

Bang the Drum Slowly Study Guide

Bang the Drum Slowly by Mark Harris (author)

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Plot Summary

Henry and Bruce are both baseball players in the 1950s who play for a team called the New York Mammoths. Bruce shocks Henry with the news that he has a deadly disease and will probably die soon. Henry tries to come to terms with this while he also plays baseball and awaits the birth of his first child.

During the off-season, Bruce calls Henry up and tells him to come see him in Minnesota, where Bruce is in the hospital. Henry learns that Bruce has Hodgkin's disease, a cancer of the blood, and that he is certainly going to die. Henry agrees to keep this a secret, worrying that Bruce will be fired as soon as Dutch, their manager, finds out. When spring training starts, Henry delays signing his contract, asking for more money, and insisting that he and Bruce stay together, no matter what happens. Dutch is annoyed, and keeps trying to figure out what Henry and Bruce's big secret is, even hiring a detective.

The season starts, and the Mammoths are the best team in the league. They still have their problems, and Dutch complains about their lack of team unity. Most of the players tease Bruce a lot, because he is rather stupid, and Henry tries to get them to be nicer to Bruce. Little by little the secret leaks to more and more people on the team, and Henry can always tell when someone has found out, because they suddenly start being nice to Bruce. The other players play cards with him, drink with him, and sing songs with him. None of them want to admit why, and no one talks openly with Bruce about his condition.

When Henry is not playing baseball, he supports his wife by selling insurance to baseball players. Henry's wife, Holly, goes into labor, and by the time he gets there, he has a daughter, whom they name Michele. Around the same time, Bruce's mother dies, and the team sends flowers to her funeral. Bruce is in love with a prostitute named Katie, and he asks her to marry him. When Katie learns about the huge insurance policy that Henry has sold to Bruce, she agrees to marry him. Bruce asks Henry to change the beneficiary on his insurance policy to Katie, but Henry suspects that she is only trying to swindle Bruce, so he only pretends to change it. Katie does all she can to get Henry to change the form, but he never does.

On Labor Day, Bruce is not feeling well, but he manages to play half a game before falling unconscious. Henry accompanies him to the hospital, worried that he will die that night. He does not, but sits on the bench for the first half of the World Series, cheering his team on. He goes home with his father, and the Mammoths win the Series. Soon after, Bruce dies.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Henry Wiggen receives a phone call one morning from one of his baseball teammates, Bruce Pearson. Henry travels to Minnesota to see Bruce in the hospital, where he learns that Bruce has a deadly disease.

Henry Wiggen is lying in bed one morning with his wife, Holly. The phone rings, and Henry lies there, trying to think of a funny way to answer the phone. When he picks up, he learns that it is a collect call, but when someone calls him "Arthur," he knows that it is his old friend Bruce Pearson. Bruce is the only person who ever calls Henry "Arthur", and Henry assumes that Bruce must be in jail, calling him for bail. Instead, Bruce says that he is in the hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, but beyond that he will say nothing, except that Henry must come and see him. Henry answers that he can not afford to come all the way from New York because he is already in so much debt. When Holly hears that Bruce is in a hospital, she insists that Henry go see him, and packs him an overnight bag. Henry affectionately kisses her goodbye, and tells her to take care of the baby growing in her belly. She is three months pregnant, and in an aside, Henry foreshadows that the baby will be a girl, and that he will not return until the time of the baby's birth.

In addition to playing baseball and writing a published novel, Henry also sells insurance with a company called Arcturus. He is not especially good at sales. In fact, the only people who have ever bought insurance from him are friends from baseball. Henry has taken a single course in how to sell insurance, and he takes his Arcturus kit with him to Minnesota, so that he can try to sell along the way, and write the trip off as a tax deduction.

Henry finds the snowstorm that he has to fly through to be disconcerting, but his worries are soothed by the flirtation of an attractive stewardess. They have coffee together in Chicago, and she hints broadly that he should come spend the night with her. Henry considers it, and stalls by calling up several old friends from baseball and trying to sell them insurance. Instead, he gets ahold of their wives, who complain about their absent husbands. Henry kicks himself inwardly for letting the opportunity of the stewardess slip away, but he knows that he would hate himself if he were to cheat on his pregnant wife.

Finally, Henry arrives in Minnesota. He gets a bite to eat, then goes to the hospital, where the nurses have been waiting for him to show up so that they can discharge Bruce. Bruce, who looks quite healthy, explains that he is not allowed to leave without a friend. Several doctors come into the room and tell Henry that Bruce has Hodgkin's disease. Confused, Henry does not understand what they are saying, and Bruce has to explain that he is going to die. Henry is suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of Bruce's stupidity and the folly of the doctors. He tells the doctors that they do not know what



they are talking about, and accuses them of being quacks. Bruce tries to reason with him, knowing that the doctors are correct.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter introduces the main characters, and the basic situation of the book. The reader is plunged somewhat suddenly into the world of the novel because it is the sequel to "The Southpaw," a previous book starring Henry. The narrator is Henry Wiggen, who has played professional baseball for four years, and is now between seasons. Although he has three different jobs, the fact that he is in bed at 10:00 on a Wednesday morning indicates that he does not work very industrious hours. In fact, the training schedule that Henry adopts when he is not actively playing baseball would probably make most modern professional athletes laugh. In the 1950s, it was much easier to break into professional sports, and athletes did not have to keep their bodies in as good of a condition.

Most of the chapter has a light, silly feel to it, as though the main point is to show the funny little things that make Henry laugh inside all the time. These little details serve to contrast the serious nature of Bruce's illness, Hodgkin's disease. Hodgkin's disease, or Hodgkin's lymphoma, is a serious type of cancer of the lymph nodes and blood cells. Although the survival rate today is high, the book takes place in the early 1950s when modern cancer treatments were not yet available. By having Henry's wife be pregnant, the author juxtaposes the creation of new life with the likelihood that Bruce will die. This shows that even in the midst of death, life continues, and it provides hope for a rather hopeless situation.



Chapters 2-3

Chapters 2-3 Summary

Bruce and Henry start Bruce's old car for the long journey from Minnesota to Bainbridge, Georgia, Bruce's birthplace. Henry decides not to bring up Bruce's illness until Bruce is ready to talk about it, but instead Bruce slowly unwinds stories from his childhood, especially as they get closer to the region he is familiar with. Even far away from home, Bruce seems to know everything about nature, but in Georgia, he knows every river, forest and path. Each night, Henry calls Holly collect, with each of them giving ridiculous names, but Holly never accepts the calls. This way, they can hear one another's voices without having to pay a long-distance bill. Finally, Henry is able to tell Holly about Bruce's condition, and she is appalled that Henry makes jokes. He tries to explain that the shock can only last so long before it takes on the feel of everyday life.

Henry calls Dutch, who is the team's manager, but he cannot bring himself to tell Dutch the bad news. Bruce agrees that this is the best plan, worrying that Dutch would fire him if he knew. The two men arrive in Bainbridge, which Bruce thinks is a very special place. Henry has been all over, and any place seems as good as any other to him. He reflects back on Bruce's life. Bruce grows up on a farm, helping his father with the farm work in the 1930s and 1940s. He is always good at various sports, and when he graduates high school, Southern States University recruits him to play baseball. Bruce goes to college and plays several seasons, each time convincing the university to donate various farm goods to his family so that the family can spare him.

Bruce leaves college to enlist in World War II and he goes to France, where he spends a lot of time shooting from a foxhole. When he runs out of ammunition, he surrenders and is sent home, where the University is glad to have him back. He rooms with a fellow named Sutter, who knows where all the whorehouses are, anywhere they go. Together, Bruce and Sutter spend most of their money at whorehouses, and pick up sexually transmitted diseases. Sutter coaches Bruce in just how to ask his school for donations to his family farm. In the summer time, Bruce plays with an amateur league, playing one or two games every day, often against the same opponents over and over. After college, a scout named Ray Pink recruits Bruce for the team the New York Mammoths, although Bruce is nothing spectacular. Bruce is always late to training, because the only time he drinks is once a year, on the way to training. As Henry thinks back on times when Bruce has spat his disgusting tobacco, or peed in the sink, or gotten so drunk that no one could control him, Henry feels bad for all the times he has been mad at Bruce, or said bad things about him.

Chapters 2-3 Analysis

Even sixty years ago, telephones were not anywhere near as affordable and convenient as they are today. Henry and Holly have an elaborate system that they use to have a



few moments of voice contact, with a stranger listening in, because long-distance phone calls were very expensive. Even when Henry calls Holly for real, he does not want to tell her the bad news, knowing that the switchboard operator is listening in. With a switchboard operator, a caller would verbally tell the operator what number or person they were trying to reach, and the operator would manually plug in a cord to connect the two parties. If the person on the other line was not home, or did not get to the phone after a certain number of rings, there was simply no way to get ahold of them or leave a message. There were no answering machines, no voicemail, no caller ID, no speed dial, no text messaging, no 911 system, and certainly no mobile phones. In fact, back then, car phones were used as a Hollywood gimmick to show that someone was unfathomably wealthy or decadent. If a call did not go through, there was little the caller could do to get their message through, except send a letter, or actually go find the person. If someone wanted to spend a lot of money to send a message in a great hurry, they could go to a telegraph office and send a telegram, using Morse code to transmit a short line of text. This would then be written down on the receiving end, and someone would deliver the piece of paper to the recipient. Telegrams were priced by the word, with the minimum usually being ten words, so many telegrams were strange, ten-word codes.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Although Bainbridge is listed as Bruce's official hometown, Bruce is actually from Mill, Georgia, which is not so much a town, as his parents' house. They do not know that he is coming, but Bruce and Henry roll up in the drive without ceremony and go sit on the porch with Bruce's parents. Bruce's parents pass the time by sitting on their front porch, swatting flies and sipping water. They are happy to have Henry join them. Bruce's parents ask him what the news is from Minnesota, and he tells them that there is nothing wrong with him. Each morning, the group waits for the mail for several hours, then carefully reads and discusses every piece of mail that comes in, while they hang out with the mailman. Henry is amazed by the slow pace of such a life, and also at how the family seems to know when it is time to eat or go to bed, without any clocks.

In the weeks that the men are staying there, Bruce shows Henry places all over the county, telling him story after story of the times he has had and the people he has known. Bruce is struck with the realization that he has put his life in danger countless times, doing dangerous work, or playing in unsafe places, and going to war. None of these things has killed him, but he knows that he is going to die from his disease. Bruce suddenly understands that all the little irritations of life do not really matter, and everything seems wonderful for him, since he is going to lose them soon. Bruce even starts going to church, and Henry goes with him, although neither of them is religious. However, Bruce tells the pastor, Reverend Robinson, about his illness.

In the evenings, Bruce and Henry pass the time playing the card game Tegwar, which is an acronym for The Exciting Game Without Any Rules. When playing Tegwar, players pretend that there is a complicated set of rules, but they have to make them up as they go along. The object of the game is to confuse an observer and take his money while keeping a straight face. Bruce's father joins the game one night, so Henry and Bruce come up with reason after reason that he owes them money for penalties within the game. Bruce gets a real kick out of getting his father to play with them. When Henry sees how willing Bruce's dad is to hand over so much money, he realizes that Bruce's dad knows that Bruce is sick.

Bruce and Henry's baseball contracts come in the mail. Bruce signs his and sends it back, while Henry refuses to sign a contract for what he calls slave wages. One day, Holly surprises them by showing up, and she stays with them for the rest of their visit. Her pregnancy is just beginning to show. It reminds Henry of a time several years before, when Bruce would constantly come over to their apartment, almost becoming a permanent fixture.



Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter really gives an idea of the slow, relaxed pace of life in the country. Especially in the days before television and the internet, country folk might not have the variety of stimuli that most modern people are used to. When living in a town that contains nothing but a house and a broken-down old mill, a person must either find entertainment in exploring nature, or learn to enjoy discussing the same topics with the same people, over and over. This does not necessarily mean that country living is boring, just that someone might have to put more conscious effort into finding ways to entertain themselves. Some people consider such a pace of life to be relaxing, rather than boring, and many take pleasure in the simple things, like chatting with the mailman. In addition to playing in the mill, Bruce and Henry go fishing and hunting, and play golf, as well as talking to his friends about farming. Henry muses to himself that Bruce's conversations with his old friends are so repetitive, talking about crops and hogs, that he thinks that Bruce just enjoys the act of talking with them. Sometimes, city people are so used to the convenience of various entertainments that they do not even consider the excitement of falling in the creek, or of observing nature. Farm life may be slow, but farm children see some things that would be very shocking to city dwellers, like butchering hogs and processing the carcass. Most people think that Bruce is stupid, but he is an expert when it comes to the countryside where he has grown up.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

The New York Mammoths assemble for training in Aqua Clara. Henry is one of the only players who has not yet signed a contract, because he is holding out for more money. As the days go by, Henry has to find ways to pass the time as he waits it out, and he gains weight. Sometimes he drives around and sells insurance, and on one of his trips, the coach from Cincinnati tries to recruit him for their team, offering him more money. Between games of badminton, lounging on the beach with Holly, and games of Tegwar, Henry finds it hard not to go begging his coaches to let him play. Henry knows that he is the best left-handed pitcher around, so he feels secure in waiting the coaches out. Finally, Old Man Moors, the team's owner, calls Henry in for a meeting, and they begin negotiating how much money Henry will get. He ends up getting the team to pay his taxes for him, but refuses to sign unless there is one more clause in the contract. When Henry insists that he and Bruce must travel together, even if one of them gets transferred, Moors insists on making the team manager, Dutch. Dutch is offended that Henry wants to tell him what to do, but he finally agrees, because of the look in Henry's eyes.

Henry is still overweight, but he finds that he pitches faster and better than ever, so he does not worry about it. The team starts touring, playing games, and this year Henry is the Player Representative. Henry and Bruce drive Holly to Jacksonville, and then she leaves them and goes back home. In the car, Henry is surprised to hear Bruce singing, which he almost never does. Even when Bruce and Henry are temporarily separated, Henry always keeps track of the phone numbers for several doctors, in whatever town Bruce is staying. They do not talk about Bruce's disease openly over the phone, because they worry that the operator, Tootsie, will listen in, and tell everyone about it.

Sports reporters wonder why Dutch is putting Bruce in the game now, since Bruce is nothing special. Bruce is surprised that they are keeping him, since Henry has not told him about their contracts being tied together. Bruce talks about how dumb he is, and Henry manages to convince him that he is not stupid, pointing out many of the things that Bruce understands about nature that very few people know. Ironically, Henry thinks that the only reason Bruce believes what he says is because Bruce is so stupid.

Henry makes an aside, referring to the fact that he is writing this book, and talking about how busy he now is with the baby and everything. He also comments that although he knows all the men on the team, from their food preferences, to their romantic activities, he realizes that not all of his readers are so familiar with the players. Remembering how much people seemed to like it in his previous book, "The Southpaw", Henry includes a roster of the team, detailing what positions the players hold.



Chapters 5-6 Analysis

It is a little startling when Henry refers directly to writing this book, because of the way it takes the reader out of the narrative present, and into the present of the author. This blurs the line between fiction and reality. What is more jarring is the understanding that the Mammoths and Henry are fictional characters. This imaginary author, who is called "Author" by most of his friends, even claims to have written the book "Bang the Drum Slowly," as the title page of the book credits him as the author, with "Certain of His Enthusiasms Restrained by Mark Harris". In this way, the real-life author, Harris, masquerades as a fictional ballplayer/author, who is called "Author". In fact, Harris actually did write "The Southpaw", which is a previous book starring Henry Wiggen. It is like Harris is making a joke, poking fun at the way disbelief is suspended when reading a novel. Several times, Henry comments on how other players also try writing books about the team, except that they use ghost writers, while Henry actually writes his books. Harris is not the first author to pretend to edit or "find" a book, which is supposedly written by a fictional character. One example of this sort of trick is William Goldman, who claimed that S. Morgenstern wrote Goldman's "The Princess Bride". Another example, in which the "editor" tried to pass off a work of fiction as history, is the 1971 book "Go Ask Alice", which Beatrice Sparks presented as the diary of an anonymous teenage girl who died of a drug overdose.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

Dutch, the team manager, calls Henry into his office one night, and asks him what is going on with Bruce. Dutch also wants to know why Bruce and Henry went to Bruce's parents' house. Henry claims that there is nothing going on with Bruce. Dutch is quite suspicious, but senses that Henry is not going to tell him the truth. Henry claims that he went to Minnesota to try to sell insurance to Aleck Olson, another ballplayer, and then he and Bruce went hunting. Dutch tells Henry that he will check with Aleck about that. Henry makes sure to tell Aleck the new version of the truth.

The season officially begins, and the Mammoths are doing well, winning most of their games. They are just about the only team in the league that year with a really solid, powerful set of men who can work together and make up for one another's weaknesses. One night on the train, Dutch calls Henry in to his room and begins asking more detailed questions about Bruce's and Henry's trip, pointing out inconsistencies. Now Henry asks him to please stop asking questions and keep quiet about it, because Henry is having an affair with an airline stewardess. Dutch answers that if Henry is telling the truth, he is a real jerk for having an affair when he has such a great wife, but Dutch doesn't believe him anyway. Dutch calls Bruce in, but Bruce backs up Henry's story.

Dutch is always losing his temper over something. Sid Goldman, the best hitter on the team, demands in his contract that he be allowed off on Passover, which drives Dutch crazy. Sid is an exceedingly calm man, who only thinks about his hitting technique. One day during a game, Bruce shocks everyone by stealing a base. Although he succeeds at it, he does the play with no instruction from Dutch, and Dutch is outraged. Bruce points out the very logical reason that he knew he could get away with stealing the base, and Dutch is surprised to hear that his stupid catcher has finally figured something out on his own.

Henry gets a call from Katie, a prostitute that Bruce has been in love with for years. She asks Henry to meet her at a restaurant, and asks him what is wrong with Bruce. Bruce has recently called her up and asked her to marry him, hinting that there will soon be a big payoff. Henry tells her that Bruce is not contagious, but perfectly healthy, and tells her she should get married. Katie laughs at the thought of going amateur, for her own career has made her very wealthy, and she likes what she does.

One afternoon, Henry is playing Tegwar with Joe, one of the assistant coaches, and they find a gullible young player to play against, slowly milking him of his money. A crowd gathers to watch the game, and eventually Bruce turns up. He asks if he can play, but Joe refuses to deal him in. Henry decides to walk away from the game rather than continue playing as Bruce watches sadly.



Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Bruce seems to be realizing that he does not have much time left, so he is trying to make the most of each moment. He is doing some things for the first time, like singing openly, and paying attention to the habits of the players on the opposing teams. This is significant, for Henry has pointed out to him that opposing players do not worry too much about Bruce, because they know that he is not analyzing their movements. Bruce starts to write down what he observes about certain players, and using what he notices to play more strategically. This shows that although his body is weakening, his mind is still learning, and he is open to new relationships. Bruce's desire to learn is important, since his main fault seems to be that he is not very smart. He wants to get smarter, meaning that he wants to improve himself as a person. This sends the message that it is never too late to improve and grow as a person, and Henry also grows as a person throughout the book.

Bruce has also stopped worrying about money, since he knows there is no need to save for the future. He wants to share his wealth, and his life, with Katie, knowing that she would get a gigantic insurance settlement when he dies. Bruce has the biggest possible insurance policy that Henry can sell him. He has it, not because he worries about the future, but because he wants to support Henry's business. What seems like stupidity is really kindness, and the same could be said of his courtship with Katie. Bruce probably understands that Katie would only marry him for the money, but he does not really mind. The fact that a professional baseball player would be worrying about money shows that times have changed, since today ballplayers make a lot of money. If this story took place today, Katie might consider marrying Bruce for his money, without him having to die and leave her an insurance settlement.



Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary

Although the Mammoths are having a very good season, they are basically riding on the success of a few key players, and as the season progresses, it becomes apparent that they are not really working together as a team. Sid hits so well that he is always being compared to Babe Ruth, but this drives him crazy, and sometimes he can not hit at all. Several players continue to tease Bruce and Henry, calling Bruce "Juliet". Finally, Dutch calls a team meeting, in which he compares their season to a fly that he is trying to catch but it slips through his fingers. He tells them that they are losing their edge because there are too many grudges and prejudices on the team, and he bans card playing and borrowing or lending money, to try to put a stop to the strife. Still, right after the meeting, some guys are singing loudly in the shower, making up an obscene song about Katie. Bruce realizes that they are really teasing him, and not Henry. One day, a player named Goose is joking around so much that Henry asks him to lay off of Bruce, and Goose asks why he should. Henry blurts out that Bruce is dying, and then asks Goose to please not tell anyone, so Bruce will not be fired.

Bruce asks Henry to change the beneficiary for his insurance, because Katie has finally agreed to marry him. Holly arrives to visit them, very pregnant. She and Henry discuss the baseball career that their baby is sure to have, based on the way it kicks all the time. Henry explains to her that he has misgivings about allowing Bruce to be swindled out of his money by Katie, and Holly agrees that they should only pretend to have changed the beneficiary. Katie still does not know what is wrong with Bruce.

Katie takes the four of them out to dinner at an expensive restaurant and pays for everything. Afterward, the four of them go back to Katie's place, and it is the first time in many years that Holly and Henry have been there. Everyone but Henry has a lot of wine, and Holly and Bruce have a great time telling stories about Henry. Henry talks with Katie, and wishes that he knew more about her background, but she says little. She looks gorgeous, like she always does. Katie keeps calling Bruce "my Little Old Future Husband". Since Holly is leaving the next day, she moves to kiss Bruce goodbye, but he draws back, since he is engaged now.

Chapters 9-10 Analysis

Henry does not know why Katie has finally agreed to marry Bruce, but he and Holly are both sure that it is because she knows he has a huge insurance policy and she thinks he will be dead soon, leaving her the money. This goes along with the picture of a savvy, streetwise woman who knows how to go after money and has few scruples about getting it. Henry talks about how Katie can casually find a \$100 bill in her purse while looking for something and casually toss it out of her way, showing that small amounts of money do not impress her at all. In fact, she lavishes money on Bruce, Henry and Holly,

trying to win them over. It is important to remember that she is a woman who is used to exchanging love for money. When Henry and Holly stand in her way, she first tries bribery, then businesslike discussion, and finally seduction. Bruce puts up with a lot of teasing because he wants to marry a prostitute. This is the theme of many books, plays, and movies, and it usually ends in tragedy.

When the other players call Bruce and Henry "Romeo and Juliet", they are simply making fun of them for being so close, like lovers. What the players do not realize is how correct they are, since Bruce is fated to die young, like Romeo and Juliet. The fact that Henry is willing to do his best to support Bruce draws a sad contrast to the behavior of Katie, whose love can be bought and sold.



Chapters 11-12

Chapters 11-12 Summary

One night, Bruce has an attack, and Henry calls up a doctor. The doctor complains that his chauffeur is not around, so Henry goes and asks Goose if he will pick up the doctor. Goose reveals that his roommate, Horse, already knows the secret. They go and get the doctor, while Henry tries to keep Bruce calm and warm in bed. Bruce seems sure that he is dying this very night. When the doctor finally arrives, Horse and Goose come into the room with him. The doctor examines Bruce, and concludes that Bruce is certainly not going to die tonight. The next day is Bruce's birthday, and Goose and Horse surprise him with cake and ice cream, and tobacco. Bruce continues to ask Henry to write to Arcturus, and Holly keeps sending him fake letters, supposedly from Arcturus, delaying the change of beneficiary.

One day, Dutch introduces Henry to Mr. Rogers, a detective. Mr. Rogers has found out that Bruce went to Atlanta for medical treatment, and then to Minnesota for further treatment, and claims to now be cured of the mystery illness. Henry answers that Bruce goes up to Atlanta all the time to visit whores, and implies that he had a case of gonorrhea, which is now cured. Henry claims that the reason for secrecy is embarrassment over the nature of the disease. Dutch summons Bruce, who corroborates Henry's story, and then a doctor is called for, to examine Bruce for signs of gonorrhea.

Henry goes into the room of several black players, who are secretly playing cards one evening. Henry asks them to stop teasing Bruce, and he tells them what a nice guy Bruce is. They reply that they know that he is racist, and they know that he is from Georgia, where everyone is racist. Henry points out that since we all die, isn't it better to get along than to tease one another? They laugh and say that they hope Bruce does drop dead soon, and tell Henry to get out of their room.

Henry plays in the All-Star Game, along with quite a few Mammoths, and together with the best players from the league. Henry calls home, and his father tells him that Holly has gone into labor. They talk a little about Bruce, and it suddenly occurs to Henry that his father has been going around with the same secret burning inside of him. Henry hangs up and trashes his hotel room, in order to let off some steam. The detectives show up, and he pays for the damages in cash. Henry takes the next plane home to be with Holly, and by the time he gets there, their daughter has been born. They name her Michele. Right after the baby is born, Henry gets the idea to write a book about the experience, which is, of course, this book.

Soon after Henry gets back with his team, they receive word that Bruce's mother is dead. Bruce reacts calmly, glad that his mother has died without ever knowing that her son is ill. When Katie hears, she cries and cries. She asks Henry to go out to dinner with her, privately, so they can discuss a business matter. In the restaurant, Katie pulls out



the fake letters that Henry has been using to fool Bruce. She easily recognizes them as fakes, and threatens to go to the Arcturus company with this information. Henry counters by threatening to turn her in for running a prostitution ring. Katie gets out \$5,000 in cash as a bribe, and also promises him unlimited entry to her elite whorehouse for the rest of his life if he will change Bruce's beneficiary to her. Henry turns her down, and Katie leaves angrily.

Chapters 11-12 Analysis

There are a lot of descriptions of baseball games and techniques in the book, which could be very confusing to someone who does not know much about baseball. On the first page of the book, before the text itself starts, is a quote from Wright Morris, describing how a book can have some subject in it, but not be about that subject. "Bang the Drum Slowly" has a lot of baseball in it, including team rosters. However, it is really a book about friendship, and learning how to let go when faced with a terminal disease. This is always a hard thing to deal with, whether one is a professional athlete, or any other path in life.

Horse and Goose illustrate how many people do not seem like good people, or are hard to get along with, but in a time of crisis, they turn out to be all right. No one else on the team especially likes Horse or Goose, because they are not the nicest guys. However, when Goose understands the seriousness of the situation, he is quick to help, even though he has to get up in the middle of the night. Not only that, but he feels so much compassion for Bruce that he and Horse go out of their way to make Bruce feel special and appreciated, while not making a big deal of his illness. At times, a crisis can bring out the best in people.



Chapters 13-14

Chapters 13-14 Summary

Joe, the assistant coach, starts collecting money from all the players to send flowers for Bruce's mother's funeral. Henry does not know what type of flowers to pick, so the girl at the telegraph office offers to select some for him. Henry can sense that Joe knows that Bruce is sick, although he does not know how Joe could know. At first, Henry is mad that Goose or Horse has told the secret, but then he remembers how painful it was for him, not telling anyone, and he does not blame Goose or Horse. Joe is the same man who earlier refuses to allow Bruce to join his game of Tegwar. Now, Joe offers to play with Bruce, and the two can always be seen playing the game. Henry foreshadows that it is Joe's wife who will ultimately spill the beans to everyone.

After the funeral, Bruce's father comes up for a visit, and he comes into the locker room and meets all the players. When he is introduced to the black players, Henry winces, worrying that Mr. Pearson will not want to shake their hands. However, Bruce's father greets them exactly the same as he does the other players, and then goes to sit down and observe the team meeting. Bruce is a good hitter, but he likes hitting better than catching, so he is not that good of a catcher. All that season, the Mammoths have many examples of players breaking records and playing excellently, but with the team performing not as well, and they are just barely in the lead of the league.

One day, the players are all sitting around in the locker room, complaining about how long the season seems to be stretching. There are only six weeks left, and they are anxious for the season to be over with. Several of them say that they wish they could just go forward six weeks in time, and Bruce answers that they are wishing their lives away. Most of them pay him little heed. Several of the players know about his illness now, and they are all nicer to him. They also stand up for him, keeping the others from teasing him too much.

Henry walks into a meeting of the coaches, their wives, doctors, and some detectives, and he knows that Dutch has figured out what is going on. Tootsie, the telephone operator, has listened in to enough conversations that she has a pretty good idea what is going on, and she freely explains. It turns out that Joe has told his wife, who has told Dutch's wife, who of course has told Dutch. Dutch is angry that Henry has fooled him into putting the clause into his contract, linking him with Bruce. Dutch worries about what he will do for a catcher, so he brings in Piney Woods to play backup catcher. Since Bruce's catching is not that great, they also bring in Red, a retired catcher, to coach Bruce and the other catchers. Dutch worries that Bruce will drop dead at any moment.



Chapters 13-14 Analysis

There are many references to the ways in which people refer to death in casual conversation, without really considering the possibility that death is just around the corner. Henry starts noticing all of these morbid phrases once he finds out that Bruce's days may be limited. One interesting aspect of this is the fact that patients who have Hodgkin's disease can live up to fifteen years, so Bruce could have quite a lot of time left. Suddenly, time seems very precious to him, because he understands that one day, he will have to go. Each person who finds out about his sickness suddenly forgets about all the annoying things that they have always disliked Bruce for, and they consider what their lives will be like if he is gone forever, and if they have to watch him sicken and die. Even those who callously make comments about how everyone is going to die feel differently when they realize that for Bruce, it is a more immediate possibility. Death is a hard subject to deal with, and some people are able to face it while others prefer to never think about the inevitability of death. People who are dying force us to confront this fear, even while we try to deal with losing someone we love.



Chapters 15-16

Chapters 15-16 Summary

Now that Dutch knows about Bruce's situation, he brings in Red to coach the catchers, and he also brings in Piney, another catcher, who has been hanging out on a ranch, apparently. Piney walks in in full cowboy gear, with a gunbelt and a guitar, and all the players make cowboy jokes to him. Piney insists that he knows how to handle a gun safely, and to prove this, he tosses his gun onto a shelf, spilling bullets everywhere. Dutch sees Piney wearing the gunbelt one day, and takes all the bullets out of it before giving it back to Piney. One day, Piney is playing a sad cowboy song, in which a cowboy dies young after living a wicked life. Most of the song is the funeral march, apparently sung by the dead cowboy. One of the lines sings, "O bang the drum slowly and play the fife lowly," which is where the title of the book comes from.

The newspapers know that something is up, but they cannot figure out what is going on. Rumors fly. Anyone who has studied the team can see that something strange is going on, simply because there is such a motley group socializing. No one wants to admit why they are now being nice to Bruce, and ignoring old fights among themselves. Even Dutch comes in to join the group, and he asks Bruce if Bruce has ever thought that Dutch is not human. Bruce answers that of course he knows Dutch is human, but Dutch asks him several times before being satisfied with Bruce's answer.

Red is a good coach, and he helps Henry, warming him up, and suggesting that he take pills to wake up. The coaches are always telling the players to take certain colors of pills, but Henry suspects that they are just placebos. Nevertheless, after taking his pills with a Coke and a cup of coffee, he wakes right up. Red's coaching makes a big difference in Bruce's playing, as Red teaches him not just to catch the ball, but to find ways of helping the pitcher. The team is doing well, although Sid is in a slump, not hitting much. Bruce, however, hits the ball so hard that he splits a bat in two. Red finds out that Henry is writing a book about his experience with Bruce, and Red asks to see what he has so far. Red tells him that it is too much about Henry and baseball, and not enough about Bruce. Henry says that he will try to change that.

Katie asks Henry to meet her again at the restaurant, and this time there is a beautiful girl with her, whom Henry recognizes as a movie star. She is one of Katie's newest employees, and Katie reminds Henry that he can have unlimited, free access to her warehouse if he will only change Bruce's beneficiary. She also threatens to tell Arcturus about his fraud. Henry points out that the Mammoths are having a great season, and he is going to get a bonus, so he does not really care if he loses his insurance job. Katie asks him why he even cares about Bruce's dad, and Henry admits that he does not know.

When Henry gets back, everyone is celebrating in his room. No one really has a good reason to celebrate, though Goose claims that it is in honor of his thirty-fifth birthday.



Goose announces that now he is so old, that he will retire this year. One of the players entertains everyone with amazing handstand tricks. Holly calls, and when baby Michele starts crying over the phone, the men sing lullabies to her over the phone. Everyone except Henry, who does not drink, is getting very drunk, and Henry does not kick them out of his room all night, even when he goes to bed. Goose and Piney make jokes about playing Russian roulette, and Goose asks Henry where he keeps his bullets. Henry sleepily tells him, and then Piney and Goose get into an argument over whether there are any bullets in the gun. To prove a point, Goose shoots out the overhead light, bringing detectives immediately. The detectives take the gun and fine Henry for the room damages, and the men sit giggling drunkenly in the dark.

The next day, the Mammoths lose, because most of them are hung over. Sid, who has spent the weekend with his family, is disappointed that they have had a big celebration without him. When no one can even tell him what they are celebrating, he is outraged, yelling about how no one thought to throw him a party when he was close to breaking Babe Ruth's record.

Chapters 15-16 Analysis

When Bruce's friends and acquaintances find out about his illness, they decide to let go of old grudges and annoyances, realizing that those things do not matter in the long run. Various characters who have never liked one another realize that if they cling to old grievances, they could miss the chance to let Bruce know that they care. Also, in light of a life-or-death situation, a lot of little things do not seem to matter anymore. When Dutch asks Bruce if Bruce thinks that Dutch is human, he is probably reflecting on how Bruce has kept his disease a secret from Dutch until Dutch tracked him down with a detective. Dutch no doubt understands why Bruce has delayed in telling him, but Dutch is also capable of altering his actions when he knows how serious the situation is. Dutch might think that the others view him as a heartless tyrant who will fire a dying man, as soon as the news comes to light. Although the clause in Henry's contract protects Bruce's position on the team, it is possible that Dutch would not cut Bruce off, knowing the situation he is in.

Although Bruce could last fifteen years with Hodgkin's disease, the fact that the title comes from the funeral of someone young foreshadows that Bruce will die young too. His fellow players sense this, and they want to show respect to him, for they could be the ones dying young. This is contrasted with Piney and Goose's foolhardy attitudes toward gun safety. Piney brandishes his gun in not one but three different dangerous ways. This either shows that Piney does not understand the danger of a loaded gun, or that he understands it and wants to show that he is not afraid. Some people, especially the young, try to prove that they are not afraid of death by doing dangerous and daring acts. Piney's gun handling also underscores the idea that death can come when we least expect it, from any accident, or from a disease that has been growing secretly for years. This echoes Bruce's complaint that he could have died in countless farming accidents, but now has Hodgkin's disease.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

The season is nearly over, and the Mammoths are playing very well, except for Sid. Sid takes out his anger on anyone nearby. The team plays several games in Boston, winning, but it is gloomy to play in a park with very few fans. One day, Sid joins Bruce and Henry in a restaurant, and Henry can tell from Sid's kind attitude that Sid knows the truth about Bruce. On Labor Day, Bruce does not feel well. Katie calls him, and over the phone Henry can hear her yelling at Bruce about the insurance forms. When she hangs up on him, Bruce pretends to be talking to her still, finishing by telling her that he loves her too. Bruce sits out for most of the game, and when he says that he is cold, three ballplayers at once jump up to get him a jacket. This shocks and confuses the announcers. Bruce offers Henry some chewing tobacco, and for once, Henry chews it with him, although he does not like it.

Bruce manages to hit the ball and gain a base, and Henry foreshadows that this is the last hit Bruce will ever have. As Bruce catches, Henry can tell that he is only acting on habit, and that he has no idea what is going on around him. The game gets rained out in the fifth inning, and Bruce is taken to the hospital, unconscious. Henry and two of the coaches go to the hospital, worrying that he will die that night. In the morning, they hear Bruce singing Piney's sad cowboy song, and they make jokes with him about how lazy he is.

Bruce is very weak, but each day he dresses in his uniform and sits on the bench, watching his team play. For the first time all season, the Mammoths have finally achieved team unity, and can let go of petty squabbles in order to work together. The team enters the World Series, but halfway through, the travelling is too much for Bruce, so he goes home with his father. He asks Henry to send him a scorecard from the games, which Henry agrees to. Instead, Henry sticks the scorecard on a shelf, and never does send it. Later, he feels really bad for this, pointing out that it would be practically no effort to send it to Bruce.

One day in October, Bruce's father calls Henry with the news that Bruce has died. Henry is a pallbearer, but he is disappointed that no one else from the team comes to the funeral. Henry decides that from now on, he is done giving people a hard time, because life is short enough.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Henry shows that he wants to make the most of his time left with Bruce when he decides to chew tobacco with him. Henry does not normally chew, and is not good at it, so that the experience is even grosser to him, as he dribbles tobacco juice down his chin. He understands that having companionship with Bruce is more important than the



physical act. Later, Henry is not such a dedicated friend, never sending Bruce the scorecard. It makes Henry wonder what kind of person he is, that he never gets around to doing such a little thing. Most people are ashamed sometimes, because they do not act as selflessly as they would like to think. When someone dies, many people are confused about how to feel, wanting to outwardly show that they respect the person, but not knowing precisely how to behave. It is easy to feel guilty for continuing to enjoy the pleasures of life.

All season long, the Mammoths have been distracted and fractured by little arguments among the team members. Although Henry does not say so, the reason that they finally gain some team unity is because they want to do it for Bruce. When Bruce returns from the hospital, the entire team cheers, and Henry knows that this is not fake cheering to make a dying man feel better, but genuine celebration. The team has never seen much in Bruce that is worth their respect, but when they see that he is doing his best to play baseball when he can barely stand, they understand that he has a strong spirit. Although Henry is a joker and loves to poke fun at people, losing Bruce makes him decide that it is not worth it to tease others. There is no telling when someone will be snatched away forever, so Henry wants to live his life without getting people down.



Characters

Henry Wigger

Henry is the narrator of the story, and he claims to be the author as well, although he is actually a fictional character. Because Henry has written a successful book, "The Southpaw", about his experiences in baseball, the other players call him "Author". Henry loves a good joke and he has an unusual sense of humor, so that he thinks that things are funny that no one else is laughing about. Henry has a habit of keeping a straight face while he is cracking up inside about some joke he has made to himself. Henry loves teasing people and giving them a hard time, but when he learns that Bruce is sick, Henry does not take as much pleasure in teasing people. In fact, after Bruce dies, Henry decides that he will never give others a hard time again. Henry finds Bruce to be stupid and tiresome, but when he finds out that Bruce is sick, Henry does not care anymore about all the things that have always bugged him about Bruce. Henry does his best to get the other players to back off of Bruce. Once, when Henry is in the middle of an exciting card game, he walks away because the other players will not deal Bruce in. In this way, Henry becomes a sort of champion to Bruce, earning them the nicknames of "Romeo and Juliet".

Henry writes books in his spare time, and goofs off with his wife, Holly, while putting off selling insurance. Henry is neither a good salesman nor a hard worker, but he is the best left-handed pitcher around, so this supports him well.

Bruce Pearson

Bruce is a catcher for the New York Mammoths. He is not a very good catcher, but he is a good hitter. Bruce is from Mill, Georgia, which is too small to even be called a town. Most people think that Bruce is stupid, and in fact, he is gullible and bad at understanding the people around him. However, Bruce does understand nature, and he can explain lots of things about the wildlife and the terrain that would boggle most people. When Bruce gets an idea in his head, all he does is repeat the gist of it, until finally someone gives in to his desire, just to get him to shut up. He does not pay any attention to what he wears and does disgusting things like spitting tobacco juice and peeing in the sink.

Bruce is in love with a prostitute named Katie, and when he knows he is dying, he asks her to marry him. Katie agrees when he offers to make her the beneficiary of the enormous insurance policy he has. Bruce seems to be incapable of realizing that the people around him are not as nice as they try to seem, and he never realizes that the other players are only being nice to him because he is dying. Bruce tries his best to keep playing with the team, and when he is too weak to play, he wears his uniform and sits on the bench shivering. Bruce dies at the end of the book.



Holly Wigger

Holly is Henry's wife, who waits at home while he plays baseball. She gives birth to their daughter during the book.

Katie

Katie is a prostitute that Bruce is in love with. She agrees to marry him, but only because she thinks that she is going to get a large insurance settlement when he dies.

Dutch

Dutch is the manager and head coach of the Mammoths. Henry keeps Dutch from finding out about Bruce's disease as long as possible.

Goose Williams

Goose is a player for the Mammoths who no one likes. He is the first teammate that Henry tells about Bruce, and then Goose starts being nice.

Michele Wigger

Michele is Henry and Holly's first child. They are surprised that she is a girl, and they name her after Mike Mulrooney, one of the coaches.

Bruce's Mother

Henry and Bruce go to see Bruce's parents for a month in Georgia. Bruce's mother never finds out that her son is sick, and she dies soon after.

Bruce's Father

Bruce's father comes to some practices after his wife dies. He tries to get the coaches to use Bruce more in the game.

Red

Red is a catcher who retired from the Mammoths the day he split his finger during a game. He comes back and coaches Bruce on his catching skills.

Piney Woods

Piney is a catcher who is brought in halfway through the season, in case Bruce can not play. The other players make fun of Piney for dressing like a cowboy.



Objects/Places

Bainbridge, Georgia

Bainbridge is the nearest actual town to Bruce's birthplace. He is a local celebrity since he is a baseball hero.

Mill, Georgia

Mill is the name of Bruce's official birthplace, but it is not so much a town, but rather just Bruce's parents' house and a broken-down mill. The pace of life there is unbelievably slow.

The New York Mammoths

The Mammoths are the fictional baseball team that Bruce and Henry play for. They end up winning the World Series.

The Southpaw

"The Southpaw" is the name of the previous book, which comes before "Bang the Drum Slowly". Henry often refers to having written it, although it was actually written by Mark Harris, the real author of both books.

600 Dollars

600 Dollars is the name that Holly and Henry call their unborn baby. They are sure that it will be a boy, and a successful baseball player, but it is a girl named Michele.

Rochester, Minnesota

The story opens with Bruce calling Henry and telling him to come to Rochester, Minnesota. There, Henry learns that Bruce has Hodgkin's disease.

Hodgkin's Disease

Hodgkin's disease, or Hodgkin's lymphoma, is a cancer of the blood and lymphatic system. Today, most patients live after receiving treatment, but in the 1950s it was a death sentence. Bruce dies of Hodgkin's.



66 Street

Katie has her warehouse in an apartment on 66 Street. Henry and Holly lived there too, several years before, which is how they know Katie.

Aqua Clara

Aqua Clara is where the players train for the new season. Henry stalls there for a while, holding out for more money.

The World Series

The World Series is the championship for the best teams in professional baseball. In the book, the Mammoths win the World Series.

The Streets of Laredo

"The Streets of Laredo" is a cowboy song that Piney sings to the other players, and later Bruce sings it in the hospital. It is about a cowboy who dies young, and it contains the phrase, "Bang the drum slowly".

Arcturus

Arcturus is the insurance company that Henry sells for. He does his best to fraudulently keep Bruce's insurance policy just the way it is.

Tegwar

"Tegwar" is an acronym for "The Exciting Game Without Any Rules". The ballplayers love using Tegwar to confuse and swindle observers.



Themes

Time Is Fleeting

As Henry comes to terms with Bruce's illness, he learns that time is fleeting, and that there is no going back. He realizes how important it is to appreciate the people around him, because he never knows when circumstances will change, and time will be up. Thinking about the way he treats Bruce, Henry muses, "There is no time to say, 'Well, I been a heel all week but I will be better to him beginning Monday because Monday might never come'" (p. 152). It occurs to Henry that he had better say and do nice things to the people around him that he loves, because he may never get another chance. Although he begins the book with a joking attitude, he decides at the end not to tease his friends anymore or start arguments with strangers, because life is too short to fill it up with ugly words.

In addition to appreciating people while they are still around, Henry also learns that time is valuable and that it is important to use his time to do the things he really wants to do. As he is writing his book, he expresses regret that he has not played enough with his daughter while she is still a baby. He resolves that the next year he will definitely set aside time to spend with her. When Bruce wakes Henry up very early one morning because he needs to go to the hospital, Henry takes a moment to reflect on the lovely sunrise weather. He says, ". . . you always tell yourself, 'I must get up and appreciate this time of day once in awhile,' and then you never do" (p. 139). He understands how easy it is to put off doing something, because it is not convenient at the moment.

Coping With Death

When Henry finds out that Bruce is going to die young, the reality of death presents itself to him, and he has to acknowledge that everyone is going to die, including Henry himself. Although he understands that everyone will die, Henry points out that most people imagine dying very old. He says, "Dying old is in the cards, and you figure on it, and it happens to everybody, and you are willing to swallow it" (p. 86). Bruce seems to be dealing with the news pretty well, and he takes the opportunity to reminisce over all the good times he has had throughout his life. Bruce admits right away that he is "doomed", and he faces death with an optimistic attitude, happy about what he has accomplished in his life. Not only that, but he continues trying to learn and improve his baseball game, wanting to become the best person he can in the time he has left.

The other players have several celebrations for Bruce when they find out that he is dying, and his last days are happy ones. In light of such parties, Henry remarks, "Do not ask me why you do not live it up all the time when dying is just around the corner, but you don't" (p. 217). This perspective is easy to have when there is an obvious reminder of death, but most people live their lives forgetting about the possibility of death at any moment. The title of the book, "Bang the Drum Slowly" is a line from a song, and is a



reference to funeral music. This indicates that really, the entire book is about dealing with death.

Friendship

At the beginning of the book, Henry presents Bruce as an old acquaintance and roommate, and suggests that Bruce is annoying, stupid, and hard to live with. This turns out to be a reflection of years of close friendship, and as Henry prepares to say goodbye to Bruce forever, Henry finds that all of Bruce's faults do not bother him anymore. Many of the things that Henry does for Bruce seem silly or unnecessary, but they show how deeply Henry cares about him. In the way that Henry tries to get the other players to be nicer to Bruce, Henry shows how much Bruce means to him as Henry tries to protect him. Henry gets a lot of teasing for this, but he wishes that he could take the teasing for Bruce. One day, Bruce comments to Henry how the other players like to tease the two of them, and Henry feels bad, knowing that really Bruce is the butt of their jokes.

When people find out that someone is dying, or has a major tragedy in their life, most people tend to reassess their requirements for friendship. Bruce mentions to Henry, "Probably everybody be nice to you if they knew you were dying" (p. 140). Bruce never seems to catch on that everyone on the team starts treating him much better only when they find out that he is sick. Does this mean that their friendship is false? Henry notes with sadness at the end that none of the players come to Bruce's funeral. This shows how friendships can be confusing, and many people do not know how to cope with the death of an acquaintance. When a casual acquaintance dies, most people feel guilty, as though they should be mourning harder for someone that they were never close to.



Style

Point of View

Bang the Drum Slowly has a unique point of view, to say the least. The narrator is Henry Wiggen, a fictional baseball player, who claims to be writing this very book. He often makes reference to things which happen in his life while he is writing it. In fact, the title page of the book lists Henry as the author, and lists Mark Harris as an editor of sorts. Mark Harris is the real author, and also the author of a previous book about Henry, called "The Southpaw". To further complicate matters, Henry claims to have written "The Southpaw", and as a result, the other ballplayers in the story call him "Author". This blurs the line between fiction and reality, until the primary reminder that it is a work of fiction, is that New York does not really have a baseball team called the Mammoths.

The book takes place in 1955, which was modern day when it was written. If it took place in the twenty-first century, Bruce would probably live after undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Instead, he receives no treatment at all. Henry observes Bruce's illness from the viewpoint of a twenty-four-year-old ballplayer, who is becoming a father for the first time. Henry matures in his attitudes during the book, gaining a sense of compassion for the people around him.

Setting

Although the book starts out at Henry's home, he describes very little about his home. Instead, he describes the places that he goes with Bruce. Henry remarks that he has been to Mexico, Canada, Cuba, and Japan, and one place seems just as good as any other to him. Although Henry cares little about the terrain, Bruce sees everything. Bruce understands a lot about nature, and he can tell which direction a river flows just by glancing at it. In Rochester, Minnesota, it is very cold, and this is appropriate, since this is where Bruce and Henry find out that Bruce has Hodgkin's disease. They drive across the country into Georgia, and Bruce knows the terrain better and better. In Bainbridge, the tiny town listed as his birthplace, Bruce is a local hero, because he has grown up to be a big-time baseball player. They end up in the township of Mill, Georgia, where Bruce's parents have their farm, and there is a broken-down old mill. There is a creek where the boys fish and woods where they hunt. Mostly they sit on the porch with Bruce's parents and wait for the mail to come. The mailman always arrives at the same time, which strikes Henry as unnecessary because no one ever has anything scheduled. Henry remarks, "You could tell time by [the mailman] if you ever cared what time it was, which you never cared because it never made much of a much down there if it was 6 o'clock or half past 2" (p. 43). The rest of the book is spent in various ballparks, as the team travels all over the country. Some parks are packed, while some are empty and gloomy. Sometimes the crowd is filled with a strange, malevolent energy, and they boo the team for no reason. The team ends up winning the 1955 World Series.



Language and Meaning

Henry Wiggen, the narrator and main character of the book, is clearly not an educated man. Although he is already a published author, Henry speaks like a dumb country boy who just likes to play baseball. Early in the book, when Henry is reflecting on how he hates it when Bruce uses hick phrases like "Hunker down", Henry has a change of heart and says, "Go ahead and speak any way that suits you because to tell you the truth probably a lot of the things I say ain't the King's English neither" (p. 16). This pretty well sums up his speaking style. His grammar is terrible, and he often substitutes words for their homophones, such as saying "could of" instead of "could have". This colloquial method of writing enhances the illusion that the book has been written by the main character. Henry describes his own writing style, saying, "Write it like you speak it and then knock out the apostrophes" (p. 168). When asked what he has against apostrophes, he answers that the newspapers do not use them. In fact, Henry takes out the apostrophes when he is recording a conversation between teammates. This creates a strange, stilted sound, as men talk with 1950s slang, but never use contractions. The old-fashioned slang can be confusing, especially for someone not familiar with baseball terminology. However, the meaning of the book comes through very clearly, even if the some of the details are lost.

Structure

Early in the book, Henry describes Bruce's speech patterns, saying, "He never tells you anything much in a bunch, only a little now and a little later until over the long pull you will find out a lot that he will never tell in one day or one week" (p. 21). This could also be said of Henry's storytelling, for he presents details and scenarios, and much later explains the significance of such events. It is especially true in the way he introduces characters, having them show up and interact in one scene, and then giving their life story several chapters later. Once, Henry decides to get a lot of his introductory details over with all at once, and includes a full roster of his baseball team.

The main subject of the book, Bruce's illness, plods along slowly for a while, before moving quickly at the end. In the first chapter, Henry finds out that Bruce has Hodgkin's disease. In chapters two through four, Henry spends time with Bruce, enjoying the time that they have left together. In chapters five and six, Henry holds out on signing his contract, until he has secured protection for Bruce. In chapters seven through thirteen, Dutch tries to find out what Bruce's secret is, and then Bruce's mother dies, while Henry becomes a father. In chapters fourteen through sixteen, everyone finds out about Bruce's illness, and they start being nice to him. Katie keeps trying to get Henry to sign over Bruce's insurance to her. Bruce dies in the final chapter, and the Mammoths win the World Series.



Quotes

"I laugh at a lot of things nobody ever laughs at except her."
Chap. 1, p. 1

"We will all of us die with things never remembered."
Chap. 2, p. 22

"It is sad," said Mike. 'It makes you wish to cry.'
'It is sad,' said Red. 'It makes you wish to laugh.'"
Chap. 17. p. 239

"He stood a chance of living a long time yet, not too long but long enough, and I tried to keep him thinking of things yet ahead."
Chap. 4, p. 45

"Everything you said to her any more she said 'What difference?' meaning lay in the sun and enjoy life."
Chap. 5, p. 54

"But power plus brains is the difference between nobody and somebody."
Chap. 6, p. 78

"And even the people who read it will think that it is about baseball or some such stupidity as that, . . . "
Chap. 15, p. 207

"Dutch stood up and took a bat out of the rack and begun tapping the handle on the step, like a drum, ba-da-dum, ba-da-dum, ba-da-dum-dum-dum, like the Lone Ranger's horse, Hiyo Silver, away."
Chap. 7, p. 98

"I said 'See you around,' which is what you say to people you hope you seen the last of."
Chap. 8, p. 114

"Goddam it anyhow, by the time you are old enough to have more sense than power you realize you already pissed away the most exciting days of your life."
Chap. 14, p. 190

"I used to correct people a lot when they lied, but I cut that out."
Chap. 12, p. 165



Topics for Discussion

Although this is a book concerning baseball, the title comes from a cowboy song. How are baseball players like cowboys? How are they different?

Describe the differences in the way people treat Bruce before and after they find out that he is dying.

Bruce's mother dies, somewhat unexpectedly. How do people react to this death? Compare this with Bruce's own death.

What is the significance to Michele being born when Bruce has a deadly disease? Does this have any significance? What does this say about life and death?

How would the story be different if the Mammoths were playing very badly? Do you think the other players would be as sympathetic?

Do you think it is better to die young, at one's peak, or live a long life? Explain. Who have you known who has died?

If you could choose your time and method of death, what would you choose? Why?

At the very end, Henry says that he will not be giving others a hard time anymore. Do you believe him? Why or why not?