the white group: Black Larry, Dwayne and Clovis. It's clear the whites have special privileges versus the blacks or latinos due to bribes or racism. The three white men promise to show Poe the ropes, but Poe knows they will exact some sort of cost for their "kindness."

Meanwhile, Isaac travels west as a stowaway on a train. With nothing much to do, Isaac becomes lost in his own disjointed thoughts.

Harris gets a call from Glen Patacki, an older man who's a justice of the peace. Harris meets Patacki on Patacki's large boat. Patacki tells Harris he should pursue the justice of the peace job when Patacki retires, but Harris is lukewarm. Patacki also warns Harris that his relationship with Grace Poe and his continued involvement in the Billy Poe murder will not look good for him and may end up politically damaging. Harris says he's only doing the right thing. Patacki responds that, "Good deeds will not go unpunished."

Poe continues being coddled by the whites, who are white supremacists. Poe works out with them on the weight rack outside. Poe is fitting in well enough, but he fears that the blacks will retaliate for Poe beating up one of their own.

Isaac arrives in Michigan. Baron hops out from another car on the same train, and Isaac does the same. Baron guides Isaac through the train yard and they head to Detroit ten miles away. Isaac wants to ditch Baron and tries to find any opportunity, but there isn't one. Baron and Isaac eat at a diner, and Isaac is forced to pay for it with a bill from the \$4,000 dollar wad he stole from his father. Thus, Baron now knows about all that money. The two go to sleep in some bushes and Isaac wants to run from Baron, but he's simply too tired.



Billy Poe's arrest and details of the murder are in all the local papers, which Lee sees and reads. An officer comes to their door and asks for Isaac, saying he is a witness to the murder but not a suspect. Deep down, Lee believes Billy Poe's story that Isaac was the one to actually murder the bum. Lee confronts her father Henry about the purpose of the officer's visit. Henry has no interest in ascribing any blame to Isaac or involving him with the investigation if he can help it. Henry tells Lee not to trust Billy Poe. Lee decides that she must locate Isaac. She will ask her husband Simon to get money from his parents to hire both a private investigator and a lawyer for Isaac.

A couple days later, Harris goes to Grace. Virgil is long gone, according to Grace. Grace cooks dinner and asks about Billy's case. Grace is convinced that Isaac did the killing, not her son. The talk soon turns to affection and then sex as their problems melt away with the physical intimacy.

Back with Isaac, Isaac dreams of his family and awakens to discover Baron stealing the envelope with the \$4,000 dollars in it. Baron runs for it and Isaac chases him with a knife. They run past traffic, and a cop arrives and pulls a gun on them. Isaac hops a fence and loses his knife, then he runs away from the cop, having failed to recover the money.

Back in prison, the white supremacists discover that Poe is in jail for murder. They ask Poe to beat up a young guard – a “tweaker” drug dealer – who ripped them off when they tried to bribe him. Though hesitant, Poe agrees to their request, as it means his full membership into the white group and his protection against the blacks who want to hurt him. Through additional bribes, the whites have a plan to get Poe alone with the tweaker guard.

Analysis

Painful regrets are again a common theme among the characters. Grace laments not raising Billy right and for staying so long with a man (Virgil) who wasn't any kind of father to Billy. Grace is also concerned about aging and her appearance. Harris regrets “marrying his job” and not raising a family, and he fears the boredom and loneliness of retirement that is only a few years off. Lee, meanwhile, regrets not looking after Isaac more carefully and for “escaping” Buell while leaving Isaac alone with their father.

The author continues to use objects, situations, places, etc., as symbols for the decay of Buell and consequently for the moral decay of the characters. Abandoned buildings, poorly-maintained public areas, rusted-out cars, shrinking budgets, increasing unemployment, and public corruption all come together to paint a rather bleak picture of a town (and its inhabitants) undergoing a massive, negative change. Poe's imprisonment and Isaac's fugitive adventure are the most explicit physical manifestations of this “decay” (or as the title implies, rust), but really the evidence is plentiful.



The color of the narration for both Poe and Isaac continues to evolve. It's clear that both men are changing mentally in light of their extreme circumstances in order to survive their ordeal. Isaac, now a murderer on the run from the law, is “cracking up” to use a colloquial term. His physical disintegration (after getting beat up and becoming starved) mirrors his mental disintegration. In Poe's case, he has had to become “harder” to endure the dangerous prison environment where a wrong move could mean his death. Poe's prose becomes less emotional and more matter-of-fact.

The machinations of the plot are an important factor in revealing traits about the characters. When Baron steals Isaac's money, Isaac considers killing him with his knife, but he also worries about knifing a defenseless man and getting caught. The theft shows that Isaac is extremely desperate and unhinged but that he also has the wherewithal to think rationally in short bursts. As for Billy Poe, he is put in the impossible position of being coerced into beating up the tweaker guard or face certain death at the hands of the blacks. His decision to say Yes to the beating demonstrates that Poe has acquired a certain cold and calculating logic about his position in prison. He will do anything to survive his time inside, and he quickly realizes that the morality that functioned outside the prison walls does not apply inside.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author use contemporary events about the economy, lack of American manufacturing, etc., to help tell his story? Cite specific examples.

Discussion Question 2

As of the end of Book 3, describe how Lee feels about the following characters: 1) Isaac, 2) her father, Henry, 3) Billy Poe and 4) Simon, her husband. How do these feelings relate to personal regret about her own life choices?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the picture painted by American Rust of the Fayette prison. How are rules and morals different inside the prison versus in free society? Are there ways in which the Fayette prison is similar to life in Buell?

Vocabulary

excrement, commissary, pompadour, pandemonium, imperceptible, interlude, claustrophobic, inevitable, tenuous, surreptitiously, dehydrated, endorsement, indulgence, mottled, gist, solidarity, potshot, migration, humidior, consensus



Book Four

Summary

More cops converge on Isaac's location. He runs and hides in some trees. He attempts to double-back to where he was sleeping so he could grab his pack, but the police presence is thick and he abandons his pack. He changes his clothes to hide his identity. He hops on a bus and loses the cops. At night, Isaac is dazed with hunger and bitterly cold from not having a coat. He's in desperate straits.

Meanwhile, Grace is going stir-crazy in her house thinking about her son being in jail. She wonders whether another man in her past, Bud Harris, would have been a better father to Billy than Virgil, but she ultimately decides that Harris was just as violent and good-for-nothing as Virgil was. To get her mind off things, Grace goes to a local bar, Rego's. A couple named Ray and Rosalyn arrives to cheer Grace up. Grace also meets up with a woman named Heather, wife to a wealthy local businessman, who expresses her sympathies for Grace's plight.

In prison, Poe meets his cellmate, Tucker, who just got back from solitary confinement. Tucker masturbates to a female guard exposing herself in a prearranged deal, which Poe finds distasteful. Poe is having second thoughts about his deal to beat up the guard for the white supremacists. During the night, Poe gets up to splash water on his face and Tucker warns him not to do that because it wakes him up. Poe expresses that he doesn't care, and soon the men are wrestling and fighting. As the stronger man, Poe gets Tucker in a headlock and causes him to lose consciousness. Guards come in and both beat and pepper-spray Poe. They take him to solitary confinement. A guard says that they've been wanting Tucker beat up for a long time, but that Poe has gotten himself into a lot of trouble with the fight.

Harris goes to a bar called the Dead End where he meets three friends – Riley, Chester and Frank – who worked for the steel mill and had to get new careers when it closed. The men share the town gossip – about how some people think Harris let Billy Poe off too easy when he beat up the kid a few years ago, and how if Harris wasn't screwing Grace Poe, Billy would have been dealt with appropriately at that time and the murder of the Swede never would have happened. There are prominent people in town who want Harris' career ruined because of Billy Poe. Harris tries to shake off this gossip.

Isaac makes his way to a Wal-Mart, where he eats a little food and takes a nap. Then, he shops for some new clothes, a knife, some energy bars, and some personal hygiene products. He goes into the fitting room, changes clothes, and stuffs the items into the clothes. He makes a break for it, shoplifting. People try to catch him but he keeps running, and soon he is back into the safety of a wooded area.

In a rare chapter dedicated to Henry English, Henry grapples with his own mortality. With Isaac gone and Henry too proud to ask Lee for help, Henry is struggling to get in



and out of bed and perform other everyday activities. He is very pessimistic and seems to be merely biding his time before death.

In solitary, Poe weighs whether or not to tell his lawyers and police that Isaac was the one who really killed the Swede. He is conflicted, as he believes telling the truth would be damning a good kid, Isaac. But without his truthful confession, Poe feels he is as good as a dead man, as he has made many enemies in a short time in prison. Poe's lawyer arrives and the guard tells Poe to “cuff up” (submit to handcuffs) for the visit. But Poe refuses because seeing the lawyer would mean having to tell the truth or a lie about Isaac. Poe learns that Tucker was hospitalized, but that no charges will be filed against Poe for the beating because Tucker was so hated by everyone.

Isaac runs from Wal-Mart and attends to his hygiene near a stream. Isaac's mentality has increasingly hardened. He feels that it is him against the world and that survival trumps any concept of morality.

Grace and Harris meet at Grace's house and make love. Grace hands over Billy's weapons to Harris because they are too painful to keep. Harris understands that Grace lives for her son, and that she will change for the worse if Billy's life is ruined. As such, Harris promises that he will make sure nothing happens to Billy. It's unclear at this point what that promise means or what Harris intends.

At the end of this book, Isaac continues running and struggling to survive. He is paranoid and tries to keep away from populated areas while still needing to find potable water and food. Isaac obsesses over his mother and why she killed herself (and thus left him alone). He considers throwing himself in front of a truck, but ultimately vows to continue on and survive.

Analysis

Isaac's mental state continues to evolve in this book, but instead of the madness and disjointedness of Book Three, we find a more single-mindedness and unity. Isaac is now completely committed to survival above all else. His mind is chiefly occupied with finding enough to eat, with picking a direction to go in, and with avoiding populated areas as much as possible in order to avoid police detection. Isaac has become quite paranoid, and that is reflected in the chapters dedicated to him.

Additionally, Isaac has lionized himself in his own head, perhaps as a coping mechanism for his harsh, hand-to-mouth existence. He continues the phrase “Badge of Honor” when he undergoes particularly brutal conditions like having to sleep under a mess of leaves and twigs for the night. Isaac is taking pride in being able to survive as a fugitive. This pride is part of what keeps Isaac going. In a twisted way, it's a sort of rite of passage for a diminutive man like Isaac who heretofore got by on academic intelligence.

Meanwhile, and perhaps ironically, Billy Poe – who initially stands in contrast to Isaac because of his physical brawn – has become more logical and calculating during his incarceration. He has had to use his brain to understand the rules and various



allegiances (some of them hidden) that mean the difference between life and death inside the prison walls. Poe goes through extensive interior monologues as he weighs the benefits and consequences of his fight with Tucker, and of telling on Isaac to the authorities. The chief question we have for Billy Poe at the end of Book Four is: Will his desire to escape prison outweigh the loyalty he feels toward Isaac? Will he tell on Isaac to save his own skin?

Book Four also ends with an important question with respect to Bud Harris. He promises Grace Poe that he will not let anything bad happen to Billy. But what does this mean, and what sort of sacrifice on Harris' part will it involve? What specific action will Billy take? The text is deliberately ambiguous, leading the reader to want to discover what Harris intends. But whatever it is, it's clear that Harris loves Grace and is willing to sacrifice himself because of that love. Bud Harris and Grace Poe's love story stands as a rare bright spot in a story otherwise dominated by pessimism, regret, ruination and decay.

Discussion Question 1

How does Isaac feel about his mother and her suicide? To whom does he ascribe blame, and why does Isaac believe his mother killed herself? Use the text to cite specific examples.

Discussion Question 2

Develop a list of pros and cons (according to Poe's perspective) for telling the authorities about Isaac's real role in the murder of Swede. Given these, what do you believe is Poe's best course of action, and why?

Discussion Question 3

What do the townspeople of Buell think and feel about the murder of Swede? What do they think about Bud Harris' involvement with Grace Poe, about Billy Poe's culpability, and about the absence of Isaac? Is the townspeople's opinion and gossip important to any of the main characters, and why?

Vocabulary

hunkered, gazebo, precinct, precocious, optimistic, leverage, profusely, acquaintance, derelict, salvation, vagrant, coalition, jovial, infirmary, condescension, diversion, conduit, fallout, afterimage, tantrum



Books Five and Six

Summary

Book Five

Billy Poe stays in solitary (“the hole”) for three more days. Again the guard demands that he exit to see his lawyer, but Poe refuses. Poe asks if she can come visit him, but the guard refuses. Poe believes that he only has two choices: inform on Isaac about the murder of Swede and escape jail, or refuse to inform on Isaac and die violently when he is returned to the general prison population. Poe reflects on his life and proclaims that the best thing he'd ever done was save Isaac from drowning and then talk him into not trying to kill himself again. In the end, Poe decides he will not inform on Isaac. He vows to fashion a weapon out of something and fight back as best he can once he is returned to general population.

Lee is going stir-crazy and calls two old friends, Joelle and Christy, who meet her at a bar. They don't know about Isaac, but they have heard about Poe's imprisonment. Like many in the town, Joelle and Christy are stuck in a rut and will keep to their mediocre existence indefinitely. Lee feels uncomfortable and like an outsider.

Bud Harris has decided to visit Murray – the single witness to Swede's murder who has come forward – and intimidate him into silence. Harris intends to chase Murray out of the county. Harris is conflicted about it and compares his immorality to a time in Da Nang, Vietnam when he killed a Vietnamese man with a rifle in violent fashion. Despite his intention to only scare Murray, Harris steals a gun from evidence and carefully loads bullets in order to have a “clean” gun that could not be traced if he happens to shoot Murray. Harris then drives off to find Murray.

Back with Isaac, Isaac hitchhikes with a friendly trucker who enjoys right-wing talk radio. Isaac has reversed course and is now trying to head back to Pennsylvania. After a series of hitchhikes at truck stops, Isaac ends the chapter being only two days away from Buell.

Poe gets a visit from a guard. He is going to be released back into general population. Poe is returned to his cell, and he fashions a knife from a whittled-down toothbrush. He asks the guard for protective custody, but no one comes to take him into protective custody. It becomes lunch time, and Poe makes his way to the mess hall. He sees the white supremacists including Clovis and Dwayne eyeing him. He exits the mess hall and tries to run to the yard, but he finds the guard booth to the yard has been evacuated. The white supremacists likely bribed the guards to abandon their post. The white supremacists come after Poe and he struggles, but he is knifed several times and loses consciousness.

Book Six:



Grace is sick with guilt and worry after her encounter with Bud Harris, and has not eaten for two days. She knows that she is responsible for sending Harris off to likely kill Murray and thus throw his own life away for her son's. But in the end, her son and her own preservation are all that matter to Grace.

Isaac continues to travel and is only miles outside of Buell. He symbolically casts away his hunting knife, and he has resolved to confess his part in Swede's murder to Harris.

Lee and Henry English visit the expensive attorney hired by Simon's parents. Lee tells the lawyer everything she knows about the night of the murder. Henry believes they should just be quiet about the whole thing, but the lawyer believes that once Poe talks to his lawyer, Isaac will be implicated. Returning home, Henry has a flashback to the site of his injury at the steel mill, where a fallen crucible full of liquid steel caused a massive fire. He had jumped from a third-story window to save himself from the fire, and the injuries had resulted in his current state. Henry believes that he should have died in that fire to spare his family from taking care of him.

Henry decides to commit suicide. Wanting to spare Lee the bloody scene of a gunshot, Henry rolls outside into the frigid air in his wheelchair and takes a few Oxycontin pills. Then, he waits.

Harris stakes out the house Murray is staying in and waits until the three men inside the house are asleep. He steps inside and confronts Murray, yelling at him to leave the county and never talk to the district attorney again. Another man moves to attack Harris. Harris shoots Murray then wrestles with the man. The man is stabbing Harris, but Harris' kevlar vest protects him from the worst of it. The man breaks Harris' hand. With his left hand, Harris pulls another gun from his waistband and shoots the man dead. He then chases Murray out of the house, locates him in the woods, then shoots him dead as well.

Afterward, Harris disposes of the murder weapon and his vest, but he believes there's no way he will not be discovered.

Poe wakes up in a hospital bed, very badly hurt but alive. He cannot move his arms or legs. Meanwhile, Isaac arrives at the Buell police station and talks to Harris, who is nursing his broken hand. Isaac confesses to the Swede murder, but Harris wants no part of his confession. Harris says the matter is taken care of. Isaac says that he should move away to Connecticut, and Harris thinks that's a good idea. In his head, Harris knows it's only a matter of time before the district attorney comes to take him away.

In the final scene, deputy policeman Steve Ho visits Grace and gives her food, as she had wasted away for a few days. Grace wants to see Bud Harris, but Ho says that's impossible. Ho instructs Grace that she has to pack her things and leave. Grace hallucinates that Billy is walking toward her home.



Analysis

The chapters have become briefer and more frenzied, a deliberate choice to increase the excitement and tension surrounding the resolution of the story. These final two brief books decide the fates of the major characters. In Poe's case, he refuses to inform on Isaac and pays the price he knew he would by being shivved by the white supremacists. There is a glimmer of hope in that Poe survived the assault, but we are told that he cannot move his arms and legs. The narrative is not specific enough to indicate whether Poe is going to be permanently disabled, but given the overall ruination and pessimism of the story, it's a good bet that Poe will be left physically broken by the events of the novel, perhaps mirroring or echoing Henry English's own condition.

In this interpretation – that Poe has been left a quadriplegic – the final image of the book takes on a new and more insidious meaning. Grace – wasting away because of a mental breakdown – hallucinates Billy Poe walking toward her. The probability that Billy will never walk again lends the final image additional weight and pathos.

In Isaac's case, he has gone through a sort of “trial by fire” and has emerged a new person. The book does not provide any tidy conclusions that Isaac will be explicitly better or worse because of his ordeal; he is just different. Bud Harris does the boys a final service by letting Isaac go, who was ready to confess and go to jail.

On the topic of Bud Harris, he made a deliberate choice to help the Poes by intimidating Murray, an intimidation he knew was likely to end in Murray's death and his criminalization. Murray's choice is certainly a sacrifice, and perhaps a noble one, in that he did it for the love of Grace. For her part, Grace in comparison comes across as selfish and cold, in that she knows Harris is going to meet his end but she does nothing to stop it.

Themes introduced early, like fate and the decay of the town, are returned to. We learn the exact circumstances of Henry English's injury – circumstances caused in part by cheap equipment and consequently the deterioration of American manufacturing. In the end, the decay of Buell has ultimately caused much of the strife of the characters. *American Rust* portrays an America that is slowly but steadily on the decline, a country which has lost its manufacturing base and thus an important part of what made it what it was in the heyday of the 40's and 50's. In light of a depressed economy and a town which has been devastated by the closure of the steel mill, the characters seem preordained to crumble apart as they have, just like the town and by proxy, working-class America.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the character arc of Isaac English. Chart where his character changed and why. Contrast the type of person Isaac was at the start of the book with what he has become at the end.



Discussion Question 2

Is Billy Poe heroic for refusing to inform on Isaac with respect to the death of Swede? Is there such a thing as heroism in a story as bleak as *American Rust*, or is everything fraught with moral failings?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the final fates of the major characters at the close of the book. Is there a sense of poetic justice for any of the characters, or a sense of justice denied? Did the characters deserve their fates?

Vocabulary

pension, fetal, barrage, satchel, debriefed, inertia, antibiotics, syphilis, quantum, stratosphere, solemnly, mortuary, renounce, amicably, nitrous, jiggered, habitation, muzzle, odometer, disheveled



Characters

Isaac English

Isaac is twenty years old and lives in Buell with his wheelchair-bound father, Henry, for whom Isaac is the primary caretaker. Isaac is very smart and did quite well in school, leading everyone to believe he would go on to college and a distinguished career. However, Isaac (like many in the town) was unable to escape Buell. Isaac is portrayed as small and slight, but he has a terrific aim and strong arm, qualities which factor in to his murder of Swede at the abandoned car factory.

At the outset of the novel, Isaac has stolen his father's nestegg (\$4,000 dollars) and is trying to escape to California. But the murder of Swede pulls him back in. During a long and tortuous escape from justice, Isaac undergoes a mental disintegration but a consequent reformulation. Isaac could be said to emerge stronger and more self-reliant after his ordeal than before.

Isaac's familial relationships are troubled. He resents his father but feels a sense of duty towards him. Isaac also resents his sister, Lee, who was able to escape Buell for a better life while Isaac was not. The root of Isaac's problems is the suicide of his mother a few years ago, an act which eventually led Isaac to attempt the same type of suicide. Only Billy Poe's intervention prevented Isaac's death in the river.

Billy Poe

Billy Poe (known mostly just as "Poe" in the novel) is twenty-one years old and a former high school football star. Painted as a sort of opposite of Isaac, Poe is well-built and strong but he is not very smart. Having failed at an athletic career, Poe is "stuck" in the town like many other residents, unable to escape or better himself. He lives with his mother, Grace, and his father, Virgil, who is neglectful and frequently absent.

Poe reveals himself to have a strong sense of loyalty. When Poe is arrested for Swede's murder, Poe refuses to tell authorities about Isaac's involvement in the murder in order to spare his best friend from persecution. Isaac saved Poe from getting sexually molested or raped by the bums, and so Poe returns the favor by not ratting Isaac out. Poe also shows a certain strength of character by holding his head high in prison and not caving to the tremendous pressure therein.

Poe believes that he is fated to have a violent and nasty death, and that he is only playing out the hand that was dealt to him. He is quite fatalistic. He doesn't run like Isaac or try to resist arrest; instead Poe embraces his fate. Poe has a sexual relationship with Lee and wants more, but also in a fatalistic way; Poe knows that nothing can come of his feelings.



Bud Harris

Bud Harris is the “top cop” in Buell and a veteran of the police force. Harris has a rather pragmatic approach to justice in his town which borders on unethical. He has been known to bend the law in the name of justice, such as when he saved Billy Poe from a much stiffer sentence when Poe beat a young boy so badly he got brain damage. Harris also sometimes prefers to chase criminals out of his county rather than properly arrest them.

For several years, Harris has had an on-again, off-again romantic and sexual relationship with Grace Poe. When Harris realizes that Grace lives for her son and her son alone, Harris makes the decision to sacrifice himself for the Poe family. Harris intimidates and shoots Murray, the witness to the Swede murder, knowing full well that he will probably be caught and go to prison himself for the deed. Harris' love for Grace outweighs his own self-preservation.

Bud Harris is presented as a relic from a lost era. While Harris' partner Steve Ho dons combat armor and equips an assault rifle, Harris prefers a simple cloth uniform and his trusty pistol. Harris lives alone and is full of regret for not starting a family.

Grace Poe

Grace Poe is the forty-something mother to Billy Poe. Grace is in the middle of a mid-life crisis. She is afraid of growing older and watching her once-beautiful features disintegrate due to age. She is also realizing that her grand plans to go to college and have a decent job will never materialize. She feels stuck with her good-for-nothing husband, Virgil, and she is horrified that the love of her life, Billy, has not amounted to anything.

When Billy comes home badly wounded after the murder of Swede, Grace devotes all of her energy to protecting her son and giving him whatever comfort she can afford him. This includes a complicated, morally ambiguous “seduction” of Bud Harris, such that she knows Harris will sacrifice himself to save her son Billy. Worry over Billy's present and future causes Grace to go into a state of mental anguish where she neglects herself and forgets to eat for days. At the end of the novel, Grace is rescued from her torture by the police and she perhaps will start on a road to recovery.

Lee English

Lee is Isaac's older sister. She married Simon and escaped Buell to Connecticut, where she has a nice job and cushy life. However, Simon has cheated on Lee several times and Lee is secretly unhappy. Lee has a long-standing crush on Billy Poe, and they consummate this crush with sexual intercourse during Poe's escape from justice.



Virgil Poe

Virgil is Billy's good-for-nothing father and Grace's husband. He wastes money and bounces aimlessly between dead-end jobs. Grace and Virgil have broken up and gotten back together several times in the past few years. At one point in the novel, Virgil leaves apparently for good.

Henry English

Henry is Isaac's father who, due to a medical condition, is confined to a wheelchair and must be tended to throughout the day. Henry was injured in a steel mill fire. Henry believes he should have died in that fire and that he's a burden to his children. Near the end of the novel, Henry takes his own life by swallowing pills and exposing himself to the frigid cold.

Otto the Swede

This physically-imposing homeless man is part of the group that attacks Poe in the car factory. Isaac throws a ball bearing at Otto's forehead and kills him, throwing the events of the novel into motion. Otto was not assaulting Poe when Isaac killed him, thus Isaac and Poe's belief that the police will declare the death murder and not self-defense.

Murray

Murray is part of the group that attacks Poe in the car factory. Poe beats Murray badly. Murray later serves as the only witness to come forward who can positively ID Poe, leading to Poe's arrest. To save Poe from a life in prison, Harris decides to intimidate Murray into leaving the county. Instead, Murray is shot dead by Harris after violence erupts during the intimidation.

Jesus

Jesus is a small Mexican man who is part of the group that attacks Poe in the car factory. He slices Poe in the shoulder and then sexually molests him, leading to Isaac hurling the ball bearing at Otto.

Steve Ho

Steve Ho is Bud Harris' younger partner at the police station. He wears combat armor and carries around an assault rifle, unlike Harris, but he is characterized as a good cop who cares.



Baron

Baron is the nickname for a bum who befriends Isaac during his escape from justice. Baron then betrays Isaac by stealing his money while he sleeps, leading to a near-arrest at the hands of the police before Isaac is able to narrowly escape the law once again.

The White Supremacists

The leaders of the white supremacists in Fayette prison are named Black Larry, Dwayne and Clovis. They're all hard-bitten "lifers" who don't hold human life in any regard. They coerce Poe into assaulting a guard in return for their protection, but when Poe fails to do so, they mark Poe for death and eventually stab him nearly to death.

Tucker

Tucker is the young cellmate of Poe's. During their first night together, Poe and Tucker get into a fight over Poe visiting the sink in the middle of the night. Tucker has to be hospitalized and Poe is sent to solitary confinement.



Symbols and Symbolism

Ball Bearing Murder Weapon

Isaac used a large ball bearing in a car factory's machine shop to strike and kill Swede. The ball bearing is a symbol of the town's vanished manufacturing industry. Many problems in the town have been caused because of a lack of jobs and purpose because of factory closures.

Poe's '73 Camaro

Billy Poe owns a rusted-out Camaro that he intends to repair and rebuild but which he never gets around to. The Camaro is a symbol of Poe's wasted potential. He is fated to remain like that car: stuck in one place.

Four Thousand Dollars

Isaac steals four-thousand dollars from his father at the beginning of the book. This represents most of his father's life savings, and thus it represents a betrayal between father and son.

Steve Ho's Equipment

Steve Ho uses military-style combat armor and a large assault rifle for his police gear, in contrast to Bud Harris who doesn't wear armor and only carries a pistol. Steve is the "new generation" of policeman who has become more militarized, and Harris is a relic.

Billy's Football Jacket

Billy leaves his high school football jacket at the scene of Swede's murder. Harris discovers it first and hides the potential evidence. This mistake is the first sign that things are going to end in tragedy.

Isaac's Pack

In addition to Billy leaving his football jacket at the murder, Isaac leaves his pack full of books in the field next to the car factory. The pack and jacket are symbols for the boys. Isaac is smart and has his nose always buried in books, while Poe is strong and athletic.



Trains

Isaac partially escapes from Buell via trains. Trains could be seen as another dying relic of New England's once-mighty industrial sector, along with the closed steel mill.

The Dead End Bar

The symbolism for this hole-in-the-wall bar in Buell is obvious from the name. The town is a dead end that leads to nowhere for all the characters.

Isaac's Hunting Knife

Isaac steals a hunting knife from Wal-Mart, and for him it becomes a symbol of his newfound strength and willingness to survive no matter the cost. But later, he casts away the hunting knife when he returns to civilization, showing he is willing to accept the consequences of his action (the murder).

Henry's Wheelchair

Henry became wheelchair-bound after a steel mill accident crippled his legs and caused other problems. For Henry, his wheelchair is a reminder of how trapped he is and how much of a burden he is to Isaac and Lee. It's a reminder that he is dying and that it's only a matter of time. He hastens the process by killing himself.



Settings

Buell

Buell, Pennsylvania in present day is where the major characters live. It's a moderately-sized industrial town that was once dominated by its steel industry. But nowadays, the mill has closed down. This has led to high unemployment and a general economic depression in the area. The working-class people in Buell suffer as they struggle to remain above the poverty line, and the town is quite rundown. This scenario mirrors the historical reality of many steel towns in the northeast United States which changed significantly (and often for the worse) with manufacturing leaving the U.S.

Like the town, the characters are worse for the wear. They cannot escape the town and are very much a product of their environment. The town is in a state of decay and so are its inhabitants.

Fayette Prison

Billy Poe is taken to Fayette Prison once he is arrested for the murder of the Swede. Fayette Prison is depicted as a brutal and heartless place where death is waiting around every corner. The guards are indifferent and easily bribed, and mess hall is a lawless danger zone. To survive, Billy Poe must befriend a faction inside the prison, but instead he ends up angering all of the factions, which leads to his assault.

Wilderness

Isaac escapes justice by walking and hitchhiking through several states in the northeast and upper midwest. Isaac is in the impossible position (as fueled by his paranoia) of having to be close to civilization to get food and basic essentials, but of also having to stick to uninhabited areas to avoid discovery. Like the prison, the wilderness is a cruel and dangerous place full of people like the homeless man Baron who steals Isaac's money.



Themes and Motifs

Decay and Ruin

The downward spiral of Buell is reflected in the characters themselves. A black cloud hangs over the inhabitants of the town. No one appears to have a positive outlook on life, and the best times seem to be behind everyone. The heyday of the town was many years ago when the steel mill was in full force, and, similarly, the heyday of its people are also in the rearview mirror. Grace, for example, is depressed that she is “past her prime” as a woman in her forties whose looks have worsened in the past few years. She also never started a decent career and feels too old to start one now. Even in Billy Poe's case, his life seems to have peaked during his high school days when he was a football star. Now, at the outset of the book, he works at a hardware store and has no idea what he'd like to do with his life. College seems like an impossibility.

In Henry English's case, he is literally physically decaying from his worsening medical condition. Isaac undergoes a sort of mental decay during his escape from justice, going insane from lack of food and from his own guilt. Similarly, Grace is reduced to a mentally broken woman by the last scene in the book, unable even to care for herself. Overall, the novel paints a rather bleak picture. Everyday life in Buell often seems like a slow march toward death. No one is safe from this inexorable decay.

Fatalism

Following Swede's murder, Billy Poe is convinced that life was always going to end badly for him and that it was only a matter of time. Billy feels that he is predestined to have a violent and short life, and that his propensity of violence was inherited from his criminal grandfather. As a consequence, Billy doesn't believe there is anything he can do to stop his wrongful persecution and arrest for the murder of Swede. In one sense, Billy feels he deserves such a fate, particularly considering he received a light punishment for giving a boy brain damage a few years prior.

Fatalism fits hand in glove with the novel's pessimistic outlook. Most - if not all - of the characters feel that they are stuck on a certain path. In Isaac and Billy's case, their path is to be caught and sentenced for murder. But even in the case of other characters who are not in such immediate jeopardy, they also feel their path is set. Bud Harris feels he is destined to die alone and unloved, perhaps making his decision to sacrifice his career and freedom easier. Grace feels she will never live up to her potential, and neither will her son. Henry's path is certainly set because of his deteriorating physical condition, but he importantly wrests control of his life from destiny by hastening his end via suicide. Even Isaac becomes resigned to his fate, evolving after his trip in the wilderness to come back to town and try to confess for Swede's murder to face his punishment. No one can escape once the murder sets into motion a sequence of events.



Secrets

The murder of Swede forces numerous secrets to come to the surface, secrets which inform the relationships between the characters and ultimately the major actions these characters will take. In Isaac's case, his mother committed suicide and he tried to follow her lead only to be rescued by Billy Poe. In Billy's case, he beat a boy to the point of brain damage and was only saved from a stiff sentence by Bud Harris, who himself harbors secret feelings for Grace Poe. Additionally, Bud Harris has a long history of skirting and twisting the law for his own purposes, a practice which ultimately leads to his downfall. Lee's secret is her love for Billy Poe despite her marriage to Simon. Henry's secret (not revealed until the last part of the book) is the exact nature of his injury with respect to a steel mill fire.

This proliferation of secrets relates to a larger theme of the past affecting (and infecting) the present. Just as these characters cannot escape Buell, they cannot escape their pasts. In Billy's case, he is presumed to be Swede's murderer because of his past history of violence, and he is treated as such despite not committing the murder. Isaac's troubled history of mental illness rears its ugly head during his escape. And Bud Harris' love for Grace results in a dramatic act of sacrifice when he kills Murray. All of these characters have tried to bury or hide their past regrets and indiscretions, but such secrets can never be truly erased.

Styles

Point of View

The book employs a third-person limited narration. This narration switches from character to character according to the chapter, and the reader experiences the story through that character's eyes and mind for the duration of the chapter. This narration is somewhat unusual in the degree to which it is intertwined with the characters' thoughts. In fact, it could be said to lie somewhere between first-person and third-person narration. While never using classic first-person narrative techniques (such as using "I"), sometimes the third-person narration presents the exact thoughts of the characters without singling them out as thoughts per se ("Grace thought," etc.). Instead, the thoughts are mashed up seamlessly with the rest of the narration. This is in keeping with an overall strategy to use stream-of-consciousness to more accurately capture the nature of human thought.

All of the main characters chosen for chapters are dealing with intense and conflicted feelings, and this tension is reflected in the narration. Whether it's guilt, sadness, regret, or romantic ambivalence, the narration is often "inside the head" of the characters as they grapple with their feelings and think through their predicaments. True to the stream-of-consciousness approach, the characters often wander off on tangents and random thoughts before they settle back in to their immediate problems. Time is quite fluid during these thought processes. The character may express doubt about the future and then veer into regret for something that happened twenty-five years ago.

Language and Meaning

The author slightly but deliberately changes the vocabulary level according to the character a particular chapter is dedicated to. For Billy Poe, for example, the author uses mostly simple words and short sentence structures. This reflects the notion that Billy may be strong, but he is not very smart. By contrast, the chapters devoted to Isaac have quite advanced language and they delve into more abstract and philosophical subjects. This mirrors Isaac and his superior intellect. Other characters are somewhere in the middle, such as Bud Harris and Grace Poe.

Overall, the book uses modern American English, including idioms and slangs, to reflect the working-class Americans who are the subject of the book.

Grammar and sentence structure are of particular interest in American Rust. The author employs a stream-of-consciousness approach where conventional rules of grammar and punctuation are deliberately ignored in order to more accurately mimic the thought processes of the characters. For example, sentence fragments and run-on sentences are commonly employed. Several conflicting thoughts may run together without any separation via punctuation or paragraph splits. This has the effect of communicating a



certain frenzy or stress in the characters, which is particularly true in the case of Isaac when he is running from justice in the wilderness.

These stream-of-consciousness passages erupt in more extreme “spikes” when characters are under particular stress. And in the case of Isaac, his stream-of-consciousness passages reflect the unraveling of his mind as he suffers from starvation and guilt during his escape from justice.

Structure

The novel is divided into six books with several chapters apiece. Chapters themselves are dedicated to specific characters and are simply titled according to that character. In this way, the story unfolds as the narration switches from character to character in an approximately chronological fashion.

The novel begins with an important act having already been carried out, i.e. Isaac's theft of his father's money. This is a classic literary technique to pique the reader's interest and to begin on an exciting note.

Once the murder of Swede happens, the two main characters separate and spend little time together. Thus, the two primary narratives of Isaac and Poe are told in parallel.

The later books (Five and Six) and accompanying chapters are noticeably shorter than the preceding books and chapters. Here, the author intentionally increases dramatic excitement by presenting the climax and denouement in short, punchy sections.

Structurally, there is a sense of fatalism to the plot and the actions of the characters. It seems only a matter of time before Billy Poe will be caught and wrongfully persecuted for the murder of Swede. And on the sidelines, there is a strong sense that Bud Harris and Grace are hurtling toward tragedy as well. Characters can (and often do) wring their hands and lament their predicaments, but the plot (namely, the investigation and process of justice) continues to grind along at a steady pace. There is nothing the characters can do to stop the inevitable.



Quotes

Poe was always doing these things. He'd nearly gone to jail for beating up a kid from Donora, he was still on probation for it. He can't resist a fight, not something you understand. Probably it's not his fault. Probably you can't be as big as him without having some kind of robot mentality.

-- Narrator (Book 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 161)

Importance: This passage describes Poe's propensity towards violence and foreshadows the fight he has with the homeless men. It's a good example of the herky-jerky narrative style with its run-on sentences and semi-stream of consciousness delivery. It also reveals a certain fatalism. According to the narrator, Poe was fated for violence because he was a big guy. He was born into it.

Basis of everything, he thought. Pick your own over a stranger. Dead Swede for living Poe. Ten dead Swedes or a hundred. Long as it's the enemy. Ask any general. Ask any priest – millions die in the Bible, no problem if God says thumbs-up. Babies, even – dash em on the rocks say Jesus made me do it.

-- Narrator (Book 1, Chapter 3 paragraph 14)

Importance: After killing Otto the Swede, Isaac is reflecting on the violent nature of humanity as part of a justification for his act. Murder is a constant of the human condition, as is justifying murder by invoking God, country, family, or something else.

Go on, Poe thought. Lee brushed his hand it was not accidental, he took her hand and squeezed it, in the crowd no one could see him, he looked at her she was blushing, she had that crooked smile, she only smiled that way when she couldn't help it. He would ignore Isaac, he decided, for the entire night. For his entire life.

-- Narrator (Book 1, Chapter 7 paragraph 3)

Importance: Poe has become infatuated with Lee, who it turns out he had a fling with a couple years before. The stream of consciousness style – which spikes in intensity here in comparison to other parts of the book – reflects Poe's intense and ambivalent emotions with being near Lee again.

Except Christ what was wrong with him. She had moved in with her boyfriend, husband now. It was all a fantasy, what he'd just had, it was not the last time they'd sleep together it didn't have that feel, it didn't have that tragic, sitting around crying feeling. But it was close.

-- Narrator (Book 2, Chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: The narrator is communicating Poe's ambivalent feelings about sleeping with Lee. They had something special together with sex, but there doesn't appear to be a realistic way they could have anything more than that. The fragmented, smashed-together feel of the prose helps to show that Poe's mind is racing with conflicting thoughts.



Poe didn't move. 'About two months ago [Isaac] went for a dive in the river. You probably didn't know that because he would never tell you and because when I called to talk to you about it, you never called me back. But basically I had to jump in after him and pull him out. It was about twenty degrees and I don't know how either of us even made it.

-- Billy Poe (Book 2, Chapter 5 paragraph 75)

Importance: Poe is confronting Lee about Isaac's mental (and legal) problems. Poe believes Lee only superficially cares for Isaac and that she is in fact at the heart of some of Isaac's problems. This quotation is in keeping with the dredging up of memories and secrets that many characters in the book do.

All for Virgil. Billy ending up this way, her bad choices all around. Your three semesters of college – how long was it before you stopped reminding people of that? That was dropped for him as well – Virgil – he couldn't make the bills on his own.

-- Narrator (Book 3, Chapter 1 paragraph 3)

Importance: Grace is beating herself up for her current predicament with Billy in jail and her life going nowhere. The use of “your” and “you” makes it clear that the narration is inside Grace's head and that she's thinking to herself, but the narration makes no explicit indication that it's a thought. This is a good example of the third-person limited narration that often veers quite close to first-person narration.

Sleeping or awake, no difference. Gray area between them. Dull blue light from the porthole and the view of the car behind you. Noise of the train, vibration, you're a part of it, rattling. Meat tenderizing. Forgive us our daily softness. Pitch black again – another tunnel. Make you deaf – plug your ears.

-- Isaac (Book 3, Chapter 3 paragraph 7)

Importance: Isaac is a stowaway on a train and is making his way west to Michigan. In his exhausted and mentally unwell state, he thinks in short, fragmented bursts. He also doesn't have much sensory stimulation in the dark train car, so he is hanging on to any sensation he can get.

Her mother must have felt some sense of desperation, or loneliness, or time creeping in on her, if she had married Henry English. A beautiful woman with a master's degree in music composition. But she was also thirty-one, living in a country that was not her own, no family to speak of, little support structure, and here was a man who would never leave her, a man with a good job, a man who wanted to take care of her.

-- Narrator (Book 3, Chapter 7 paragraph 16)

Importance: Lee is trying to figure out why her mother – highly-educated, beautiful, sophisticated – resigned herself to marry the working-class slob Henry (Lee's father). This quotation is in keeping with all the major characters' intense regrets about their pasts.



She felt shaken and went back inside, sat in front of the TV. She flipped through all the channels, nothing worth watching, she would have to get more channels, she would have to remind herself to do that. It didn't help – she couldn't stop thinking about it. At first it seemed possible and then she was sure of it. Something in Bud Harris could kill a person if he thought it was best. He'd been in Vietnam.

-- Narrator (Book 4, Chapter 2 paragraph 10)

Importance: Grace's mind is racing as she considers the incarceration of her son, Billy. The prose mimics the herky-jerky nature of actual thought as Grace flits from watching TV to regretting her lack of channels to thinking whether Bud Harris would have been a better father to Billy than Virgil. In the end she decides that Billy would have inherited just as much violence from Harris as from Virgil. There's no way to win for Grace, even in a “what if?” scenario.

[Henry] needed a bath, he hadn't had one since the boy left, he knew she could tell. The way she looked at him when she said good night, like kissing a baby. That was bad enough. Put you in a home. Isaac wouldn't, it had never crossed Isaac's mind, but his daughter was practical. Her heart ran a couple degrees colder.

-- Narrator (Book 4, Chapter 6 paragraph 4)

Importance: Now that Isaac is gone, Henry is grappling with his deteriorating physical condition and the fact he needs help for basic everyday activities. Henry's physical condition is another manifestation of the book's overall pessimism and despairing outlook on life.

There was no good answer. It was him or Isaac. There was no way they could both come out of it. The day they took him out of isolation was the day Clovis and the others would be waiting for him. One way or the other he was spilling his guts – shank or lawyer it was his decision.

-- Narrator (Book 5, Chapter 1 paragraph 17)

Importance: Billy Poe is becoming increasingly resigned to the fact that he either has to rat on Isaac and escape prison or stay in prison and probably get killed by the white supremacists or by another group. The plot has put this character into an impossible situation, and Poe will either have to surrender his loyalty or his life.

[Billy Poe] was looking out over things, it was all gone, the trailer was a burned shell, even the trees around it had burned. Poe stood looking for a long time and then he was walking back down the road, toward a new place. Making his way toward her.

-- Narrator (Book 6, Chapter 9 paragraph 28)

Importance: This is the last passage of the book. It provides a final emphasis for the decay and ruin that is thematized in the book. However, Grace hallucinates a moment of hope by seeing her son walking toward her. But given that Poe is likely paralyzed at this point in the story, Grace's hallucination is all the more ironically pessimistic.