Black Dog of Fate: A Memoir Study Guide

Black Dog of Fate: A Memoir by Peter Balakian

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Black Dog of Fate is the story of Peter Balakian on his journey through life to discover his roots and the fate of his people, the Armenians. Through secret stories, documents, poetry, and lost artifacts, Peter is able to piece together his family history through the Armenian genocide and discovers that the past has much influence over the present and future.

Peter Balakian is a young man growing up in suburban New Jersey with his parents, grandmother, and aunts when he first hears phrases and fables from his family's origins. Peter realizes early that his family is different from others in that they carry with them Armenian customs, although they also fully embrace much of life in suburbia. His grandmother, Nafina, has a vast influence on him as a child, but she speaks little of her own past. Large family gatherings are common, with Armenian foods and styles abound. When Peter reaches college, however, he begins to realize a past that his family has kept secret for many years as he learns of the Armenian genocide. Against his family's wishes, Peter begins researching the topic, only to discover that his own family was deeply involved. Through help from his aunts, he learns that his grandmother was a survivor of the genocide, but that her entire family was killed, including her first husband. He learns of the horrific torture, slaughter, starvation, disease, and misery bestowed on the Armenian population by the Ottoman empire in 1915. He pieces together the life of his grandmother in the old world as she and her two young daughters battled for survival. He also learns of his father's family and of their own sacrifices at the time of the war. He even discovers that his grandmother, in 1920, began a claim against the Turkish government for her loss, which included her parents, all brothers and sisters, nieces, nephews, and her husband, as well as all of their belongings. Amid Balakian's own research, there are many testimonies of witnesses in 1915 of the horrific crimes against humanity at the hands of the Turks and many stories, both of survival and of loss. Through this, Peter discovers he is better able to understand his aunt, his parents, and his beloved grandmother, as well as better able to understand himself.

Black Dog of Fate is not a light story. It is not a story of hope, necessarily, or a story of accepting one's ethnic heritage. Instead, this book is an angry look at the near eradication of an entire population at the hands of an empire. It is the story of one young man's struggle to understand victimization, and of the power the past holds over people. It is a story of anguish, fear, loss, grief, and survival. However, within this dark setting, there are moments of deep understanding and glimpses of the hope that one day, the people of Armenia will be recognized and that the genocide will be accepted. As Balakian points out, this recognition is the only thing that can allow Armenians, including his own family, to heal.

Part I: Grandmother

Part I: Grandmother Summary and Analysis

Black Dog of Fate is a book about a man's journey to find his roots and a civilization's journey to survive. As author Peter Balakian learns more of his Armenian roots, he learns too of the Armenian genocide of 1915 and of his family's horrible past.

In "Black Dog of Fate," the first chapter, Peter Balakian tells readers of his Armenian family. His grandmother, Nafina, and her daughters, Gladys and Lucille, arrive every Sunday for a large Armenian dinner. Impeccably dressed and fashionable, the women are constantly fawning over Peter. For a young boy in the '60s in suburbia Tenafly, New Jersey, such attention is unwanted, but is tolerated out of respect. Peter notes his family speaks fluent Armenian but that his siblings and he know very little. His childhood is filled with memories of helping his grandmother bake Armenian goods at her apartment as the two of them talked baseball and listened to rock and roll. Some afternoons, Nafina tells him fables and tales of Armenian origin. Peter admires and adores Nafina, with her extreme love of baseball and her Armenian accent. When the family moves even closer to Nafina, she begins to appear each night to watch the Yankees play on television with her grandson. During the '62 season, however, Peter disappoints her by watching the series with his friends. Shortly thereafter, the Cuban missile crisis occurs, and one night, Peter is awake, worrying about war. When he rises from bed to go get cereal, he sees Nafina in the living room, smoking a pipe. Shocked, he asks his mother for explanation, and she tells him that, in the old country, such behavior is a sign of wisdom. Peter has heard the phrase "the old country" before and knows the phrase refers to Armenia, but wonders where it has gone, since his mother says it no longer exists.

In "The Woman in Blue", Peter reveals that over time, he begins to understand that his grandmother is part of a different era and a different history than he himself. She tells Peter and his family of dreams she has, which appear to be visions as they often come true. One day, when she and Peter become lost in Harlem, Nafina tells him the story of a young wife who sees visions of a woman in blue. Nafina and Peter board a bus, and suddenly, Peter is hit by a cane from behind. A fight has broken out on the bus, and Nafina is immediately on her feet, attempting to stop the argument. Afterward, Peter is in awe, wondering how his grandmother found the courage to defend a total stranger. In 1964, Nafina passes away, and Peter finds solace in the rock and roll songs they listened to together. The previous night Peter had seen her, and the two bantered normally. She had mentioned a baseball player that looked like a Turkish Jew she had seen once. Peter finds himself wondering what that phrase means, and he realizes he can no longer ask his grandmother all the questions that lie in his heart.

In "Freedom, New Jersey", Peter begins to link memories of suburbia, his grandmother, and rock and roll. He discovers that music has the power to draw a memory and that he can forget his troubles and be free within it. He also learns that memory can surprise a

person at inopportune times. He recalls being on a date and suddenly remembering a time when he was very sick. His father, a doctor, medicates him, but his grandmother uses old country medicine on him. She tells him a story while he is delirious with fever in which there are dead bodies with maggots. She tells of kicking a man named Hagop, who is cold and dead, and of "gendarmes" hitting her. She collapses and sees the woman in blue, mother of God. Waking from the memory, Peter finds he is still on his date, but emotionally exhausted. Back home that evening, he wonders if he had heard a horrible memory of his grandmother, told only to him in his sickest hour, or merely a story. He begins to wonder about Armenia.

Part II: Mother

Part II: Mother Summary and Analysis

In "An Armenian Jew in Suburbia," Peter recalls Sunday dinners, during which he felt more Armenian. Several family members are always on hand, and the food is decisively Armenian. Aunt Anna, Peter's father's sister, speaks out against suburbia. She is a modern woman even in the 50s, and is a professor at NYU. She believes the suburbs will take away the ethnicity of the Armenian Balakians, and she and Arax, Peter's mother, often begin to argue about the sense of community in the suburbs. In Teaneck, Peter's first home, many neighbors are Jewish, and Peter finds himself wanting to be Jewish like his friends. When he asks his parents, they explain that he is Christian, and that "their people" decided to follow Christianity after Moses landed on Mt. Ararat, the national symbol of Armenia. Peter asks where Armenia is, and is confused by the answer that it is in another country. Arax continues to explain that Mt. Ararat is in Turkey and Armenia is in the Soviet Union. Peter is more confused, but is silenced. Soon, after, his parents announce they are moving to Tenafly, New Jersey, and Peter believes he should stay, since he feels he is Jewish, simply by association. After an argument about the move, Arax tells Peter he should never become attached to places. He admits now that his tie to the Jews at that time was in location alone, and not in the deeper tie he now understands to be a tie based on the suffering each enduring during their own period of genocide.

In "Tahn on Crabtree Lane," Peter recalls his mother's obsession with their new home and in making sure it was stylish. Lucille, Gladys, Nafina, and Arax constantly revise plans to make sure the home is accented and decorated properly. The neighborhood is wealthy, and Peter feels out of place in his Armenian rooted family. Food becomes a cultural emblem, and where other families have steak and casseroles, his mother makes traditional Armenian meals nearly all the time. He tells the story of his mother in a French restaurant, questioning the freshness of the food, and points out that this need for control in terms of food is based in his mother's Armenian background, and in an unconscious disposition about food brought about by the near extinction of the Armenian culture after the genocide. When asked why casseroles were not acceptable, Arax responds by noting that such foods are fine, for Americans. Peter is left to wonder, again, what he is, if not American. One day, after a skirmish with the neighbor children, the Walls, he hears his parents again speak against the modern American family. Peter notes his family is different than others. He recalls the evening the house was blessed by an Armenian priest, and can remember being both awed and embarrassed by the event, knowing his friends would not understand.

In "Threads of Silk", Peter explains that his mother is named Arax, meaning turbulence. Her maiden name, Aroosian, is of Arabic and Armenian decent, from southeastern Anatolia. This is near the city of Diarbekir, where one hundred thousand Armenian died at the hands of the Turkish government in 1915, and where today, thousands of Kurds are killed in what is now Turkey. The Aroosians, including Nafina, Arax, Gladys, and

Lucille, are the judges of Peter's clothing. Twice a year, Arax takes Peter shopping, and after each trip, the Aroosian women choose from the purchases what he is able to wear, and what is not good enough. Later, Peter learns much of this aesthetic love is generational, in that his grandparents' families were silk growers, refiners, and merchants in Diarbekir before the genocide. Bedros Aroosian, Peter's grandfather, arrived in the US in 1903 to work in the silk industry. After surviving the genocide, Nafina married Bedros in 1920, and the two started a cleaning and tailoring business. Thus, Peter notes, all aspects of decoration, food, and clothing were endless debates of quality, and Peter comes to realize that perhaps nothing is ever good enough for this family of women who lost their inherited silk fortune to the Turks during the genocide.

Part III: Father

Part III: Father Summary and Analysis

In "Saturday Autumn I," Peter explains that he and his father went to every Columbia football game possible together. Gerard, his father, grew up watching Columbia after he and his family arrived in the US when he was five, and he grew to love America because of it. Peter remembers one day when his father, on arriving at the stadium, ran to help a man having a heart attack, and Peter notes this is the first time he understood his father in a public sense, as a physician. After the game, he reminds his son that he has to be "tough as nails." As they drive home, Peter is filled with questions about death, and about how his father can be so relaxed after such an event.

"Istanbul Was Constantinople" begins with Peter's admission that he and his father began to have strained relations in seventh grade. Peter phones his girlfriends often, much to the annoyance of his father. As his father becomes more disapproving, he becomes more Armenian in Peter's eyes. Although he is an immigrant, Gerard tries hard not to appear ethnic. He even lies at times about his birthplace, claiming New York instead of Constantinople. Peter wonders about how Istanbul was, at one point, Constantinople, and wonders what happened. Peter discusses the history of the great city, and notes that Gerard and his family left there when he was only two. Diran Balakian, Gerard's father, was also a physician, and he practiced in Vienna, and a small town in the French Alps. Gerard remembers little of his time in Europe, but small fragments do creep into conversation. Peter realizes that Gerard's birthplace is gone, just as Armenia is gone.

In "The Other Side of the Bridge," Peter discusses Sundays spent with family at the home of his aunt Anna's. She and Uncle Steve live in Manhattan, in the seat of high culture. Peter notes Manhattan and Tenafly are separated by a bridge, just as the two families are separated by a cultural rift. Anna is a professor of French at NYU, while her sister Nona works as an editor for the New York Times Book review. Anna loves large family gatherings, and often includes her writer friends in her parties. Peter feels a constant competition between the Aroosians and the Balakians in terms of their culture. The Aroosians have a sense of style, aesthetic refinement, and morality, based on Protestant views, whereas the Balakians are strong in surreal poetry, literary arts, and high culture. Peter wonders about his father, realizing he is a clash of cultures. Gerard is both Armenian and American, but more than that, he is also European. His father is not chummy or down to earth, and has no need for social clubs. In addition, Gerard is extremely clean and worries incessantly about germs. Peter recognizes this is the same overwhelming anxiety and deep seated fear his grandmother expressed, and he recognizes the link between this anxiety and the genocide. Peter realizes his family is ruled by women, and without grandfathers, the women take over the role of matriarch.

In "A Creature of Rock N Roll," as Peter becomes more obsessed with girls, Gerard becomes obsessed with private school. Peter recalls that in eighth grade he is tasked to

write about a Near Eastern culture, and his father is excited, noting that he should write about Armenia. Unable to find many resources, he instead does his paper on Turkey. When he brings it home, his father is enraged, although his grade was an A. He angrily asks if Peter knows what the Turks did to them, and if his Jewish friends would write about Germany in the same way. Peter is confused, but says nothing. When Peter reaches ninth grade, he is sent to private school. Peter is furious, and refuses to speak to his father through the summer. One evening at dinner, the two physically fight, and Peter runs away . As summer ends, however, Peter realizes he has to attend the school.

In "Saturday Autumn II", after a tentative year of peace with his father, Peter and Ed Singleton sneak out and steal the Singleton car. After several friends take turns, Peter drives, and crashes into a tree. Bleeding, he and his friends are taken to the hospital, where their parents are called. Peter realizes he has lost the respect of his father. The following year, football again helps heal the rift between father and son as Peter suffers heat stroke, and his father concocts a drink to replace fluids in the body lost during exercise. He begins to market "Sportade," while Peter is taken to juvenile court for his summer crime, but is given a light sentence. When the New York Giants ask Gerard to do some test with Sportade on the team, father and son bond further as they work together in the locker room. Peter realizes later that football was his father's escape from his anger and frustration, and that their after-game analysis were a form of bonding and love. His father couldn't show his deep love for his son through words or contact, just as Peter could not do the same later, as his father lay dying. The two bonded through football, and Peter now understands the depths of his father's love.

Part IV: Chain of Words

Part IV: Chain of Words Summary and Analysis

In "Benzene Rinsings From the Moon," Peter notes that language is vital to him, and that he believes poetry is a part of language that links together family history. He can recall English class in 1967, where he and a "nerd" square off about the deeper meaning of a poem by Hart Crane, and Peter begins to realize his love for poetry. Although his new love puts a strain on relationships, as his girlfriend calls him an elitist (a word used earlier as a reference to his father), it also brings him closer to his aunts on his father's side. He begins reading their books of poetry, and his aunt Nona's book reviews in the New York Times. He finds himself quoting French poetry in English class as a result of his aunt's books.

In "The Sioux Chief," Peter attends Woodstock and begins to wonder about the days ahead as he enters college. In the fall, Peter and his father begin talks about deeper subjects, such as Marxism and socialism, and Peter begins to respect his father and value his knowledge. He begins writing letters home to discuss campus life, and one day, receives a letter back, pertaining to the history of Armenia. In it is enclosed an article about the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet Armenian Republic. The note angers Peter as he wonders again why no one tells him of his past honestly, instead of leaving a trail of cryptic messages. He remembers a bus trip he and his father took, where Gerard bonded with an American Indian Sioux chief in the Black Hills, noting they had much in common as their people were forced from their homelands. Gerard embraces the Indian, and Peter is in awe. He wonders again why everyone offers small pieces of information about Armenia, and then retreats.

In "Kaddish," Peter decides he no longer wants to play college football or be involved in a fraternity. Peter finds himself drawn instead to writer circles and poets, and with his father's blessing, Peter changes from law school to writing as a major. After an honors thesis on Allen Ginsberg, Ginsberg agrees to come for a reading at Bucknell. The day of the reading, Ginsberg and his "friend" Peter Orlovsky arrive, as does Arax, Peter's mother. Arax and Ginsberg hit it off, and she produces for Ginsberg a copy of the book review coming out in the Times for his latest book. Peter realizes Arax has done this intentionally, to show Peter she, too, can navigate the literary circles. During the reading, Ginsberg reads "Kaddish," a poem about his mother, and Peter is moved to tears. Back at the apartment, Peter is infuriated with his mother as she berates his girlfriend. Peter believes Arax will never approve of any woman who isn't of Armenian decent. The following morning, Arax barges into Peter's room, only to find Ginsberg and his "friend" in bed. Arax leaves and follows up with a phone call to Peter, asking for copies of "Kaddish," as it reminds her of Armenia.

In "A Princess in Byzantium," Aunt Anna arrives at campus to deliver a lecture on surrealism. Peter is in awe of her teaching ability, and reflects on her admiration of Anais Nin, whom she calls the princess in Byzantium. Peter understands that Anna

dislikes realism in poetry, believing it should be surreal only, but he disagrees, noting that American poets have a voice, as well. He believes Anna to be judging American poetry on principles that had little value in America, but he does understand that her beliefs stem, somehow, from the genocide, and from her experiences in Armenia.

In "Owls Flying in the Dark," Aunt Nona invites Peter to a dinner at her home, where writer William Saroyan will be in attendance. When he arrives, he finds Saroyan surrounded by Armenian writers, and Peter again finds himself admitting that he, unlike Nona, isn't keen on Saroyan or his works. Peter begins to understand why writers like Nona, however, in that she nurtures their work and introduces them to others in their field. She is a stylish, powerful woman, although she is disfigured, in that her spine is curved due to illness as a child. Raised partially in hospitals in Vienna in the 20s, she, Gerard, and the rest of the family came to New York, where Nona was home educated. Books became her friend as a child, and she later excelled at Horace Mann School for Girls, and at Barnard and graduate school at Columbia. She was taught by the leading book reviewer of the Times, and he gave her a job, which began her career. To Anna, then, Saroyan represents the tie between America and Armenia, and the link back to her perpetual exile. She explains, after his death, that Saroyan, because he was Armenian, had an imagination that spanned farther than most.

In "Word For My Grandmother," Peter's mother calls to invite him to a memorial for the tenth anniversary of his grandmother's death. Peter declines, and the two argue for days over the phone. Instead, Peter spends the weekend with his girlfriend, only to return Sunday evening with a sense of guilt. He writes a poem for his grandmother, and realizes he has many vivid memories he was unaware of. There are phrases in the piece that seem to have come from no where, as well, leaving Peter to believe there is much about his grandmother he still needs to learn, and much about his past that is a family secret. Peter finally realizes that he sees his grandmother as part of the Old World, and that to fully understand himself, he has to find out what Armenia truly is.

Part V: Bloody News, Through Page 198

Part V: Bloody News, Through Page 198 Summary and Analysis

In "Before The Nazis," Peter begins to learn about the Armenian genocide from a book called "Ambassador Morgenthau's Story." He is working at the time as a mail runner, and in between runs, he spends time reading. Morgenthau, he learns, was a German Jew who came to America in 1865, and in 1913 was appointed as ambassador of the US to Turkey. Morgenthau explains that the ruler of Turkey, Abdul Hamid II, was a tyrant. As his empire began to crumble, he began to take out his frustration on the minorities of Turkey, including the Christians, which were mostly Armenian. By 1896, over two hundred thousand Armenians were killed. In 1908, Hamid II was brought down by Talaat Pasha, Enver Pasha, and Dhemal Pasha, or the Young Turks. Promising reform, the three men of military backgrounds began to order boycotts of Greek goods and the deportation of anyone of Christian origin. Morgenthau explains that the Turks viewed Christians as lower than dogs and that their anger was primarily aimed at the non-Turks because they held much of the power in Turkey due to their higher educational statuses. The Young Turks developed pan-Turkism, or the concept of a revival of the Turkish nation based on racial purity. The Turks began leveling anything that was not Turkish, centering mostly on the Armenians. In the province of Van, several key Armenian leaders were killed as they attempted to negotiate for the lives of four thousand Armenian soldiers, and the pan-Turkish leader of Van proclaimed a need to exterminate the remaining Armenians. The same day, 2,500 Armenians were murdered in Akantz. A rebellion in Van provokes a claim that the Armenians are traitors. Race extermination became the solution.

In "The Murder of a Nation," Peter continues to read, learning that the Turks tortured the Armenians and eagerly sought new torture methods for the "detested" race. Soon, the deportation of the Armenians to the desert of Syria was mentioned by Morgenthau, and he notes the entire goal of the operation is to rob the Armenians of their possessions and then to kill them. Entire male populations of towns were slaughtered, not by gun, but by spade, saw, and axe, in order to save gun powder. For others, forced to march to the desert, a slower death was in order, as they were provided no food or water for their journey. Instead, the Turkish army simply accompanied them, torturing them and raping women along the way. Over a million Armenians were marched in this way. The Turkish populations and Kurdish tribes in the desert were alerted, so they too could participate in the torture and killing. Peter suddenly realizes that phrases he has heard used, such as "remember the starving Armenians" meant something to others, but that he never understood clearly. Morgenthau continues to note that the caravans left behind them thousands of dead and unburied bodies, which led to typhus, dysentery, and cholera. Women were shoved into the river, or threw themselves into wells, drowning as they sought water. In one march, only 150 women and children out of 18,000 reached Aleppo. Some had been kidnapped by the Kurds and Turks and kept as slaves, but the

rest were killed. When Morgenthau interviewed Pasha Talaat, Morgenthau reports, he stated that nearly seventy-five percent of the Armenians had been disposed of. Peter, after reading, spends the next several years reading about the genocide.

In "Fall from the Clouds," Gladys and Lucille invite Peter along with them to France, where many of their ancestors fled after the genocide. One morning, after a week of visiting distant relatives, Peter finally asks Gladys what she recalls of the genocide. She explains that the family had been returning to their home from their summer cottage when they heard their house had been burned down and that everyone in the family had been killed. Only her father, Nafina, her mother, and sister Alice survived. Arax and Lucille were not born yet. They were immediately captured and put on a march. She remembers her mother giving a commemoration speech, but otherwise, she never spoke of the march. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Nafina had a nervous breakdown and began to think the genocide was going to happen again. She stopped eating and rarely left the house. Eventually, the family took her for electroshock treatment, and she recovered. Gladys explains that they believed the past should stay buried, but that Nafina was always filled with fear and anxiety. Gladys also recalls that during Nafina's breakdown, she herself had glimpses of memories. In one, she sees her father lying dead in a box on a table. In another she recalls smells of vomit and feces and death in a tent. She remembers being escorted by an Assyrian woman to a church in Aleppo to her mother's bedside. Believing Nafina was going to die of cholera, she and Alice said their goodbyes. Several days later, she walked into their apartment, weak but fine. Nafina worked as a tailoress to support the family, and one day, she was delivering a dress to a wealthy couple. When she arrived, she recognized the rug in their living room was actually hers, stolen from her family home. She took the family to court and won the rug. She sold it, and combined the money with some sent by her only remaining half brother in America, funded their journey to the US. They traveled to Marseilles and then to Paris, and finally boarded the S.S. New York. Peter is stunned at this side of Nafina he never knew, and he writes a poem about her journey as he now understands it. He realizes that he owes it to her to try and understand the fall of Armenia and her struggle for survival.

In "A Thousand Shoes," Aunt Lucille tells Peter of his grandfather, her father, Bedros Aroosian. Seeing that the situation was worsening for the Armenians in the 1900s, Bedros came to America to work in the silk mills. He brought over his brother and nephew in 1911 and his sisters in 1920. One of those sisters met Nafina on the boat, which is how Bedros and Nafina came to be married eventually, and came to have Arax and Lucille. With the money he had left, he bought five hundred pairs of shoes. He located a dealer in Turkey and sailed over with his goods in order to sell them for profit for his family. When he arrived, however, the Turks tricked him and stole his shoes without giving him a penny. He traveled back to the US empty handed.

Part V: Bloody News, From Page 199 Through Page 269

Part V: Bloody News, From Page 199 Through Page 269 Summary and Analysis

In "A Document and a Photograph," Peter is given a legal document by Gladys that was filed by Nafina against the Turkish government. In it, Nafina explains that she is filing on behalf of herself and her first husband, Hagop Chilinguirian, who was a U.S. citizen. He came back to Diarbekir in 1909 to arrange his affairs, but was killed on a death march on August 1, 1915. Her marriage to him in 1910 thus made her a U.S. citizen. She is claiming complete ownership of his assets and partial ownership of the assets of her other relatives who also died at the hands of the Turks. For their belongings and Hagop's death, Nafina is asking 68,750 US dollars. Further, she is claiming compensation for the deaths of her father, mother, two brothers, three sisters, two nephews, one niece, and an aunt, all killed by the Turks during the genocide. In the end, Nafina asks for a total of 124,666.66 US dollars. The document continues to explain that the family was forced on the march and forced to watch as Nafina's family was killed. Hagop perished, and she and the children were given no food or water for many days. Arriving in Aleppo, Nafina sought and obtained support from the Consulate of the USA, being a US citizen as a result of her marriage to Hagop. Peter is violently angry about this long-held family secret, but Gladys reminds him that the story is not one for children and that he can only comprehend the situation now because he is older. Gladys also gives Peter a photo Nafina brought with her that shows her entire family, and Peter realizes all in the photo except two were killed by the Turks.

In "Dovey's Story," Peter learns that Dovey was the cousin of Nafina. While in the hospital, she told Gladys of her own escape from the genocide. She and her family were living in Diarbekir when the Armenian extermination began. They began to fear leaving their homes and often stayed inside. Her father was taken by the Turks. The following morning, his body lay in the doorway, nailed to a cross like Jesus, beheaded. The head was left on the steps. Dovey, a week later, left to again investigate screaming. She discovered the Turks were forcing women to dance naked in front of their children, and then burning them alive as their children watched. The following day, she and her family were rounded up for a death march. They brought a little food, but it was soon gone, and they were provided no more. On the fifth day, their mother died. Her brothers dressed as women to avoid being shot, and she tried to dirty herself to appear ugly, so as to avoid rape. As Dovey lay on the ground one night, a soldier urinates on her, inflaming her already infected wounds. Another night, she is raped. Their food consisted of seeds from camel dung, locusts, or any other insects. Water was sucked from dew covered plants, when they could be found. One of her brothers died at Euphrates. Finally reaching the desert destination, she was immediately kidnapped by a Kurd nomad, who kept her a slave for five years, and who forcesdher to bear two sons. She

escaped and made her way to America, where she happened to see Nafina years later in a mall.

In "The Cemetery of Our Ancestors," Peter is giving a reading of poetry about Armenian when his Aunt Anna in the audience begins to object loudly. When pressed later, she asks why he is writing about Armenia, noting that poetry is not for circumstances of history. The two argue, and he realizes that to understand Anna, he must understand her literature. Peter knows his grandfather, Anna's father, Diran Balakian, was a physician who was obsessed with germs and hand washing. After he attended private school in Russia, he attended college in Tiflis. His medical training was done in Leipzig, after which he joined an archaeological dig an Ani, an ancient Armenian city. Soon, however, the Young Turks began their tyranny in Adana, where nearly thirty thousand Armenians were killed. Diran immediately went to Adana, where he helped the wounded for months. He sent letters to his family describing the killing fields, and those letters were the source of poet Siamanto's writings. During the war, he served in the Turkish military at Soma, repairing Turks to return to killing Armenians. Peter knows he did this to save his family. In 1922, the family returned to Vienna, where daughter Nona was treated for tuberculosis that had set into her spine. By 1924, Diran was in the United States while his family was in the French town of Collonges. They were free from tyranny, and well cared for as they adapted to the high culture of France. Diran, sponsored by his brother, was given citizenship in 1924. By 1926, the entire family was in the US. By 1936, Anna was in graduate school at Columbia. Peter begins to understand that to Anna, the French represented freedom and safety. Surrealism, to her, focuses on a human goal instead of a situational one, and this poetry transcends time and place for her. He also realizes, however, that her opinions are biased by her own need to escape the genocide, and he wonders how she can so steadily deny the historic circumstances that led to the near demise of an entire population.

In "Reading a Skeleton," Peter learns more about a distant relative, Bishop Gregoire Balakian. A gathering announced in a newspaper in Marseilles celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of his death, and notes he provided hope and strength to Armenians during the genocide. He helped to build a number of churches, as well as existed as one of the only survivors of 250 martyrs arrested in Constantinople. The article mentions memoirs of the Bishop, and Peter is surprised, as no one has ever spoken of them before. He orders a copy, but is discouraged, as they are in Armenian. He has the table of contents translated, and realizes the Bishop played a huge role in the genocide, as a witness and a victim. Another friend soon sends him a copy of testimony given by the Bishop at the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, who shot and killed Talaat Pasha. In it, the bishop describes the deportation of the 250 intellectuals from Constantinople. He tells of how he escaped the genocide, and Peter finds himself weeping, as the words of a lost uncle reach him a century later.

Part VI: Commemoration

Part VI: Commemoration Summary and Analysis

In "Times Square," Peter is asked to speak at a commemoration for the seventieth anniversary of the Genocide, and he reluctantly agrees. When he arrives, he realizes there are Turks there, as well, protesting the event. Peter is angry, and explains that he was chosen to advise the Department of Education about a chapter on the Armenian genocide, but was stopped by the Turkish Embassy's threats to the US State Department. Peter describes several cases of governmental intrusion on the revelation of the truth. In addition, he notes that the Turkish government prosecutes and arrests anyone on their own soil who supports the genocide story. He also points out that no books in Turkey have the word Armenia, and that even maps and other articles in the US have removed the country name or any reference to Armenia. He blames, in part, the lack of a process of self examination by Turkey, and notes that this process is vital to democracy. Peter mentions several circumstances where the US government has refused to support the Armenian people at the threats of Turkish government, even though, in 1918, the US sent aid for Armenia following the genocide. In addition, he claims high ranking professors of universities are paid by the Turks to support their brand of the truth. He points to Bernard Lewis, a Princeton professor, who in 1962 supported the genocide theory, but later recanted. He also discusses Heath Lowry, who rose to the top of the academic chain without any teaching or literary work, other than the discounting of a powerful book called The Nazi Doctors that referenced the genocide. In response to his anger, Peter began a petition to stop Turkish corruption of American politics, and is happy to report a host of prominent writers have signed.

In "The Open Wound," Peter discusses what it means to be Armenian in this decade, and notes the many tragedies that have befallen Armenia even after the genocide. Trade blockades due to war cut all resources from Armenian, resulting in death and the loss of precious resources. Peter notes he sends help where he can, but that he knows that Armenians can never heal unless the genocide is admitted and apologized for. He believes the Turkish government's cover-up of the genocide results in a constant urge for the world for forget the crime, or to blame the victim. Commemoration, he notes, is vital to both victim and perpetrator, in that it allows those involved to gather meaning from the event. He argues against the statement that genocide denial is a right of free speech, believing instead that free speech does not protect statements that are morally reprehensible. He urges all governments to refuse such denials, and to stop allowing the government to dictate their decisions. He points to the case of his grandmother, and notes she fought for her own human rights, before such a concept was discussed. He believes that when she realized her case would fall on deaf ears, she chose silence, and chose to let another age try to heal the wounds.

In 'The Fact of a House', Peter expresses surprise at the assimilation of his family into suburbia American life. He recalls the local country club, of which they were members, turning people down for membership on the basis of color or religion, and he is offended

now. He attributes his family's ability to merge to their ability to transform their own culture into acceptable American rituals. The silence, then, is attributed to being outside this safe realm of American ritual, and thus necessary to maintain social acceptance. Peter now realizes his parents did this to keep him an American first and to allow him to discover his past only after he was assured of his present. Their parents, he notes, did the same. He believes his grandmother survived her ordeal only due to the numbed response that comes from a deep pain few can understand. She swallowed her experiences and moved forward as much as possible. He sees the freedom of Armenian Americans as a freedom to hide from their past and the freedom to be safe and remain numb. However, he also now understands that those secrets do not remain buried, and that he was the sole witness to his grandmother's memory, and in giving him that, Nafina gave him the voice she could no longer use.

Part VII: Syria 2005

Part VII: Syria 2005 Summary and Analysis

In "Going to Aleppo, May 2005," Peter describes his trip to the refuge of his grandmother during the genocide. He begins in Cyprus, doing a series of lectures, and then heads to Beirut. One of his hosts, Father Nerseh, takes him to Anjar on the way to their journey to Syria, in order to see the only purely Armenian town outside of Armenia. Anjar was originally a village made of refugees from Musa Dagh. After a visit in Anjar, the group travels to Syria, where they arrive in the village of Damascus. After touring the city, they travel to Aleppo, where Peter is to speak at the Forty Martyrs Armenian Cathedral. In the morning, he discovers the church has located the records of Nafina and her family from her time in Aleppo. Even her street address in Aleppo is known. The documents are translated to Peter, and he is amazed at the idea that he has proof of his grandmother's actions in Aleppo so long ago. Additionally, he is given a photo of his aunts in the school system of the city. Peter and his guides visit the churches Nafina would have been to, old orphanages of the refugee children and the house Nafina occupied during her stay in Aleppo. He is reminded of letters from her to her brother, thanking him for the money he sent, which helped her to flee to the United States. Peter again is forced to picture his grandmother, only twenty-five, windowed, having been through hell, and still having the strength to survive typhoid, and to support her two daughters. He realizes he has now bridged the past to the present.

In "Bones," Peter describes his visit to the Armenian equivalent of Auschwitz, Der Zor. Der Zor was the final destiny of the death marches. Existing in the middle of the Syrian desert, Der Zor was essentially a graveyard for the Armenians. Witnesses reported thousands of starving people, orphaned children, and sick refugees. The refugees who did manage to survive the march to Der Zor were slaughtered by Turks, Kurds, and soldiers. By 1916, nearly four hundred thousand had been killed at Der Zor. When Peter arrives, however, he finds there is now a thriving city, complete with an Armenian genocide museum underneath the majestic Holy Martyrs Armenian Church. After sight seeing, the group travels for hours through the desert until they reach a small church, called Margadeh. His hosts explain that the church was built out in the desert because the Syrian government had been digging for oil and found piles of bones. Peter reaches into the sand and pulls up handfuls of bone. He pockets several of the bone pieces, and thinks about how badly the American relations with the Middle East have become. Angry, he enters the chapel and begins to try and let go in the cool air. Later, as they are driving back, Peter learns that thousands of Armenians make a yearly trip to Margadeh to commemorate the genocide. After several more stops and a rough night of sleep, Peter is on the flight back to the United States. He suddenly realizes he has forgotten the bone fragments in his bags. He is not stopped at customs, however, and in the airport bar, he can feel the bones in his pockets.

The "Acknowledgments" section pays tribute to those Peter has received information from over the years, while the "Sources and Selected Bibliography" portion lists several

key pieces of literature from which Peter obtained information. The final section, "Reader's Guide to the Tenth-Anniversary Edition" lists several topic questions those reading the book in a group can use to launch discussion.

Characters

Peter Balakian

Peter Balakian is the author of the book and the character through whom the book is experienced. Peter was an American growing up in suburbia New Jersey in the 1960s when he first recalls stories of his grandmother and her past. Throughout his childhood, Peter understands that his family is part American and part Armenian, but does not know what being Armenian truly means. He knows his mother and her sisters, as well as her mother, have a passion for food and decorating, and a feeling of being different, but he does not know why. It is not until Peter is in college that he begins to seek out his heritage and learns of his family's demise during the Armenian genocide of 1915. Through the rest of the novel, readers follow Peter as he looks for his roots and begins to understand his past, and the horrible past of those he loves. As he uncovers more of his grandmother's suffering and his grandfather's sacrifices, he realizes what it really means to be an Armenian and becomes a voice for his ancestors.

Nafina (Shekerimedjian) (Chilinguirian) Aroosian

Nafina Aroosian is the material grandmother of Peter Balakian. Nafina is quiet about her past, but occasionally tells Peter fairy tales and legends of Armenian descent. She, along with the other Aroosian women, loves to cook, and takes pride in her family and household. It is only after her death that Peter learns of his grandmother's past and learns of her tremendous courage. In Armenia in 1915, Nafina's family was slaughtered during the Armenian genocide. Both parents, her in-laws, her brothers and sisters,and all their children are killed. She, her husband, and her two young children were forced on one of the many death marches, but on the march, her husband also died. Struggling, Nafina managed to survive, and eventually moved to the United States where she was able to remarry. Nafina shut the door on the past, but, as her daughter reveals, it affected her continuously, to the point of a breakdown following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. While still in Turkey, however, Nafina began to file a suit against the Turkish government for the losses of her family and the suffering they endured, proving her to be not only forward thinking, but brave and strong. It is for her and the other Armenians that suffered and perished, that Peter continues to speak on behalf of throughout the book.

Gladys (Zivart) Aroosian

Gladys Aroosia is the half-sister of Peter's mother. An unmarried older business woman on Wall Street, Gladys is another strong female presence throughout Peter's life. As one of the older two children of Nafina, however, Gladys remembers more of the Armenian genocide, and of her mother's struggle. A highly religious woman, Gladys believes, like the other Aroosian women, that Armenian culture is something to uphold, but that the

past should remain silent. When Peter pushes her, however, it is Gladys who reveals to him that Nafina, she, her sister Alice, and her father were rounded up for the deportation march to Der Zor following the burning down of their family home by the Turks. She notes that Nafina said little later in life of the march, but that she had a breakdown following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. She herself remembers looking into a wooden box as a child, and seeing her dead father. She recalls saying goodbye to her mother, as it was believed she would die of cholera. She can also recall the refugee city, filled with disease and death. Once Gladys speaks to Peter about the genocide, she remains a continued point of reference for him as she slowly reveals more of her own mother's strengths and her struggle to keep her family alive.

Lucille Aroosian

Lucille Aroosian is the half sister of Gladys and the sister of Peter's mother. While not born during the Armenian genocide, Lucille plays a vital role in the novel. Lu, as Peter affectionately calls her, is one of the caregivers in Peter's life, and as an Armenian woman, Lu is a power to be reckoned with. She is strong willed, like her mother and sisters, and seems just as surprised often to learn of the Armenian genocide, as it was rarely discussed in the family. Lu is an unmarried businesswoman, like Gladys, and she too is a highly moral and religious individual. However, Lu finds several amazing artifacts over the course of the book that help Peter to discover his family's roots and helps him to experience life as Nafina understood it. Lu's own father had emigrated to the United States prior to the genocide, knowing there was death in the future. It is Lu who gives Peter several documents of Nafina's and several photographs. Her role in the novel, while seemingly small, is vital in that without the information she gives to Peter, he would be unable to completely understand the story of his family and the genocide.

Arax (Aroosian) Balakian

Arax Balakian is Peter's mother, and one of the younger two children of Nafina. Arax was born after the genocide, to the husband Nafina married in the United States. She knows little of her mother's role in the genocide, since the family does not discuss such things. However, Arax is very much an Armenian woman. Smart, stylish, and centered on the home. Arax strives to provide a comfortable and modern atmosphere for her family, while still maintaining her Armenian roots. Her life centers on Armenian food, and the home she provides for her family. While she is not as business savvy as her sisters, Arax is just as powerful of a female force in Peter's life.

Anna (Anahid) Balakian

Anna Balakian, called by her Armenian name Anahid, is the oldest sister of Peter's father, Gerard. Anna is opinionated, as are the other Armenian women in the book, but her focus is on combating modern suburbia. She is against the life Arax has chosen with Gerard, and she speaks often of her opinions against the bourgeoisie life. Anna is a

professor of French at NYU, and is married to an engineer, Steve. Anna has written several books on surrealism and French poetry and focuses on poetry as a way to combat the human condition. She and her sister, Nona, love the high culture life, and stress the importance of culture in everything they do. Later, Peter learns that Anna's family, including Anna, struggled to escape the Armenian genocide, as well, and found themselves saved by the French. They lived in Collonges, in an area of high culture, and Anna learned that the surrealist poetry she read could take her to a place beyond the materialistic world. Peter realizes her love for poetry stems from her experiences as a child, fleeing the genocide.

Alice (Arshalous) Aroosian

Alice Aroosian is Peter's mother's sister and the daughter of Nafina. As the second daughter of Nafina's first husband, she was witness to her father's death during the genocide, but is young enough to blissfully not remember. Nafina tells of being brutally assaulted while Alice was on her back in an infant sling, and Gladys tells stories of remembering Alice as an infant during the genocide, but Alice herself does not appear in the story. She is mentioned as living in Fresno.

Gerard Balakian

Gerard Balakian is the father of Peter. As a doctor, Gerard is a good man, who values his family and their comfort and happiness over most things. He cares deeply for his son, and wants only the best for him, which can lead to problems between the two as Peter grows older. However, Gerard is also a man who stands slightly away from the world. Peter does not know his father closely, but does realize he too, like his sisters, is more comfortable in high culture than the Aroosians. He and his father bonded over football, but their relationship was always more formal than Peter's relations with his mother. His father remembers little of the genocide or his family's escape, but does remember small pieces of life in Collonges.

Diran Balakian

Diran Balakian is Peter's paternal grandfather. Diran moved his family from Constantinople when Gerard was two years old, and the family traveled through several countries. Peter learns later that Diran moved his family to escape the genocide. Gerard describes Diran as a quiet man, with a certain distance. As a physician, he was adored by patients, but he also had an obsession with cleanliness. As a child, Diran and his brothers attended school in Russia, where they were left alone by the Turks. By 1896, Diran was in Tiflis, a cosmopolitan Armenian city. He went to medical school in Leipzig, only to return to Armenian Ani in 1905, to work with an archaeological excavation of the ruined Armenian city. By 1909, he was studying medicine, but when he heard of the massacre of Armenians at Adana, he immediately went to assist. He worked for months tending survivors and burying the dead. He began writing about his experiences in the

killing fields, and his letters were used by poet Siamanto in his work. In 1913, Diran was married and beginning a family. During the war, however, Diran found himself forced to join the Turkish army. Knowing he was saving soldiers to go kill Armenians, Diran had no choice, as he had to support his now growing family. In 1922, he and the family returned to Vienna, where they sought health care for their daughter, Nona, who contracted tuberculosis. By 1924, Diran was in the United States, leaving his wife, Gerard, and Nona in Europe, where they found refuge in Collonges. In 1926, they too came to the States. Diran, while unseen in the novel, plays a role, in that his experiences show the depths to which the Armenians had to go to spare themselves and save their families.

Nona Balakian

Nona Balakian is the sister of Gerard and daughter of Diran. Nona is an editor of the New York Times Book Review, as well as the author of several books on American and Armenian writers. Nona, like her sister, enjoys high culture and believes literature is a sign of a cultivated society. Nona is often hostess to a number of writer friends, even in spite of a disfigured spine due to illness as a child. Nona was home educated following the arrival of the Balakians in the United States, and due to her illness, spent most of her time indoors, reading. She gained a love for books that would lead her through the rest of her life, and learned the world through the pages of those books. Peter learns that Nona is well loved in the writing circle not only due to her position at the paper, but also because she helps nurture writers and their works. Nona particularly loves Saroyan, an Armenian writer, and it is Nona that introduces Peter to a more sophisticated world of writing. Again, while Nona does not remember the genocide, her life is largely influence by the event, and as a result, her influence on Peter helps him understand his ancestral roots.

Abdul Hamid II

Abdul Hamid II, the last ruling sultan of Turkey before the war, was an oppressive dictator. As his empire crumbled, he took out his anger on the Christian minorities of Turkey, the Armenians in particular. In response to Armenian opposition, the sultan ordered the Armenian's slaughtered. By 1896, over two hundred thousand Armenians had been killed by the armies of Abdul Hamid II. In 1908, his reign was ended by the Young Turks (see Important People; Talaat Pasha, Enver Pasha, and Djemal Pasha).

Talaat Pasha, Enver Pasha, and Djemal Pasha

Known as the Young Turks, Talaat Pasha, Enver Pasha, and Djemal Pasha were a trio of leaders who overthrew Abdul Hamid II and promised a new age of reform for Christian minorities. Talaat Pasha was a Bulgarian gypsy, who was raised as a peasant, and who rose to power as the Minister of the Interior. Djemal Pasha was Minister of the Marine, with a background in military. Enver, also in the Turkish military, was more like

Napoleon than Hitler, in that he was pleasant and dapper. He believed he was destined by God to restore Turkey to glory. By 1913, Talaat had ordered a boycott of Greek merchants and the firing of Greek employees. Because the business of Turkey rested in the hands of minorities, the Young Turks sought to restore power to the Turkish people through the demise of all minorities. Pan-Turkism advocated the racial purity of Turkey, and served as propaganda for the annihilation of the Armenian population.

Bedros Aroosian

Bedros Aroosian is the second husband of Nafina, Peter's grandmother. Bedros is mentioned only briefly in the novel, as his daughter Lucille tells him of his own genocide tale, but the story reminds readers that even those not directly affected by the genocide were still affected. Bedros, arriving in the US in 1903 ahead of the slaughter, became a silk mill worker. He used most of his earnings to bring his family, other than his parents, who were killed in the genocide, over from Turkey. With the rest, he purchased shoes, with the idea of taking them to Turkey and selling them for a profit. He took five hundred pair of shoes by boat to Turkey. When he arrived, he was told to wait on board until his packages were unloaded. When he arrived at the baggage area, he realized the shoes had been stolen by the Turks. He returned to the ship and sailed back to the United States, empty handed.

Hagop Chilinguirian

Hagop Chilinguirian is the first husband of Nafina, Peter's maternal grandmother. Nothing much is said of Hagop, other than he died during the deportation, leaving young Nafina and their two children to carry on without him. While his character is small, the ramifications of his death, leaving a young mother and two young daughters to survive during a genocide, is massive.

Dikran, Haroutiun, Anna, Arusyag, Karnig, Diran, Azniv, Levo

These individuals are the parents, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, and mother and father in law of Nafina who were killed during the Armenian Genocide in 1915. Nafina was left with a half brother, Thomas, and her two daughters, Gladys and Alice. The entire rest of her family, including her husband, Hagop, were killed by the Turkish military.

Dovey (Aghavni)

Dovey (Aghavni) was the cousin of Nafina, Peter's maternal grandmother. She tells her own story of her tribulations during the genocide, and the story is repeated to Peter by Gladys. Dovey tells of the beginnings of the genocide, with increases in kidnapping and

murder in Diarbekir. One night, her father is taken by Turkish military, only to be beheaded and left, crucified, in the family entryway. Dovey watches as women in the town are burned alive in front of their children. She herself is stoned, and nearly killed before her entire family is forced on a deportation march. They are given no food or water, and many are raped or killed. Dovey's mother dies, and soldiers beat Dovey and urinate on her. She watches women throw themselves off cliffs or into the river to die, rather than be tortured, and sees piles of rotting bodies. Once they finally reach the desert of Syria, Dovey is kidnapped by a Kurd nomad, where she is held hostage for five years and bears two children.

Bishop Gregoire Balakian

Bishop Gregoire Balakian is Peter's grandfather's cousin and his grandmother's uncle. Bishop Gregoire, during the genocide, worked to bring his people hope by building several churches, and was one of the only survivors of the 250 martyrs arrested on April 24th in Constantinople. He wrote a book of memoirs dictating the horrors he saw and of his interviews with key persons of the genocide.

Objects/Places

Tenafly, New Jersey

Tenafly, New Jersey is a suburban town where Peter grew up and where he experienced his young life as an Armenian American.

Mahleb

Mahleb is a spice used by Peter's grandmother. It is the pulverized pit of the wild cherry and is used in bread and other goods to add an earthy sweetness.

Armenia

Armenia is a country located in Southeast Asia, to the East of Turkey, in the Middle East Under attack throughout history, Armenian people have suffered tremendously at the hands of foreign invaders, and the borders of the land have changed as rulers have changed. Becoming part of the Soviet Union in 1922, what was left of Armenia lost independence. In 1991, Armenia regained independence following the fall of the Soviet Union.

Pan-Turkism

Pan-Turkism is a political movement designed to unite the Turkish people without influence from foreign interests.

Bastinado

Bastinado is a form of torture where the soles of the feet are beaten with a thin rod until they swell and burst.

Military Tax

The military tax was implemented both to keep Christians out of the Ottoman army and to overtax the Christians. Instead of serving, Christians were forced to pay a large tax amount.

Aleppo

Aleppo is a city in Syria which served as a point for Armenian refugees following the genocide in 1915. This city is where Nafina was able to secure a meager living for herself and her children before coming to the United States.

Anjar

Anjar is the only city outside of Armenian to be exclusively Armenian in nature. It was created by refugees from Musa Dagh.

Collonges

Collenges is a small French village at the foot of Mt. Saleve where the Balakians stayed while Durin applied for citizenship in the United States.

Der Zor

Der Zor is a place in the Syrian desert where the Turkish military forced the Armenian refugees during the genocide. While thousands died along the way, several more thousand perished once they reached the harsh desert. Today, Der Zor is a small city.

Margadeh

At Margadeh, there is a small chapel built to commemorate the Armenian Genocide. Built where the Syrian government found huge numbers of human remains, Margadeh is a tribute to the millions killed or made homeless as a result of the genocide.

Anada

The city of Adana was the site of an Armenian revolt against the Turkish counterrevolutionary forces in 1909. Believing the British would come to their aid, they lay down their weapons, only to be completely wiped out by the Turkish army as well as the counterrevolutionaries, resulting in the death of over thirty thousand Armenians.

Themes

Armenian Genocide

One of the most prominent themes in the novel is the controversy surrounding the Armenian Genocide that occurred during World War I, and the effect of that genocide on those who survived it. First, it is important to note that there is discrepancy in the world, as Peter Balakian points out, as to whether or not the Armenian genocide occurred. Turkish government officials refuse to recognize the genocide, noting instead that the war in Turkey caused deaths on both sides, and that the Armenians were either killed because of their threat to public security, or killed as a result of war and disease. Turkish officials report the Armenians were not harmed by the government, and refute the idea that there was any attempt at mass extinction. Other governments, such as the United States government, do not openly denounce the concept of the genocide, but at the same time, do not admit the genocide occurred by teaching about it in educational institutions. On the other hand, there are hundreds of eyewitness testimonies of the atrocities of the genocide. There are documents, such as Peter's grandmother's document, that discuss the plight of the Armenians at the hands of the Turks. There are state documents from the time that report the Young Turks plan to wipe out the Armenian population. Balakian points to bribes from Turkish officials and threats from state government as reasons for the lack of dissemination of information about the genocide.

For those in Peter's family who recall the genocide, however, the effects are abundantly clear. Much of Peter's mother's family was slaughtered during the war, leaving young Nafina a widow with two children. Her courage, as seen by Peter on countless occasions as she fought for those less fortunate, such as with the young man on the bus, is a direct result of her experiences during and after the genocide. Her constant fear, however, is a negative effect of the same experiences. The Aroosian women, their outspokenness, their ties to Armenian, and their affinity for aesthetics, speaks too about their own experiences during the genocide, and their heritage as Armenian silk growers. The Balakian women, too, show effects of their times during the genocide. They believe strongly in the written word as an escape method, and a way to speak for humanity. French surrealism becomes a symbol to them for freedom, and this leads them through their lives. For Gerard, his relations with his sons, his harshness against death, and his fear of germs are all products of his upbringing by a father who experienced the atrocities of war. To these individuals, the issue of the Armenian Genocide is not whether it happened, but how to overcome its effects.

Experience and It's Effect on Behavior

Another primary theme of the novel is the effect of experience on all behaviors. Throughout the novel, the characters' experiences influence their behaviors even though they may not be aware of the link. Nafina, Peter's grandmother, spends much of

her life in silence about her experiences. However, during World War II, her inner fears come bursting forward through her breakdown, making it very clear that her horrifying experience through the genocide has left a lasting impact on her life. Nafina also teaches her children about fine materials and craftsmanship, stemming from her experiences as part of a family of silk growers. Additionally, Nafina regales Peter as a child with stories of Armenian culture, showing her to still have a hold on her past life.

Gladys, too, is affected by her past as she places high value on aesthetics and Armenian culture. Also, Diran Balakian was also affected by his experience during the genocide, as his children and those who knew him reveal that he was germophobic. His son, then, Gerard, was exposed to this obsession, and as a result, is also afraid of germs and bacteria. Gerard's sister, who was older during the genocide, was also affected by her experiences. She and Nona both value high society and French poetry as a medium for expression, stemming from their childhood in a small French villa. Having escaped the genocide though this small French town, the women come to associate surrealistic French poetry with a sense of freedom and safety. The author, Peter, is another example of experience and its effect on behavior. For many years, Peter was sheltered from his past and was brought up not knowing of the genocide. Once he is informed, Peter spends much of his life educating others, in the hope that such events can be examined and rejected, so as not to happen again. Additionally, Peter was taught to be both American and Armenian, and his behaviors throughout the book are a clear blend of these cultures.

Ethnic Awareness / Coming of Age

Ethnic awareness, and the role of that awareness in the life of Peter Balakian as he becomes an adult, is a vital theme in the novel. The entire first half of the novel deals with how Peter learns to identify with Armenian culture before he is even aware of what that culture really means. Peter knows his family values delicacies and aesthetics, and he knows their food choices are different from that of other family's. He is also aware they attribute great value to aesthetic aspects of the home and of how one is presented to the public. On the other hand, he is also aware that he and his family are American, and that their suburban lives are centered on American values. This duality seems odd to Peter, and it is only as he grown older that he begins to understand that although his family lives in America, their heritage is closely identified with the Armenian way of life.

Peter's relations with his family members, too, reflects coming of age in combination with an awareness of heritage. Nafina, Peter's grandmother, is a symbol of happiness and awe for Peter in childhood as the two share a love of baseball and rock and roll. As Peter grows older, however, he begins to see a side of Nafina he did not see as a child. He understands that Nafina lived in the present in order to hide her past, and it is only when Peter can realize the torment Nafina went through that he can truly appreciate his grandmother. This is true, too, of his mother and aunts. While he understands, as a child, that they want him to be presentable, it is only with age that he understands his family's history as silk growers, and their need for order. Finally, Peter's relationship with his father grows also as his understanding of his ethnicity also grows. Peter begins to

see his father not as an overbearing, distant man, but as a man whose own father was distant, because of his experiences during the genocide. Gerard learned how to relate to his son through his own relationship, and as a result, suffered the same distance as he and his own father. Peter begins to appreciate his father for who he is, as opposed to what he wants him to be.

Style

Perspective

Black Dog of Fate is written in first person perspective. This is vital to the story, in that the novel is about Peter Balakian's journey to find his Armenian roots and to discover the history of his ancestors. While the story is, at times, told in the third person as other individuals' testimonies about the genocide are discussed, the main flow of the novel is first person, whether the narrator is Peter, or other members of his family, or other eye witnesses. The point of view definitely adds to the story, in that only a person whose family has suffered so tremendously can speak with such authority about what occurred to the Armenian people. The first person point of view also allows readers to see the world as Peter sees it, which is important for the coming of age parts of the story. On the other hand, at times, this first person point of view does bias the story. As Peter and his family are Armenian, and as his family did, without question, suffer horribly during the Armenian genocide, his tale is still rightfully biased. This bias is understandable, in that it is his own family that is suffering, but at the same time, both sides of the story are not represented.

Tone

The tone of the novel ranges across the board. Much of the transition between tones in the novel coincides with the aging of the author. As a child, Peter's tone is that of a hurt child, in that he clearly does not understand his parent's heritage, and often finds himself at odds with his own ancestry, without realizing the true meaning behind it. As he gets older, his tone changes to that of indifference, as his teenage years are filled with a desire to belong to his peer group, and to ignore his heritage. Once Peter learns of the genocide, and as he begins to learn of his family's plight during the genocide, Peter's tone becomes angry and combative, as he strives to make peace with a family secret. He is clearly upset at his family for keeping the genocide from him, and his tone reflects his deep seated anger. Once Peter comes to terms with his past, however, his tone turns to one of righteousness. Peter has come to understand the Armenian genocide, and he is educated enough to argue for retribution without anger. Finally, Peter's tone turns to educational as he strives to explain the truth of the genocide to readers in an effort to promote healing for Armenians as well as for the rest of the world.

Structure

The novel is broken into nine important sections. First, the book opens with an introduction to this particular edition of the book, where Peter explains his reasoning behind adding some additional material to the book. In this introductory section are also a map of Armenia and a family tree. These two pieces of information are vital to understanding the book, in that the family tree helps to explain each side of Peter's

family, and the map of Armenia helps readers understand how much land was lost. The next seven sections are titled based on the content within the chapters these sections consist of. These sections are of unequal length. The final section of the book includes an Acknowledgments section, sources, a Reader's Guide, and a section about the author. In all, the book is 357 pages in length. The writing style of the book is easy to read and easy to follow, although constant referencing to the family tree is necessary to keep track of all the characters in the book. There are several words of Armenian origin used, but the author does an excellent job of describing these words throughout the novel. Although the content of the book is extremely heavy at times, the author avoids unnecessary graphic violence, choosing instead only to highlight atrocities, as oppose to detailing them.

Quotes

"The idea that I couldn't ask my grandmother questions anymore flashed through me like a cold current of terror. That she was no more. That there was a big empty space where she once pushed through the world with her quick step." -
"The Woman in Blue", p. 27

"She had become my pakht - the force of fate that called on me, whether I was ready or not, and who, like Lady Fate, was indifferent to my present moment, my station in life, or my need for security and comfort. She was history knocking on the door of the heart, and when she came knocking, her message often was opaque, symbolic, evocative."
"Freedom, New Jersey," pg. 31

"In 1960 I hadn't even heard the phrase 'starving Armenians,' nor did I know that my ancestors were among the more than two million Armenians who, if they weren't killed outright, were marched into the deserts in 1915 and left to starve as they picked the seeds out of feces or sucked the blood on their own clothes."
"Tahn on Crabtree Lane", p. 53

"On and on it would go on those Sundays. Literary Romanticism verses middle-class Protestantism. Democratic suburbia versus high culture. The Aroosian women and the Balakian women fired their opinions back and forth across the symbolic bridge of the dinner table"
"The Other Side of the Bridge", p. 91

"I believe that Saroyan, like all Armenians, was a natural Utopian. We have a dream instead of a country. Because territory has eluded us, we have a freedom to invent that most people don't."
"Owls Flying in the Dark", p. 145

"This poem, then, was a tremor from the unconscious - the historical unconscious, the deep, shared place of ancestral pain, the place in the soul where we commune with those who have come before us."
"Words for my Grandmother", p. 149

"The common term applied by the Turk to the Christian is 'dog', and in his estimation this is no mere rhetorical figure; he actually looks upon his European neighbors as far less worthy of consideration than his own domestic animals."
"Before the Zazis", p. 159

"And thus, as the exiles moved, they left behind them another caravan - that of the dead and unburied bodies, of old men and of women dying in the last stages of typhus, dysentery, and cholera, of little children lying on their backs and setting up their last piteous wails for food and water..."
"The Murder of a Nation", p. 175

"Had the Treaty of Sevres passed, it would have said: The civilized world cares about the most ancient Christian nation of the Near East. It would have said: The martyrdom and suffering of Armenians will not go unheeded. Armenia had built a beautiful civilization for three thousand years, and we have to watch it be destroyed."
"A Document and a Photograph", p. 215

"A landscape of corpses. Thousands of murdered children. Thousands of mangled, raped, and murdered women. Everything burned. Stink of rotting flesh...Blood hardening and darkening earth, stone, clothes, objects, cobblestone streets. Adana, 1909."
The Commentary of Our Ancestors", p. 243

"Because genocide seeks to negate all meaning, to unmake the world, the survivors and their children must find a way back to civilization. Commemoration, then, publicly legitimizes the victim culture's grief."
"The Open Wound", p. 291

"The past is ruptured, but one excavates the shards, brushes them off, handles them, finds a way to see the broken picture, to navigate the lacunae between a solid image that leads to another solid image. And the solid images begin to add up."
"Going to Aleppo, May 2005", p. 331

"For Armenians, Der Zor has come to have a meaning approximate to Auschwitz. Both, in their different ways, epicenters of death in a systematic process of mass killing, both symbolic places, epigrammatic names on a dark map."
"Bones", p. 334

"In fact you meet all along the road from Meskene to Der-i-Zor graves containing the remains of unfortunate Armenians abandoned and dead in atrocious suffering. It is by the hundreds that these mounds are numbered, where sleep anonymously in their last sleep these outcasts of existence, these victims of barbary without qualification."
"Bones", p. 341

Topics for Discussion

One of the primary themes of Black Dog of Fate is the debate concerning the legitimacy of the Armenian Genocide. Whereas Armenians and much of the rest of the world privately acknowledge the genocide, Turkey, Syria, and several other nations refuse to publicly admit any involvement in the crime, or even that the genocide occurred. In several cases, in fact, the Turkish government and Turkish people openly deny the genocide occurred. Do you believe the Turkish have a right to deny the genocide? Why or why not? Do you think Balakian is right, and that the Turks refusal to admit any part in the genocide harms the ability of the Armenians to heal? Why or why not? Based on what you read in the novel, do you believe the Turkish people are entirely responsible for the thousands of Armenians killed in 1915? Why or why not?

Food plays a vital role in the life of young Peter Balakian, and clearly in the life of his parents and grandparents, as well. Explain the role of food in the novel. Why is it important? How is it used? What does it represent, culturally? Why do the Balakians refuse to eat like other American families? What does this say about what food means to them? Do you think Nafina's experiences in Armenia in 1915 have influenced the role of food in her life? Why?

Explain why Peter believes Anna's view of poetry focuses only on the surreal, rather than the descriptive. Why does Peter believe her focus is on poetry that represents the human condition, rather than the condition of a specific area or people? How was that view influenced by her childhood?

The almost absolute silence in the family surrounding the genocide is a theme that runs in many directions throughout the entire novel. Why do you think Nafina remained silent about the genocide? Why did her daughters not question her about her life in Armenia, or during the war? Why did Peter's own father not question his own family's experiences during that time? What does this say about the victims of the genocide, and what their experiences did to them?

Describe how Der Zor was used by the Turkish government as a part of the planned genocide. How was this natural landscape used to further the goal of the government? Did the isolation of Der Zor help? Why? What aspects of Der Zor helped to ensure the demise of any Armenian that managed to live long enough to get there?

During the first chapter, the title of the novel is revealed in a fable told to Peter by his grandmother. What is the fable? What does Nafina note the black dog of fate represents? Why do you think Balakian chose this for the title of the book?

Describe what Balakian is shown at Margadeh. What is it? Why was it built? Why did the Syrian government allow it to be built? What did they find that prompted the building? Since it is in the middle of the Syrian desert, why do thousands of Armenians come to the place each year? What has it come to represent?

There has been much research done on why horrific events such as the Jewish genocide or the Armenian genocide occur. Some suggest that such events occur due to a group mentality, in that individually, no single person would willingly commit such crimes against humanity, but that when part of a group, their personal responsibility for their own cruel actions seems less morally reprehensible. Why do you think human beings can commit such horrific acts against men, women, and children as are described in the book? Do you think each person is to blame, or do you think the Turkish government is to blame? Why? Do you think, for example, that a person in the Turkish military is responsible for his actions, even if those actions were directed by another? Why or why not?