

The Book of Speculation Study Guide

The Book of Speculation by Erika Swyler

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Plot Summary

Simon Watson, a librarian, continues to mourn the loss of his parents years after their deaths. His mother, Paulina, a former carnival "mermaid," killed herself by drowning when he was just a boy and left him to watch after his little sister, Enola. His father, Daniel, was so devastated from her loss that he neglected everything else and slowly wasted away. Now their old house is slowly falling apart around Simon, but he doesn't have the money to fix it, especially after he loses his job. Simon receives a book from a stranger--a bookseller named Martin Churchwarry--who recognized his grandmother's name. It's the record book for an old traveling carnival, and as Simon studies it, he realizes that every woman in his family has killed herself on July 24th-- the same day his mother did, and in the same way. Simon begins to grow anxious for the well-being of his sister, Enola, who also performs in a traveling carnival. Enola arrives in town for a visit with her boyfriend, Doyle, and seems to be keeping secrets, particularly about the tarot cards she's been reading. Simon realizes a curse has been placed on his family and struggles to unravel it before his sister succumbs to the same fate as their ancestors, especially as the 24th of July approaches.

The story intertwines with the past, in which Amos, mute boy abandoned and raised in the wild, joined up with a traveling carnival and became the apprentice to a tarot card reader, Madame Ryzhkova. There, Amos met Evangeline, a girl who could hold her breath for long periods underwater, and who was running from a dark past: her birth caused her mother to waste away and die, and she killed her grandmother to escape from her oppressive ways. Evangeline was initially wary of Amos, but through the use of tarot cards they learned to communicate with each other and fell in love. Madame Ryzhkova didn't trust Evangeline, however, recognizing her as a water spirit that would suck out men's souls. She tried to warn Amos away, but their love was too strong. Evangeline gave birth to a baby girl, Bess, which caused an entire town to flood, and slowly began to wither away herself. When Amos discovered the truth about what Evangeline had been running from, she drowned herself. Amos was so distraught that he left the baby with the carnival and vanished into the woods. The baby was raised to be a "mermaid" like her mother, and the cycle continued.

Believing the book is cursed, Simon burns it, but realizes that didn't work when the town begins to flood and his parents' house falls into the ocean. Simon learns that Enola inherited her tarot cards from their mother, who in turn inherited it from her ancestors all the way back to Evangeline and Amos, and realizes it is the cards that has carried this curse over the years. Simon takes the cards into the ocean to drown the curse--and nearly in the process himself--before he is saved by the girl next door he has been falling in love with, Alice. Alice, Enola, Doyle, and Simon take off to leave their messy past behind and start a new life.



Section One - Chapters 1, 2, and 3

Summary

Simon worries about the state of his parents' house, which has been left to him and is falling apart, though he doesn't have the money to fix it. A family friend, Frank McAvoy, who was close to his parents, comes by and gives him advice, but it's going to cost a lot of money. Simon remembers his mother, Paulina, teaching him how to hold his breath underwater. Paulina was a circus performer and could hold her breath for several minutes. He also remembers the day his mother left him to watch after his younger sister, Enola, before she went off to drown herself. Simon receives a book from a stranger in the mail. It is old, and references his grandmother, who was also a circus performer. Simon receives a phone message from his sister, Enola, telling him she'll be coming into town.

A bastard, mute boy was abandoned by his parents and left to survive on his own. He discovered he had the ability to vanish into his surroundings. The boy came across a traveling carnival, where he met Hermelius Peabody, who took him in and gave him an act. He began to perform in the Wild Boy act and was a natural at it. He gained the notice of the fortune teller, Madame Ryzhtova, who decided to name him Amos.

Simon gets in touch with Mr. Churchwarry, the man who sent him the book on a whim; he had a surplus of books and decided to send it off as a gift. Simon is a librarian and promises it will find a good home. Simon goes to work and is warned that layoffs may be coming. Simon's co-worker and old family friend (and Frank's daughter), Alice, also works at the library. They decide to go out to take their mind off work. Over drinks, Simon fights his attraction to Alice, but their dinner is interrupted by a phone call from Enola. She sounds upset and tells him she's had a bad reading (she reads fortunes in the traveling carnival). Enola recalls a time that Simon saved her when she hurt herself in the water. Simon offers to pick her up, but Enola assures him she'll be fine. Alice worries that Enola is going to overtake Simon's life. Simon and Alice sleep together. He goes back to study his book and is troubled by a picture of a man leaping from a tower into the rocky ocean below.

Analysis

The two main characters, Simon and Amos, are both troubled by a sense of abandonment by their mothers. When Simon was only a young boy, his mother left him with his sister in the house and went outside to drown herself. Amos was a bastard who was abandoned by his mother and left to fend for himself. In both instances, this creates a sense of resentment, though again in both instances, the men continue to hold onto the memory of their mothers, unable to let them go. Simon becomes obsessed with piecing together the mystery of his mother and the other women in his family; Amos



would sneak back into his parents' home to lie next to his mother but made sure to vanish before she woke up.

Similarly, both boys look for father figures in the men they meet in the course of their lifetimes. Amos didn't know who his birth father was and was abandoned by his mother's husband, but he quickly attached himself to Peabody, who took him under his wing. Simon, whose father wasted away after Paulina's suicide and eventually died himself, also looks to Frank as a father figure, seeking him out for advice on his family home. In both instances, the men are so scarred from their childhood abandonment that they seek kindness wherever they can find it. Though they may have appeared to have grown up and become men, deep down they are still children who wish to be loved.

This section introduces the symbol of the book of records sent by Mr. Churchwarry. This book begins Simon on the journey to discover the truth about his family. Though it is little more than some records, telling him about his grandmother and the other women in his family, it opens up the doors to the past. Many experience a similar sense of discovery in looking into their family history, with only dates and a few small facts to guide their search. In Simon's case, this search proves to be more dramatic than most, hinting at a family curse that may explain the devastation that has plagued his lineage.

Another symbol introduced in this section is that of Simon's family home. To Simon, the building is much more than just a house, but rather a symbol of his parents and what he believes to be his last remaining tie to them. His desperation to restore the house at any cost is not so much because he wishes to maintain the house itself, but because he is afraid of losing that connection to them.

Discussion Question 1

What is Simon's last memory of his mother before she drowns herself? How does this impact the way he feels about looking after his sister?

Discussion Question 2

Why did the "wild boy" decide that he would follow Peabody anywhere? What can a little kindness mean to someone who has never received any before?

Discussion Question 3

What is so intriguing to Simon about the book that Churchwarry sends him? What are some other ways that Simon seems connected to the past?



Vocabulary

perched, churned, carapaces, maw, apathy, delinquent, skiff, splotchy, poised, tableau, bulkhead, furrows, perilous, navel, sternum, kelp, angular, pendulum, contorted, gracious, pleasantries, requisite, rampant, prolonged, negligence, spidery, intricate, substantial, gritty, antiquarian, whimsical, flourishes, legible, obscured, fanciful, specimen, fixating, diminutive, proprietor, supple



Section Two - Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7

Summary

Madame Ryzhkova persuaded Peabody to let Amos be her apprentice in fortune telling. One time she poisoned him to get an advance on her salary, so Peabody mostly did what she told him to do from thereon out. Amos was intimidated by her, especially since she lived such a harsh, austere lifestyle. Ryzhkova taught him how to read the tarot cards. Amos befriended a performer named Benno. Ryzhkova taught Amos how to dress and behave. She read his cards and determined water would play a devastating role in his life. Amos found a girl in the woods and brought her back to the carnival. Ryzhkova had grave misgivings about her.

Simon has reached dead ends trying to find out more about his grandmother. He does discover that she committed suicide on July 24th, the same day that his mother did years later. He calls Mr. Churchwarry again, who tells him another book that might be helpful. Simon goes into work and is let go. Alice tries to comfort him and offers to take him out. Simon finds the book Mr. Churchwarry told about him at his library and takes it with him. He goes home and tears down the gutter that's been falling off his house. Too late, he realizes he's stood Alice up.

The girl in the woods, Evangeline, had been surrounded by trouble since she was born. Her grandmother, Sarah, was deeply religious and her mother, Amelia, snuck out to meet a man by the river and became pregnant. Sarah nailed the window shut so Amelia couldn't meet him anymore, and Amelia wasted away with love. Sarah tried to drown the baby when she was born, but the baby survived and Sarah was moved with compassion toward her. As Amelia died, she vowed to raise the baby in the Lord's way. Evangeline grew and began to sneak out to the river to swim. She met a boy named Will and started to meet up with him. Sarah discovered this and began beating Evangeline with a spoon. In a fit of rage, Evangeline took the spoon from her and beat her grandmother to death. Overcome at what she'd done, Evangeline ran away, and there met up with the carnival.

Simon discovers more of his relatives died July 24th. He puts out some feelers for some other library jobs, including one in Georgia. Simon calls Frank for advice on the house and feels guilty for sleeping with his daughter. Enola comes home and tears a page out of Simon's book, with a tarot picture of a devil. They bicker, and catch up. Enola wants him to join the carnival with her. She discovers the house is falling apart and tells him to ask Frank for help. She goes to bed, and Simon realizes he's stood up Alice again. Simon worries something is wrong with his sister and calls Mr. Churchwarry to consult about the dates in his book. He now has ten days to save his sister.



Analysis

As Amos's role in the carnival changed, Peabody made a record of it in his book, the very same kind of record that Simon reads about in the future from the very same book. Seeing these notations that Simon has been reading about as they take place in these flashbacks creates a sense of connection with the past and present. Simon's fear is that if he does not figure out the mystery of the past in this record book, then the past will repeat itself in the present, particularly with the date of July 24th drawing nearer and nearer.

The date of July 24th becomes one of the recurring symbols used throughout the novel. The date already held a great deal of importance to Simon when it only served as the anniversary of his mother's death; it is a time of mourning for him and his sister, both in losing Paulina and in losing the family life they once took for granted. This date is ascribed even more importance as Simon witnesses it repeating again and again over the years, suggesting something more mysterious and sinister than suicide alone.

Another frequently used symbol is that of the tarot cards. This is another way that the past is connected with the present. Amos, Madame Ryzhkova, Paulina, and Enola are all connected by using these tarot cards. Tarot cards are meant to be a way to foretell the future, as they do when Ryzhkova read Amos's fate with water. However, tarot cards can also work as a way to connect to the past. Drawings of them can be found throughout the books that Simon uses to research his ancestors, and later it is revealed that Enola has been using Paulina's old cards, which makes her feel bonded to her mother.

Water plays an important role throughout the course of the story, alternating between a thing of danger and a thing of beauty, and sometimes acting as both. Some of Simon's fondest memories are of swimming with his mother and sister, yet water is also where Paulina committed suicide, and where Simon fears Enola will do the same. Ryzhkova was disturbed to read in Amos's cards that he would eventually be destroyed by something coming from the water. Simon's house is falling apart due to structural damage largely caused by water, yet it is this closeness to water that is part of what makes the house remarkable and why Paulina wanted to move there in the first place.

Discussion Question 1

People began to treat Amos differently once he dressed differently, even though he felt the same on the inside. He also discovered that Madame Ruzhkova was not as fierce as she appeared. How does the way that people look affect the way they are perceived by others?



Discussion Question 2

What saved Evangeline from drowning? What did Evangeline represent to her grandmother, especially after what happened to Amelia?

Discussion Question 3

What does Enola do to the book that Mr. Churchwarry gave to Simon? What does this indicate about her attitude toward books, and the differences between her and Simon? How can two people who were raised in the same home turn out to be so different?

Vocabulary

crone, decreed, pronounced, therein, apprentice, insurmountable, abundance, jostling, protege, lair, swarthy, pleated, lacquered, distinctive, meticulous, depicted, merrily, rhythmic, lulled, guttural, smoldering, oppressive, inexplicably, solitary, hunkered, britches, pantaloons, unease, correspondence, menagerie, sloshing, ritual, preceded, blanched, pry, troupe, prosperity



Section Three - Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11

Summary

Amos took Evangeline to Peabody, who agreed to give her an act as a mermaid in the carnival. They built a tub for her to swim in. Benno noticed Amos noticing Evangeline. Evangeline learned how to do her act, and became used to being ogled by men and being part of the carnival. She noticed Amos, as well, and was haunted by nightmares of her grandmother. Amos heard her crying out at night and tried to comfort her. Ryzhkova noticed that Amos was drawn to Evangeline and worried.

Enola goes through Simon's notebook and confronts him about his findings, but Simon lies about it. They go swimming and Simon tries to challenge her to hold her breath, but Enola refuses, claiming she is out of practice. They discuss Simon's problems with the house, and with Alice. Enola wants him to join the traveling carnival with her. They are joined at the house by Enola's boyfriend, Doyle, who also works at the carnival as the Electric Boy and who is covered with tattoos. Simon is uncomfortable having him there but Enola tells him to be nice. Simon feels restless in the house and asks Alice to get a drink with him, but she has a busy day ahead of her. Simon watches Doyle perform his act for Enola.

Evangeline woke up with Amos in her bed and ran away. He followed her and tried to explain himself, trying out his voice, but was embarrassed by the croaking noise he made. Amos took Madame Ryzhkova's tarot cards and attempted to use them to communicate with Enola. She misinterpreted the first card, of the lovers, and asked him to leave her alone. Amos helped Ryzhkova with her readings. She called him out on stealing her cards. She warned him not to lie to her again and to stay away from Evangeline.

Simon receives a second book from Churchwarry, on loan so he can figure out more about the mystery surrounding the suicides. Simon goes swimming, holding his breath under the water, but Doyle thinks he's drowning and tries to save him. Enola explains he can hold his breath, but is worried about how long Simon was under. A contractor inspects the house and tells Simon he'll need \$150,000. Enola tells Simon to ask Frank for it. Doyle tells Simon that Enola's been acting strangely. Alice calls and accuses Simon of taking books from the library. He admits to it and apologizes. Alice tells him her parents are insisting on having dinner with him and Enola. Enola figures out that Simon has been sleeping with Alice.

Analysis

One symbol used throughout the novel is that of a mermaid. Mermaids are referenced in folklore from around the world; depending on the folklore, they are sometimes benevolent, sometimes vengeful. According to some traditions, mermaids help men who



are lost at sea and sometimes fall in love with them. Madame Ryzhkova saw in Evangeline a different tradition: that of the Rusulka, a vengeful water spirit that destroys the men who fall in love with her. Amos saw Evangeline as the beautiful, kind type of water creature, whereas Ryzhkova pegged her as the evil sort and would not be convinced otherwise.

Another symbol that is introduced at this point in the novel is that of horseshoe crabs. The symbol has yet to be fully developed at this point in the novel, but there is foreshadowing as to what their future importance will be. Simon and Enola notice that they are beginning to accumulate on the shore in mass numbers, which is unusual. Enola expresses discomfort at having them near, even though Simon tells her there's nothing to worry about--the crabs won't hurt them. Over the course of the novel, these horseshoe crabs will come to represent a connection to the past. This symbolizes how Enola and Simon feel about the past as well; Enola fears what will happen if the past is unearthed, where Simon is convinced it won't hurt them and continues to dig deeper and deeper.

Simon and Enola are both keeping secrets from one another, with similar motivations: to protect the other. Simon is afraid to tell Enola about the pattern of suicides because he fears she will fall into the same trap and wants to find a way to prevent it. He's also been hiding the full extent of just how much trouble he's in with the house, as well as playing down the importance of losing his job. Similarly, Doyle references that Enola's been having a difficult time and has been behaving strangely with the tarot cards, but when Simon questions her about it, she acts strangely and evasively and refuses to give him a straight answer. Since the story is told from Simon's point of view, the reader does not yet know what exactly she has seen in the cards or why she's keeping it a secret, but it is hinted at that it has something to do with Simon.

While Enola's use of tarot cards causes her to keep a secret, thus closing down communication between her and her brother, Amos used the cards as a way to attempt to open up communication between himself and Evangeline. Amos selected a card that he believed would help her see how he felt about her, but because he could not read, did not realize that he had chosen a card called 'the lovers' that carried with it the implication that he wanted to become her lover. This initially closed down communication between them, though Amos later returned to this tactic as a way to express himself to the outside world.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of claiming that Evangeline was a mermaid from Atlantis--"a miracle of mystic seas and secrets"? What secrets was Evangeline keeping?



Discussion Question 2

The way Enola describes traveling with the carnival is hardly ideal, even by her own description. So why does she prefer that life to a more traditional life like the one her brother leads?

Discussion Question 3

Simon remembers crying when they found his father's body, but he and Enola also say they hate him. How can people love someone but also hate them at the same time?

Vocabulary

aquatic, excessive, attire, garish, specimen, perusal, occupant, clad, passive, crudely, drawled, baptism, vessel, fermenting, staves, delegating, mystic, splurge, commissioned, appendage, feats, ramble, monologue, caressing, blunted, leers, contentment, salvation, disquieted, scalding, summon, profitable, tuft, slick, increments, glacially, esoteric, wholly, unrestrained, siphon



Section Four - Chapters 12, 13, and 14

Summary

Amos waited for Ryzhkova to fall asleep and took her cards again. He searched for just the right cards to communicate with Evangeline. Peabody attempted to teach him how to speak, but with no luck. One day, as Amos waited for Evangeline, Benno told Amos he'd be better off with a less complicated woman than Evangeline. Amos left cards for her to find--with a lion being tamed by a woman--and Evangeline tracked him down. At first she rejected the cards like before, but Amos "explained" to her that he was the lion and had been tamed by her. They slept together.

Simon tries to find other ways to save the house but is unsuccessful. Simon learns that Enola's been using Paulina's old cards and is troubled by this. Enola, Doyle, and Simon go to have dinner at the McAvoy's house. Frank asks Simon about the house and offers to loan Simon money. Simon agrees, which upsets Alice. They argue in the kitchen, and she tells Simon he'd be better off going somewhere else. Frank recalls seeing Paulina for the first time. He recalls the last time he saw her, when she gave him her cards, which he has now passed on to Enola. Simon notices some strange family heirlooms in the garage--paintings that look like some of the drawings Simon has seen in his book. Simon expresses his fears about Enola to Mr. Churchwarry.

Amos and Evangeline continued to learn to communicate with the tarot cards. They came to refer to each other as the Queen and the Fool in the tarot deck, and assigned characters in the tarot cards to other people they know. Their differing views of Ryzhkova became apparent in the cards they chose for her. Despite this, they continued to grow closer. Benno went to Ryzhkova's wagon to look for Amos. Ryzhkova worried about him. She remembered her own father, who fell under the sway of a water woman. Her father became neglectful and wasted away to nothing, and eventually was dragged into the water and died. Ryzhkova feared the same would happen to Amos. She confronted Evangeline, but Evangeline refused to stay away from Amos. Ryzhkova went to Peabody and demanded that Evangeline leave, or she would leave and take Amos with her. Peabody refused.

Analysis

In attempting to open communication with Evangeline, Amos used the card of the lion and the lady to represent himself and Evangeline so that she would understand his feelings toward her. Whereas the card with the two lovers was not received well by Evangeline, as it suggested sexual desire, the card with the lion and the lady did the trick. In it, Amos portrayed himself as a wild creature that had been tamed by the love of a lady and was willing to be led along on a leash merely to be near her. This touched Evangeline, as it suggested a more romantic, rather than sexual, love. This allowed not only a relationship to bloom between them, but opened up a means for Amos to better



communicate. Amos began the story as a wild boy who knew nothing about relating to other human beings. His desire to find a way to communicate began in large part because of Evangeline, so in a way, she did tame him, by allowing him to become less of the wild boy he used to be, and more of a civilized man.

Tarot cards again prove to play an important role in the novel, once again providing a connection between the past and the present. Simon is disturbed to learn that Enola has been using Paulina's cards. As has been referenced earlier by Madame Ryzhkova, tarot cards can often carry something of the people who have used them in the past. Simon already fears that Enola is falling into the same patterns as their mother. Doyle has warned him that Enola's reactions to the tarot cards lately have been strange. This additional connection to the past, and to Paulina, acts as even more of a warning to Simon that Enola may be susceptible to the same fate as the rest of the women in their family line.

Amos and Evangeline did not see eye to eye when it came to selecting a card to portray Madame Ryzhkova. Evangeline saw Ryzhkova as mysterious and perhaps a little frightening, as was evidenced in her choices of the magician and (somewhat jokingly) the devil. Amos, on the other hand, saw her as benevolent and wise, as was shown through his selection of the high priestess card. This directly reflected their different relationships with Ryzhkova. To Amos, she had been like a mother, bestowing her knowledge to him and taking him under her wing. To Evangeline, Ryzhkova had been cold and on the offensive, believing her to be a dangerous creature and a threat to Amos.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Simon so worried about his sister using their mother's old tarot cards?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Frank's offer of a loan cause such a rift between Alice and Simon? How have their parents otherwise complicated their relationship?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Madame Ryzhkova distrust Evangeline so much? What happened in her past, and what did she believe Evangeline to be?

Vocabulary

herringbone, melancholy, reminiscence, clientele, ebbed, procured, obligation, comply, waned, pantomimed, warped, suited, liniments, venture, leaden, subservient, disjointed, sensation, disparate, profound, dwarfed, impact, engrossed, methodically, divesting,



homestead, gawking, inevitable, diction, gaping, mortgage, coarse, archives, tamps,
conjugating, fixated, percolator, warped



Section Five - Chapters 15, 16, 17, and 18

Summary

Simon continues researching his genealogy, the Ryzhkovas, and curses and jinxes. Enola notices that there are horseshoe crabs all over the beach. They remember a time when they snuck out of the house to swim and seeing the crabs then. Enola resents their parents for leaving them to fend for themselves. They look at the book together. Enola and Doyle go back to their carnival and ask Simon to come with them. He stays behind, and falls through the floorboard, hurting his ankle. Alice comes over to help him but is still angry at him. Simon calls Churchwarry and tells him he believe his family has been cursed.

Ryzhkova was angry with Amos, and there was a rift between them. Ryzhkova explained her worry about Evangeline to Amos. She showed Amos the cards about Evangeline, promising danger and doom, but Amos refused to believe them. She asked Amos to leave her. Amos went to Evangeline. Ryzhkova left in the middle of the night. On the way out, she asked Benno to keep an eye on Evangeline and keep Amos safe.

Frank comes to the house and berates Simon for letting it fall apart so much. Simon enlists help from some other librarians to find out more about the Ryzhkovas. He asks Frank about the paintings in his barn, but Frank cuts him off, still angry about the house. He reveals that he was the one to buy the house for Paulina. He loved her, and they carried on an affair for several years, though he assures Simon that neither he or Enola are his. In his anger, Simon reveals that he slept with Alice and leaves the house.

Amos tried to go back to Ryzhkova's wagon but found it locked. When he knocked, she didn't answer. Benno picked the lock, and they found it empty. Amos was devastated. Evangeline knew she was the reason. Amos tried to communicate with Peabody through the tarot cards but couldn't. Amos went back to Evangeline, who tried to comfort him. He was afraid he would be all alone without Ryzhkova, but Evangeline assured him she would be his home now.

Analysis

The symbol of the horseshoe crabs returns in this section, both in Enola noting that they have begun to accumulate on the shore once more, and in her memory of years before when she watched on the beach when Simon swam out in the water with thousands of them. Simon let the crabs crawl over him, laughing and delighting in them, but Enola was afraid and stayed on the beach. She recalls believing that they might drag him under and not knowing how she would save him. Simon thinks of the crabs as being ancient creatures, and they signify a connection to the past. As such, Enola's fear for



Simon being covered by the crabs and being dragged under can also be seen as her fear for him becoming lost in the past.

Another recurring symbol that takes on new significance in this section is that of the log book sent to Simon by Mr. Churchwarry that details the comings and goings in the carnival, including the names and dealings of some of their ancestors. Enola tells Simon that log books aren't supposed to leave the show; something terrible must have happened to the carnival for it to end up in Mr. Churchwarry's hands. This foreshadows what will come of the storyline in the past that has been intertwining with Simon's and Enola's, as well as what could be lying in wait for Simon and Enola if they continue down the same path.

The thrall that Simon's family members possess has been detailed throughout the novel, but this section provides a glimpse into Paulina's draw, specifically. First, Enola and Simon recall the way their father, Daniel, used to speak of her, and how he let himself slowly die after her suicide, even neglecting his home and his children in his grief. Frank also reveals that Paulina carried the same power over him, making him betray his family, his friendship with Daniel, and his closeness with her children.

With the departure of Madame Ryzhkova, Amos lost not only his closest mentor and the woman who was like a mother to him, but also his ability to communicate with other people. Amos and Ryzhkova had a system worked out with the cards; but even more so, she could read his meaning in his expression, his gestures, in a way that not even Evangeline could replicate. As a mute who had spent most of his life unable to speak with others, this was a devastating blow, and may perhaps be the first time he truly realized just what Evangeline could cost him.

Discussion Question 1

Simon discusses the strange sensation of being covered by "ancient" things when he swims surrounded by horseshoe crabs. In what other ways has his life recently been touched by ancient things?

Discussion Question 2

How did Madame Ryzhkova accuse Amos of biasing his reading of the tarot cards for his future with Evangeline? How was Ryzhkova herself biased against Evangeline, and how did this cloud the way she saw Evangeline?

Discussion Question 3

How does Frank's revelation change the way Simon views him and their relationship? How might it affect his relationship with Alice?



Vocabulary

manifests, revolution, triggered, genealogy, etched, factor, persistent, primordial, purposeless, mausoleum, deadweight, dismembering, lure, mangled, gouge, efficiency, speakesies, brothels, propaganda, burlesque, defaces, dense, infallibility, leeway, providence, boon, accurate, berated, incantation, fidelity, indiscernible, tenuous, attire, grotesque, callused, hobble



Section Six - Chapters 19, 20, 21, and 22

Summary

Simon visits the traveling carnival where Enola and Doyle work. He finds Enola's tarot reading tent and stumbles into a reading she's giving to two customers. Enola behaves strangely and begins reading dark fates for the girls. Doyle makes Simon leave. He's showing up in the cards. Simon goes to meet with their boss, Thom Rose, who recognizes him as Enola's brother. He's excited to learn that he's a swimmer. He recalls seeing Simon's grandmother performing as a mermaid. Simon asks him about the book but Thom won't give any answers. Enola is angry about him barging in on her readings. He tells her about Frank. Enola figures out that Simon thinks she's going to do the same as their mother in the 24th.

Amos mourned the loss of Madame Ryzhkova and avoided others at the carnival. Benno told him that he saw Evangeline and Ryzhkova arguing. He warned Amos about Evangeline. Peabody set Amos up as the Wild Boy again, but Amos's desperation made people afraid of him now. Evangeline became pregnant. She asked Amos to teach her tarot so they could do that act together. Her pregnancy would show soon, and the wild boy act was killing Amos's spirit. He agreed, but was afraid of what the cards might do to her.

Simon calls Churchwarry and asks if he's uncovered anything new about Ryzhkova. Churchwarry worries about Simon and wonders if he should have sent him the book. The phone cuts out. They return to the house, where Alice confronts Simon about telling Frank about them. He tells her that he will be leaving, and that he's given up on the house. Simon goes into the house after Frank. Frank has noticed the horseshoe crabs on the shore by the thousands. In the book, he finds a sketch of the horseshoe crab. Simon realizes the book is cursed and knows what he has to do.

Peabody redid Madame Ryzkhova's wagon and recast Evangeline and Amos as sophisticated, fashionable French fortune tellers. Amos saw dark things in Evangeline's cards but kept them from her. Evangeline continued to swim on her own. People in small towns took to Evangeline's and Amos's glamour. Evangeline called Amos out on hiding her cards, but Amos insisted he was only protecting her. Benno noticed that the river that Evangeline had been swimming in had died out. He showed Evangeline a horseshoe crab, which she recognized from a different swim, and realized they were following her.

Analysis

As Simon comes across Enola telling fortunes in her tent, he is unsettled by how out of sorts she looks, almost as if she's a different person. He remembers a notation in the book kept by Peabody, which tells of various people keeping fortunes, like the Wild Boy



(whom the reader recognizes as Amos) and Madame Ryzhkova. Simon also recognizes something of his mother in Evangeline. This ties back to earlier in the story, when Ryzhkova tells Amos that people leave behind their traces on the cards when they use them. Simon fears that Enola may be channeling the spirit of their mother, but this moment indicates that other people may be intertwined into their family's fate, as well.

In the storyline in the past, Amos taught Evangeline how to use the tarot cards, indicating that she was also mixed into the tarot cards now, leaving behind her impression. Evangeline drew the card of the lion being tamed by the lady, which had romantic significance for Amos and Evangeline when they first fell in love. Amos realized now that Evangeline may have interpreted the card differently. He believed he was indicating that he could be her protector, whereas Evangeline seemed to have seen it as Amos becoming like her pet, to be trained and led on a leash.

After the recent revelations he's received about Frank, Simon's view of Frank has completely changed, causing him to question everything he knew about Frank growing up and how he always looked to him as a father figure. On a whim, he asks Alice if Frank was a good father to her growing up, and Alice assures him that he was--not perfect, by any means, but there for her. Simon has painted Frank as a monster in his mind, but needs this reminder that Frank is human, and that there is both good and bad in him.

Another character who is more complicated than simply being termed as "good" or "bad" is Evangeline, whom many people turned against in the course of her life because she seemed strange. Evangeline, herself, seemed to believe that she was bad. This can be seen in the sign of the devil which kept appearing in her cards. After the river spoiled and all the fish in it died, Evangeline believed she had poisoned it, just as she poisoned everything she touches. She also realized that she was being followed by the horseshoe crabs, symbolizing that her past with her grandmother continued to follow her, poisoning her life just like she poisoned the river.

Discussion Question 1

Seeing the water that his mother drowned herself in, Simon is upset that it is ugly and calls it "second-rate water." Why should it matter what kind of water Paulina drowned herself in? How does the lack of beauty make her death more difficult?

Discussion Question 2

Why was it so difficult for Amos to go back to being the wild boy? How did this impact the way he saw himself? What did it do to his relationship with Evangeline?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Evangeline believe that she was responsible for what happened to the river?



Vocabulary

awnings, careening, centrifugal, loping, scraggly, spangled, slack, migratory, mounted, silhouettes, caravan, classification, fervor, defaced, encompass, reconfiguration, quarrel, poised, mussed, enterprise, vocation, enlightening, fearsome, irksome, punctuated, confinement, employ, acquiescing, strain, trance, mantle, intrinsic, stark, assent, phantom, bluff, strata, boundaries



Section Seven - Chapters 23, 24, 25, and 26

Summary

Simon asks help from a librarian he used to work with to do more research. She tells him Alice is having a hard time. Simon records all the important information from the book so he can burn it and break the curse. Enola and Doyle return to the house, and Simon asks them to have one last bonfire there with him. Enola distracts Leah while Doyle and Simon break into Frank's barn and take the paintings. The truth has come out for Frank and his family is suffering. Simon burns the book and the paintings. It begins to rain.

Peabody received a letter from his son, Zachary, telling him about the success of the carnival he'd been traveling with. Peabody remembered what happened with the dead river and was troubled by it.

The rain continues and the house begins to fall apart. Enola, Doyle, and Simon go to Alice's to wait out the storm. Alice has learned the truth about Frank and is devastated. Simon tries to return the stolen library books to her but she no longer cares. She gives Simon the keys to the library so they can spend the night there. Alice tells him the librarians Simon asked for help have been trying to contact him. Simon learns Churchwarry is Ryzhkova's descendant. Doyle confides that he heard about their family before he met Enola--rumors about mermaids who drowned. Enola is upset that he kept this from her. She swerves to avoid hitting a deer and her cards spill out. Simon gets a good look at them for the first time.

Peabody's carnival arrived in Charlotte. It began to rain heavily while they were there. Evangeline went into labor. Amos refused to leave her side. The town began to flood. Amos was afraid the baby would kill Evangeline. The baby was born and, just like with Amos, the carnival members all took a stab at naming her, with the landlady who helped deliver the baby finally naming her Bess. They opened the door and realized the entire town had been washed away. Everyone who wasn't in the building was dead, including the landlady's son. She blamed Evangeline and drove them out of town.

Analysis

As Enola and Simon reflect over learning about the affair between Frank and Paulina and seeing what it has done to both of their families, they claim that it is worse than it should have been Frank than anyone else. For most of their lives, Frank was more of a father figure to them than their actual father, looking after them long after Daniel had succumbed to his grief. They learned from him, relied on him, and trusted him. To be



betrayed by someone they believed to be so close is more cutting than if they had merely learned their mother had had an affair with some stranger.

As Peabody remembered the dying river his carnival left behind, he recalled the horseshoe crab and sketched it from memory. He belatedly thought he should have kept some of the crabs and marketed them as "sea devils" in his traveling carnival show. This association between horseshoe crabs and a devilish figure carries a deeper significance than might appear at first glance. Horseshoe crabs are connected to Evangeline, and have even been shown to be following her around; Evangeline was also often associated with the devil, whether rightly or not. By now directly connecting the crabs with the devil, an even deeper sense of foreshadowing has been created that the crabs indicate something dark and tragic is about to occur.

The symbol of the tower tarot card appears frequently throughout the novel. In this section, as Enola swerves to hit a deer in the road, her tarot cards spill out, and the top one that Simon sees is that of the tower. The importance of the tarot cards and their symbolism has been well-established throughout the rest of the novel, but this card in particular suggests disaster and upheaval--another foreshadowing that something tragic is about to occur. However, the card can also symbolize revelation, meaning that important facts are about to be brought to light, which also indicates that there is still hope that the upheaval that follows may not be entirely for the worst.

Just as it begins to rain in the current-day scenes with Simon, Enola, and Frank, destroying the house, in the past storyline, it also began to heavily rain and flood when Bess was born, destroying an entire town. Bess's birth was a major event, which caused the elements to react accordingly; the rain in the current day storyline similarly suggests that something of great importance is about to take place, which is worrisome for Simon, especially since it is the eve of the 24th of July, the day in which his mother and other family members have killed themselves for generations.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Simon burn the book that Churchwarry sent him? How can physical objects hold power over people, real or imagined?

Discussion Question 2

How does Doyle describe the pull that Simon, Enola, and their family members have over people? What examples are there of this in the rest of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

What happened as a result of Bess being born? How did water come into play in the life of Evangeline and all of her family members?

Vocabulary

consummate, bemoaned, commiserated, recourse, obliterate, origins, insistent, curator, charred, spasm, throng, kindling, sandwiched, prescribed, dory, parchment, petrified, inferno, putrid, singe, mantra, tinder, smolders, bloodshot, jostling, mystic, courtier, rut, reinvention, axles, taupe, penance, pelted, inland, monastery, descendant, symmetry, retinas



Section Eight - Chapters 27, 28, 29, and 30

Summary

In the library, Enola is angry at Doyle for not telling her what he knew about their family. Simon asks Enola about the cards and accuses her of keeping secrets. Water starts coming in through the doors. They do everything they can to block it up. Simon checks his email and sees the gaps of genealogy his friends have helped filled in, particularly Martin Churchwarry being Ryzhkova's descendant. He calls Churchwarry and tells him the truth, and also that he burned the book. Churchwarry tells him to be safe.

After Bess's birth, Evangeline began to wane away. The other carnival people were afraid of her and avoided her and Amos. Peabody restored the tub for Evangeline. Evangeline wanted to teach Bess how to swim but Amos was afraid. Evangeline argued she wouldn't be able to read tarot, which upset Amos, since he wouldn't have a way to communicate with her. Amos could tell by the cards that Evangeline had been keeping secrets and learned she murdered somebody. Evangeline tried to explain herself, but Amos didn't let her touch Bess. Evangeline left to go swimming, where she was covered by horseshoe crabs and let herself drown. Amos waited for her to return but she didn't. They found her ribbon on the shore but nothing else. Amos tried to go in after her but Peabody told him he had to look after the baby. That worked for a while, but Amos began to grow wild again. He gave Peabody the baby and disappeared into the woods, vanishing, never to be seen again. Peabody raised Bess as his own and gave her Madame Ryzhkova's old cards, taking on Ryzhkova's daughter Katya to train her. Bess turned over the first card, which was the tower.

Enola, Doyle, and Simon survive the night at the library. Alice tells them that house is about to go over the cliff. They return and get what they can, but then the house begins to fall apart. The crabs begin to gather on the beach again. Enola pulls out her tarot cards and Simon realizes where they came from. She's been dealing the same cards over and over, indicating their dark fate. Frank tries to make peace with Simon. Simon asks Enola to talk to him, then gets Doyle's help to steal the tarot cards from her. Simon takes the cards into the water and is overcome by horseshoe crabs, which drag him under. Simon is at peace, believing Enola will be safe now. Alice pulls him out before he can die.

Mr. Churchwarry comes to visit and meets Frank, who tells him Simon is gone but left him a letter. Frank admits he read the letter. Simon, Enola, Doyle, and Alice all left together. Churchwarry tells Frank he is a descendant of Peabody. They find the tarot cards washing up on shore. He tells Frank he believes they can be good friends. On the road, Enola thanks Alice for saving Simon. Simon begins writing down their families' histories.



Analysis

Simon asks Churchwarry why he sent the book to him in the first place, and Churchwarry tells him he didn't feel as though the book belonged to him. Churchwarry believed the book was meant to come to him, but not that he was meant to own it, which was why he sent it to Simon. It may seem like a strange concept--the idea of books choosing their owners and belonging to people--but as a librarian and a bookseller, Simon and Churchwarry both have a special, almost religious connection to books, believing them to have a power beyond just bound words on a page.

One of the recurring motifs throughout the novel is that of secrets. In this section, some of those secrets that have been hinted at throughout the novel come to a head. Simon accuses Enola of keeping secrets, from him and from Doyle. Her major secret turns out to be the doom she has read for their family in her cards, time and time again, and which she is trying to prevent. Similarly, their ancestor, Evangeline, has kept the secret of murdering her grandmother from everyone, including Amos. Amos finally sees the truth of it in her cards, creating a rift between them, which causes Evangeline to give into her fate and drown.

Simon originally believes that the book is cursed, and burns it to destroy the curse. He finally comes to realize it is the tarot cards, which had been passed from Madame Ryzhkova to Amos to Evangeline to Paulina and finally to Enola. The cards have never been "smudged," or cleaned, so that traces of all these people have been left behind, cursing everyone who touches them. Simon realizes that the best way to destroy them is not by burning, but by drowning; his family is so intimately connected to water that it is the only way to completely erase all the traces from the cards.

The many revelations of the novel culminate in the realization that the families of Madame Ryzkhova, Peabody, and Amos and Evangeline have all been tied together over the years by the cards. Ryzhkova's descendant is Martin Churchwarry, who finds the book and sets the entire story into motion by sending it to Simon and causing him to search his family's past. Peabody's descendants are Frank and his family, who are just as drawn to Amos's and Evangeline's descendants as Peabody was to his favorite performing duo. The drowning of the cards does not dissolve this connection, but perhaps will allow it to evolve into something healthier for everyone involved.

Discussion Question 1

What caused the carnival people to turn on Evangeline? Were they right to fear that she was dangerous, or did she become dangerous because of them?

Discussion Question 2

Why was Amos upset about Bess learning how to swim? What was the significance of Evangeline saying Bess wouldn't be able to use the tarot cards as a child?



Discussion Question 3

Why is Simon horrified to learn where Enola's cards came from? What do the cards carry with them over the years?

Vocabulary

musky, percussive, mundane, sulk, lynched, jag, tic, horizontal, pristine, academia, periodicals, spastic, enticing, digitized, essence, embarked, disreputable, proprietor, horrendous, speculation, exorcism, swaddled, profiteering, apprehension, summoned, beckoned, withstand, shrouded, misfortune, glinting, hauled, borne, coaxed, fragile, twined, adorned, scant



Characters

Simon

Simon Watson is a male born to a traditionally female line of family. Like the women in his family, Simon has the ability to hold his breath underwater for great lengths of time--up to ten minutes--and is a natural swimmer. A librarian, Simon lives in the family home left to him by his parents, on the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean. The house has fallen into disrepair, which Simon knows, though he has neither the money nor the skill to fix it. Early on in the book, Simon loses his job and is left adrift, not certain what to do with his life.

Simon has long had a crush on the girl next door, Alice McAvoy, whose parents helped to raise him after his own parents died, and who have been like family to him. Perhaps because of this, Simon has never pursued anything with Alice up until this point, but begins a romantic relationship with her. Though Simon clearly cares for Alice, he often gets distracted by other things happening in his life and often ends up letting her down.

One of those distractions is Enola, Simon's younger sister, whom Simon has always felt extremely protective of. The day his mother committed suicide, she asked him to take care of Enola, and he has always done so ever since, to the point that Enola often felt smothered and ended up leaving to join a traveling carnival. Simon loves Enola deeply but they often don't seem eye to eye; Enola seems to have embraced more of his mother's bohemian lifestyle, while Simon is more about order and discipline.

Yet when the family curse threatens to claim Enola's life on the 24th of July, just as it has every other woman in his family for generations, it is eventually Simon who almost falls susceptible to drowning just like his mother and the others did. Simon becomes obsessed with breaking the curse, literally letting his parents' house fall down around him and driving away the people he cares about in his desperation to figure out the clues of the past. Simon eventually figures out it is the tarot cards that have been passed along in his family that carry the curse, and in attempting to drown them to get rid of the curse, nearly loses his own life, though Alice saves him at the last minute. By the end of the novel, Simon's life is no longer ordered or structured, and what lies ahead of him remains ambiguous, suggesting that he may have to take a new path and venture outside of his shell.

Enola

Enola is Simon's younger sister and has noticed everything Simon did to take care of her over the years, even as she resented it. Like the other women in her family, Enola exerts a strong charm that causes people to be drawn to her. It is suggested that in the course of traveling around with various carnivals over the years, she has taken on a string of lovers, none of whom were particularly meaningful until she met Doyle. Enola



joined the carnival to get away from Simon's stifling protectiveness. Though the women in her family have traditionally worked as "mermaids" in the carnival, showing off their ability to hold their breath, Enola has opted to read tarot cards instead, perhaps because of the associations with her mother committing suicide by drowning.

Enola comes to visit Simon out of the blue, supposedly because the carnival happened to be passing close by their old family home, though it is later revealed that Enola has been reading dark fortunes for their family in her tarot cards and wants to make sure that Simon is all right. Enola has been behaving erratically herself, though she resents Simon's implications that she is going to fall prey to the same curse as their mother. Enola attempts to persuade Simon to give up searching for clues about the past and to get away from their old family home, believing it is driving him mad. Finally at the end, she convinces him and Alice to leave with her and Doyle and start a new life.

Alice

Alice works with Simon at the library and has been his long-time neighbor and crush. Alice's parents, Frank and Leah, helped to raise Simon and Enola after their own parents died, and the families have always been extremely close, which may be why Simon has never acted on his feelings for Alice. After learning that they both are at risks for losing their jobs, Alice and Simon begin a romantic relationship together. Alice cares deeply for Simon but also isn't shy about letting him know when he's disappointed her, such as forgetting plans they've had because of his obsession with finding out the truth about his family. She also disapproves strongly when Simon agrees to take money from her father to renovate his house; though the two have a falling out, she continues to come to his aid several times, and eventually saves his life when he is close to drowning.

Frank

Frank is Alice's father and a man who has become like a surrogate father to Simon and Enola after the death of their parents. He was best friends with Simon's and Enola's father, Daniel, growing up, and introduced him to their mother, Paulina. Frank checks in on the family home often and seems deeply preoccupied with its upkeep; Alice believes this is because he is haunted by the memories of his dead friends. Frank later reveals to Simon that he was also in love with Paulina and that the two carried on an affair for several years. He was the one to buy the house for her, and wants to keep it in good condition so that he can keep her memory alive as well. This revelation severely damages his relationship with Simon and with his own family, though Frank seems to regret the past and by the end of the novel is doing what he can to salvage his relationship with his wife and daughter.



Evangeline

Evangeline was one of Simon's and Enola's ancestors. Like them, she could hold her breath for a great amount of time, a fact which saved her life when she was a baby. Her mother used to sneak away to meet up with a mysterious man at the river and soon became pregnant. When her grandmother discovered the truth, she locked her away so she couldn't see the man anymore. Evangeline's mother gave birth to her and began to waste away and die. Her grandmother tried to drown the baby, but Evangeline held her breath, and eventually her grandmother was persuaded to let her live. She tried to raise her to be God-fearing, but when she caught Evangeline running off to meet a boy, just like her mother, she started to beat her. Overcome with rage, Evangeline took the spoon and beat her grandmother to death. Evangeline carried the guilt of this with her wherever she went.

Evangeline eventually met up with a traveling carnival, where she began to perform as a "mermaid," and where she met Amos, a mute "wild boy" who fell deeply in love with her. Evangeline was wary of Amos at first, but soon fell in love with him as well, though she was too afraid to tell him her secret. Others at the carnival suspected Evangeline of having ulterior motives, but Amos remained true to her despite their warnings. Evangeline did not have any intent to harm Amos, but she made him blind to the danger she might pose. Evangeline gave birth to their baby and began to fade away herself, just like her mother did before her. She longed to return to the water. When Amos learned the truth of what she did to her grandmother, he shied away from her. Evangeline drowned herself in the sea, becoming one with the water again.

Amos

Amos was a mute who was abandoned by his family in the wilderness because he was also born a bastard. From a young age, he discovered that he could "vanish," blending into his surroundings, and got by on his own for a very long time. Eventually he came across a traveling carnival and was taken in by others for the first time in his life. Amos became close to the carnival owner, Peabody, and apprenticed the tarot card reader, Madame Ryzhkova. He performed the act of a "wild boy" in the carnival to earn his keep.

When Amos met Evangeline, he was immediately taken by her and wanted to be near her, though Evangeline was wary of him at first. Unable to express himself verbally, Amos contrived a way to use the tarot cards to communicate with her. They began to fall in love. Madame Ryzhkova believed Evangeline to be trouble and warned Amos away from her, but though Amos loved her like a mother, he could not stay away from Evangeline. Ryzhkova eventually abandoned him to his fate.

Amos and Evangeline had a child together, and Amos strove to protect them, even when others began to be suspicious of Evangeline, too. But when he learned that Evangeline killed her grandmother, his impulse was to keep the baby away from her. After he learned that Evangeline had drowned herself, Amos tried to pull himself



together for his daughter's sake, but ended up leaving her with the carnival and vanishing in the woods, never to be seen again.

Peabody

Peabody was the owner of the traveling carnival who took in first Amos and then Evangeline. Peabody had a kind heart, though he was also pragmatic, constantly searching for ways to earn money. Though he cared for Amos like a son, he still found ways to make him earn his keep, even when this proved to be damaging to Amos's spirit--such as forcing him to go back into the "wild boy" act after Amos became accustomed to the more civilized tarot reading. Peabody didn't seem to believe much of the carnival lore and superstition, despite some of the things he saw throughout the course of his career--like Bess's birth causing an entire town to be washed away. In the end, Peabody was left to raise Bess as his own, and (most likely unknowingly) perpetuated the cycle of drownings by having her perform in the mermaid act just like her mother before her.

Madame Ryzhkova

Madame Ryzhkova was a Russian tarot card reader who was deeply superstitious. She took in Amos as her apprentice because the cards told her to do so, and was very protective of who got to handle the cards, as she believed traces of people were left behind whenever they touched them. Ryzhkova's father died after being bewitched by a water spirit called a Rusulka, and believed Evangeline to be the same. She did everything she could to save Amos, warning him and Peabody and threatening Evangeline, but none of it worked. Eventually, Ryzhkova abandoned him to his fate and went to live with her daughter, Katya, though traces of her continued to live on in the cards that she left behind with Amos.

Doyle

Doyle is Enola's boyfriend and is one of the performers with her in the traveling carnival. He is covered nearly head to toe in tattoos, and performs as the "electric boy," able to draw energy from electrical sources to light up light bulbs and other objects. Though Doyle looks somewhat wild, he proves to be loyal and is deeply in love with Enola. Doyle recognized her for what she was before she did, having heard stories about a family of mermaids who drown at a young age before he met her. He saves Simon from what he believes to be drowning and helps Simon steal the tarot cards from Enola so that he can destroy the curse.

Martin Churchwarry

Martin Churchwarry is an elderly bookseller who stumbles across a record book for an old traveling carnival. Though Churchwarry feels compelled to buy the book, he also

feels that it is meant to belong to somebody else, and finds the descendant of one of the names listed in the book: Simon. Churchwarry sends him the book, and the two begin a back and forth phone conversation as they struggle to piece together the meaning of the family curse and why the book was brought into Simon's life. It is eventually revealed that Churchwarry is a descendant of Ryzhkova, which means that their families' fates have been tied together for generations, and is perhaps why he feels so compelled to help put things right again.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Book of Records

Simon receives a book of records for a traveling carnival, sent to him by a bookseller named Martin Churchwarry. Churchwarry felt prompted to buy the book but didn't believe it was meant to belong to him; instead, he found a name inside and traced one of the descendants to Simon. Believing the book was meant for him, Churchwarry sends it, and Simon soon becomes obsessed with puzzling together the mystery of his family. The book represents a door to the past, particularly as the novel is written, with lines from the book coming to life in the past storyline, giving meaning to names and dates (such as Amos, Evangeline, and the town of Charlotte). The book ultimately brings the past and the present together, uniting the descendants of Evangeline, Amos, Peabody, and Ryzhkova, to break the curse that has plagued them over the years.

Simon's House

Simon's family home is an important symbol in the novel. The house is much more than just a building, but rather symbolizes a connection to his parents, and in particular, his mother Paulina. Simon later learns that the house carries the same significance to Frank, who bought the house for Paulina because he loved her and who is obsessed with keeping it intact so that his love for her will stay alive. When the house finally falls into the ocean, both Simon and Frank are freed--Simon, from the fear of becoming like his mother, and Frank to put into perspective the life he has with his wife and daughter instead of the woman he lost so long ago.

Tarot Cards

Tarot cards play a significant role in the novel, and represent a connection between the past and the present. Through the course of the novel, Madame Ryzhkova, Amos, Evangeline, Paulina, and Enola all use the same tarot cards, and leave traces of themselves behind on them. Tarot cards are supposed to be a way to foresee the future, and they act this way many times in the novel; however, these particular cards also carry a curse that plagues the three families and finally brings them all together to correct the mistakes of the past.

Water

Water symbolizes many things at different points of the novel: it is dangerous, beautiful, mystical, and also provides a strong sense of home. Simon feels at his most confident when he is in the water, even though it is the same water where his mother killed herself, and where he fears his sister will do the same. Evangeline descended from a man who is said to have come straight from the water, and was able to hold her breath



even as a young baby. When she was at her weakest, she recharged by returning to the water, but this was also where she ultimately ended up losing her life. Ultimately for all the characters, water is something to be wary of as it is completely unpredictable; even though it provides life, it can also bring death, and there is no telling when it will shift one way or the other.

July 24th

July 24th comes to symbolize Simon's worst fears: the day that his mother and ancestor's took their lives by drowning, and the day he fears Enola will do the same. The novel begins on June 20th, and as it progresses ever closer to July 24th, the sense of danger increases, with the clock running out on Simon and Enola to figure out the curse or else be doomed to repeat it. At the end of the novel, the date-- post-24th--is signified to show that the danger has past, and that Simon and Enola can live free of fear once more.

Horseshoe crabs

Horseshoe crabs are one of the most significant symbols in the novel, recurring many times throughout, and often providing a sense of foreshadowing for danger to come. Evangeline, Simon, and Enola all notice being followed around by horseshoe crabs, which seem to accumulate in high numbers as it gets closer and closer to their impending death. Simon notes that the crabs are "ancient" creatures, and this indicates their role in symbolizing the past, which Simon and his family members are unable to escape. At the moment of death, the crabs surround the person in the water, dragging them down, much like the past can refuse to let people go and keep them from moving on.

Mermaid

Evangeline and her descendants, including Paulina, swam in carnivals as part of a mermaid act, monopolizing of their love of water and their ability to hold their breath underwater for long amounts of time. Though they didn't have the tails, they seemed to embody the same romantic, ethereal spirit of a mermaid. For centuries, mermaids have appeared in folklore from around the world, both as man-loving and man-hating creatures. Madame Ryzhkova painted a far less romantic picture for the creature she equated Evangeline to: the Rusulka, a vengeful water spirit that lured men into falling in love with it before slowly destroying them. Evangeline and her descendants fell into neither category completely, but borrowed traits from both.

The Lion and the Lady

Wanting to communicate with Evangeline and express his true feelings, Amos used the tarot card of the lion and the lady to indicate that, though he was a wild creature, he had



been tamed by his love for a beautiful woman. Indeed, Amos gave up the wild boy show and became a lover and father, even appearing respectable on occasion. Later, when Amos was reading Evangeline's cards, she drew the same card, but Amos realized that she had read it differently. Amos meant to show that he would be her protector, whereas Evangeline seemed to have interpreted it that Amos would become like her pet.

The Devil

The tarot card of the devil appears often throughout the novel, often before something dark, dangerous, or tragic occurs. This card usually also appears in connection with Evangeline. The traditional meaning of the devil tarot card usually indicates some kind of unhealthy attachment, which explains why it is often used in association with Evangeline and her descendants, who create an obsession in many of those they meet.

The Tower

Another tarot card that appears often in the novel is that of the tower. The card traditionally symbolizes disaster and chaos, foreshadowing some great disaster or change. It is one of the cards that appears frequently as Enola reads her own cards and does the same for Simon, and also appears frequently in relation to Evangeline. This seems to suggest that something tragic is about to happen to the family, and indeed in many cases does. However, the tower can also represent revelation, which means that the change about to take place may not necessarily be negative.



Settings

Simon's House, Modern Day

Simon's house was built in the 1700s and sits on the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean, with easy access to the beach beneath. It was purchased for his mother, Paulina, who loved to swim, so that she could be near the water. Simon believes the house was bought by his father, Daniel, but later learns it was actually purchased by their family friend, Frank, who was also in love with Paulina. Since Paulina's and Daniel's deaths, Simon spent a few years raising his younger sister, Enola, in the home before she left to join up with a traveling carnival. Since then, Simon has lived on his own and hasn't had the time, money, or skill to keep the house up. It is slowly decaying, as is evidenced by the gutters falling off and by him stepping through the floorboard. Frank offers to give Simon money for the house, which Simon initially agrees to take, since the place makes him feel connected to his parents. However, after learning about the truth of Frank's and Paulina's affair, Simon no longer wants to stay in the house. By the end of the novel, the house falls into the ocean after a huge storm.

The Library, Modern Day

Simon begins the novel working at the local library, as one of the archivists who works with old books and records. The library is relatively small, with their major attraction being an exhibit on whaling, although recently they have started to move toward digital archiving. When Simon is let go due to budget cuts, he steals a few of the books that he believes will be helpful to him in learning more about his family. Later, when a huge storm forces Simon to leave his house, he, Enola, and Doyle take shelter in the library, which begins to flood. Simon is forced to desecrate some of the books he loves by using them to stop some of the flooding and save the other books from suffering the same fate.

The Carnival, 18th Century

The traveling carnival that Amos and Evangeline joined was comprised of a caravan of wagons and carts that were decorated to portray whatever act used them. These acts were constantly shifting and evolving, so most of the decorations were homemade, including signs made by the carnival owner, Peabody (including an advertisement for Evangeline's mermaid act). Evangeline did not have a wagon but rather a tub, which she performed in by day and was then turned on its side for her to use as shelter as they traveled and camped at night. The carnival folk were a small, tight-knit community and had meals, celebrations, etc., together. They didn't remain in any one place too long but traveled without any set schedule, to wherever Peabody believed they would best be able to make a profit.



Charlotte, 18th Century

Charlotte was a small town that the traveling carnival stopped in to perform. The town was full of simple, uncultured people who took an instant interest in the carnival. As the carnival prepared to camp for the night, Evangeline began to have her baby, and it began to rain outside. She was staying at a tavern, and the owner helped her deliver the child, sending off her own son to get help from the doctor as it continued to rain savagely outside. By the time Evangeline had her baby, they opened the door to the tavern to realize the rest of the town had been completely washed away, and that they were the only building left standing. The tavern owner blamed Evangeline and threatened the carnival folk to move on immediately before she rounded up any survivors to kill them.

Underwater, various times

Much of the book takes place underwater in various locations, as Simon and the other members of his family are all talented swimmers. These underwater locations include tanks, rivers, lakes, and oceans, though all are marked as having a calming, soothing effect on Simon's family members. In a way, this can be considered their ancestral home, since Evangeline's father was said to have come from the river and disappeared back into it without a trace. All of the members of Simon's family can hold their breaths for great lengths of time, and many have used this to earn a living in traveling carnivals. Eventually, all of Simon's ancestors from Evangeline on ended up drowning themselves, perhaps as a way to return to their original home.



Themes and Motifs

The Past and Present

The past and present are constantly intertwining throughout the novel. This is reflected physically in the alternating chapters that go from modern day to the 18th century. It can also be seen symbolically in the book of records, which was used by Peabody in the past and later read by Simon in the present. The notations that Simon reads about in the book play out on the page in the chapters taking place in the 1700s, creating a deeper connection with the past and present. The stakes with this record book are particularly high, since Simon needs to use the details found in the past to keep his sister from dying in the present.

Tarot cards provide a similarly important role in the novel for connecting the past and the present. The cards initiated with Madame Ryzhkova in the 18th century, then passed hands to Amos and Evangeline; in modern day, they pass to Enola from her mother, Paulina, who presumably received them from her own mother, and on back to Evangeline. Madame Ryzhkova hints that tarot cards can often carry something of the people who have used them in the past. Simon's fear is that Enola will fall into the same patterns as their mother, and their ancestors before that, and her use of these cards suggests a connection to the past that will make her more susceptible to suffering the same fate.

Horseshoe crabs are another symbol that connect the past and the present. In Evangeline's timeline, she notices them following her to different locations. In present day, Simon and Enola recall the crabs gathering on the beach around the time that Paulina died, and again now that the 24th of July is approaching. Simon notes that the crabs are ancient creatures, which signifies that they are tied to something ancient and mystical, which is why they keep coming for Evangeline and her lineage. When it is time for Evangeline and her descendants to drown, the crabs appear and surround them, dragging them down to the bottom of the ocean, their ancient, ancestral home.

Secrets

Various characters keep secrets throughout the novel, many of which play an important role in shaping the plot. Simon and Enola keep secrets from one another, both similarly motivated by wanting to protect each other from unpleasant truths. On a less serious level, Simon hides the loss of his job and how much trouble the house is in. He also doesn't want to tell Enola about the history of suicides on July 24th in their family because he's afraid she'll do the same and wants to find a way to prevent this from happening.

Similarly, Enola does not tell Simon about the trouble she's been having with the tarot cards or how strangely she's been behaving at the carnival; though Simon begins to



suspect it, he doesn't learn the whole extent until Doyle comes to town and fills him in. Even when Simon questions Enola directly, she continues to evade him, keeping her troubles a secret. Because Enola isn't a POV character, for the majority of the novel, it is unclear why she is keeping these things from Simon, though it can be gathered that she similarly fears for Simon's life and is trying to find a way to save him. It is eventually revealed that she has been reading doom for their family in her cards, over and over again, just as Simon has seen in the book of records.

Not all secrets are kept for such benevolent motives. Evangeline killed her grandmother and then went on the run, keeping this a secret from everyone she encountered, including the man she loved, Amos. Even as Evangeline began to notice signs that indicated she had been cursed as a result of this--such as the river drying up and all the fish dying--she continued to keep her secret from Amos. Perhaps in a way she was trying to protect him, but she also kept him ignorant of facts that would eventually harm him and their family.

Another person who keeps harmful secrets is Frank, who carried on a secret affair with Paulina for years and has continued to carry a torch for her even years after her death. When Frank's secret comes out, it not only hurts his family, but destroys the relationship that Simon has built with him over the years as his surrogate father and the man he looks up to. In the case of Frank, Alice expresses a desire that he had kept the secret to himself instead of sharing it, believing it would have been less harmful to everyone that way. However, in a way, this secret provides enlightenment to Simon about the kind of thrall his family can exert and how they have the power to potentially destroy lives.

Drowning

Drowning plays a literal role in the novel, as it occurs many times throughout the course of the story, both on and off-page. Evangeline's grandmother attempted to drown her as a baby, and later Evangeline began the cycle of suicides in her family by drowning herself, which was then repeated by all of her descendants for centuries. Bess's birth caused an entire town to drown in a flood. Paulina killed herself by drowning in the sea outside her family home. Simon fears that Enola will do the same, but turns out to be the one who almost drowns himself.

The irony of this drowning is that Evangeline and her descendants performed as mermaids in their carnival shows, and mermaids are beings that are known for being able to breathe and live underwater. Evangeline and her lineage could echo this to a certain extent, since they were all able to hold their breaths for an extended amount of time; this may be because they had actual merman (or some other water creature) DNA mixed in, but they were also part human, which made them mortal and thus susceptible to drowning.

Simon initially tries to destroy the curse on his family by burning the record book that Mr. Churchwary sent to him, believing it to be the endowed object that is bringing his family so much misery. When Simon realizes it is actually the tarot cards passed from his



mother to his sister, he decides to "drown" them instead of burning them. He believes a "slow curse needs a slow breaking," and allowing the water to wash away the pictures of the cards and all the remnants left on them by people over the years will allow the thoroughness he believes is necessary.

Evangeline and her posterity literally drowned themselves to end their lives, but the people who come under their thrall could be said to metaphorically "drown" in their obsessions, becoming so obsessed with the mermaid-like beings that they ignore what they used to believe to be important and allow themselves to be dragged under by this love. This is exemplified in Madame Ryzhkova's father, who used to be a loving, doting father and husband but became so enthralled with the creature in the river near his home that he neglected everything, and eventually literally allowed himself to be dragged into the water and drowned. In modern times, Simon's father Daniel doesn't physically drown, but after his wife's death he stops functioning and dies from heartbreak, unwilling to survive without Paulina.

Curses

The exact origin of the curse on Simon's family is never directly spelled out, though some assumptions can be made. Peabody remembered a time when he refused to give Madame Ryzhkova an advance on her salary and she poisoned him until she got what she wanted. Later in the novel, Ryzhkova tried to persuade both Amos and Peabody to get rid of Evangeline; when they ignored/rejected her advice, she disappeared, leaving behind her cards. Amos and Evangeline began using the cards in their act without "smudging" them to erase Ryzhkova's presence on them. Afterward, strange things began to happen to Evangeline, such as the decay of the river she was swimming in, the flooding at Bess's birth, and Evangeline's eventual drowning. Thus, it can be assumed that Ryzhkova intentionally cursed the cards to get rid of Evangeline. Whether or not she intended to destroy Amos and curse their children remains unclear, but given her vengeful history and her personal association with the Rusulka that killed her father, it is a definite possibility.

Whether or not Evangeline would have brought ruin to Amos without this curse also remains ambiguous. Evangeline's own mother began to waste away when she was born, just as Evangeline began to do after Bess was born, suggesting that this aspect of her bad luck began before she met Ryzhkova and began handling the tarot cards. Evangeline also killed her grandmother before meeting Ryzhkova, a fact which Evangeline believed poisoned everything that she touched and followed her until the day she died. In fact, it was Amos's discovery of this that convinced Evangeline to drown herself, beginning the cycle continued in the cursed cards.

Simon begins to suspect the curse on his family when he notices the recurrence of the July 24th date for all of the deaths of his ancestors. This suspicion deepens when he sees Enola telling fortunes in her tent, appearing almost as though she is possessed. Because so many strange things began to occur around the time that he received the book from Churchwary, Simon initially believes this to be the cursed object, and burns



it, though the problems persist. Later, he connects that various people have left their traces in the tarot deck that she is using (which she inherited from Paulina), which allows him to realize that the cards are actually to blame. He drowns them rather than burning them, and nearly drowns himself, but is saved by Alice.

This is significant because Simon's genealogical investigation has revealed that Alice and Frank are descendants of Peabody, and that Churchwarry is the descendant of Ryzhkova. All of the original families that were involved when the curse began have been brought back together, and it is only through all of them working together that the curse can finally be broken. Churchwarry sends the book to Simon, which allows him to realize the need to take the tarot cards from Enola and drown them, and Alice saves him before he can die in the process.

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Communication

Communication is a theme that appears regularly throughout the novel. The ability to communicate is something that many people take for granted, but because he lived so much of his life alone and in silence, Amos realized just what a powerful thing it could be. Peabody was the first person to treat Amos like a human being and attempt to communicate with him on any level, and Amos reciprocated by thinking of him as a father figure. Madame Ryzhkova's communication with her tarot cards allowed her to determine that Amos would be an ideal apprentice. Though Amos was initially frightened of her, her ability to understand him without the usual means of communication caused him to love her like a mother and become deeply loyal to her.

It wasn't until Evangeline arrived at the carnival, however, that Amos felt the need to develop a structured means of communication. He stole Madame Ryzhkova's cards to use the pictures on them in order to have a "conversation" with Evangeline. This eventually drove a rift between him and Ryzhkova and set them all on the path that would begin a terrible curse, but Amos's desire to express himself to the woman he loved was nonetheless understandable. This communication was initially stunted by Amos's wild appearance and his inability to read; he chose a card of two lovers, not realizing the connotation of that word, which caused Evangeline to reject him at first. However, they soon began to form an understanding through these cards, developing trust and love, which would not have been possible without this method of communication.

When Madame Ryzhkova left the carnival, he not only lost his mother figure and mentor, but the person with whom he was best able to communicate (which was exemplified in his attempt to express himself to Peabody, which failed miserably). Evangeline tried her best to fill that role for Amos, but proved she did not truly understand what it meant to Amos to be able to communicate when she attempted to keep their daughter, Bess, from using the tarot cards. Without the cards, Amos would

have no way to communicate with his daughter; she would essentially be a stranger to him.

This lack of communication proves to be a dangerous thing in the novel. It was Evangeline's and Amos's lack of true communication that resulted in her committing suicide and him vanishing altogether from society. Years later, Simon and Enola refuse to truly communicate with one another about their fears for each other, which hinders them from discovering the truth about the curse and nearly results in them succumbing to the same fate as Paulina and all the women who came before her.

Styles

Point of View

There are five points of view throughout the novel: Simon, Amos, Evangeline, Peabody, and Madame Ryzhkova. These cover two distinct storylines: the one taking place in modern day, and the one taking place in the past, in roughly the late 18th Century. The main point of view in modern day is Simon's, and it is told in first person, in present tense. The past storyline shifts primarily between Amos and Evangeline, though it occasionally goes to Peabody, and Madame Ryzhkova, and is told in third person in past tense. These past points of view represent the important members of the main three families that will be connected by the curse. This is paralleled in the last chapter, when the points of view in the modern-day storyline shift from Simon to Churchwarry and then Alice, the descendants of Evangeline, Ryzhkova, and Peabody, respectively, bringing the connection between these three families full circle.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is lyrical and almost poetic in some places, reflecting the magical, almost fairytale-like feeling of the novel. The storyline that takes place in the past, in particular, relies on this mythical style, particularly since the main character, Amos, is mute, and cannot rely on dialogue. Without this, this part of the storytelling has almost a timeless feel to it.

The difference between present and past tense in the different points of view also plays an interesting role in the text. The novel centers around a curse that has plagued a family over generations that they seem unable to escape from; the past storyline is told in the past tense, indication that the curse is fixed and that the characters will be unable to escape the tragedy about to befall them. The modern storyline is told in present tense, indicating that the characters may be able to change their fates, since the events are still taking place and nothing has been set in stone.

Structure

The novel is broken into thirty chapters, which alternate back and forth between modern-day and the late 18th Century, chapter by chapter (with the exception of the last two chapters, which are both told in modern-day instead of switching back to the past). The modern-day chapters are almost all headed by a marking that shows the date, counting down until July 24th, which is a date that holds special importance for Simon's family, since the women in his family traditionally commit suicide by drowning on that day. One significant exception to this is the last chapter, which bears a date that reads after the 24th, showing that Simon and Enola have survived the curse and will be able to move on with their lives.



Quotes

People do love a good story.' Yes, a story. We are of course a good story. My hands slip and suddenly my coffee is on the kitchen floor, pooling in the cracked linoleum. I grab for a paper towel to mop it up and knock over the sugar canister. The old sour feeling settles in the corner of my chest, a familiar sensation that comes with being the town tragedy. A mother who drowned herself, a father dead from grief, a young man raising his sister alone.

-- Mr. Churchwarry, Simon (Three)

Importance: Simon tries to distance himself from the tragedy of his family, choosing a quiet, calm, non-dramatic life as a librarian. However, he cannot distance himself from the dramatic nature of his family lineage, the details of which Simon lists out more like a story than his own actual history. Simon may do this as a way to distance himself from the emotions of what happened to him, yet when Mr. Churchwarry brings it up and takes Simon unawares, his true emotions slip out, indicating that he is not able to distance himself from the events of his childhood as much as he would like. To him, it is not just a story, but the thing that has defined his life thus far.

No woman, no girl, looked as such. The girl was something Ryzhkova had not seen in long years, not since her father had gone missing. She'd left everything she'd known to flee from it. She would not say its name. To name such things was to give them power, and yet it was impossible to stop her mind from whispering.

-- Madame Ryzhkova (Four)

Importance: Madame Ryzhkova recognized something in Evangeline that Evangeline may not have truly understood about herself: something unnatural, perhaps even supernatural. This selection hints at what Ryzhkova would reveal about Evangeline, though Ryzhkova was afraid to put a name to it, even in her mind. Words may not seem to carry much weight, but in Ryzhkova's world, seemingly insignificant things can prove to be dangerous--such as the deck of tarot cards that called down a curse upon Evangeline and her descendants for generations.

She is beautiful, yes. But she is not like you, not like me. Look at her. She is half a soul, hungry for another. You stay with this girl," she spat the word, "and she will drown you....She cannot help it. Half a soul will kill to be whole.

-- Madame Ryzhkova (Ten)

Importance: This quote again hints at Evangeline's inherent danger--a danger of which she may not have even been aware. Evangeline could not help but suck out the life of whoever fell into her thrall. From her first entry into the world, she began to drain the life out of her mother. She went on to bring ruin to virtually anyone who cared about her; and yet unlike the Rusulka from Ryzhkova's story, Evangeline did not seem to do so intentionally--it was merely within her nature.



The Mermaid is not for you," he said softly. "Melina or Susanna are better suited, happy women. A quiet man needs a happy woman. Evangeline, she pulls sadness behind her like a cat does its tail.

-- Benno (Twelve)

Importance: Here, yet another person warned Amos that Evangeline was not the right match for him, yet Amos was drawn to her beyond reason or logic. Before she arrived at the carnival, he had considered Melina as a potential love interest; after Evangeline, he could no longer think of her in those terms, or even really see her. Benno argued that a happy woman would be better suited to make Amos happy in turn, but part of Evangeline's lure was her sadness, even though it only seemed to breed more sadness in turn.

Amos lay awake until light bled under the edge of the canvas. He swore his skin still burned from where she'd touched it--a pleasure so profound it dwarfed all else. Nearly. He smiled into Evangeline's hair, more pleased with life than he'd thought possible. He'd found a way to speak.

-- Amos (Twelve)

Importance: Amos became enamored of Evangeline almost from the moment he first saw her, but one of her greatest lures for him--more than her beauty or her charm--was that she found a way to understand him in a way that most people didn't, and that he was able to communicate with her more than he could with most people. To a boy who was mute and who was raised outside of society, Amos had long lacked a true relationship with other human beings. That he could "speak" through the tarot cards completely opened up a new world of possibilities for him--not just to change his act in the carnival, but to truly connect with another person.

I saw her in the water and I believed her. I knew it was true, even if she didn't really have a tail, even though there's no such thing, she was a mermaid. My whole life before that moment I'd been in a locked room, and then all the doors opened.

-- Daniel (Fifteen)

Importance: This quote provides another perspective to the thrall that Evangeline and her descendants are able to cast over other people, which is generally seen as a negative thing. Indeed, the speaker of this quote--Simon's father, Daniel--goes on to become so enamored of Paulina that after her death, he wastes away and dies himself, leaving his children behind without a second thought. Yet in this moment, Daniel recalls what a life-changing thing it was to see Paulina for the first time, and how she opened his horizons, even as she was sealing his fate.

I'm sorry," Churchwarry says. "I suppose I expected a more cheerful outcome. In the past when I've gifted books to strangers, it's always been a positive experience and even earned me a customer or two. I was hoping for a bit of happy providence and now I can't help thinking I've opened Pandora's box." And I can't help but feel I've invited him into sadness, a genuinely nice man who knew nothing about drowning women and the tragedy that was growing up a Watson. "My family is a little dark," I say, "But even



Pandora's box had hope.
-- Mr. Churchwarry, Simon (Fifteen)

Importance: Churchwarry and Simon refer to the story of Pandora, who was warned not to open a box, but whose curiosity got the better of her; by opening the box, she inadvertently introduced the world to all manner of terrible things, including hate, war, crime, etc. However, at the bottom of the box was hope, which would be humanity's only defense against all the rest. Churchwarry believes that by sending Simon the book, he has set him down a dangerous, obsessive path and opened his mind to terrible possibilities. Yet Simon is correct when he argues that with the bad comes the good, since Churchwarry's book also makes Simon aware of the curse on his family, and thus better prepares him to be able to stop it.

Am I alone? I am here. Am I alone? I am your home.
-- Amos, Evangeline (Eighteen)

Importance: After Ryzhkova left, Amos worried about being left on his own. The reasons for this were twofold: Amos was abandoned by his birth mother when he was just a small child, because he was a mute bastard that brought shame upon his family. Ryzhkova had become like a mother to him, which made this second abandonment all the more painful. The other reason that Ryzhkova's departure was so difficult for Amos was because she was one of the few people with whom he could communicate, and the person who perhaps best understood him. Amos had developed a rudimentary way of communicating with Evangeline, but Ryzhkova knew him so well she could understand him without any need for him to speak. He feared without her that he would be alone, though Evangeline assured him that she would stay with him and become his new home, making up for the lack that both his "mothers" had left in his life.

It was she who'd fouled the river. She thought of Amos's hidden cards and her stolen swims, that they might choke under their secrets until they gasped like the fish on the shore. She carried murder within her and it poisoned everything she touched. I am a killer.
-- Evangeline (Twenty-Two)

Importance: Evangeline turned to water to find a sense of solace, but discovered afterward that the water had become polluted and that all the fish in it died. With the possible exception of her grandmother, Evangeline did not intentionally harm anyone, yet cannot seem to stop herself from bringing ruin and despair to the people who love her. Water was supposed to be a safe haven from all of that, but Evangeline discovered that she destroyed even this. Nothing she loved was safe from her poisonous touch.

Once you've held a book and really loved it, you forever remember the feel of it, its specific weight, the way it sits in your hand. My thumb knows the grain of this book's leather, the dry dust of red rot that's crept up its spine, each waving leaf of every page that holds a little secret or one of Peabody's flourishes. A librarian remembers the particular scent of glue and dust, and if we're so lucky--and I was--the smell of parchment, a quiet tanginess, softer than wood pulp or cotton rag. We would bury



ourselves in books until flesh and paper became one and ink and blood at last ran together. So maybe my hand does clench too tightly to the spine. I may never again hold another book this old, or one with such a whisper of me in it.

-- Simon (Twenty-Three)

Importance: As a librarian and a lover of texts, Simon has a special relationship with books. In particular, the book of records which Churchwarry sent to him seems to have meant to belong to him; Churchwarry remembers being drawn to purchase it, and equally drawn to send it to Simon. There may be nothing supernatural about this connection; many people have felt similarly drawn to records of their ancestors which can reveal something about their past. However, as Simon was born into a family with mermaids, vanishers, and fortune tellers, the book very well may be endowed with the spirits of old who wish the book to be in his hands so that he can finally end the curse that has tormented their family for generations.

It will be years before she can read tarot," Evangeline reasoned. "And who would tell their secrets to a child? Most wouldn't want a child touching the cards at all." He did not need her to say the rest. She did not want Bess near the cards. He would be unable to speak to his daughter.

-- Evangeline, Amos (Twenty-Eight)

Importance: Amos's fear of being alone was more than just being physically on his own; having spent much of his life unable to communicate with other human beings, he feared the loss of that more than most people might. Tarot cards were Amos's way of communicating with others. So, although Evangeline's reasoning behind not letting their daughter use the tarot cards might have been sound, it also showed that she did not truly understand Amos and his fear of being silenced. It was this lack of understanding that created the first rift between them that would eventually lead to their tragic fates.

When the need for air came hard like hunger she opened her mouth. It filled with sand and ocean. Inside she became as much water as out. Strange, she thought. The mermaid could drown.

-- Evangeline (Twenty-Eight)

Importance: Despite the fact that Evangeline was dying, she seemed at peace in this moment, surrounded by water--and, indeed, filled with water. Evangeline's background implied that her father was an actual mythical water creature, which made returning to the water to die seem like the natural course of things. This may be why she was able to accept her death so matter-of-factly, and why all of her descendants continued to be so drawn to the water.