

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford Study Guide

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford by Ron Hansen (novelist)

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Plot Summary

Jesse James is a notorious outlaw who, with his brother Frank, makes up the core of the James Gang. Other members of the gang vary depending on the job and who is available, but usually include an array of cousins and friends. As Frank and Jesse make plans to rob a train on September 7, 1881, they are joined by Charley Ford, a man who is sometimes included in the illegal activities. It's here that they first meet Robert "Bob" Ford. Frank isn't impressed with Bob but Jesse seems to like the young man. Bob is a huge fan of Jesse and knows everything about him from reading books and newspaper accounts of Jesse's activities. Bob spends some time with Jesse but lives most of the time with his widowed sister, Martha Bolton. Meanwhile, Jesse's reputation with the people is somewhat favorable but the government and law enforcement are berated for allowing the tyranny of Jesse James go on for so long. When the governor offers a large reward for the capture or death of Jesse, several members of the gang are interested in the possibility of collecting. Ed Miller confides in Bob Ford that he's been talking to others about the possibility of capturing Jesse James.

Meanwhile, other members of the gang are going about their daily lives. Woodson Hite, known as Wood, is Jesse's cousin. He and another gang member, Dick Liddil, go to visit Wood's father and stepmother. Dick has an affair with Wood's stepmother and the two men clash over it. Wood kills a servant who knows about the affair and when Dick and Wood meet up later at Martha's house, a gunfight erupts. Bob steps in and kills Wood but Dick is injured. Those at the house know they can't tell Jesse that they've killed his cousin and so they hide the body. Jesse suspects Dick and puts a reward on his head, both for Wood's death and for the possibility that he's planning to turn Jesse in for the reward money. Bob and his brother, Charley, meet with the governor and agree to turn in members of the gang, including Jesse and Dick Liddil. Dick is taken into custody immediately.

As Jesse plans another bank robbery, he's joined by Bob and Bob's brother, Charley. The two men are in Jesse's house on a Monday morning when Jesse leaves his guns on the bed, moving some distance away. Bob sees his chance and shoots Jesse, who is unarmed and apparently unaware, killing him instantly. Bob and Charley turn themselves in, confident that the governor will pardon them, which he does.

Bob expects accolades and wealth as the result for being the man to kill Jesse James but the governor's reward turns out to be only two hundred, fifty dollars each for Bob and Charley. They are pardoned for their past crimes but the brothers are broke and at odds. Charley eventually commits suicide but Bob goes on to start several successful businesses, including a gambling house in Creede, Colorado, following a silver strike there. It's there that he meets up with a man named Soapy Smith who kills Bob in cold blood, apparently looking for the same glory Bob had sought when he set out to kill Jesse James.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

As the story opens, Jesse James is at his home on Woodland Avenue. He subscribes to several newspapers and often checks up on current events. His name is Jesse Woodson James and he was born September 5, 1847. He seldom drinks and smokes cigars but never inhales. He is missing the end of a finger on his left hand and has two "incompletely healed bullet holes" in his chest. Jesse's six-year-old son is named Jesse Edwards James but is known by everyone as Tim and doesn't know his real name. One night, Alexander Franklin James - Jesse's brother, Frank - arrives at the James home. Frank leaves the following day and Jesse leaves a day later. They meet up with cousins, Robert Woodson Hite - better known as Wood - and his younger brother Clarence. The Hites are from Adairville Kentucky. Other members of the James Gang at this time are also there and include Dick Liddil, Jim Cummins, Ed Miller and Charles Wilson "Charley" Ford. On this particular meeting, Charley's younger brother, Robert "Bob" Ford, is also present. Charley has a tendency to berate himself, extolling his faults to others before they can discover them for themselves. He's twenty-four but seems younger. Bob spends some time with Frank and Jesse takes note. Frank is noncommittal and refuses to give in to Bob's insistence that he can be a valuable asset to the gang. Bob later catches Jesse alone and says that he'd had a conversation with Frank and that he and Frank had decided that having Bob beside Jesse during the upcoming robbery would be a good plan. Jesse doesn't object. Over the hours they wait for the train to appear, Jesse listens to Bob's constant chatter and seems to like the boy.

The train is forced to a stop on Independence Hill by debris on the track and Jesse and the others prepare for the robbery. As the engineer, Chappy Foote, and his helper climb down from the engine, Jesse introduces himself. At one point, a man fails to comply with Jesse's orders and Charley hits him over the head. Someone says there was no need for that violence but Jesse intervenes, saying that they'd "needed convincing" that the robbers were serious and that they intended for the crew to comply with demands. Frank walks into a passenger car, asks if there are preachers or widows on board and finds no one who claims to be. He announces then that they don't rob either preachers or widows but when several people then make the claim, he tells them it's too late and robs them all. As they prepare to leave the scene, Jesse gives Chappy Foote a dollar and tells him that he should "drink to the health of Jesse James." He then offers to clear the tracks but Foote asks that he just leave and the gang complies. Jesse tells the members of the gang that they'll separate and divide the spoils later.

Jesse and Bob spend some time together and Bob tells about his childhood in Fairfax County, Virginia. When they reach Jesse's house, Frank and a couple of others, including Charley, sleep in the barn. There, Charley touts Bob's abilities, saying that Bob has "complicated" plans for the James Gang that Charley can't even comprehend. Frank says the James Gang has officially retired following that train robbery. Jesse invites Bob inside where his wife, Zerelda - known as Zee - is waiting. Later, Jesse and



Bob are outside when a neighbor happens by. Jesse is living under the assumed name of J.T. Jackson.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The author gives a great many details about Jesse James as the story opens. These details are very thorough but are presented almost as a shopping list. For example, one paragraph begins, "He was a Democrat. He was left-handed. He had a high, thin sinew of voice, a contralto that could twang annoyingly like a catgut guitar whenever he was excited." This goes on to talk about his ability at math, the number of suits he owns, his superstitious beliefs and that he "sometimes heard children in the fruit cellar." It seems the author has dug up every piece of information he could find about Jesse James and included it all in this section. It's the level of detail that brings the story to life but it's also these details that make the story fiction rather than a biography of Jesse James and Bob Ford. There are similar introductions of several of the main characters of the book. For example, the author notes that Charley Ford is anxious to share his faults with everyone he encounters, hurriedly refusing to give anyone a chance to discover his faults on their own. It's also noted that he's "rail-thin and rough." He tends to look for favor and that fact seems to be one of the reasons Jesse approves of Charley.

The chapter ends with Jesse going inside, leaving Bob on the porch. The author notes that the man on Jesse's porch has "played at capturing Jesse James, even as a child." This foreshadowing would be effective if not for the fact that most readers already know that Bob kills Jesse and is labeled a coward by many for the murder.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Jesse's wife is Zerelda Amanda Mimms James, known to family and friends as "Zee." She is Jesse's first cousin and is named for his mother, Zerelda. Jesse, Frank and Zee had played together as children though Frank, as the older, had been less interested in playing with Zee than Jesse. As adolescents, Jesse and Zee sometimes write letters and his are usually filled with his unhappiness. His father died when he was young and his mother had married a man named Dr. Reuben Samuels. When the Civil War erupts, Frank becomes associated with a group of guerilla soldiers and Union soldiers try to beat information out of Jesse, Dr. Samuels and Jesse's mother, who was pregnant at the time. Jesse soon becomes associated with a similar band and lives in exile in Texas until several months after Lee's surrender. About that time, Jesse is riding under a flag of truce toward a promise of pardon for their deeds during war when he is shot by Union soldiers. The shot hits him in the chest but Jesse manages to slip away and hides in the woods. He's later taken in by Union soldiers and a Union doctor decides that the bullet can't be removed and that Jesse won't survive. Jesse is sent to his mother's house in Rulo, Nebraska. After several weeks, Jesse is still not improving and his mother takes him to Kansas in order to ensure that Jesse not die in a "northern state."

They arrive at a relative's house and Zee takes over the majority of Jesse's care. While recovering, Jesse decides that he'll attend Georgetown College in Kentucky to follow in his father's footsteps as a minister. Zee is in love with Jesse and fears he'll leave without discovering her affection but on Christmas he proposes. The engagement lasts nine years. While they are engaged, Jesse introduces Zee to Cole Younger and his brothers, another group of outlaws that sometimes ride with Jesse's gang. Zee hates the fact that Jesse seems to change when he's around Cole Younger. She notes that Cole brings out a vicious side of Jesse that doesn't appear when Jesse is alone with Zee. Zee eventually comes to accept how her life is to be as Jesse's wife. She wants only to be a good wife to him and gradually becomes a loner, shying away from spending time with others. Some take her actions as a sign that she feels she's too good for friendships.

The Pinkerton Detectives are soon joined by the United State Secret Service in an effort to quell the robberies. When a detective named John W. Whicher goes to the Samuels' ranch in search of the James brothers, he's caught by Jesse. Whicher is found a few days later, dead and tied onto a horse with a note indicating that the same fate will be awaiting any other detectives. A few days later, a pair of detectives has a run-in with two of the Younger brothers, John and Jim, and John Younger is shot. Jesse is involved in a series of robberies in Missouri. He returns to Zee and shows her a copy of the Kansas City Times in which a writer talks about the robbery as "diabolically daring and so utterly in contempt of fear that we are bound to admire it and revere its perpetrators." Jesse is pleased with the story but Zee stands without reading it all. When Jesse refers to the article again, she grows angry and tells him that she doesn't "want to know." Jesse is



depressed after the confrontation and then learns that his sister, Susan, is to marry Allen Parmer. Jesse hates Parmer and takes morphine in an attempted suicide. He returns to Kansas City where he convinces Zee that he's reformed and that they should marry immediately. Two months later, Frank marries a woman named Annie Ralston. Annie runs away from home and doesn't tell her parents who she marries. In January of 1875, Pinkerton detectives, thinking that Jesse is at his mother's house, attack. A "railroad pot" is thrown into the room and explodes, killing Jesse's younger brother, Archie Samuels, and so injuring Jesse's mother that her hand has to be amputated. At that time, Jesse and Zee are living under the names J.D. and Josie Howard and Zee gives birth to a son. They name him Jesse Edward but call him Tim.

The gang decides to rob the First National Bank of Northfield. Inside the bank, Jesse tries to get several tellers to open the safe but they insist that they can't. Jesse hits one, causing him to collapse and doesn't discover that the safe is already open. They also overlook several thousand dollars in a teller drawer. Outside, the robbery has been discovered and the members of the gang who are outside are under attack. A member of the gang named Clell Miller is shot and killed and another member, Bill Chadwell, is killed minutes later. Jesse walks back into the bank and kills the man he'd hit minutes earlier. The bodies of Miller and Chadwell are sent to the University of Michigan medical sciences department for study. Miller's skeleton remains in a faculty office for more than fifty years. A member of the Younger gang is wounded and the James brothers split off from that faction. The Youngers are caught just days later, their progress slowed by their wounded man.

In 1877, Zee is again pregnant and Annie is expecting their first child. Zee gives birth to twin boys but both die of crib death as infants. Jesse is heartbroken over the loss. Annie has a son, Robert Franklin James, and Zee nurses him when Annie doesn't have sufficient milk. In 1879, Zee has a daughter, Mary, but Jesse is away and doesn't return for a month. For a time, Frank leaves Jesse to his robberies and remains at home, living an honest life. But Frank struggles to make ends meet and Jesse often drops by, flaunting his wealth and the obvious ease of his life as compared to Frank's. Frank eventually gives in and rejoins Jesse.

Jesse and a man named Ed Miller plan a train robbery in Missouri. Ed is the younger brother of Clell Miller, who'd been killed during a bank robbery. Also on the train are Frank James and Robert Woodson Hite, known as "Wood." Wood is a cousin of Jesse and Frank. The robbery is successful for the gang though there's a tense moment when Jesse prepares to kill a man and Ed cries out. Missouri newspapers cover the robbery and point out that only in Missouri would the James Gang be allowed to run rampant. The governor, reacting to public pressure, offers a reward of fifty thousand dollars.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The relationship between Zee and Jesse is interesting in its evolution. Early on, Zee is apparently ignorant of Jesse's criminal activities and she seems concerned about his long absences. She apparently sometimes tries to pin him down, wondering where he's



been and what he's been doing, and seems to fear that he might be out with other women or drinking to excess. When she confronts him on one particular occasion, he tells her that he's got more money than most men and that he'll always have that, then tells her that it's up to her to decide what his career is. This seems to be a challenge for Zee's loyalty and she takes it, forever after avoiding any talk about the James and Younger gang or criminal activities. It seems that she eventually comes to accept that Jesse is an outlaw and she probably puts together news of robberies and murders with Jesse's absence, but they apparently don't talk about it. When he returns from the train robbery at Independence Hill, he tells her an elaborate story about the cattle that he bought, where they are and what he made off the transaction.

When the conversations are brought around to criminal activities, Jesse sometimes tells Zee that he's sure the perpetrators were driven to their actions by a society that refuses to allow second chances. He says that they were probably "ex-guerillas" who were denied opportunities by law-abiding people. Added to the author's note that Jesse often tries his hand at normal jobs such as a machinist or salesman, it seems that Jesse is using his own excuse. It's not clear why none of these other jobs suited Jesse or why he could never settle into a career other than his criminal activities.

Zee is somewhat jealous of Jesse's time spent away from home. She believes that Jesse's fame interferes with her ability to fully connect with Jesse. Meanwhile, the American public, as a whole, loves Jesse. His exploits are told in exaggerated detail in newspapers, magazines and books. The author notes that it's only the people who are robbed by Jesse and his gang who hate him.

Chapter two ends at the same point in time as chapter one. As chapter one ends, Jesse and Bob are on the porch and Zee has already gone to bed. As chapter two begins, the author goes back to the beginning of the courtship of Zee and Jesse, providing information about their backgrounds and relationships. The chapter comes to an end with Jesse on the porch, Zee in the bedroom and Bob leaving the house. The same sense of foreboding is presented, in that Zee watches Bob with what is supposed to be concern. The reader, who already knows that Bob kills Jesse, probably understands the reference though there's no surprise in when or how it happens.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Jesse sends the group away from his house but tells Bob he can stay. Jesse has made plans to move the family to a new home and one of the others teases Bob, saying that he's going to have a great deal of work ahead of him. Bob says that he doesn't mind even though he isn't happy at being used in this manner. They move from their house to a home at 1017 Troost Avenue and Bob becomes Jesse's almost constant companion. One day the two men and Jesse's son are fishing. Bob relates stories he's heard about the James Gang and Jesse elaborates in some cases. One of those is the story of Jesse and Frank who happened upon the house of a woman who was about to lose her farm because she wasn't able to meet the mortgage payment. She provided the brothers with a meal and they gave her the money to make her payment. They then waited until the banker came to collect and Jesse and Frank robbed him after he left the house, taking back the money they'd given the woman. The following day, Bob is sent away but he isn't at all surprised. Bob stops in Liberty and buys himself several new outfits of clothes.

Bob's sister is Martha Bolton. She's a widow and rents a farmhouse in 1879. Her brothers, Charley, Bob, Elias and Wilbur, rent rooms from her and do chores. When Bob arrives, Martha's daughter Ida is in the yard with Wood Hite, who is also staying at the farm. Wood is in his late twenties but seems older and is teased by the others as being "crotchety." Another man, Dick Liddil, is also there. He is Jesse's cousin and sometimes rides with the gang. Dick confides in Bob that he is in "cahoots" with another man named Jim Cummins but warns Bob not to tell Jesse for fear of retaliation. Bob says it doesn't seem that it would matter because Jesse and Frank have apparently ridden for their last robbery. Wood and Dick ride for Wood's home to spend a few days. Wood's father had remarried following the death of Wood's mother. His wife, Sarah, is younger and has apparently been promiscuous on previous occasions. By the time Wood and Dick arrive at the Hite home, they are angry with each other. Wood, his father and stepmother go out onto the porch with Dick after dinner. When his father goes to bed, Dick makes it clear that he plans to stay up with Sarah but Wood intervenes. That night, Dick slips out and meets up with Sarah in the outhouse where they have a sexual encounter. Wood is awake and angry but Dick says it shouldn't be a "grievous" incident. Wood challenges Dick to a duel but neither is killed. Wood's father tells Dick to leave the property and he does. He rents a room in Russellville and the Hite's servant, John Tabor, brings messages to Dick from Sarah whenever she can arrange meetings for them. One day John says that Sarah will be waiting for him near a pig sty. But then he says he won't participate anymore because he knows that Wood is aware he's helping Sarah carry on an affair. When Dick arrives at the meeting place, he sees John's body, partially consumed, in the pig pen. Sarah sees it too and Dick tells Sarah that she's to contact the sheriff, tell him that Wood killed John, but that she isn't to mention the James Gang or Dick in her complaint.



In October, Jesse is in Kentucky when there's news that the James Gang robbed a train in Texas. Jesse then travels to Ed Miller's house. It's obvious that Ed is nervous about Jesse's presence and tells Jesse that he'd been worried that Jesse might hear that he had met with Ed Cummins. He says that Jesse might have guessed that Ed and Jim were planning to capture Jesse to get the governor's reward, though he hastens to assure Jesse that it isn't true. Jesse invites Ed to go for a ride and Ed agrees, though he's obviously afraid. He assures Jesse that he has money put aside and doesn't need the reward but when they are riding along on the road, Jesse shoots Ed and kills him. Two days later, Ed's horse is found but by the time the body is discovered, the coroner is unable to identify Ed.

Dick Liddil meanwhile travels to Kansas City where he stays with his "common-law wife," Mattie Collins. He's uneasy, constantly looking over his shoulder. One day, Jesse appears and invites Dick to go for a ride. Jesse, accompanied by Dick, begins his search for Jim Cummins. Jim's sister is married to Bob Ford's uncle and Jesse goes to their home where he terrorizes Jim's nephew in an effort to get information on Jim's whereabouts. The boy doesn't know and Dick intervenes. As they are leaving, Dick tells Jesse, "Little deals like that just make me feel dirty." Jesse is obviously at odds with himself as well and the two part company.

Wood is arrested for John's murder but simply walks away from police custody and is out of sight for awhile. Martha asks what Dick and Wood had argued about and only a short time later, the two men are involved in a gunfight. Wood is hit in the arm and gets off a shot that hits Dick in the leg before Bob intervenes, fatally shooting Wood. Wood is alive only moments and Martha tells him that she'd give him something to drink but that she fears he'd choke on it. Bob steps close to Wood and assures him that he's "done a gallant job of dying so far and [has] nothing whatsoever to be ashamed about." Dick's wounds are tended and Wood's body is taken to a shallow creek. Charley says that if the sheriff finds out about the gunfight, Bob will be jailed, but if Jesse finds out they've killed his cousin Wood, they'll all be killed in retaliation.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The families of Frank and Jesse are expert at hiding in plain sight, in an effort to avoid suspicion. Frank, Annie, Jesse and Zee take pseudonyms at various times and Jesse and Zee call their son Tim though his name is Jesse. They know that calling him by his real name would give people a chance to figure out who Jesse really is. At one point, Annie dresses their small son as a girl and calls him "Mary" in order to avoid detection. Zee later says that it's a difficult life. She has already become extremely shy because she imagines that she's being pursued even when she's not. The author doesn't really delve into Zee's state of mind but it seems that she adopts some of Jesse's attitude in that she blames others for their constant fears of being caught or killed.

The author is rather vague about what Jim Cummins is planning with the others and it's almost presented as if they might be planning to create a rival gang to do robberies on their own. It's only after Jesse confronts Ed Miller that it becomes clear that the group



has been considering capturing Jesse for the reward money offered by the governor. This collusion is not successful and Jesse does figure it out though it's not clear how he comes to those conclusions.

An interesting point is made in the connection between Jim Cummins' family and that of Bob Ford. The majority of these families are connected in some manner and many of the men who ride with Frank and Jesse are related. Another interesting aspect is that no matter how many of the outlaws come to a violent death during a crime, there are brothers and cousins ready to fill the spot.

Bob Ford's role in Wood's death seems to be almost self-defense or at least defense of Dick Liddil's life, but the author doesn't present it that way at all. It could be because Jesse puts all the blame on Bob but the author also notes that someone says the sheriff would certainly arrest Bob for Wood's murder, if the facts were known. Bob considers his options carefully as soon as he sees the gunfight as inevitable. He is carefully considering his options and comes to the conclusion that he'll have to kill Wood in order to survive. Bob seems certain that if he intervenes, Wood will kill him. The author also notes that Bob cowers by the bed, afraid, when the gunfight starts. But he is very cold and calculated in his movements when he comes to the conclusion that he's going to kill Wood and stands up to do so. It's left to the reader to determine the significance. What is certain about the situation is that it provides Bob some much-needed self-confidence. After Wood's death, Bob says that he's glad that Wood is dead while he remains alive and unscathed.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Sheriff James R. Timberlake of Clay County keeps a log of all visitors arriving in the area but mistakes Jesse for a circuit riding preacher when he arrives at Martha Bolton's on a December day. Dick hides in the closet, fearful that Jesse knows about his role in Wood's death. Jesse spends the evening talking to Bob and Charley and Bob is put out over Jesse's comparison of him to a guerilla fighter named George Shepherd. Jesse then says that he'd come to ask "one of the Fords" to accompany him and that because of Bob's petulance, he asks Charley. Jesse and Charley ride out in the bitter cold and spend a night at the Samuels' home. Jesse questions Charley about Wood but Charley denies knowing where Wood is. Jesse's mom, Zerelda, then goes to bed. After only a couple of hours' sleep, Jesse wakes Charley and tells him that he killed Ed Miller. Jesse says that it would be a good time for Charley to make a similar confession with regard to Wood but Charley stands by his story. When they head out the following morning, Jesse reveals that he's moved to St. Joseph.

Dick and Bob spend a great deal of time together and Dick's leg wound is infected and slow to heal. One day Bob and Dick are in town together when they encounter a man who knows Bob by his full name. He then identifies himself as Sheriff James R. Timberlake. He says that he doesn't care about Bob but wants Jesse and Frank, adding that there's a significant reward available. Dick poses what is supposed to be a hypothetical question, asking what could be done if a person were in trouble with the law and helped capture Jesse. Timberlake tells them they should talk to Henry Craig, a Kansas City police official who will speak for the governor on the issue.

Around Christmas, Jesse - posing as Thomas Howard - moves with his family to "The House on the Hill" on Lafayette Street. The house has a view from all sides and Jesse apparently feels that he will be able to watch out for danger. On Christmas Eve, Jesse and Charley break into a local church and steal several toys. They also borrow a Santa suit and Jesse dresses up, surprising the children before returning the suit to the church. Jesse and Charley join his mother and stepfather for Christmas dinner. During the meal, Zerelda is vocal about her fears for her sons, swearing that they're "doomed" to be "shot at like coons in a tree."

Jesse and Charley then ride to Martha's. Bob goes inside first and learns that Dick is no longer at the house. He's left word that he's gone to Mattie's but Martha says she believes he's gone to turn himself in to Craig who has offices in the Times Building. Charley says he is having trouble keeping up with the conversation but Bob tells him that all he needs to know is that Jesse isn't going to kill any of them and that they'll all be rich from the reward. Jesse later appears in the room and tells Bob and Martha to spread the word that he's offering a one thousand dollar reward for Dick Liddil.



Jesse's stepbrother, Johnny Samuels, causes a problem at a party and is shot. Though not fatal, he's not expected to live for some time and the man who shot him is not charged. In January, Dick returns to Martha's house and Bob tells him about a newspaper article that promised accolades and wealth to the man who brings Jesse to justice. The following day, Bob goes to Kansas City and meets with Henry Craig. Bob tells Craig that he can deliver members of the James gang and that he'd like to begin with Dick Liddil. He says that Jesse has offered a reward for Dick and that turning Dick in would actually save his life. Bob gives Craig directions to Martha's house and returns there himself. Within days, Timberlake and a group of deputies surround the house and take Dick into custody. A short time later, acting on more information from Bob, the officials take Clarence Hite, Wood's brother, into custody. He makes a full confession of his crimes but dies of consumption long before his twenty-five year sentence is served.

In February, Bob is at Craig's house taking a bath when Thomas Speers, Kansas City Police Chief, enters the room. Bob scampers from the tub to a closet and puts on the first underwear he can find. They're Henry Craig's and have his initials marked on them. That night they have a meeting with the governor. The governor tells Bob that "Jesse James is a desperate case and may require a desperate remedy." The men part ways on those words.

Chapter 4 Analysis

While Jesse is visiting with Bob, Charley and the others at Martha's house, they begin telling stories. Charley relates stories of Bob's youth and his infatuation with all stories about Jesse. Jesse then says that their stories reminded him of a story. He says a man named George Shepherd, who was a lieutenant in Quantrill's guerilla band, had been trying to befriend Jesse but it was only so that he could get an opportunity to kill Jesse. Jesse falls to the ground during a gunfight, pretending to be hit, and George runs away, then begins telling everyone that he'd killed Jesse James. Jesse says that he'd considered it to be a second chance and he had had Zee pretend to be a widow but had forgotten to let his mother in on the scam. He says that her disbelief that Jesse had been killed by George led to the truth. Jesse seems to be comparing Bob to George, a fact that Bob says "isn't very flattering." It's unclear whether Jesse really distrusts Bob as much as he should and seems that if he is certain that Bob is out to get him, he should distance himself from Bob and Bob's family. He doesn't.

Jesse's visit to his mother on Christmas seems something of a tradition and it's noted that there's an empty seat for Jesse's younger brother who was killed by the Pinkertons. During the meal, Zerelda begins wailing, saying that to lose all her sons to violent deaths will cause her heart to "break in two." She's very vocal about her concerns and doesn't ignore the fact that Jesse is bringing the law down on himself. She doesn't seem to condemn his criminal actions for any reason other than the fact that he's putting his life in danger, and that his death would be impossible for her to bear.

Bob is looking for an opportunity to take Jesse and knows that he'll likely have to kill him. When chances arise, he hesitates and the moment passes, always leaving him to



realize that he missed another opportunity and leaving him wondering if he'll ever be able to take one of the chances afforded to him. During the holidays, Jesse's stepbrother Johnny Samuels gets into a fight and is shot. Bob watches the situation with interest and the man who shot Johnny is not charged, based on witness testimonies. It's noted that Bob's interest in the situation is only as it relates to him. He sees the "possibilities" of getting ahead of Jesse expanding because the shooting doesn't even garner retaliation from Jesse.

It seems fairly certain that the governor expects Bob Ford to kill Jesse James. His words, "desperate measures," imply that but it should be noted that he never tells Bob to kill Jesse and never promises to take care of any criminal charges pending against Bob. Bob, however, fully trusts that the governor will take care of him and that he will be applauded and loved for the act.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Charley and Jesse remain together until early April. Jesse spends a great deal of time assessing land and Charley believes that Jesse might actually buy a farm or ranch. They also look over several possibilities for bank robberies during that time. Bob has made arrangements that include his agreeing to relay Jesse's whereabouts to Timberlake within ten days. After the ten-day period, the officers are going to assume that Bob is dead and will seek to apprehend Jesse without his help. Bob spends some time working as a grocery clerk in a store and when Timberlake shows up one day he notes that Jesse always seems to know what's going on. There's the idea that Jesse might be spooked and simply won't show back up. Jesse and Charley wander the country. Many people claim to see them but several who actually do see him won't tell about it until after Jesse's death. In March, Charley and Jesse find Bob at the store that belongs to a relative. Bob's brother, Elias, sees them leave and knows they're headed to the Samuels' ranch but tells Timberlake only that they've gone.

Johnny Samuels is still alive when Jesse stops in with Charley and Bob. When Charley and Bob are alone, Bob tells Charley that he's planning to kill Jesse. He says that Jesse "has to be stopped." Charley is immediately afraid. Later, Charley points out that Jesse "is our friend." Bob points out that Jesse killed Ed Miller and plans to kill Dick Liddil and Jim Cummins, if he can find them. He says that it's only a matter of time before Jesse turns on them as well. Charley agrees to think about it but won't commit to helping kill Jesse. They eventually end their trip at the House on the Hill where Jesse and Zee live. Zee isn't pleased to see Bob.

For several days, Bob and Charley remain at Jesse's house, doing small chores and killing time. The waiting makes Bob so nervous he can barely stand it. One evening, Bob, Charley and Jesse go to the local pool hall and Jesse gets into a conversation with a man about firearms. He suggests a contest, creates a nick in a lead ball and attaches it to a string, then ties the string to a tree limb and the two men shoot at it. Jesse is the only one to hit it. One day Zee is doing laundry when Jesse notes that Bob's underwear have the initials H.C. on them. He seems to guess at the owner's identity but doesn't pursue it. Bob says that he'd found them in a hotel where he'd stayed, that they seemed in good shape and he kept them "as a memento."

Every day, Jesse reads several newspapers and Bob takes up that habit. One day Bob slips out alone and sends a coded telegraph message to Timberlake, hoping to convey their location and the plans Jesse had revealed with regard to an upcoming robbery of the bank in Platte City. The governor is interviewed by reporters that week and he hints broadly at plans to bring the James brothers to justice. The media gets information about Dick Liddil and the story reveals that Liddil is working with the law, providing information about Jesse James. The next day Jesse gives Bob a gun as a gift. Bob says that he wants to have his name, Jesse's name and the name of the city engraved on the



gun to commemorate the gift. He says it will be something to be handed down to future generations. Jesse tells Bob that he's been "feeling cornered and just plain ornery," and that he has offered up the gun as an apology. Bob responds that he understands and that he would be "ornier if I were in your position."

On April 2, Palm Sunday, Jesse and his family - living as Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Howard - attend church with their two children and their cousin, Charley. Bob remains at home. That afternoon, they go on a picnic. Jesse tells Bob that he has a "network of spies" and that he knows Bob has been in Kansas City. He asks for Bob's purpose in visiting the city and Bob says he was "making purchases," and under further questioning says that he hasn't seen Dick. Jesse then discovers that Charley is reading "The James Boys Among the Mexicans," a novel about the exploits of the James Gang, to Tim. Jesse is furious and slaps Charley. That night, Charley cries and admits to Bob that he's afraid. Bob consoles Charley and promises that he'll take the situation with Jesse in hand. Later, Jesse asks Bob what he's most afraid of and Bob is quick to reply that he's afraid he'll be forgotten.

On April 3, 1882, Bob wakes to discover that Zee is upset because she burned biscuits. Bob spends a little time pushing two-year-old Mary on the swing. They have breakfast with fresh biscuits. Jesse receives the newspaper with the story about Dick Liddil. He tells Bob that Dick surrendered three weeks earlier, just about the time Bob was seen in Kansas City. Bob continues to deny knowing anything about it. Later that day, the three men are preparing to leave town, headed for Platte City and the bank they plan to rob. Jesse becomes interested in a picture hanging on the wall and removes his guns while he dusts the frame. Bob gets between Jesse and his guns and draws his own. Jesse realizes what's happening and instinctively reaches for his guns before he realizes he doesn't have them. Bob fires once and Jesse falls. Zee rushes in and yells at Bob. She asks if he shot Jesse and he answers, "I swear to God that I didn't." Jesse dies in Zee's arms. Charley "skulks" into the house and tells Zee that the gun discharged accidentally. Then Charley and Bob run away, stopping at the telegraph office where Bob sends messages to Craig, Timberlake and the governor, saying, "I have killed Jesse James. Bob Ford."

Chapter 5 Analysis

One day during their time at the House on the Hill, Jesse tells Bob that he likes Charley. He says that Charley is not cultured or smart but that he's "easy to be around." Jesse then says that he doesn't feel the same affection for Bob. It's obvious that Bob is nervous at the missed opportunities and is worried that the right opportunity will never arise or that he won't be able to take it. This nervousness is conveying itself to Jesse. Jesse claims to be clairvoyant and had written a letter to Clarence Hite weeks before his arrest, warning him of the impending danger. It's unclear how much of the author's words are conjecture based on Jesse's temperament and personality and how much is sheer guesswork, but the emotions and concern seem reasonable, given the circumstances.



When Bob tells Jesse that he understands his "ornery" feelings, he adds that he would be "ornerier" if he were in Jesse's position. Bob is probably feeling the pressure because he is looking for an opportunity to kill Jesse but Jesse himself is realizing that the law is probably closing in.

It's noted that while Timberlake and the other officers are in Martha's house looking for Dick, Bob slumps to the floor and wishes the entire incident could be behind him. It seems at that point that he's realized the wheels he's set in motion and that they cannot be stopped. Bob, however, is an excellent actor as he proves later when he takes to the stage, and no one else seems aware that he's conflicted. It's therefore difficult to decide whether he's genuinely pleased with the gun Jesse gives him as a gift or if he's acting out a role he's now forced to play. This conflict is born of Bob's hero worship of Jesse as it battles his need for personal notoriety. He points out on several occasions that the person who kills Jesse James will be applauded by the people and government officials, and will be wealthy. Bob seems unsuited to live the life of an outlaw. He needs for people to know who he is, just as Jesse James does. In this way, the two men are very alike.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Charley and Bob run to the sheriff's office, intending to turn themselves in, but find the sheriff is not in his office. They locate Deputy Marshal James Finley and Bob tells Finley that he shot Jesse James but Finley doesn't believe them at first. The Sheriff, Enos Craig, has already made it to Jesse James' house but knows the family by a different name. Bob tells Enos Craig to check the inside of Jesse's ring and under Enos Craig's continued questioning, Zee admits their identities. Enos Craig in return promises Zee that he won't let Jesse's body fall into the hands of a traveling carnival to be put on display. The law officials soon have to close the house because people are stealing everything they can get their hands on. One attorney, Alex Green, tells Zee that she'll probably be prosecuted as an accessory to Jesse's crimes and asks for a five hundred dollar retainer to represent her but another attorney, R.J. Haire, promises to represent Zee for free because he believes Jesse to be a "much-maligned and magnificent man." Zee's uncle sends a telegram to the Samuels, informing them of Jesse's death and a neighbor takes the two children. Bob and Charley are taken to the Buchanan County Courthouse. Both are questioned about their reasons for being with Jesse and their roles in his death. Bob freely admits that he'd shot Jesse. That evening several men arrive on horseback and there's a fear that they're intent on retaliation against the Fords, but the men stay only a few minutes, assess the situation, then leave. Some believe they are friends of Jesse's who hadn't yet learned of his death.

Jesse and Zee are penniless, especially after items from the house - including the horses - are confiscated as stolen property. Craig and Timberlake anonymously pay for the funeral. Jesse's body is secretly autopsied and it's discovered that his right lung has collapsed and has not worked for some time. They also note other details about the body, including a section of one finger that's missing. The following day, Jesse's mother arrives. Zerelda Samuels wails when she sees Jesse's body, crying out the question, "Why have they taken you from me?" and referring to the Fords as "miserable traitors."

That same afternoon, Bob and Charley are indicted for Jesse's murder. Many of the newspapers include editorials applauding the actions of the Fords but most people interviewed condemn them. There are few who believe the government really supported Bob's action. The governor publicly says that the lives of innocent men are worth more than that of Jesse James, who he calls a "putrid curse." Then a little boy finds the decomposed body of Wood Hite which prompts the arrest of Martha Bolton and Elias Ford, who are siblings of Bob and Charley Ford. Elias admits that it's Wood's body. Martha and Elias are released "on their own recognizance." Police believe they won't run away because their brothers are already in jail. Timberlake and Enos Craig each believe the other might be capable of selling Jesse's body and they argue about who will keep watch over it. The body is put on display in a glass-sided coffin and Rev. J.M.P. Martin, who is pastor of Mount Olive Baptist Church, officiates over the service. The body is buried on the Samuels' ranch, near enough to the house that Zerelda can watch



out for would-be grave robbers. Both Zerelda and Zee lose control, screaming out for revenge against the men who killed Jesse for money.

While there is some public sentiment against the Fords, there is no doubt that they've become famous. Several newspapers run advertisements, touting Bob's recent purchases at a particular store as a reason to shop there. Bob and Charley are taken to a theater where they are asked to re-enact the slaying of Jesse James. Charley is too shy to put on a performance but Bob takes the lead and soon has dreams of taking to the stage.

Henry Craig arrives in town with an attorney, Colonel John Doniphan, who warns Charley and Bob that the governor might not stand by his offer and that they have no proof he even made the deal for them to kill Jesse. When the court proceedings begin, both Jesse and Charley say they are guilty of murdering Jesse James. They are sentenced to death by the judge but seem unconcerned and the governor commutes their sentences, granting them pardons. Two days later, Bob is arrested in Richmond, Missouri for Wood Hite's murder. He borrows money for his bail from his father. Bob begins hearing some public sentiment that's not in his favor, including an editorial predicting that "whatever they dread the most" will happen to Jesse's assassins.

Bob and Charley are granted audience with the governor who tells them that the money he'd promised as a reward depended on the railroads and other entities kicking in their shares. Bob and Charley receive two hundred, fifty dollars each and are told that most people would be willing to pay more than that for a pardon from the governor. A short time later, a man named Georg H. Bunnell arrives in Richmond. He has a traveling theater show and hires Charley and Bob to perform their renditions of the slaying of Jesse James. Bob takes the lead and Charley plays the role of Jesse, dying in elaborate fashion during each performance. The play isn't a hit.

When it's time for Bob to come to trial for Wood's murder, the James family ignores the summonses in the hope that the Fords will do the same when it's time for the trial against Frank - who turns himself in.

Bob and Charley eventually argue and the brothers stay away from each other as much as possible. One day Bob is in a saloon when he hears a song written by a Missouri sharecropper named Billy Gashade. The song is "The Ballade of Jesse James" and includes the words, "It was Robert Ford, that dirty little coward," who "laid Jesse James in his grave." Bob is angry at the discrepancies in the song, which says that Jesse had three children and was murdered on a Saturday night. Bob, who is incredibly drunk, says that it was a Monday morning and that there were only two children, though Zee was pregnant at the time of Jesse's death. Bob is thrown out of the saloon and told to go home and sleep off his liquor. Bob and Charley often fight with Charley taking the stance that Bob's killing of Jesse was cowardly. Their play is cancelled and the brothers join a road show that features Bob shooting blanks toward Charley who holds apples in his mouth. The apples are jerked away with strings as Bob fires, giving the impression of an excellent marksman. Bob travels to Jesse's grave one time and discovers that the



inscription reads, "Jesse W. James; Died April 3, 1882; Aged 34 years, 6 months, 28 days; Murdered by a traitor and coward whose name is not worthy to appear here."

Chapter 6 Analysis

The author notes that Bob and Charley could be indicted for their roles in the murder of Wood Hite while they are in jail for Jesse's death, but that neither seems particularly upset by the discovery of Wood's body. It could be that neither can really comprehend the idea of what it could mean for them but it could also be that they believe that the governor is going to pardon them for everything they've done prior to Jesse's death. An attorney soon points out to them that they don't have anything in writing and that the governor might or might not support them. They still don't seem to worry.

A journalist named John Newman Edwards, who is editor of the Daily Democrat in Jefferson City, has known Jesse James for many years. It's Edwards who questions the manner in which Jesse was killed. Edwards says that there's no way Bob Ford could have managed to murder Jesse in that manner and presents the opinion that it might not be Jesse who was killed. The reader should know that there is a school of thought among historians that it wasn't Jesse James and that the entire situation was fabricated by Jesse, Zee, Bob and Charley so that Jesse would have an opportunity at a new life. The author of this book obviously holds to the opinion that it was Jesse James and it's left to the reader to decide.

When Bob and Charley are given the money by the governor, they are warned not to "bite the hand that feeds you" and Charley responds that it seems "we already did." Obviously, Charley is realizing that all they were promised will not be delivered and that all they're being given is a chance to live their lives without the fear of being prosecuted for past crimes. For Charley, who obviously has no skills and no way to make a decent living, this means nothing because he'll be back to a life of crime as soon as the money from the governor is gone.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Charley Ford becomes ill and can't live with his illness or his guilt over Jesse's death. He stays with his parents and one day goes into his bedroom, lays himself on the bed and shoots himself through the heart. Bob is under scrutiny with people wondering if he were about to do the same. Jesse's younger brother, John Samuels, doesn't die but eventually recovers from the gunshot wound. He dies at age seventy-one. Dr. Samuels goes crazy and spends his last years in a mental institution. Zerelda Samuels capitalizes on tourists, charging for a look at the house where Jesse grew up and encouraging tourists to send back photos of Zerelda on her porch, which she then sells to other tourists. Zee is completely destitute. She lives with her children, staying with her siblings for periods of time and finding work as a cleaning woman or seamstress. She never becomes involved with another man and some say she lives out her life in penance. Mary, Jesse's daughter, marries and though she is pleased that she physically resembles her father, few know of the connection until her maiden name is revealed upon her death in 1935.

Jesse's son, Jesse Edwards James, is proud of his name and capitalizes on it in several ways, including writing a book about his father and serving as a consultant for a movie. He's accused of robbing a train but his grandmother swears in court that young Jesse was at her home at the time of the robbery, just as she'd often done for his father. He's acquitted but the judge reportedly admonishes him not to do it again.

Frank is in the east when he learns of Jesse's death and he begins negotiating with Governor Crittenden through a journalist, John Newman Edwards. Frank turns himself in and during an interview following that event, says that he doesn't blame the government for taking "desperate measures" against crime. He says that he feels sorry for Bob Ford who has "brought upon himself a blighting curse" in exchange for "a few paltry dollars." The first case against Frank had depended on the testimonies of Dick Liddil and Clarence Hite. Clarence dies before he can testify and Dick, a convicted horse thief and bandit himself, isn't given much credit. Frank is arrested for additional charges but is never found guilty and never goes to jail. Frank tries his hand at various professions but finds nothing he likes. He sells clothing, farms, handles cattle, performs on stage and in a wild west show with Cole Younger. Frank dies at age seventy-two in 1915, is cremated and the ashes buried with his wife, Annie, when she dies in 1944. Cole Younger dies at seventy-two after spending his last years speaking on the "evils of whiskey" and crime.

Bob Ford and Dick Liddil go into business together but Bob soon realizes that the money is going out too quickly. Dick takes an offer to work racehorses and leaves Bob on his own. Bob eventually connects with a young woman named Dorothy Evans who sings in Bob's saloon. She questions him about Jesse and his motives and Bob says that he'd expected public acclaim. She is soon his "common-law wife," and Bob opens a



business in Creede, Colorado, where silver is discovered. He is successful there with a gambling establishment and Dorothy at his side. When a man named Soapy Smith arrives in town, he visits Bob's gambling house. By that time, Bob has heard about him and a short time later Soapy has a gang established and is in control of the entire town. Bob loses a great deal of money on a fight arranged by Soapy Smith and is angry over the loss. He runs wild through the town that night, shooting out windows and lights, and a group of Creede citizens force him to leave town the next day. He does but returns, pays a fine and remains in town despite the public opinion against him. His saloon is burned, along with a great deal of the downtown, but he quickly buys another place and opens again.

A young woman named Nellie Russell recognizes Bob and asks for a job in his new place but he discourages her. On June 8, 1892, Nellie's body is returned to Creede and Dorothy tells Bob that the young woman committed suicide. After Bob's death, Dorothy marries a man who forces her to take bets at a racetrack and she eventually commits suicide. On that June day, shortly after Nellie's body is returned to town, Deputy Sheriff Edward Kelly shoots Bob in the head with a shotgun. Kelly is looking for glory himself but is sentenced to life in prison, though the sentence is commuted by the governor, and spends the rest of his life wandering aimlessly. He dies in a fight with a policeman in Oklahoma City in 1904 and is buried in a potter's field.

Chapter 7 Analysis

It's noted that the political figures involved in the conspiracy to kill Jesse James are ruined by their roles. Timberlake, Henry Craig and Governor Crittenden are voted out of office and it seems that none of the three had expected any fallout from their participation. This doesn't seem an unreasonable expectation because all three had apparently been beset by public concern over the criminal activities of the time.

Bob Ford talks to Dorothy about what he'd expected and hoped would happen after he killed Jesse James. He says that he'd expected that he would be lauded a hero and that he was surprised when that didn't happen. Bob later talks to the young girl named Nellie Russell. She is complimentary of him and it seems that Bob would have approved of her attitude and taken her into his life as an employee, but he doesn't. It seems that Bob has, at this point, come to accept that he'd made a mistake in killing Jesse.



Characters

Jesse James

An outlaw during the 1800s, Jesse is cold and calculating but can be kind and generous with his family and friends. He is lauded by some as a hero but kills several men in cold-blooded murder during robberies. Jesse learns that Ed Miller is conspiring with some others to capture him for the reward money and kills Ed, hiding the body. Jesse marries a cousin, Zerelda Mimms, whom he calls Zee. They have four children prior to his death, including twin sons who die as infants. Jesse takes their deaths hard. He initially seems to want to brag about his exploits to Zee but she makes it clear that she doesn't want to know. He then obeys her desire by making up elaborate tales of his "business trips," going so far as to tell how many cattle he purchased during one such trip. Jesse is tolerant of Bob Ford, much more so than is Jesse's brother, Frank, when Bob joins their gang for a train robbery. Jesse is anxious to be noticed and often announces his name during robberies. Jesse reads newspapers daily and it's this habit that alerts him to the fact that a member of his gang, Dick Liddil, has turned himself into government officials and is reportedly cooperating in the effort to bring Jesse James to justice. Jesse admits in the days leading up to his murder that he's feeling "ornery" and apologizes to Bob by presenting him with a gun as a gift.

Robert (Bob) Ford

Robert (Bob) Ford is the man who shoots and kills Jesse James. Bob is only nineteen years old when he first goes on a train robbery with Jesse James. He talks with Frank then tries to convince Jesse that Frank agrees that Bob should be Jesse's "apprentice" during the train robbery. Bob needs to be constantly in the limelight and seeks to be in positions that garner the most attention. As a youngster, he is a fan of Jesse James and collects all the knowledge, facts and stories he can find about Jesse. Bob wants to be part of Jesse's gang but then learns that there's a large reward being offered for Jesse's life and believes he will become more famous for being the man who kills Jesse James than for being a member of the James Gang. He meets with government officials, including the governor, and fully believes that the government will grant him complete pardons for any crimes he's committed in return for killing Jesse James. Bob watches for some time for the opportunity and seems to fear that he won't ever find the right chance or that he won't be able to take it if he does. Bob finally does get the opportunity and shoots Jesse while Jesse is completely unarmed. Bob later confides that he'd expected acclaim and wealth would be his for killing Jesse and that he is bitterly disappointed that he doesn't achieve that. He goes into business for himself and spends several years working at several enterprises, including saloons. He's killed by a man who is seeking glory, much as Bob did when he killed Jesse James.



Zerelda Mimms James

Known as Zee, she's Jesse James' wife. Zee is also Jesse's first cousin and the two play together as children. Zee falls in love with Jesse while tending him after he is shot and almost dies. She becomes engaged to him but nine years pass before they marry. Zee is apparently aware of Jesse's career but insists that he not share details with her. She lives under an alias until Jesse's death in an effort to help him evade capture. She is at home when Jesse is killed and gives in to the questioning by the sheriff, finally admitting their true identities.

Zerelda James

Jesse and Frank's mother, she is a very large woman who is vocal about her displeasure in Jesse's choice of a career because it puts his life in jeopardy. She often berates him for bring misery on his family. She loses a hand and her son when the Pinkerton detectives throw a bomb into her house. She charges for those who want to see the house where Jesse lived and makes some money from the tourists.

Charley Ford

Bob's brother, Charley is less intelligent but endears himself to people by pointing out his shortcomings long before they can become apparent. Charley is with Jesse for days prior to Jesse's death and is part of the gang that participates in robberies. Charley is in the home with Jesse when Bob shoots him. Charley stands by Bob after the shooting but eventually turns on Bob, saying that his shooting Jesse had been cowardly. Charley becomes ill after Jesse's death and eventually commits suicide in his parents' home.

Robert Woodson Hite

Known as "Wood," he is a cousin of Frank and Jesse. Wood has an argument with Dick Liddil after Dick has an affair with Wood's stepmother. Wood and Dick fight and Wood is killed by Bob Ford. His body is hidden in a creek and is not discovered for some time.

Dick Liddil

Dick is a frequent member of the James Gang activities but falls out with Wood Hite, who is Jesse's cousin, after Dick has an affair with Wood's stepmother. Dick turns himself in to the police in the hope that he'll be able to help capture Jesse James and claim at least a portion of the reward for himself. He is the only person to testify against Frank James.



Frank James

Jesse's brother, Frank is a participant in many of the James Gang robberies. Though he is not as cold-blooded as Jesse, he is a willing participant. At one point, Frank tries to extract himself from the gang's activities but sees Jesse's easy wealth and returns to the illegal activities. Frank turns himself in after Jesse's death and is tried for several crimes but is not found guilty and does not serve time.

Ed Miller

A frequent member of the James Gang, Ed Miller is in collusion with others to turn Jesse in to the law but Jesse finds out about the plan. Ed is at home one evening when Jesse arrives and he's immediately on edge. He tells Jesse that he fears Jesse might have heard rumors that Ed and others have met and that Jesse might come to the wrong conclusions about those meetings. Ed assures Jesse that there's nothing to the rumors that he plans to turn Jesse in for the reward money, adding that he has some savings of his own and has no need for the money. Jesse doesn't believe him and kills Ed, leaving his body hidden so that it's not found for some time.

Martha Bolton

Sister of Bob Ford, Martha Bolton is a widow, lives in a farmhouse and makes a living renting out rooms to her brothers. It is her home the boys are at when Dick Liddil and Wood Hite get into a fight that ends with Wood's death. Martha is later arrested for her role in Wood's death but is released.



Objects/Places

Adairville, Kentucky

The Hite brothers are from Adairville, Kentucky.

Independence Hill

Jesse James and the gang rob a train in Independence Hill; it's the first robbery of which Bob Ford is a part.

Fairfax County, Virginia

Bob and Charley grow up in Fairfax County, Virginia.

Rulo, Nebraska

Jesse's mother lives in Rulo, Nebraska when Jesse is shot by Union soldiers.

Russellville

Dick rents a room in Russellville to carry on an affair with Wood's stepmother.

Kansas City

Kansas City is where Henry Craig first meets Bob Ford.

The Times Building

Henry Craig has his offices in The Times Building.

The House on the Hill

The house Jesse rents in St. Joseph where he feels secure because of the extended view is called The House on the Hill. It's where he is killed.

St. Joseph

St. Joseph is where Jesse James is living with his family when Bob Ford kills him.

Platte City

The bank that Jesse James plans to rob just before Bob Ford kills him is located in Platte City.



Themes

The Quest for Glory

The quest for glory drives both Jesse James and Bob Ford and causes both their untimely deaths. In the case of Jesse James, the need for glory prompts him to brag about his exploits. He tells those being robbed his name and makes sure that he receives credit for the majority of his robberies. He's happiest when the newspapers are reporting on the bravado shown by members of the James Gang. These newspaper accounts result in the need for official interaction. A reward is offered that prompts several of the gang members to plot against Jesse, hoping to earn the reward. Bob Ford is eager for glory and initially wants to be part of Jesse's gang but comes to realize that he'll be lauded for being the person to kill Jesse and sets out to find a way to make that happen. Bob believes that people will honor him, that he'll be given a large reward and that he'll have unlimited opportunities and wealth because he kills Jesse James. He immediately finds a sheriff and turns himself in because he is so certain that he's going to be hailed a hero for the deed. Bob doesn't achieve that acclaim and lives out his life disappointed because of it. However, he dies young at the hands of a gunfighter who wants to be known as the man who killed Bob Ford, because Bob is the man who killed Jesse James.

Self-Preservation

When Bob Ford, Wood Hite and Dick Liddil get involved in a gunfight, Bob tries to figure out how to get out of it alive. He soon decides that his only option is to kill Wood and he does so. Bob and the others hide Wood's body. Later in the evening, when Bob is reflecting back on the events leading up to Wood's death he admits that he should be sad because of Wood's death but that all he can think is that he's glad he's alive. This self-preservation may seem at odds with the actions of the main characters of the story. They rob and steal, involve themselves in gun fights and put themselves repeatedly into position to be killed or arrested. Despite the fact that they put themselves in danger, they fight to remain alive. These efforts at self-preservation also prompt the families to hide their identities. They use aliases and Jesse and Zee even call their son, Jesse, by another name rather than risk associating him with Jesse James. They move often and change names. At one point, Frank's wife even travels with her small son disguised as a girl. Zee seems to fear that she might let some piece of information slip and so she withdraws from society altogether. She doesn't make friends other than with Frank's wife, a habit that makes her seem snobbish.

The Cost of Crime

Jesse James, the members of his gang and his friends and family pay for the crimes committed by Jesse, sometimes paying the ultimate price by giving their lives. Zerelda



Samuels is an example of this theme. Jesse's mother is vocal about her disapproval of his lifestyle but says it's because her heart will be broken if Jesse is killed. She doesn't seem particularly upset by Jesse's criminal actions and provides him alibis on several occasions, but doesn't want him to die for his crimes. Zee is another example of the cost. She lives a life that is anything but normal though it is apparently materially comfortable. She has no friends and moves often in an attempt to stay ahead of the law. She also lives with the knowledge that Jesse is in dangerous situations. The fears of both Zee and Zerelda are realized when Jesse is shot in his own home by Bob Ford who expects to be applauded and loaded with wealth for his efforts. There are others who exemplify this theme. Wood Hite pays with his life as does Ed Miller. Several members of the gang are killed during a bank robbery and the Cole brothers are captured and jailed. Frank, though never convicted for his role in the robberies, spends a great deal of his life running from the law and spends his later life unhappy and involved in menial jobs that he feels are beneath him.

Style

Point of View

The story appears to be written in third person and from an omniscient perspective though it could be argued that the story is first person because of the presentation from the author's perspective. This perspective is evidenced by the presentation of some of the facts. For example, there is a passage in chapter four in which the author details an incident in which Johnny Samuels causes a fight at a party and is shot. The author describes Johnny but makes it clear that these details come from his research. The passage reads, in part, "records mention a graceful young man with luxurious golden brown hair, liquid blue eyes, a soft, combed mustache and beard, and the complexion of a girlchild - one writer even compared his beauty to that seen in Flemish paintings ...". This reference to records and other writers makes it obvious that the story is presented from the perspective of the author. The perspective is subject to the author's interpretations and to the facts he finds relevant, and the reader should remember that the book is presented as fiction though many of the facts and the historical setting can be considered truth, rather than non-fiction.

Setting

The story is set in the United States, mainly in Missouri and surrounding states, during the 1800s. The setting is real and at least the majority of the events and places are real. It seems likely that the author has gone to great lengths to ensure that the setting is real in order to present the story as truthfully as possible. The author is somewhat vague on some points. For example, he mentions a particular date but omits the year, leaving it to the reader to figure out the year in question. When Dick Liddil is carrying on an affair with Wood Hite's stepmother, Dick rents a room in Russellville but the state is not mentioned. These omissions may be merely an oversight by the author who believes that these details would be clear to the reader.

Historically, the actions of Jesse James are well chronicled but there are discrepancies. For example, there are documented "sightings" of Jesse James and the James Gang in different states at the same time. The author tells of a law enforcement officer who sees Jesse come into town but mistakes his identity. It seems possible that the officer didn't mistake the identity and that Jesse wasn't actually there. The various settings are described only in their reference to the story. For example, Independence Hill is sufficiently detailed so that the reader can fully understand how the train came to be stopped, why Jesse chose that spot for the robbery, and how the events played out. The descriptions are adequate to the story line.



Language and Meaning

The book reads almost like a history book with detailed accounts of many of the robberies and other exploits of Jesse James, his brother Frank and other members of the gang. The author seems to become bogged down at times in revealing the details, such as the name of the man who slipped out into the alley during a particular hold up but who was armed only with birdshot. Other details include specific amounts of money they steal from various robberies and the names of men who were hurt or killed by Jesse and his gang. This may become a problem for some readers who may find these details boring. There are also passages that are so convoluted that some readers may have difficulty discovering the meaning behind the passages. After the reader becomes accustomed to the author's writing style, it tends to become easier to understand the narratives. Some readers may be tempted to skip passages containing so much detail and little is lost from the story line without those passages. The overall tone of the book is dark, both because it's obvious that the author is leading up to the scene in which Bob Ford kills Jesse James and because of the atrocities performed by Jesse and his gang. There are many cold-blooded killings described in detail which lends the book a level of darkness. What's interesting is that so many of the people during that time frame were not greatly upset about the exploits of the James Gang as long as they weren't targeted as victims, even though the James Gang left many dead.

Structure

The book is divided into three parts. Each is numbered and titled. Part one is titled Loot, part two is Nighthawks and part three is Americana. The first part contains the first two chapters of the book. Chapters are also numbered but their titles are dates. Chapter one is September 7th, 1881, and chapter two is 1865-1881. Part two includes chapters three through five. Chapter three is dated September-December, 1881. Chapter four is December 1881-February 1882. Chapter five is March-April, 1882. Part three includes chapters six and seven. Chapter six is April 1882-April 1884. Chapter seven is dated May 1884-April 1892. As is evidenced by the chapter dates, the book does not fall exactly in chronological order. Chapter one ends with Jesse returning home after the train robbery at Independence Hill. Chapter two steps back in time to tell about the courtship of Jesse and Zee and provide other details prior to the Independence Hill robbery, but ends at the same point in time as chapter one. Each chapter begins with a quote. These quotes are sometimes about Jesse James and the James Gang. The first is by Miguel Antonio Otero who describes a meeting with Jesse James. The second is by Jesse as printed in the Liberty Tribune in 1874. Chapter four's quote is by Robert Pinkerton, the man who devoted a great deal of time and money to capturing Jesse James. The quotes are not vital to the story but provide additional information, specifically to the time setting of the story.



Quotes

"He regretted neither his robberies nor the seventeen murders that he laid claim to, but he would brood about his slanders and slight, his callow need for attention, his overwhelming vaingloriousness, and he was excessively genteel and polite in order to disguise what he thought was vulgar, primitive and depraved in his origins." Chapter 1, Page 5

"Folks sometimes take me for a nincompoop on account of the shabby first impression I make, whereas I've always thought of myself as being just a rung down from the James brothers. And, well, I was hoping if I ran into you aside from those peckerwoods, I could show you how special I am." Bob Ford on his first meeting with Jesse, Chapter 1, Page 10

"Insofar as it wasn't them that the James gang robbed, the public seemed to wish Jesse a prolonged life and great prosperity." Chapter 2, Page 67

"And for the arrest and delivery of said Frank James or Jesse W. James, and each or either of them, the sheriff of said Daviess County, I hereby offer a reward of five thousand dollars, and for the conviction of either of the parties last aforesaid of participation in either of the murders or robberies above mentions, I hereby offer a further reward of five thousand dollars, in testimony thereof, I have hereunto set my hand,' and ta-da-ta-dum." Sheriff Timberlake to Bob and Charley Ford, Chapter 4, Page 135

"Let me tell you a secret son: there's always a mean old wolf in Grandma's bed, and a worm inside the apple." Jesse James to his son, Chapter 4, Page 138

"You get to be twenty-nine years old and you look back and see you've never done anything good that you can brag about you sort of forget all your pipe dreams. I gave up all my ideas of grandeur." Chapter 4, Page 150

"I'll tell you one thing that's certain: you won't fight dying once you've peeked over to the other side; you'll no more want to go back to your body than you'd want to spoon up your own puke." Jesse James, Chapter 5, Page 171

"She looked at Jesse and said, 'I don't know what it is about him, but that boy can aggravate me more by just sitting still than most boys can by pitching rocks.'" Zerelda Samuels, Chapter 5, Page 178

"Then Charley was outside again and the two Fords ran down Confusion Hill, their coats flying, cutting through yards and down alleys until they reached the American Telegraph office, when was sent to Sheriff Timberlake, Henry H. Craig, and Governor Thomas Crittenden an abbreviated message that read: 'I have killed Jesse James. Bob Ford.'" Chapter 5, Page 212



"At 3:45 p.m., Coloney John Doniphan climbed onto a box in the city marshal's office and soberly read aloud to the assembled press a telegram in which the governor granted an unconditional pardon to Charles and Robert Ford. Henry Craig ran to the jail cell and greeted the Fords with the news but few others joined him in congratulating the two." Chapter 6, Page 244

"And as Bob was turning as a gentlemen might to a greeting he recognized, the shotgun ignited once and again from five feet away, clumped sprays of shrapnel ripping into the man's neck and jawbone, ripping through his carotid artery and jugular vein, stripping skin away, and nailing the gold collar button into scantling wood." Chapter 7, Page 304



Topics for Discussion

Why does Bob Ford decide to kill Jesse James? How does he set out to do the deed? How does he accomplish it? What does he expect will be the result? What is actually the result? Compare the deaths of Bob Ford and Jesse James.

Describe Jesse James and Robert Ford. What are their connections? How do they come to know each other? How are they similar? How are they different? Compare the motivations and personalities of the two men.

Who is Zerelda Samuels? Zee James? Wood Hite? Dick Liddil? Sheriff Timberlake? Henry Craig? Enos Craig? Martha Bolton? What is the role each of them plays in the life and death of Jesse James?

Describe the life of Jesse James as an outlaw? What is he like? Describe Jesse James as a husband and father? How are the two personalities similar? How are they different? In what way does Jesse keep the two separate? Why does he keep them separate?

Describe the lives of Bob and Charley Ford after Jesse's death. How does Charley react immediately after Jesse's death? How does his reaction change over time? What is Charley's fate? How does that differ from Bob's fate? Do the personalities of the two men have anything to do with their fates?

Describe the relationship between Dick Liddil and Wood Hite. What causes the two men to argue? What is the result of that argument? How does Bob become embroiled in their argument? Why does Jesse become involved? How does that argument impact the outcome of the story?

At one point, Zee talks about the difficulty of living life in hiding. What are some of the steps the family members take in an effort to stay ahead of the law? What is Jesse's attitude about being pursued? What is Zee's attitude? Are they correct in their thinking? Support your answers.