

The Assault Study Guide

The Assault by Harry Mulisch

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Plot Summary

The Assault is a novel by Dutch writer Harry Mulisch. In this novel, Anton Steenwijk's family is murdered and their home destroyed after a Nazi collaborator is murdered on their street. Anton is adopted by an aunt and uncle in the aftermath and chooses to bury the events surrounding the deaths of his family rather than dwell on them. However, as Anton grows and matures, he finds himself almost constantly running into people who provide small details of that fateful night, until finally Anton learns everything that happened and lead to his personal tragedy. The Assault is a novel about how one event can have a lingering effects and can change a life.

The Steenwijk family is locked in a single room of their house because the war has left them with an inability to warm the entire house. There is no food, no medical care, and no dental care, leaving Mrs. Steenwijk suffering a toothache with no remedy. Peter Steenwijk, the eldest child, has just finished his studies when he hears a series of gunshots outside. Peter runs to a window and sees Fake Ploeg lying dead on the neighbor's lawn. Ploeg is a Nazi collaborator, a local police officer, who is known for his cruelty. As Peter watches outside the window, he sees the neighbors, Mr. Korteweg and his daughter Karin, move the body in front of the Steenwijk house. Peter becomes furious, knowing they have done this because the Germans will seek retribution. Peter tells his parents they must move the body back or to their other neighbor's house, the Beumers.

Mrs. Steenwijk is frightened. She tells Peter that they should leave the body where it is. Mrs. Steenwijk believes if they stay in the house, the Germans will not think they had anything to do with the murder. However, Peter refuses to listen. Mrs. Steenwijk takes the key to the front door and throws it into the darkness of a back room. This infuriates Peter, but it does not stop him from leaving the house. Peter runs out a back door and goes directly to the body. However, it is too late when Peter reaches the body. The Germans are already coming. Peter grabs Ploeg's gun and disappears. At the same time, the Germans charge into the Steenwijk house and demands to see their papers. Mr. Steenwijk quietly does as they demand.

The Germans takes Mr. and Mrs. Steenwijk outside. Anton is placed in a car where he loses sight of his parents. Anton watches as soldiers use a flame thrower to torch his house. Anton briefly sees his mother, but does not know what happened to her or where she was taken. When all appears to be over, the German soldier comes back to the car and finds Anton there. The man forgot about the twelve-year-old boy. The soldier takes Anton to a police station in Heemstede. Anton is placed in a dark cell with a young woman. The woman talks to Anton, telling him a story about being lost in the dark. The woman refuses to tell Anton her name or to discuss why she is in the jail. After a short time, Anton falls asleep. When he wakes, Anton is yanked out of the cell and taken to the Ortskommandantur, the Regional Command center.

At the Ortskommandantur, Anton falls asleep again. In the morning, Anton meets the commander who asks him where he might have family. Anton mentions his uncle, Peter



Van Liempt, in Amsterdam. The commander arranges for Anton to be taken to Amsterdam with a military convoy. Unfortunately, on the way to Amsterdam, the convoy is attacked by a plane and Anton's escort is injured. When they arrive at the command post in Amsterdam, Anton explains to the man in charge why he was with the convoy. Anton's uncle is located and picks him up, taking him home.

Over the next five months, Anton becomes comfortable living with his aunt and uncle. When Holland is liberated, Van Liempt goes to Haarlem to learn what happened to Anton's family. Van Liempt is able to learn that Mr. and Mrs. Steenwijk were killed along with twenty-nine hostages on the night of Ploeg's murder. However, Van Liempt is unable to ascertain what happened to Peter. There remains some hope that Peter may still be alive. However, a short time later they learn Peter too was shot that fateful night.

Over the next few years Anton grows up, finishing high school and going on to medical school. A friend invites Anton to a party in Haarlem. Anton has not returned to Haarlem since the night of Ploeg's murder and has no intention of returning. However, he finds himself drawn to the party almost unconsciously. When Anton arrives, he discovers the party is across the canal from the neighborhood where he lived. Anton walks over to his street and studies the empty plot where his house once stood. Mrs. Beumer, a neighbor, sees him and invites him in for coffee.

Anton speaks to Mrs. Beumer for a while, learning that she saw the events of that fateful night. Mrs. Beumer tells Anton that his mother attacked the soldier in charge and perhaps this is why she and her husband were killed with twenty-nine other hostages murdered that night. Mrs. Beumer also tells Anton that there is a memorial set in the spot where the murders took place. Before he leaves, Anton goes to the memorial and reads his parents' names. His father is the oldest person on the list, his mother the only woman.

Four years later, Anton has graduated from medical school and has become an intern. Anton has taken an apartment of his own. Demonstrations are taking place a few blocks from his building, causing Anton to have trouble with noise and simply reaching his own front door. One evening Anton comes home and finds protesters blocking the street before his building. Anton makes his way to the door, but the police come and cause people to press up against him. Suddenly they all run in another direction, leaving Anton alone with a single protester. Anton recognizes him as Fake Ploeg, the murder victim's child. Anton invites Fake into his apartment.

Fake tells Anton how difficult life was after the death of his father. Fake's mother went to jail for a time and then was forced to take a job as a house cleaner to make ends make. Fake himself had to drop out of school and became an appliance repairman to help care for his mother and two sisters. As they talk, Fake begins to cry, insisting that his father was an innocent man and Anton was not the only one to suffer from the events of that faithful night. Before Fake leaves, he throws a heavy rock at a mirror on Anton's wall, destroying it.



Ten years later, Anton is an anesthesiologist and has married a beautiful young woman named Saskia. Anton and Saskia have a four-year-old daughter, Sandra. One afternoon Saskia is to go to a funeral for a friend of her father's who was a part of the Resistance with her father during the war. Anton decides to take the day off and attend with her. Afterward they intend to go to the beach with their child. The funeral turns out to be more of a reunion than a funeral. Afterward, Anton and Saskia go with the other mourners to a bar where many of the Resistance members reminisce over the war. Anton overhears a man describing the death of Fake Poeg. Anton finds himself questioning the man's memory, involuntarily revealing his connection to the murder.

The man, Cor Takes, drags Anton into the cemetery and begins to ask him about his recollection of that night. Anton tells him how the Kortewegs moved the body in front of his house. Takes admits that he knew there would be retribution for his actions, that the hostages might be murdered. Takes tells Anton he had a younger brother who was a hostage, but that even his mother agreed that Ploeg had to die no matter the fallout. Takes then tells Anton he was not alone that night, that he had a girlfriend with him. Anton realizes that Takes' girlfriend must have been the woman in whose cell he was placed that night. Takes becomes agitated at this news, demanding to know what she might have said to him. Unfortunately, Anton cannot recall their conversation.

Anton goes on to the beach with his family and then home, still thinking of his encounter with Takes. At home, Anton finds himself realizing that he married Saskia because she resembled the image of that woman in the cell he has carried with him all these years. Anton decides he must see a picture of the girl, to know once and for all what she looks like. Anton calls Takes and arranges to see him the following day. At Takes' apartment, Anton finds he has created something of a shrine to this woman, Truus Coster. Anton studies a picture of her and sees in her eyes that she is very similar to Saskia.

Takes shows Anton a gun and describes how Truus used it to murder Ploeg. Then, as she believed Ploeg lay on the ground dead, she began to ride her bike past him. Unfortunately, Ploeg was not dead and he fired at her, shooting her in the lower back. Takes tried to get Truus out of the area as the soldiers began approaching, but could not. Instead, he hid under some bushes with her. An elderly woman tells the soldiers where they are hiding. Truus makes Takes leave, which he does, leaving her to be arrested alone. Takes clearly regrets this choice. As Anton leaves Takes, Takes tells him he has just received news that a friend from the Resistance has committed suicide because a war criminal, a man who was responsible for thousands of deaths during the war, has been released from prison because of poor health.

Fifteen years later, Anton has divorced Saskia and is now married to a young student named Liesbeth. Anton and Liesbeth have a twelve-year-old son named Peter. One morning Anton wakes with a bad toothache. Anton convinces his dentist to come to the office and fix his tooth, but the dentist demands that Anton attend an anti-nuclear bomb protest in compensation. At the protest, Anton runs into his daughter, who is now pregnant and living with a man Anton dislikes. As they talk, Anton sees an elderly woman watching him. A few minutes later, the woman approaches and introduces herself as Karin Korteweg.



Anton and Karin walk together and Anton asks about the events of that fateful night. Karin tells Anton that her father forced her to help move the body because he was worried that the soldiers would burn down their house, killing the lizards that had become his only source of happiness since the death of his wife. Karin then describes how she and her father were arrested that night, taken to the Ortskommandantur and questioned. Karin admits that she told the truth, admitting to moving the body. However, this admission had no impact on the soldiers.

Karin explains to Anton how her father was deeply troubled by the deaths of the Steenwijk family. In fact, Mr. Korteweg insisted on leaving the country, afraid that Anton would come looking for revenge when he became an adult. The fear of retribution became so intense in Mr. Korteweg that he committed suicide three years later. Anton listens to this information and tells Karin he had no intention of ever seeking revenge. However, he has one last question. Anton wants to know why they placed Ploeg in front of their house and not their neighbors, the Aarts. Karin tells Anton that her father knew the Aarts were hiding a Jewish family, a couple and their daughter. Mr. Korteweg knew if the body was in front of the Aarts home, the Jews would be found and executed.



Prologue and First Episode, 1945

Prologue and First Episode, 1945 Summary

Harry Mulisch, a contemporary Dutch writer, was born in Haarlem, much like his protagonist Anton Steenwijk. Mulisch's mother was Jewish and lost her family to the concentration camps and his father was a Nazi collaborator who was jailed after the war. This gives Mulisch a unique point of view on the war, suggesting a highly personal connection to the characters of his novel.

In the prologue, the writer describes the neighborhood in which the Steenwijks lived. There are four houses set close together along a quay that is bordered by water. Each of the houses bears a name. The first is Hide-away, belonging to the Beumers, then Carefree, where the Steenwijks live. Next to the Steenwijks is Home at Last, where Mr. Korteweg lives with his adult daughter. Beside the Korteweg's is Bide-a-Wee, the home of the Aartses, an older couple who keep to themselves most of the time.

First Episode. It is after seven in the evening and the Steenwijk family is gathered in the dining room because it is a small room that can be sealed, conserving the amount of fuel that must be consumed to war the family. It is January of 1945. The war is nearly over, but Liberation has not come to Holland yet. The family is on the verge of starving due to a lack of available food. Mrs. Steenwijk has a terrible toothache that she treats with a piece of clover. The children no longer attend school because of the inability to warm the school building. As a result, Mr. Steenwijk, a clerk, is teaching the children at home. Peter, the eldest at seventeen, is just completing a lesson despite his insistence that he does not need to learn to translate Homer.

In the silence of the evening, six shots suddenly ring out. Peter runs to the windows in the front parlor and calls to his family that Fake Ploeg has been shot. Anton instantly thinks of his schoolmate, Fake, whom he once saved from punishment at school when he stood up for him against a teacher who refused to teach a child in a Nazi youth uniform. However, it is Fake's father who has been killed. Fake Ploeg is the Chief Inspector of Police, known for his particular brand of cruelty. As Anton joins his brother at the windows along with his mother, their neighbors, the Kortewegs, move the body from their front yard to the Steenwijk's front yard.

Peter becomes angry, insisting by doing this, the Kortewegs have placed all their lives in danger. Peter tells his mother they should move the body back or next door to the Beumers. Mrs. Steenwijk refuses, insisting they have done nothing wrong and the Germans will understand that. When Peter tries to defy her, Mrs. Steenwijk throws the key to the front door into the darkness of a back room. Peter leaves through a back door instead. However, just as Peter reaches the body, they can all hear the Germans approaching. Peter grabs Ploeg's gun and disappears around the corner of the house.



The German soldiers come into the Steenwijk's home and begin demanding their papers. Mr. Steenwijk shows them the papers. The soldiers demand to know where Peter is. Mrs. Steenwijk is honest and tells them that Peter ran toward the Korteweg home. The soldiers drag Mr. and Mrs. Steenwijk out of the house. Anton is placed inside a car. From the car, Anton watches as the soldiers break the windows of his house and burn it down with a flame thrower. Anton watches for his parents, but only sees his mother briefly. Finally the soldier who placed him in the car returns, surprised to find Anton there. The soldier had forgotten about him.

Anton is taken to a police station in Heemstede. A man who appears to be in charge places Anton in a cell with a prisoner he cannot see. The darkness is so complete that Anton only finds his way to the prisoner by the sound of her voice. The prisoner takes Anton into her arms and strokes his face, attempting to console him. Although she refuses to give Anton her name or talk about why she is in the cell, she tells Anton a story about how she once got lost in the darkness after attempting to return home after curfew. The woman got so lost that she just stopped and sat on the curb until dawn. When she could finally see, the woman realized she was sitting in front of her own home.

The woman tells Anton, too, that there is a man who loves her. This man is married and has two children. The man believes that the woman does not love him, but she tells Anton she does love him very much. Anton listens, but he is so exhausted he finally falls asleep. A few hours later, the cell door opens and Anton is yanked out by a man who is angry that he was placed in the cell. The man sees blood on Anton's face and becomes angry, especially when he learns the blood is not Anton's, but belongs to the young woman.

Anton is sent to the Ortskommandantur in Haarlem. Anton falls asleep and sleeps until morning. In the morning, Anton wakes and sees Mr. Korteweg walking down the corridor. Anton is taken into the office of a man who appears to be a general. The man questions Anton, telling him that many mistakes were made the night before. When Anton asks about his parents, the man claims he knows nothing about their current location. The man tells Anton he is going to send him to Amsterdam with a military convoy to be reunited with his aunt and uncle until his parents can be located. Anton is giving to a young soldier who dresses him in warm clothes and a helmet before taking him into a truck that is part of the military convoy. As the convoy approaches Amsterdam, it is attacked by a plane. Everyone jumps out of the trucks except for Anton, who is fascinated by the plane. Anton is finally yanked from the truck as the plane destroys the final truck in the convoy. The man assigned to escorting Anton has been shot.

Anton is taken to the military headquarters in Amsterdam where he explains who he is and why he was with the convoy to a man who appears to be in charge. Anton's uncle, Peter Van Leimpt, arrives and takes him home.



Prologue and First Episode, 1945 Analysis

The prologue describes the neighborhood in which Anton grew up. The description is somewhat nostalgic, belying the tragedy that is soon to happen there. It is important, however, that the reader understand how the houses relate to one another so that the reader can understand the complexity of the events that are about to transpire.

Anton and his family all suffer the effects of the war. While the war is nearly over in most of Europe, with many countries already liberated, Holland is still under German control and suffering the lack of basic amenities like coal and food. The Steenwijks are suffering, but the parents attempt to keep things as normal as possible for their two sons. All this ends when a cruel Nazi collaborator is killed in their neighbor's front yard. The body is moved. This fact is extremely important because this move causes Anton's family to lose their home and to be taken away, possibly arrested, possibly killed. Anton has no clue what has happened to his family and will not learn the truth for several more months.

Anton is taken to a jail where he is housed with a female prisoner. This woman is kind and gentle with Anton, making a deep impression on him. Anton has no idea who the woman is, but suspects she is a member of the Resistance. The memory of this woman will remain with Anton for many years, haunting him in a way that the disappearance of his own family will not.



Second Episode, 1952

Second Episode, 1952 Summary

In the five months after Ploeg's murder, Anton has settled in well with his aunt and uncle. After the Liberation, they wait a few days for Anton's family to find them. When they do not appear, Van Liempt goes to Haarlem to learn their fate. On the quay, Mr. Korteweg refuses to speak to him, but Mr. Beumer tells him he saw Mr. and Mrs. Steenwijk killed. They have no news about Peter, but later the Van Liepmts learn that he too was killed that same night. This news has little impact on Anton, however, who feels as if these events took place hundreds of years before.

Anton finishes high school and moves on to medical school. Anton is invited to a party in Haarlem by a school friend, but does not initially plan to go. However, Anton changes his mind at the last minute and decides to attend. When Anton finds the house and goes into the garden where the party is taking place, he discovers that the house is just across the canal from the quay where he once lived. Anton barely pays attention to a political conversation going on about Vietnam, his mind filled with memories of his childhood on this canal. Anton decides to go for a walk.

Anton finds himself standing in front of the empty lot where his home once stood. Anton imagines that under the weeds remains his family's cellar, though he supposes anything of value has long since been stolen. As he stands there, Mrs. Beumer comes to her door and calls to him. Anton goes into her home for coffee even though he really does not want to. Anton discovers that Mr. Beumer has become senile, just sitting in his chair listening to children's programs on the radio all day. It saddens Anton, who can recall having cake in this home and listening to Mr. Beumer read to him.

Mrs. Beumer tells Anton how she and her husband stood at the windows that night and watched what took place. Mrs. Beumer saw the soldiers burn down their house and his mother attack the man in charge. Mrs. Beumer believes this is why the soldiers executed Anton's parents along with twenty-nine Resistance hostages. Anton asks about the other neighbors. Mrs. Beumer tells him that the Kortewegs moved almost immediately after Liberation. Their house is now occupied by a young couple with two small children. The Aartses are still there, however. As Anton rises to leave, Mrs. Beumer tells him about a memorial that was erected three years ago at the site of the executions. Mrs. Beumer thought she might see Anton at the ceremony, but was disappointed. Anton claims to have not known about the memorial. As Anton leaves, he stops at the memorial and reads the names listed. Anton is saddened to see his father was the oldest man listed and his mother the only woman. Back at his uncle's, Anton is told that he was informed of the memorial but that he had no desire to attend the ceremony.



Second Episode, 1952 Analysis

Anton learns about the deaths of his family, but as a twelve-year-old he has no desire to learn the details. In fact, Anton pushes the whole tragedy to the back of his mind and pretends it never happened. This is a sort of coping mechanism that many people who experience deep trauma use to avoid the pain. Anton is not even aware that he is doing it, as the reader comes to understand when his aunt and uncle tell him that they informed him of the memorial to his parents and the others who died that night and he forgot about it.

Anton returns to Haarlem for the first time since the night of Ploeg's murder. Anton is drawn to the street where he once lived, drawn to the empty lot where his family once lived. When Mrs. Beumer invites Anton to her home, Anton has no interest in visiting her, even though she was a good friend to him as a child. Anton does not want to discuss his family, does not want to know the details of their deaths. However, Mrs. Beumer shares with him some details of that night that he did not know. This includes the fact that his parents were killed along with twenty-nine Resistance hostages. In fact, Mrs. Beumer claims his parents were killed because his mother attacked the leader of the soldiers. This suggests to the reader that Anton's mother was a strong, determined woman who was under a great deal of emotional strain that night. Perhaps this is a side to his mother Anton had not known.

There is a memorial to those who died that night. Anton is saddened by it, shocked to see his father is the oldest man on the memorial at forty-nine and his mother the only woman. This memorial is important because it will be revisited several times in the plot as Anton learns more about the events of that fateful night.



Third Episode, 1956

Third Episode, 1956 Summary

Anton has moved into his own apartment and finished medical school. Anton is now an intern studying to become an anesthesiologist. From time to time Anton suffers migraine headaches that cause him to spend whole days in bed. Anton does not believe this has anything to do with the events of that January night in 1945. Recently a mob of thousands has besieged the Felix Meritis building in protest against communism. Anton's apartment building is situated behind the Meritis building, so the noise of the protest caused him a great deal of trouble the first night. The second night Anton thinks of sleeping at his aunt and uncle's home, but when he gets off work he believes the protest must be over and decides to go home anyway. Unfortunately, Anton has misjudged the fortitude of the protesters.

Anton parks his scooter a few blocks away to prevent damage by the protesters and walks to his building. There is a huge crowd in the street beside his building. As Anton attempts to enter his apartment, the crowd pushes up against him as the police arrive. A large man holding a rock presses Anton into his door. As suddenly as the crowd pushed against him, they disappear. Anton is left there facing the man with the rock. The man is Fake Ploeg.

Anton invites Ploeg into his apartment. They begin to discuss that evening. Fake tells Anton how his father's death devastated his family. Fake's mother was jailed briefly after the war and then had to take a job as a house cleaner. Fake had to drop out of school and has become an appliance repairman to help support his mother and two sisters. Fake claims it was all terribly unfair because his father was a good man who only did his job to the best of his ability. Fake claims that the death of Anton's family lies more with the Resistance fighters than with his father. Fake begins to cry, then becomes angry and breaks a mirror on Anton's wall. Fake begins to leave, but returns to tell Anton he never forgot the kindness he paid him that day in the classroom when he stood up against the teacher on Fake's behalf.

Third Episode, 1956 Analysis

Anton continues to push the events of the January 1945 evening into the back of his mind. Anton has no interest in politics, in war, in anything to do with the conflicts that caused the tragedy in his own life. Anton suffers migraines, but has no idea that they are caused by his refusal to deal with the events of that night. The reader, however, should make special note of these headaches because they will become important later in the novel.

Anton runs into Fake Ploeg, the son of the man murdered that fateful night. In meeting Fake, Anton sees the impact of Ploeg's death on his family. Fake, a child the same age



as Anton at the time, sees his father as a hero, as a man who fought for his beliefs and who died a tragic death for those beliefs. Fake refuses to see that his father was a cruel man who took special interest in the punishment of those who did not hold with his beliefs. This inspires in Anton some fight, but not enough to help him deal with the death of his family. In truth, all this encounter inspires in Anton is a deep sympathy for a boy who never understood his father's cruelty.



Fourth Episode, 1966

Fourth Episode, 1966 Summary

Ten years have gone by. Anton is now an anesthesiologist in a local Amsterdam hospital. While on vacation in London, Anton meets a young woman named Saskia De Graaf. Anton and Saskia marry a year later. Anton becomes close to Saskia's father, telling him about the death of his family one afternoon while vacationing with him in Athens where he was an ambassador.

In June of 1966, Saskia and Anton are living in a two family home in Amsterdam they bought with help from De Graaf. They now have a four-year-old daughter named Sandra. Saskia is to attend the funeral of a poet friend of her father's, so Anton takes the day off to attend with her. Afterward they plan to take their daughter to the beach. The funeral seems more like a reunion than a memorial to Anton, as he watches old friends greet one another with great pleasure. The ceremony is a testament to the Resistance roots all the mourners share. Afterward, the mourners move to a bar across the street. Anton and Saskia stand by as De Graaf talks old politics with some of his Resistance friends. As Anton turns to leave with Saskia, he hears a man talking about a murder he committed during the war. Anton recognizes the details of Ploeg's death and comments that the man has left out several shots as he describes where his bullets hit Ploeg. The man asks Anton what he knows about it and Anton comments that the murdered man ended up on his front lawn.

Realizing who Anton is, the man drags him out of the bar and into the cemetery. The man introduces himself as Cor Takes. Takes begins asking Anton about that night, surprised to learn that the body of Ploeg was moved from in front of the Korteweg house to his own. Takes admits that he did not know who lived in those houses, though he assumed there would be retribution for the murder. Takes tells Anton that his assumption was that the residents of the house where the body fell would lose their home, but if anyone was killed, Takes assumed it would be the twenty-nine Resistance hostages. Takes had a little brother who was among those hostages, but even his mother agreed that killing Ploeg was worth the risk.

As they discuss the events of that night, Takes wonders aloud why Korteweg moved the body in front of the Steenwijk home instead of the Aarts home. Anton wonders the same thing, since no one on that street really liked the Aartses since they kept to themselves so much. Takes then tells Anton that he was not alone that night, but was with a woman he considered his girlfriend. It is then that Anton becomes emotional, bursting into tears. Anton realizes that Takes's girlfriend had to have been the woman with whom he was locked in a cell. When Anton tells Takes this, Takes becomes emotional himself, suddenly aware that if he had known which jail his girl, Truus Coster, was being held in, they could have saved her.



Anton and Takes are joined by Saskia and her mother. The women insist it is time to leave. Anton goes to lunch with his family and in-laws, then to the beach. Anton cannot stop thinking about Takes and Truus. At home that night, Anton realizes that he married Saskia because she reminded him of the image he has carried in his head of Truus all these years. Anton decides he must see a picture of Truus in order to show himself Saskia is nothing like her. Anton makes an appointment to meet Takes at his home the following day.

Takes shows Anton his basement, which has become something of a shrine to Truus. There is a map on the wall chronicling troop movements in the final months of the war. On the map is a lipstick impression of Truus's lips. There is also a photograph. Anton studies it, recognizing a similarity in Truus and Saskia's eyes. Takes pushes Anton to recall what Truus said to him that night in the cell, but Anton cannot recall except for little snippets when Takes tells him how Truus once got lost in the dark. Anton briefly thinks of ways to force him to remember, but discounts them without telling Takes. Takes pulls a gun out of a drawer and shows it to Anton, telling him with this gun Truus took careful aim at Ploeg and delivered what they both believed were fatal shots. However, Ploeg was still alive and managed to fire once at Truus. Truus was hit in the lower back. Takes tried to get Truus out of the area, but she could not sit on his bike, so he hid with her in the bushes. When the soldiers came, an old woman pointed out their hiding place. Truus made Takes leave.

The phone begins to ring upstairs. Takes leaves to answer it. Anton is left with his thoughts. A fire breaks out in an ashtray. Anton puts it out, then goes upstairs. As Anton says goodbye to Takes, Takes tells him that he has just learned that a friend with the Resistance killed himself that day when he learned a war criminal, Willy Lages, has been released from prison because of failing health.

Fourth Episode, 1966 Analysis

At a funeral for a poet active in the Resistance during the war, Anton overhears a man bragging about the murder of Fake Ploeg. Anton cannot stop himself from commenting on what he overhears. When the man pulls him aside, Anton insists he does not want to talk about that night, but this man seems to be more tortured by his own actions than Anton. Anton quickly learns that Cor Takes knew people would die that night as a direct response to his actions, but he had assumed it would only be Resistance members who knew the risk when they joined the Resistance. This includes Takes's own baby brother who may or may not have been killed that night.

Takes's biggest regret appears to be the woman who was with him that night. This woman, Truus Coster, was arrested and killed several months later. Takes is tortured by her death, tortured that she killed Ploeg and was arrested after an injury kept him from being able to get her away from the scene of the crime. It seems to the reader that Takes has the same survivor's guilt that Anton would suffer from if he allowed himself to deal with the events of that night. Takes desperately wants to know what Truus said to Anton that night, but Anton cannot recall. The reader recalls, however, and knows that



one of her final statements to Anton was that she deeply loved Takes even though she never told him. The reader wonders if Anton will ever recall this and be able to give Takes this small piece of consolation.

One important detail about that night haunts both Takes and Anton. The body was moved. Anton knows that the moving of the body is what led to his family's death. However, Anton has not considered why it was his family that was targeted, intentionally or unintentionally, by the Kortewegs. Takes points this out to Anton, wondering why the body was not moved in front of the Aarts's home, which sat on the other side of the Kortewegs, instead of the Steenwijk's home. This point will become a moment of revelation for Anton as the novel reaches its conclusion.



Final Episode, 1981

Final Episode, 1981 Summary

Anton and Saskia divorced in 1967 and Anton remarried to a student named Liesbeth. Anton and Saskia remain close despite their divorce and the fact both are remarried. In fact, Saskia and her new family often vacation with Anton and Liesbeth in their vacation home in Tuscany. Anton now has a son who is twelve, the same age he was that fateful night in 1945. Over the years Anton's migraines have diminished, but he then begins suffering panic attacks. Anton refuses to submit to them and they too slowly begin to diminish.

When Sandra was sixteen, she insisted that it was time for her to see where her paternal grandparents and uncle were killed. Although Saskia and Liesbeth disagree, Anton willingly takes her. Together they visit the quay. A new house now stands where Anton's home once stood. The memorial is still on the corner. Anton and Saskia read through the names together. Anton is surprised to find the name of Takes's brother under his parents' names. Afterward, Saskia suggests they visit the grave of Truus Coster. It is a simple stone, showing the woman was only twenty-five when she died.

In November of 1981, Anton wakes with a toothache. Anton calls his dentist but learns that he is not opening the office that day in order to join a protest against nuclear weapons. Anton talks him into opening the office for him, but has to promise to join the protest. The toothache is easily cured, but Anton keeps his promises, going to the demonstration with his young son, Peter. At the protest, Anton quickly loses the dentist and soon loses track of his son as well. Anton runs into Sandra, who is now nineteen and pregnant with her first child. As Anton speaks with Sandra and her unpleasant boyfriend, he sees an elderly woman watching them. Anton assumes she is a prior patient and nods politely at her.

As Anton separates from his daughter and moves into the crowd, he again runs into the elderly woman. This woman introduces herself as Karin Korteweg. Anton is shocked at seeing her, but sees it as an opportunity to have some questions answered finally. Anton asks her about that night. Karin tells Anton that her father was worried that the Germans would burn down their home and kill his lizards. The lizards were the only thing that brought Mr. Korteweg pleasure after the death of his wife. For this reason, he insisted that Karin help him move Ploeg's body. Afterward, Peter broke into their home with a gun Karin later learned was Ploeg's. Karin tried to talk him into hiding the gun, but her father knew the soldiers would find it, so he encouraged Peter to keep it. The soldiers saw Peter with the gun through a crack in the window's blackout screen and fired on him. They then entered the house and continued to fire until Peter was dead.

When everything was done, the soldiers arrested Karin and her father, taking them to the Ortskommandantur. Anton remembers seeing Mr. Korteweg there. Karin swears that she told the interrogator about moving the body, but the man showed no interest in this



detail. Upon arriving home, Mr. Korteweg immediately killed all his lizards and later buried them in the garden.

Anton asks why Karin and her father left Haarlem after the Liberation. Karin tells Anton that her father became obsessed with the idea that Anton would seek revenge when he became an adult. This idea was enforced when Van Liempt came to his home seeking information. Mr. Korteweg packed up the house immediately and moved in with an aunt of Karin's until he could arrange immigration to New Zealand later in the year. Three years later, still obsessed with the idea of Anton's need for revenge, Mr. Korteweg killed himself.

As Karin continues to talk, Anton interrupts her and asks why she and her father moved Ploeg in front of their house and not the Aarts'. Karin tells Anton she wanted to move the body to the Aarts, but her father refused. Karin tells Anton that the Aarts were hiding a Jewish family in their home, a couple and their young daughter. Mr. Korteweg knew if the soldiers thought the Aarts were responsible for Ploeg's death, they would find the Jews and execute them. Anton is surprised by this detail, and by the sense of released it gives him. Now everything makes sense. It seems a trio of Jews saved the lives of the Aarts simply by needing saving themselves.

Final Episode, 1981 Analysis

Anton becomes successful and owns four homes, two vacation homes, his primary home, and the home where his ex-wife still lives. This is the life the reader can only imagine Anton's parents would have wanted for him. Anton, however, suffers panic attacks that he tries to ignore and therefore fails to deal with the tragedy that has brought them on.

Anton visits the quay where he grew up with his daughter and discovers that Takes did not only lose his girlfriend, but his baby brother as well. Anton and Sandra also visit the grave of Truus, offering Anton some degree of closure in connection with this woman that became so ingrained in his thoughts and subconscious desires.

Anton attends a political demonstration even though he has always avoided this type of situation. However, Anton unexpectedly runs into the one person who can answer questions that are the few remaining from that tragic night in 1945. Karin Korteweg tells Anton that her father, who Anton has always kind of assumed was a cruel, heartless man who moved Ploeg's body to save his own home, was actually a big hearted man who only did what he did to save the last thing he had that gave him any sense of happiness. Not only this, but Korteweg chose to move the body in front of the Steenwijk house because he was trying to protect the Jews hiding in the Aarts' house. What Korteweg did saved three lives, but took three. In the end, Korteweg could not live with what he did and committed suicide.

Anton also learns from Karin the details of his brother's death, learning that the murder was as much Peter's fault for taking Ploeg's gun as it was the Germans who actually



killed him. Karin tried to help Peter, but Mr. Korteweg knew if Peter attempted to hide the gun, the Germans would find it and kill them all. There was nothing they could do to help Peter.

Anton has had four chance encounters with four people who were affected by the events that took his family's lives. Anton should have been a victim, he should have suffered without his family. However, Anton did not suffer, but chose to put the events of that night in the past and focus on the future. By doing this, Anton suffers physical ailments that are a manifestation of his inability to deal with tragedy. As Anton learns about the events of that night, he sees how those events ruined the lives of many other people. Fake Ploeg had to drop out of school, but later came to own his own business. Cor Takes suffered the loss of a brother and the love of his life. Mr. Korteweg suffered the most, taking his own life out of guilt for what he did to Anton and his family. However, it turns out Mr. Korteweg did what he did for the greater good, just as Takes thought he was doing. In the end, it was Mr. Korteweg who suffered the most, not Anton.



Characters

Anton Steenwijk

Anton is the main character of the novel. Anton Steenwijk is twelve years old in the final months of World War II. Anton and his family are living in one room of their home with little fuel to warm them and almost no food. The children no longer attend school because there is no fuel to warm the school rooms. One January night in 1945, a Nazi collaborator with whose son Anton attended school, is killed in front of their neighbor's house. The neighbors move the body in front of Anton's family's house. As a result, the Germans soldiers come and burn down Anton's home. Anton is taken to a jail where he is left alone with a prisoner for several hours, a woman who will remain in his subconscious thoughts for many years and influence the choice of woman he will marry.

As Anton grows, he learns that his family was murdered, his parents and his brother, but it seems like a different world, a different life, and Anton buries it in his mind. Four times, however, Anton faces the past. First Anton meets with an old neighbor after returning to Haarlem for a birthday party. At this meeting, Anton learns how his mother confronted the soldier in charge, perhaps precipitating her death. A second meeting brings Anton face to face with the son of the dead Nazi collaborator who believes his father was innocent of the charges that have been leveled against him by the Resistance. The third meeting introduces Anton to the man who killed the collaborator, giving him information about that mysterious prisoner he was not aware remained in his mind all those years. Finally, Anton learns the complete truth of that night when he runs into the daughter of his neighbor who made the fateful decision to move the body. When Anton learns the final truth of that night, he feels liberated more than thirty years after Liberation Day. Despite Anton's refusal to consciously deal with the tragedy of that night, it has remained with him. Now that he has all the information, he feels free.

Mr. and Mrs. Steenwijk and Peter

Mr. and Mrs. Steenwijk are Anton's parents. Mrs. Steenwijk is a strong woman who takes charge when her son attempts to move the body of Fake Ploeg from in front of their house. Mrs. Steenwijk believes if they mind their own business, the Germans will believe them innocent of any wrongdoing. However, the Germans are not as fair as Mrs. Steenwijk believes they will be. The family is dragged out of the house. Anton learns later that his mother stood up to the German soldiers, perhaps precipitating her own execution. In contrast to Mrs. Steenwijk, Mr. Steenwijk is a clerk who remains quiet all during the debate over what to do about Ploeg's body. In fact, Mr. Steenwijk barely speaks in the early portions of the novel after finishing giving Peter his lessons. Peter, on the other hand, is more like his mother. Peter takes charge immediately, wanting to move the body in order to protect his family. Unfortunately, Peter acts too late and finds himself vulnerable on the street with the soldiers come. Peter takes Ploeg's gun, a fatal mistake, and is killed when the soldiers see him holding the gun on the Korteweg family.



Mr. Korteweg and Karin

Mr. Korteweg is a retired seaman who lives next door to the Steenwijks. Mr. Korteweg's wife has passed away and he has brought his daughter, Karin, to live with him. Karin is an adult, a nurse. Karin befriends Anton in the days before that January night in 1945, playing games with him in the sitting room of her house and showing him her father's lizards. However, on that January night, Karin helps her father move the body of Fake Ploeg from their house to the Steenwijks house. For many years Anton believes this act to be a selfish one that targeted the Steenwijk family for unknown reasons. More than thirty years later, however, Anton runs into Karin and learns the truth. Mr. Korteweg was worried about the fate of his lizards. This is why Mr. Korteweg moved the body. The reason he chose the Steenwijks home rather than the Aarts is because he knew the Aarts were hiding Jews.

Mr. and Mrs. Beumer

Mr. and Mrs. Beumer lived on the other side of the Steenwijks. Mr. Beumer once had Anton to his house on many occasions in order to read to him. Seven years after that fateful night in 1945, Anton returns to the quay where he grew up and finds the Beumers still there. Mrs. Beumer has Anton in for coffee, where he discovers that Mr. Beumer has gone senile in his old age. Mrs. Beumer tells Anton about the night of his parents' death, how she saw his mother attack one of the soldiers, perhaps precipitating her murder. Mrs. Beumer also tells Anton how the Kortewegs moved shortly after Liberation Day. Finally, it is Mrs. Beumer that makes Anton aware of the memorial that has his parents' names on it. A few years later, Anton will also learn that it was Mrs. Beumer who told the soldiers where Truus Coster was hiding, precipitating her arrest.

Mr. and Mrs. Aarts

Mr. and Mrs. Aarts are a retired couple who live in the Bide-a-Wee house on the quay. No one likes the Aarts much because they are reclusive, rarely speaking with any of the neighbors. However, Anton learns more than thirty years later the reason for this was that the Aarts were hiding a family of Jews in their home. The only one aware of this fact was Mr. Korteweg.

Cor Takes and Truus Coster

Cor Takes was a member of the Resistance during the war. Anton meets him in 1966 while attending the funeral of a poet also involved in the Resistance. Anton discovers during this initial meeting that Takes is the man who killed Fake Ploeg. Takes committed this murder because of the cruelty Ploeg committed against Resistance hostages, knowing the Germans would take retribution. In fact, one of the hostages that would be killed in retribution was Takes's own baby brother. When they meet, Takes tells Anton that a woman, his girlfriend, was with him that night and that she was shot, arrested,



and later executed. Anton realizes that this woman is the same woman with whom he shared a cell that fateful night. Unfortunately, Anton cannot recall anything the woman told him, therefore he is unable to tell Takes that she was in love with him despite her careless avoidance of commitment during their relationship.

Saskia De Graaf Steenwijk

Saskia De Graaf is Anton's first wife. Saskia is the daughter of a diplomat, a man who was once a member of the Resistance during the war. Saskia reminds Anton of Truus Coster when he meets her, though he does not make the conscious connection until he meets Cor Takes. Anton and Saskia share a great intimacy, which is partially to blame for the failure of their marriage. Through Saskia, Anton has gained a new father figure in his life, and received the great gift of a daughter. Anton and Saskia remain close even after their divorce, showing the reader what a great impact they had on one another's lives.

Fake Ploeg

Fake Ploeg is the Chief Inspector of Police in Haarlem during the war. Fake works closely with the Germans, often torturing the Resistance hostages that come through his jail. Anton knows that Fake is a cruel man, but it is not until he meets Cor Takes that he learns just how cruel he truly was. Fake Ploeg is killed by Takes and his girlfriend, Truus Coster, as he bicycles through the quay in Haarlem on his way home one evening. Fake falls in front of the Korteweg house, but they move him out of fear of their house burning down. Fake's body ends up in front of the Steenwijk home, causing the deaths of Anton's mother, father, and brother, Peter.

Fake Ploeg, the son

Fake Ploeg had a son with the same name who was a classmate of Anton's. Anton recalls that Fake was as cruel as his father, but also appeared to be a victim of his father's cruelty. One day when Fake came to school in the uniform for the Nazi Youth, Anton stood up for him by walking into the classroom to sit with him despite the teacher refusing to enter until he took off the uniform. Fake never forgot this kindness on Anton's part. In 1956, Anton and Fake meet again. Fake tells Anton how difficult it had been after his father's death for his family. Fake continues to believe his father was innocent of the crimes the Resistance accused him of, clinging to the child's ideal of a beloved parent.

Sandra Steenwijk

Sandra Steenwijk is Anton's daughter and oldest child. Sandra is a precocious child who brings Anton a great deal of joy in the early years of her life and a great deal of guilt after his divorce from her mother. When Sandra is sixteen, she insists that Anton take

her to Haarlem to see where her grandparents died. Anton does, and together they visit the memorial and the cemetery to see Truus's grave. Later, Sandra becomes pregnant and moves in with a man Anton disapproves of. However, they remain close and Sandra is clearly a source of joy and peace for Anton.



Objects/Places

Novel

Anton takes a novel by a Haarlem writer as a gift for a friend's birthday. This birthday party brings Anton back to Haarlem for the first time since his family was killed.

Protest Signs

As Anton talks with Karin Korteweg in 1981, he reads the slogans on protest signs all around them. It is a demonstration against nuclear weapons, and Anton finds the slogans fascinating even as he learns the final details of his own family's death in 1945.

Truus' Gun

Takes has kept the gun Truus Coster used to kill Fake Ploeg with for twenty years, despite laws that require him to give up the gun or have it rendered unusable. Anton sees this gun when he visits with Takes to see a picture of Truus.

Truus' Picture

Anton decides he needs to see a picture of Truus in order to prove to himself she looks nothing like he has imagined for nearly twenty years and that his current wife does not resemble her in any way. However, when Anton sees the picture, he realizes that his wife does resemble Truus in the emotion in her eyes.

Ploeg's Gun

Peter takes Ploeg's gun and holds it on the Kortewegs when he breaks into their house to hide from the soldiers. One of the soldiers sees Peter through a crack in the window shade and kills him.

Lizards

Mr. Korteweg owns a large number of lizards. These lizards are the only thing that provides Korteweg pleasure after the death of his wife. It is for these lizards that Mr. Korteweg moves the body of Fake Ploeg from in front of his house.



Carefree

Carefree is the name of the house the Steenwijks live in during the war. This house is burned to the ground the night Fake Ploeg is found dead outside of it.

Jail Cell

Anton is placed briefly in a jail cell under the police station in Heemstede with a woman he cannot see because of the darkness in the cell. Anton will subconsciously recall this woman for the rest of his life, marrying a woman because of his perceived resemblance between the two women.

Memorial

There is a memorial on the quay where Anton lived that is to the Resistance hostages killed the same January night in 1945 that Anton's family was killed in retribution for the death of Fake Ploeg. This memorial includes the names of Anton's parents because they were also killed that night along with the Resistance hostages.

Quay

The Steenwijks live in one of four houses that sit along a quay in Haarlem.

Haarlem

Haarlem is a small town outside Amsterdam where Anton Steenwijk lived with his family during the war.

Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a large city in Holland. Anton moves here to live with his aunt and uncle and remains in Amsterdam throughout his adulthood.



Themes

Aftermath of Tragedy

The main theme of this novel is the aftermath of tragedy and how that tragedy affects all it touches. Anton Steenwijk lost his parents and older brother when a Nazi collaborator was killed in his neighborhood and his body moved to in front of Anton's family's house. Anton is adopted by his aunt and uncle and lives a fairly successful life. However, Anton continuously runs into people who give him small pieces of information about that night until he finally has a full picture of what happened. The tragedy is not something Anton dwells on; in fact, he goes out of his way to avoid thinking about it. Despite this, learning the entire truth is something that helps Anton overcome emotional blocks related to that night that he is not even aware he has.

Anton is not the only person affected by the events of that night, however. The son of the murdered man lost out on an education, on the love of his devoted father, and undivided attention of his beloved mother. For this young man, he must live with the idea that many believe his father was a cruel tyrant. For the murderer who took Fake Ploeg's life, he must live with the fact that his actions caused his own brother to be killed. Cor Takes lives daily knowing his actions caused the executions of twenty-nine Resistance hostages as well as three members of the Steenwijk family. Takes's girlfriend was also arrested and later executed for the same crime. Takes spends the rest of his life unaware that Truus loved him as much as he loved her, knowledge that only Anton has, but has forgotten.

The most profound fallout of that fateful night is the impact it had on Mr. Korteweg, Anton's neighbor. Mr. Korteweg made a split second decision to move Ploeg's body so that the German's would find it in front of someone else's house. Mr. Korteweg was afraid that the Germans would burn his house and kill his lizards, the only things he cared about after the death of his wife. There was no way Mr. Korteweg could have known that the Germans would kill three of the Steenwijks. Afterward, guilt overcomes Mr. Korteweg and he ends up killing himself. Anton does not learn until thirty-five years later that Mr. Korteweg choose his family's home because he did not want the Germans to find the Jews living in the house on the other side of his.

The event of that January night in 1945 touches many lives. Anton appears to be the person who lost the most because he lost every member of his immediate family. However, Anton was only twelve, and he was adopted by caring people who doted on the young child. The most profound impact of that night was on the other people involved, the family of the dead man, the killer, and the neighbor who made a selfish choice that ended three people's lives. This all is information Anton learns as he pieces together the events of that night, making the aftermath of tragedy the main theme of the novel.



Family

Family is a common theme in many modern novels and this one is not an exception. In this novel, twelve-year-old Anton loses his mother, father and brother to the Germans after a Nazi collaborator is killed near their home. Anton has every right to be devastated by this tragedy, to use it as an excuse to hide from commitment, to become emotional detached from the world and other people. However, Anton does not use this as an excuse. Anton buries this tragedy and refuses to deal with it. Instead, Anton embraces the only family he has left and grows to have a family of his own.

As Anton matures and comes into contact with people who were also affected by the events surrounding his family's death, the reader begins to see how family moves beyond the obvious and becomes a more subtle theme that colors the lives of the other characters. Cor Takes, for example, loses his baby brother as a direct result of his actions on that night. More important to Takes, however, is that he loses his love that same night. However, Takes did what he did to protect his fellow Resistance members from the cruelty with which Fake Ploeg treated those he saw as criminals. The Resistance itself became a family to Takes and others like him, giving them purpose and helping them to believe what they were doing was for a greater good.

Anton marries, and through his marriage becomes a part of a family. Anton once again has a mother and a father, a father whom he grows very close to. Anton has two children, two wives, all people for whom he cares deeply for. These people do not replace what Anton has lost, but that fulfill his life and give him purpose. For this reason and others mentioned above, family is a theme of the novel.

Cruelties of War

When the novel begins, World War II is in its final days. The war has hit Holland hard, leaving its people without food, without heat, and without hope. The Steenwijk family manages to remain a close knit family, spending long hours together during that winter of starvation, and finding hope in one another. However, the war goes beyond stealing food and heat from them. The war comes to their front yard.

When Fake Ploeg is killed in their neighbor's yard, no one imagines that anyone will die as a result. The body is moved and Peter Steenwijk fears that his family's home will be burned down in retribution. Peter wants to move the body, but cannot get his mother's support because she insists on believing in a civilized world where one is innocent until proven guilty. However, the war has changed all that. Mrs. Steenwijk, her husband, and her son are all killed for one reason or another, all in retribution for the death of a Nazi collaborator. It did not matter that they had nothing to do with the murder, it was enough that the body was in their yard.

As Anton matures and learns about the death of his family, he learns more about the cruelty of war. The reason Fake Ploeg was murdered had a great deal to do with war. Fake was a cruel man who was allowed to torture and abuse people in the name of war.



His death was a direct response to that cruelty, an attempt on the Resistance's part to stop the torture. The moving of Ploeg's body was a result of war too, since the owners of the first house knew their home would be burned if Ploeg's body were found in front of it. They could have taken the body inside and hidden it, but it might have been found in a search. Instead, they chose between the two house on either side of them, choosing one filled with children rather than the home of an elderly couple because they knew Jews were hiding in that house. That too was a result of the war. For this reason, cruelties of war is a theme of this novel.

Style

Point of View

The point of view is third person omniscient with a degree of authorial voice. The point of view utilizes the narration of one character whose story is told in a third person voice. Anton Steenwijk is a little boy when the book begins. Anton shares his story with the reader from a point of view that is distant from the events taking place, as though he is looking back on these events from a future point. There are times in the novel in which the author makes comments, such as when he mentions that the German who placed twelve-year-old Anton into the back of a car looked like the Germans popular in movies about the war. The author makes it clear to the reader that Anton grows into maturity and is looking back on these days when the story is written down.

The point of view of this novel is third person omniscient, a point of view that is quite common in modern literature. What sets this novel apart is the fact that it also includes an authorial voice. The authorial voice is when the author voices an opinion or fact that is clearly coming from the author, not the characters. In this novel, the author makes statements from time to time about Anton, such as how he would recall the taste of a particular sandwich whenever he traveled to Tuscany to vacation in his home there. However, the author does not intrude on the narration often, only when he feels the information he has to offer is important to the overall plot. The point of view of this novel works well, not only because of this occasional authorial voice, but because it shows the reader the struggle one man has with an event from his past that affected many other lives much more than it did his own.

Setting

The novel is set in Holland. At the beginning of the novel, the setting is Haarlem, a small city outside of Amsterdam. Haarlem is the home of the Steenwijk family, a middle-aged clerk, his wife, and two sons. It is their home that is burned down and the couple and older child who are murdered in revenge for the death of a Nazi collaborator. Later, the novel's setting moves to Amsterdam along with the Steenwijk's youngest child, Anton. In Amsterdam Anton becomes a doctor, marries twice, and has two children. During the thirty-seven years that past between the night of his family's death in 1945 and the end of the novel, Anton runs into four people who give him bits and pieces of information regarding that fateful night, showing him how that one event changed the lives of all the people involved.

The setting of this novel is important to the plot because it places the main characters in a country that is under the control of the Germans in the latter days of World War II. If not for the German occupation, the people of Haarlem would have had no fear of the cruel Inspector of Police who was murdered on the quay in front of the Steenwijk home. If Fake Ploeg had not been murdered, then the Steenwijk family would have lived and



the plot of the novel would have had no conflict. The setting is also important to the plot because Amsterdam was a location of great strife in the thirty years after the war, creating an atmosphere that paralleled the difficulties Anton had in dealing with the tragedy of his family's deaths as he learned more and more about what happened that night.

Language and Meaning

The novel was originally written in Dutch. The novel was translated into English for sale in Europe and the United States. Some words and phrases could not be translated, however, so there are many terms or words that remain in Dutch or German. These words are often explained within the context of the paragraph in which they appear or the meaning is made clear through a rough translation that appears after the original foreign word or phrase. Due to the fact that the original novel was written in a foreign language, the grammar and some of the sentence syntax is unfamiliar to the English speaking reader. However, the main purpose of the phrasing is intact, making it possible for the reader to comprehend the meaning.

The language of the novel is true to the writer and his characters. The language is a close translation of what the writer originally intended; therefore, the reader can comprehend what it was the writer wanted the reader to understand. Although a great deal of foreign words and phrases remain in the text, some of it not clearly translated, the reader does not find these words and phrases an impediment to comprehending the overall meaning of the novel. In fact, these words and phrases tend to underscore the setting of the novel. By doing this, the language gives authenticity to the conflict and setting that drive the plot of this novel.

Structure

The novel is written in both exposition and dialogue. However, a great deal of the novel is written in exposition that is filled with the authorial voice, a narration that describes what has happened to Anton Steenwijk from the night his parents and brother are killed until the day he learns the truth of what happened to them that fateful night.

The main plot of the novel follows the life of Anton Steenwijk from the time he is twelve until he reaches the same age his father would have been the year he died. Anton lives through the executions of his parents for their perceived actions on the night a Nazi collaborator was killed. Anton then goes on to medical school, marries twice, and has two children. During this time, Anton runs into four people who were also affected by the activities of that fateful night in 1945. As Anton learns the truth of what happened that night, the reader learns how those actions affected all the other people involved, either directly or indirectly.



Quotes

"Even before the catastrophe occurred, Anton used to think that Carefree meant a place where cares entered freely, not a place free from cares; just as someone could think priceless meant without cost, rather than beyond price." Prologue, p. 3

"It was January, nineteen forty-five. Almost all of Europe had been liberated and was once more rejoicing, eating, drinking, making love, and beginning to forget the War. But every day Haarlem looked more like one of those spent grey clinkers that they used to take out of the stove, when there had still been coal to burn."

First Episode, 1945, p. 9

"His mother and Peter were just in time to see them deposit the body in front of Carefree."

First Episode, 1945, p. 19

"He could tell by her voice that this was somehow fatal. What had happened to Peter?"

First Episode, 1945, p. 40

"All the rest is a postscript—the cloud of ash that rises into the stratosphere from the volcano, circles around the earth, and continues to rain down on all its continents for years."

Second Episode, 1952, p. 55

"The three houses. An open space between the first and second, like a missing tooth. Only the fence was still there."

Second Episode, 1952, p. 63

"After many years, also mathematically calculable, he would at last stop and remain floating, weightless, at the center of the earth, where he would be able to reflect upon the state of things in eternity."

Second Episode, 1952, p. 76

"One more thing he would never have found out if it hadn't been for Fake."

Third Episode, 1956, p. 94

"In love, too, he simply let things happen to him."

Fourth Episode, 1966, p. 97

"Why did the seaman deposit him at your doorstep and not here, at his other neighbor's?"

Fourth Episode, 1966, p. 117



"From the very beginning he had imagined her looking like this and not otherwise—like Saskia. This was what he had recognized in Saskia at first sight that afternoon at the Stone of Scone."

Fourth Episode, 1966, p. 130

"The War, though periodically revived in books and TV programs, had gradually become a thing of the past, if one can say such a thing."

Final Episode, 1981, p. 158

"The three Jews...Six million of them had been killed, twelve times as many as there were people marching here. But by being in danger, those three people had unknowingly saved themselves and the lives of two others, and instead of them, his own father and mother and Peter had died, all because of some lizards..."

Final Episode, 1981, p. 184



Topics for Discussion

Who is Anton Steenwijk? Why is he the main character of the novel? How does it impact Anton when his family is murdered? Why does Anton have migraines? Why does he have panic attacks? What does this have to do with the deaths of his family? Why does Anton refuse to deal with those deaths? Why does Anton not wish to return to Haarlem or learn the truth about the death of his family?

Who is Mrs. Beumer? Why does she become so excited when Anton comes to visit her? What does she tell Anton about his parents that he did not already know? What is significant about the information Mrs. Beumer gives Anton? What is missing from this information? When does Anton learn about Mrs. Beumer's role in the activities of that night? What is wrong with Mrs. Beumer's husband? How does this make Mrs. Beumer a sympathetic character?

Who is Fake Ploeg? Why is he murdered? Who is his son? How does Anton know his son? When does Anton meet Fake's son again? What is the result of this meeting? Is Fake's son a sympathetic character? Explain. How did the death of Fake Ploeg affect his family? How does Anton feel about this? How does Anton feel when he discovers that Fake has come to own his own company?

Who is Cor Takes? Why does Anton speak to him after a funeral? What does he overhear Takes admitting to? What does Takes tell Anton about the night Fake Ploeg was murdered? What question plagues Takes when he learns that Ploeg's body was moved? What information about that night does Takes tell Anton that makes him have an emotional reaction to that night's events for the first time? What did Takes lose that night? Why did Takes go through with the murder when he knew what the end results would most likely be?

Who is Truus Coster? How does Anton meet her? Why is she in a jail cell? What crime did Truus commit? For what reason? What impact does meeting her have on Anton? Why does the knowledge that Truus was murdered affect Anton more than the loss of his family? Why does Anton believe he chose his wife because of his perceived idea of what Truus looked like? What does this say about the way Anton felt about this woman he knew so briefly?

Who is Mr. Korteweg? Where does he live? What is Anton's opinion of Mr. Korteweg before that night in 1945? Why does Anton believe Mr. Korteweg moved Ploeg's body to the front of the Steenwijk home? How does Anton learn this opinion is not true? What do Mr. Korteweg's real motives say about his character? Why does Mr. Korteweg become convinced that Anton will attempt to enact revenge against him? How does Mr. Korteweg react to this fear? Why?

Why does Anton divorce his first wife? How does Anton feel about his first wife after the divorce? How does she feel about him? How do Anton and his second wife get along

with his first wife? What does this say about this group of people? What kind of father is Anton? What does this say about his character?