

Ashfall Study Guide

Ashfall by Mike Mullin

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Plot Summary

Ashfall is a young adult novel by Mike Mullin, which revolves around the explosion of the Yellowstone Supervolcano, and the attempts of Alex Halprin and Darla Edmunds to survive its aftermath.

When the novel begins, Alex is a typical teenage kid, staying at home for the weekend in Cedar Falls, Iowa, while his mother, father, and sister go to visit his uncle and his family in Warren, Illinois. The supervolcano erupts, blanketing everything with ash. Alex takes refuge with neighbors, and then ultimately decides to set off to find his parents in Warren. He travels through the countryside, coming across an escaped convict named Target. Target attempts to kill Alex with an axe; he narrowly escapes, and tumbles into the barn of the Edmunds, Darla, and her mother, Gloria. They help nurse him back to health, and he assists them with their farm chores.

Target and a friend brutally rape and murder Mrs. Edmund, while Alex helps to defend Darla. Target's friend is killed by Alex, and when Target comes back, Alex kills him as well. He and Darla then head out across country to go to Alex's uncle's farm. They scavenge for food as they go, and sleep where they can, dealing with cold rain, and incredible amounts of snow. They are scooped up into a refugee camp that is overcrowded and starved, and escape to the uncle's farm. There, Darla and Alex discover that Alex's parents have been gone for five weeks, looking for him. Alex agrees to stay put, because his uncle and aunt and cousins need him, and because his sister is there as well. Darla helps to revolutionize the farm by creating a grist mill which the family can use to its advantage in terms of collecting food as payment, and offering the locals a service. When Alex's uncle breaks his leg, Doc McCarthy sets the fracture and accepts kale as payment. They set up a future trading market, where kale will be traded for pork from the town of Warren, through the doctor. From the farm, Alex and Darla look forward to an uncertain future.



Chapter 1 - Chapter 29

Chapter 1 - Chapter 29 Summary

Chapter 1 - Friday begins just like any other day for Alex Halprin. He argues with his mother after school about going to visit his uncle and his family in Warren, Illinois. He doesn't want to go, and wants to stay at home in Cedar Falls, Iowa. When his family leaves, Alex envisions a weekend of gaming with his friends. He is a Tae Kwan Do expert. He plays World of Warcraft for three hours, and then hears a rumble in the distance, followed by the failure of power. An explosion rocks the house, sending Alex flying across his room. He becomes trapped between his desk and his bookcase, and feels something heating up. He manages to get outside, and runs into his neighbor, Darren, and his husband, Joe. Most of the neighborhood seems intact. Alex takes off running.

Chapter 2 - Alex runs toward the fire station. Power is out all over town. He lets the firemen know his house is on fire, and they load up and head out. Alex is bruised and beaten, but he doesn't need hospital treatment. Back at his wrecked house, Alex asks to borrow a cell phone from Darren and Joe, but their phones have no service. There are about four other fires, and it looks as if something has landed on Alex's roof. He agrees to spend the night with Darren and Joe, pending the return of his mother. But then more explosions begin.

Chapter 3 - The explosions continue and the ground shakes. Alex, Darren, and Joe make a dash for Darren and Joe's house. The noise is deafening. Alex, Darren, and Joe hunker down in a marble Jacuzzi. As they hunker down, Alex begins crying and praying, asking God to keep his family safe. The noise continues for hours, it seems. They pad the bottom of the Jacuzzi with blankets and a comforter, and spend the night inside. But there is no dawn.

Chapter 4 - Alex wakes up, and wants answers. He stumbles around in the darkness. Alex wonders what could be happening: asteroids, the worst storm ever, and a nuclear strike are thoughts that run through his mind. Outside, gray ash is falling. It smells like rotten eggs, like sulfur. Joe looks at his wristwatch. It is 9:47 in the morning. Because it is so loud, Joe, Darren, and Alex write notes to each other to communicate. Joe explains that the day before, on the radio, he heard that the super volcano at Yellowstone National Park had exploded. Joe explains that people are supposed to be inside during the ashfall, but if they have to go out, they need to cover their noses and mouths. Because Alex's family is 140 miles further east, he hopes they are safer. After lunch, there is silence.

Chapter 5 - The radio and the cell phones still don't work, but the water still does. They clean up and drink some water. Later, they have dinner. Then the explosions begin again.



Chapter 6 - Alex, Joe, and Darren wait again while the explosions continue. They spend another night, and have salad for breakfast. It is still dark and ash is falling the next morning. Then it begins to rain. The gutters fall off under the weight of the ash, and Alex wonders how much longer it will be before the entire roof caves in.

Chapter 7 - It is lighter out the next morning, but not by much. The propane grill is dug out of the ash and brought inside to cook steaks. That afternoon, three men break into the house. Joe is hit with a baseball bat, while Alex takes out one of the intruders. But then Darren gets to his bedroom in time to get out a pistol, and kills two of the intruders. Darren then shoots the third intruder, who had been taken out by Alex. Alex runs out.

Chapter 8 - Alex runs through the rainy ash, losing his shoes along the way. Two blocks later, he stops running, and throws up. He goes to his ruined house, gets some sodas out of the fridge, drinks them, coughs up some specks of blood, and eats two apples. Alex grabs some of his father's clothing to wear. He sleeps under his parents' bed that night. He decides that he will set off for Warren to find his family the following day. Alex packs an old hiking knapsack that belongs to his father, fills it with one change of clothes, two t-shirts, and food and bottled water. He also puts on his father's work boots. Alex has another coughing fit, but this time, there is no blood, and he thanks God for it. He grabs a knife, some matches and candles, a large rain poncho, and the house's spare keys. He then heads out.

Chapter 9 - Alex tries to ride his bike, but it won't move through the soggy ash. He realizes he can't walk to Warren, or drive, so there has to be a better way. He decides he can use skis, so he puts them on, and they work well enough. He begins moving through town. It is tough going. Cars litter the roads. There are dead people in some of them. He goes to his taekwondo academy, to discover it -and other stores- have all been looted. This angers him. He wants to know why everyone is out for themselves, and not helping each other. He decides to borrow Master Parker's bo staff, and switches up one of his ski poles for it. He heads toward his school to discover that it is packed.

Chapter 10 - People are heading into the school, while others are shoveling ash off the roof to keep it from collapsing. He goes inside, where Mr. Kloptsky the school principal is sitting in a chair. An older man with a shotgun is there, as is a senior football player. He tells Alex not to talk about having food with him. Alex is free to stay if he wants, but he will be put to work if he does stay. Alex is tempted to stay and help, but remembers he wants to find his family, and so only sets up for the night in the gym. That night, a little girl raids Alex's backpack, and he almost strangles her, but lets her go with two packages of crackers.

Chapter 11 - The next morning, Alex stretches and goes off by himself to eat some cheese and water. He feels bad about it, but knows he has to move on. He has his water refilled, since the school has its own water tank. Back in the gym, Alex comes across Ian, nicknamed Spork for the eating utensils his father packed with his meals for lunch. A pretty girl named Laura comes up to say hello. They call her Ingalls, because of the old-fashioned dresses she wears. Laura offers Alex the chance to leave with her church. Alex, Spork, and Laura go to Redeemer Baptist Church. Spork tries to steal



two candy bars from Laura's mother, but Alex goes after him. When he catches up with him, Spork offers Alex a candy bar, which he accepts. The two then go their separate ways.

Chapter 12 - Alex heads down Main Street toward Waterloo. He wants to get to Highway 20, but is worried about going through major population centers, not knowing whether people will be looting or helping each other. He sticks to less populated areas and then moves out into the country. Alex has canned stew for lunch. He continues on, attempts to taste some water in a country stream, but it is packed with sulfur. He then moves on, and sleeps off the road, wrapped up in a plastic tarp and using the backpack as a pillow. He dreams about Laura.

Chapter 13 - Ash has penetrated Alex's clothing, and he is running out of water. He resolves to find water that day, and comes across a farm that appears to be deserted. At first, he considers breaking into the house, but decides against it. Having run out of water, he then goes to the next farm house he can find. Here, he can smell food being cooked, and the back porch is shoveled off, so he goes to the door. An old man answers with a shotgun, telling Alex to move along, but the man's wife allows Alex entry. The old man is Elroy Barslow, and his wife is Edna. She prepares him a steak, insisting he stay to eat. She says she hopes that if either of her sons were out in those conditions, someone would help them, too. He eats and then falls asleep in the living room. Elroy wakes him up, and Alex prepares to head out. Edna has washed Alex's dirty clothes, and Elroy has brought Alex some more supplies, including more water bottles. Alex then heads out.

Chapter 14 - As Alex moves on, there is the continual roar of thunder in the background. He gets caught in the rain, and finds an abandoned car to sleep in for the night. It is still raining the next morning, though there is less ash, and Alex moves out once again. Five days into his trip, the cold rains stop. Alex is out of food as he comes to the corner of US 20 and Highway 13, where a little gas station is located. It is mostly destroyed, and Alex scavenges some candy for dinner. He spends the night there.

Chapter 15 - In the morning, a husband, a wife, and his two kids are scavenging at the gas station. The man confronts Alex, asking him if he has any food. Alex says he doesn't, but the man doesn't believe him. As he approaches, Alex bangs the bo stick he has, and the man's wife demands he leave Alex alone, and help her search for food.

Chapter 16 - Alex heads up US 20 East. There are other sets of footprints, and sled tracks. He begins making good time, and catches up to a group of five adults, which he decides to avoid by cutting across country. He wonders how else he might get to Warren. Eventually he comes across a man cooking meat over a fire. The man introduces himself as Target. He is shaving his head with an ax, and asks Alex to hold a mirror so he can see the back of his head. The back of his head has a bulls-eye tattooed onto it. Alex gets some meat for helping Target, who says he is getting a crew together. He is an escaped inmate. Alex doesn't want to join, and Target attacks him, hitting Alex's ribs with the ax causing them to bleed. But Alex uses his training to fight Target off. He then skis away toward the next farmstead, bleeding profusely. He wraps



the wound with clothing, and the blood slows. He continues on to another farmstead, where he decides to stay in the barn. Inside the barn, he sees a girl and an older woman working some sort of a bike contraption, and then falls forward and passes out.

Chapter 17 - When Alex wakes up, a girl's voice is telling him to sit up. He is in a living room in front of a fireplace. Alex is given ibuprofen, and the girl's mother gives him a shot of alcohol to help ease the pain. The girl is named Darla. Her mother is Gloria Edmunds. Darla is wary about helping Alex, but her mother believes God put him in their path. Darla, who has 4H junior veterinary experience, tends to Alex's wound, and Alex passes out.

Chapter 18 - When Alex awakes, his wound has been tended and stitched up. Darla brings him a bread pan to use as a bed pan. She doesn't want him moving too much, because she doesn't want the stitches to get ripped out. Darla brings him back some water, and Alex returns to sleep.

Chapter 19 - The next morning, Mrs. Edmunds helps Alex around. She gives Alex some of her husband's old clothes. Her husband has been dead for more than three years. Darla is out tending to farm chores. Mrs. Edmunds explains her daughter has a rough tongue, but is really very sweet. Mrs. Edmunds prepares Alex corn pone pancakes for breakfast. Later, Darla tends to Alex's wounds, and Alex becomes sexually aroused, and embarrassed, but Darla shrugs it off.

Chapter 20 - Alex eats breakfast with Darla and Mrs. Edmunds the following morning. Darla announces she is going to dig corn, but with six sacks of cornmeal, Mrs. Edmunds tells her daughter to rest for the day. But she protests, and Alex insists on helping out as best he can. They all go dig up corn. They fill up six sacks of corn. Alex then follows Darla to the barn.

Chapter 21 - Inside the barn, Darla tends to some twenty or twenty-five rabbits. She explains they are all meat rabbits, but they are all ill, that they became sick shortly after the ashfall. She says she hopes it doesn't get them, too. Darla kills one of the rabbits. She then teaches Alex how to skin and prepare the rabbit, gutting it and cleaning it. Alex wonders if it will be alright to eat a sick rabbit, and Mrs. Edmunds says she will cook it really well -and then they will find out. Alex helps Darla tan the rabbit's hide while Mrs. Edmunds prepares a rabbit corn chowder stew for dinner.

Chapter 22 - Alex stays on with the Edmunds for two weeks. Apart from the usual chores, most of the time is spent digging up and grinding corn, using the bicycle-powered device in the barn. They build a makeshift smokehouse for the rabbits, which they must butcher because the rabbits are getting sicker.

Chapter 23 - Alex and Darla do the laundry by pumping water and filling up the tub. Alex later helps Darla out working on an alternator, and tells her to stop being so impatient with him. He says he'll be moving on soon, to find his family. They use the alternator to charge batteries, which is in turn powered by the bike contraption. That night, they listen to the radio, and catch wind of some of the news broadcasts, which come and go. As far



west as California and Oregon has been affected, and even the Chinese are helping out with a humanitarian mission. There has also been a collapse in international grain prices. Alex and Darla decide to head five miles into town, to see Doc Smith about the rabbits, and see if there is any news about Illinois.

Chapter 24 - Alex and Darla set out the next morning. They both use the skis together going downhill, but Alex turns to talk to Darla and loses balance. Falling into the ash, they get into an ash fight that ends when they laugh, call a truce, and continue on.

Chapter 25 - As Darla and Alex arrive in Worthington, they are confronted by Earl, who has a gun. Earl explains people have been seeking corn in the silos at the edge of town. Doc Smith's house has had the lock on its door busted, and Alex and Darla seek out help from the neighbors. Mrs. Jean Matthews asks Alex and Darla to help her bring food out to the harvest crew, which they do. She explains that Doc Smith died when he fell off his roof while shoveling ash. His wife, Lottie, is staying at the school. They feed the crews digging for corn, and then they return to Mrs. Matthew's house to help do the dishes. The water still runs in town because the Mayor has put a five-gallon daily ration into effect.

Chapter 26 - Darla and Alex head toward Worthington Public Library. There, they find Rita Mae, who says that people in town are on edge following the murder of the Fredericks family. Rita Mae helps Darla find information about her rabbits. Twelve million years before, a supervolcano erupted, and the animals became sick, crawled into watering holes to cool off, and died. This has been gleaned from the archeological dig site at Ashfall Beds. People can get the sickness, too, which is why people need to stay inside as much as possible. A refugee camp has been set up outside of Galena, Illinois, for Iowan refugees. In exchange for rabbit meat, and some other supplies, Rita Mae trades Darla a pair of skis. As they head back to the farm, Alex and Darla hear rumbling and feel the ground shake once more.

Chapter 27 - When they return to the barn, Darla and Alex find Mrs. Edmunds being raped. Alex attacks the assailant, killing him. Target then appears in the doorway. He vows revenge, tries to shoot Darla, but Alex shields Darla with his body, knocking her to the floor. Target tries shooting again, but his gun is empty. Alex and Darla both attack Target, and he runs off, vowing to get even. Meanwhile, Mrs. Edmunds dies.

Chapter 28 - Darla is wracked with pain and guilt, and blames Alex, hitting him again and again. Alex knows they have to hide for the night, but Darla is in a state of shock. They go and stay in the hayloft in the barn overnight.

Chapter 29 - That night, Alex wakes up to see an orange glow below him. Target is trying to start two fires. Having brought up a grinding stone the night before, Alex drops it on him, partially caving in his skull. The fire begins spreading, and Alex brings Darla down the ladder. But the farmhouse -with all of the supplies in it- is on fire. Alex rushes to get the skis outside of the barn, and grabs the backpack that Target had been carrying. It is full of supplies, including water, rabbit meat and cornmeal -enough for a week. As the house burns, Alex and Darla say prayers for her mother.



Chapter 1 - Chapter 29 Analysis

Mike Mullin's novel *Ashfall* begins quietly enough: Nearly sixteen year-old Alex Halprin is settling into his house for a weekend of gaming and hanging out with friends while his mother, father, and sister are away visiting his uncle's farm in Illinois. But the eruption of the Yellowstone Supervolcano changes everything, first by destroying Alex's house, and then by covering multiple states with suffocating ash.

Alex, like any typical teenager, has no idea what to do at first. He ultimately takes refuge with his neighbors, but when violence spikes, Alex takes off on his own. Much of what transpires is instinctual on Alex's part, for, beyond taekwondo classes, he has had no experience in abnormal situations that require more than a casual response. Indeed, Alex realizes he is on his own much later because he understands that, in a post-volcanic world, there is no one to call for help. Indeed, it appears as if everything has come apart, including the escape of convicts and lawlessness ruling the day. Everything people take for granted, they are without by and large.

After narrowly escaping from a convict, and without any taken-for-granted medical services to call, Alex manages to stumble upon the Edmunds farmstead and barn, where Mrs. Edmunds says God's will prevailed in Alex finding her and her daughter. (For more on this, see "Religion" in the themes section of the study guide.) Indeed, it appears as if God indeed did have a hand in bringing together Alex and Darla -even if things might not seem that way at first, given the death of Mrs. Edmunds. Indeed, it is Alex who defends Darla and kills Target following Mrs. Edmunds's murder. In so doing, both Alex and Darla have saved one another's lives.



Chapter 30 - 58

Chapter 30 - 58 Summary

Chapter 30 - Alex prepares to move out, but Darla is still in shock about everything. At last, they get moving. Darla brings a rabbit with her, and makes very slow progress. Darla doesn't want to leave the rabbit behind. They go to Saint Paul's School in Worthington. There, they check in with Mrs. Nance, who offers them board if their keep is earned. Alex wants to move on in the morning. Mrs. Nance says there is much lawless country between Worthington and Illinois. Alex and Darla then bed down for the night.

Chapter 31 - Before breakfast, Alex heads out, leaving Darla behind with the people and community with which she has grown up. He feels bad about it, but heads out anyway. A short time later, he sees Darla behind him, catching up to him, still carrying a rabbit. When Darla refuses to turn back, Alex returns to town to find supplies for her. There, he trades for a backpack, fills it with a blanket and the tarp to stop rabbit droppings from soiling the blanket, puts the rabbit in the backpack, and gives the backpack to Darla to wear.

Chapter 32 - Alex and Darla set out, and spend the night in a partially-collapsed garage. The following day, it snows -lightly at first, and then heavily. It gets cold very quickly, and in the blinding snow, Alex goes tumbling over a guardrail.

Chapter 33 - Alex lands in freezing water. Darla pulls him out, and they head up away from the water. They take shelter under the bridge. Darla gets Alex into dry clothes and lights a fire. They cuddle up together under a blanket for warmth, and Alex falls asleep.

Chapter 34 - Alex thanks Darla for saving his life for the second time. She has gathered more firewood amid the roaring blizzard. They build a wall of snow to keep out the wind. They then cuddle up again together for sleep. The next day, they build more walls, creating an igloo. It is warm inside. Alex talks about his parents, and about his little sister, Rebecca. This gets Darla to open up, and she talks about her rabbits, including Jack (the rabbit who is with them), and she apologizes about blaming Alex for her mother's death. She cries because she misses her mother, and then Alex holds her.

Chapter 35 - While Darla makes breakfast, Alex goes scouting around. The snow has stopped, but it is bitterly cold. He chops two branches off of a tree, one for a ski pole, the other for a bo stick. That night, they break into a farmhouse, to discover its occupant has committed suicide by pistol. They take the empty gun and pack it away. They make a fire, and pull the couch in the living room closer to it, and cuddle up together for warmth. They kiss, but then Darla starts crying, wondering how they can feel so good when so many people are suffering or dead.



Chapter 36 - In the morning, Alex and Darla search the house for supplies. There is no food, and there are no more bullets. They do find good winter clothing. Darla uses bailing twine from the barn to make snow baskets for Alex's skis. Darla explains that it was her father who gave her the mechanical know-how she has. Darla explains she is eighteen; Alex is sixteen -having turned sixteen two days before without realizing it. Darla tells him the snow baskets are a birthday present, but Alex tells her she is his birthday present. They head out. They come to Highway 151, and the only way to get to Illinois is to cross the Mississippi River at Dubuque, where, Mrs. Nance has mentioned, there have been riots. But there are not tracks at all on 151. They head out to Dubuque, and then ahead of them, see someone coming toward them.

Chapter 37 - They come upon a woman who is bringing her three children behind her in the snow in a toboggan, but the girl at the back is passed out. Alex says the girl needs shelter and a fire. They break into a snow-bound SUV, and build a fire. The girl, Katie, is breathing, but is very cold. The mother has presumed her dead. Against Darla's protests, Alex makes the mother and three children dinner. They then prepare to spend the night in the SUV.

Chapter 38 - Katie dies during the night. The mother tells Alex that the troubles of this world cannot hurt Katie anymore. She explains that she and her husband, Roger, attempted to get through Dubuque, but were unable. Roger fought off a gang while she and her children escaped. Later, she saw Roger being roasted like a pig for eating. They leave the woman some food, and Darla fashions them a pan for melting snow for water. Then, they take off, knowing they must find another way across the Mississippi.

Chapter 39 - As they travel, Darla is still upset with Alex about leaving the woman and her children some food. That night, when they snuggle up together near the stump of a tree, Darla confesses she is worried. They snuggle up closer, and while they don't have sexual intercourse, they get close.

Chapter 40 - They move on, and spend the next night in a pig barn. They are nearly out of food. In the morning, only Jack gets breakfast. At last, they come to a farmstead. It appears to be a deserted pig farm. There, they butcher a pig. They cook some thick-cut bacon for dinner, and freeze the rest of the meat for future use in a snow bank. They spend the night in the farmhouse living room, before the fireplace.

Chapter 41 - In the morning, Alex and Darla come back to Highway 52, meaning they have gone in a circle. At last, they come to the Mississippi River. The river is in bad shape, covered with ash, dead fish, and ruined barges. Alex and Darla decide to cross the river using the lock and gates, in which a tugboat and barge have been trapped. On board, they find all kinds of grain and foodstuffs, and pack some. Darla suggests staying on, but Alex insists on finding his family. They make it across the river, and head up to a road that has been plowed.

Chapter 42 - Happy to see a plowed road, Alex and Darla trek north on foot, carrying their skis. A FEMA truck pulls up, and the two uniformed men driving it give Alex and Darla a ride to the camp. A woman and a young boy are already inside the truck. They



head south and then north, making a loop to pick up refugees and bring them to the camp, Camp Galena. The refugees are told they are subject to military law because it is a state of emergency. Until the emergency is over, people from Illinois are forbidden from traveling inside the safe zones. All of their possessions are taken, ordered by Captain Jameson. Jack is taken away and shot. There are 47,000 refugees at the camp. Alex and Darla are taken away and sent through a gate in a fence.

Chapter 43 - Alex and Darla look through their packs. Their food and weapons are gone, but their clothing, water, and some matches remain. The camp is full of dirty, unhappy people. There isn't enough room in the tents for the people to sleep, so many of them sleep outside. Darla and Alex sleep curled up in a hollowed-out snowdrift. When they wake up, they discover the camp has cleared out for food: Dixie cups of plain, white rice. Hands are spray painted blue as a way to identify people who have already received rations. Alex and Darla ask a little boy about when dinner is, and he suggests trying the yellow coats, but they might be too tall. He then runs off.

Chapter 44 - Alex and Darla seek out the yellow-coated people: a nice, orderly line, full of mothers and young children, as well as various other aged children. The yellow coats say "Southern Baptist Conference" on them. Black bean and ham stew is being served. One of the yellow-coated workers, a woman, explains that they are doing disaster relief despite food prices skyrocketing, because they have been doing disaster relief for years, and are better prepared than most. Meanwhile, emergency food supplies aren't coming in, but their pastor is pressing FEMA and others to help out how they can. The woman catches Alex by the waist and tells him to trust in God. When Alex defends Darla from someone trying to search her for food, another man proposes that Alex can sleep in their tent if he stands guard. Alex only agrees if Darla can sleep there, too -and they will split guard shifts. The man agrees.

Darla, meanwhile, watches the fenced-in vehicle compound, looking at the bulldozer. Alex then realizes the woman from the Southern Baptist Conference has put almonds in his pocket. He shares them with Darla. That night, they split their guard shifts, and sleep in the tent.

Chapter 45 - The next morning, Alex and Darla thank the woman, Georgia Martin, for the almonds. They also tell her about the barge full of wheat near Bellevue, on the Mississippi. The woman is intrigued. The next morning, Alex and Darla are summoned to the gate, where they meet Mission Director Jim Evans, and Georgia. They tell Jim about the wheat, and then they go to meet with Colonel Levitov. The colonel thanks Jim for the intelligence, and says he'll pass it up through channels. He then tells them all to leave.

Chapter 46 - Darla and Alex watch a man, Chet, working on the bulldozer. She talks to the man about hydraulics, and he is intrigued by her knowledge. Meanwhile, Alex knows that he and Darla need food, or they will be in trouble -as will the nearly 50,000 people in the camp.



Chapter 47 - Six days later, Chet gets authorization for Darla to help him work on the bulldozers. Darla wants Alex to come and help, but he isn't allowed. Darla will get two square meals in exchange for her work. While Darla is gone, Alex seeks to find Georgia, only to find out she has gone home after a dispute with Jim Evans. Darla returns later, smuggling a chocolate bar to Alex.

Chapter 48 - Because Darla is getting meals through Chet, she gives Alex her ration of rice. Alex and Darla tell Chet about the wheat, and he hasn't heard anything about it. He goes and gets Captain Jameson. Jameson explains the wheat is being guarded by Black Lake security for Cargill distributors, being tipped off by Levitov. There are grain shortages all over the world, and big bonuses are being promised for the safe guarding of the grain on the barge. Captain Jameson suggests that Darla can entertain soldiers for extra food, and this causes Alex to kick Jameson in the face. Alex is then clubbed with a gun and knocked out.

Chapter 49 - When Alex awakens, he is in a punishment hut. He cannot even kneel, and gets snow by digging through the ashen floor and reaching outside. He goes to the bathroom in a hole and covers it up with ash. He then returns to sleep.

Chapter 50 - Alex awakens to the punishment hut being upended by a bulldozer, with Darla at the helm. She urges him to get into the bulldozer's cabin, which he does. She plows through fences, and two guards open fire on them. They drive into the refugee camp, taking out the fence. They go through, ultimately plunging down a hill and coming to rest halfway in a creek. From there, they are stuck.

Chapter 51 - Humvees come hurtling toward them just as Darla is able to get the bulldozer to move up out of the creek. They continue on foot. Alex asks Darla how she managed to steal a bulldozer, and she says she volunteered for prostitution, though she didn't actually have sex with anyone, to get what she needed to steal the bulldozer. She explains that Alex broke Jameson's nose, and that the punishment huts are meant for death. Alex is stunned. He tells her he loves her. She explains she stole a uniform and passed for a guard until she made it to the bulldozer. Alex decides they should head to their left when they come to a road.

Chapter 52 - Walking along, they come upon another intersection, and turn right onto Stagecoach Trail. They move semi-consciously from one road to the next, Alex trying to remember the way to his uncle's place. At last, they come up to his uncle's farm, and Rebecca comes running out to meet her brother, only to reveal that their mother and father are gone.

Chapter 53 - When Alex awakens, Darla is sleeping beside the bed in a chair. She has shaved her head to be rid of the lice in it, because Alex's family has no pesticide shampoo. Alex's Uncle Paul comes in, and Alex tells his uncle that Darla saved his life more than once, and that she can be trusted, and that he would die for her. Uncle Paul explains that Alex's mother and father left five weeks before to look for him, and they haven't heard from them since. Alex agrees to stay on to help his uncle prepare for the



coming hardships, and in exchange, his uncle will consider supplying him for a trip to Cedar Falls to search for his parents.

Chapter 54 - Alex heads to the dinner table. His cousins, Max and Anna, as well as Rebecca, are ready for dinner. Aunt Caroline and Darla are cooking outside. They have some ducks and goats, and are growing kale in the greenhouses, which is how they are able to stay fed with cheese and eggs. Alex and Darla recount their story to everyone present at dinner. Later, Uncle Paul forbids Darla and Alex from sleeping together, at least until Alex's parents come back. Alex grudgingly accepts this. Darla is very patient and tells Alex to give his uncle some time to see he is not a kid anymore.

Chapter 55 - At breakfast the next morning, Darla suggests making a larger grinder for cornmeal, and Max suggests using headstones from the cemetery. They theorize that they can become a gristmill business, charging a portion of the ground product as a price for grinding. Uncle Paul allows Darla and Alex to work on the project following morning chores. With Max, they go to the cemetery and obtain two headstones. In the afternoon, Darla and Uncle Paul begin working on another greenhouse.

Chapter 56 - As the next week passes, Alex regains his strength, and does everything he can to help out at the farm, from digging up corn to helping build the greenhouse. Uncle Paul goes to the nearby town of Warren to trade for things. A goat and duck are butchered for food. Uncle Paul explains that they killed their two dogs earlier, because they couldn't afford to feed the dogs meat, or let them starve.

Chapter 57 - In two weeks, Darla completes the gristmill. Alex is assigned the task of helping her work it. The process frees up much time for other chores. Eventually, Uncle Paul allows Darla and Alex to sleep together in the same room, giving Alex two condoms, just in case. Alex and Darla make love that night.

Chapter 58 - A new winter storm severely damages the greenhouses, destroying much of the kale crop. Rebecca is worried they will all die, or starve, but Alex tells her not to worry, that everything will be okay. Uncle Paul, while repairing the greenhouse, slips and falls from the ladder, catching his knee in a rafter, and the bone in his leg breaks. The entire family helps to free Uncle Paul and bring him inside. Doc McCarthy has to be summoned from Warren. But Uncle Paul tells them to fix the greenhouse first. Aunt Caroline and Rebecca agree to work on the greenhouse while Alex, Darla, and Max go to get Doc McCarthy. He still has a working car, and he drives them back to the farm. There, the family helps to hold Uncle Paul down while Doc McCarthy sets the leg and wraps it with fiberglass tape.

Doc McCarthy agrees to take a payment of kale, which is high in Vitamin C, so he can give it to his patients who have scurvy. He is also willing to trade pork for the kale, since the town has an enormous stockpile of it. A trade agreement is set up, to exchange pork for kale in the future. Alex goes to get some of the pork with Doc McCarthy, and is amazed to see the town has enough pork to feed everyone for years. Alex returns with the pork, determined to stay on until his uncle is better, and knowing it will be easier with Darla by his side.



Chapter 30 - 58 Analysis

With everything in Darla's life absolutely destroyed by the involvement of Target in her life (her father already dead, her mother dead now, and her home and entire farm in flames), Darla at first blames Alex, and then later recants. Indeed, the destruction not just of stable American life, but everything in her life means that Darla has nothing left to hold onto or protect -except her rabbit, Jack, and Alex, so she decides to follow Alex away from Worthington to Warren. Darla becomes a fierce guardian for Alex, saving his life on several more occasions, including from drowning in freezing water, and from a punishment hut in the refugee camp.

Beyond her love of Alex, everything that Darla hopes for -some kind of a future life- rests with Alex and his ability to find his family. She risks her own life in order to save Alex from the Black Lake Security refugee compound, which mirrors a Holocaust camp in many ways. It is likewise eerily reminiscent of refugee camps in Africa. What is even more horrifying are the conditions in which Americans are keeping fellow Americans under the guise of help. Indeed, the only true freedom that Alex and Darla have following the destruction of their former lives is the family farm, which was considered the agrarian, American ideal by Thomas Jefferson. It is on the family farm of Alex's Uncle Paul that Alex, his sister, and Darla, find love, acceptance, and importance. And it is on the family farm that Alex, Darla, and the others face an uncertain future.



Characters

Alex Halprin

Alex Halprin is the fifteen year-old (later sixteen year-old) main character, narrator, and principal protagonist of Mike Mullin's novel, *Ashfall*. Alex is an ordinary teenager who spends most of his time playing video games and hanging out with friends. A resident of Cedar Falls, Iowa, Alex has a younger sister named Rebecca, and stays home for the weekend alone because he doesn't want to go for a trip with his family to his uncle's farm in Illinois. Alex is also a black belt taekwondo expert. Alex is at home when the Yellowstone Supervolcano erupts, debris from which smashes apart his house and nearly kills him. From there, he is taken in for a few days by his neighbors, but when violent thugs are killed breaking into their house, he sets out on his own.

Alex scavenges for food and supplies as he goes, and has a run-in with an escaped convict named Target who nearly kills him with an axe. When Alex ends up on the Edmunds farmstead, Mrs. Edmunds and her daughter, Darla, take Alex in and nurse him back to health. When Target and a companion brutally rape and murder Mrs. Edmunds, Alex defends Darla, killing Target's companion, and later Target, who sets the farmhouse and barn on fire. Alex and Darla then head off together, falling in love as they travel, and ultimately coming to a refugee camp across the Mississippi River in Illinois. They escape from the camp, and head to Alex's uncle's farm, where they at last settle down -only to learn that Rebecca is the only member of Alex's family there. His mother and father had left five weeks before to head to Cedar Falls to find Alex. He vows to go and find them in the spring.

Darla Edmunds

Darla Edmunds is an eighteen year-old country girl, and the daughter of Mrs. Edmunds. She is brash and abrasive, yet kind, sweet, compassionate, and attentive. She has junior veterinarian skills, which allow her to stitch up Alex's wounds. Darla is also very mechanically-competent, being able to build, improvise, and design mechanical and physical devices, having learned much of the craft from her father, who has been dead for three years. Darla saves Alex's life on a number of occasions, and is stunned when her mother is murdered, and her house and farm is burned by Target. Darla at first blames Alex, but later recants. She accompanies him through thick and thin, across the frozen wilderness, down highways and through farms and across the Mississippi River, even saving Alex's life and escaping with him from the refugee camp. From there, she and Alex travel to his uncle's farm, where Darla comes to be warmly welcomed. She vows to stand by Alex's side.



Rebecca Halprin

Rebecca Halprin is the younger sister of Alex Halprin. She is sweet, kind, and caring, and goes with her mother and father to her Uncle Paul's Illinois family the weekend the Yellowstone Supervolcano erupts. She is overjoyed to see Alex when he arrives with Darla, but saddened and scared that her mother and father have been gone for five weeks looking for Alex.

Mrs. Edmunds

Mrs. Edmunds is the widowed mother of Darla Edmunds. Mrs. Edmunds is compassionate, kind, and deeply religious, believing Alex's appearance at their farm is the work of God. Mrs. Edmunds is ultimately raped and murdered by Target and his companion.

Target

Target is an escaped convict from Anamosa State Prison. He has a bulls-eye tattooed on the back of his head. When Alex refuses to join his crew, Target attempts to kill him. Target and his friend rape and murder Mrs. Edmunds, and Target sets fire to the Edmunds farmhouse and barn. Target is ultimately killed when Alex drops a rock onto his head, crushing his skull.

Uncle Paul

Uncle Paul is the uncle of Alex and Rebecca, the husband of Caroline, and the father of Anna and Max. Paul is very traditional, and very strict, but also very caring, for he takes care of Rebecca, Alex, and Darla as if they were his own children. When Paul breaks his leg, it is Alex, Max, and Darla, who go and retrieve Doc McCarthy to set the bone.

Aunt Caroline

Aunt Caroline is the wife of Paul, and mother of Anna and Max. She is the aunt of Alex and Rebecca Halprin. Caroline is very motherly, very sweet, and very patient. She is happy to welcome Alex and Darla into their home.

Colonel Levitov

Colonel Levitov is a member of the Black Lake Security force that guards and oversees the FEMA refugee camp. He is ruthless and callous, and dismisses Alex, Darla, and the Southern Baptist Conference's reports of a grain barge being trapped in the Mississippi River. Rather than feed the starving refugees, he orders his men to guard the grain for the company that owns the grain, for monetary bonuses.



Georgia Martin

Georgia Martin is a member of the Southern Baptist Conference. She is devoutly religious, sneaks food to Alex, helps administer food to the refugees, and tries to make it possible for the wheat on the trapped barge to be used for the refugee camp. She disappears mysteriously, supposedly having gone home after a disagreement with the pastor of her conference.

Doc McCarthy

Doc McCarthy is a kind and friendly local doctor in Warren, Illinois. He is called upon to help set Uncle Paul's leg, and discovers that Paul and his family are growing kale, which is high in vitamin C, of which there is a deficiency in town. He sets up a trading system with Darla for pork, of which the town has a supply that will feed everyone in town for years and years.



Objects/Places

Yellowstone National Park

Yellowstone National Park is the site of the supervolcano which explodes and blankets most of the western half of the United States in more than a foot of sulfuric ash.

Cedar Falls, Iowa

Cedar Falls, Iowa, is the town in which Alex and his family live. It is a nice town before the volcano erupts, Alex explains, but the town's people turning on one another and looting makes him sad.

The Edmunds Farm

The Edmunds Farm is located in Iowa, and is where Mrs. Edmunds and her daughter, Darla, live. It is the farmstead to which Alex heads following the encounter with Target that nearly leaves him dead. The Edmunds Farm is ultimately burned down by Target.

Warren, Illinois

Warren, Illinois, is the town near which Alex's uncle and his family live. It is to Warren, Illinois, that Alex and Darla seek to go. Warren is also the home of Doc McCarthy, and an innumerable years' supply of pork.

Galena, Illinois

Galena, Illinois is east of the Mississippi River, and is the location of a FEMA refugee camp overseen by Black Lake Security.

Bellevue, Illinois

Bellevue, Illinois is a town on the Mississippi River, and is the location of a canal lock in which a barge of wheat has become stuck.

Uncle Paul's Farm

Uncle Paul's farm is located near the town of Warren, Illinois. On the farm, greenhouses have been constructed to grow kale to feed the family and the animals, the ducks and goats, that are being raised there.

Candles

Candles are used by Alex and Darla in order to see in the darkness at night, and to see into the darkness in abandoned buildings and farmsteads. They are in short supply, and are very valuable.

Corn

Corn is a major crop in Illinois and Iowa, and becomes the main staple for the diet of survivors of the supervolcano. Corn is dug out from under the ashes, ground up, and turned into various dishes for consuming.

Backpacks

Backpacks are used by Alex and Darla in order to carry their supplies as they trek across Iowa and Illinois. In fact, everything they own is in their backpacks.



Themes

Coming of Age

Coming of age is a major and dominant theme in the novel *Ashfall* by Mike Mullin. Thematically, coming of age involves the emotional, ethical, spiritual, and character growth or maturation of an individual dealing with real world experiences and encounters. The theme of coming of age affects primarily the characters of Alex and Darla in the novel, each with important and lasting consequences. Indeed, Alex and Darla ultimately learn a lot from each other as they grow as people.

Alex begins the novel as a typical teenager: he plays computer games, hangs out with friends, and doesn't think much about anything else. Forced out of his home by the supervolcano, Alex sees three men killed in front of him as they attempt to break into the house of his neighbors. He sees people having committed suicide, frozen to death, experiences the effects of looting, stealing, rape, arson, and human cruelty in the form of Black Lake Security members. Yet, along the way, Alex steps outside of himself, giving food to a passing family, watching out for Darla, protecting her, and bringing her along with him to his family's farm. He is no longer a punk teenager by the time he shows up at his uncle's, but he is a competent, grounded, and responsible young man.

Darla begins the novel as a typical teenager only insofar as she is abrasive. She is very rational, mechanically-oriented, and very responsible. But far too often, she lets her head get in the way of her heart. She doesn't believe that Alex should have left any food with the family they pass, but as her love grows for Alex, she comes around more and more to care about the welfare of others. Indeed, her love of Alex causes her to risk her own life in order to save him and escape with him from the refugee camp. By the end of the novel, Alex has learned to use his head more, while Darla has learned to use her heart more -and they are both better people for it.

Love

Love is a major and dominant theme in the novel, *Ashfall*, by Mike Mullin. Love occurs in two predominant ways in the novel: That of the love of family, and that of the love of romance. Each form of love primarily affects both Alex and Darla, and has tremendous consequences for both of them.

For Alex, the love of his mother, father, and sister means that he is willing to walk 140 miles, risking his own life in order to reach them at his uncle's farm in Illinois. His entire experience is fueled by being able to be reunited with his mother and father and sister. When he arrives at his uncle's farm, it is his love of family that convinces him to stay on and help tend to the farm in order to prepare for the coming winter, and for the welfare of the entire family. For Darla, her love of family revolves wholly around her widowed mother. She idolizes her deceased father, who taught her everything she knows about



mechanical endeavors. She essentially runs her farm on behalf of her mother, and the death of her mother confounds and stuns her into a state of shock.

In terms of romantic love, love exists wholly between Alex and Darla. They instantly connect when Alex shows up at her farm, and their desperate situation helps them grow together in closeness and intimacy. Indeed, their emotional affection toward one another is only increased by having nothing outside of the other. They ultimately do fall in love, and they resolve to stand by one another's side, no matter what. It is the love of Darla that compels Alex to bring her along to his uncle's farm, and Darla's love of Alex that compels her to risk her life to save Alex numerous times, including at the refugee camp.

Religion

Religion is a major and underlying theme in the novel, *Ashfall*, by Mike Mullin. In the novel, the major religion that appears is Christianity, and religion appears in a very positive light. Religion manifests itself in terms of both personal faith and morality, and organized church efforts.

In terms of personal faith and morality, religion affects individuals in various ways. In times of difficulty, Alex prays to God and asks for God to protect his family. He finds some comfort in these prayers. Along the way, Alex encounters numerous people who implore him to seek God's help, and to never waver in their belief that He will allow things to work out for the better. It is this belief in human goodness, and in God, that compels Mrs. Edmunds to reach out and shelter Alex. Indeed, Mrs. Edmunds believes that God had allowed Alex to come across their paths. And this may indeed be the case, since Alex and Darla fall in love, and save one another's lives multiple times.

In terms of organized religious efforts, the most potent and important example of Christian generosity occurs in the form of the Southern Baptist Conference, whose members voluntarily head around the world to administer humanitarian aid to dispossessed and needy people. The Southern Baptist Conference is present at the Galena, Illinois FEMA camp. There, they distribute all the food they can to the children and younger members of the refugee camp.



Style

Point of View

Mike Mullin tells his novel, *Ashfall*, from the first-person, limited omniscient perspective, from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist, Alex Halprin. This is done for two primary reasons. The first is that the novel is about the experiences of Alex following the eruption of the Yellowstone Supervolcano, and there is no one better to tell Alex's story than he, himself. The second reason is that the first-person narrative mode is very intimate and personal, and allows the character to directly communicate thoughts, feelings, and emotions to the reader without the presence of a third-person narrator. This allows a greater sense of relation between the character and the reader, and makes the events of the novel that much more emotionally compelling.

Setting

Mike Mullin sets his novel, *Ashfall*, in Iowa and Illinois, parts of the American Midwest. This is done for at least two reasons. The first is that Iowa and Illinois are close enough to the supervolcano at Yellowstone in order to be directly impacted, but not destroyed. This allows for the characters of the novel to be forced to deal with the aftereffects of the eruption. The second reason is that the setting allows for the characters to make their way through the land, being able to scavenge and provide for themselves as they travel along -something that might not be possible in a city.

Language and Meaning

Mike Mullin tells his novel, *Ashfall*, in language that is simple, quick, and to the point. This is done for at least two reasons. The first is that the novel is told from the perspective of sixteen year-old Alex, and the language employed matches his character: an average teenage boy without college education. The second reason is that the events of the novel -the eruption of the supervolcano, death, destruction, and mayhem- do not lend themselves well to poetic language. The short, fast-paced language further adds to the desperation and fast-paced action of the novel, making it more believable.

Structure

Mike Mullin divides his novel, *Ashfall*, into fifty-eight consecutive, linear, and chronological chapters. This is done for at least one primary reason: the eruption of the volcano in Chapter One is the event from which all consequences derive. As the chapters increase, so does time away from the eruption of the supervolcano. This simple and straightforward structure also allows for the reader to focus on the plot and the events of the novel, rather than on the structure of the novel itself.



Quotes

"What did we know about either atheists or foxholes? Nothing. But I sort of understood it now. So I prayed."

-Chapter 3, p. 23

"I kicked the rack, feeling suddenly furious. What was it with Cedar Falls? People here had always been nice enough. But somehow the volcano had turned them into looters. Was everyone crazy now? We should have been sticking together and helping each other, not wrecking stuff."

-Chapter 9, p. 66

"I rubbed the Skittles clean on the inside of my shirt and ate them and the Starbursts. Mom would have told me not to spoil my dinner with candy. I wished I had a dinner to spoil. Or a mom to tell me."

-Chapter 14, p. 110

"Hunger of choice is a painful luxury; hunger of necessity is terrifying torture."

Chapter 15, p. 117

"Right or wrong, I already felt somewhat responsible for her mother's death. What if following me got Darla killed, too?"

-Chapter 31, p. 236

"Why pen us in at all? I feel like a pig on the way to the slaughterhouse."

-Chapter 43, p. 338

"The volcano had taken our homes, our food, our automobiles, and our airplanes, but it hadn't taken our humanity. No, we'd given that up on our own."

Chapter 43, p. 344

"I hated the fact that I was holding us back. I hated that she had to break the trail for us. I even hated her a little for being so damned nice about it."

-Chapter 51, p. 399

"I'd spent the last eight weeks struggling to reach my uncle's farm, figuring that once I got here my quest would be complete. But it wasn't."

-Chapter 53, p. 410

"Our kale, loaded with vitamin C, was more valuable than gold. Food represented wealth in the post-eruption world, as surely as a bank vault stuffed with one-hundred-dollar bills had represented wealth in the old world."

-Chapter 58, p. 455

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the theme of coming of age in the novel, *Ashfall*, by Mike Mullin. What is coming of age? Which two characters does coming of age affect, and in what ways? How do these characters grow as people because of their experiences? What are the consequences of this growth? Is this good or bad? Why?

In the novel, Alex leaves Katie's mother and siblings with some food as he and Darla head out on their own. Darla is unhappy about this. Why? Is she correct to be upset? Why or why not?

Discuss the theme of love in the novel, *Ashfall*, by Mike Mullin. In what forms does love appear in the novel? How does love affect the plot of the novel? Does love impact the novel for the better or for the worse? Why?

After Mrs. Edmunds is raped and murdered, Alex can't help thinking he is at least partly responsible for her demise. Darla argues at first that it is entirely his fault, and then, later, not his fault. Is the demise of Mrs. Edmunds Alex's fault, especially given the force of greater events, such as the eruption of the supervolcano, and all of its aftereffects? Why or why not? Explain your position.

Discuss the theme of religion in the novel, *Ashfall*, by Mike Mullin. What form of religion predominantly appears in the novel? In what ways does religion appear in the novel, and to what ends? Is religion presented as a positive or a negative thing? How so, and why?