

The Casual Vacancy Study Guide

The Casual Vacancy by J. K. Rowling

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Plot Summary

The Casual Vacancy by J.K. Rowling begins with the death of Barry Fairbrother, a Pagford Parish councillor. Barry dies of an aneurysm at the carpark of the golf course's restaurant on the eve of his nineteenth wedding anniversary.

The following morning provides glimpses into the townspeople's reactions to Barry's death. Barry held a seat as a Pagford Parish Councillor and was fighting to keep the neighborhood known as the Fields a part of Pagford. Prior to his death, he was working with the local newspaper to illustrate the positive influence that allowing the children of the Fields. He grew up in the Fields and knew that by attending school in Pagford's good schools allowed him a better life that he would have had had he had to go to school in Yarvil. Additionally, the Bellchapel Addiction Clinic rents a small church to administer methadone to addicts that live in the Fields and Yarvil. Pagford Parish, specifically Howard and Shirley Mollison, no longer wants to lease the building to this tenant.

In the following weeks, an election is held to fill Fairbrother's casual vacancy on the council. During the days leading up to the election, mysterious posts appear in the name of the Ghost of Barry Fairbrother on the parish website, which Shirley Mollison is in charge of. The messages are defamatory toward the candidates who are running: Simon Price, Colin Wall, and Parminder Jawanda. Although the people feel they are being attacked by other people in the town, ironically, they are being attacked by their own teenage children.

As the debate to keep the Bellchapel Addiction Clinic heats up and Miles Mollison wins the vacant seat, each family lives in their own crisis. Desperate to get out of her terrible living situation, Krystal Weedon runs away with her younger brother Robbie. While she is having intercourse, in the hopes of getting pregnant, with Fats Walls, her younger brother falls into the river and drowns. That Sunday morning, as many of the adults in town are out walking and contemplating their own melodramas, they saw Robbie, a toddler, wandering alone and dirty, but do nothing.

The only person brave and sincere enough to help was Sukhvinder Jawanda who jumps in the river to save Robbie while risking her life. Krystal Weedon now realizes that there is no way out of this life. Without her brother and feeling the guilt of his death, she chooses to commit suicide.

Howard Mollison has a heart attack the same afternoon that Robbie Weedon drowns and Shirley Mollison, after learning about his long-term affair with co-worker Maureen, plans to attack him with an epipen. He has a heart attack first and now she fears that he knew that she was going to attack him.

The novel ends with the funeral of Robbie and Krystal Weedon who comes from a family that changes the least in the story since they are used to death and tragedy. The

other character's contemplate their futures as they are reminded of the chaos that has ensued since Barry Fairbrother's death.



Part I

Part I Summary

The novel opens with Barry Fairbrother taking his wife to dinner for their nineteenth anniversary. Initially he forgot about the anniversary, but at the last minute, he is able to make a reservations at the golf course restaurant. Walking into the restaurant, he falls to the ground and has a fatal aneurysm.

The novel takes place in a small English town called Pagford. Barry is a city councilman in Pagford and many people are after his seat. After his death, the first chapter revolves around how the other characters in the novel reacted to his death.

After the scene of Barry's death, the first chapter flits around briefly introducing characters and their reaction to the news of Barry's death.

Miles calls his dad Howard to tell him about Barry dying from something to do within brain.

Simon and Ruth are talking about Barry's death Sunday morning. Simon is mean to Otis his son calling him pizza face due to his acne. Their other son Andrew is caught smoking in the shed. Ruth is a nurse at the hospital where Barry was taken. Andrew is in high school and loves watching a new girl named Gaia get on the school bus. He's waiting for her to get on the bus but she does not come.

Gavin is dating Kay, whom he does not like very much. Kay and her daughter Gaia moved to Pagfrod at no promoting of Gavin. Gavin gets a phone call and finds out that Barry has died and is devastated, realizing it was his best friend.

Fats and Andrew are at school at assembly on Monday morning. Cubby, Fat's dads, is a principal and he announces that Barry Fairbrother has died. A girl laughs and is sent to the office. Gaia walks in late and takes a seat next to Andrew. He gets the courage up to turn and smile at her. She smiles back.

Howard opens his deli and tells his business partner, Maureen, about Barry's death. He explains that his death has caused a casual vacancy in the local Pagfrod government.

Krystal is sent to Tessa Wall, the guidance counselor or Fat's mother and Cubby's wife. Krystal insists that she had not been laughing at assembly but was genuinely upset and distraught. Krystal is a trouble teenager who acts as if she has nothing to lose. Her only adult connection is to Tessa and Barry Fairbrother, who was her rowing coach.



Part I Analysis

In this first chapter, initially it is not made clear how all of the characters know each other or Barry. The reader is just thrown into new scenes with various characters early on Monday morning as they learn of Barry Fairbrother's death. As the chapter continues and scenes and characters keep rotating, a thread begins to weave through all of the character's life. Some people in Pagford hated Barry Fairbrother and others are devastated by his death. But one conclusion is clear, that this death has changed things dramatically for the characters in Pagford.

Besides Barry's death, it is not apparent yet what the main conflict will be of the novel.



Part I, Tuesday - Saturday

Part I, Tuesday - Saturday Summary

The Sweetlove mansion was bought by Aubrey Fawley years ago. Initially Pagford was delighted that a man of such wealth and reputation take up residence there, but then he sold the fields to Yarvil. This began a 60-year feud between pagford Parrish and Yarvil. Cheap concrete and steel structures were built and t was in one of these in the 1960s that Barry Fairbrother was born. Now, the Fawley's as an apology are trying to offload

Howard and Shirley hate Yarvil and all it represents, namely the poor and needy. With Barry's vacancy on the parish council, there is an opportunity for Pagford to purge the Fields once and for all.

Meanwhile, Mary Fairbrother breaks down into hysterics a few days after Barry's death. She is in fury. She is sick of hearing about Barry's vacant seat on the council and is resentful that he spent the last hours of their time together working on the article about the Fields and Krystal Weedon.

Kay Bawden, Gavin's girlfriend, who is also the Weedon's social worker, visits the house. The Weedon household is in the Fields. It is small and dirty, hardly a place to raise children. Terri Weedon is a heroine addict who is supposed to be clean in order to keep her son, Robbie. After the Weedon visit, Kay Bawden returns to the office. She suspects that the case has not been given the proper attention and sets up a case review.

Samantha and Miles go to Shirley and Howard's for dinner, Miles's parents. By the end of dinner, they are discussing the casual vacancy on the council that has opened because of Barry Fairbrother's death. Samantha is drunk and disgusted by the joviality of the conversation that was initially masked as concern.

Kay goes to visit the Weedon household again. Krystal has come home and has done her best to clean the house up and she's taken Robbie to preschool - a requisite if Robbie is to stay with Terri Weedon, Krystal's mother. Kay agrees to helping Terri get one more chance at Bellchapel Addiction Clinic.

Ruth Price and Shirely have lunch at the hospital. Ruth confesses to Shirley that her husband Simon, is considering running for Parish Council. Simon Price buys a stolen computer. His family awaits anxiously as he works himself into a rage putting it together. Andrew resents his father deeply and is embarrassed by his father's lack of social activity.



Part I, Tuesday - Saturday Analysis

Barry Fairbrother represents the historic feud between Pagford and Yarvil. Though he lived with his family in Pagford and was a respected businessman, he was from the Fields. His family was poor but because he lived in the Fields, he was allowed to go to the schools in Pagford. The work that he was doing on the council represented that he supported the Fields. He was a minority on the council, and with his death came relief to the other councillors. In many ways, Barry Fairbrother kept the town together. Though he represented the other side for the Mollisons and some of the older Pagford folk, he was still well-liked and respected.

Fats Wall believes in authenticity and brutal honesty. He despises his father Cubby for the secrets he harbors, although these secrets have not been made known to the reader yet. Because Fats believes that he's being authentic, he feels that anything he does, even if cruel and mean, is acceptable. Fats teases Sukhvinder in class and posts cruel things on Facebook. None of this contradicts with his personal beliefs. Though Andrew Price is his best friend, this makes him uncomfortable. He does not believe that Fats should be so cruel, yet is not strong enough in his own right to stand up on his own.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Rowling has a rove of ranging perspectives drawn out in scenes. But at the end of Part I, Barry Fairbrother's funeral is held. The town shows up at St. Michaels to honor him. Some are there out of obligation and some duty and loyalty. Rowling captures this with mini-scene in which the perspective flits around from character to character.



Part II

Part II Summary

Ten requests have been received asking for a vote to fill Barry's vacancy. So now, much to Howard Mollison's chagrin, an election must happen. Howard is sorting the letters, the applications and complaints.

Samantha refuses to go to dinner at the Sweetlove house. She stays home drinks a bottle of wine and thinks about all of the things that she and Miles had talked about doing before they got married. They were going to travel around the world and live in London. In her drunkenness, she decides that she's not going to live like this anymore.

Later in the week, Gavin and Kay go to Miles and Samantha's for dinner. Early in the afternoon, Samantha sees Mary and also invites her over for dinner but Samantha says it as a gesture of goodwill and does not really expect that Mary will come. Samantha burns the dinner, yet still serves it and Mary arrives. It is the five of them. Gavin finds Samantha intolerable and is duly uncomfortable by the fact that Kay is being paraded around as his girlfriend. Gavin turns his attention, nearly exclusively, to Mary, his best friend's widow. Kay is unnerved and Samantha becomes vitriolic as she continues to drink.

Meanwhile, Andrew Price goes to an Internet cafe and hacks into the parish council website and posts a post about how unfit Simon Price is to win an election seat. The post refers to purchasing stolen home goods and how he steals supplies at work. Andrew is careful to cover his tracks so that his father will not catch him. He does not want Simon to run for election as he knows it will embarrass and humiliate all of them.

Part II Analysis

Howard gets one anonymous letter that states that Miles Mollison is unfit to fill Barry Fairbrother's shoes. Before anyone else can see it, he shreds it. This action is indicative of how untrustworthy Howard is.

During Samantha's evening in when Miles attends dinner with his parents at Sweetlove house, she is filled with so much regret, resentment and vitriol, that she doesn't know what to do with herself. She had never expected that her life would become so small and her husband would be so entangled with his parents and the local politics of Pagford. She's disgusted by how Miles is turning into his father. She feels trapped. Her shop is about to close and she has very little in Pagford. She longs to travel, to get away from this life. Things must change for Samantha Mollison.

Kay Bawden is one of the few characters in the novel who fully understands, or tries to, Krystal Weedon. Kay is an outsider from London, having just moved to Pagford to be closer to her boyfriend Gavin. The real reason Kay has agreed to help Terri is because



she sees how hard Krysyal is working to keep her brother. Krysyal begins to trust Kay and is surprised by her genuine concern since so few others, besides Barry Fairbother, have done so.

Rowling does not allow the reader to forget that all of this drama and tension that are building are doing so in the aftermath of Barry Fairbrother's death. Krystal and Fats have sex under some bushes at the cemetery, and when they stumble out, they nearly trip on Barry Fairbrother's grave.



Part III

Part III Summary

Gavin goes to Mary Fairbrother's to sort out the death benefit insurance payments. Mary breaks down and tells Gavin about how Barry gave everything to everyone but her.

Miles and Samantha go to Howard and Shirley's house for dinner. Shirley discovers that someone has written about Simon Price. Shirley decides to leave it on the parish website until Ruth asks her to take it down. At dinner, Samantha drinks a lot of wine and fantasizes about a different life, specifically Jake, the lead singer from her daughter's favorite boy band. More than anything, Samantha wants away from the Mollisons and away from Pagford.

Simon Price finds out about the post on the council website. He attacks and beats Ruth, Andrew, and Paul. He finally comes to the conclusion that it must have been somebody at work, rather than a family member. He makes Andrew help him get rid of the stolen computer.

The following day Simon Price withdraws his name from the election. Andrew is relieved that his father steps down from the election. The entire reason that he broke into the council website was to do just that, embarrass his father enough to get him to step down.

Krysyal Weedon and her gang threaten Sukhvinder because her mother Parminder, a physician, is being accused of giving Krystal's Nana Cath the incorrect medication. Sukhvinder contemplates suicide and decides to skip class. Tessa Wall finds her as she's leaving school. She brings her back to the guidance office and Sukhvinder tells Tessa about what has happened.

Krystal is raped by Obbo she makes a plan to escape this life.

Part III Analysis

In the briefest section of Rowling's novel, she allocates a significant amount of space to Terri Weedon's perspective. The inclusion of Terri Weedon's perspective suggests that Rowling wants her readers to see Terri as more than just a victim and a villain. Even the lowest and most base of characters have a rich backstory wrought with grief and tragedy.

Gavin does not yet understand that what he wants more than anything isn't Kay, but Mary and his best friend Barry's life. He likes the children and how open and polite they are. He likes Mary and wonders if Barry knew how lucky he was. Kay sees what Gavin wants but chooses to ignore it.



Andrew Price knew that he would pay for the post on the parish website, even if his father didn't suspect him. Though his mother does not beat him as his father does, he holds just as much as a guilty party because she defends him. He allows her boys to be hit, kicked, and punched. Andrew finds this just as despicable and unforgivable as the heinous and abusive treatment that he receives from his father.



Part IV

Part IV Summary

Sukhvinder Jawanda in spite of her mother, posts another post in the name of the Ghost of Barry Fairbrother on the council website. The post claims that Parminder was in love with Barry Fairbrother.

Parminder is devastated and distracted. She attends a case review meeting with the Weedon's social workers. She attends because she is the family's general physician. Throughout the meeting her thoughts are constantly on the new ghost post on the council website.

The following day another post by the the Ghost of Barry Fairbrother goes up on the council website. Fats (Stuart Walls) has done it about his father Colin who is still running for the open council seat. The new post It suggests that Colin Wall is a pedophile and has groped first year students. Tessa suspects that it is their son. Shirely is excited and happy that someone else has been written maliciously about — she does not remove the post right away. Colin Wall considers committing suicide.

Krystal and Fats continue to have sex. She lies and tells Fats that she is on the pill. She wants to get pregnant because she thinks that it will be a way out of the life that she is destined. Fats does not fully believe that she is on the pill, but also fantasizes about the possibility of her getting pregnant and how it would hurt and shock his parents.

The Parish Council has a meeting and votes to have the Fields removed from Pagford. Parminder defends the Fields but loses to the other parish councillors. She also defends the addiction clinic and loses her temper when people begin complaining about the cost of the clinic. She screams at Howars Mollison about his weight and what it has cost the state. She flees the meeting knowing that she has made a terrible mistake.

Gavin tells Kay that he is in love with Marry Fairbrother and that he must break up with her.

The following day, the council seat vote is held. Many of the characters are so disgusted with what the election has done that they don't even vote. Miles Mollison beats Colin Wall and wins the new seat. That evening is Howard's 65th birthday party. Samantha gets really drunk and snogs Andrew Price. Miles catches her and pulls her off of him. Patricia, Miles's sister comes, but leaves early because she is angry that Shirley didn't include her lesbian partner on the invitation.

Part IV Analysis

Parminder cannot shake the post. She suspects that it is Mollison, but not knowing who it was and how obvious she realizes her feelings must have been toward Barry, she



cannot move past it. Throughout the week, she ruminates on the post: during the case review and during the election for parish councilor and the parish meeting. Through all of this she realizes that the post is true, ironically Sukhvinder knew what her own mother had not yet accepted, that she was in love with Barry Fairbrother.

Krystal thinks a baby is her way out of this life that she lives with her mother, Terri. She knows that if she gets pregnant with Fats Walls kid, that his parents would help pay for their grandchild and additionally the state would help her find a home. She believes that a baby will love her forever and unconditionally. What is ironic is that in Terri Weedon's reflection of her life it is implied that she thought that having children would be a way out of her hateful life. Clearly, this was not true for her, it further embedded her into this life of drugs and poverty.

Fats so easily agrees to not wear a condom — even though he doubts that she's really on birth control — because wants to hurt and shocks his parents by going "slumming" and getting Krystal Weedon, of all people, pregnant. He believes that this will show them what real life is all about. The fact that Fats cannot see that he is dealing with real life, that his parents are, is indicative of how immature he really is.



Part V

Part V Summary

Sunday morning everyone is home in the aftermath of Howard's party. It is a beautiful sunny Sunday. Gavin is going to Mary's house to tell her how he feels. Samantha and Miles are fighting and send Lexie to Howard and Shirley's. Krystal and Fats have agreed to meet downtown. Howard is hungover and sleeping it off. Shirley opens the parish website and someone has posted about Howard and Maureen — that they are having an affair

Readers know that it must be Andrew, Fats, or Gaia because Patricia told them of the affair.

Krystal and Fats meet again in downtown Pagford. Krystal leaves her mother's house and takes Robbie with her since her mom was using smack again. Krystal intends to get pregnant by Fats Wall. She has Robbie with her and has him wait on the bench. Fats is very uncomfortable with Robbie being able to see what is going on, but Krystal reassures him that she'll find someplace secluded and finds a private spot under the bushes. While they are down in the bushes, Robbie gets up and begins looking for water because he is thirsty.

Sukvinder is out walking around town, skipping work at the Copper Kettle. She sees Robbie in the river and jumps in after him. She cuts her leg open on a broken computer monitor. She finds Robbie and is taken downstream by the current. When she is rescued, Robbie is in her arms, but it is too late and he has drowned.

Meanwhile, Shirley makes her way home. Disgusted and full of vile and hatred for Howard from his affair with Maureen, she has taken Andrew Price's Epipen from the cafe with the intention of injecting it into Howard. This will cause him a heart attack. When she gets home, she walks around the house looking for him, Epipen poised. Already he is face down on the floor from a massive heart attack. She calls an ambulance and Howard is taken to the emergency room.

Part V Analysis

The adults are disgusted by the fact that Krystal leaves her brother and is having sex with Fats Wall when her brother drowns. But three adults passed Robbie while he was wandering around alone: Gavin, Samantha, and Shirley. None of them stopped to help Robbie or ask where his mother was. Shirley continues to blame Robbie's death for stealing the ambulance away from Howard, Samantha is disgusted by Krystal's actions, but Gavin feels guilty that he didn't stop to see if the boy needed help.

The adults in the novel are so self-involved that they rarely realize what is really happening in the children's lives. Samantha, Gavin and Shirley are so caught up in their

own melodramas, that they do not consider helping Robbie, but Sukhvinder who hears Krystal looking for Robbie, begins to help at once. It is Sukhvinder who helps when all of the adults have failed.



Part VI

Part VI Summary

Sukhvinder is taken to the hospital. The police go to Terri Weedon's house to tell her that Robbie has drowned, Krystal is with them. When Terri finally comes out, Krystal runs in the house, grabs her mother's tin of drugs and locks herself in the upstairs bathroom. Though she has never shot up before she has seen her mother — and others — do it many times before. She shoots up enough, she knows, to kill herself. The police find her dead on the bathroom floor.

Howard is still in the hospital recovering from another surgery.

Part VI Analysis

Krystal is the most misunderstood character in the *Casual Vacancy*. Though her actions sometimes were crass and rude and inappropriate, some of her actions though tasteless, may have had good intentions. When Krystal drowns, few have anything good to say. Fats Wall is affected because of the guilt that he feels from Robbie drowning, but other than that few people show any remorse or regret over her death.

Her death comes suddenly and as a relief from a tragic life full of heartache, loss, rape, drugs, and poverty. She desperately wanted out of the life that her mother lived, and in death, she found it.



Part VII

Part VII Summary

The last part of the novel is brief. Initially a funeral was not going to be held for Robbie or Krystal because Terri Weedon could not afford it. Sukhvinder Jawanda organizes donations so that the funeral can be held at St. Michael's. She picks out their caskets and the closing song. During the funeral she recalls that Krystal was misunderstood and that she had always admired her brazenness, that Krystal wasn't afraid of others judgement.

Many of the characters go to the funeral, except Colin and Fats Wall, and the Mollisons. Shirley still believes that Howard would not still be in the hospital if the ambulance hadn't been diverted because of the drowning.

Part VII Analysis

As Samantha is watching the people congregate for the funeral, she finally feels guilt at knowing that she saw Robbie Weedon, could have helped him and did nothing. She resolves to be a better wife, reconciles with Miles and even volunteers to fill Howard's place until an election can be held.

Gavin also feels guilty at knowing that he passed the boy that drowned and could have helped him. He has been rejected by Mary and now more than anything misses Barry Fairbrother. With his rejection from Mary, he misses Barry more intensely.

Shirley, who also saw Robbie, is the only character of the three who saw him who does not feel guilty for not helping.



Characters

Barry Fairbrother

Barry Fairbrother is only alive very briefly at the beginning of the book. He is writing an article for the Yarvil Gazette about Krystal Weedon and the positive influence that the Fields being part of Pagford has had on her. While he is writing this article, he remembers that it is his nineteenth wedding anniversary and hastily makes reservations to take his wife out.

Though the other characters in the book talk about Barry as if he were a saint, the brief glimpse that the reader gets of him suggests that he isn't what everyone believed him to be. Mary Fairbrother suggests that though her husband was attentive to civic matters and very likable, he didn't spend enough time and energy on his family.

Samantha Mollison

Samantha Mollison is Miles Mollison's wife and the daughter-in-law of Shirley and Howard. Samantha and Miles have two daughters together who attend school at the prestigious St. Anne's, which Howard and Shirley pay for.

Samantha is an alcoholic who is deeply unhappy with her place in life. Her lingerie shop is closing down, she finds her husband dull and boring and repulsive as she watches him turn into his father, she dislikes her in-laws and Pagford, and wants to be anywhere but where she is.

When she and Miles were engaged, they had plans to travel the world together, but then she found out she was pregnant and her little visit to Pagford morphed into a life.

During the novel, she becomes obsessed with a lead singer in a boy band. She buys their DVDs and fantasizes about sex with the lead singer. She even plans an overnight trip for her and her daughter to London to see the band play. Her plan is foiled when her daughter wants to take her friend instead.

At Howard's birthday party, Samantha launches herself at Andrew Price, a boy in the same class as her eldest daughter. Embarrassed, and at rock bottom, Samantha decides that she will make the best of the life that she is living.

Miles Mollison

Readers are never in Miles's perspective, but simply see him through other characters - namely Shirley and Samantha. Miles is Shirley's son and in her eyes cannot do any wrong. When Miles runs for the vacant seat, Shirley is beside herself.



Samantha sees Miles as boring and predictable. When she looks at him, she sees nothing of the man that she married, but sees him slowly turning into his father.

Andrew Price

Andrew Price is the son of Ruth and Simon Price. Andrew is also Fats Wall's best friend. Andrew's father Simon is very abusive. Andrew resents his father for the hatred that he spews at them, for the beatings, and the teasing and how Simon tries to make everyone's life miserable. But, Andrew resents his mother just as much. She does not stand up for her boys, but allows Simon to beat and berate them, and she always makes excuses for Simon. Andrew is repulsed by her weak behavior.

Andrew is generally a kind boy although he does not stand up for Sukhvinder against his friend Fats's cruel behavior. The hypocrisy in his action compared to his mother's never occurs to him. Andrew falls in love with Gaia Bawden and spends much of the book trying to run into her and avoiding the wrath of his father.

Fats (Stuart) Walls

Fats Walls is the son of Colin and Tessa Walls. He is adopted. He is a vitrolic young man who deeply resents both his mother and father. He cruelly makes fun of other children at school, namely Sukhvinder Jawanda. He begins a relationship with Krystal Weedon to prove that he has nothing to prove. Above all, he believes that to be honest and true, even if it is cruel, is better than being phony.

He is deeply affected when Robbie dies, but at the conclusion of the book, little is said about his character's transformation.

Tessa Walls

Tessa Walls is Fats's (Stuart) mother. She is the guidance counselor where he attends high school. Tessa is described as a short portly woman. To ease her stress and anxiety she turns to food. She is married to Colin Wall who has a serious case of obsessive-compulsive disorder, which makes him believe that he did things that he did not actually do. Tessa constantly has to calm him down and reassure him that he is a good person.

Tessa is good friends with Parminder Jawanda.

Colin Wall

Colin Wall is the headmaster at Winterdown Secondary School, where Tessa is a guidance counselor and Fats a student. Fats and all the other students call him Cubby because of an obsessive desire to keep the cubbies at school cleaned out. Colin Wall



suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder. He often thinks that he has done things but does not know what is reality and what has been dreamed or imagined.

He considers Barry Fairbrother one of his best friends and is devastated by his death. When Barry's seat opens up, he runs for his spot in hopes that he can continue to do the good work that Barry was trying to do.

Colin is incapacitated when the Ghost of Barry Fairbrother posts that he may have touched some first year students and that he has to do everything in his power to not be attracted to the students. Colin considers suicide.

After Robbie's death Colin and Fats make amends and begin to heal together.

Krystal Weedon

Krystal Weedon has grown up in the Fields. Her mother Terri Weedon is a drug addict. Two of Krystal's older siblings have been taken away from Terri and Krystal does not know who her father is. More than anything, Krystal wants out of this life of drugs and poverty. She's watched her mother destroy her life as a drug addict and prostitute. She fears for her own future and her little brother Robbie's.

Though Krystal wants out of this life that she was born into, she sees no way out. She is raped by Obbo and realizes that her brother is being abused too. She sees pregnancy as a way out and into the world on her own.

After Robbie drowns, Krystal kills herself, finally freeing herself from the life that she did not want to live.

Howard Mollison

Howard Mollison owns the local deli and the newly opened cafe, the Copper Kettle. Howard is a selfish, arrogant, and ignorant man. Anything he pursues is in the name of self-interest. He is dishonest with the election and with his family.

He feels that women and residents of Yarvil and the Fields are constantly trying to take something from him and the men that he knows. Though his business has expanded, he wants the rest of Pagford to stay just as it is.

Shirley Mollison

Shirley Mollison is Howard's wife and Miles's mother. Her goal in the book is to feel important. She is a bored woman who entertains herself with the gossip of others. She detests those in the Fields, yet her past is colored and pocked with questionable characters, namely her mother. When Shirley is faced with something unsavory or uncomfortable, she simply chooses to ignore its presence.



Shirley volunteers at the hospital and is also in charge of managing the council website. When the Ghost of Barry Fairbrother posts on the website, Shirley is thrilled. The first two posts she just take down until Ruth Price asks her to and until Parminder demands it. She thinks that the more gossip that is out about every body else, the better it makes Miles, and in return her, look.

When the Ghost posts a post that talks about the affair between Howard and Maureen, Shirley loses it and plans to kill Howard with an Epipen. She finds him already on the floor from a heart attack and is happy that she might finally be able to play the victim now that her husband's in critical care and may die.

Gavin

Gavin is Miles's business partner at the law firm. Gavin thinks of himself as Barry's best friend and is distraught by the loss. His long-distance girlfriend, Kay Bawden, much to his chagrin has just moved to Pagford from London. He does not want to be with her but cannot seem to break up with her and now feels further obligation now that she's living in Pagford and has uprooted for him.

Gavin falls in love with Mary, Barry's wife and covets the life that his friend lived. Mary refuses him and Gavin attempts at getting back together with Kay. Gavin is a weak man who does not know what he wants, until Mary. In every other decision in the book his decision making is a lack of action.

Kay Bawden

Kay Bawden is Gavin's girlfriend and Gaia's mother. She is the Weedon's social worker for a short period of time. Kay tries desperately to make it work with Gavin despite his lack of enthusiasm for their relationship.

Kay is a secondary character.

Gaia Bawden

Gaia Bawden is Kay's daughter. She is deeply resentful of her mother for uprooting her from London and dragging her to Pagford for a relationship that isn't even very steady.

By Andrew Price, Gaia is described as extremely beautiful.

Parminder Jawanda

Parminder Jawanda is a physician in Pagford and treats most of Pagford's population. She also holds a seat on the parish council. She believes in what Barry was standing for



in keeping Bellchapel Addiction Clinic and keeping the Fields part of Pagford. She plans to execute Barry's plans, but realizes that with opposition growing, that she is a minority.

Parminder is critical, and sometimes cruel, to her daughter Sukhvinder. It isn't until her daughter nearly dies that she begins to understand her hurt and frustration toward her mother.

Sukhvinder Jawanda

Sukhvinder Jawanda is Parminder's daughter. She is a deeply unhappy young girl and is neither beautiful nor a good student like her elder siblings. Everyday Fats Wall torments her with mean posts on her Facebook page. To release her frustration and pain, Sukhvinder uses a razor blade to cut her arms.

Gaia befriends Sukhvinder and she finally feels as if she belongs somewhere. Together the girls get a job at Howard's Copper Kettle.

Sukhvinder helps Krystal look for her little brother Robbie. Sukhvinder finds him in the river and without hesitation, jumps in after him.

Simon Price

Simon Price is a violent, angry man. He steals and cheats. He regularly teases his sons and his wife, as well as beating them when he is angry or frustrated. Because of the Ghost post on the parish council, he loses his job and the family is relocating to Reading.



Objects/Places

Pagford

Pagford is the small town divided by the Fields from Yarvil. Most of the characters reside in Pagford.

Yarvil

Yarvil is the town on the other side of the Fields. Many of the residents of Pagford travel to Yarvil for work and for necessities.

Casual Vacancy

A casual vacancy is what is created when there is opening on the parish council that could be filled by a replacement, if an election isn't suggested.

Cubby Hole

The Cubby Hole is the cave near the river where Fats and Andrew spend their afternoons smoking.

Bellchapel Addiction Clinic

Bellchapel Addiction Clinic is housed in the old chapel that is owned by Pagford.

Yarvil and District Gazette

The Yarvil and District Gazette is the newspaper that is read by both the residents of Pagford and Yarvil.

The Copper Kettle

The Copper Kettle is the new cafe that Howard and Maureen are opening. Gaia, Andrew and Sukvinder get jobs there.

Mollison and Lowes

Mollison and Lowes is the law office that Miles and Gavin own.



Black Canon

The Black Canon is the bar in Pagford. It is where Miles proposed to Samantha.

The Fields

The Fields is a neighborhood that was built on outfields of the Sweetlove House. The land was sold to Yarvil and they developed it. Many of the residents of the Fields live off of government assistance.

Winterdown School

Winterdown is the secondary school that the teenage characters attend. The school is in Pagford.

The Rowing Team

Barry Fairbrother was the coach of the Winterdown rowing team. Krystal Weedon and Sukvinder were members of the rowing team.

The Price's Computer

Simon Price buys a stolen computer that he later dumps in the river because he is afraid that the police are going to come by and ask questions about it.

Howard's Deli

Howard Mollison and Maureen co-own a deli.

The Ghost of Barry Fairbrother

The monniker of the hacked posts on the Pagford Council website.

Razor blade in a the bunny rabbit

Sukhvinder hides a razor blade in her stuffed rabbit. When her parents go to sleep, she cuts her arm.



Pagford Council Website

The Pagford Council website is hacked by Andrew Price and Sukhvinder. Both of them write under the pseudonym "the Ghost of Barry Fairbrother."

Works

Krystal Weedon refers to her mother's heroine as her "works."

Nursery School

Robbie, Krystal's brother, must attend nursery school in order to stay in the custody of his mother Terri.

Crew Photo

Before his death, Barry Fairbrother led the girls at Winterdown to victory on the crew team. All of the girls have this photo in their house — including Krystal Weedon and Sukhvinder.



Themes

Interconnectedness

"And she took a deep breath, as though she hoped to taste the tang of disaster on the warm afternoon air" (Rowling, 368). This quote is demonstrative of one of the major themes in the book *The Casual Vacancy*. Pagford is a small town rich with physical history and history among its population. This quote appears at the end of the book when Maureen stands outside in the sunshine and hears sirens screaming through Pagford. Everything and everyone in Pagford is connected, whether they like it or not.

Rowling has done an exceptional job of making the details meaningful. For example, Simon Price buys a stolen computer from Obbo who rapes Krystal Weedon and is Terri's drug dealer; the computers came from stores at Terri's; Andrew mentions purchasing black market stolen goods in the Ghost post and Simon dumps the computer in the river; Robbie Weedon goes missing; Sukhvinder finds him in the river; she jumps in and cuts her leg on the computer that Simon through over the bridge just a week before.

This interconnectedness within the character's lives brings up the question of who is responsible for Robbie's death and Krystal's. No one accepts this responsibility but the interconnectedness of their lives falls like dominoes. They are all responsible.

History of Place

Pagford's residents are deeply embedded in their history of place. The characters who wish to keep the Fields as part of Pagford and to keep the Bellchapel Addiction Clinic open are outsiders or residents who have moved to Pagford, namely Barry, Kay and Parminder. The others are clinging to an idealistic image of the past. They want Pagford to be pure and "unpolluted" by annexing the Fields which are largely low-income housing families. Many of which receive government assistance. This clinging to the past allows the residents a reason to act so hatefully.

To those character who fight for people without as much privilege, the others say that they are freeloaders and junkies that will never get clean. Rowling makes no conclusions by her inclusion of characters, except to suggest that one cannot stereotype so cleanly for a broad population of people.

Family

Family dynamics are a central theme in the *Casual Vacancy*. In all of the family's portrayed there is a parent and child dynamic. Many of the children are resentful for how their parents have failed them, some, rightfully so. In some moments in the book, the children are acting more responsibly. Certainly in Terri and Krystal Weedon's situation,



and at the end when Gavin, Samantha, or Shirley, inquired about Robbie's mother and whereabouts. The adults do not act much more responsibly than their teenage charges.

It is the children's actions of using the parish council website and moniker "Ghost of Barry Fairbrother" that finally has the adults (some of them) questioning their own actions.

Additionally, all of the children harbor secrets that their parents don't want others to know, secrets that are to be kept in the family. There is a lack of connection with all of the families from what they portray to the outside world with what is happening within the family dynamics. The one exception to this behavior among the families is the Weedon family. Everyone judges Krystal because her family dysfunction plays out everyday for all to see.



Style

Point of View

The Casual Vacancy is written in the third-person and omniscient perspective. Nearly all of the characters have a scene, chapter, or part that is written from their perspective, so that the reader can hear their thoughts and internal feelings, and how the world around them is perceived. Though this method was popular in turn-of-the-century literature, it has fallen out of fashion. One advantage to the third-person and omniscient perspective is that the author has the ability to create real empathy and understanding for all of the characters. Even Rowling's most detested characters have feelings, motives, and also forgivable faults.

Though the perspective changes frequently, sometimes divided only by a paragraph break, there are a few main characters: Andrew Price, Samantha Mollison, Gavin, Sukhvinder, Kay Bawden and Krystal Weedon. Consequently, these characters are also the easiest to sympathize with, although they are often at odds with each other.

Setting

The Casual Vacancy is set in a small town in West County, England, approximately 132 miles from London in modern times. Though the characters reside in the small parish of Pagford, Yarvil, the next small town over is also very much a part of the setting, as well as the downtrodden neighborhood that separates the two - the Fields. The characters that reside in Pagford resent Yarvil and the people who live there.

The residents of Yarvil are not as well off as those of Pagford and many whom live in the Fields receive government assistance. The residents of Pagford, or at least a few that are on the Parish Council, are resentful that the children in Yarvil are able to attend Pagford schools.

Language and Meaning

Rowling uses modern British English in The Casual Vacancy. Rowling's sets of characters are divided by education, wealth, stability and drug use — she uses language to illustrate this. The characters from Yarvil speak with a different accent than those in Pagford; they swear more and they don't follow customary British English usage rules, illustrating their lack of education and gentility.

Whereas, the residents of Pagford speak with a properness that doesn't exist in the Fields. Though a character from Pagford may swear, it isn't in the same vein, or with as



much frequency as it is from the characters in *The Fields*. This is most clearly illustrated when comparing how the teenagers speak.

Ironically, Gaia Bawden feels that the Pagford accent is low class, but she is from London and has an outsider's perspective.

Structure

The novel is divided into six parts, or chapters. Each chapter has different scenes that are broken up by roman numerals. Each scene is brief and the perspective becomes limited to the characters in the scenes. The patchwork of scenes allows the reader to gain a sense of the entire community and what the people are thinking both collectively and individually. No one character is all knowing, but all characters are analyzed at such a distance that it is difficult to name a protagonist.

The novel opens with a scene that anchors time and from there the novel moves forward chronologically in time, with few flashbacks.



Quotes

"He tried to give his wife pleasure in little ways, because he had come to realize, after nearly two decades together, how often he disappointed her in the big things. It was never intentional. They simply had very different notions of what ought to take up most space in life" (Chapter 1, p. 6).

"It was his first lie, and he turned his eyes away from his wife as he told it. She remembered his big protective arm around Mary's shaking shoulders: He'll be OK...he'll be OK" (Part I, p. 10).

"Birth and death: there was the same consciousness of heightened existence and of her own elevated importance" (Part 1, p. 16).

"Shirley scrolled through the possibilities, her mild eyes rolling up and down, wondering to which of these deadly conditions, some of them unpronounceable, she owed her present happiness" (Part I, p. 18).

"Ah," said Howard. "Well, now. That's the question, isn't it? We've got ourselves a casual vacancy, Mo, and it could make all the difference" (Part I, p. 31).

"O mind, the world is a deep, dark pit. On every side, Death casts forward his net" (Part I, p. 36).

"Simon had the child's belief that the rest of the world exists as staging for their personal drama; that destiny hung over him, casting clues and signs in his path, and he could not help feeling that he had been vouchsafed a sign, a celestial wink" (Part I, p. 43).

"The Fields polluted and corrupted a place of peace and beauty, and the smoldering townsfolk remained determined to cut the estate adrift" (Part I, p. 48).

"The mistake that ninety-nine percent of humanity made, as far as Fats could see, was being ashamed of what they were; lying about it, trying to be somebody else. Honesty was Fats' currency, his weapon and defense" (Part I, p. 62).

"Colin had a habit of making sweeping judgments based on first impressions, on single actions. He never seemed to grasp immense mutability of human nature, nor to appreciate that behind every nondescript face lay a wild and unique hinterland like his own" (Part I, p. 8).

"This magnitude of anxiety and shame could not be contained in an instant message or a text; he was alone with it, and even Fats would not understand, and he did not know what to do" (Part 2, p. 117).



"She was driving through the Fields when the simple thought that she had tried to bury, to drown out, slipped past her lowered defenses at last. Perhaps I did love him, she thought" (Part IV, p. 278).

"And I never wanted him at all! He was sure he had heard it. Cubby must have been talking about him. They had been in his room. Who else could Cubby have been talking about" (Part IV, p. 292).

"It had never been easy to explain to Fats the reality of having Simon as a father, and, somehow, Fats was becoming more difficult to explain things to" (Part IV, p. 301).

"He had lately decided that questioning your own motives was inauthentic; a refinement of his personal philosophy that had made it altogether easier to follow" (Part IV, p. 303).

"The victims of the Ghost of Barry Fairbrother were mired in hypocrisy and lies, and they didn't like the exposure. They were stupid bugs running from bright light. They knew nothing about real life" (Part IV, p. 304).

"He imagined Krystal pregnant with his child; the faces of Tessa and Cubby when they heard. His kid in the Fields, his flesh and blood. It would be more than Cubby had ever managed. He climbed on top of her; this, he knew, was real life" (Part IV, p. 306).

"As to the suggestion of closing down the site, of which she was guardian and curator, she had taken no steps, nor had she mentioned the idea to Howard. Shirley was afraid that a site containing all the security measures that the superior young man had suggested would be way beyond the scope of her managerial and technical skills. She was already stretched to the limits of her abilities, and she was determined to cling to the post of administrator" (Part IV, p. 315).

"No denial, no outrage, no scathing laughter. Merely a cautious request for a source. Ever afterwards, Shirley would remember this moment as a death; a life truly ended" (Part V, p. 352).

"The familiar, well-loved streets seemed different, strange. She had taken a regular inventory of the window she presented to this lovely little world: wife and mother, hospital volunteer, secretary to the Parish Council, First Citizeness; and Pagford had been her mirror, reflecting, in its polite respect, her value and her worth. But the Ghost had taken a rubber stamp and smeared across the pristine surface of her life a revelation that would nullify it all: "her husband was sleeping with his business partner, and she never knew" (Part V, p. 363).



"In the theater upstairs, Howard Mollison's body overflowed the edges of the operating table. His chest was wide open, revealing the ruins of Vikram Jawanda's handiwork. Nineteen people labored to repair the damage, while the machines to which Howard was connected made soft implacable noises, confirming that he continued to live. And far below, in the bowels of the hospital, Robbie Weedon's body lay frozen and white in the morgue. Nobody had accompanied him to the hospital, and nobody had visited him in his metal drawer" (Part VI, p. 375).

"But who could bear to know which stars were already dead, she thought, blinking up at the night sky, could anybody stand to know that they all were" (Part VI, p. 376).

" "Oh yes," said Shirley. "Broad daylight. Open air. And the boy was right by the river when I saw him. A couple of steps and he'd have been in." Something in Maureen's expression stung her" (Part VII, p. 384).

"She kept asking herself whether, if he had looked cleaner, she might have been more concerned; whether, on some subliminal level, she had confused his obvious signs of neglect with street-smartness, toughness and resilience. "I thought he'd come in there to play, but there was nobody with him. He was only three and a half, Miles. Why didn't I ask him who he was with" (Part VII, p. 388).

"Sukhvinder wished that she could be like Krystal: funny and tough; impossible to intimidate; always coming out fighting" (Part VII, p. 396).



Topics for Discussion

How is Barry Fairbrother's death received by the people in Pagford? How are the Mollison's taking advantage of his death?

What does Barry Fairbrother's death mean for the town of Pagford?

Describe Barry Fairbrother. How was he perceived differently: by his widow, Krystal Weedon, the Mollison's, Gavin, Colin Wall, and Paraminder?

Why do the Mollison's want to shut down the Bellchapel Addiction Clinic? What is Howard's motives for closing it?

Why did Barry Fairbrother and Paraminder, as well as others, want to keep Bellchapel open? How does it affect them?

How does Bellchapel Addiction clinic impact Pagford and Yarvil? How does Bellchapel affect the families who live in the Fields?

Why does Andrew Price sabotage his father? How does he know how to hack into the Parish website?

Why doesn't Ruth Price leave her husband? How is she implicit in what he does? Why doesn't she protect her children? What is her excuse for Simon's behavior?

Why doesn't Gavin discourage Kay from moving to Pagford? Why does he continue to be part of the relationship even though he no longer wants to be?

Why does Sukhvinder contemplate suicide? Why does she cut herself?

Why is Paraminder so humiliated by the post that Sukhvinder secretly posts? What cultural factors play into her feelings? Was there any trust to the accusations in the post?

How does Rowling create reader sympathy for characters like Terri and Krystal Weedon?

How does Kay justify her moving Gaia from London? How does Gaia feel about moving? Why doesn't Kay see that Gavin is not that interested in her? How does Gaia see it?

How do the children justify their posts about their parents? Why does Fats confess to it all?

Who is responsible for Robbie's death? For Krystal's?



Why didn't Samantha, Gavin or Shirley stop when they saw Robbie, a toddler, wandering around alone by the river? How do each of them pardon themselves?

Why doesn't Shirley get the security beefed up on the council website?

Why does Samantha become obsessed with Jake from Lexie's favorite boy band?

Why does Samantha kiss Andrew Price?

Which characters change? What was their catalysts?

Which characters do not change?

What do you think Rowling's message is in the book?

Why does Sukhvinder include the lyrics in the eulogy at Krystal's funeral? What does the song represent?