

# **The Brothers K Study Guide**

**The Brothers K by David James Duncan**

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# Plot Summary

The Brothers K, by David James Duncan, is about the Chance family from Camas, Washington. The story is told by one of the sons, Kincaid. The story begins in the early 1950s and continues to the mid-1970s.

Kincaid Chance tells the story of his family: father Hugh, mother Laura, brothers Irwin, Everett, Peter and Kincaid, sisters Beatrice and Winifred. The Chance family resides in Camas, Washington. Hugh is a failed professional ball player who is forced to work at a pulp mill in order to provide for his family, and Laura is a homemaker who is extremely religious. Hugh's hopes for a recovery from a minor injury are dashed when his pitching thumb is ruined by an industrial accident at the mill.

The brothers are close and have many discussions during their childhood regarding baseball and religion. Hugh and Laura have disagreements that balloon into loud arguments and end with Laura leaving the family home to go to her brother's house in Spokane. Often she takes the twin girls with her. She creates a void in the house that Hugh tries to fill, and eventually she returns each time.

An uneasy truce exists in the family with Hugh tolerating Laura's eccentricities and fanaticism about religion because he knows her darkest childhood secret. When the eldest boys become teenagers, they do not have that knowledge and just think their mother is crazy, causing arguments that erupt into Laura physically attacking Everett and Irwin.

Hugh returns to baseball after an unusual surgery that replaces his damaged thumb with his big toe. He begins a coaching/backup pitcher career that allows him to return to the game and a life he loves. Laura begins a cleaning business that helps out the family's economic situation.

Everett, Peter and Irwin go to college. Peter goes to the east coast and eventually stops communicating with his family while he immerses himself in eastern religions. Everett becomes a student radical, protesting against the war in Vietnam. Irwin does not do well in college, and when his girlfriend Linda becomes pregnant, drops out to work for his new family. He is soon drafted and sent to Vietnam.

Everett burns his draft card and emigrates to Canada to avoid the authorities. The love of his life, Tasha, comes to see him and then deserts him. He dissolves into depression.

Peter is granted a scholarship to go to India and realizes his dream to be in that country is nothing like the reality of the poverty, heat and foreignness he experiences there.

In Vietnam, Irwin has a life changing experience that challenges his religious beliefs and his sanity. He attacks his captain and is sent to a mental hospital in southern California. The Chance family reunites to fight the government and retrieve their son from this hospital prison before he dies from medication and electroshock therapy.



Peter returns from India disillusioned, but soon joins into the rescue mission. Everett comes back to America only to be imprisoned after an impassioned speech to Laura's church. Hugh leaves baseball forever so he can stand vigil for his son Irwin. Laura and the rest of the children form a caravan with some of the church members and they all meet up at Mira Loma, at the hospital gates.

When Irwin is finally freed, the family goes home to accept a new reality: Hugh is dying of lung cancer. Irwin becomes Hugh's caretaker and it eases Hugh's death. After Hugh dies, Irwin becomes interested in woodstoves, eventually building a successful company from this obsession. Irwin and Peter own the company together, and Kincaid works for them. Everett gets out of jail and marries Tasha; they have a son.

At the end of the novel, the brothers are all grown, have careers and children. Despite the many opportunities the family has to break apart, their love for baseball, their parents, and for each other holds them together.



# Book One, Joy to the World

## Book One, Joy to the World Summary

During this entire section, the author goes from February 1963 in Camas, where Kincaid and his father are watching a Roger Maris ball game before going on a promised fishing trip. Kincaid is the narrator and is anxiously awaiting the end of the game while respecting the solemn rituals of baseball. As the chapters progress, Kincaid reverts back to the present, the day when he and Hugh are going fishing, and the comments his father is making about the baseball game.

As Chapter One opens, Kincaid Chance, the narrator of most of this novel, is a young boy sitting on his father's lap while Hugh reads the sports pages and smokes Lucky Strikes. Kincaid is very young, but is struck by the correlation of his father's lit cigarette and the neighbor seen through the window, raking leaves and lighting the bonfire.

It is 1956, and Kincaid's mother, Laura, is pregnant with the twins. Later that same day, the family is in the living room watching the Ed Sullivan Show and there are some scary Russian dancers that enthrall them all. The boys each react to the surreal Russian dancers in a different way. Laura is delighted to see that the guest is Maurice Chevalier, one of her favorite actors. Kincaid thinks the actor is embarrassed to be performing on this show, but Laura is happy with the performance.

Next is a copy of a letter from Bull Durham, a baseball professional agent, to Everett, Kincaid's older brother. Unknown to Hugh, Everett has contacted Bull to see if there is a chance his father could be reconsidered for baseball. Bull admits he is a professional "junk" man, which means he handles the broken down ball players and tries to fit them with a team who can use the talents they offer.

In Chapter Two, it is 1960, and the family is living in Camas, Washington. Kincaid is describing his home and his family. Mama is a devout Seventh Day Adventist, a religion that holds their main services on Saturday as the Sabbath. Today is Saturday, but Kincaid and his father are at home watching the Cleveland/Yankees baseball game instead of Kincaid being at church because Hugh and Laura have had a serious argument and Laura took the twins to her brother's house in Spokane, and the older boys, Everett, Irwin and Peter, are at church camp. The argument is about Hugh's refusal to go to church with Laura, about Hugh drinking beer and about money.

Kincaid says that Mama's religion is the most important thing in the world to her, and she respects the preacher, Elder Babcock very much. Kincaid talks about his brothers and how different they are, and how the family is close even though Papa loves baseball and Mama loves church; they all love each other. At this time in their lives, the boys argue and talk about both baseball and religion. Papa is a professional ball player working his way from the minor leagues to the majors when his thumb is crushed at the



paper mill. There is a lawsuit pending, but it has been going on for years. In October, he loses the suit.

Kincaid recalls an argument between Everett and Peter, regarding religion. The atheism of Grandawma, Hugh's mother, gives the boys much fodder for their conversations as they try to correlate their mother's religion with the realities of the world. Peter does more than talk, he explores different religions by reading books. He shares his findings with the other brothers, and they listen respectfully, but do not necessarily agree. Peter has begun his lifelong fascination with truth and peace.

In Chapter Three, there is a copy of a paper Irwin writes for English class, and it tells the story of the Chance family from Hugh's childhood to the time Kincaid is born. It is written in a rough but readable form, and shows Irwin's love of life and of his family. Hugh and Laura meet in Walla Walla, and fall in love very soon afterwards. Irwin covers the beginning of Hugh's career, and the moves the young family make in order for him to accommodate the progress from Majors to minors after an injury. Irwin talks about Hugh's parents, the death of Hugh's father, and goes into great detail about Hugh's mother, Irwin's grandmother, an atheist who hates baseball. Irwin's style of writing also reveals his attitude towards authority, joking but respectful.

It is February 1963, and Hugh is taking Kincaid with him to meet Hugh's friend Roy, and the three are going fishing. Kincaid has had difficulty figuring out what makes his father tick, why he works at a pulp mill, and is attempting to work through this by asking his father very pointed questions. Kincaid is only seven years old but is very perceptive and observant. Kincaid's constant questioning is beginning to push Hugh over the edge. Hugh finally strikes Kincaid, causing damage to Kincaid's eye. Hugh is mortified that he does this, and apologizes with many tears. Of course Kincaid accepts his father's hug, but does not realize the impact of this event on Hugh's future.

## **Book One, Joy to the World Analysis**

There is joy in the world of Kincaid Chance, the narrator of the story, as he introduces his large family and the characteristics that will expand and enlarge their lives to propel them towards the next years. Kincaid is the victim of his beloved father's self-hate when he is struck, but Hugh becomes the hero as he apologizes, then changes his life as a testament to his remorse. Laura's unfortunate childhood and bent towards fanaticism is described, Irwin's joyful and innocent nature, Everett's grandstanding and Peter's broodiness—all are hinted at with the promise that these eccentricities will become more important in later chapters.

The foreshadowing includes hints about Laura's secret, references to a surgery that may save Hugh's career, and problems with Grandawma.

This book sets the stage for all that follows. The groundwork regarding the family pecking order, Hugh's priorities, Laura's obsessions and the interests of the boys are laid out.



Even with the differences between the parents, the love in the family is clear and unsullied at this early stage in the book. The violent act of Hugh striking Kincaid is unexpected and brings the section to an unexpected end.



# Book Two, Dogmatomachy

## Book Two, Dogmatomachy Summary

Chapter One opens in the Spring of 1963, the day after Hugh strikes Kincaid. Hugh starts running six miles several times a week, and soon afterward he begins building a large covered shed in the backyard of their Camas home. Kincaid is helping him one day and asking what the purpose of the shed is, but Hugh does not reveal his reasoning. When the shed is done, Hugh begins spending every evening after work throwing pitches at an old mattress. The brothers find a secret place in the hedge where they can watch their father's pitching attempts and philosophize about his motivation and his future. The boys name all of the pitches by the sound they make when the balls hit the makeshift backdrop. The hedge becomes a place where the boys bond in their dedication to baseball and to their father. This display of their father working against his handicap teaches the boys how to fight against failure. The evenings in the hedge develop into a time when the boys talk about everything, and their characters begin to find further definition. Everett is the trouble maker, Irwin the lovable peacemaker and Peter is the one who asks the deep questions and seeks the answers in oriental philosophy.

There are more excerpts from Irwin's history of the family. When Hugh originally becomes a professional ball player, he is signed with the Chicago White Sox. He is injured and while he is healing, he is sent to a minor league team in Oklahoma. The peaceful and glorious days of Kincaid, Oklahoma, are described by Irwin in this section, as well as Hugh's time in the armed service. When Hugh is sent to the Army, he is tapped to play ball as entertainment for the troops. Hugh is happy he is chosen to play baseball, but disappointed to find out he will always be on the losing team so the stars can always win. This is a difficult position for Hugh, who is used to winning and performing at his best. Finally one game he decides to pitch the way he knows how and the stars lose the game.

As Chapter Two begins, Kincaid is remembering a conversation he had with Hugh about the strike zones. This is an area where the ball can be pitched towards a batter and the umpire decides whether or not the batter should have swung at the ball. Most rules and regulations in baseball are very specific, and this one is also; however, the area is defined more by the size of the batter and the umpire than the rules. Hugh tells Kincaid many stories about batters, catchers and pitchers who learn to manipulate that rule. Kincaid reflects that the religion of his mother can be compared to the devotion people have towards baseball.

Everett is in church, counting the minutes until he can leave, and the congregation is singing. He looks around at his family and realizes Irwin has tears of joy streaming down his face. Everett makes up an elaborate parody of the song, and his brothers are afraid the elders and Laura will hear it. Kincaid and Peter see the fun of it, but Irwin is disappointed in Everett.





A few days later, Peter is in school and is shown a movie about the making of the atomic bomb. It makes him physically ill. Kincaid notes here that Peter is always vomiting and fainting, and Kincaid suspects it is an escape mechanism that Peter utilizes to avoid situations he does not like.

As Chapter Two continues, it is a rainy night and the streets of Camas are in danger of flooding. Irwin is coming home from a school function, and enjoying the rain without realizing the danger. He stops on a bridge that is about to be overrun with water, and the police see him and signal him to come to safety. Irwin sees a dog in the river, floating on a dog house. The dog cannot swim to safety because he is chained to the dog house. Ignoring the screams of the police, Irwin in his usual exuberant fashion, jumps into the raging river to save the dog. The police rush to the bridge railing and are sad to think this young man is dead. Suddenly a hand appears and it is Irwin and the dog, both safe but very wet. The police officer brings them both to the family home and tells the story.

In Chapter Three, Laura decides to allow the children to take turns saying grace for supper, since Hugh misses the usual time while he is pitching. At first the family and Laura are amused about the style and extemporaneous nature of the prayers. Winifred is first, asking God to be with their Papa because he is hurting. Irwin follows this theme the next night but is very loud and funny, and the family is reduced to laughter. Beatrice tries next, but just makes them all laugh. Each of the children are trying to replace Hugh's very simple grace with their own version of asking God to help Hugh feel better. Kincaid thinks the pitching is doing more to heal his father than anything else.

Finally it is Everett's turn, and what happens next is referred to by the family is the Psalm Wars. Everett begins by insinuating God does not exist, and Laura gets angry, then becomes violent. She stands up and screams at him to stop, but Everett continues. She screams at him as if he is a demon. She strikes Everett in the face with her fist. Irwin comes between them and Laura hits Irwin too. When she will not stop, Peter jumps up and grabs her from behind. She kicks at him like a madwoman and he tries talking calmly to her. When she works herself free, Laura is like a monster who is ready to kill Everett. Peter and Irwin stand in front of Everett, Laura screams and takes the twins upstairs to her bedroom. Everett and Laura then begin screaming Bible verses at each other and Hugh comes in at that moment. Hugh throws the Bible across the room where it falls broken, and tells Everett if he does not shut up, he is next. Laura releases the girls from the bedroom when Hugh goes up to talk to her.

That night the boys are in their rooms, trying to deal with their mother's behavior. They are all stunned. Hugh comes up to talk to them, and sends Irwin to his room. Hugh tries to explain to the boys about their mother's eccentric behavior, basing it on her unhappy childhood. He tells them they no longer have to go to church anymore with their mother.



## Book Two, Dogmatomachy Analysis

The close-knit family begins to unravel as Hugh spends more time pitching in the backyard homemade stage, and Laura's attempts to unite everyone with even more religion fail miserably. More unexpected violence occurs when Laura strikes her sons with her fists and her other sons have to physically restrain her. This behavior indicates Laura's secret in childhood is far more than a little mistreatment. There are three chapters in this section. One is entitled The Shed and covers the actual building of the pitching shed, and the boys hiding in the hedge watching their father try to heal himself. The last chapter is Psalm Wars, which refers to the supper table confrontations that divide the family.

Between these two chapters is one entitled "Strike Zones" which ostensibly is about baseball players who attempt to manipulate the umpire's definition of the area that a ball can enter, and if not hit, is considered a strike, or a missed opportunity for the hitter. The conclusion is that although a strike zone is actually defined by the rules, it can be interpreted differently according to the player's stance, attitude, intimidation by the catcher, the umpire's like or dislike of the players or team, and a number of other factors. When the brothers are "up to bat" with their mother's fanaticism about religion, they have a choice to manipulate the strike zone or get thrown out of the ballgame. Each of them chooses according to their personal belief system and faces the consequences.



# Book Three, Rebels & Scientists

## Book Three, Rebels & Scientists Summary

In Chapter One, Kincaid describes the time after the Psalm Wars, when the family is divided into Rebels (Peter, Everett and Kincaid), Scientists (the twins Winifred and Beatrice) and Irwin, whose sunny outlook and religious bent make him part of neither of the two factions. Laura decides to wage war on the rebels and the boys are left to fix their own food, wash their own clothes, and get jobs. The brothers are dealing with their new found freedom from church, but decide the price for this freedom is too high. The boys struggle to keep up with their studies, work their jobs, keep themselves and their clothes clean. Everett and Peter are roommates, and when Laura decides not to clean their rooms anymore, Everett becomes very untidy and messy. Peter takes a different path altogether, giving away most of his possessions and making his side of the room look like monk's quarters. Meanwhile, Laura is conspiring against them.

It is June of 1964, and the routine of the Chance family life is interrupted when Dr. Franken visits them. He is a profane and explosive man and the family is shocked to see how Laura allows him to speak and act like this in her home. It is revealed that Everett was instrumental in getting Dr. Franken to visit the family because Everett feels it is time Hugh returns from the shed to work as a pitcher for a ball team.

Dr. Franken is the man who originally examines Hugh after the paper mill injury, and he is back to look at it again. He offers to do the surgery on Hugh, and suggests that Hugh, with the assistance of his teenage sons, work off the payment by landscaping his home. Hugh at first is too proud to accept this arrangement, but Laura speaks to him and soon Hugh agrees.

Hugh's dead thumb is replaced by his big toe, in a revolutionary surgery. When he returns to the shed to begin practicing again, the brothers are wincing at first with the inaccuracy and problems of the pitches. As time goes on, Hugh's pitches become finer tuned and more accurate.

As Hugh is off work during the time of the surgery, no money is coming into the family. One afternoon Hugh's mother comes to Laura and hands her a packet of bills, totaling about two thousand dollars to tide them over. Laura is shocked to receive this gift from a woman who has never been a real part of the family and is always disapproving their actions.

In Chapter Two, Kincaid describes some of the scientific experiments the twins conduct during this time when they have their mother's undivided attention. One experiment involves capturing annoying birds in a net, then whirling the net around until the bird is dizzy and confused. The twins spend time with their Grandmother, too, going on field trips and asking her questions. Grandawma is delighted to teach them what she knows, although she is careful not to let them know of her joy.



One day as they are about to go on a field trip that has been planned out by Grandawma, the three are sitting at the kitchen table in Grandawma's little house. They are discussing various scientific things as Grandawma is putting things together for their trip. To the surprise of the twins, Grandawma makes a strange noise, her head drops and then she leans forward and falls out of her chair. She has died. The twins, ever curious, study her in death before deciding to clean her up before they call their parents.

As Chapter Three opens, Kincaid is reflecting that not only does a youngest son inherit the wardrobe and sports equipment of his older brothers, he inherits their high school instructors and, sometimes, their reputations with the coaches and staff.

The Rebels are realizing their mother has become even more dedicated to her church and religion and is bordering on fanatic. One night in 1965, she calls Irwin, Winifred and Beatrice into a meeting with two of the church elders. The Rebels are surprised to find that their mother has been searching their rooms and their trash and has turned over everything to the Elders who now claim the boys are Satanists. Irwin and the twins do not accept this, and laugh at the Elders and at their Mama. Elder Babcock is frustrated in his attempts to discredit Everett and Peter, and this failure will come back to eventually hurt Irwin.

In Chapter Four, Hugh learns of the plot against his sons and is furious. He calls the family together and announces three decisions: Elder Babcock is no longer allowed in the Chance home, Hugh will start keeping beer in the refrigerator, and the Rebels are no longer to be treated as outcasts in the family. He says if it is not done this way, he will move out. When he finishes speaking, Laura packs her bags and goes to her brother's house again.

Kincaid says the family always knew their Mama was like this for a reason, but only Hugh knew the reason and he would never divulge the secret. So through their years, Laura would leave, they would think she would never come back, but then she would return and everything would be good for awhile.

Kincaid reflects on Everett's character, and how Hugh's erratic baseball career contributed to make it dark. As he does with Dr. Franken, Everett contacts Bull Durham to come see Hugh's new pitching. Bull Durham comes to see Hugh pitch in his homemade shed and offers to find him a job. Hugh is sent to try out at the Portland Tugboat training camp in Tempe, Arizona. He is hired as a pitching coach and backup pitcher.

Kincaid tells a family story about Irwin being a baby and crawling out to the baseball field while the game is going on, attaching himself to a large outfielder and eliciting laughter from the fans.

## **Book Three, Rebels & Scientists Analysis**

The family is truly divided now, with the older brothers being rebels and the twins being scientists. Irwin goes merrily between the two, but keeps his religion the same as his



mother's. The war escalates between Laura and Peter, Everett and Kincaid, and she brings the church elders in to help her attack them. Hugh is understandably angry about this step, and realizes Laura's problem has far exceeded the realm of normal.

Hugh's attempt to lay down his own rules results in Laura leaving the family again. Each time she departs, nothing gets resolved, and the children are more confused than ever. They all know something is really wrong with their mother, but no explanations are offered.

The theme of rebirth and renewal is strong in this chapter as Hugh tries to keep his family together even when he is allowed to return to baseball. He leaves the lushness of Washington state to go to the stark Arizona desert, almost as a pilgrim to a sacred site.

The insertion of Bull Durham into the family life takes them out of their normal routines and adds a dash of color and inspiration to the tireless Hugh. The demise of Grandawma closes a life experience and rids the book of a character who really has a limited role in the story.



# Book Four, The Left Stuff

## Book Four, The Left Stuff Summary

This section begins with a dissertation about Roger Maris's attitude towards the game of baseball, psyching out pitchers, and becoming famous. In Chapter One, Kincaid talks about his father's baseball career, and about the love his brothers had for the game. Everett wants to play well, but is only second rate. Peter is a gifted athlete, but is more interested in eastern religion than baseball. Irwin is talented but undisciplined, and is wooed into track by the high school coach.

Kincaid is a mediocre ballplayer, involved in the sport because of his brothers and his own love for the game. One day he is on his way to practice when he is stopped by a group of high school coaches, who ask about his older brothers and what they are doing in college. The coaches are using profanity, making sexual innuendos, spitting, talking about the players, and behaving like macho men from the 60's, which they are. Kincaid realizes that his brothers' performances are being held up to him as an example of how a ballplayer should be. They believe Peter to be the greatest, and assume that he is pursuing an athletic career.

Kincaid enjoys telling them that the object of their admiration, Peter, is studying poetry in college. Kincaid sees that his own efforts to play baseball would only win him the admiration of these men whom he does not respect. He decides that day to quit baseball for good.

Hugh's stint with the Portland Tugboats continues, and at first the family comes to every game. They are soon disappointed when they realize he is doing far more coaching than pitching. When he is called to pitch on an away game, the general manager of the team notices that the attitude of the other players changes and they are inspired by Hugh. Although Hugh will never have the opportunity to move from the minors back to the majors, because of his age and injuries, he has a pure love for the game that inspires the other players.

Irwin switches from baseball to track one day when he throws a javelin further than anyone at the school ever has. He goes on to set several state records.

Laura begins a cleaning business and employs Irwin, Kincaid and the twins. Each week she pulls 10% of her earnings and places it in a blue box that sits on the table. She uses this display of her church faithfulness to make a point to her family.

A sports writer in Oregon writes an article about the special effect Hugh has on the Portland Tugboats. The article makes Kincaid remember when Peter is awarded a trophy at the end of his high school career, but chooses the awards banquet to announce he is done with athletics and despises what the award stands for. Hugh leaves the banquet when his son walks out, but tells Peter he could have handled it in a



different way. Hugh is trying to understand this son, and although he does not agree with his methods or beliefs, he tells Peter they are family and he loves him.

Peter receives a full academic scholarship to Harvard, chooses to become a Buddhist and turns away from his family.

In Chapter Two, Everett is at college at the University of Washington and becomes a left wing radical, protesting against the government and especially the Vietnam War. Everett begins experimenting with drugs, and when under the influence writes a play that is actually quite good and is performed around the Seattle area. He continues with his classes, but is distracted with protests, marches, and various girlfriends. He meets a beautiful woman named Tasha who will not have anything to do with him. Everett continues to aggravate his professors and write provocative columns for his school paper.

In Chapter Three, Irwin goes to college too, but cannot keep up his grades. Everett, Kincaid and Hugh encourage Irwin to stay in school, therefore getting out of the draft, but Hugh does not see a problem there. Irwin makes a special trip from college to Camas one evening and tells his family he is getting married the next day, his girlfriend Linda is pregnant, and he is dropping out of school. Instead of receiving a conscientious objector status because of his membership in his church, the Elders have denounced him for living with Linda instead of getting married. This news makes Hugh very angry at Elder Babcock, but Laura continues going to church in defiance of Hugh.

In Chapter Four, Everett comes back to Camas to tell Irwin not to go to the Army, but is too late. Everett and Laura have a horrible fight, and Winifred and Kincaid try to break it up. It becomes physical when Laura slaps Everett, but Everett continues pushing the issue, calling Laura names. Finally Kincaid has had enough and punches Everett. Laura becomes hysterical and Everett leaves.

Here the author inserts some more "attic documents," which are papers written by Beatrice Chance about war and assassinations. It is her conclusion that it is best to be a bad person because if you are good, you will be assassinated.

The next day Everett burns his draft card and announces he is moving to Canada. He hides in a rough part of Seattle first, to make arrangements to move to Canada, and is dismayed to discover that after the initial publicity regarding his decision, everyone forgets him. He meets an older woman and, after all his romantic conquests in college, he feels sure he can handle her. He soon finds out she is never satisfied and this is another area where he receives an unexpected disappointment.

The next Sabbath, Hugh is shocked that Laura has continued to go to church, and turns a cold face to her when she announces she is proud to have a son in the armed services. That night when Kincaid returns home from work, he discovers Laura has moved to her brother's house again. He is alarmed to see that his father is drinking whiskey, but Hugh takes the remainder of the bottle and pours it out onto the carpet.

## **Book Four, The Left Stuff Analysis**

The section is appropriately named the Left Stuff because it refers to the leftist politics of Everett, the fact that Peter leaves the family, Irwin leaves school, Everett leaves for Canada, Irwin leaves the country, and Laura leaves Hugh again.

The long standing anger between Laura and Everett comes to a head in this section, and her violence towards her own children is shocking, especially when she is presented as a good Christian who expects Christian behavior from her children and husband. There is deep seated anger in her character that her children cannot even begin to understand.

Irwin, the beloved clown of the family, is about to be sacrificed to the war gods, and the family is stunned.





# Book Five, The Brothers K

## Book Five, The Brothers K Summary

It is November of 1970, in Chapter One, and Kincaid is watching his father work on an engine part and Winifred is waiting to be taken fishing. Kincaid knows his father has just read one of Irwin's letters from Vietnam. Kincaid has received a separate letter from Irwin, one that tells how horrible it really is there. Irwin and Linda have a boy, Nash. Kincaid talks about how his father can get distracted from his goals, and how frustrating that is to Kincaid, but he understands the pressures his father is under.

Chapter Two finds Everett in Canada, settling down in a town called Shyashyakook. It is a remote area of British Columbia, and is a mixture of ancient Indian sites and abandoned modern facilities. He has been hired as a caretaker for some summer homes, and is making friends with the local people, especially the ones at the only tavern in town. During the summer, Everett works at a car wash in Victoria, to make enough money to survive during the winter. In the winter it rains all of the time, and Everett feels like he is now living in a car wash. Everett is shocked at the reality of becoming a draft dodger living in Canada, and misses the attention he used to receive when he was a student rebel at the University of Washington. Most of all, though, he misses Tasha, the beautiful Russian Lit student. He keeps a journal, and he is thinking always of Tasha. Everett finds reasons for Tasha to fall in love with him, so he studies Russian literature and begins writing her letters to change her opinion of him. Finally he asks her to come visit because he has a Russian relic she might find interesting. He is very surprised when she shows up at his door.

Chapter Three is about Peter, who is not a part of the family from 1965 until 1970 because of his immersion in comparative religion studies at Harvard, and his choice to separate himself from the Chance family. In August of 1970, he is given a grant that will allow him to spend a year in India, in fulfillment of his dreams. The first two weeks he is in India, Peter travels like the natives, in third class trains, but soon moves to first class compartments to avoid the crowds and the smells. Peter realizes his life no longer matches the Ghandi-like dream he had of living in India, but he cannot stomach the true India. He delves deeper into the texts he is studying, continues to deprive himself of food and company, and begins sleeping in the day time so he can be left alone at night. He does this even when traveling in the first class compartments on the trains. He writes about this in his journals, realizing daily that he cannot consider himself a contemplative when he is not participating in the India experience firsthand.

Everett wakes up one morning and Tasha is gone. He writes Kincaid about his misery, and the letter is obviously written when Everett is drunk or high.

Kincaid receives a letter from Irwin, who was forced to kill a sniper and has begun losing his mind over it. Irwin has somehow mixed up the sniper with a biblical character named Zaccheus and is tortured by the thoughts he is having.



Everett is trying to live without Tasha, and is deep in depression, fueled by drinking and smoking weed. Irwin writes his mother a letter to be given to Nash, his son, when he is old enough to read it. Irwin does not believe he will come home from Vietnam alive.

Peter is staying at the University of New Delhi, and has a manservant tend to his every domestic need. He realizes he is not improving in his attempts to be more like Ghandi, even slipping backwards. He cannot tolerate the people, the heat, the food, or anything. He consults a friend at Harvard who says Peter is in a temporary state of spiriitual aridity.

Everett finds one of Tasha's cookbooks and inside is an old address of her grandmother. He begins writing Tasha a letter, building his hopes on finding her again.

Irwin's letters to his family become more guarded, as if he is protecting them from the insanity that is approaching him. He writes to Everett that he has been transferred from long range recon to a base. Everett and Irwin begin a strange correspondence, with Everett sending radical anti-war articles and notes to Irwin, and Irwin unloading his thoughts to Everett.

Chapter Four tells the story of Irwin losing his battle with sanity when the soldiers in his unit kill a young boy. The Vietnamese boy had been responsible for a booby trap that killed one of the American soldiers, and the captain decides that instead of turning their prisoner over to the authorities, the unit will exact its own punishment on the boy and then claim there was no prisoner. Irwin realizes what is happening, and when he sees the boy, handcuffed to the jeep, winding his stolen watch just before he is about to be murdered, it is the moment when Irwin detaches himself from reality. Irwin attacks his captain with a tube of toothpaste and is sent back home in a straightjacket, heavily sedated, and is given electroshock treatments.

Chapter Five begins with Irwin in the hospital, trying to figure out where he is, and fighting the hospital attendants.

Papa is still pitching and coaching, and Mama has started a home based cleaning business. Kincaid and the twins work for her, and Linda and Nash live with the Chance family. News of Irwin's hospitalization/imprisonment in Mira Loma, Southern California, frightens everyone. When Hugh learns of it, he is in Arizona, and drives immediately to see Irwin. He is met with stony opposition from Major Keyes, the man in charge of the hospital. When Hugh realizes he cannot free Irwin by himself, he sends a telegram to Everett for help. Over the next few days, the Chance family learns that Irwin's religious training and feelings are making him appear insane to the military hospital. It will not be an easy task to get their son back.

In Chapter Six, Peter is traveling in India and encounters some men who befriend him, and whom he finds out later are thieves. Peter's lack of knowledge about the culture and the language of the Indian people makes him and another American, T Bar, easy targets. Peter is asleep in his first class compartment when he realizes the train has stopped and disconnected his car, so he must travel third class. A series of strange



characters sit next to him before T Bar shows up, a brash American who is planning to use cheap Indian labor to make millions in Wyoming. There is a British man named Dessinger who seems to know his way around, so Peter and T Bar listen to him. When the train stops and Dessinger says there is serious trouble for Westerners ahead, Peter and T Bar disembark and follow him to what they think is safety. Soon they are in a car with another British man, and realize they have been the victims of an elaborate scheme to separate them from their luggage and valuables. T Bar and Peter end up with nothing but their underwear, miles from civilization. They walk to a small village and are helped. Peter realizes his world has crashed down upon him.

In Chapter Seven, Papa is pitching, but realizes that he has lost his love for baseball His passion for his family is worth more to him now. He throws a memorable last pitch, then leaves for Mira Loma, to stand at the gates of the hospital until he is allowed to see his son. He learns that one of the reasons Irwin is being held is a letter written by Elder Babcock condemning the boy.

Everett finishes a letter to Tasha and sends all 211 pages to her grandmother's address.

Everett consults another draft dodger in his Canadian town about what might happen if Everett returns to the USA. He begins to think about returning so he can help Irwin, but is unsure how that would help. Everett has an epiphany, leaves Canada and heads to Camas.

Hugh Chance shows up on Elder Babcock's doorstep and intimidates him into writing a new letter; however, the Army still wants to keep Irwin and the family realizes the situation is a power struggle with Major Keyes.

Everett is still contemplating what he can do to save Irwin, when he is driving home from the bar one night. He sees an otter get fatally struck by a car, then by a truck. To his amazement something is crawling from the otter's body and he finds a crayfish. He takes the crayfish to the river and releases it, then drives on, overcome by the irony and symbolism of the cold blooded surviving and the warm blooded dying. Everett experiences an epiphany that night, and the next day he packs up everything and heads home to his family in Camas.

In Chapter Eight, it is 1971, a June Sabbath. Services are starting and there is a guest preacher, a Korean man named Kim Joon. Everett bursts into the services and makes an impassioned plea for the congregation to help his brother Irwin. As usual Everett cannot get his message across without hurting people's feelings, but this time Laura finally stands up for her family. Everett leaves and goes to the family home, and is arrested there as a draft dodger. Laura stands up to the FBI over Everett, but they still take him away. As they leave, she realizes how much she loves Everett.

## **Book Five, The Brothers K Analysis**

This chapter is where the majority of the plot reaches its zenith. The brothers are all over the world, yet maintain contact. The boys are realizing their goals and dreams, but



finding that the reality does not match the dream. Irwin does what he thinks is right and now his soul is being ripped apart. Peter is in his beloved India and hates it. Everett has made his grand stand and instead of being granted hero status, everyone has forgotten about him.

Hugh is the only realist in the family, and he is the engine of the machine that is brought together to rescue Irwin. Hugh gives up everything to get Irwin back. He sacrifices his baseball career by walking off the mound. He sacrifices his pride by calling Everett for help. He sacrifices his health through worry over Irwin and despair about the situation.

The family who was torn asunder in previous chapters somehow finds its way back to each other during this traumatic section. Everett has given everything for his family, Peter has returned home, and everyone is working on a plan to free Irwin. The only problem is a haunting dream Kincaid has where his father is trapped in a sinking boat.



# Book Six, The Blue Box

## Book Six, The Blue Box Summary

In Chapter One, Laura continues courageously, telling all the callers from the church that if they do nothing, she will no longer belong to the congregation. More of the congregation call, and some pledge to help financially, and some with prayers, and some actually show up at a meeting to discuss the problem and how to handle it. As the family gathers with some of their church friends, they try to decide what to do about Irwin. The meeting includes Laura, Kincaid, Linda, the twins, Elder Joon, Dolores McKibben, Sister Ethel Harg, and Mr and Mrs Beal. At first, there is no progress and it appears the meeting will descend from a call to action to a prayer meeting. Kincaid stands up and says there needs to be something done, and not just praying. Kincaid says he is leaving immediately to go stand vigil with his father at the hospital in Southern California. Laura says she is going too, and suddenly all of them are planning to leave the next morning. They call Laura's brother and he comes to Camas with his RV, and they begin the journey to Mira Loma.

Everett is given three years in prison. His first letter home describes prison life in detail, and how much he would like to receive visitors.

The thirteen people in the caravan to save Irwin are getting to know each other on the long trip. Kincaid reports on their activities and his own thoughts of what might happen next. He is surprised at how much he likes Elder Joon, considering how much he disliked Elder Babcock. When the group arrives in Mira Loma they are at first at a loss what to do, but very happy to be with Hugh again.

Everett receives a letter from Tasha, who has traveled to Canada to see him and missed him by a few days. She announces she is seven months pregnant and will return to Arizona to wait until he is released. She loves him and wants to give their baby a Russian name.

As they are traveling, one of the church ladies finds some notes Laura's brother and wife wrote to each other in the form of rhymes. A conversation between Elder Joon and Kincaid reveals Joon's attitude towards God speaking to him, and Joon believes that whatever he asks, God would say "No Comment" because humans could never understand God's reasons for what He does.

Tasha writes to Everett saying she will move to Camas and attend the University of Washington so she can visit him more often.

Kincaid, Laura and the family are shocked at the way Hugh looks and encourage him to go to a doctor, but he wants to wait until they know more about Irwin. They all meet with Major Keyes and are very disappointed that their petition, the letters from Elder Babcock and their presence do nothing to persuade the officials to release Irwin. Keyes attempts



to turn Irwin's wife, Linda, against the others of the caravan by insinuating their efforts will not help Irwin but hinder his release.

As the group convenes back in the parking lot, things look very dim and there is no defined plan to rescue Irwin. A car pulls up, and Peter steps out. He asks about the plan, and Hugh grabs him, Kincaid, Beatrice, Elder Joon and Laura's brother's wife Mary Jane and they leave the others. Hugh puts this smaller group in charge of coming up with a rescue plan, and they do. The plan is to enlist the aid of the local Seventh Day Adventist conference leaders, use some of Joon's college friends to pretend to be the press, and descend on Major Keyes again. To the surprise of everyone, this works, and Irwin is released to the custody of his family.

Still heavily drugged and injured, Irwin cannot speak and is unable to respond to anyone's words or actions. The family heads home.

In Chapter Two, Kincaid is dreaming about the caravan of people, and they are all in boats trying to row up a river. His father's boat has stopped and is leaking.

In Chapter Three, Hugh is diagnosed with lung cancer. Irwin is recuperating very slowly from his injuries and all the drugs and electroshock, but becomes Hugh's main caretaker. Hugh writes a brief letter to Everett, telling him he is dying. Peter writes a long letter to Everett, telling him about Hugh's last pitch, all the details of their rescue of Irwin, and about Hugh's illness. Beatrice writes to Everett about Nash, Linda and the shell that was once Irwin.

Peter receives a letter and a box from the man who attempted to con him, and it is his manuscripts.

Everett writes a letter to Tasha, telling her that instead of being angry about everything that is happening to his family, he is at peace, and it is because of her that he feels consoled and accepting.

Irwin's role as a caretaker is one he takes on voluntarily, but he has no reactions, no speech, no tears and performs like a robot.

One day Kincaid comes home from a successful fishing trip to find his father dead. As he is in shock, Irwin begins speaking again, and the two men clean up their father just as the twins cleaned up their grandmother.

Chapter Four is the wake for Hugh, in October of 1971. Hugh asked to be cremated, and his ashes are in the blue box that Mama used to put her tithe money in every week. Friends, fellow ball players, and family all stand in the house and talk about Hugh, his life and his legacy. Peter offers the final prayer, saying that Hugh was much loved.

In Chapter Five, Irwin takes an obsessive interest in woodstoves and begins working out his problems through building a new type of woodstove. Peter helps, then Hugh's old friend Roy, and when the woodstove is a success, the entire family gets involved. When the neighbors complain about the noise in the old shed, Peter arranges for a loan



from an old friend, and the brothers build a store and warehouse to expand the business.

Linda and Irwin have another child, and the family business goes well enough for them to buy a farm. Linda and Irwin begin adopting children then, most of them from Vietnam and Korea.

Everett gets out of jail and begins working with the woodstove business. Kincaid marries his longtime girlfriend Amy and has two children. Mama sells the family house and moves to a trailer on the farm.

Chapter Six ends the book with Irwin reading the sports pages and his son Winter sitting on his lap, admiring his father, just as Kincaid did with Hugh at the beginning of the novel.

## **Book Six, The Blue Box Analysis**

The Blue Box is the family term for the box where their mother placed her tithe money over the years, and in the end, is the one she chooses for her husband's ashes.

After so many rebirths and renewals for Hugh, he is faced with an obstacle he cannot overcome: a diagnosis of lung cancer. Irwin needs to recover from his ordeal and, ironically, becomes his father's silent caretaker.

The wake does not do much to honor this fine man, but the years that follow show a family who honor him by becoming good and decent husbands and fathers. The legacy of Hugh Chance lives on with his sons and their dedications to their own families and to each other.



# Characters

## Kincaid Chance

Kincaid is the narrator and guide for this story. He has three older brothers, Everett, Irwin and Peter, and has two younger sisters, the twins Winifred and Beatrice. Kincaid is sometimes called "Kade." He was named after the town of Kincaid, Oklahoma, which his family remembers as the time they were the most happy.

Kincaid is an observer of people, and admires his father, Hugh, greatly. He loves his mother, Laura, but, like most of the family, does not understand her dedication to her religion or her sometimes violent behavior. He is loyal to his family, recognizing their faults and loving them no less. Hugh is a professional ball player who has fallen on hard times, and Laura is a homemaker who is fanatical about her religion, the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

In the novel, *The Brothers K*, Kincaid tells the story of his family. Throughout the story, Kincaid faithfully reports what happened and to whom, using letters found in the attic, accounts from others, newspapers and personal observation. He listens to the long conversations about philosophy and religion between his brothers, arguments between his mother and father, and observes the scientific experiments of his sisters. Laced in every story are stories about baseball legends, because Kincaid immerses himself in baseball lore and statistics. Kincaid serves as a sort of catalyst to the other characters to move them forward in the story. When his father loses his composure and hits Kincaid, the remorse causes Hugh to begin training again as a baseball player. When Kincaid hits Everett years later, it is the impetus for Everett to burn his draft card and move to Canada.

At the beginning of the story, Kincaid is very young, joyfully sharing a lazy afternoon sitting in his father's lap while Hugh is reading the sports section. His father is working at a pulp mill in Camas, Washington, and his hopes for a successful baseball career have ended because of an industrial accident that has robbed him of the thumb on his pitching hand. Hugh is having a difficult time giving up baseball for a career as a pulp mill worker, and one afternoon he is frustrated and angry with Kincaid's persistent questions and hits the boy on the side of the head. Kincaid's eyesight on that side of his head is never the same.

Kincaid follows his brothers through high school and college, but is never the shining stars they are, and has no grand design or dream. Kincaid is more of a follower and observer than a type A personality, but his character is strong, he is a good listener, and loyal to his family. As the narrator, he seldom steps forward in the story, depending instead to keep the reader interested with his stories about the journeys of his older brothers, detailed accounts of actual baseball games, and essays on the merits of different ballplayers and the sport of baseball.





Kincaid's family lives in Camas, Washington, for his entire life. Kincaid has a relatively happy childhood, and in his teenage years begins working for his mother's cleaning business. He is ineligible for the draft because of his bad eye, and enrolls in college. When offered freedom from attending services at his mother's church, Kincaid never goes back, and seeks truth in his own fashion. He is a solid member of the team that goes to California to rescue Irwin. As a young adult, Kincaid marries Amy, his only girlfriend, and they have two children. Kincaid handles the warehouse operations and the bookkeeping for Windriver Woodstoves, the company founded by Irwin and Peter.

Kincaid's role in *The Brothers K* is to tell the story of his family. His love for the Chance family and his love for baseball are carefully intertwined, and the story is told without much emphasis on his character.

## Hugh Chance

Hugh is described as having sun browned skin, high cheekbones, gray eyes, a strong jaw, and a hooked nose. His nicknames include Smoke, Hook, and Papa Toe. Hugh is born in Chicago in 1929, and in this story is in his early 40s. His mother is a scientist and his father is a high school coach. When WWII breaks out, his father goes to war and is killed in Germany. Hugh's mother wants him to go to college, but Hugh is an outstanding athlete and takes an offer to play professional ball instead. Hugh and Laura get married, and he knows a terrible secret about her childhood, which makes him forgive her eccentric behavior in later years.

Hugh is the father of six children: Everett, Irwin, Peter, Kincaid, Winifred and Beatrice. He is a good father, even though he does drink sometimes and smokes constantly. Hugh is injured early in his baseball career and it keeps him from rising through the minor leagues to the majors; as he is going for a comeback, he suffers from an industrial accident which permanently deadens the thumb on his pitching hand. He goes to work at the pulp mill full time and is very unhappy. One afternoon he cuffs his youngest son, hurting Kincaid's eye, and is filled with remorse about the incident. This prompts him to quit sitting around drinking every afternoon when he gets off work, and to run and practice pitching instead. He builds a large shed in the back yard of their Camas home and begins spending hours throwing balls into a mattress.

Bull Durham is contacted by Everett and comes to see Hugh pitch. He offers him a chance to coach and be a backup pitcher for the Portland Tugboats, and Hugh is back in the game he loves. For the next several years, Hugh travels with the minor league club, providing not only good pitching advice, but inspiration to the other players because of his pure love of the game. It is at this point when Laura begins her own cleaning business and contributes to the family economy.

When Irwin is drafted and sent to Vietnam, Hugh is greatly concerned, but matters have been taken out of his hands because of Irwin's actions. When Irwin is hurt and sent back home, Hugh drops everything and rushes to see his son. Hugh's usual heroic stature is greatly threatened when he finds he can do nothing to get his boy out of the



hospital, away from the drugs and the electroshock therapy. Hugh turns to Everett for help, gives up his baseball career forever, and begins a vigil near Irwin's hospital.

When the family all comes together to rescue Irwin, their happiness is marred by the realization that Hugh is deathly ill. The diagnosis of lung cancer devastates them all, but Hugh's need for a caretaker results in Irwin's full recovery from his ordeal. When Hugh dies soon after his diagnosis, the family grows closer through their memories of this man.

Hugh is the hero of this story and is admired by all his children, his co-workers, other ballplayers, his coaches, and everyone who knows him. Although he is not a churchgoer, Hugh embodies the spirit of a good and decent man who acknowledges his shortcomings and treats everyone fairly.

## Laura Chance

Laura is born the same year as Hugh, but her childhood is very different. When she is in the fifth grade, her father sexually molests her. This continues for almost six months while her own mother ignores the situation. Laura seeks refuge in her church and finally finds a way out by moving the entire family, less Dad, to Walla Walla Washington. Her saviors are the Elders of a Seventh Day Adventist church, so the church earns Laura's undying devotion and dedication.

When Laura marries Hugh, she does not get a husband who is as fanatical about the church as she is, but he is a good man who provides well. Although he does not attend church, he ensures that all the children go to the services every Sabbath Day. When Hugh begins working out and pitching every night, Laura replaces his grace with making the children take turns saying it. This does not turn out well when she realizes the older sons are rebelling against the church she loves. Everett begins his prayer by questioning whether or not there is a God, and Laura loses her control, hitting Everett, then Irwin, with her fist. Laura turns away from Everett then, and soon after, against Peter. These rifts between Laura and her sons damage the family considerably and Laura chooses her religion and her beliefs over her sons.

When Irwin is hospitalized and imprisoned, Laura comes to a severe crisis of faith. She learns that her beloved preacher is one of the reasons her son went to war, but it takes the realization that Everett sacrificed his own freedom to shake her belief system. She organizes the caravan to rescue Irwin, and stands beside her husband to bring the family back together.

When Hugh dies, she puts his ashes in the blue box that once faithfully received her weekly church tithes. She promises Hugh she will tell the children about her own childhood, as Hugh hopes this will help the family to understand her as he did. Her role as a widow is to move near Irwin and his family and to help out.

Laura's role in the story is to be Hugh's first rescue, his first act of compassion. There is a deep love, but one beset with the challenges of too many children and too little



income, obsessions over a sport and a religion, and a crisis that requires them to pull together just in time for Hugh to die an early death.

## Peter Chance

Peter is one of the older sons, and shares his father's athletic ability. He is a handsome young man with a fragile constitution, always vomiting or fainting. Although Peter loves baseball, it is not his dream to make a career in that field. He is fascinated with religions, having been forced to attend services of the Seventh Day Adventist Church since he was a baby. An extremely intelligent man, he studies many cultures and religions, finally settling on Eastern religions as his focus. When offered an opportunity to live in India and to study the ancient scripts in that country, Peter turns away from his family and leaves for the far east.

India is as colorful and exotic as Peter thought it would be, but far more odorous and filthy than he ever dreamed. Instead of accepting this culture and immersing himself in it, Peter removes himself from the seedier side by traveling in private compartments on the train, sleeping during the heat of the day to avoid crowds, and failing to learn the modern languages of India. As a result, his trip comes to an abrupt end on a train ride where he gets involved with unscrupulous men who steal his manuscripts, his clothes, his luggage and his money.

Peter makes a critical decision in this crisis, and sacrifices everything in a realization he needs truth in his life more than he needs material possessions. He returns home just in time to get involved in Irwin's rescue. After his father dies, Peter is still in Camas and gets interested in Irwin's obsession with woodstoves. Peter and Irwin heal together, and the result is a thriving woodstove manufacturing business. Peter finishes his studies at Harvard, lives with a woman named Marta, and operates a company that takes disadvantaged teenagers on vision quests.

## Irwin Chance

Irwin is the oldest son of Hugh and Laura Chance. He is a man born with a great capacity for love, and he embraces his mother's religion more than any of the other children. Irwin is the lovable clown of the story, whose talents and energy are a mixture of heroics, humorous mistakes and breezing through life with a happy smile and infectious laugh. The family recognizes early on that Irwin is not intelligent in the traditional way, but they all admire and defend him. After losing his draft deferment by leaving school to get married and get a job, Irwin is sent to boot camp and soon thereafter, Vietnam. Irwin at first sees the Army as a big game, something he can handle and endure if he is just strong enough, like everything else in his life. Irwin's years of dedication to the tenets of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, especially those regarding the sin of murder, begin to play on his mind and cause him to begin the descent into insanity.



When Irwin is forced to shoot a sniper, he throws his rifle away and is transferred to a desk job. One of his unit members is killed by a young boy, and the unit retaliates, with their captain's approval, and kills the boy while he is handcuffed to a jeep. Irwin does not participate, but loses his self control and attacks his captain with a tube of toothpaste. Irwin is sent to Mira Loma, a hospital prison in Southern California.

Irwin is given heavy medication and electroshock therapy. When he is finally rescued by his family, he does not speak and his spirit is crushed for many months. His first words come on the day his father passes away, and he regains his mental health after obsessing about woodstoves, spending time with his children and being with his brothers.

What happens to Irwin is the crisis that brings the Chance family together. Without this incident, it is likely Everett would have stayed in Canada forever, devolving further and further into depression. Peter would have returned to America with no home and no direction. Laura would have gone even further into her fanaticism for her religion, eventually disappearing altogether. Hugh would still have been diagnosed with cancer, but would have died with his family torn apart.

## Everett Chance

Everett is one of the older sons of Hugh and Laura Chance. He is athletic, but not as talented as his father, or as Peter and Irwin. He is a quick thinker and good public speaker, which comes in handy when he decides to be a revolutionary student at the University of Washington. Everett has practice in disagreeing with authority, as he and his mother have been fighting each other for years over dogma and religion. Everett questions everyone and everything, and is quick to voice his opinions, without care for the results. Much of what he does in his life is for show, to impress others and gather crowds.

Everett is handsome, as all the Chance boys are, and easily attracts women to his side. His attitude towards females changes forever when he meets Tasha and falls in love with this woman who originally ignores and berates him. After an especially brutal and emotional disagreement with Laura one night, where Kincaid punches Everett, Everett decides to make his unhappiness with America formal. He burns his draft card and moves to Canada.

Everett's escape to Canada to avoid the draft is not the heroic adventure he thought it would be; in fact, no one even misses him except his family. Everett finds a caretaking job in a remote section of British Columbia, where he begins to miss Tasha most of all. He invites her to come visit and she does. They spend 44 days together and then she disappears. He sends her a very long letter, over 200 pages, that he has written in the months after she leaves. When called by his family for help regarding Irwin, Everett leaves for home, missing Tasha by a few days. Everett is arrested as a draft dodger and sentenced to three years in jail. Tasha finds him and tells him she is pregnant with their child.



When Everett gets out of jail, he finishes his education and teaches writing. He and Tasha have a son.

## Winifred Chance

Winifred is one of the twins, and is nicknamed Freddy. She is intrigued with science when she is a young girl and becomes a veterinarian when she gets older. Her and her sister Beatrice's role in this novel is mostly in the shadows, providing insight into the life of Grandawma, and allowing the older boys to see the feminine side of life.

## Beatrice Chance

Beatrice is the other twin, and is referred to as Bet. She has her own idiosyncrasies that border on madness, but turns out all right in the end. She becomes a world traveler. The author does not spend as much time on developing the characters of the twins as he does on the sons' characters.

## Grandawma

Marion Becker Chance is Hugh's mother, and at the time the story begins, she is living near the family in Camas. Originally born in England, Marion loses her husband to the war and is forever angry at the United States government. She is referred to as Grandawma by the Chance children. They are in awe of her because she does not like baseball and she likes science. The twins spend a lot of time with her during their scientific phase, and are with her when she dies.

## Dr. Franken

Dr. Franken is the man who invents the surgery that replaces a damaged thumb with a patient's big toe. He is an exuberant man who uses profanity generously, and is greatly admired and respected by Laura. Dr. Franken does the surgery that allows Hugh to become a pitcher again. The doctor allows Hugh and the older boys to work off the cost of the surgery by landscaping his yard.

## Bull Durham

Bull Durham is the famous baseball agent who actually existed and is not just a character in this book. Bull is instrumental in Hugh's initial career and continues to support him after the thumb/toe surgery. Bull is an irascible character who endears himself to the family and is at the wake when Hugh passes away. There are many discussions between Bull and Hugh regarding baseball philosophy.



## **Elder Babcock**

As the preacher at Laura's church, Elder Babcock is the ultimate figure of religious authority, and his appearances in the story signify Laura's religion interfering in the lives of the family. It is Elder Babcock who writes the original letter disavowing Irwin's eligibility for conscientious objector status.

## **Elder Joon**

Elder Joon is the antithesis of Elder Babcock, as he represents a religious man who is humane, loves life, and does more than preach at people. Elder Joon is a Korean visiting preacher who jumps right into the Irwin rescue efforts and proves to be a key element in the success of the mission.

## **Major Keys**

Major Keys is in charge of the hospital in Mira Loma where Irwin is being held. He represents the government, and the seemingly insurmountable wall that the Chance family must climb in order to free Irwin and restore the family to its wholeness.

## **Linda Chance**

Linda is Irwin's wife. She is abused as a child, just like Laura. Linda is timid and frightened at the beginning of her time with Irwin, and even resents the Chance family during the rescue because she is afraid they will hurt Irwin's possibilities of discharge. As the years go by, however, Linda becomes stronger and ends up partnering with Irwin to adopt five more children.



# Objects/Places

## Camas, WA

Camas, Washington is the small town where the Chance family lives. It is an actual town, not fictional, and is located in south Washington, near the Oregon border. The main industry in town is the pulp mill where Hugh works and, eventually, where Peter finds employment.

## Vietnam War

This is the war of the 1960s for the United States, and one that divides the country. The novel is decidedly anti-war, and Vietnam is presented as the worst possible location for the best possible child, Irwin.

## Lucky Strikes

This is the brand name of Hugh's favorite cigarettes. This is an obvious play to keep everything in the novel baseball oriented. The cigarettes indeed are not lucky as they cause him to die of lung cancer at a young age.

## Thumb/Toe Surgery

This is a revolutionary surgery invented by Dr. Franken that replaces a dead thumb with the patient's working big toe, and replacing the toe with a prosthetic.

## Paper Mill

This is a large plant located near Camas that turns timber into paper. The paper mill symbolizes the dead end life Hugh faces if he cannot return to baseball

## Baseball

The sport of baseball, its statistics, its legends and heroes play a major part of this novel, representing Hugh's object of worship. All of the older boys participate in the rituals and sacredness of the game, as they admire their father and want to be like him.

## Seventh Day Adventist Church

This is a religion that has extremely strict rules and regulations, and demands their congregations observe Saturday as the Sabbath instead of the traditional Sunday.



## Me Kong Delta

This is the part of Vietnam where Irwin is assigned, and where he suffers his split with reality.

## Chance Family Home

This is a house large enough to accommodate a family of eight, but not extravagant or luxurious. Its furniture, window coverings, landscaping and décor are simple. It is not the house itself that is important to the story, but the lives of the occupants within it.

## Kincaid, OK

This is the town in Oklahoma where Hugh is sent when he has a shoulder injury, to work in a Double A minor league baseball team. The Chance family is very happy in this small town, creating some good memories. They name their youngest son after the town.

## Watch

The Vietnamese boy who causes the death of Irwin's friend in Vietnam is wearing a large watch, obviously found or stolen from an American. Just before the boy is killed by the men from Irwin's unit, the boy is winding the watch. This is the act that makes Irwin go over the edge, mentally.

## Supper table

Laura gathers her family together every night at the supper table, and it is a symbol of her role as the caretaker and homemaker of the family. The supper table becomes a place of intense confrontations between Laura and her rebellious sons. Later, it becomes the place where the rescue plans for Irwin are hatched.

## India

This country is the focus of Peter's dreams and research all his life until he actually arrives and it is more exotic and foreign than he ever imagined. This country and its religions are symbolic of Peter seeking truth in the wrong places.

## The Brothers K

The name of the novel is significant because it brings to mind the famous novel The Brothers Karamazov. There are similarities to the Russian novel, but it should be noted



that K is also the baseball shorthand for Strike Out, and this term is mentioned several times in *The Brothers K*.



# Themes

## Baseball and Religion are Similar

In this novel, Hugh is the high priest of baseball, and Laura is the dedicated worker in religion. Both Hugh and Laura have their congregations, with Hugh admired and followed by his sons and most men in the story, and Laura by the twins and Irwin. Irwin is a dedicated follower of both baseball and religion.

In both congregations, there are rituals, regulations and meetings where attendance is required to receive full impact and measure. Both congregations have their worshipers who spend hours reviewing the rules and the statistics, and discussing the legends and heroes. There are various means of interpreting the logistics and styles of baseball and religion, inside tricks, and the ability to practice without formal education or training.

In both baseball and religion, a person could easily lose themselves in participation, move to a level of fanaticism, and neglect their families and jobs in pursuit of a higher level of devotion.

The author pits Hugh and Laura against each other over their choice of worship throughout the book. Sometimes it is a playful tolerance, but sometimes the conflict erupts into violence and sorrow for the entire family. The children see the need to choose sides, and only Irwin can move easily between the two factions. It is symbolic that Laura's faith interferes with the observation of baseball games on television, and that Hugh's decision to practice pitching removes him from the only religious action he ever takes, that of saying grace at the supper table.

## War Is Pointless

This theme is hinted at early in the novel, and the reader learns that Hugh's father died in WWII while trying to escape from a German prison camp. The pointless aspect is revealed when Hugh's mother is denied insurance compensation because she is not an American citizen, which means that Hugh's father went to war to defend country and his family, but his family lost him and his financial support because of the war.

The Vietnam War is next for the family, and even though Everett spends his entire college experience speaking out against the war and gives up his citizenship to protest it, the war goes on, and eventually tries to eat up the kindness and sweetest of the Chance boys, Irwin.

War is presented in this novel as the ultimate punishment for acts against God. Hugh's father marries an atheist and dies in war because of it. Irwin lives in sin with his girlfriend Linda, and is punished by injury and temporary insanity in war.



## Rebirth and Renewal

The story of Hugh Chance is one of a man who has been knocked down by life several times, but keeps coming back stronger. His story is a testament of courage and adaptation.

Hugh is a young man with substantial athletic ability and a bright future, but is forced to give up college in order to support his mother and new wife when his father is killed. His professional baseball career is delayed because of a shoulder injury, then completely derailed when his thumb is damaged. He has surgery to repair the thumb, but is now too old to return to the majors. He has a successful rebound in the minors, then must leave baseball to rescue his son. He rescues his son only to find out he is dying from lung cancer.

Throughout all these trials and tribulations, Hugh feels the impact of the latest loss or twist of fate, but does not let it defeat him. Again and again he re-invents himself, recognizes his faults and overcomes them, fights with everything he has against those who would attack or harm his family.

When faced with a life of a pulp mill worker, Hugh turns away from drinking and practices pitching. When injured, he has a revolutionary surgery. When faced with a wife who is attacking his children, he comes to a fair solution. When leaving baseball, he dedicates himself to his family. When told he is dying, he does not rail against fate; instead he spends time with his family, and ends his life with dignity.



# Style

## Point of View

The entire story is told through Kincaid Chance's first person point of view. Rather than just relying on his observations and opinions for the story, the author includes newspaper articles, letters to and from family members, and conversations with people who were at various events, so these can still be included in the main character's experience.

The reader is aware that Kincaid's point of view is biased with the love of his family, and the willingness of Kincaid to forgive his family's faults and eccentricities for this reason. He is not a reliable source for all aspects of the events, or for an unbiased opinion on any subject, especially if it concerns baseball or his father.

By seeing the story through the eyes of Kincaid, the reader is privy to his thoughts, feelings and reactions, and it encourages the reader to feel the same love Kincaid has for his family and for baseball.

Using Kincaid as the storyteller removes him somewhat from the action of the story, and he seldom steps from the observer/reporter mode to become an active part of the tale. It is Kincaid who is struck by his father, and who strikes Everett during an especially heated argument between his mother and his brother. Most of the story is Kincaid reporting on the conversations of his brothers or his parents, observations of character traits of his family, and only providing the minimum on any updates of his own personal life. This allows the reader to concentrate on the main story, which is about Hugh Chance blending his love for baseball with his love for his wife and children.

## Setting

Most of the plot moves forward through conversation between the family members in the home of the Chance family. All major events happen in this house: the fight between Everett and his mother, Everett's arrest, Irwin's announcement about Linda and the Army, fights between Hugh and Laura, the decision to go rescue Irwin, and finally, Hugh's death.

The location of the home is Camas, Washington, a typical small town in America. This symbolizes the simplicity of the Chance family and represents their portrayal as a middle class family with normal aspirations for their children.

Most of Hugh's baseball scenes happen in dry hot Arizona, a counter to the lushness of Washington state where his family resides.



Vietnam is the location of Irwin's departure from the security and love of home, and his subsequent break with reality. The author describes Vietnam as if it were another planet, which it must have seemed to the men sent to fight there.

The hospital where Irwin is sent is pictured more as a prison, and represents the impenetrable and confusing government that has treated this family so badly.

The story begins with a cohesive but troubled family in Camas, and ends in the same location with the children of Hugh and Laura forming their own families and carrying on the tradition of Hugh Chance.

## Language and Meaning

There are a number of baseball terms used in the story, especially when the characters are watching a television broadcast, participating in a baseball game, or discussing any of the techniques, statistics or legends of baseball.

Each baseball term is explained by the author, which allows even a baseball-deficient reader to follow without consulting the sports section of their dictionary.

By discussing baseball at such length in this book, the author is introducing the reader to his view that baseball and religion are not too dissimilar. Each has its own language, rituals, heroes and requires attendance at the ceremonies to continue worship.

The vocabulary of this novel is extensive and appropriate. The discussions between characters are believable and easy to understand. Locations are not overtly described, but sufficiently to picture the setting.

Physical descriptions of the characters are spare, encouraging the reader to concentrate more on the spirit of the character rather than the picture of them.

## Structure

The novel is 716 pages long, broken into six books. These six books are further divided into chapters. These chapters do not follow a traditional chapter set up, and are sometimes presented with further subsections. The subsections vary from copies of letters, old documents, homework assignments, newspaper articles, and accounts of baseball games.

Book One is entitled Joy to the World. The major characters are introduced, and through an English composition by Irwin, the family history is outlined. Book Two tells the story of what happens after Hugh strikes Kincaid, and begins Hugh's road to recovery. This is the section where the older boys, now in their teens, begin to rebel against their mother's religion, and she begins to see herself in a religious fight against them.



In Book Three, there is further character development of all members of the family, and Grandawma passes away. Book Four shows Peter, Everett and Irwin going to college, Hugh going back to professional baseball, and Laura increasing in her fanaticism in regards to her religion. The ground is laid for the older boys to go even further away from the family, as Everett goes to Canada, Peter to India, and Irwin to Vietnam. Book Five is the longest and most active of the entire novel. Irwin is injured and sent to Mira Loma, Everett leaves Canada and is arrested, Hugh leaves baseball, Peter returns from India, and Laura stands up to her church. Irwin is rescued and the family returns home only to find that Hugh is dying of lung cancer.

In Book Six, Hugh dies, Irwin recovers, Peter and Irwin create a business together, Everett gets out of jail and marries Tasha. Kincaid, our narrator, marries Amy and, at the end, tells the reader how well everyone finally turned out, despite their differences in the past.



## Quotes

Book One, Joy to the World, page 23, Hugh Chance:

"We're both washed up," he said. "Both athletic wrecks. That's how me and that old geezer are alike."

Book Two, Dogmatomachy, page 163, Officer Hervano:

"But lo and behold, not five minutes after dying—though even Christ himself had the good manners to stay down three days—up onto the girder swings the ugliest pardon my French face of the stupidest excuse of a hero I ever hope to see."

Book Two, Dogmatomachy, page 169, Hugh:

There is a part of me that wants to state flat out that I learned more in the hedge about the defiance of dullness and career death, about the glory hidden in defeat, about the amazing inner capacities of a straightforward no-frills man—even a man stripped of hope—than I've learned anywhere since.

Book Two, Dogmatomachy, page 187, Hugh:

Then she froze. And then she began to let out a series of horrible, convulsive gasps, which, even in my wooden state, I recognized as the death rattle of my brothers' and my childhood.

Book Two, Dogmatomachy, page 199, Hugh:

Hmmm. I'd never thought of that. Papa knew things I couldn't possibly know. He was in his thirties. He was old.

Book Three, Rebels and Scientists, page 221, Hugh:

What we'd gained from the Psalm War explosion was three hours of idle time on Saturday mornings. The price of those three hours had been our relationship with our mother. It was not what I'd call a bargain.

Book Four, The Left Stuff, page 401, Hugh:

We all stiffened, and my parents grabbed both arms of their chairs; we were jet passengers now, coming down into the fog for an announced crash landing.

Book Five, The Brothers K, page 559, Peter:

"But I became a scholar because I wanted truth in my life. And if I buy those manuscripts, my life becomes a lie."



Book Five, The Brothers K, page 570, Everett:

"Because you're in my center, Tasha. You've invaded my heart and I can't get you out. So no one else can come in. But you're gone. You vanished. So I have no center."

Book Five, The Brothers K, page 598, Bet:

"Insult God with your cowardice, Mama, but not with your bribes. It's embarrassing."

Book Six, Blue Box, page 669, Hugh:

The leak in Papa's boat was cancer.

Book Six, Blue Box, page 685, Hugh:

Contrariness as deep as hers has got to be some kind of virtue.



## Topics for Discussion

How is this novel similar to *The Brothers Karamazov*? How is it dissimilar? Which characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* remind you of the ones in *The Brothers K*?

Discuss Laura Chance in detail. How did her sexual abuse as a child affect her as a wife? As a mother? As a congregation member?

Do you see Hugh as the hero of this novel? Why or why not? Who is the hero if it is not Hugh?

Discuss the author's plot device of including documents from the "attic" of the Chance home. Does this work? Discuss what information is included in these documents and how the information might have been relayed to the reader in another fashion.

What is Kincaid's role in the family? Is he the only quiet one in the family? Does he take a back seat in the story as a plot device or because it is his nature to sit back and observe rather than be the instigator of action?

Discuss the relationship between Everett and Peter, especially how they communicate. Both men seek a dream that begins with their deep affection for baseball, but goes in other directions. How are they similar and how are they different?

What is the symbolism in these events: 1) Everett choosing a small, almost deserted village in Canada for his emigration; 2) Peter losing everything he owns and loves in a con in India; 3) the essay at the beginning of Book Four regarding Roger Maris.

What does Everett mean, in his letter to Kincaid about Tasha joining him in Canada, when he refers to a new continent being discovered?

Describe in detail what happens to Irwin in Vietnam and why that causes him to depart from reality and turn against his superiors.

What is the role of women in this novel? Discuss Laura, Winifred, Beatrice, Linda, Tasha and Grandawma. Are they strong women? Are their characters detailed and well outlined, or are they used in a stereotypical manner?