

Black Cherry Blues Study Guide

Black Cherry Blues by James Lee Burke

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Contents

Black Cherry Blues Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	9
Chapter 4.....	11
Chapter 5.....	13
Chapter 6.....	15
Chapter 7.....	17
Chapter 8.....	19
Chapter 9.....	21
Chapter 10.....	23
Chapters 11-12 and Epilogue.....	25
Characters.....	27
Objects/Places.....	32
Themes.....	34
Style.....	36
Quotes.....	38
Topics for Discussion.....	40



Plot Summary

Black Cherry Blues is a novel by James Lee Burke featuring his popular character Dave Robicheaux. Dave is still reeling from the murder of his wife when an old friend enlists his help in a suspected murder case. Dave refuses his help several times, but old grievances cause him to reach out to the police in a half-hearted attempt at help. This attempt, however, proves to be dangerous for Dave's daughter when a threat is made against her life. Dave takes matters into his own hands, warning the two men off, only to leave himself vulnerable to a murder charge. Now Dave must fight for his freedom in a case he is not even sure he is completely innocent of. Black Cherry Blues is a novel of grief, of fear, and of hope that will entertain Burke newcomers and fans alike.

Dave has settled down to a normal life, working his business and caring for his daughter, in the aftermath of his wife's murder. The last thing Dave wants is to become involved in someone else's drama, so when Dixie Lee Pugh reenters his life after a more than twenty year absence and asks for help, Dave refuses. However, when Dixie Lee is nearly killed and then set up on a drug charge, Dave feels the least he can do is go to the police with information Dixie Lee supplied him about a murder in Montana. While Dave is making his statement, the two men Dixie Lee accused of murder are in the next room.

Dave walks out of the police station only to be accosted by Vidrine and Mapes, the men Dixie Lee overheard discussing a murder. The two men warn Dave to stay out of their business. Dave cannot leave things alone, however. The oil company Vidrine, Mapes, and Dixie Lee work for is the same company responsible for the death of Dave's father. With this as motivation, Dave decides to go to the oil company and ask a few questions. Dave's questions are not received well. A few days later, Dave receives a package in the mail that makes threats against his daughter, Alafair.

Dave goes to the police with the package, but because there are no fingerprints on any of the items, there is nothing the police can do. Dave decides to take matter in his own hands. Dave goes to the hotel where Vidrine and Mapes are staying, breaking into their room and beating them with a chain in order to frighten them away. Instead Mapes takes a pocket knife Dave accidentally left behind and kills Vidrine. The following day Dave is arrested for murder. Dave remains in jail for several weeks while he attempts to raise the money to cover his bond, refusing help from Dixie Lee and his mob friend.

When Dave is released from jail, he cannot sit still and wait for his trial to begin. Dave decides to travel to Montana to find evidence of the murder Dixie Lee overheard being discussed. Once in Montana, Dave goes to Dixie Lee for help, but finds him uncooperative because of the mobster with whom he is living. However, an ex-partner of Dave's who is also working for the mobster offers his help. Dave investigates the disappearance of two Indian activists who appear to be the victims of Vidrine and Mapes, but cannot get anyone to believe their disappearance is murder. It seems everyone, including the local police, believe the two men left town to avoid mounting debt.



As Dave continues to look into the disappearance of the two Indians, he learns that his ex-partner's new girlfriend is the sister of one of the men. Darlene has been living with Cletus in order to find out her brother's fate. However, Darlene is killed before she can learn anything. At the same time, Mapes begins watching Alafair at her school. Dave goes after him, making threats against him. While doing this, Dave sees a unique gun that Mapes has. Later, Dave finds the bodies of the two men Mapes killed and is able to connect their murders to Mapes's unique gun. As a result, Mapes is arrested for murder and charges are dropped against Dave.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Black Cherry Blues is a novel by James Lee Burke featuring his popular character Dave Robicheaux. Dave is still reeling from the murder of his wife when an old friend enlists his help in a suspected murder case. Dave refuses his help several times, but old grievances cause him to reach out to the police in a half-hearted attempt at help. This attempt, however, proves to be dangerous for Dave's daughter when a threat is made against her life. Dave takes matters into his own hands, warning the two men off, only to leave himself vulnerable to a murder charge. Now Dave must fight for his freedom in a case he is not even sure he is completely innocent of. Black Cherry Blues is a novel of grief, of fear, and of hope that will entertain Burke newcomers and fans alike.

Dave Robicheaux is in Baton Rouge on a business trip and is forced to get a room for the night because of a rainstorm. Dave dreams about his wife's murder and decides to get an early start. On his way out of town, Dave stops in a roadside diner where he runs into an old college friend. Dixie Lee dropped out of college to become a rock and roll singer in the fifties, finding some success before he fell into drug and alcohol addiction. Unfortunately Dixie Lee was involved in an accident while under the influence and a child was killed. Dixie Lee spent time in prison which effectively ended his career. Now Dixie Lee seems to still have a drinking problem as he is drinking even though it is early morning, despite his new job as a leaseman for an oil company. Dave and Dixie Lee exchange pleasantries before Dave gets back on the road and returns home.

Dave settles back into domestic bliss, dealing with a raccoon who likes to be difficult and a daughter who prefers to speak like a Cajun rather than learning the grammar Dave repeatedly tries to drill into her. Three days later, Dixie Lee visits Dave and asks for his help. Dixie Lee tells Dave how he overheard a conversation between two co-workers about a murder they committed. Dixie Lee does not know who the two men killed or why, but is afraid that his life might be in danger now that he knows about the murders. Dave refuses to help, however, reluctant to bring danger to his simple life. Dave suggests Dixie Lee go to the police, even offering to introduce him to a couple of ex-colleagues, but Dixie Lee refuses, afraid his history will make his story unbelievable. Dixie Lee's story brings to mind old memories for Dave, however. The oil company Dixie Lee works for is the same company responsible for the death of Dave's father. Dave's father was on an oil rig in the gulf that did not have a blowout preventer. Dave's father was never found.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Dave Robicheaux is introduced in this chapter. Dave is an ex-cop who is clearly still grieving the horrific death of his wife. Dave dreams about Anne and thinks about her in his waking hours, finding living with the murder near impossible. However, Dave has



made a life for himself and his daughter that is focused around domestic normality. When Dixie Lee comes and asks for Dave's help, he recognizes the danger to the life he has built and quickly refuses. Dave is motivated by a desire to keep his daughter safe and to keep his life simple.

Dixie Lee Pugh is also introduced in this chapter. Dixie Lee is a troubled man who was once a famous singer but is now an ex-con and an alcoholic. When Dixie Lee comes to see Dave, Dave immediately senses trouble. An alcoholic never brings good things into a person's life. Dixie Lee explains his trouble, introducing the possible murder of two people in Montana that will become significant later in the development of the plot, and asks Dave to help him, afraid that if he goes to the cops, no one would believe him based on the fact that he was in prison. Dave refuses. Dixie Lee tries to persuade Dave by reminding him that the men who committed this possible murder work for the same oil company that is responsible for the death of Dave's father. At the end of the chapter Dave is remembering this death, making it clear to the reader that Dave is still angry at the company for not having the equipment that could have saved his father's life. This memory and the emotion attached to it suggest a possible motive for Dave to change his mind and become involved in Dixie Lee's drama despite his protests.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The days slowly pass and Dave spends them enjoying his six year old daughter, Alafair. A short time after Dixie Lee's visit, Dave is visited by a DEA agent from Montana named Dan Nygurski. Nygurski asks Dave about Dixie Lee and suggests that Dixie Lee is involved with a Texas mobster named Sally Dio whom he shared a cell with in prison. The DEA is aware that Dixie Lee has been helping Sally Dio buy up land in Montana and believe that Sally plans to use the land to import and export illegal drugs. Nygurski wants Dave to give him any information he has on Dixie Lee in regards to Sally, but Dave has nothing to tell him. Dave has trouble sleeping that night, his mind filled with memories of Anne, his wife.

A week later, Dave sees in the paper that Dixie Lee was injured when a cabin he was staying in burned down. A young woman was killed. The article also says that Dixie Lee was arrested on a drug charge after cocaine was found in his car. Later Dave gets a phone call from a nun at the hospital where Dixie Lee is in serious condition. The nun says that Dixie Lee is asking for Dave. Dave refuses to visit. That night, Dixie Lee himself calls and asks Dave to come. Dave visits Dixie Lee the next morning. Dixie Lee tells Dave that he believes the fire was not an accident; that someone broke into the cabin hit him over the head, and then set the cabin on fire. Dixie Lee believes it was his two co-workers, Vidrine and Mapes, who did it to keep him from telling anyone about the conversation he overheard where they discussed murdering a couple of people in Montana. Dixie Lee also believes Vidrine and Mapes planted the drugs in his car. Dave tells Dixie Lee there is nothing he can do, except maybe speak to the police on his behalf.

Dave goes and looks at the remains of the cabin. It appears that the fire traveled up the bank, but Dave cannot see any evidence that the fire was set by Vidrine and Mapes. Dave goes and talks to a sheriff's deputy anyway. While Dave is talking to the deputy, Vidrine and Mapes are down the hall in the sheriff's office, within hearing distance, something Dave does not know until he has made his statement. Dave becomes angry and walks out. On his way to his car, Vidrine and Mapes approach Dave, warning him to stay out of their business and to stop spreading rumors about them. As Dave prepares to drive away, he asks Vidrine and Mapes if they used the Coleman for the stove and can see by their reaction that he had described the arson at the cabin perfectly. The following day, Dave talks with the sheriff, a friend of his from the days when he worked for the sheriff's office, and learns there is no evidence of arson despite Dixie Lee's claims. Dave then calls Nygurski and learns there is no proof of the story of murder that Dixie Lee came to Dave about. Dixie Lee seems destined to go to jail on the drug charges.

Dave spends some time with his daughter, watching movies on the VCR, before returning to visit Dixie Lee the next day. Dave tells Dixie Lee that there is no evidence



against Vidrine and Mapes either for the arson or the murder. Dixie Lee tells Dave that he has reached out to his ex-cell mate, Sally Dio and expects to get out of the drug charge. When Dave chastises his friend for getting involved with Dio, Dixie Lee tells him that he is afraid that Vidrine and Mapes will try again to kill him and that the sheriff's office cannot protect him. Dave disagrees, but feels he has no choice but to wash his hands of the entire situation.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Dan Nygurski is introduced in this chapter. Nygurski is a DEA agent from Montana who is working on building a case against Texas mobster, Sally Dio. Nygurski is also building a file against Dixie Lee Pugh whom he believes is helping Dio buy land in Montana in order to traffic in drugs. Nygurski wants Dave to give him any information he has about Dixie Lee and his relationship with Dio, but Dave has nothing to share with Nygurski. Dave does call Nygurski later, however, to fish for information about the murder plot Dixie Lee came to Dave about, only to learn that no one has been murdered as far as Nygurski is aware. This establishes a relationship between Dave and Nygurski, suggesting that Dave will use Nygurski for help as he begins an investigation into the murders, an investigation that seems inevitable based on Dave's continued involvement with Dixie Lee despite his protests to the contrary.

Dixie Lee is injured in a fire he claims was set by Vidrine and Mapes, his two murdering co-workers. Dave does not want to get involved, but finds himself backed into a corner by his friend and his desire to hurt the company who are responsible for the death of his father. Dave goes to the sheriff on Dixie Lee's behalf and by doing so puts himself on the radar of these two murderers. Dave then checks out the arson scene and feels that it could have been arson or it could have been an accident, though he feels that his theory of arson could be true when he sees the reaction on the faces of Vidrine and Mapes when he describes how it could have happened. This reaction suggests to the reader both that it was arson and that Dave believes it was arson. However, Dave remains reluctant to become involved in the case and decides to back off when Dixie Lee reveals that he has called Dio for help. The last thing Dave wants is to become involved with a mobster, even peripherally, touching on the theme of crime. Based on his past behavior, however, the reader suspects that Dave is destined to continue to be involved with Dixie Lee and his troubles.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Despite his protests to Dixie Lee, Dave decides to speak to a representative of Star Drilling about Dixie Lee's claims of murder by Vidrine and Mapes. While having lunch prior to approaching the oil company, Dave sees his ex-partner in the parking lot of the diner. Cletus Purcel was once a good cop who turned bad and ran off to South America with money paid to him for killing a government witness. Dave is surprised to see Clete back in the States. At Star, Dave speaks to a Mr. Hollister about Dixie Lee's claims. When the subject of the death of Dave's father comes up, Mr. Hollister threatens to have Dave arrested if he does not leave. A few days later, Dave tells a depressed Dixie Lee that he cannot help him any more.

That weekend, Dave takes his daughter, Alafair, to the ranch of an acquaintance where he buys her an Appaloosa pony they name Tex. The following Monday Dave finds a package in his mailbox that contains a used hypodermic needle, a picture of a headless Vietnamese girl, and a letter threatening Alafair if Dave does not stop making accusation against Vidrine and Mapes. Dave immediately picks Alafair up from school and then goes to the sheriff. There is nothing the sheriff can do because there are no fingerprints on the contents of the package or the package itself. The sheriff suggests that Dave go to the FBI, but being an ex-cop, Dave knows there is little the FBI can do. Dave leaves his daughter in the care of his employee, Batist, and goes to the hotel where he knows Vidrine and Mapes are staying. Dave watches them party by the pool and then retire to their room. Dave then goes to the bar where he has a conversation with the bartender about finding a companion to spend the evening with him. When a woman shows up a short time later, Dave is able to confirm his suspicion that the bartender is a small time pimp and that he most likely supplied Vidrine and Mapes with the prostitutes they are partying with in their room. Dave tells the bartender to have the girls leave Vidrine and Mapes' room or he will arrest him. Dave then goes to Vidrine and Mapes' room as soon as they are alone and beats them with a chain.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Cletus Purcel is introduced in this chapter. Cletus is Dave's ex-partner in the police department in New Orleans. Clete was a good cop who turned bad and ended up leaving the country after killing a government witness. This and the fact that Dave runs into Clete near the office of the Star Drilling company, indicates that Clete is not a nice guy and that he may have turned to crime as a way to make a living, perhaps even working for the Star Drilling Company. The timing of Clete's arrival also suggests to the reader that he might be involved with Dixie Lee or Dixie Lee's old cellmate in some fashion.



Dave visits the Star Drilling Company and when the conversation, which had featured Dixie Lee's claims of murder, turns to the death of Dave's father, the executive throws him out of the office. This turn in the conversation shows the depth of Dave's grief, a theme of the novel, and anger at the death of his father, as well as showing his motivations for helping Dixie Lee. At that point, however, Dave feels he has done all he can for Dixie Lee and effectively washes his hands of the whole ordeal. Dave then refocuses his life on Alafair, his daughter, and takes her to buy a horse. However, it seems that Dave's visit to the Star Drilling Company has worried someone involved with Vidrine and Mapes because he receives a package in the mail that makes a clear threat against Alafair's safety. Dave does the appropriate thing and goes to the police, but there is nothing they can do without proof that either Vidrine or Mapes made the threat. Motivated by a desire to keep his daughter safe, Dave decides to send a warning of his own. Dave locates Vidrine and Mapes and then beats them both with a chain from his truck. Dave is hoping that this show of violence will convince Vidrine and Mapes that he is stronger than them and that he does not take threats to his daughter's safety lightly. The reader turns a quick eye to the next chapter with a desire to see if the message is received and to see if there is any fallout from Dave's actions.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Alafair wakes with a stomachache, so Dave keeps her home from school the following day. Dave spends the day working in the yard with Alafair, constantly watching the road for the police vehicles he knows will come. They do come, before noon, and arrest Dave with more force than he believes is necessary. At the station, Dave is informed that he is being accused of killed Dalton Vidrine. Dave realizes then that his pocket knife is missing. It dawns on Dave then that Mapes must have taken the opportunity to kill Vidrine who was going to break and tell someone about the murders, using the pocket knife that must have fallen out of Dave's pocket during the beatings. Dave hires a lawyer and begins applying for loans to cover his fifteen thousand dollar portion of the one hundred and fifty thousand dollar bail.

Dave sends Alafair to stay with a cousin and settles into jail life. Dave is put into a cell with the worst offenders at the county jail due to the horrific murder he is accused of committing. Among his cell mates are a motorcyclist from New Orleans who nailed a girl to a tree, a Vietnamese thug who garroted his business partner with cables from a battery, a four time loser who killed an entire family, and a simple minded black man accused of killing his infant son. Dave spends the majority of his time in his cell, filling out loan applications and reading old magazines. Two weeks after his arrest, Dixie Lee comes to visit Dave with Cletus Purcel. Thanks to a high priced lawyer paid for by Sally Dio, the charges have been dropped against Dixie Lee. Cletus tells Dave that he works security for Dio and that he can do the same for Dave that he did for Dixie Lee. Cletus wants to bail Dave out and pay for a lawyer. Dave refuses, insisting that he does not want anything from Dio. A few days later, Dave is moved into solitary for getting into a fight with a couple of his cellmates after they tricked the simple minded man into sticking his arm into the toilet. Finally, after nearly three weeks, Dave gets a loan approved and is able to post his bond.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Dave is arrested for murder, introducing again the theme of crime. Due to the fact that the last chapter left off during the beating, the reader is not sure at first if Dave did kill Vidrine. However, when Dave speaks to his lawyer, the reader learns that Vidrine was alive when Dave left and that Mapes must have used Dave's pocket knife to kill the other man. The reader gets this information from Dave, so the reader is not certain if Dave killed Vidrine or not because Dave could be an unreliable narrator. However, the reader wants to believe that Dave, a single father and grieving widower, is a good man and could not have killed anyone, especially not in the gruesome way in which Vidrine was killed, illustrating the theme of innocence.



Dave is in jail when Cletus and Dixie Lee come to visit him. Dixie Lee is free since the drug charges against him were dropped. However, Dave is not happy that it took a lawyer hired by Sally Dio to do it. Dave is also not pleased to learn that Cletus, a man who was once a good cop, is now working security for a mobster like Sally Dio. Dave shows his moral side when he refuses Cletus' offer to bail him out and help him fight the charges against him. Dave does not want to have anything to do with Dio, a mobster who could only bring heartache to Dave's life. Dave wants to be free and he wants to be able to fight the charges against him, but he will not do it on the back of someone like Dio, showing that Dave is still a good man inside, once again washing doubt over the possibility that he killed Mapes.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Dave goes home and tries to settle back into his normal routine. However, Dave feels he cannot just sit around and wait to be sent to prison. Dave decides he needs to go to Montana and find evidence to discredit Mapes, the prime witness against him, in order to prove himself innocent. At first Dave wants to leave Alafair behind with his cousin, but when the little girl becomes upset at the idea, Dave decides to take her with him. Dave and Alafair make the drive in his pickup truck. Once in Montana, Dave rents a house and gets Alafair settled in a small Catholic school near the home of a woman who has agreed to babysit for them. As soon as Alafair is settled, Dave takes a drive to the compound where Sally Dio lives.

Cletus is happy to see Dave, welcoming into his small home with open arms. Dave has lunch with Cletus and his girlfriend, Darlene American Horse. They talk about the past, about Cletus' legal troubles that have now been resolved, and about Sally Dio. Dave learns that Sally is a powerful man in the mob not because of his own history but because his father was one of the most powerful criminals in Galveston before he became ill. Dio also likes music from the fifties, fancying himself a singer, which explains why he likes Dixie Lee so much. Dave does not care much about Dio and only wants to talk to Dixie Lee, but Cletus insists that he needs to go up to the main house and meet Dio. When Dave does, he is rude and insults Dio's father. Dio has Dave thrown out of the house. However, Dixie Lee comes out to speak to Dave before he leaves.

Dave and Dixie Lee go to a nearby bar where Dave demands to know what Dio is doing with the land he has Dixie Lee helping him buy. Dixie Lee claims he has no idea beyond Dio's desire to have a safe haven to live in. Dave asks Dixie Lee if Dio is connected to Vidrine and Mapes, but Dixie Lee insists Dio only met the two men once and that they were not in business together. Finally Dave asks who Vidrine and Mapes killed. Dixie Lee again has no idea, but thinks maybe the murders might have something to do with a couple of Indian activists with the American Indian Movement who were causing them trouble while they were trying to buy some land. Later, at home, Dave calls Nygurski and lets him know that he is in Montana and that he believes Dio has something to do with Mapes, Vidrine, and the murder they supposedly committed. That night Dave dreams about his wife who warns him to keep up his AA attendance so that he does not allow the stress of his situation to cause him to start drinking again.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Dave gets out of jail and decides he needs to do something constructive to prevent himself from going to jail. Dave decides to go up to Montana. Dave takes Alafair because the child has already lost too many people in her short life, Dave does not want to put her through losing another. However, the reader wonders if perhaps the real



motivation for taking Alafair is because she has become the focus of Dave's life since the death of his wife and he needs her to remind himself that there is still life worth fighting for. At any rate, Alafair is with Dave, placing her firmly in harm's way due to the fact that Dave's investigation into Mapes and the murder he may have committed is sure to make him a target of Mapes' murderous rage.

Dave visits the compound belonging to Dio in order to speak to Dixie Lee about Mapes. Dave finds Cletus firmly ensconced on the property with his girlfriend, Darlene American Horse. This is the first the reader gets to see Darlene, a shy, quiet girl who seems bothered by Dave's discussion of murder and mayhem at the lunch table. Darlene is sure to play a larger role in the novel, but the reader is not sure the impact she will have on Dave and his investigation, if any, at this point. Sally Dio is also introduced in this chapter. Sally appears to be a violent, yet unintelligent man who enjoys power because of what it can give him. Sally wants to be a fifties rock star, which explains his fascination with Dixie Lee. Dave does not hit it off with Sally and this hints at some tension that will explode between these two characters as the novel progresses.

Finally, Dave speaks with Dixie Lee and gets a hint as to the identity of the men Mapes and Vidrine supposedly killed. Dixie Lee suggests they might have been activists with AIM, the American Indian Movement. This gives Dave a direction in which to begin his investigation. Dave also calls Nygurski to let him know he is in town, confirming the reader's impression that Nygurski would become a source of information and support for Dave. That night, Dave has a dream about Anne in which Anne tells Dave to go to an AA meeting. This is important because, although it is not the first dream Dave has had of Anne, it is the first in which she tells him something that is pertinent to his current circumstances. The fact that Anne seems to be real and present in real time is important because Dave's dreams will prove to be important as he continues his investigation into Mapes.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Dave is sick the next morning, telling Alafair he has malaria. Dave walks Alafair to school and then sits in front of the fire until Darlene shows up. Darlene puts Dave to bed and sticks around to make him lunch. Dave feels better after some sleep and food. Darlene tells Dave that Dio does not like him and does not want him around the compound again. Dave is not impressed with Dio's annoyance. Instead, Dave turns the conversation around to the murders Mapes and Vidrine committed. Dave tells Darlene that Dixie Lee thinks the victims might have been members of AIM and asks if she has any idea who the victims might be. Darlene tells Dave the little she knows about AIM and a story about a group of Blackfeet killed at the Marias River. Then Darlene suggests he go to the reservation and ask around there.

Dave spends the rest of the day with Alafair. The next morning he makes arrangements for Alafair at the babysitter's and then makes the drive to the Blackfeet Reservation. Dave speaks to the tribal chief, asking if anyone from the reservation is missing or if he knows Mapes. The chief knows Mapes, but claims to know little about him. The chief also tells Dave about a young man with AIM, Clayton Desmarteau, who disappeared with his cousin, but claims no one believes them to be dead. The man then sends Dave to speak to Clayton's mother at her home off the reservation. Mrs. Desmarteau does not trust Dave and says little in response to his questions, except to say that she has not seen her son in some time and that he was once beaten for his work with AIM. The police tell Dave that Desmarteau had a car that was about to be repossessed, so one night after partying late in a local bar, Desmarteau drove his car into a ditch, stripped it of everything valuable, then left town to avoid the repercussions.

Dave returns home in time to pick up Alafair. A teacher from the school is with his daughter while the babysitter is running an errand. The teacher is young, beautiful and single. The next morning, Dave makes phone calls home, to the bondsman, and to his lawyer. The lawyer is less than optimistic about the case, telling Dave the only information his man was able to gather on Mapes is that he was once charged with assault when he was seventeen. Later in the morning, Dave gets a call from Dixie Lee who is at a local bar and wants him to join him. Dave refuses. A short time later, Darlene shows up. Dave and Darlene fall into bed. Afterward Dave feels guilty but Darlene assures him that Cletus cannot be intimate with her because of a physical problem and will not be offended by her decision to be with Dave. Dave continues to protest and by doing so offends Darlene, who leaves angry.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Dave wakes up ill and Darlene comes to his rescue. Darlene takes care of Dave and then talks with him, allowing him to express his frustrations and share his theories on



Mapes. Darlene has become something of a surrogate wife to Dave, so it no surprise when at the end of the novel they end up in bed together. Dave's reaction also is expected because the reader has known Dave to be a moral man up to this point, so he should feel guilty for sleeping with his ex-partner's girlfriend. Darlene claims that Cletus is impotent, which gives her an excuse to seek intimacy elsewhere, but the reader continues to question Darlene's motivations to be with Cletus when he cannot be intimate with her. It seems Dave is suspicious as well because he cannot let the subject drop, pushing it until Darlene leaves angry. Whatever Darlene's motivations, it does seem odd that she would be with Cletus without intimacy or other reasons.

Dave goes to the Blackfeet Reservation on Darlene's suggestion and finds out that a man with AIM named Clayton Desmarteau has been missing along with his cousin. Desmarteau has been beaten in the past for his work with AIM, making it seem that the sheriff office's explanation of his disappearance, escaping debt, is unlikely. Dave believes he has found his victims and the reader has to agree. However, it seems it will be more difficult to find Clayton and his cousin without some help from local law enforcement, but they are not looking for him because they do not believe he is missing. It seems this case only gets tougher and tougher for Dave. One final note of importance is the information Dave receives about Mapes. Mapes was arrested at seventeen for assaulting another boy. This is the only record Mapes has, which seems amazing due to the fact that he is clearly a psychopathic killer. The reader suspects that there will be more to the story eventually, hoping any more information will help Dave prove his innocence, a theme of the story.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Dave goes to the county courthouse to find a connection between Dio, Dixie Lee, Mapes, and the Star Drilling Company. Dave has little luck. Afterward Dave drives out to the lake and watches as Dio, Cletus, and Dio's friends spend a day on the water. Dave watches through binoculars and is spotted toward the end of the afternoon. Dio and his group drive up to the road where Dave is and confront him. Dave and Dio get into a verbal confrontation that ends with Dave punching Dio in the jaw. The police are called and Dave is taken in for assault. Eventually Darlene bails Dave out. Darlene drives Dave back to his car and tells him that their relationship is over despite the fact that Dave asks her to move in with him. Darlene is clearly scared, but Dave has no idea why.

The next day, Dave attempts to go back to the reservation, but his truck breaks down causing him to be grounded for a few days. Nygurski shows up and takes Dave fishing. Nygurski tells Dave that he and his team have a wire tap on Dio's phone and a phone booth down the road from his house. Nygurski and his team overheard Dio hiring a hitman to kill Dave. Dave has a sleepless night over the information, not so much for himself but because of Alafair. Dave considers sending her back to Louisiana but decides against it in the end. The next morning Dave heads back to the reservation, but his fan belt breaks. Dave gets a ride to a gas station, but finds himself walking back. A group of people in an old bus pick him up. As Dave is riding in the bus a thought occurs to him. Dave asks if any of the people know Darlene, but they say she is not Blackfeet, that her name is Souix. Dave realizes American Horse is Darlene's married name. Then Dave asks about Clayton and learns that he was in the First Cavalry in Vietnam with the bus driver. Dave remembers that Darlene wears a First Cav jacket. Suddenly Dave knows what Darlene is doing with Cletus.

Dave gets back to his truck and fixes it before going to see Mrs. Demarteau. Dave tells Mrs. Demarteau that her daughter is in danger. Dave has figured out that Darlene is Clayton's sister and Mrs. Demarteau confirms it. From there, Dave goes to the place where Clayton's car was found abandoned and walks a trail that leads into the woods. The trail ends at a small stream. Dave keeps an eye out for a fresh mound of earth or any other indication of a burial or violence, but finds nothing out of the ordinary. On the way back to town, Dave is followed by a black Jeepster. It turns out Harry Mapes is the driver. However, Mapes does nothing to threaten or harm Dave. At home, Alafair asks when they can go home. Tess Reagan, a teacher at Alafair's school calls and informs Dave that a man called the school trying to establish that Alafair attended there. Dave refuses to tell Tess Reagan who the man is or what the situation is, only that she should not give out any information about him or Alafair. Later, Dave goes for a run and returns home to a phone call from Cletus informing him that Darlene is dead.



Chapter 7 Analysis

Dave tries to find a connection between Dio, Mapes, and the Star Drilling Company, but has no luck. Dave then goes and watches Dio with his friends. The reader has no clue why Dave does this, except perhaps to intimidate Dio, to prove how tough he is. No matter the motivation, Dave and Dio end up confronting each other and Dave proves he is tougher than Dio when he punches him out, making Dio look like a fool in front of his friends. Dave is arrested and later released, but the damage is done. Dio is humiliated. Men have been killed for less. Dave later learns that Dio has hired a hitman to kill him because of the humiliation Dio suffered. Now Dave must look over his shoulder for more than one murderous madman.

Dave returns to the reservation with hopes of finding out more about Clayton and perhaps where he was killed or where his body is. Dave really needs some sort of evidence against Mapes in order to prove his own innocence back in a Louisiana court. However, instead of finding Clayton, Dave finally finds out why Darlene is with Cletus. It turns out that Darlene is Clayton's sister and that she is with Cletus in order to investigate Dio's connection to his disappearance. This explains a great deal to Dave who suspected that Darlene was not with Cletus out of love despite her refusal to move in with him. However, it seems that someone has learned about Darlene as well because Dave gets the call that she is dead.

Dave also discovers that Mapes is clearly back in Montana. Dave sees Mapes on the road and later learns that a man has been calling Alafair's school. Clearly Mapes is going back to his old tricks of threatening Alafair in order to get to Dave. This foreshadows the possibility that Alafair could be in danger. Now Dave not only has to watch his back for Dio's hitman, but also has to worry about Mapes stealing Alafair out of her school or coming after him at home. Either way, tension now streams from the pages in waves as the plot builds to its crescendo.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Dave leaves Alafair with the babysitter and rushes out to Cletus' house. Darlene is in the bathtub, an apparent victim of suicide, complete with a note left on the mirror in lipstick. Dave does not believe it, however, insisting that she was murdered. Dave learns that Dio and his group picked up a man named Charlie at the airport that morning. Dave knows Charlie is the name of the hitman and tells Cletus so. Then Dave makes Cletus call the police. The next morning, Dave visits a priest in an attempt to get help for the overwhelming grief Darlene's murder has left him with. The priest listens to Dave talk, but has little to offer him in way of absolution. The following day Dave goes to the sheriff's office to find out about the autopsy. The coroner has ruled Darlene's death a suicide, but they tell Dave that Darlene had sex shortly before death. Dave knows that it could not have been Cletus, so he suspects she was raped by her murderer. Dave attends the funeral on the reservation. Dave asks Dixie Lee who killed Darlene, but he claims not to know. Cletus is clearly beside himself and Dixie Lee warns Dave that if Cletus finds out who did it, he will kill the man.

Dave is home trying to decide how to proceed with his investigation when a telephone repair man comes into his yard. Dave talks to the man and learns they are having trouble with the lines. Dave thinks nothing of it until he realizes his phone line has gone dead. Dave sticks his head out the door and cannot find the repairman. Dave calls to another man who is delivering pamphlets up and down the neighborhood, and asks him to call the police. Dave then goes out and grabs the repairman, knocking him to the ground and holding a gun on him. However, it turns out the repairman is legitimate. A short time after Dave lets him go, the police show up. Dave explains his situation and apologizes. Shortly after the police leave, the man with the pamphlets comes back. Dave allows the man into the house for a glass of water. The man knocks Dave over the head and handcuffs him to the pipes under the sink. The man explains that he is the hitman, Charlie, hired by Sally Dio and that he is supposed to take before and after pictures, but has decided to go easy on Dave because he seems to be a nice guy. Charlie then grabs a knife to cut Dave's chest open, but is interrupted when Cletus comes in with a gun. Cletus pulls Charlie away from Dave and begins to beat him, believing him to be the man who killed Darlene. Cletus beats Charlie unconscious and then takes him from the house, leaving Dave the keys to the handcuffs.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Darlene is dead and her death is ruled suicide despite Dave's insistence that she was murdered. No one seems to care about evidence or people anymore. Dave is disillusioned and goes to a priest for guidance who can do little more than listen to him talk. Later, Dave goes to the funeral where he learns that Cletus is looking to kill the person who killed Darlene. Cletus suddenly becomes the victim, the good guy, the one



the reader wants to feel sympathy for. Cletus was held up as Dave's opposite when he was first introduced, the good cop turned bad who works for a mobster for easy money. However, Cletus now seems to have more in common with Dave than he did before, now the victim not of his own making, but of the will of dark and nefarious criminals. Cletus saves Dave's life and kidnaps the man who tries to kill Dave, believing him to be Darlene's killer. This move once again makes Cletus look like he has few morals, but when the reader takes into account that Dave too killed his wife's killers, it makes the comparison between the two seem that much more sympathetic.

Dave has been watching over his shoulder for some time and has survived by instinct and brute force. However, this time Dave picks the wrong enemy and ends up placing himself right in the hands of evil. Dave's instincts are not always perfect, which leaves the reader wondering about his ability to protect Alafair from Mapes, who is still out there and still a threat. Dave's continued survival seems to be in question now, again injecting the developing plot with tension and leaving the reader doubting the outcome of the novel.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Dave decides not to call the police about Charlie and instead takes a shower before a nap. As Dave sleeps, he dreams about his father and crab fishing in the marsh. In the dream Dave and his father catch a fish that is not saleable, but Dave's father tells him not to worry because they can live off the fish meat for several days. After the day's fishing, Anne appears. While Dave is talking to her on the deck of his father's houseboat, he smells something bad. It turns out a large alligator was injured by a boat and crawled onto a sandbar to die. Dave's father instructs him to dig in the soft ground to bury the animal.

After his nap, Dave picks up Alafair and learns that someone was watching her with binoculars at the school that day. Dave speaks with Tess Reagan about the incident and learns that an older boy saw a man sitting in a yellow car watching Alafair. The same man had come to the fence and asked about Alafair. This time Dave shares a small bit of what is going on with Tess, but she is angry about the danger he has put the school in and hangs up on him. The principal does the same when Dave calls her in an attempt to speak to the boy who saw the man in the yellow car. During dinner that night, Dixie Lee shows up at Dave's telling him that he has left Sally Dio's. Dave at first does not want to help Dixie Lee, but finally relents and allows Dixie Lee to move in with the understanding that he stop drinking, go to AA, and get a job. After dinner, Dave calls Cletus at a local bar. They arrange to meet in a local park. Cletus tells Dave that Charlie did not kill Darlene and does not know who did. Cletus promises he will find the man who did, however.

Dave decides he needs some help, so he makes a call to Nygurski. Dave asks Nygurski to run a check on Mapes for him. Dave also tells Nygurski that Dixie Lee has left Dio and that he might be willing to testify against him. The next morning Dixie Lee tells Dave that he overheard the phone call and was not happy with his offer of Dixie Lee's testimony. Dixie Lee then tells Dave a story about Sally from prison. Sally apparently had a lover in jail that began making Sally look like a fool in front of the other inmates. Sally's father told him to take care of it, so Sally beat the man within an inch of his life. Sally told Dixie Lee the reason he beat the boy was because he was a made man and sometimes made men had to do things they did not want to do.

Dave takes Alafair out of school for a few days and goes back to the Blackfeet Reservation. In Teton County Dave checks property records at the courthouse and finds the connection he has been looking for between Mapes, Dio, and the Star Drilling Company.



Chapter 9 Analysis

Dave has a dream about his father and Anne. In the dream, Dave is instructed by his dad to dig a grave in the softest soil. This dream seems as much a memory as a dream, but the image of a burial seems to relate either to Darlene's death or the bodies that Dave has been searching for. Perhaps Dave's subconscious is trying to tell him something. Later, Dave learns that a man in a yellow car was watching Alafair at school. It could have been Mapes or Charlie, but the reader suspects that it was Mapes. Now it appears that Alafair is in the same position she was before Dave took her out of Louisiana. The reader worries that something might happen to the child, again increasing the tension in the novel.

Dixie Lee leaves Dio's and moves in with Dave. Dave tells Dixie he has to get sober. Dave also offers Dixie Lee up to Nygurski, prompting Dixie Lee to tell Dave a story about how Sally Dio beat a man he cared about because he felt like he had no other choice. This story seems to parallel Dave's own story, a man being forced to do something unpleasant because he feels that he has no choice. Dave is becoming desperate, afraid that if he does not find something to prove Mapes to be a psychotic killer he will have to go on the run to avoid jail. Dave turns to Nygurski for help, suggesting to the reader that Nygurski will find something to help Dave. At least, the move injects some hope not only into the plot, but into Dave, giving him motivation to continue fighting.

Cletus tells Dave that Charlie did not kill Darlene. Charlie also did not know who killed Darlene. Cletus swears to keep looking for her killer, however, making it clear that he intends to get justice for Darlene. Cletus is grieving, a theme of the novel, and this is the only way he knows how to deal with it. Cletus' feelings imply that someone else in the story will die before the end, perhaps someone the reader already knows. It also implies that the reader will eventually learn the identity of Darlene's killer, solving a subplot interwoven into the main plot.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The next day Nygurski calls Dave and invites him over to dinner. Before dinner, Nygurski tells Dave that Mapes was a suspect in the kidnapping and murder of a young couple when he was seventeen. The only witness against Mapes was the young man he was accused of assaulting. No one was ever able to pin the murders on Mapes. At the same time, Dave decides it is time to turn the tables on Dio. Dave writes a letter pretending to be Charlie upset about not getting his full pay for taking out Dave and not for putting his life in danger. Dave then sends the letter with a bouquet of flowers that he has a blond man buy for him. In the middle of the night, Dave calls Dio's house and makes threats pretending to be Charlie.

The next day at an AA meeting, Dixie Lee learns that the job placement service has found him a job working a fork lift part time. Dixie Lee is not happy about the job but agrees to take it when Dave stresses that a job was part of the conditions for Dixie Lee to live with him. Dave then tells Dixie Lee what he learned about Mapes, Dio, and Star Drilling at the Teton. Dixie Lee finally admits that he was giving Dio information on the properties Star Drilling was buying up so that he could buy up bordering properties in order to cash in on the mineral rights. Dixie Lee also admits that Mapes and Vidrine found out about it and Dio cut them in on the deal.

Dave invites Tess Reagan to have desert with him and Alafair. After a pleasant evening, Dave takes her home only to discover he is being followed. It turns out Cletus Purcel is following him. Cletus has left Dio's employ and plans to leave town. Cletus wants to say goodbye. A short time later, Dave gets a call that someone took shots at Dio's compound, scarring the man half to death. Nygurski wants to know if Dave did it, but Dave suspects Cletus did it. The following night, Dio calls and requests a meeting with Dave. Dio thinks Dave cut a deal with Charlie and believes it was Charlie who took shots at his house. Dio wants to make a deal with Dave to get Charlie off his case. Dio offers to kill Mapes and to cut Dave in on the land deal. Dave says he will think about it.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Dave learns from Nygurski that Mapes kidnapped and killed a young couple when he was only seventeen. The feds were never able to pin the murder on Mapes although he was their only suspect. This shows the reader and Dave that Mapes is not only a murderer, but smart and careful. Mapes has clearly been killing for a long time, but no one has been able to stop him. It seems that Dave's desire to stop Mapes is impossible. This leads to Dave considering the idea of going on the run and never returning to his home in Louisiana. Dave must be desperate to think this way because the reader knows that Louisiana is Dave's home, in his blood, and to consider never returning is a drastic move on his part. Dave begins to play with Dio, causing him to come to Dave and offer



to kill Mapes. This move is interesting because the reader knows from earlier chapters that Dave would not consider taking anything from Dio. However, Dave is desperate and is strongly motivated to get rid of Mapes. Perhaps now Dave will climb into bed with Dio despite his strong moral base.

Dixie Lee gets a job and has remained sober, suggesting that he might make it this time. Cletus has left Dio and is most likely the man who shot at Dio's house. This turn is interesting because it suggests that Cletus has turned his grief, a theme of the novel, onto Dio and that he might attempt to kill him. Dave has also begun to move on with his life, taking Tess Reagan out to dessert. This hints at a romance and leaves the reader hoping for a little happiness in Dave's tumultuous life.



Chapters 11-12 and Epilogue

Chapters 11-12 and Epilogue Summary

Dixie Lee has kept his job and has taken on another job playing piano at a nearby church. However, Dixie Lee is afraid he needs to drink again. Dave does all he can to counsel Dixie Lee against drinking. Tess Reagan calls and tells Dave that the young man who saw the yellow car at the school saw it again behind a local restaurant. Dave drives to the restaurant to check to see if the car is there, but it is not. Dave goes back home to wait for Dio to call. When Dio calls, Dave implies that he knows there is a tap on his phone and he is about to go down. Afterward, Dave goes back to the restaurant and speaks to the owner of the yellow Mercury, pretending to have hit the car by accident. Dave then waits for the woman to leave the restaurant and follows her home.

At home, Dave gets a call from an angry Dan Nygurski. Nygurski is angry because Dave blew the tap on Dio, making any attempt to catch Dio incriminating himself impossible. Not only that, but Nygurski could be in trouble for telling Dave about the tap in the first place. Later Dave drives back out to the waitress's house and confronts Mapes. At first, Dave threatens to kill Mapes if he goes near Alafair again. Then Dave admits he would not kill Mapes, but tells him that Dio offered to kill him and that he should watch his back. While Dave is talking to Mapes, Mapes pulls out a unique gun, a Russian Tokarev, most likely a souvenir from his time in Vietnam.

Dave learns that Cletus was beat up in the parking lot of a bar on his way home. Dave and Dixie Lee go to see him and find out it was a couple of Dio's men who did it. Cletus says it is because he stole some ashtrays, but Dave suspects it was something bigger than ashtrays. Dave and Dixie Lee pick up Cletus' car and Dixie Lee puts his things in the basement. Among his things, Dixie Lee finds a pillow case with sand in it. Dave does not think anything of it at first. That night, Dave has a dream where Darlene comes to visit him. When Dave wakes, he immediately rushes out of the house and returns to the spot where Clayton's car was found. Dave walks the trail to the little stream and then begins to dig. Dave realizes his father and Anne had been trying to tell him, all along, to dig in the soft soil of the stream bed. Dave finds two bodies and the spent shells from a Tokarev.

Dave calls Nygurski and tells him what he has found. Dave tells Nygurski his theory on how Mapes killed Clayton and his cousin, then urges him to go arrest Mapes before he hears about the discovery and gets rid of the gun. After all the excitement settled down, Dave thinks about the pillowcase and realizes what it meant. Dave goes to Dio to warn him that Cletus put sand in the gas tank of his plane, but Dio does not believe him. Dio has finally realized that Dave set him up and is busy getting out of Montana. The next morning, Dave reads in the paper about the plane crash that killed Dio and his father. Mapes is arrested for murder and eventually sentence to two life sentences. Cletus moves back to New Orleans and opens a bar where Dixie Lee plays piano. The charges against Dave are dropped.



Chapters 11-12 and Epilogue Analysis

Dave meets with Sally Dio who offers to cut him in on the land deals and to kill Harry Mapes for him. Dave seems willing to take the deal, but does not. Instead, Dave tells Dio that he is about to go to jail because of the wire tap on the phone and the fact that the police just heard him offer to kill Mapes. The idea is to keep Dio from bothering Dave again, and seems to have worked since the next time Dave sees him he is on his way out of town. Dave realizes that Cletus, in his constant search for Darlene's killer, has put sand in the gas tank of Dio's plane. Dave does the moral thing, showing once again the depth of his character, by telling Dio, but Dio shows his own stupidity when he refuses to believe Dave. It seems karma has come back to get Dio and news of his death hits the papers the following morning.

Nygurski is angry with Dave for blowing the wire tap, but shows his own character when he comes around and helps Dave after he finds Clayton's body. Dave puts Nygurski's job on the line by telling Dio about the wiretap, but by doing that Dave gave himself ammunition to use against Mapes. Dave then finds Mapes and tells him Dio offered to kill him, hoping that will scare him more than anything Dave could do. At this point, Dave's motivation is simply to keep his family safe. Finding proof to get Mapes arrested has become a dream Dave does not believe he will fulfill. Ironically it is a dream that brings the answer to Dave. The dreams that Dave has been having all along prove to have been either the dead speaking to him and attempting to tell him where to look for the bodies, or his own subconscious telling him where to look. Either way, Dave finds the bodies after a dream in which Darlene comes to him. Not only that, but Dave finds bullet casings from a Tokerev, the same gun that Dave saw when he went to visit Mapes.

Everything is wrapped up in the end, with all the subplots tucking nicely into the climax of the main plot. Cletus goes back to New Orleans and opens a bar where Dixie Lee plays piano. Mapes goes to jail and the charges are dropped against Dave. It is a conclusion that is satisfying to the reader and seems to settle every mystery brought up in the plot, except Darlene's murder. However, Dave is sure that Mapes killed Darlene because she was investigating Clayton's death and Mapes was afraid she had given Dave help with the investigation. Therefore that mystery is solved as well.



Characters

Dave Robicheaux

Dave Robicheaux is an ex-cop who has his own business near his home in New Iberia, Louisiana. Dave grew up in Louisiana and is Cajun, bringing to the story all the culture that this heritage implies. Dave is also a new widower. Dave's wife was murdered when two men broke into their house while she was sleeping and shot her in the bed they shared. Dave is still suffering intense grief from this event and often dreams about his wife in which they have conversations about the events in his life. Dave's wife often encourages Dave to keep fighting to stay sober and to keep focused on their daughter, Alafair. Dave listens to his wife and does try to make her proud even though his instincts often encourage him to fall back into the alcohol addiction that once nearly ruined his life.

An old college friend of Dave's comes to visit him and asks his help in proving that two of his co-workers killed a couple of Indian activists in Montana. Dave refuses, but when his old friend is injured in a fire that kills a young woman, Dave finds himself pulled in to the drama. Dave goes to the police, believing he can just give the investigators a little information and wash his hands of the situation. However, Dave is overheard giving information on his friend's co-workers by the co-workers themselves. Shortly after this event, Dave's daughter is threatened. Dave goes to the police, but knows there is little they can do without evidence. Dave decides to take things into his own hands, and warns the two men away by beating them in a hotel room with a chain. However, the following day Dave is arrested for the murder of one of the men.

Dave gets out of jail on bail by receiving a loan from the bank. Dave then decides to go to Montana to prove the prime witness against him is a murderer and a liar. Dave arrives in Montana and immediately goes to the home of a mobster for whom two of his old friends work. However, Dave's presence is not welcome. Dave later visits an Indian reservation and discovers the identity of the two men his friend's co-workers supposedly killed. At the same time, Dave discovers the girlfriend of one of his friends is the sister of one of the murdered men. Dave takes up with this girl, but soon after she is also murdered. Dave becomes frustrated and begins to fear he will never be able to prove his innocence. However, a dream leads Dave to the place where the bodies are buried and he is able to prove a connection between his accuser and the murdered men. The charges are subsequently dropped against Dave.

Alafair

Alafair is the six year old daughter of Dave and his wife, Anne. Alafair was born in South Africa and was found by Dave and his wife when the plane on which she was traveling crashed in the Delta. Alafair's mother drowned while holding her daughter above the rising water that was flooding the plane's fuselage. Subsequently Dave and his wife



adopted the little girl. After Anne's death, Alafair has become the focus of Dave's life, giving him a purpose and a motivation to keep from drinking again.

Shortly after Dave becomes involved in Dixie Lee Pugh's drama, he receives a package in the mail that contains a threat against Alafair's life. In order to protect his daughter, Dave first goes to the police and then decides to handle it himself by beating the two men in what is supposed to be a warning for them to stay away. However, one of the men takes advantage of the situation to kill his partner and frame Dave. After Dave is arrested, he decides to investigate this man to prove his own innocence. Dave wants to leave Alafair with a cousin, but realizes that she has lost so many people in her life that it would be harmful for him to leave her for any length of time. Dave takes Alafair to Montana with him where she again becomes a target of the man whom Dave is attempting to investigate. Dave again threatens the man to stay clear of his daughter and by doing so finds evidence that will eventually tie the man to a murder.

Dixie Lee Pugh

Dixie Lee Pugh is a classmate of Dave's for a short time in college. Dixie Lee drops out of college to become a rock star. Dixie Lee has a short, but successful singing career until he gets involved with drugs and alcohol. One night Dixie Lee is involved in a car accident that kills a little boy. Dixie Lee is convicted of manslaughter and spends time in jail, successfully ending his career. After leaving prison, Dixie Lee becomes a leaseman for an oil company, making good money and having access to all the alcohol he can possibly drink. However, while in Montana leasing land for the company, Dixie Lee overhears a couple of co-workers discussing the murder of two men. Dixie Lee becomes frightened that these men will try to kill him because of what he heard. Dixie Lee goes to Dave and asks him to help find out who these men killed. Dave refuses, suggesting Dixie Lee go to the police instead.

A few weeks later, the house where Dixie Lee is staying burns down. Dixie Lee is subsequently arrested when police find drugs in his car. Dixie Lee is frightened of returning to jail and begs Dave to help him. Dave goes to the police and tells them about the murders Dixie Lee overheard being discussed, but the police do not have enough evidence to do anything about it. However, Dave is overheard by the men in question, leading to the threat made against his daughter. At the same time, Dixie Lee calls his ex-cell mate, a mobster from Galveston, who hires him a lawyer that gets the drug charge dropped. Dixie Lee then goes to Montana to live and work for the mobster. It is here that Dave finds him after he is freed on bond in his murder case. Dixie Lee helps Dave the best he can, even leaving his mobster friend and moving in with Dave in an attempt to sober up.

Dalton Vidrine and Harry Mapes

Dalton Vidrine and Harry Mapes are leasemen who work with Dixie Lee Pugh. Vidrine and Mapes are overheard by Dixie Lee discussing the murder of two men. After Dixie



Lee tells Dave about this conversation, he is nearly killed in a house fire. Dixie Lee believes these men are responsible for the murder and the drugs subsequently found in his car, but cannot prove it. Dave attempts to help Dixie Lee, only to be overheard by Vidrine and Mapes, who subsequently threaten him and then his daughter. Dave goes to their hotel room and beats them both with a chain in an attempt to scare them away. However, Mapes takes advantage of the situation to get rid of Vidrine, killing him with the pocket knife Dave accidentally left behind.

Mapes becomes the prime witness against Dave in the murder case. Dave decides his only way to prove his innocence is to prove that the conversation Dixie Lee overheard about the murders in Montana was true. Dave wants to show that Mapes is a cold blooded murderer to either discredit him as a witness or tie him up in court so he cannot testify. Either way, Dave feels proving Dixie Lee's story can prove his own innocence. However, when Mapes finds out Dave is in Montana, he again threatens Alafair by sitting outside her school and watching her with binoculars. Dave finds where Mapes is living and goes there to threaten him away. While there, Dave sees the unique gun Mapes owns. Later when Dave finds Mapes' murder victims, he is able to establish a connection between that weapon and the bodies, proving that Mapes committed the murders.

Cletus Purcel

Cletus Purcel was Dave's partner when he was a cop in New Orleans. Cletus was a good cop when the two men first began working together. However, Cletus slowly became jaded, eventually allowing a drug dealer to pay him to kill a witness. After the murder, Cletus left the country, leaving Dave holding the bag. Now, many years later, Cletus is back and working for mobster Sally Dio. Dave is not thrilled to see Cletus because of his connection to Sally and refuses Cletus's offer of help when he is arrested on murder.

When Dave travels to Montana to clear his name, Cletus attempts to help him in any way he can, short of crossing his new boss. However, when Cletus' girlfriend is murdered, he becomes consumed with grief. Cletus quits his job and begins hunting down the people he believes are responsible for the murder. One of these men is Sally Dio. Before Cletus leaves Sally's compound, he puts sand in Sally's airplane's gas tank. Dave tries to warn Sally, but Sally does not listen. The plane crashes.

Dan Nygurski

Dan Nygurski is an agent with the DEA. Nygurski comes to visit Dave shortly after Dixie Lee's visit. Nygurski has been investigating Dixie Lee because of his connection to Sally Dio. Nygurski wants Dave to give him information on Dixie Lee that might help the DEA take down Sally and his entire drug operation in Montana. Dave refuses. However, when Dave arrives in Montana, he contacts the DEA agent with the hopes that he can help Dave with his investigation. From Nygurski, Dave learns a few things about Sally



Dio and Mapes that he hopes will help him find out who Mapes killed and why. After Dave gets into a fight with Sally Dio, Nygurski tells him about a wire tap they have on several phones Sally is known to use and that they overheard Sally arranging for a hired killer to take Dave out. Later, Dave uses the information regarding the wire taps to set up Sally, exposing Nygurski. Dave also turns to Nygurski when he finds the men Mapes killed.

Darlene American Horse

Darlene American Horse is a widow who takes up with Cletus Purcel after she drives Dixie Lee back to Sally Dio's after a night of drinking. Darlene is a quiet, respectful woman whom Cletus feels a connection to despite the fact that he is physically incapable of having an intimate relationship with her. Darlene, however, has an alternative motive for living with Cletus. Darlene's brother is one of the men Mapes killed. Darlene hopes to find out why and where her brother's body is by hanging around Sally Dio's. When Dave comes to Montana, Darlene becomes intimate with him. However, shortly after their relationship begins, Darlene is killed in a fashion that masquerades as suicide. Dave later proves she was killed by Mapes. Before Cletus learns this, however, he pins the blame on Sally Dio and his hitman, killing them both in revenge.

Clayton Desmarteau

Clayton Desmarteau is an Indian activist who causes so much trouble for Mapes in his work as an oil leaseholder that Mapes kills him. Clayton's death goes unnoticed by the local police and community because it is assumed he simply left town, something that is common on the Indian reservation. Dave, however, believes he has been murdered, as does his sister, Darlene. Dave wants to find Clayton's body in order to prove Mapes a killer and to prove his own innocence in the murder of Mapes' partner, Vidrine. Eventually Dave does find the bodies and is able to establish a connection between Mapes and the victims, putting an end to both cases.

Sally Dio

Sally Dio is a small town mobster who has as much power as he does because his father once ran Galveston. Sally is not a smart man and he has a temper that causes him a great deal of trouble. Sally spent time in jail for check fraud. During that time, Sally shared a cell with Dixie Lee. Sally protected Dixie Lee and they became friends. Once out of jail, Dixie Lee got into business with Sally, helping him buy up land near the land the oil company was buying so that Sally could make money when the company found oil on the land. Later, when Dixie Lee is arrested on drug charges, he turns to Sally Dio for help. In return, he goes to work for Sally. However, when Dave comes to town, Dixie Lee sees the danger of associating with Sally and decides to leave the compound. At the same time, Dave rubs Sally the wrong way and they get into a



physical confrontation for which Dave is arrested. Later, Dave threatens Sally, pretending to be the same hitman who tried to kill Dave for Sally. Finally, Dave attempts to warn Sally about sabotage to his plane, but Sally dislikes Dave so much that he refuses to listen. Sally is later killed.

Anne Robicheaux

Anne Robicheaux is Dave's wife. Anne was killed when two men broke into their house and shoot her while she lay in bed. Anne was the love of Dave's life and he is wracked with both guilt and grief over her death. Dave dreams about Anne frequently and she continuously attempts to encourage him to keep fighting for his freedom and his sobriety. Anne comes to Dave often, sometimes even during the waking hours of day. Anne also brings Dave's father with her at times. Eventually Dave realizes that Anne and his father are attempting to tell him where he can find the bodies of Clayton Desmarteau and his cousin. When the case is over, Dave stops dreaming about Anne, suggesting that she has gone on in the afterlife and is content.



Objects/Places

Chain

Dave beats Vidrine and Mapes with a chain for threatening Alafair. Later, Dave is arrested for the murder of Vidrine.

Pocket Knife

Dave loses his pocket knife while he is beating Mapes and Vidrine. Later the knife is used to kill Vidrine.

Bloody Syringe

Someone sends Dave a bloody syringe to scare him off from investigating Dixie Lee's claims that Vidrine and Mapes killed a couple of people in Montana.

Picture

Someone sends Dave a grotesque picture of a dead woman in order to scare him off from investigating Dixie Lee's claims that Vidrine and Mapes killed a couple of people in Montana.

Bathtub

Darlene is found dead in a bathtub, the victim of an apparent suicide that Dave believes is murder.

Stream

Dave finds the body of Clayton Desmarteau and his cousin buried in a stream. Dave hopes to prove Mapes killed the two men in order to keep him from testifying at Dave's murder trial.

Bait and Boat Rental Business

Dave owns a bait and boat rental business that he runs off his property in New Iberia.



Pickup Truck

Dave owns a pickup truck that he drives to Montana in order to find evidence to prove he is not guilty of murder.

Pink Cadillac

Dixie Lee Pugh drives a pink Cadillac.

Yellow Mercury

Mapes drives his girlfriend's yellow Mercury to Alafair's school and watches her on the playground through binoculars. Dave traces the car in order to find Mapes and scare him away from testifying against Dave in court.

Star Drilling Company

Star Drilling Company is an oil company for whom Dixie Lee works. Star is also the company that owned the oil rig on which Dave's father was killed due to a lack of a blowout preventer on the rig.

New Iberia

Dave lives in New Iberia, Louisiana with his adopted daughter Alafair.

Blackfeet Reservation

Dave visits the Blackfeet Reservation multiple times in an attempt to find out who Vidrine and Mapes killed as well as to locate their bodies.

AIM

AIM, or American Indians Movement, is a group who work to protect the rights of Indians.

AA

AA, or Alcoholics Anonymous, is a support group for alcoholics who want to stop drinking. Dave is a member and he encourages Dixie Lee to join.



Themes

Crime

Dave is a retired police officer who is trying to keep his life as simple as possible in the aftermath of his wife's murder. Dave is raising a young daughter that he and his wife adopted after finding her among the ruins of a plane crash. There is nothing Dave wants more than to run his business and spend time with his daughter. However, when an old friend comes back into Dave's life, he finds himself unable to stop becoming involved in the turmoil that seems to surround his friend. Dave learns that his friend, Dixie Lee Pugh, a ne'er-do-well, has recently begun working for an oil company as a leaseman. Dixie Lee comes to Dave for help when he overhears two of his fellow leasemen talk about two men they killed. At first Dave refuses to help, but when Dixie Lee is nearly killed in an explosion and set up on a drug charge, Dave begins looking in to the situation.

As Dave makes wave for the other two leasemen, Vidrine and Mapes, he receives a warning that his little girl will be hurt if he does not back off. Dave tries to go to the police, but when that fails, he takes matters into his own hands. Dave goes to the hotel where Vidrine and Mapes are staying and beats them with a chain. The following day Dave is arrested for murder. Dave did not kill anyone, but Mapes killed Vidrine with Dave's knife and made it look as though Dave committed the crime. Dave spends several weeks in jail until he can raise bail money. Soon after, Dave decides to find the two men Vidrine and Mapes killed in order to prove himself innocent. At the same time, Dixie Lee has taken up with his ex-prison cell mate, the son of a notorious mob lord. Dave is saddened by this turn of events, but it does not stop him from harassing the mobster in the hopes of finding a connection between him and Mapes.

Crime follows Dave wherever he goes. Dave confronts the mobster and again is arrested for assault. Later, the young woman that Dave has become involved with is murdered in a fashion that is designed to look like suicide. Dave is quickly becoming desperate that he will never find out the truth about the two men Vidrine and Mapes killed, so he begins formulating a plan to go on the run rather than face jail time. However, Dave's investigative skills kick in and he finally finds the bodies, giving the men's families peace and escaping a jail sentence of his own.

Grief

Dave's wife was killed when two men broke into his house and shot her while she lay in their bed. Dave has since repaired the damage to their bedroom and gone back to sleeping in their bed, but he cannot forget the final moments of his wife's life. Dave blames himself for the death and often laments his absence in their bedroom that night. Dave dreams about his wife and in the dreams he often tells her that he will soon be joining her. Dave's therapist believes Dave has a death wish and urges him to stop



thinking those thoughts and instead concentrate on his daughter. Dave continues to dream about his wife, however, as well as his dad. In the dreams, Dave's wife often tells him things that are pertinent to his situation and finally it is a dream about his dad that leads Dave to the bodies of the two men Vidrine and Mapes killed.

Grief is a theme in this novel because Dave is in a constant state of grief throughout the novel. Dave has lost his wife, the love of his life, and he believes he will never recover. Dave feels sick every time he thinks of the way his wife died and often wishes he had died in her place or with her. As a result, grief colors everything Dave does. Not only this, but when Dave finally opens himself to another woman, she is also killed. Dave is dumped into another pit of grief over this second death and finds himself a step away from falling back into the bottle. However, Dave's daughter helps him keep his emotions on track and he is able to focus on a strategy to get himself out of trouble.

Innocence

Innocence is a theme of the novel for two reasons. First, Dave's young daughter, Alafair, is only six, a beautiful young girl who is rescued from a plane crash only because her mother drowned trying to keep her above the rising water in the plane's fuselage. Dave and his wife Anne adopted Alafair, only to have Anne murdered a short time later in their own home. Alafair has lost so much but still manages to be a normal little girl. Dave strives to keep things that way. Dave wants to leave Alafair in Louisiana when he decides to go to Montana to find evidence to clear himself of murder charges, but Alafair does not want to be without him and Dave cannot take anything else away from her. Dave takes her along only to cause her to become the target of Mapes, the man he knows committed the crime for which he is charged.

Innocence also comes into the novel when Dave is arrested for murder. Although Dave has done some dark things in his life and although he willingly went to the motel where the murder happened and beat two men with a chain, he is innocent of the murder charge. Dave did not kill Vidrine and does not want to spend time in jail for a crime he did not commit. Dave goes all the way to Montana to prove his innocence, only to face the possibility that he will not be able to get out of the charge and will have to go to jail. Dave knows what happens to cops in prison and is afraid not only for his life, but for his daughter's life. Dave considers running away when things begin to look bleak. However, Dave is eventually able to prove the prime witness against him is guilty of another crime, making it impossible for him to testify against Dave. All charges are dropped against Dave, allowing him to return to his ordinary life.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is first person. The main character of the novel is Dave Robicheaux. The narration is seen through Dave's eyes and the reader is allowed access to Dave's thoughts and emotions as well. The narration does not shift from Dave to any other character, keeping the focus tightly on the main character. This allows the reader to concentrate on the plot as it affects Dave without becoming confused with frequent changes of narration.

The point of view of this novel works because unlike other types of narration, this novel stays in the mind of one character, allowing the reader to become intimate with him without muddling the story with forays into other characters' minds. Character driven novels require a certain amount of intimacy between the reader and the main character and this novel achieves that by keeping the reader close to the main character. The choice of point of view also allows more intimacy by allowing the reader access to Dave's thoughts and feelings, as well as his observations of the action within the plot. For these reasons this point of view works well for this novel.

Setting

When the novel begins, the setting is the bayou of Louisiana. Dave Robicheaux lives in New Iberia, Louisiana, where he runs a bait and boat rental shop near his home. Dave's life revolves around Louisiana culture, including the cuisine and the lifestyle. However, the plot takes Dave out of Louisiana to the mountains of Montana. Dave settles into life in Montana like a fish out of water, attempting to make a normal life for himself and his daughter while fighting to keep his freedom.

The setting of this novel is important only to the extent that the culture of Louisiana has an impact on Dave's everyday life. Louisiana is where Dave was born and raised, therefore everything about it, from the French he speaks with his family members to the food he makes for his daughter, affects his everyday life. However, Dave is taken from his home in Louisiana to find evidence that he hopes will clear his name in a murder case. Dave travels to Montana, where he struggles to do what needs to be done to keep out of jail. The change in setting changes the tone of the novel, adding tension to an already stressful plot. In this way the setting plays a role in the plot, making it an important element to the overall structure of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple, precise English. At times the novel includes words in French or Cajun that reflect the culture of the part of Louisiana where Dave lives. These words are few and far between, but are not always explained within the text of



the novel. The words, although unexplained and often leaving the reader wondering what they are, do not impede the flow of the novel in any way. These words add authenticity to the novel, giving the setting a more realistic feel because the reader would expect a man who grew up in the Louisiana bayou to use these words.

The language of the novel is important because it is simple enough for all readers to comprehend and enjoy. The language is varied and rich, including foreign phrases as well as slang, giving the novel a sense of authenticity that might be missing without these unique phrases. The novel features a unique setting, therefore it requires certain techniques to enrich this setting and one of those is the use of language specific to the setting. Due to these words and the simplicity of the language, the language of this novel works well within its plot.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter is fairly long, including more than twenty pages each. The chapters move from scene to scene, including several days within each at times. The novel is written in exposition and dialogue, a happy division of each that keeps the plot flowing. The plot is told in a linear fashion, moving logically from the beginning to the end without many flashbacks. However, the plot also includes a large number of stories told about the past as well as dreams and memories that influence Dave's investigation into the man who set him up for murder.

The novel's plot includes the main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows Dave as he is pulled into Dixie Lee's trouble, threatened, and then framed for murder. The first subplot gives the reader backstory on Dave's wife and her murder. Another subplot follows Dave's relationship with his ex-partner and their interaction throughout Dave's attempts to clear his name. Cletus, Dave's ex-partner, has a girlfriend, Darlene, with whom Dave becomes involved and she is subsequently murdered. Another subplot follows Cletus' attempts to find and punish her killer. Finally, a subplot follows Dave's relationship with his daughter, an innocent young girl whose mere presence keeps Dave focused and sober.



Quotes

"The night is hot and breathless, the clouds painted like horsetails against the sky; a peal of thunder rumbles out on the Gulf like an apple rolling around in the bottom of a wood barrel, and the first raindrops ping against the window fan. She sleeps on her side, and the sheet molds her thigh, the curve of her hip, her breast. In the flicker of the heat lightning the sun freckles on her bare shoulder look like brown flaws in sculpted marble." Chapter 1, p. 1.

"The false dawn, with its illusions and mist-wrapped softness, can be as inadequate and fleeting as Morpheus' gifts." Chapter 1, p. 23.

"In my dreams is a watery place where my wife and some of my friends live. I think it's below the Mekong River or perhaps deep under the Gulf. The people who live there undulate in the tidal currents and are covered with a green-gold light. I can't visit them there, but sometimes they call me up." Chapter 2, p. 43.

"I heard the chain clink and sing through the air, felt it come back over my head again and again, felt their hands rake against the side of my face; my ears roared with sound—a rumble deep under the Gulf, the drilling-rig floor trembling and clattering violently, the drill pipe exploding out of the wellhead in a red-black fireball." Chapter 3, p. 83.

"But it was an even deeper fatigue, one that went deep into the bone, that left the muscles as flaccid as if they had been traversed by worms. It was a mood that I knew well, and it always descended upon me immediately before I began a two-day bender. I felt a sense of failure, moral lassitude, defeat, and fear that craved only one release." Chapter 4, p. 103.

"Once out of jail I felt like the soldier who returns to the war and discovers that the battlefield is empty, that everyone else had tired of the war except him and has gone home." Chapter 5, p. 106.

"Is this the way it comes? I thought. With nothing dramatic, no three-day bender, no delirium tremens in a drunk tank, no cloth straps and Thorazine or a concerned psychiatrist to look anxiously into your face. You simply stare at the yellow handkerchief of flame in a fireplace and fear your own thoughts, as a disturbed child would." Chapter 6, p. 143.

"And she left me there, with a wet spot in the center of my bed and a big question mark as to whether I had acquired any degree of caution or wisdom in the fiftieth year of my life." Chapter 6, p. 172.



"I wanted to go into yesterday. And I don't think that's always bad. Sometimes you simply have to walk through a door in your mind and lose thirty or forty years in order to remember who you are. Maybe it's a self-deception, a mental opiate that I use to escape my problems, but I don't care. We are the sum total of what we have done and where we have been, and I sincerely believe that in many ways the world in which I grew up was better than the one in which we live today." Chapter 8, p. 222.

"The opinion of certain people has always been important to me. Most of those people have been nuns, priests, Catholic brothers, and teachers. When I was a child the good ones among them told me I was all right. Some in that group were inept and unhappy with themselves and were cruel and enjoyed inculcating guilt in children. But the good ones told me that I was all right." Chapter 9, p. 287.

"Then a strange thing happened, because she had never appeared to me during the waking day. But I saw her face in the water, saw the sunlight spinning in her hair." Chapter 10, p. 315.

"I drove back up the road in the rain and parked by the stream where I had entered the woods at dawn. Then the clouds moved eastward and the rain drifted away over the land behind me, and in the distance the sheer red cliffs of the mountains rose into the tumbling plateaus of ponderosa. When I closed my eyes and laid my head back against the seat I heard robins singing in a lone cottonwood by the stream." Chapter 11, p. 352.

Topics for Discussion

Who is Dave Robicheaux? What is his background? How does this background make Dave vulnerable to the sequence of events in the novel? Why does Dave become involved in Dixie Lee's troubles? Is Dave becoming involved for friendship or for deeper reasons? How does Dave's involvement spiral out of control? How much of this is Dave's fault?

Who is Dixie Lee Pugh? Why does Dixie Lee come to visit Dave? What is their relationship? Why does someone try to kill Dixie Lee? Why are they not successful? Why is Dixie Lee arrested? Why is Dixie Lee afraid of going to jail? Why does Dave try to help Dixie Lee?

Who is Cletus Purcel? Compare and contrast Cletus and Dave. Was Cletus a corrupt cop? Were his actions different than some of the violent behavior Dave has displayed? Should Cletus have gone to jail for murder? Is Cletus morally corrupt? Is Dave morally corrupt? Is Dave a better person than Cletus? Is Dave a hypocrite?

Discuss Dave's dreams. How are Dave's dreams about his wife and father important? Are the dreams really dreams or are they something more? Do you believe people can communicate with the dead? Is Dave communicating with the dead or is his subconscious telling him things in his dreams through the forms of his wife and father? How do these dreams help Dave solve a murder?

Discuss Sally Dio. Who is Sally Dio? What kind of crime is Sally involved with? Is Sally Dio a powerful mobster? Is Sally a smart man? Why do Dixie Lee and Cletus work for Sally? Is this a smart career move? Why does Dave focus his investigation on Sally? Does this help Dave find the evidence he needs to clear his name? Why or why not? Who kills Sally? Why?

Discuss morality. How is morality presented in the novel? What does the novel offer as evidence of Dave's morality? To whom does the novel compare Dave and his sense of morality? How is Dave morally superior to some of the other characters? Is Dave really morally superior or simply morally different?

Discuss grief. How does grief overwhelm Dave? Why is Dave grieving? What happened to Dave's wife? How does this death affect Dave's decisions to get involved with Dixie Lee? How did Dave's father die? How does this death affect Dave's decision to get involved with Dixie Lee? Is Dave still grieving for his father?