

The Burgess Boys Study Guide

The Burgess Boys by Elizabeth Strout

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Contents

The Burgess Boys Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Prologue through Book 1, Chapter 4.....	5
Book 1, Chapters 5 through 8.....	8
Book 2, Chapters 1 through 5.....	10
Book 2, Chapters 6 through 10.....	13
Book 3, Chapters 1 through 7.....	16
Book 4, Chapters 1 through 6.....	19
Book 4, Chapters 7 through 14.....	22
Characters.....	25
Symbols and Symbolism.....	28
Settings.....	30
Themes and Motifs.....	31
Styles.....	34
Quotes.....	35



Plot Summary

The Burgess Boys, by Elizabeth Strout, follows a year in the life of Bob and Jim Burgess, who have escaped their small hometown in Maine for New York. As they return to Shirley Falls to help their sister Susan and her son, who is being charged with a hate crime, the truth comes out about a tragic accident that has defined their family and the Burgess boys must reevaluate their relationship and their lives.

Bob, Jim, and Susan Burgess grew up in tiny Shirley Falls, a town in Maine that is in decline but has recently seen an influx of immigrants from Somalia. The Somalis assimilation into the community has not been easy, as their customs are different and the language barrier often leads to misunderstandings and miscommunication. Things come to a head when nineteen-year-old Zach Olson, Susan's son, throws a pig's head into the local mosque during the holy time of Ramadan, leading to his arrest and the threat of a federal hate crime charge.

Zach's problems lead Susan to call her brothers, both of whom are attorneys in New York, although they have traveled different paths. Jim rocketed to fame when he won the acquittal of a man accused of murder. Now he represents white collar defendants for a large law firm and lives well with his wealthy wife, having raised three children together. Bob, divorced and childless, works for Legal Aid and continues to be troubled by the fact that at age four, he released the clutch of a car that ran over and killed his father. The family never speaks of the accident, but is always hovers over their lives.

Jim and his wife, Helen, are on vacation when Susan calls, so Bob goes to Maine to help. However, he ends up making things worse, thus proving what everyone already knows -- the Jim is the competent one in the family. The situation escalates as news reports of the pigs head incident spread, and local clergy plan a tolerance rally to diffuse the situation, although a white supremacist group plans a counter protest. Jim and Bob return to Maine for the rally, where Jim gives a heartfelt, rousing speech and the problem seems to be on the way to becoming resolved. However, he soon learns that his arrogant attitude has angered local and state politicians, who now plan to charge Zach with a federal hate crime, causing the terrified young man to run away.

The brothers return to Maine again to sort out Zach's disappearance, which at first appears to be a potential suicide. Eventually they learn that he has gone to his father's home in Sweden, but in the meantime, Jim gets drunk and tells Bob that it was he who let off the clutch and caused the accident that killed their father. Jim was eight years old at the time and moved Bob to the driver's seat before anyone arrived, and although he felt guilty, he never told anyone and allowed Bob to shoulder the blame and guilt.

While Bob's life begins to turn around for the positive, Jim's unravels when an affair with his paralegal leads to a sexual harassment charge, his dismissal from the firm and Helen kicking him out. Eventually all the charges against Zach are dropped and he returns home, but by this time Jim has taken a teaching job at a small upstate college and is living in near squalor. Bob finds him there and takes him back to Shirley Falls, then



he and Susan put him on a bus to New York where he hopes to reconcile with Helen. In a final act of redemption, Bob returns to his hometown to start a new life with Margaret Estaver, the Unitarian minister who has taken an interest in Zach's case, but his ties to his brother clearly remain strong.



Prologue through Book 1, Chapter 4

Summary

Prologue

The Prologue of *The Burgess Boys* is narrated in the first person by a woman presumed to be the book's author. She now lives in New York, but her other still lives in the small town of Shirley Falls, Maine and the two women have fallen into the habit of talking frequently about the Burgess family, who are also from Shirley Falls. Jim Burgess has become a prominent attorney after winning a highly-publicized murder trial some years ago. His younger brother Bob also lives in New York now, but was rumored to have killed his father in some sort of tragedy when he was a child. Their sister Susan still lives in Shirley Falls, and the narrator tells her mother she plans to write the story of the Burgess kids.

Book 1, Chapter 1

Beginning with Book 1, Chapter 1, the book switches to a third person narrator. Helen Burgess packs for a vacation she is about to take with her husband Jim when she gets a call from his brother Bob. When Bob comes over to join them for dinner, their sister Susan calls to say that her son Zachary is about to be arrested for throwing a pig's head into a local mosque. Since this appears to be a hate crime, it is already getting a lot of publicity, so Bob agrees to go to Maine and handle the situation so Jim and Helen can proceed with their vacation. Bob does not have a car, so Jim says he can borrow his. Returning to his own apartment, Bob watches as another couple in his building fight and the wife has the husband arrested, although Bob is not convinced that the man actually hit her. The following morning, Jim is frustrated when he realizes Bob did not take the keys to his car and they have to drop them off for him on their way to the airport.

Book 1, Chapter 2

Chapter 2 introduces Susan Burgess Olson, whose husband left her and moved to Sweden. So, she now rents a room to an old woman named Mrs. Drinkwater. After talking with her son Zach, Susan calls Police Chief Gerry O'Hare and arranges for Zach to turn himself in later that day. Meanwhile, Bob drives from New York to Maine and thinks about his past, including his ex-wife Pam. After he arrives, he and Susan take Zach to the police station, where he is arrested and booked. While they are waiting, Susan tells Bob that some local clergy are talking about having a rally regarding the incident. When Zach is released on bail, Bob makes a joke as they are leaving the police station and Zach smiles just as a photographer takes a picture.

Book 1, Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, Jim and Helen have arrived for their tropical vacation with his law partner Alan and his wife Dorothy, whom they tell about the situation with Susan and Zach.



Dorothy gives Helen a newspaper article about the horrible plight of Somali refugees, some of whom have settled in Shirley Falls and are presumed to be the targets of Zach's hate crime. Helen is upset by the article, but thinks about her three grown children and forgets about it.

Book 1, Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, Susan expresses concern that Zach will go to jail and worries about how scared he is. She talks to Bob about the Somalis and reveals that she does not like them because they behave so differently and receive so much help from the community. Bob needs a drink so he goes out to buy wine and food. Meanwhile, a Somali named Abdikarim Ahmed feels resentment and anger when he remembers that the police officers who came to the mosque after the pig's head incident had laughed about it. The next morning, Susan goes to work and Bob talks with Mrs. Drinkwater, who tells him that Zach cried in his room at night, and the newspaper picture of Zach laughing on his way out of the police station makes the situation worse.

Analysis

This section establishes the book's primary plot and introduces the main characters. It is not clear what Zach's motivation was in throwing the pig's head into the mosque, but the situation escalates quickly into a national news story because there is already tension in the community. Shirley Falls is a small town with a declining population and poor economy, and its residents are conservative New Englanders who do not like change. The arrival of a large number of Somali refugees has upset the applecart in a number of ways, and Susan is one of the many people who mistrust the new arrivals.

The concept of misunderstanding becomes a theme in this section. The locals of Shirley Falls do not understand the culture and habits of the Somalis and the refugees likewise are not adapting well to their new surroundings. The photo of Zach smiling causes everyone to think he was making light of his situation when the opposite is actually true.

This section also provides initial insights into the main characters. Jim is the successful, famous brother with the supportive wife and three children, while Bob is the likeable underachiever who is divorced and childless. Both are New Yorkers now, but while they have remained ostensibly close, they live quite different lives. Susan is filled with bitterness for a variety of reasons and there are hints that Zach has deep-seated problems also.

Chapters 3 and 4, in particular, provide a stark contrast between the lives of well-to-do Jim and Helen as they enjoy an expensive tropical vacation and the lives of the impoverished Somali immigrants who are barely scraping by.



Discussion Question 1

Describe the three Burgess children in detail based on what you know so far. How are they alike and how are they different?

Discussion Question 2

What do you know about Jim and Bob's relationship at this point? What positive aspects do you see in their relationship? What negative aspects?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss some of the ways in which Abdikarim thinks the people of Shirley Falls have misunderstood the Somalis. Do you think he has reason to be upset?

Vocabulary

Atheist, homicide, eclipse (verb), devotee, acquittal, allegedly, eloquent, relentless, component, loathe, scrumptious, remote, betrayal, lineage, cesspool, gregarious, exacerbate, paralysis, abrupt, prestigious, authority, variegated.



Book 1, Chapters 5 through 8

Summary

Book 1, Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, Jim is bragging to Helen about how well his golf game is going when she tells him Bob called. Jim gets frustrated with her failure to provide details on how things are going in Maine and they get testy with each other. Later at dinner, Helen mentions to Dorothy and Alan that Jim rarely drinks and she tells them that she got drunk and danced on a table after Jim won the Walley Packer trial.

Book 1, Chapter 6

In Chapter 6, there is tension between Bob and Susan as they wait for the local lawyer, whose arrival has been delayed. Bob is fuzzy after drinking too much and taking sleeping pills the previous night and when he goes to a convenience store, a Somali woman accuses him of almost hitting her in the parking lot. Bob drives slowly to Susan's house and tells her they have to call Jim.

Book 1, Chapter 7

In Chapter 7, Helen returns to their room to find Jim screaming at Bob on the phone and he brings her up to date about the newspaper photo and the parking lot incident. He also says that Bob refuses to get into a car now and plans to fly back to New York and leave the car in Maine. Jim now must go to Maine and straighten things out but Helen does not want to go with him.

Book 1, Chapter 8

In Chapter 8, Bob thinks Jim is right to believe he is useless. Margaret Estaver arrives and introduces herself to Bob as the local Unitarian minister and appears to be sympathetic to the family's situation. After she leaves, Bob calls for a taxi to take him to the airport in Portland.

Analysis

Chapter 5 is short but significant because it shows the first hints of tensions between Jim and Helen, revealing another side of their relationship and another side of Jim's personality.

The incident with the Somali woman in Chapter 6 further exacerbates the situation between the refugees and the other people of Shirley Falls. It is unclear whether Bob actually grazed her with his car or not, but he is shaken up and realizes that he needs to inform his brother. Again, the author is setting up a stark contrast between the two



brothers with Bob as the pleasant but somewhat bumbling one and Jim as the competent savior who can solve any problem presented to him. Bob's alcohol use is becoming a greater issue also, and the incident with the car parallels the accident during his childhood when Bob accidentally ran over his father with the car, killing him.

Book 1 ends with Bob continuing to sink while Jim prepares to rescue him and save the entire family, foreshadowing a reversal of roles that will take place later in the novel. It is also important to note Jim's comment to Helen about the remark Bob made to him after the Wally Packer acquittal -- that he had done a great job but had taken the man's fate from him.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the incident with the Somali woman in the parking lot upset Bob so much?

Discussion Question 2

Analyze the character of Helen at this point in the novel. Do you think she is likeable? What seem to be her good and bad points?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the planned rally as Margaret explains it to Bob. Does it seem to be a good thing or bad? How might it affect the community as a whole and Zach's situation in particular?

Vocabulary

Cavernous, mesmerize, foreboding, convey, gait, confrontational, discretion, ostensibly, urgency, implacable, veracity, vexation, disgruntlement, benevolent, sanguine, hinder, unison, supremacy, diversity, agitated.



Book 2, Chapters 1 through 5

Summary

Book 2, Chapter 1

The first chapter of Book 2 finds Bob back in New York and meeting his ex-wife Pam at a bar near Central Park. Bob and Pam were unable to have children, which is part of the reason their marriage fell apart, and now Pam has remarried and has two boys. While she waits for Bob to arrive, Pam thinks about her feeling that she is living the wrong life, having given up the scientific research she enjoyed doing. Bob brings her up to date and tells her he is no longer seeing his former girlfriend Sarah but refuses Pam's offer to fix him up. Back at home, Bob reflects on a press conference the police chief held that has stirred up the situation even more.

Book 2, Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, Abdikarim again recalls the police officers laughing about the pig's head and the depressing situation his people continue to face in this country. His daughter has adjusted well but he feels he is too old to learn English or fully acclimate. He also learns that a white supremacist group is stirring up trouble around the country regarding the pig's head incident, but the rally will go on even though the Muslims object to. Meanwhile, a group of Somali women come to the eyeglasses store where Susan works and Susan fixes a young woman's glasses without charging her, but secretly wishes the refugees had never come to her town.

Book 2, Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, Bob joins Helen and Jim for dinner and Jim says that Charlie Tibbetts, Zach's attorney, is doing a good job with the case. Bob continues to feel that all he did in Maine was make things worse. Meanwhile, Pam reflects on her previous life with Bob and the fact that she felt almost like one of the Burgess siblings during their marriage. She also thinks that she benefited from the fact that Bob's terrible secret made him his mother's favorite and therefore she loved Pam as well. Jim tells Helen that he plans to go to Shirley Falls to speak at the upcoming tolerance rally because he is still well thought of there.

Book 2, Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, Susan gets a prescription for tranquilizers and sleeping pills, but she gets them filled in another town so no one will know. She calls Bob, who tells her what to expect during Zach's upcoming court appearance and talks to her until she falls asleep.

Book 1, Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, Bob and Jim discuss the upcoming rally, but Helen refuses to go.



Analysis

This section sheds further light on Bob's personality and life through the eyes of his ex-wife Pam. The fact that Bob has no children has been mentioned a number of times previously, but we now learn that it is because of his sterility, which was the primary factor in the breakup of his marriage, as Pam wanted children and now has them. Pam still clearly cares deeply for Bob and he is close to her and her new family, but the reader gets a clearer sense of his loneliness as he must watch her family from the outside and has none of his own. Pam's reflections also paint a clearer picture of the Burgess family as the children were growing up. Susan was always rude to Bob despite the fact that they are twins and Jim has always been the golden boy, adored by everyone, including Bob. The end of Chapter 4 also solidifies the depiction of Bob as a man with a good heart, though slightly troubled as he helps Susan until she falls asleep despite her continued poor treatment of him, which we assume is caused by his role in their father's death.

As the book approaches the halfway point, the tolerance rally begins to loom large over the plot. Hate groups in other parts of the country have begun to talk about the Shirley Falls situation on the Internet and the community is determined to hold the rally even though the Muslim community would prefer not to draw additional attention to their plight. The rally is also becoming a point of contention between Jim and Helen, and cars continue to be a strong symbol for Bob's haplessness. It was he who accidentally killed their father with a car when he was only four years old, he apparently nearly hit a Somali woman while he was in Maine, and Jim continues to berate him for leaving his car in Shirley Falls.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Helen's feelings about Shirley Falls to those of Pam. Why does each woman hold such a strong, but different opinion about the town?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the scene in which the Somali women come into Susan's store? Does the encounter change her feelings about the immigrants? If so, how?

Discussion Question 3

Why do the Muslims in Shirley Falls object to the upcoming tolerance rally? Are they justified in their opinions about its potential effects?

Vocabulary

Intimate, dismal, nostalgia, provincial, inclination, ludicrous, relentless, ultimatum, strident, mirth, incomprehension, exquisite, untethered, entity, apathy, osmosis, replication, disdain, renown, appalled.



Book 2, Chapters 6 through 10

Summary

Book 2, Chapter 6

In Chapter 6, Police Chief Gerry O'Hare tells his wife about a meeting earlier in the day involving several city officials and the imam from the mosque. He is proud of his performance and thinks he stold some thunder from liberals like Rick Huddleston, who accused him of not adequately protecting the Somalis in the past. His wife asks if it is true that the Burgess boys will be coming and he confirms that Jim will speak at the rally.

Book 2, Chapter 7

Chapter 7 finds Bob at Jim's Midtown office, planning their strategy, and Bob comments that Jim is becoming increasingly insufferable. Jim notes that Maine needs the immigrants because the state and town is suffering economically as young people move elsewhere, and Bob agrees but insists that there are many inherent problems. Before leaving, Bob notes that Jim might be happier doing more courtroom work.

Book 2, Chapter 8

In Chapter 8, the presence of the Somalis is causing deep divisions among the residents of Shirley Falls even though local clergy, including Margaret Estaver, Rabbi Goldman and others have tried to diffuse the situation. Now a white supremacy group called the World Church of the People has requested a permit to hold a gathering on the same day as the Together for Tolerance rally. Meanwhile, Zach comes home and tells Susan that he has been fired from his job at WalMart, and Jim assures his sister that he and Bob will be there soon.

Book 2, Chapter 9

Chapter 9 finds Helen at home, thinking about her life with Jim. She tells him she needs a job and he agrees that it is a good idea, but then she changes the subject. She makes plans to reconnect with some women friends and calms Jim down when he learns about Zach's firing and expresses his dread of going to Maine.

Book 2, Chapter 10

In Chapter 10, Jim and Bob arrive in Shirley Falls and take Zach to a hotel to keep him safe from potential trouble stemming from the presence of the white supremacy group. Zach reveals that his father's girlfriend went to Somalia as a nurse and saw horrible things. Jim becomes concerned when he learns that Zach's father has warned him that the local Somali immigrants might be a little crazy and Jim realizes he threw the pig's head to impress his father. The next day, Jim and Bob go to the rally, where Bob speaks



with Margaret and continues to think about her. Jim makes an eloquent speech that impresses everyone, including Bob, but afterward they are approached by a young man from the white supremacist group. Bob confronts him about his hate speech, but when the kid calls Bob fat, Jim jumps to his defense and almost breaks the kid's arm. The rally is a success, attracting about 4,000 people, both whites and Somalis, while the counter gathering has only thirteen people.

That night, Abdikarim thinks about how nice all the white people had been that day and begins to feel differently toward them, although he still wishes he could go back to Somalia. Later, Jim questions Zach about what happened to him at the jail but he is vague and the following day as he and Bob drive home, Jim says Susan told him Zach had soiled himself that night. Before leaving Maine, Jim says people are talking about how great he was at the rally and it looks like Zach's case will be resolved easily. Later that night, at the hotel, Jim tells Bob that Pam came on to him after they had separated and Bob, who has been drinking, has the feeling of a flashback. As they return to New York, Jim apologizes for his behavior and they discuss their childhoods and the fact that their mother never really liked Susan.

Analysis

The centerpiece of this section is the long-anticipated rally, at which Jim wows the crowd and Bob feels full of affection and admiration for his brother. Still, their relationship is strained, particularly when Jim says Pam came on to him once. It is never clear whether this is true or not because Jim waffles on it the next day, but the roughhousing that follows causes Bob to feel a familiar sensation of liquid running down his neck and in the author's words, "a lightbulb goes on." This is a short moment, but it foreshadows important things to come.

The rally seems to have had a positive effect on the town and on Zach's case. Jim has retained his status as the hometown hero and something seems to have shifted in the town's mood s everyone feels good about the event. Even Abdikarim begins to feel differently about the people of Shirley Falls because he sees them looking directly at him and smiling, something he has not been accustomed to. Abdikarim is a minor character, rarely seen at this point in the novel, but the author uses him as the voice of his people and a window into their sad history.

This section also finds Bob having another encounter with Margaret and there are strong hints that a relationship will develop between them even though he still has feelings for Pam.

Discussion Question 1

This marks the halfway point of the book and the centerpiece of this section is the rally, but after much buildup, not much happens. Why do you think the author writes it this way? What purpose does the rally serve? Has anything been resolved?



Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the encounter between the Burgess brothers and the white supremacist kid after the rally? What does it reveal about Bob? What does it reveal about Jim? Are their different reactions surprising given what we know about them so far? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Jim tells Bob that Pam came on to him? What does he hope to accomplish?

Vocabulary

Sardonic, prismatic, receding, sparse, impermeable, nonchalance, revelry, accountable, pragmatic, taunt, instigate, pungent, vibrancy, liaison, voucher, tolerance, convene, umbrage, reprehensible, melancholy, visceral, recoil, precipitously, eloquence, interject, grandiose, timbre, garrulous.



Book 3, Chapters 1 through 7

Summary

Book 3, Chapter 1

In the first chapter of Book 3, we learn that Susan had always wanted a girl and was devastated when she miscarried her first child, who was a daughter. She then felt guilty when Zach was a boy and was always an odd-looking, strange child. He suffered from teasing and was often beaten up, and his father, Steve, accused Susan of turning him into a weenie. She looks for job and volunteer opportunities for Zach, but Charlie Tibbetts vetoes most ideas because he would run into Somalis. The holidays come and go, and Zach's case is moving slowly when they get a call saying that the Office of the Maine Attorney General has filed a civil rights action against him.

Book 3, Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, Helen loses the diamond in her engagement ring and Bob comes to help her look for it, but Jim is too concerned with the civil case to care. He calls Diane Dodge but is unable to dissuade her from pursuing the suit and again he angrily says how much he hates Maine. After leaving Jim's house, Bob worries about what Jim said about Pam coming on to him and wonders what that would mean. Helen and Jim go to the opera with Alan and Dorothy and when Alan says how much he has missed seeing her, Helen is surprised at how much this pleases her.

Book 3, Chapter 3

Chapter 3 covers Zach's hearing, at which Abdikarim and another Somali testify about how terrifying the attack on the mosque was. Then Zach takes the stand and Diane grills him mercilessly although he swears that he did not mean any harm and that he did not know the building was a religious site or that the date was that of a Muslim holy day. The judge announces that Zach has been found guilty of the civil rights violation and that if he goes within two miles of a mosque or has contact with the Somali community, he will be jailed. Afterward, Margaret tells Bob that the Attorney General filed the charges because he was angry that Jim showed him up at the rally and rankled feelings by leaving while the governor was seeking. Later, Zach asks Bob if he has a crush on Margaret, but he denies it.

Book 3, Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, Pam and her husband are at a dinner party when the group begins talking about Zach's case, but Pam does not say that Zach is her nephew. She remembers how sad and strange Zach was as a child and realizes for the first time that Bob did not come to their Christmas party this year. Later, Dorothy Anglin is having lunch with a friend when she sees Jim at another table with his attractive young paralegal, but her husband dismisses it, saying that Jim has had a lot on his mind lately.



Book 3, Chapter 5

Chapter 5 finds Abdikarim lying awake at night, thinking about his son's death back in Somalia and all the violence there. He tells his niece that Zach is cutting his heart, not because he did something wrong, but because he is just a frightened child. A month later, Susan gets a call from Charlie telling her that the federal government is going to charge Zach with a hate crime. When she tells Zach, he is terrified because he has done Internet research and knows how very serious this is.

Book 3, Chapter 6

Chapter 6 opens with Jim telling Helen how much he loves her. After he leaves for work, she feels something is wrong with her and makes an appointment with her doctor, but feels happy as she goes to Manhattan for the day. As she is eating lunch, Jim calls to say Zach has disappeared, leaving a note saying, "Mom, I'm sorry." Jim plans to leave for Maine and Helen says she will go with him.

Book 3, Chapter 7

The final chapter of Book 3 opens with Susan calling Gerry, who says she cannot file a missing persons report until Zach has been gone 24 hours. Jim, Helen and Bob arrive but there is little they can do and everyone is worried that Zach will kill himself. Helen goes back to New York and Jim, at the hotel with Bob, drinks a lot of alcohol and talks about how his life seems to be falling apart. Then he confesses that he is the one who pulled the clutch on the car, causing it to run over and kill their father, and he put four-year-old Bob in the front seat and let everyone think it was him, but Bob finds this impossible to believe. Susan calls to tell them that Zach is in Sweden with his father and everyone is greatly relieved.

Analysis

The author provides more insight into Zach, Susan and their relationship in this section. Susan's extreme protectiveness of Zach seems to come from her guilt about being disappointed that he was not a girl, and his personality has been shaped, in part, by his father's concerns that he was not normal and his father's abandonment of the family. Bob now tries to stay in touch with him and provide some influence, but Jim has disappeared into his own life again.

Although things seemed to calm down after the rally, they take a much more serious turn in this section when Zach faces charges. In a case of irony, the turn is Jim's fault for simply being himself -- he spoke well at the rally and was proud of his performance, but his arrogance angered powerful people and now Zach is the one who will pay. While Zach is being accused of a terrible hate crime against his Muslim neighbors, the author now begins to move him closer to the Somalis as Abdikarim sees how scared he is and begins sympathizing with him. Now it is the government that is against Zach and a parallel is drawn between his situation as a helpless boy and that of Abdikarim and the other refugees who were tormented and driven from their homeland.



We also see another side of Jim. In addition to having inadvertently worsened Zach's problems through his arrogant attitude, it now appears that he might be having an affair with his paralegal, and in the final chapter of Book 3, he shockingly confesses that he is responsible for their father's death. Since the novel began, Jim has transformed from a confident man who can handle anything to a sham who has spent his entire life living a horrible lie. His guilt explains his intense hatred of Maine and it extends beyond the accident. He also promised to stay in Maine and defend people who really needed help, but instead he bailed out and now represents wealthy hedge fund managers. Bob, always the even-keeled brother, finds it impossible to believe that Jim could have done such a thing, as the accident has been largely responsible for shaping Bob as a person and is something that has always loomed over him although no one ever speak about it. The chapter ends with Bob still refusing to believe Jim's story, but Jim ominously tells him that he will soon crash just as Susan will come down from the emotional high of knowing Zach is alive. His statement ironically foreshadows the fact that Jim is the brother who will soon crash.

Discussion Question 1

What role does Jim inadvertently play in worsening Zach's situation? What clues did the author drop in the chapter on the rally that hinted at this development?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Zach's testimony at the hearing. Do you believe his intentions were as harmless as he says? Should he have known better than to do what he did? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Susan feel partially responsible for how Zach has turned out? Do you think she is right or wrong to feel this way? Why?

Vocabulary

Discernible, disruptive, adamant, bafflement, interminable, unconscionable, intimidate, fascism, assuage, conjure, dilettante, prefab, congenial, sanction, credibility, mute (verb), injunction.



Book 4, Chapters 1 through 6

Summary

Book 4, Chapter 1

In the first chapter of Book 4, two months have passed since Bob returned from Shirley Falls, and he spends a lot of time walking around New York. He feels a bit like a stranger there. He is disturbed by his memories of how differently he was treated by his family because of his role in the accident. Even Jim taunted him. Jim gives Bob the good news that Zach will not be prosecuted for the federal hate crime. When Bob presses him about the accident, Jim says it makes no difference. Bob quietly moves to a new apartment in Manhattan without telling either Jim or Helen. Helen is puzzled about why Bob no longer calls or visits and why Jim is in such a bad mood all the time.

Book 4, Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, Abdikarim is very pleased when Margaret tells him Zach is living in Sweden and asks what it would take for the misdemeanor charges to be dropped. He continues to worry about his homeland but also feels an opening in his soul.

Book 4, Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, Pam learns her job is being phased out and she briefly considers going to nursing school. She reads a book about Somalia and calls Bob to talk about it, but he cuts her short. Bob begins to make friends with his new neighbors and although Jim knows he moved, he does not understand the reasons for it. Bob reflects that he has no memory of life without Jim being the bright spot at its center.

Book 4, Chapter 4

Chapter 4 finds Susan telling Mrs. Drinkwater how well Zach is doing in Sweden, having gained weight and bonding with his father and his girlfriend. She also realizes that although she resented her mother's poor treatment of her, she treated Steve and Zach the same way.

Book 4, Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, Helen and Jim visit their son Larry, who is in college in Arizona. They go for a hike in the desert even though Helen thinks it is too long and the weather too hot, and she nearly collapses halfway through and Jim gets her back with great difficulty. Later, as they prepare to go to the airport, Larry's girlfriend reminds Helen about the fact that Larry was forced to go to summer camp even though he hated it and it was at Jim's insistence that Helen refused to let him come home early.

Book 4, Chapter 6



In Chapter 6, Susan goes to New York for the first time to visit Bob and is overwhelmed by the city. Bob asks her if she remembers the accident and she says she always thought she was responsible and that is why her mother yelled at her so much. While they are having an uncomfortable visit with Jim and Helen, Charlie Tibbetts calls to say that Zach will not be prosecuted on the misdemeanor charge either. The story then skips ahead a few weeks and finds Adriana, Jim's paralegal approaching Alan with sexual harassment charges against Jim, after which Alan goes to talk with Jim. Later, Bob is puzzled when his messages to Jim are not returned and they lose touch. Later, he runs into Jim on the street and Jim is almost unrecognizable, and Jim tells Bob to just go away.

Analysis

Jim's confession has had a strange effect on Bob. He still finds it impossible to believe -- and almost seems as though he prefers not to believe it, yet Jim insists that it is true. Bob is disturbed by the revelation because it up-ends all the assumptions on which he has built his life. The accident has defined him in many ways. It changed the way his mother treated him, making him the favorite child to compensate for his guilt and spending money she did not have on therapy for him. He has always assumed that Jim's treatment of him, often berating him even when they were children, was a result of Bob's role in their father's death but now this is called into question.

After avoiding the subject of the accident all his life, Bob now wants to talk about it with both Jim and Susan, but they are still reticent. In another surprising development, Susan reveals that she has always thought that perhaps she was responsible, which would explain her mother's poor treatment of her. The revelation makes Bob feel like a stranger in the familiar city of New York, symbolizing the fact that he is becoming a stranger to himself since the event that defined him apparently was based on a lie. He also faces conflicting feelings toward Jim, but at the end of the day his brother is still the shining center of his life, as he has always been, and he is shocked when Jim cuts him out of his life because of his sense of guilt and the fact that his own life is falling apart. The fact that Bob's life is starting to turn around is reflected in his growing friendship with his neighbors, as he has always kept his distance from people in the past, as well as his highly symbolic move to a new home, which he does not announce to his brother.

Changes are also taking place in Abdikarim's life. Like Bob, he is beginning to feel a new lightness as he comes to the realization that Zach's act was not borne out of hatred for his people. For the first time since his son's death, his heart begins to open up as he thinks about how frightened Zach is and he relates to him. His conversation with Margaret also hints that he will play a role in Zach's eventual vindication. Zach's life is also taking a turn as Susan sees how much better he seems to be faring in Sweden, and Jim's usually charmed life is taking a turn for the worse.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the various references to learning a new language and what they mean to the characters. What is the significance of these new languages? How are these references symbolic of the way various characters are learning to communicate with each other?

Discussion Question 2

At one point, Bob says he wishes Jim had not told him the truth about the accident. Why do you think Jim finally told him what really happened? Would Bob really have been better off not knowing? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How does Jim's revelation about the accident affect the dynamic between him and Bob?

Vocabulary

Exuberance, amnesiac, dsquieting, amiable, benign, anguish, incarcerate, callous, occlude, intricate, insurgents, senile, variable, immutable, umbrage, curt, succumb, recessive, deplorable.



Book 4, Chapters 7 through 14

Summary

Book 4, Chapter 7

In Chapter 7, Susan tells Mrs. Drinkwater that when she was in New York, she began to understand how confused the Somalis must be in their new surroundings, and she says that the strangest thing had been her brothers. Susan also reveals that she plans to join a knitting group with Gerry O'Hare's wife.

Book 4, Chapter 8

In Chapter 8, Helen has now learned about Jim's affair and the fact that he was asked to leave his law firm. However, for five weeks before she found out, Jim had gone out each morning as if he were going to work but gone to the public library instead. She had encouraged him to open his own practice and offered to fund it and he pretends to be looking at office space, but the story unravels and the chapter ends with her recalling waiting for him to come home so she could get the truth.

Book 4, Chapter 9

In Chapter 9, Abdikarim's niece plans to take her children to Nairobi because she wants them to be African, not Somali-American, and she explains her decision to Margaret.

Book 4, Chapter 10

Chapter 10 reflects on the confrontation between Jim and Helen when he confesses his affair, the lawsuit and other lies he has told. She is angry and devastated, and he said the problems began when he went to Maine and failed at taking care of Zach. He felt he was supposed to take care of everyone but failed, and Adriana made him feel important. The next day, Helen throws him out of the house although she has somewhat mixed feelings. Meanwhile, Bob notices that his life is turning around. He rarely drinks and smokes, he now keeps his apartment neat and clean, he calls Susan once a week and has made friends. He runs into Pam and asks her if it is true she came on to Jim, and during the argument that ensues, she angrily calls Jim's firm and learns he no longer works there. Bob goes to see Helen, who is very bitter toward Jim, so he tells her about Jim's confession regarding the accident, but it does not cause her to have any sympathy for Jim.

Book 4, Chapter 11

In Chapter 11, Bob drives to the small town where Jim is teaching at a local college and finds him unrecognizable, smoking pot and very bitter. After a long discussion, Bob packs a suitcase for Jim and calls Susan, telling her he is coming to Shirley Falls, where Zach is arriving the next day, and bringing Jim.



Book 4, Chapter 12

In Chapter 12, the brothers drive to Maine and Bob asks if Jim remembers their father, and Jim says he was a bit like Bob. Jim is broken up about losing Helen, but Bob reminds him that he has a family that includes Helen, his children, Susan, Zach and himself. After they arrive, Bob goes to see Margaret and finds her with Abdikarim, who asks about Zach and is very pleased to learn he is coming home. After he leaves, Margaret says she has advocated for Zach and is responsible for the charges being dropped, and Bob suddenly realizes that his future is with Margaret. The next morning, Bob and Susan encourage Jim to beg Helen for forgiveness.

Book 1, Chapters 13 and 14

In the book's final chapters, the Burgess children go to meet Zach at the bus station. Before he arrives, Bob quietly buys a ticket for Jim. Bob and Susan put him on a bus to New York. Zach arrives and has changed but is also the same. The book ends with the narrator saying that at nightfall, Jim has arrived in New York and is heading for Helen's house, Abdikarem is thinking about Bob and Zach, and Bob is thinking about Margaret and the fact that he never expected to return to Maine. He does not think about Jim, but he falls asleep with his phone in his hand in case his brother needed him. But, the phone did not ring.

Analysis

The final chapters of *The Burgess Boys* are about change, setting things right, and moving forward. Jim's fall has been swift and painful, and the man Bob finds at the college is unrecognizable both physically and emotionally. While Bob has now become neat and gregarious, Jim is living in filth and does not care. He is emotionally broken and nothing like the confident, strong man the reader met at the beginning of the book. To his credit, he knows there is no one to blame but himself, but he is not in a frame of mind to seek forgiveness for the pain he has caused, nor might he ever be. Only at the very end, when he boards the bus to New York to ask Helen to take him back, do we see a chink in his self-absorbed personality. Unlike the other characters, Jim's future is left murky and uncertain.

Bob, on the other hand, has gone from treading water to planning for a bright future that he never envisioned for himself. His attachment to Pam is finally broken and he plans to seek a relationship with Margaret in a town he long ago abandoned. While his career plans are unclear, it is assumed that he will take up the role Jim originally saw for himself and decided to forgo--in the interest of money and fame -- defending those who need it most. Bob has finally been able to escape the burden that defined his life, but oddly enough, by going back to the place where it happened.

Susan is also moving forward, having come to terms with her mother's treatment of her and the ways in which she mirrored it with her own husband and son. She is opening up and turning outward after years of lonely bitterness, and Zach also seems ready to



embrace the future. Abdikarim also is moving forward, having passed up the opportunity to return to Africa and begun to embrace his new community through improving his language skills and advocating for Zach's vindication. Just as he is responsible in a way for saving Zach, Zach is also saving him and the door is left open for a relationship to develop.

Although Jim is in New York and Bob in Shirley Falls, the book ends with a continued connection between the brothers as Bob holds his phone in order to be ready if Jim needs him.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Susan gain a better understanding of the Somalis experience? How do these thoughts help her grow? In what other ways has she changed since the beginning of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Jim and his evolution throughout the book. What do you think of his character and his motivations? Do you think that overall he is a good or bad person? What leads you to these conclusions?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the issue of cultural clashes through the book. How does the author compare the Burgess family's private dynamic with the Somali immigrants' culture?

Vocabulary

Aspersions, suppressed, partake, condone, benevolent, sordid, repellent, unencumbered, contemplative, demean, adrift, accost, grandiosity, laconic, insidious.



Characters

Jim Burgess

Jim Burgess, in his late 50s, is an attorney married to a wealthy woman and father of three grown children. He quickly escaped his small Maine hometown for Harvard Law School, intending to return to Maine for a career helping people. Instead, he moved to Hartford, CT, where he won national fame by winning a sensational murder trial and now practices at a prestigious Manhattan law firm, still riding the remnants of his early fame.

Jim is confident and well liked, but also arrogant and self-absorbed. He is close to his younger brother Bob, but also treats him somewhat dismissively, and he has little use for his sister Susan and her son Zach until Zach gets into trouble and needs his help. Jim's well-meaning acts backfire because of his arrogance, exacerbating the situation and eventually resulting in a drunken confession that he, not Bob, caused the accident that killed their father when they were children.

As the novel progresses, Jim suffers a spectacular downfall that is entirely of his own making, but in the end there appears to be hope for his ultimate redemption.

Bob Burgess

Bob Burgess is a 51-year-old Legal Aid attorney in New York. He is kind and well liked, but a sad person since his divorce, and he is haunted by a tragedy from his childhood. When he was four years old, he was in the driver's seat of the family car when he let off the clutch and caused the car to roll over his father, killing him. Although no one speaks of the accident, it remains the defining event in his life. He lives under the shadow of his golden-boy older brother Jim, whom he adores despite Jim's often-dismissive attitude toward him.

When his nephew Zach gets into trouble, Bob steps forward and tries to help, but in his bumbling way only makes the situation worse. Soon his world is shaken when Jim confesses that it was he, not Bob, who caused their father's death, and Bob gradually begins to see himself and his life in a new light.

By the end of the novel, Bob has reversed roles and become Jim's savior, and made the decision he never imagined -- to return to his small hometown and begin a new life there.

Susan Burgess Olson

Susan Burgess Olson is Bob's twin sister, although the two barely tolerate each other. Unlike her brothers, she has remained in their hometown in Maine and has never envisioned a different life for herself. Her small town attitude makes her somewhat



intolerant of the Somali refugees who have moved into the community, so she is shaken when her 19-year-old son causes an incident that appears to be a hate crime against them.

As the novel progresses, Susan comes to see that she is more like her mother than she would like, having treated her own husband and son with the same emotional cruelty she endured. The experience of her son's legal battles, along with reconnecting with her brothers and her ex-husband, eventually soften Susan and by the story's end she seems on her way to a better, more open future.

Zachary Olson

Zachary Olson is the 19-year-old son of Susan and her ex-husband Steve, who now lives in Sweden. Always an odd child, Zach has few friends and a dead-end job at WalMart. He is overprotected by his mother and suffers from the absence of his father.

In what appears to be an immature prank gone wrong, Zach throws a pig's head into a Muslim mosque on a holy day, causing him to be arrested. As his legal situation escalates, his fear prompts him to run away to join his father in Sweden, where he seems to grow and mature. After his legal problems are resolved, he returns to Maine and appears to be on the right track with the help of mother and uncles.

Helen Burgess

Helen Burgess is Jim's wife and a wealthy woman in her own right. Her privileged background and attitude make her shallow and prompt her to look down on her husband's family. She laments the fact that her children have grown and left home, and her life is turned upside down by her husband's infidelity and eventual downfall.

Pam Carlson

Pam Carlson is Bob's ex-wife. She is now married to another man and has two sons, but remains in a co-dependent relationship with Bob.

Abdikarim Ahmed

Abdikarim Ahmed is a Somali refugee who now lives in Shirley Falls, Maine, where he runs a cafe. He is important to the plot because although he is frightened and offended by the pig's head incident, he comes to see that Zach is just a scared boy and is largely responsible for his exoneration.



Margaret Estaver

Margaret Estaver is a Unitarian minister in Shirley Falls who takes an interest in Zach's case.

Diane Dodge

Diane Dodge is Maine's Assistant Attorney General and the person in charge of Zach's civil trial.

Gerry O'Hare

This person is the Shirley Falls police chief and an old friend of Susan's.



Symbols and Symbolism

Park Slope

Park Slope is a well-to-do section of Brooklyn where Jim and Helen live. It is symbolic of the upscale lifestyle that defines their characters to a large extent.

Shirley Falls

Shirley Falls is the small town in Maine where the Burgess siblings grew up. It symbolizes everything that Jim and Bob tried to escape by moving to New York, but it is also a place to which they are forever tied. The setting is also important because of the cultural clash caused when a group of Somali residents try to assimilate in a traditional small town.

Frozen Pig's Head

Zach's troubles begin when he tosses a frozen pig's head into the Shirley Falls mosque on a Muslim holy day, causing accusations of a hate crime. Because Muslims cannot associate with pork -- something Zach did not know -- the incident was particularly heinous, so it becomes a symbol of cultural ignorance and intolerance.

Together for Tolerance

In an effort to calm the situation caused by the pig's head incident, local clergy hold a rally in Shirley Falls called Together for Tolerance. It is a success and helps the whites and Somalis come together a bit more, but it is also the setting for Jim's arrogant behavior that makes Zach's situation worse.

Mosque

A mosque is a Muslim place of worship. The mosque in Shirley Falls symbolizes the presence of the Somali refugees there and the difference between the two cultures, and is the site of the pig's head incident that incites the community.

Bob's Coat

Early in the novel, Bob notes that while Jim always hangs his coat up when he comes home, Bob always thows his on the floor. This is a fundamental difference between the brothers, so it becomes an important symbol. Later, when Bob begins to turn his life around, he notes that he now hangs up his coat, but when he finds Jim in upstate New



York, having taken a stupendous fall from grace, Jim now tosses his clothing on the floor, thus demonstrating how the brothers' have reversed their roles and the dynamic of their relationship.

Helen's Engagement Ring

Helen grew up in wealth and material possessions are very important to her. When she realizes with dismay that the large diamond in her engagement ring is missing, she is devastated but Jim is unconcerned, saying it can be replaced. This becomes symbolic of the growing rift in their marriage as the relationship also has something missing and is becoming irretrievably broken.

Bob's Apartments

When the novel begins, Bob lives in an apartment that his brother disdainfully describes as a graduate dorm, referring to the disarray that has become Bob's life. As he begins to see himself and his brother in a new light, Bob moves to a place on a higher floor where he becomes open to his neighbors, unlike the closed life he has lived before.

Somalia

Somalia is a war-torn country in Africa that is in political disarray. When a number of refugees settle in Shirley Falls, they bring a clash of cultures never before seen in the small Maine town. The country is an important symbol because it has defined the culture and background of the Somalis and remains a source of both pride and shame for them.

Burgess Family Car

When the children were young, their father was run over and killed when someone accidentally released the clutch on the car in which all three of them were sitting. It has always been believed that Bob was responsible, but Susan later reveals that she has wondered if she had done it and Jim confesses that it was he. The car symbolizes this crucial event that has defined all of their lives and their family dynamic.



Settings

Shirley Falls, Maine

Shirley Falls is a small, declining town in Maine where the Burgess children grew up. Although Bob and Jim have long ago moved to New York, Susan still lives there and it becomes the setting for much of the story when Zach gets into legal trouble there. The town symbolizes many things in the lives of the Burgess brothers, including their past, their secrets, and their family dynamics. For Bob, it symbolizes his redemption and future.

New York, New York

Much of the story takes place in New York City, where both Bob and Jim now live. Specific settings include Park Slope, the Brooklyn neighborhood where Jim and Helen have an upscale home, and Manhattan, where both brothers work and Bob eventually moves. There is also mention of Montauk, Long Island, where Jim and Helen have a home.

Wilson, New York

Wilson is a small college town in upstate New York where Jim moves after his fall from grace.

Arizona

One chapter takes place in Arizona, where Jim and Helen visit their son who is in college there.

Sweden

Although no scenes actually take place there, Sweden is important because it is where Zach's father now lives. Zach runs away to join him when his legal troubles overwhelm him.



Themes and Motifs

Clash of Cultures

One of the overarching themes of *The Burgess Boys* is the clash of cultures between the traditional, conservative white residents of Shirley Falls and the Somali refugees who have settled there. This is not the first time the small town has faced these issues, as it is noted that previous generations had difficulty accepting French immigrants.

The presence of the Somalis is a controversial topic in the town. Some people welcome the diversity, noting their colorful clothing and unique cuisine, while others are openly mistrustful. Much of the problem stems from misunderstanding and miscommunication. Many of the Somalis do not have good English skills yet, so they are simply unable to communicate effectively with their new neighbors. Their Muslim faith also causes problems, not only because of the difference in faith, but also because of cultural differences. For example, Muslims are not supposed to touch alcohol, so when Bob buys wine at a local store, the clerk appears to be rude when she simply shoves a paper bag toward him rather than bagging the purchase herself, but in fact she is simply following her Muslim faith.

The situation comes to a head when Zach tosses the pig's head into the mosque, although he apparently did not intend it as anything other than a childish prank. This becomes important because it demonstrates how little he and other local residents know and understand about their new neighbors. In time, greater understanding begins to emerge, as seen primarily through the gradual evolution of Susan's character from suspicious to a tacit acceptance.

Small Town vs. City

Jim and Bob grew up in Shirley Falls, but both chose to relocate to New York while Susan remained in Maine. The difference between their lives is a sharp focus throughout the book. The brothers have become consummate city dwellers, comfortable with a completely different lifestyle than the one they grew up with. Jim, in particular, rails against Maine routinely and as the book goes on, his feelings about his home state become increasingly angry while Bob is more comfortable with his return trips to Shirley Falls. The author uses this to point out differences in their attitudes toward the incident that defines all their lives, the death of their father. Although he believes he caused the accident, Bob has made a certain peace with the situation, or at least gained an acceptance of its role in his life, so he is more at peace with the setting in which it occurred. Jim, on the other hand, harbors deep-seated feelings of guilt about his role in the accident and he associates the town with the situation he has spent his life trying to escape from.



Susan visits New York for the first time during the novel and she is completely overwhelmed by it. She also finds the strangeness of the city reflective of the strangeness she now sees in her brothers, but her trip helps her understand the fear the Somalis must feel in their new surroundings, which helps lead her to a greater acceptance of them.

The Complexity of Family Dynamics

To say that the Burgess family dynamic is complex would be an understatement. The relationships among the siblings, as well as their relationship with their mother, has in large part been defined by the accident that killed their father. Because Bob was held responsible, his siblings blamed him and treated him with disdain when they were growing up, while it caused their mother to treat Bob as the favorite as a means of showing forgiveness. It is later revealed that Susan often wondered whether it was she who was responsible because that would provide an explanation for her mother's poor treatment of her throughout her life.

As adults, the accident is never mentioned but remains as an unspoken issue within the family. Jim's eventual confession brings the issue to the forefront and profoundly changes Bob's life even as Jim's falls apart.

Susan eventually realizes that despite her resentment of her mother's treatment of her, she has unwittingly followed her example and treated her own husband and child the same way. This leads to a conversation and a new understanding with her ex-husband, and presumably a better relationship with Zach going forward.

When the book ends, the relationship between Bob and Jim has reversed completely. Jim's life has fallen apart while Bob's has begun to improve, and it is Bob who is looking out for his older brother rather than subjugating himself to Jim's will as he has done his entire life.

Somalia's Political Situation

The author spends a great deal of time educating readers about the current situation in the African nation of Somalia, using a variety of means. Through the eyes of Abdikarim and other Somali refugees living in Shirley Falls, we get a first-hand account of the suffering they and their families have endured, including the murder of Abdikarim's son and the destruction of his shop. We are also privy to conversations in which the refugees discuss their deep desire to return home, even though that is impossible in most cases.

The topic also comes up in conversations among other characters. Helen learns more than she wants to know when her friend Dorothy shows her a newspaper article, and Pam later reads a book that graphically describes the horrors faced by Somali natives. Various characters also provide information and insights through their conversations as Zach's situation becomes a topic for newscasts and dinner party chatter.



Redemption

Redemption becomes a theme of *The Burgess Boys* in a number of ways. First and foremost, although Jim says it changes nothing, the revelation that he was not responsible for his father's death brings about a quiet but profound change in Bob. He does not feel immediate relief and a sense of justice, but rather a slow process of change that lightens his load and turns his life around. Rather than running away, he is now able to return to Shirley Falls with a new sense of hope for the future, and he is able to not only forgive Jim, but reach out to him in his darkest hours.

Jim also receives a sort of redemption by finally unburdening himself of the secret he has held for 50 years. Although he suffers a devastating fall from grace that is of his own making, as the novel ends it appears that he might be on his way back.

Susan also gains redemption through her evolving attitude toward the Somali immigrants and the realization of her poor treatment of her family, and Abdikarim evolves through relating to Zach in a new way, which helps him begin to shake off the sorrow of his past and embrace his future in his new home.



Styles

Point of View

With the exception of the Prologue, *The Burgess Boys* uses of third person, omniscient narrator. This enables the reader to learn from the thoughts and feelings of the characters as well as the conversations that take place among them. For the most part, it takes place in the past tense, but there are instances in which the narrator projects into the future to provide hints of things that the characters do not yet know will happen. An example is Book 4, Chapter 8, as Helen is about to learn of Jim's infidelity and the loss of his job.

The book's Prologue is written in the past tense, but presumably in the voice of the book's author. She begins by describing how she and her mother talk frequently about the Burgess family, provides a few clues about them and ends with a decision to write their story.

Language and Meaning

The book's language is straightforward and uncomplicated. For the most part, events proceed in chronological order and in a logical fashion, and long passes of description are interspersed with dialogue among the characters. The author uses no dialects that are difficult to read, and even the words spoken by the Somali immigrants, who are described as having poor English skills, are written in standard English for ease of reading. The plot moves steadily and the book is easy to read, but includes a liberal number of words that could challenge younger readers.

Structure

The Burgess Boys is divided into a prologue followed by four books. Book 1 consists of 8 chapters and takes the story through Bob's initial trip to Shirley Falls after Zach's legal troubles begin. Book 2, which has 10 chapters, ends after the conclusion of the tolerance rally, while Book 3's 7 chapters go through the pivotal point at which Jim confesses that he caused the accident. Book 4 consists of 13 chapters and brings the plot to a close. The books and chapters are unnamed.



Quotes

"We're one mess of a family, aren't we, Jimmy?" Bob, sitting next to his brother, put his arm over Jim's shoulder.

-- Bob (Book 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 9)

Importance: Occurring early in the plot, this quote turns out to be quite an understatement as it foreshadows many revelations to come.

Be a chef, be a beggar, be divorced a zillion times, no one in this city cared. Smoke yourself to death out the window. Scare your wife and go to jail. It was heaven to live here. Susie never got that. Poor Susie.

-- Narrator (Book 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote describes the anonymity Bob enjoys in New York, allowing himself to escape from Shirley Falls where everyone knows about the accident that killed his father.

Jim has a keen sense of responsibility.

-- Helen (Book 1, Chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote turns out to be ironic after it is revealed that Jim has spent his entire life avoiding taking responsibility for his role in his father's death.

It united them, their love for Jim.

-- Narrator (Book 1, Chapter 4 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote highlights the central role Jim plays in the lives of everyone in his orbit.

Abdikarim, standing by his bed, squeezed his eyes in anger, because where were the Rabbi Goldmans of America when Abdikarim's eldest daughter had first stepped off a plane in Nashville with her four children and no one to meet them, and the moving stairs called an escalator were so frightening they could only stare at them and get pushed aside by others who pointed and laughed?

-- Narrator (Book 1, Chapter 4 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is but one example of the cultural differences that separate the Somali immigrants from their new American neighbors and cause bigotry.

"Do you know what Bob said to me when I got an acquittal for Wally?" He turned to Helen briefly, then looked back out the window. "He said, 'Jim, that was great. You did a great job. But you took they guy's fate from him.

-- Jim (Book 1, Chapter 8 paragraph 1)



Importance: Although Helen does not know it, Jim also took Bob's fate from him by claiming he was responsible for the accident.

And he felt too old to learn English. Without that, he lived with the constancy of incomprehension.

-- Narrator (Book 2, Chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: This illustrates the plight Abdikarim shares with many of his fellow refugees. He is exhausted from the life he has led, yet his inability to speak English well only exacerbates the cultural divide between the white and Somali residents of Shirley Falls.

So I'm guessing you thought your father might be impressed if you threw a pig's head through their mosque.

-- Jim (Book 2, Chapter 10 paragraph 11)

Importance: Jim finally begins to understand why Zach threw the pig's head into the mosque when he learns that the boy's absent father had warned him to be careful of the Somalis.

Bob stood up and walked in a big circle around the room. What he felt seemed unbearable, and he did not know what he felt. After a few moments he stopped walking and said to Zach, 'Your Uncle Jim will take care of you. That's what he does.'" "Zach looked from one uncle to the other. 'But you take care of me, too, Uncle Bob,' he finally said.

-- Bob and Zach (Book 2, Chapter 10 paragraph 2 and 3)

Importance: Zach is young and naive, but he instinctively realizes that Bob is more capable and caring than his siblings give him credit for.

Abdikarim shook his head in his darkened room, sweat coming from his face down onto his neck. 'No, he cuts my heart. You didn't see him. He's not what we saw in the newspaper. He's a frightened child.

-- Abdikarim (Book 3, Chapter 5 paragraph 5)

Importance: This is the first indication that Abdikarim has seen Zach's vulnerability and that his empathy for him will lead to his ultimate exoneration.

I don't, really, Bob. It's the past. It's not getting redone. We've lived our lives -- And honestly, Bobby? In a way, and I don't mean to be callous here, but in a way, what difference does it make what happened? You said that yourself. We've all arrived at this point, so, you know, we go on.

-- Jim (Book 4, Chapter 1 paragraph 11)

Importance: Having shaken Bob's world by confessing his role in the accident, Jim exhibits his typical self-absorption by failing to understand the impact his confession has



had on Bob and the need to work through it together. Instead, he dismisses Bob and lets himself off the hook.

Susan said, musingly, "When I was in New York, it went through my mind, maybe that is how the Somalians feel.

-- Susan (Book 4, Chapter 7 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote shows Susan's continued growth as she gains a better understanding of both herself and the Somali immigrants.

You have a family," Bob said. "You have a wife who hates you. Kids who are furious with you. A brother and sister who make you insane. And a nephew who used to be kind of a drip but apparently is not so much of a drip now. That's called family.

-- Bob (Book 4, Chapter 12 paragraph 13)

Importance: Here Bob makes the point that no family is perfect -- in fact, most have deep-seated problems -- but they are family nevertheless and will stick together in the end. The brothers have now reversed roles and Bob has, in effect, become the older brother who takes care of the family.