

# **The Children's Crusade Study Guide**

**The Children's Crusade by Ann Packer**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: All citations in this Study Guide refer to the Kindle version of *The Children's Crusade*, published April 7, 2015.

"We never get over it ... Having started out as children" (171). These are the words that Rebecca Blair's analyst says to her during a therapy session. *The Children's Crusade* by Ann Packer deals with all of the ways that parents influence their children — for bad and for good — and the ways that children influence their parents. The novel follows four siblings as they try to come to terms with the impact of their childhood when they are faced with the sale of the home in which they grew up. Themes in the novel include the importance of both a child's nature and the way he is raised on his personality, the impact of the parent's personality on child development, and the role of the mother in childhood.

Recently discharged from the Navy, Bill Blair bought a piece of land sheltered by a huge California live oak tree. He bought it on a whim, an unusual move for him, but he was motivated by an image of dozens of children playing on the property. He hoped that by changing his specialty to pediatrics, he could help children. Since he had worked as a doctor in the war he had been disillusioned by the cruelty and unnecessary death he had seen there. Bill hoped his new line of work would help to improve his outlook on life.

Bill married the backward Penny Greenway who imagined herself with children but lived more inside herself than in actual relationships. The two decided on three children, two boys and one girl. Instead, they had four children, three boys and one girl. Bill, who was better with the children, was away from home a good deal because of his job, but Penny worked full-time trying to take care of the children and her home. In the novel, the family's story is told through the description of several incidents that happen during the course of their lives as a family. In the first incident, the children were upset because Penny had promised to let them help with party preparations but decided at the last minute it would be too hard and time consuming to teach them what to do. In another scenario several years later, the children became aware that their mother was drifting away from the family. They tried to come up with something she would enjoy doing with them so they could reunite their family. It is in this section that Penny decided she wanted to use a shed on their property as an art studio.

Penny moved further and further from her family both emotionally and physically as her children become teenagers, and then young adults. She spent more and more time in her art studio, even moving a bed in so she could sleep there at night. Of all of her children, Penny was most frustrated by James, the youngest. While the other children were relatively well behaved and followed career goals they had set for themselves, James floated through life with no real structure. He got in trouble for drunk driving and into physical altercations with his mother. Things reached a head when James tore up a painting that was a favorite of his mother. She responded by impaling his childhood security toy in one of her assemblages.



Penny believed James needed to be disciplined, but Bill did not believe in corporal punishment. She was frustrated because Bill wanted her to spend time with a family over which she felt she had no control. When she tried to connect with the family, Penny only felt frustrated and hurt. For this reason she immersed herself more and more into her career as an artist. She believed her art was her true calling.

The siblings began to think about their childhoods again when James told them he wanted to sell the house in which they grew up. Each of the children had his own opinion of James' decision. However, by the terms of their father's will, they could not refuse to sell. In order to sell the house, Penny also had to agree to the sale and would not do so if James would not come to see her in person. The two come to a sort of understanding, just as the other children do with the ghosts of their childhood during their process of coming to terms with the sale of the house.



# Chapter 1: California Live Oak

## Summary

In Chapter 1: California Live Oak, Bill Blair came home from his job as a doctor in the military. He looked for a life more satisfying and less grisly than his one in the military. He had already decided to spend extra time in school to become a specialist in pediatrics. He thought this form of medical care would be more satisfying than his stint in the military. On a whim, he purchased a plot of just more than three acres of land in the California wilderness. This land included a huge oak tree. He imagined children there.

While getting his father's watch repaired, Bill met Penny Greenway, a girl whom he imagined might be his mate for life. She had never really liked other people and had chosen to live inside herself. She did not even particularly care for the idea of being married. Even so, she wondered what life would be like with Bill. On his birthday, she made him a collage from photos she had requested from his mother.

After Bill proposed to Penny, she showed him pictures of the children she thought she would have. The pictures all contained two boys and one girl. After they were married, they had unprotected sex for the first time in his car on the plot of wilderness land. Even though he still loved the land, Bill felt that something about it had changed when he began bringing Penny to it.

## Analysis

This opening section of the novel is told from the third person point of view of an omniscient narrator. The narrator focuses on Bill but also includes Penny's thoughts on marriage. This short section, perhaps the shortest in the novel, is told in the past tense. It represents the beginnings of Bill and Penny and their family.

The plot of land and huge oak tree with which Bill fell in love is a significant setting in the novel. It is at this place that, like Penny suggests in this section, they build a house and raise their family. The oak tree on the land is also significant. "The oak was the most splendid tree he'd ever seen, its gnarled branches snaking every which way. He would learn later that it was a California live oak" (5). This magnificent oak tree inspires Bill to buy the property. A gift from his father helps him to purchase it.

Since Bill has just gotten out of the Navy, it is significant that a good deal of the imagery in this section includes refers to military terms or items. For instance, when Bill drives in the convertible his hair is described as being "blown flatter than the bunk of an enlisted man" (4). In the same way, the parts of the car are called by the names of a boat. The hood ornament is described as being "on the prow of the car" (4). Prow is the nautical term for the front of a boat. Notice also how the narrator indicates that "war had exploded" Bill's notion of what a person had to do in order to lead a contented life (5).



Notice how the narrator uses a military term in the verb “exploded” to describe what the war had done to Bill’s view of life.

Another important symbol that will appear again in this section of the novel is the watch that Bill receives as a gift from his paternal grandfather. It is a 1935 Hamilton Seckron dual-dial doctor’s watch. The watch brings Bill and Penny together because they meet each other for the first time when he takes this watch to the store where she works to get it repaired.

In this section of the novel, Penny shares a preconceived notion that she and Bill will have only three children. As a child she drew pictures of her future children, two boys and one girl. Notice also that Penny’s first gift to Bill is a collage. This will be significant later in the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

What is your opinion of the way that Penny and Bill met? Do you think they really love one another? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Bill felt his love for the land he purchased diminish when he began taking Penny there? Why do you think this is significant?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of Bill’s images of children playing among the trees on the property he purchased and Penny’s preconceived ideas of the children she expected to have. How might these expectations be dangerous?

## Vocabulary

pummeled, meandered, biannually, exemplary, asymmetry, unassailable, reverie, intricacies, rudimentary, taciturn, perplexed, studious, mediocre, mandate, celibacy, collage



## Chapter 2: The Party

### Summary

In this section of the novel, the four Blair children — Robert, Rebecca, Ryan and James — tried to amuse themselves as their mother prepared for the party the family hosted each summer. Robert was the oldest child. As such, he tried hard to gain the respect of his mother and siblings, and, especially, the respect of his father. Rebecca was intelligent with a large vocabulary. She liked to think deeply about things. While Robert tried to be strict with the youngest brother, James, Ryan was sympathetic to the younger boy and often served as his caretaker. James was unruly and seemed to lack control over his impulses. It often took all of his siblings working together to keep him out of trouble.

When their father was at home the night before, Penny had promised the children that they could help with the party preparations. However, the next day she felt too busy and too rushed to take the time to teach them what they needed to do. The older children were unhappy because they believed that their mother would have allowed them to help if the younger siblings had not been there. They all tried, in their own ways, to get their mother's attention. They believed they could at least help with the cookies, but their mother sent them away with a batch of cookies she had burned. James wailed for his father when she yelled at them to go away.

They spent the rest of the day searching for ways to earn praise from their father when he got home. Instead of doing something for which he felt his father would praise him, Robert accidentally lost the watch his father had given him as a gift. He cried with relief later when he saw that his youngest brother had found it and was using it as a collar for his stuffed dog.

Before he had lost the watch, Robert decided to get a table from a storage shed on the family's property. He believed he had heard his father and mother talking about a spare key hidden on the foundation. Robert searched a couple of times that afternoon, and he and Rebecca looked for it again just before the party. However, they were not able to find a spare key.

### Analysis

In reality, Bill and Penny have four children. Penny seems overwhelmed with the children although Bill is able to handle them easily. James, the youngest and most difficult to handle of the children, appears to be an accident. While Ryan and Penny are alone together during a short period of the afternoon, Penny pulls Ryan "onto her lap and said he was supposed to be her baby" (25). This indicates Penny had not expected James.



Although Bill gave his grandfather's watch to his oldest son, Penny felt the watch should have gone to her. Robert was given the watch as a gift when he turned ten, a special gift because he was the oldest. "It was a gift his father had received from his own grandfather, and his mother's reaction had been confusing, almost as if she thought his father should have given the watch to her" (34). Since the watch is the object that was central to Bill and Penny's meeting, it makes sense that Penny might have thought Bill would give it to her. It also makes sense for him to give it to his oldest son. What is most significant about this incident is that it shows that Bill and Penny apparently did not talk through Bill's decision to give the watch to Robert. It came as such a surprise to Penny that she is not able to hide her emotions from her son. This incident also shows that Penny is jealous of Bill's closeness with the children. Perhaps, she feels left out because he pays more attention to them than he does to her.

Bill continues to be obsessed with the land as it was when he first saw it. He loves the land so much that he commissioned an artist to paint a picture of it. That picture now hangs in the bedroom he shares with Penny. Sometimes his children catch him staring at it. Notice that the narrator describes the picture as looking more muted and drab than the trees and property appear in real life, even though the details of the trees are perfect.

Just like all siblings, the Blair children have very different personalities. Robert is the oldest. He believes his birth position gives him a position of superiority over the other children. He tries desperately to prove himself to his father. He resents any attention that his father gives Rebecca. Meanwhile, Rebecca is intelligent and captures her father's interest by talking to him about things she has learned at school that pertain to medicine. She also thinks of ways to help her parents without being asked. Robert is resentful of Rebecca's ability to think in advance. Ryan is an artsy boy. He could be described as Penny's favorite child. He is the only one to whom she shows any real affection. James is a contrast to all the other children. While they are concerned with helping their parents and impressing their parents, James appears to be uninhibited and to lack self-control.

Significant in this chapter is Robert's search along the foundation of a shed for the spare key to the building. Notice the way that Robert's awareness of this key is described: "He knew this with the strange conviction one has about things learned in dreams: it was absolute fact shrouded in mystery" (32). He does not remember how he knows about the key, he just has what one could call a hunch. The phrase "absolute fact shrouded in mystery" is an oxymoron, the combination of two opposing ideas. A fact cannot be absolute if it is covered, or shrouded, in mystery. The use of the unnecessary modifier "absolute" to describe the fact stresses the surety with which Robert believes he knows a key is hidden in the foundation.

Later when Robert mentions to his father the key hidden in the foundation, Bill does not remember having hidden a key there, but he does remember the day he poured the foundation. Robert had only been a baby on that day, but his father remembered putting three R's in the hardening concrete. He had no idea why he had put the two extra R's.





The R's seem to correspond to the number of children he and Penny believed they would have, children who were given names that started with the letter R.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Compare and contrast Penny and Bill's styles of parenting.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss relations between the siblings as described in this section of the novel.

## **Discussion Question 3**

How is the watch a significant symbol in this section of the novel? What does it mean to Robert? What does it mean to Penny?

## **Vocabulary**

tranquility, archipelago, dubious, indulgence, conundrums, inaugurated, anomaly, forlorn, insolence, pristine, confounded



## Chapter 3: Robert

### Summary

In Chapter 3, Robert is now an adult who is a medical doctor. He tells the reader how he has suddenly been struck with a lack of care for his patients. He is pulled out of his slump when James suddenly reappears in his life. At this point in Robert's story, which is being told in the present tense, switches to the past tense to describe things James has already done during this visit with his family. It was during a brunch attended by all four siblings and their families that James had pointed out Robert's misery and accused them all of being corrupt and dishonest. The comment caused Robert to think about the way he had always measured his decisions in life based on whether or not his father would have approved. Recently, he had caught himself making mistakes. He had missed what he believed was an obvious diagnosis in one patient. He also had considered using his status as a doctor to levy a favor, a move his father would never have approved.

In his frustration, Robert tried to fix a gate latch. His wife asked him through the window if he was okay. He thought of all the ways in which he was insecure. He had worried through his entire childhood that his sister, Rebecca, would surpass him in ability because he believed that she was smarter. Now, he is a doctor and she is a psychiatrist. He worried after he and his wife, Jen, had their first son if he was following his own father's directive. His father had told him to enjoy the boy. Robert wondered if he was really enjoying his boys.

He walked to the house in which he and his siblings had grown up. The house was being rented by the CEO of a Silicone Valley company. The CEO hoped to buy the house, even though the siblings said it was not for sale. Ryan, his wife, Marielle, and daughter Katya lived in the old shed. Robert sat on the front porch but was caught by the oldest daughter of the CEO. He had to explain to her parents why he was there. On the way back down the drive way, he stopped in to say hello to Ryan and his family. They briefly discussed James. He assured them something was up. He did not believe James was there only because he loved them and wanted to visit. Listening to his brother, Ryan was concerned there was really something wrong with Robert. Robert countered by saying he had to deal with dying and terminally sick patients, but their dad was in a good mood so much of the time because he dealt mostly with children.

After he left Ryan's house, Robert went back to the main house and made his way to the tree house his father had helped the boys build. He struggled to climb the slats and remembered his father climbing to the top of the tree house with them when he was Robert's current age. He wondered what sort of man his father might have been if his wife had loved him instead of being concerned only about herself.



Robert also remembers his father's death. He had contracted pneumonia and then had a mild stroke that seemed to age him suddenly. It was sepsis contracted after surgery to correct an intestinal blockage that killed him.

## Analysis

Notice the switch in perspective in this section. It is narrated in the first person point of view by Robert, the oldest of the children. Time has passed and he is now an adult with his own successful medical practice. Robert begins his chapter in the present tense and switches to the past tense as he describes how James' visit has gone so far. It can be assumed the time line has moved thirty-five years in the future since James was three in Chapter 2 and is now thirty-eight.

The narration switch gives the author an opportunity to focus on Robert alone. The reader learns about Roberts relationships with his parents and his siblings from his point of view. This is not necessarily a reliable point of view since it is affected by Robert's memories and emotions. He responds to his life from a point at which he is trying to deal with the pressure he has put on himself to live up to his father's expectations. Robert's role as the oldest child has put him in the position of trying to impress his father and be the best even though he feels insecure and incapable.

Just as he was as a child, James is the center of concern for all his siblings even though he is now an adult. Robert suspects that James' surprise appearance means that something is wrong that the rest of them will have to help straighten out. Notice the way James' body is even described as still being that of a child even though he is a grown man, bigger than his brothers. His almost hairless chest is described as "his body joining in the argument that he shouldn't be held to the standards of adulthood yet" (66).

The tree house as well as the main house in which the siblings grew up are significant symbols for Robert. The main house is a symbol of childhood and easier times. Robert goes there to try to reconnect to his younger self. Unfortunately Robert is caught there by the people who are currently renting the house. Notice that Robert still thinks of the house as his own. "The CEO greeted me with a surplus of pleasantries and, sweeping his arm to the side, welcomed me into my house" (79). The idea that Robert felt he was having to be invited into his own house show a disjoint in Robert's thinking.

Meanwhile, the tree house is a symbol of Bill's perfection at being a father. He was able to help the boys build the tree house and then was successfully and easily able to climb up into it. Robert compares his motions with the clumsy way in which he navigates the thin slats of wood that make up the ladder. He believed his father had climbed it with "a combination of grace and good humor" (85). Robert also remembered his father had a balance about his fatherhood that few others had. "My father knew just how to sit up here with us: authoritative, benevolent, self-effacing" (86).

Robert, however, refers to his own act of trying to be a father in negative terms. When his wife comments to him that he looks "terrible" (76) he responds "Only because I am"



(76). It is understood that he means that he believes that he is terrible. In this section Robert remembers “something Jen had said about some other failure of a father” (76). The reader can assume that Robert refers to this “other” failed father because he thinks that both he and Jen believe he is a failure as a father as well. Robert additionally struggles with the worry that he has not enjoyed his children enough and for that reason is like his mother, Penny.

## Discussion Question 1

How does this switch to the first person point of view alter the tone of the novel? How is the use of this point of view appropriate?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the attitudes of the other siblings toward James as described in this section of the novel. Why does his act of suddenly showing up unannounced bother Robert?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Robert’s opinion of himself as a father. Does he think he is a good father? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

berating, provisional, angular, ingenious, esteemed, perversely, disquisition, emanating, sentient, omnipotence, capricious, apotheosizing, apropos, retrospective, litigation, euphemism, coveted, subterfuge, fallibility, dissonance, probationary, fatalistic



# Chapter 4: The Crusade

## Summary

Chapter 4 reverts to the past. James began kindergarten. That night Bill made a special back to school dinner. As they were eating, he asked all of the children how the first day at school had been. Without prompting, Penny described her day in one word “heaven” (96). The children tried to ignore their mother’s jab. Ryan was hesitant to talk about his day because it had been strange being there with no other children. He and his mother had sat together and looked at picture albums. When she pointed to a picture of James hugging Dog, his stuffed animal, she asked him if he thought the love there was real. Ryan did not answer because he was afraid of seeming disloyal to James. He believed the love “was real but not wide and deep, like his love for Badger” (101).

After dinner, the children and their father went out for ice cream. Penny was not invited so she stayed at home. She believed this lack of an invitation indicated no one wanted her there. She wished she and Bill could walk together and hold hands as if they had no children. Instead, she thought that Bill was trying to set her up for failure as a mother.

During the outing, Ryan asked twice why their mother had not come. Roberta thought about his question, and she decided they needed to plan something to do that their mother would want to do with them. Robert suggested they go on a crusade. Later that day they saw Penny decorating cigar boxes with sea shells. She offered to let them decorate a box, but they decided they were not interested. Later, they tried to write down things they thought their mother might like to do with them, but James got bored. He told them that he was going to the tree house. When James was gone for some time, Ryan and Rebecca went looking for him. They found him on the trail. He was no longer wearing his pants. Later he began to itch on his privates.

When Bill came home he diagnosed James’ rash as poison oak. Since he would not prescribe medicine for his own children, he took James to the emergency room for treatment. After Bill returned home with James, Ryan apologized to his father for letting James go to the tree house alone. Ryan was full of love and concern for others, much of the reason he was sent to a private school while his siblings went to public school. Rebecca wondered if she had the same caring attitude. She began showing more attention to the students who were ignored and made fun of in her class at school.

One day the family went to a recital at Atherton, the mansion owned by Harold Lawson, one of Bill’s old friends. After parking, they had to walk nearly two blocks to the house. On the way there, Penny said she left something in the car and told the others go ahead. Ryan was nervous and edgy as he and his family waited for Penny to join them. Rebecca helped a mentally challenged girl find her mother, while James got into trouble. Robert noticed a sculpture he thought his mother might like. He decided to walk back to the car and meet his mom. He finally walked to a point that he realized was past where they had parked the car. Their mother had taken the car and gone home.



A man named Dr. Mallon drove the family home before the concert began. Bill had called their home and been told by Penny she had changed her mind about attending the recital. They found her not in the house but in the small storage shed. The children were happy to have found her. She believed she had an emergency, a reason to leave the gathering. When she tried to tell her family about her idea the children interrupted her and made her frustrated. She finally told them she wanted the shed as a place for herself, an art studio. When Ryan asked if their mother would be moving to the shed Bill quickly told him that she was not.

## Analysis

The point of view in this chapter in the novel switches back to the omniscient third person narrator. The chapter is also set back in the time when the children were small, but the time frame has advanced about two years from Chapter 2. James is now five and starting kindergarten.

The children's crusade is an idea formulated by the Blair children to reincorporate their mother into their family. They want to find something that she will enjoy doing with them. They sense her move away from the family, though they do not understand it. Remember that she had intended to have only three children. The youngest of the children, James, is a particular challenge to her because he is so different from the others. She wants to pursue her interests in art. Recall that when she and Bill were dating she expressed her love for him in a piece of artwork. It was a collage of pictures, which she gave him for the first time they celebrated his birthday as a couple.. She hopes to seek solace in the shed, where she can be alone.

Notice the strain in the relationship between Bill and Penny. Penny yearns for Bill to take her hand and for them to be able to pretend they do not have any children. Bill, on the other hand, seems focused on the children. Notice the differences in the way that the narrator refers to both Penny and Bill. He most often calls Penny by her first name, even when she is interacting with her children. Meanwhile, Bill is most often referred to as "his father" (136) or "their father" (142). This use of the name versus the label indicates that Bill is viewed through his relationship to his children. That is his most defining aspect. Penny is not defined by her relationship to the family. She is seen as an individual. In some of Bill's actions, particularly the look that he gives Penny when the family goes for ice cream, Penny believes that Bill is trying to set her up for failure as a parent. She takes his look to mean that she should stay home.

While her children search for ways to draw her into the family, she searches for a way to separate herself from them. Notice, however, that when an opportunity for the children to connect with their mother presents itself they do not recognize it and choose not to take it. This happens when Penny tries to get them interested in decorating cigar boxes with shells. Ryan is the only one who seems interested in doing the artwork with his mother.



The shed will serve a variety of different purposes in this story. In the previous chapter, Ryan, his wife and daughter are living there. In this section, Penny wants to upgrade the shed and turn it into a pottery shed. She mentions adding plumbing for a sink and toilet. Ryan is perceptive enough that he is able to recognize that with plumbing his mother could live in the shed. Fresh with the feelings of what it was like to be abandoned by their mother, this is a legitimate concern for all of the children.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that in the sections of the novel that occur while the children are young, Bill is most often referred to as the children's father, while Penny is referred to by her first name? How does the use of a title versus a name impact the reader's interpretation of these characters?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss Penny's act of abandoning her husband and children at the recital. How would you describe her behavior? What is a possible explanation for her behavior?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of James' case of poison oak? Why does the author choose to include this in the story?

## Vocabulary

bolster, febrile, paragon, decorous, banish, cajoled, palindrome, malicious, lintel, disjointed, prodigy, acoustics, feigned, meticulous, melodramatic, mnemonic, constraint, emanating, truncated, propriety, lament



# Chapter 5: Rebecca

## Summary

Rebecca begins by telling her reader that she never felt out of place being the only girl with three brothers. She does remember that James was the only one of her brothers she felt she really had to look out for, an idea her psychologist described as a “reaction formation against an unconscious hatred of him” (146). Now that he is staying with her again Rebecca wants to try to hold him in line even though they are both adults. When she visits his room he tells her that he wants to go and visit the house in which they grew up. At one point in their conversation Rebecca says to him “Oh James” (149) which causes him to believe his siblings see him only as a problem.

The following afternoon Rebecca got off work early. She and James drove to Skyline. They stopped at a bar where Rebecca suggested they have a beer together. When they left James asked again if they could stop by the house. Even though she did not really know Lewis Vincent, the man who was renting the house, that well she agreed. Lewis insisted on showing them the new wine cooler he had just had installed in the garage. James and Rebecca wound up offering to help him move his bottles of wine into it. Lewis questioned Rebecca about his youngest daughter, who seemed to be having problems adjusting to her new school. Rebecca had a phone call scheduled at 6:30 p.m. so she was frustrated when Lewis and James disappeared about 6 p.m. When she found them James mentioned to her that Lewis had some ideas about their homeplace. James pushed him to describe them even though Lewis seemed uncomfortable. Once they were back in the car Rebecca reminded James they were not planning on selling the house. James smiled at her and told her he had crossed over to the “dark side” (157) and wanted to sell.

That night Rebecca had a dream where she was in the painting that her father had done of their property before the house was built. She was alone but not lonely because she knew the rest of her family was coming. It was a dream that Ryan had described to her. After their father had died, Rebecca’s brothers finally decided the painting of the land should go to her. There had been much discussion of who should get that piece even though they had been in agreement that they did not want to sell the house.

Rebecca knew that James was referring to Penny when he made the comment about the dark side. Their father had written his will so that the house could be sold only if Penny and at least one of the children agreed on the sale. Penny had wanted to sell the house since Bill had died. While Bill was still alive Penny had transitioned to living in Taos. She was making a living selling her art but still wanted her share of cash the sale would have given her. Rebecca had thought that of all the children, James would have been the last she would have dreamed would support Penny in selling the house.

The following evening Rebecca got a call from Lewis asking if she would give her opinion of their daughter’s problems. She refused to do so because she preferred not to





treat children of acquaintances. Later when she and James were talking and she learned he had been to see Robert she asked about the boys. He said he approved of the boys and reminded her of the saying their father used “Children deserve care” (165). The next day Lisa Jansen, Lewis’ wife, came to see Rebecca at her office. She wanted to talk to Rebecca about her daughter but wound up confusing Rebecca so thoroughly that Lisa told her she would try to call later.

One night Rebecca woke to hear James talking to a woman. She went to the kitchen where she found him video-chatting with his girlfriend, a woman he introduced as Celia. The next morning James told Rebecca he was in love. Celia, however, was married and had two children. He told Rebecca the reason he had left the town of Eugene and come home was so they could figure things out.

All four siblings met at a coffee shop to talk about selling the house. James told them he definitely wanted to sell because he needed cash, an admission that surprised both Rebecca and Robert since they thought they were still in the decision making process. James was perplexed when Robert reminded him that he had to call and ask Penny if she still wanted to sell the house. James said it had been eleven years since he had talked to Penny.

On their way home they stopped at the old house again. Rebecca sat on the front steps between James and Ryan. The family arrived home while they were still sitting there. Lisa introduced herself to Rebecca, indicating she wanted Rebecca to act as if they had not met.

The next afternoon James asked to borrow Rebecca’s car because Lewis had asked him to visit the house again. James and Daphne wandered around the house while Rebecca stood near the living room. When James and Daphne came back, Daphne was telling James that she was good at nothing. She went to the living room where she folded herself inside an end table. James seemed troubled and told her she should come out. While James went to get Lisa, Rebecca and Daphne talked. However, when Lisa come into the room, Daphne refused to come out of the table. Lisa told them she was not sure what they wanted but asked them to please decide if they wanted to sell the house or not.

At the end of the chapter, Rebecca has a memory of a dinner she and her parents had with an old boyfriend of hers. During that dinner a mention is made of James and a poem he liked. Penny had begun to comment that James always got what he wanted when Bill had warned her to stop. Rebecca remembered the anger she heard in his voice.

## Analysis

The point of view and tense change again in this chapter. The author returns to the first person point of view, but the narrator is Rebecca, who is the second oldest child. This section is focused on the main action of the novel, James’ decision to sell the house. In



fact, it is in this section that selling the house is mentioned. The decision seems to be tied up in a good deal of emotion and memories held over from childhood on the parts of almost all of the children.

This section matches Rebecca's personality because it delves into the her emotions and those of her siblings and discusses the impact of their childhood on their adulthood. Notice the psychological terms in which she discusses her attitude toward James. She indicates she believes she feels she needs to mother James because of a "reaction formation" (146) to her unconscious hatred of him. Even though they are both adults, Rebecca still believes she needs to mother James and take care of him. When James tells Rebecca about his dream, she interprets it from the viewpoint of a psychiatrist.

Even when James gives a hint that he has changed his outlook on life, Rebecca does not really pay attention or recognize the changes she sees. "I was only half listening, wondering instead at James saying 'That's what I do' and thinking there was something different about him, though I couldn't put my finger on what it was" (155). James offers to help Lewis put away his wine bottles, but Rebecca does not even notice that her brother has developed a positive habit. She expects nothing but bad from him and cannot seem to accept that he has begun a new, positive way of life. She believes he is using his charisma to influence Lewis because he wants something from that man.

James tells Rebecca that he wants to sell the house, and indicates he is crossing over to the "dark side" (157). This reference indicates how the children feel about Penny. She is considered to be dark, a synonym for evil. Once when Rebecca and Walt talk about Penny, Rebecca explains to him that her mother was: "A wife and mother. To her dismay. I was thinking about this the other day. Maybe she liked it at first, but it wasn't enough for her" (185). Perhaps, it is Rebecca who picks up most clearly on her mother's personality and her mother's desire to do more than just raise children. For the remainder of the novel, Penny's desire for a career is presented as something that makes her a bad wife and mother, as if a woman cannot be both a mother and, in Penny's case, an artist.

A sense of contempt between Bill and Penny because of James comes out during a dinner with one of Rebecca's old boyfriends. Rebecca remembers her father responding in a way that was more angry than she had ever heard him sound when Penny began to indicate that James always got what he wanted. This incident underscores the idea that Penny and Bill were at odds when it came to James and the way he was being raised. The reader senses frustration on Penny's side of the argument because James always gets what he wants regardless of his behavior. Bill is angry with Penny for suggesting that they incorporate more discipline in the boy's life.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does James decide he wants to sell the house in which he and his brothers and sister grew up? What does he have to do in order to go ahead with the sale?



## Discussion Question 2

Why is Rebecca so unhappy that James is wanting to date a married woman who has children?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the children hate Penny so much? Do you think there is more to the story than is being told? Can a woman be both a mother and have a career?

## Vocabulary

distort, itinerant, peripatetic, mantra, poignantly, charisma, diffidence, rapport, invalidates, enunciation, flummoxed, provision, ascended, idiosyncratic, revulsion, paramour, disheveled, bigamist, somatic, beleaguered, inexorable, copulation



# Chapter 6: The Studio

## Summary

Eighteen-year-old Robert was dating Gina, a girl from a divorced family. James had been irritating Gina. Even though Robert tried to talk to his father about it, his father did not take him seriously. He told Robert that children need care, a comment that Robert thought was misused. He was a child himself, but his father did not seem to care about him. He had asked if Gina could go with them on their annual Thanksgiving trip to visit his maternal grandparents but was told that she could not.

On the day after Thanksgiving, Ryan, Rebecca, and James were alone in the house with their grandfather, who was resting. Ryan and Rebecca were discussing religion, while James was watching television. James got bored and turned the television up too loud. Rebecca ran to turn it back down. James was standing on the couch. He jumped at Rebecca, hitting her. Ryan ran in to pull James off Rebecca. James continued to scream as he hit Ryan. Finally, Ryan got James calmed down. Rebecca felt responsible for agitating James by reacting to him so badly.

Later, in the living room, the boys were watching the newscaster talk about Jonestown. A picture of Jim Jones was shown, which James said looked like their father. James pretended to be a gunman, shooting his brother Ryan whom he said was Congressman Ryan, the man who went to investigate the cult and was killed. James continued to make fun of the mass murder causing Ryan to lock himself in the bathroom. He could not stand any more death or any more of James' cruelty. When Ryan saw James again, James apologized for shooting Ryan.

Meanwhile, Robert found a jigsaw puzzle while looking for Christmas decorations. The children began putting it together. In the bedroom Penny's mother was criticizing her for not being around for her children when they got home from school but instead in her studio. Penny's mother tells her about the argument her husband heard between the children. She said he had heard James yelling, screaming and punching. She warned Penny that James needed discipline and if Bill would not be the one to administer it Penny needed to do so.

When Rebecca and Robert finished the puzzle James took one look and declared it was of Jim Jones. The puzzle had been made from a photo of Bill, Penny and the children sitting in front of Bill's childhood home. When Bill questioned James about his comment that the photo was of Jim Jones, James began to run out of steam but continued to make improper comments. Bill took James outside but did not punish him, only went for a walk.

Penny confronted him about James' behavior when he arrived back at home. She accused him of not wanting James either and begged him to agree with her. She



reminded him about the concrete. He promised to talk to the boy but did not follow through with his promise.

On the way home the next day the family drove by the city hall in San Francisco. At home Robert went to see Gina but she seemed irritated so he went home with the idea of breaking up with her on his mind. When he told his family he might break up with her, James was angry. Bill thought it was because of the time Penny was spending in the shed. He told his children that no one in their family was going anywhere. That night Bill went to the shed and told Penny he wanted her in the house with the family in the evenings.

Penny wondered why her husband had chosen that time to make her start coming to the house again. She thought of when she had discovered she was pregnant again and how unhappy she had been. She could not bring herself to suggest getting an abortion even though she wanted one. She decided to show out by cooking the type of dinner she would like, one she knew her children would not like even though it was healthy.

When she did get home she found Sierra, Ryan's girlfriend, there with him. They told her that Mayor Moscone and Harvey Milk had been assassinated. Robert was also upset about the murders, particularly so because of the flippant way that Gina had written them off by saying they were probably overdue for assassinations. During dinner the family began talking about how sick Penny's father was. James grew angry and began yelling and hitting again. Bill grabbed hold of him and held him tightly. Penny tried to order James to go to his room but Bill said he was just upset. Bill took James and left the room while Penny burst into tears.

In his room James began to tell his father how Sierra and Ryan were kissing. He recited dirty rhymes and said bad words. His father did not scold him. Meanwhile Robert was thinking about Gina. He decided that he did want to break up with her. Penny went back to her studio. The next day she purchased a bed and began spending the night there as well.

## Analysis

In this chapter the narration returns to that of a third person omniscient narrator. The siblings are still children but it is seven years later than the chapter about the party. Robert, the oldest, is now eighteen.

Bill and Penny's opinions on parenting become obvious in this section. Penny appears emboldened by her mother when she approaches Bill about stricter punishments particularly for their youngest son. The reader can tell that Penny is not doing this because she blindly follows all of the advice that her mother gives her. She thinks her mother does not understand the troubles that she has as a parent because her mother had only one child while Penny has four. Notice the way that Penny describes her children. She believes they are a "pack of kids led by a brilliant and demanding boy, complicated by a headstrong girl with no gift at all for the arts, softened and therefore



confounded by a meek and dreamy boy, and finally overwhelmed by a miniature wild man” (218). She agrees with her mother that James needs discipline but at the same time, Bill will not allow corporal punishment.

Bill, meanwhile, tries to deal with James’ behavior by distracting him. When he creates the scene at Penny’s house about Jim Jones, Bill takes him outside. He tries to talk to the boy and make him think rationally. Even when Bill witnesses James throwing a fit and hitting the other children he does not punish him like Penny would like to see him do. He only takes James out of the room. Penny cries not out of sadness but out of frustration.

The letters Bill scratched in the concrete come into play in this section as an important symbol. Penny brings up these letters as a way to remind Bill that he had only wanted three children as well. She is hoping for some hint from him that he understands how serious James’ behavior is and is grasping at straws to get it. Bill misunderstands her and believes that she is threatening to let James know he was not wanted, reminding him that she has proof that even Bill had not expected a fourth child.

Meanwhile the well-behaved Ryan is treading on dangerous ground for a teenaged boy. Of all the children he is the one his mother seems to like best because he is the one whom enjoys art. Notice that even Penny’s mother has taken a special liking to Ryan. She wishes all the other children would go away so she and Ryan could do something special together. Ryan and his girlfriend, Sierra, appear to be quite close. Penny is aware of their closeness and the children know about it because they lay on the floor and kiss with the door to the bedroom open. Bill learns about Ryan and Sierra’s behavior from James. He does nothing to discourage the way James talks about his brother or the way Ryan and Sierra behave when they are together at the house.

Another important symbol introduced in this section of the novel is the puzzle picture of Bill, Penny and the children in front of Bill’s childhood home. Penny believes this picture is a symbol of what she would have become if she had not saved herself. It is difficult, however, for Penny to say she has saved herself from being a wife and mother since she technically still fills that role even though she seeks solace in the shed she has set up as her work studio. She has saved herself only by buying herself a certain amount of time away from her family.

Notice the interaction between Bill and Penny when Bill tries to get Penny to return to her duties as a wife and mother. He was frustrated with her spending time in the studio so he confronted her and asked her to begin at least eating dinner with the family and spending the evenings at the house. She agreed even though she reasoned that her children liked convenience meals better than the healthy ones she tried to cook so she believed she was really doing both parties a favor by staying away. After James throws his fit and Bill refuses to punish him it is as if Penny regards this as being a sign that her promise to come to the house in the evenings is null and void. Instead of just spending the evenings there she buys a bed and begins spending the night as well.



## Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Robert's decision to break up with Gina? Do you think he breaks up with her because she is immature, or do you think he has another reason for breaking up?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is causing the division between Penny and Bill? Are either of them responding to the challenges that face them in a positive way? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of the Jonestown suicides in this section of the novel. Why is this bit of historical news included?

## Vocabulary

blithely, perennially, antidote, platen, flippancy, nonchalant, excruciating, lethargic, pantheism, perceptive, camaraderie, ostensibly, inherent, motley, tacit, dissemination, caustic



# Chapter 7: Ryan

## Summary

Ryan describes the birth of his baby daughter, Katya, and how he loves her more than anything else. After Katya was born, Ryan and Marielle had stayed with his father for a week before moving back to the shed. Everyone had expected them to take up residence in the big house, but they had wanted to go back to the shed.

It was when Bill got pneumonia that Ryan first began to fear what life held for Katya. He knew illness and pain was in her future and there was nothing he could do about it. Ryan had been most fearful for his daughter when James first met her.

When James returned home after seeming to be happy in Eugene, Ryan was surprised by how unhappy James really was. He did not just emotionally attack Robert, he also looked sad. Ryan understood James' sadness when he told him about Celia. Ryan tried to convince James he did not hate him because he had fallen in love with a married woman although that did complicate the situation.

Ryan and Marielle had become friendly with the Vincents even though they felt their living space had suddenly shrunk when the house was rented out. Susanna, their older daughter played with Katya. Lewis and Lisa discussed their concerns about Daphne with them. One day Ryan came home to find a fire truck in the driveway. Daphne had gotten stuck in the end table. Her mother had to have help getting her out. Marielle and Ryan later talked about Daphne. He had suggested her parents send her to Sand Hill Day school when he had first learned of the girl's troubles. Marielle told Ryan that she believed the girl needed therapy.

Ryan was thinking about Daphne again when he got a call from Marielle for him to come home. She said Daphne was at their house, in Katya's bed and would not come out. A babysitter had been watching her. Marielle could not get in touch with Lisa or Lewis.

At home, Ryan sent everyone outside. He and Marielle convinced Lisa to let Daphne stay there until she decided she was ready to go home. Marielle and Katya took the babysitter home while Lisa and Susannah went back to the big house. Alone with Ryan, Daphne came out very soon. She told him she wanted to go home. Once they were close she told Ryan that it would take a year for them to tear down the house in which they were living and build a new one. Lisa invited Ryan inside. He noticed the end table Daphne had gotten stuck in was gone.

Later the following day at Robert's house Robert asked Ryan why he was not angry with James for wanting to sell the house. He shared with Ryan that recently he had been feeling more like he had taken after Penny than after their father. Later Katya crawled inside an end table and pretended to be Daphne. Marielle and Ryan had to explain the situation to Robert and Jen. James mentions that he and Rebecca had also seen the





girl climb into the table. They also described the incident when Daphne had gotten into Katya's bed. The siblings discuss if Daphne's problem is caused by her parents or if she was born with the mental and emotional issues she has. Their talk leads them to their own parents and they discuss how parents act differently with each child depending on the temperament of that child.

When Robert indicates that he cannot believe his brother is about to break up a family, the two begin to argue. Ryan tells them he wished they would not. At the end of the chapter, James tells his siblings he believes that he has another option concerning the house.

## Analysis

This chapter returns to the first person point of view. This time Ryan gets the chance to narrate. Interestingly this section is more about Daphne than it is about Ryan and his family. At the end of the chapter the author builds suspense by having James announce that he has another idea about the house.

When the Blair siblings discuss their upbringing they compare their family with the family now living in their childhood home. One of the most important things they notice is that Susanna is normal while Daphne is emotionally disturbed. For this reason Marielle and Jen believe the fault does not lie with the parents. Rebecca, however, with her background in psychology reminds them that each parent interacts with children differently depending on the nature of the parent and the child. "No two siblings have the same parents. My father was not the same person as Robert's father. My mother was not the same person as Ryan's mother." (284) This brings into the discussion the idea of nature versus nurture, a common theory used in determining the cause of behaviors in children and adult. One side of the argument indicates the way a child is raised is most important in determining how they will behave while the other argues his nature, the qualities he inherits from his parents, are most important.

A statement is made that indicates to the reader that the relationship between Penny and James grew worse as James got older. James calls himself a "problem child" (284) when Rebecca suggests that James did not get the best of their mother. He takes her attitude to mean that she believes James got what he deserved for causing so much trouble in the family. James is aware of the trouble that he caused but does not appear to be apologetic about it. He does, however, seem to be more sensitive to it than his siblings might realize. For instance when Rebecca begins talking about "maternal ambivalence" (284) James claims he was kidding and asks to change the subject. His desire not to talk about his relationship with his mother may be a way of covering how upset he is by it.

Notice, meanwhile, that Ryan and Marielle feel about the shed the same way Penny did. Penny saw the shed as her own personal refuge from life. In many ways Ryan and Marielle also use the shed as a refuge. Because it is small it can contain only the three of them though they are slowly outgrowing the space. They also use their constrained



space to keep out the unwanted influences out of their lives. Ryan's only concern about moving into a bigger place is that they will no longer have the easy excuses to turn down televisions, toys for Katya and material possessions.

As Robert and Ryan talk about their parents, they categorize them. Their father is the "good" parent while their mother is the "bad" parent. Ryan tries to compliment Robert by telling him that he is his father's son but Robert says he feels like he is acting more like Penny day by day.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the Blair children categorize their father as the good parent while they see their mother as the bad parent? What influences their decision?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way Daphne and her story is incorporated into this section of the novel. What is her significance to the story of the Blair children?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think this section, narrated by Ryan, is so much shorter than the other sections?

## Vocabulary

unfathomable, candid, factual, alluring, lexicon, admonishment, decipher, hagiographer, equivocate, ambivalence



## Chapter 8: The Piece

### Summary

As a young driver, James totaled both his mother's station wagon and his father's car when he hit one car with the other in the driveway of his home. He was drunk. Because of this feat he got invited to an upperclassman party even though he was only a freshman. He was abandoned by his ride when he went back to check on a boy who was passed out. James called Rebecca for a ride. She called James' father. Both Rebecca and Bill showed up to get James. Bill went back to check on the passed out boy and had him admitted to the hospital.

Rebecca stopped by Penny's workshop on her way back to college. When Rebecca refused to stay for tea Penny asked her when she was going to forgive her. Rebecca wondered what exactly Penny wanted forgiveness for and considered it might be for her personality. Penny tried to explain to Rebecca she and her mother had also had disagreements but Rebecca did not want to listen. As Rebecca left Penny remembered how her mother had pulled her away from her art and called her talent useless.

Later when James and Bill were in the kitchen eating sandwiches Penny returned from a shopping trip. She had met Mary Lawson, the wife of Harold Lawson, who had invited them to a birthday party for Harold. Penny wanted to go because Mary's mother was an art collector. She thought the old lady could help her career. When James commented she did not have a career Bill tried to stop him but Penny said he was right. She needed Mrs. Grant's influence to help her develop her career.

Penny walked back to the shed thinking about her latest project assemblages of things people would generally throw away. Robert had actually inspired her by handing her an egg noodle bag in jest to include in her projects. Now she had one in each of her assemblages.

Robert, who had the mindset that if he was supportive of Penny he was betraying the rest of his family, agreed to go with his mother and father to the birthday party. Penny approached Mrs. Grant as soon as she had the first opportunity. She thought it was strange the old woman only smiled at her as she talked and wondered if she was deaf. Finally, she made a strange remark to something Penny said. She noticed Mary mouthing at her across the room, indicating Mrs. Grant was "not all there" (318). Even so, Penny stayed at the party while Bill and Robert left after a polite length of time.

At home, Robert learned from James the story of what had happened at the high school party. Bill went to bed early complaining of being tired. Walking past his father's room he noticed Bill was up, holding a magazine. He invited Robert in and they talked about James. After Robert left, Bill thought about the last time he had seen his father. He wished he had kissed his father's forehead as Robert had just done to him.



He heard Penny come in and call for James but he did not hear the fight that followed. She criticized him for leaving a mess in the kitchen. As the argument intensified he hit her with a shoe he had thrown. He went into his closet and closed the door but she beat on it until he opened it. When she lunged at him he hit his head on the leg of his bed. She knelt next to him and told him that “It’s me, it’s me, it’s always been me, it’s me, it’s me” (324). Although James could have interpreted this as an admission of guilt, he chose to interpret it as her own self-centered ways.

The next day Penny approached Bill about helping her to advance her career. Speaking of their lives, Bill asked where they should go from there. Penny replied he did not want her there, that he only cared about the children. Bill realized this was true, but that the children were leaving.

A few days later when the whole family was home for Ryan’s birthday, Penny asked them what they thought might happen if she started selling her art. She asked for support and James lashed out at her asking what else she wanted from them. He picked up a watercolor she had done of the house. Even though Rebecca tried to get him to calm down he asked if anyone thought a person would pay to have that. When James tore the painting in half Penny cried out. She asked if there was anyone who had anything to say to James. James cursed her. Sierra went to Penny telling her they could tape it back together.

Robert asked James why he had destroyed the painting. James replied that was the kind of person he was and ran out the door. Ryan ran after him because he was not supposed to be driving. James threw the car keys and ran off down the driveway. Because he had thrown such a fit Penny believed James’ actions required a strong reaction on the part of his parents. She wanted to send him to a small boarding school for boys known as the Priory. When Penny first brought up the idea Bill refused to even consider the school but did wind up going to tour the campus with Penny and James.

When James, Penny and Bill got home from their visit to the Priory Sierra’s car was parked in their driveway. Sierra and Ryan told James they had come to take him out. After the children left Bill told Penny he would not allow James to be sent to the Priory.

Meanwhile, Sierra drove James and Ryan to her house. She stopped to get some cash and also some mushrooms she wanted to try. James used the bathroom and found a necklace with a tiny gold cross on it. He stole the cross. Once they arrived at the beach, Ryan pulled James aside and told him about the mushrooms. He said he was not going to have any. James decided not to either. On the way home from the beach Sierra realized she wanted to go work for the man who took pictures for Vogue magazine.

The next morning the children got together and fixed breakfast. Bill suggested they not ask about the Priory. When Robert asked if they should tell Penny about breakfast the children remembered the crusade they had tried to come up with to get their mother to do things with them. When Rebecca noticed how uncomfortable her father got she wondered if it was some behavior on his part that made Penny pull away from the family.



Robert went to the shed to get his mother and stopped short when he saw what she was working on. He started to comment on the reaction that James would have to the piece of work but Penny stopped him. She asked him to help her carry it to the house. Rebecca was looking at the piece just outside the house when James and Ryan walked into the room. Rebecca told James to stop, but he came anyway. They looked in horror at the assemblage which featured Dog speared in the center of the work with four poultry trussing needles. James laughed in surprise and then angrily shouted he was “out of here” (364) as he ran away.

## Analysis

This longest section in the novel returns to a third person narrator. The time setting goes back to a time when the Blair children were teens and young adults. The family problems reach a climax as James grows older.

Penny is so frustrated with James and with Bill’s unwillingness to discipline the boy that she becomes physically violent with him. This is a turning point in their relationship as their actions seem to cement the hatred they have for one another. James first destroys a watercolor painting that his mother did of the house in which they live. Not only did he destroy her favorite painting, he also did so while he was belittling her belief that she could have a career as an artist. Because this painting and its destruction symbolizes James’ willingness to destroy something that he knows is special to his mother, it is an important object in the novel.

In response to James’ behavior Penny makes an assemblage in which she skewers a stuffed dog, James’ security toy, in the center. It is her way of reacting to James’ behavior and standing up for herself because she feels the family does not give her any support. She believes she has to defend herself or no one else will. In reality it seems that Penny’s artwork makes the family feel more sympathy for James instead of being sympathetic toward Penny.

There is a hint of hope given for James in this section of the novel. Even though he is badly behaved, James shows some capacity for compassion. Even though it is not a popular idea among his friends and he gets abandoned at a party because of his decision, James goes back and re-positions his friend, who has passed out in the floor. James does this because he is afraid the boy will throw up and choke on his vomit. While most kids in this situation are concerned only for their own relative safety and well-being, James thinks about others.

Penny apologizes to Rebecca and Rebecca wonders if it is for her own personality. The apology happens during an encounter in Penny’s studio. Rebecca is not sure for what her mother is asking forgiveness. She wonders, perhaps, if it is for her personality but Rebecca wonders if a person should have to apologize for her personality. This encounter indicates that Rebecca does not see that Penny has done anything wrong that warrants an apology. It also indicates that Rebecca does not want to spend enough time with her mother to determine what it is that she thinks she needs to apologize for.



Rebecca seems largely disinterested in developing a relationship with her mother, somewhat like Penny's disinterest in her children when they were small. Remember, for instance, the way Rebecca tried to dress up and look special for the party her mother and father hosted. She had hoped her mother would say she looked nice but Penny made no positive comments about Rebecca's appearance.

Bill has trouble thinking of Penny as an artist. This is interesting since the first gift that Penny gave him was a piece of art work, a collage of photos she got from his mother. He has also noticed that art seems to have a calming affect on her. On the days she had colored with the children she would be more relaxed, less stressed. Other people notice Penny's talent for art and appreciate it before Bill does.

The division in the family is highlighted in this section. When Robert goes to tell his mother that breakfast is ready she asks him to do her a favor. He hesitates because it has been ingrained in him that by helping Penny he is betraying the rest of his family. Notice, in fact, that there is a question of whether Penny should even be invited to breakfast or not, as if she is a stranger instead of a member of the family.

The family members also interpret Penny's actions based on a preconceived notion of her. For instance, James believes his mother is self-centered and selfish. For this reason he chooses to interpret her words to him after he falls during a scuffle between the two and hits his head as being a symbol of her self-centered ways. Her words "It's me, it's me, it's always been me, it's me, it's me" (324) could indicate that Penny is taking the blame for her bad relationship with her youngest son. James considers this, but it is easier to assume she is just being self-centered.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you think the family might have had more sympathy for Penny when James treated her badly if she had not made the assemblage with the toy dog in the center? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Bill has so much trouble seeing Penny as an artist?

## Discussion Question 3

As the children grow older, they treat Penny less and less like a member of the family. They assume she is self-centered and cares nothing for them. How has Bill helped to cultivate this image of Penny in his children's minds?



## Vocabulary

incessantly, aspirate, detritus, allay, competence, languid, patriarchy, idiom, deference, succinctly, devoid, consternation, disparaging, malcontent, pungent, rapturously, acquiescence



# Chapter 9: James

## Summary

In this section, James describes how he believes he was born again when he met his people, members of a collective called The Barn, when he was thirty-seven. It was a group of twenty-six people who helped each other and fellowshiped, like a family. He was surprised and pleased when people told him he was a great addition to the group. A welcome change because he was so used to people telling him he was a disappointment.

Soon James began spending time with Celia, a wife and mother of two, who was also part of the group. One evening while visiting with another of the families, one of the children pointed out that James had a crush on Celia. He noticed the mother give him a pointed look. A few days later the same woman, Sarah Rankin, commented to James that one of the reasons she loved the Barn was because of the respect each member showed for the others' families. He understood her point and began avoiding Celia.

In April it was James' turn to do the dinner baskets. He waited until all the baskets with the exception of Celia's family's was gone. He decided to drive it to Celia's house. She met him at the door. No one else was at home and she invited him in. She was crying and he held her. She asked him if he could come back. On the first of May they had their first sexual encounter.

After the two have been having an affair for nearly a year Celia surprises James by calling him and asking him to use his vacation days and leave town. They fight about it but finally he agrees. As James headed for home, he remembered the times before he had gone home to Portola Valley. All of these trips had been disastrous. He had finally gone to South America where he learned about his father's stroke. He talked to his father a day or two later using a satellite phone. James had talked to his father only three more times before he died. The last conversation Bill asked him to come home. Eight days later he was dead.

While James was at home, he began talking to Celia on the phone again. They forgave each other for their fight. Celia told him her love was real. Meanwhile James began picturing he and his siblings and their children having family vacations. It was at that point that he imagined he and Celia could rent the house and live in it themselves. When he told his siblings the next time they were all together they were not happy with the idea. Robert finally asked James why he had not called Penny. James lied and told them Penny no longer wanted to sell the house. Robert confronted James and told him that they knew he did not call Penny. James was happy to learn that they had called Penny, believing that his siblings had done the hard part of his job. Rebecca told James that Penny would not agree to sell the house until she saw James.





As James traveled to his mother's studio in Taos he remembered the last time she had spoken to him had been eleven years earlier. Things had not gone well. When he arrived in Taos he asked first what she wanted from him. James was smart mouthed and left but returned to the studio a few minutes later. Penny told him that she just wanted to talk to him and suggested they go to dinner. They talked for a while. Then, a couple of men Penny knows come in and she invited them to join her and James. James told them about the collective of which he was a member. He made a joke that made his mother smile warmly at him but he had to remember how she had been during his childhood, selfish, cold and hateful. The other kids noted Penny had mellowed but James did not believe them. He only remembered that she had not even come to Bill's funeral.

After dinner Penny apologized for her distraction during his childhood but he indicated that he thought she had hated him. She said she did not hate him. They agreed the visit had not been "so awful" (410). Back at the studio he asked her to show him her art. She shows him people made with wires fitted with tiny televisions for heads. Photographs of people's faces are glued to these television sets. She shows him some she had done of the family. There is even a picture of him that she had cut from the photo of himself and Dog. She tells him that she felt bad about what she did to his stuffed animal.

James tells his mother he is about to be married but that first he will wreck a home. When he told Penny the story of he and Celia they remembered Bill's mantra that children needed care. Penny mentioned it was as if he were on a crusade for children. She indicated she felt he did not think she needed care. She believed he did not even want care from her, just babies. Just before James left Penny asked him if he was concerned at all about what his relationship with Celia would do to the Barn. She touched the necklace around her neck and asked him if he was not afraid the collective would be ruined because of him. She reminded him that was what the two of them did, ruined things.

## Analysis

It appears that James turns a corner in his life when he finally goes to visit his mother. He dreaded this visit so much that he had decided it was not even worth the money he would get out of the sale of the house. The last time they had talked had been eleven years prior when Penny had asked James if he was ever going to get his life together. Now, Penny seems to be more patient with him. When he tells her that he plans on marrying a woman who is still married to another man she asks him a reasonable question and reminds him that he will be losing the support system that he has created with his friends in the collective. If he follows his selfish desires and marries Celia, he will destroy Celia's family and the family of the Barn.

James also describes in this section how he had spent his years since dropping out of college looking for something that would satisfy him. It was not until he became a member of the Barn that he found the support system that he needed. In this collective he is able to help people. They show him that they appreciate him and value him.



James had never gotten these feelings from his family before. Because he has always acted in an immature way around them, they had always expected him to act immaturely. It is for this reason that Rebecca does not understand the significance when James tells Vincent that helping out is what he does. She cannot see beyond the trouble making boy that he always was.

Dog, James' security animal, is mentioned again in this section. Penny apologizes for what she did to the stuffed animal. She also apologizes for being so distant from James during his childhood. She shows him the new art pieces she is doing and even shows him that she had chosen a picture of him to include with these pieces. The picture is the one of James smiling so big his eyes were squeezed shut while holding dog. Her decision to use this photo and her act of asking his permission seems to impress James even though he plays it down. When he is alone in the studio for a minute he slips the picture into his pocket, a reminder of a time his mother accepted him.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that James dreaded going to see his mother so much? How did their visit help him to renew his faith in himself?

## Discussion Question 2

Penny says to James before he leaves her art studio: "Isn't that what we have in common, you and I? That we ruin things?" (416). What do you think she means by this? What do you think she hopes to make James understand?

## Discussion Question 3

How does being a member of the collective help James to restore his self-confidence?

## Vocabulary

reclusive, spiel, incompetence, perpetual, voluptuous, solvent, leeching, perturbation, estranged, inert, proprietor



# Chapter 10: The House

## Summary

Ryan watched the destruction of the house with Katya, Sammy, and Luke. A few days later he asked Rebecca if just the two of them could get together. He asked her about her last time she was alone with their father. Ryan admitted he clung to the memories of his last time with his father, five months before he died, because there weren't enough of them. He wished he had thanked his father for hosting Katya's birthday party or even thanked him for being such a great father.

Rebecca had not been to see the land after the house had been demolished. She stared at the painting of the land. She tried to picture the first day he had seen the land and pictured the children there. Robert did go see the property after the demolition. All traces of the old house were gone. The huge oak tree was gone. The shed had been demolished but the rubble still lay waiting to be carted away.

The last place he visited before leaving was the remains of the shed. He believed the money that his father put into the shed to renovate it into a studio proved that his father loved his mother. He explored the exposed foundation. He noticed two pieces with scratches etched into them. When he fit them together he saw three R's. His thoughts went back to his father talking about something being on the landscape. Bill had covered by saying it was a spare key but he realized that his father, also, had not planned for James. It made him feel better knowing that his father was not as perfect as he had once believed.

When school started again Robert was surprised to learn that Daphne was in Sammy's class. Lisa said they had been taking her to a therapist and were now calling her Laurel. She had been being bullied at her old school.

James stayed in the Barn and remained deeply rooted there in every family with the exception of Celia's. When he came back from Taos he decided they had to stop. Even though she had begged him otherwise he had insisted on doing what was the best for the group. The only thing he had bought with his share of the money from the sale of the house was a new bike. When he left Penny's studio he had swiped the television with his face pasted to it. He'd made his own wire figure and attached it to the handle bars of his bike where it appeared his childhood self was flying.

## Analysis

While Ryan had seemed the most well-adjusted of all of the Blair children, it is indicated in this section that he, too, had insecurities left over from childhood. His particular hang up is that he believes that he did not appreciate his father enough. He remembers that Bill had hosted Katya's birthday party, but he does not remember if he even thanked



him. He is filled with regret that he did not spend as much time with his father as he could have when he had the opportunity.

Meanwhile, Rebecca is so disturbed by the destruction of their childhood home that she cannot even make herself go and see the property once the house is demolished. Robert, who seemed to be most stressed about the thought of selling the house, is able to go to the property even though it hurts when he sees how all of the familiar landmarks have been destroyed. Even the huge oak tree that drew his father to the plot to begin with is gone.

An important object, the pieces of concrete foundation where Bill had scratched the three R's, resurfaces in this section of the novel. Robert sees these pieces of concrete when he explores the debris left behind from the destruction of the shed. He realizes when he sees the letters what his mother and father were talking about the day Bill had told Robert they were talking about a key to the shed hidden in the foundation. These marks indicate how sure Bill was that he and Penny would have only three children. James was never taken into consideration. He was a mistake. Learning this misjudgment on his father's part gives Robert a whole new appreciation for his father. Robert had begun to see him as a perfect saint, but realizes Bill was prone to mistakes just like anyone else.

Notice also that James enjoys the gift of freedom from his guilt in this final chapter. The image of James riding his bike while the wire figure of himself, topped with the picture of himself holding dog, dangled from the handlebars captures the idea of freedom. "When he sped down a hill, the little figure appeared to be flying" (432). This reference to flying demonstrates the freedom and joy that James finally enjoys since he has made things right with his mother and has successfully overcome his desire to destroy Celia's family. He feels good about himself for doing the right thing.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way each of the children reacts to the destruction of the house.

## Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that after James talks to his mother he decides not to marry Celia after all? What does this mean for him?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it important that the huge oak tree that once grew on the Blair property is cut down when the new owners buy the land? What does the disappearance of the tree symbolize?

## Vocabulary

phenomenal, requisite, dichotomy, introjected, phenomena



# Characters

## Bill Blair

Bill Blair is the patriarch of the Blair family. He began his career as a doctor in the Navy. His experience in the war helped Bill decide to do more studying and become a pediatrician when he came home from the war. He thought that type of medical practice would be more fulfilling and less emotionally traumatic than taking care of adults.

Just after Bill got home from the Navy he found a plot of land that he discovered that he loved. The plot was in the middle of the wilderness and featured a huge California live oak. He bought the property with help from his father.

Bill met Penny Greenway when he went to the store Reliable Clock and Watch to get the watch repaired that his grandfather had given him. He and Penny got married soon after and began their family. Bill agreed with Penny that three children was the proper number for them to have. He proved this when he scratched three R's in the concrete foundation of a shed he was building. James was a surprise to both of his parents.

Bill took a different view of parenting than Penny, particularly when it came to James. He did not believe in corporal punishment. Instead, he thought that all children deserved care. Even when James acted his worst, Bill refused to punish him.

Just as Bill had little control over his children, he also had little control over his wife. After Penny started spending all of her time in the studio, Bill tried to insist that she at least spend the evenings with the family. She did as he asked the first night. However, she refused to do so after that because Bill refused to punish James when James threw a fit at dinner.

Bill died when he contracted sepsis after surgery for an impacted colon. Before he died he wrote his will so that the family house, which had been built on the land he had purchased when he first came home from the Navy, could be sold only if Penny and one of the children agreed on the sale.

## Penny Greenway Blair

As a young girl, Penny Greenway Blair never thought she would get married. She did not think she could stand to live with a man. Despite her belief that she would not get married, Penny did draw pictures of what she thought her future children would look like. She imagined she would have two boys and one girl. Penny shared these pictures with Bill just before they were married.

When Penny discovered that she was pregnant with James, she cried and told Bill she could not survive having four children. She feels completely overwhelmed by her children. The only child she seems to be able to relate to is Ryan who also enjoys art.



Penny disagrees with Bill in his refusal to allow corporal punishment, especially when it comes to James and his outrageous behavior.

When James is a teenager, James and Penny have a particularly bad fight. James tears up a picture of the house she had painted with the intention of hurting her. In response, she creates an assemblage that features his stuffed dog, a toy from his childhood, skewered by four trussing needles.

After this incident, Penny wanted James to go to the Priory, a religious school for boys who were on the verge of being trouble; but, everyone else was against the idea.

In order to give herself some space from her children, Penny asks Bill to allow her to set up a storage shed as an art studio where could enjoy her creativity. As time went by she began spending more and more time there until she eventually began sleeping there. When the children become young adults, she slowly began a move to Taos where she started taking classes there. At first, the classes lasted a week, then a month, then the whole summer.

Penny moves to Taos totally and is able to support herself with her art work. She is living in Taos when James goes to talk to her about selling the house. Even though James had always thought that he was very different from his mother, he gains some perspective when she communicates to him that she believes she has caused trouble in their family as well.

## **James Blair**

James Blair is the youngest of the Blair children. His parents did not intend to have a fourth child. They especially did not intend to have a child as active and disobedient as James. While his siblings were relatively well behaved, James had little impulse control and could not sit still.

Because James was the only sibling who did not have a name that began with an R, he often felt left out. He also knew he was treated differently than his siblings by both his mother and his father. James grew up resentful of his family. Instead of finding a career and path for his life, James wanders from job to job and place to place.

It appears that he is going to cause problems for his siblings again when he shows up unannounced and tells them he wants to sell the house where they grew up. Instead, James's actions wind up prompting his siblings to recognize and come to terms with some ghosts from their childhood.

## **Robert Blair**

Robert Blair is the oldest of Bill and Penny's four children. He follows in his father's footsteps and becomes a doctor. He lives his life in order to please his father. After his



father's death he feels lost because he does not have the point of reference he had always had in the past.

Robert is married and has two children. He worries if he is being a good parent and is enjoying his children or if he is like Penny. He fears that he may be like her.

When James announces that he wants to sell the family's home place, it is Robert who is most upset. He is angry with James because of James' desire to sell the house. Also, he is angry because James quickly picks up on the fact that Robert is going through a tough time in his life.

## **Ryan Blair**

Of all the children, Ryan Blair is the one whom Penny seems to like best. She tells him at one point that he was supposed to be her baby. Ryan is sensitive and artsy. He grows up to work as a teacher in a private school. He is married to a French woman. They have one daughter whom they name Katya.

Even though Ryan has the most to lose when the house is sold, he seems to be the sibling who is the least upset by the sale of the house. He and his family live in the shed that once served as his mother's art studio. When the sale of the house is final, Ryan and his family are forced to move.

## **Daphne**

Daphne is the youngest daughter of Lewis Vincent and Lisa Jansen. She has emotional and mental problems. She does not like her name and would prefer to be called Laurel. She spends a good deal of time folded inside an end table in her parents' living room. One day her mother has to call the fire department to get her daughter out of the table. Daphne also causes a stir when she walks to Ryan and Marielle's house, gets into Katya's bed, and refuses to get out.

Daphne's parents finally arrange for her to attend therapy sessions. She begins to show signs of improvement. They also allow her to change her name to Laurel.

## **Lisa Jansen**

Lisa Jansen is Lewis Vincent's wife. She seems to be overwhelmed by her children, but Rebecca does not believe she is overwhelmed in the same way that Penny had been as a mother. Lisa approaches Rebecca in an attempt to get her opinion about her youngest daughter's strange behavior. She later indicates to Rebecca that she does not want her husband to know that she came to Rebecca for help.





## **Lewis Vincent**

Lewis Vincent is the Silicon Valley CEO who is renting the house from the Blairs. He wants to buy the house and raze it so he can build a larger and more luxurious house there. His oldest daughter, Susanna, visits and plays with Katya often. His youngest daughter, Daphne, has emotional and mental issues.

## **Rebecca Blair**

Rebecca Blair is the second oldest of the Blair children. She grows up to become a psychiatrist. She marries an older man who is a doctor. They have no children.

## **Sierra**

Sierra is a girl that Ryan dated through his high school years. They were together for six years before Sierra decided to be a fashion model and went to New York.

## **John Mallon**

John Mallon is the doctor who takes Bill and the four children home after Penny abandoned them at the recital at Atherton.

## **Celia**

Celia is the married woman whom James meets and falls in love with through the collective of which he is a member.

## **Gina**

Gina is a girl whom Robert dated during his senior year in high school. He broke up with her because he believed she was immature.

## **Walt Newhall**

Walt Newhall is Rebecca's husband. He is a scientist.

## **Marielle**

Marielle is Ryan's wife and Katya's mother.



## **Katya**

Katya is the daughter of Ryan and Marielle.

## **Sammy and Luke**

Sammy and Luke are the children of Robert and Jen.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Oak Tree

The oak tree is symbolic of Bill Blair's first dream of having a family. He buys the property on which his family's house is built partially because of the awesome, huge tree he noticed there. Bill told his children the tree would watch over them and over their house. When the children, who are now adults, finally agree to sell their childhood home, the siblings are sad to see that the new owners have the huge tree cut down. It is as if their lives and childhood have been destroyed.

This oak tree first appears in Chapter 1. It is cut down in Chapter 10 because the new owners of the property decide to build a bigger house there.

## Dual-Dial Doctor's Watch

This watch is a symbol of Robert's status as the oldest child. His father gives it to him as a special gift when he turns ten years old. It had been given to Bill as a gift by his grandfather. It was when Bill took this watch to the shop to be repaired that he met his future wife Penny who worked there. It could have been for this reason that Penny believed she should have been the one to get the watch instead of Robert. This watch appears in Chapters 1 and 2.

## The Painting

This painting is a symbol of the dreams that Bill had for his property and the love that he had for it before it was developed. This painting was displayed in Penny and Bill's bedroom. The children would often catch him sitting on the bed looking at it. After Bill died, it was decided that Rebecca should get the painting. This painting is introduced in Chapter 2.

## The Dog

This stuffed dog is symbolic of James' childhood. It is his security toy. He and the toy are inseparable off and on until the time he is nearly a teenager. Unlike Ryan, who cared for his security toy consistently, James abandoned his dog for weeks at a time. Penny sometimes wondered if James loved the animal at all. When she wanted to get revenge for James destroying a painting she had done, she impaled this stuffed animal onto the center of one of her assemblages. This dog is first mentioned in Chapter 2. It is also in Chapter 8.



## **The Puzzle**

This puzzle is a symbol of the life to which Penny believes she had wanted at one time. It is a picture of her, Bill, and the children in front of Bill's parents' house. The puzzle appears in Chapter 6.

## **Cellophane Egg Noodle Bag**

This piece of trash is a symbol of the way that Robert influenced his mother's artwork. Penny believes Robert would be surprised that he had any influence on her at all. One day he picked an egg noodle bag up off the floor. He told his mother that the bag was something she should use for her collages. She incorporated one in each of her collages since that day. This egg noodle bag is introduced in Chapter 8.

## **A Watercolor of the Blair House**

This watercolor of the Blair house comes to symbolize the rift between Penny and James. One day when James is frustrated with his mother he tears this painting in half. His mother insinuates it was one of her favorite pieces and believes James destroyed the work just to hurt her. The destruction of the watercolor happens in Chapter 8.

## **Photo of James Holding Dog**

This photo of James holding his stuffed animal symbolizes his habit of unsustained emotion. James loved his stuffed animal from time to time. At other times, he had abandoned it. Ryan believed James loved the dog but did not believe his love was as deep or as wide as his love for his stuffed badger. This photo is important in Chapter 4.

## **Three R's Etched in Concrete Foundation**

The three R's that Bill etched in the concrete foundation of the shed symbolize his intuitive feeling that he and Penny would have three children, all with a first name starting with the letter R. Bill tries to use this etching of the three R's as a way to comfort Penny when she discovers that she is pregnant with a fourth child. He insists that he also saw them as having only three children. This etching is significant in Chapters 2 and 10.

## **Assemblage with Dog in the Middle**

Penny puts together this assemblage in response to James tearing in half a watercolor she had done of their house. The assemblage symbolizes her desire to hurt her son as repayment for him hurting her feelings. This assemblage appears in Chapter 8.

# Settings

## Reliable Clock and Watch

This store, which belonged to Penny's uncle, is the place where Bill and Penny first met.

### 3.1 Acres Surrounding an Oak Tree

Bill bought this land in Portola Valley on a whim when he fell in love with the wilderness of the area and the huge oak tree that grew in the center of it. It is on this plot of land that Bill and Penny built a house and raised their family. Immediately after their father's death, all of the children agreed not to sell the house. It was several years later when James, the youngest, decided he wanted the financial security the money would give him. The other siblings reluctantly agree because their father's will indicated the house could be sold if one child and their mother agreed to the sale. The family who buys the house demolishes the house that Bill and Penny built in favor of a larger home. They also have the huge, old tree cut down.

## The Shed

The shed was originally a small storage shed on the Blair property. It was outside this shed that Robert told Rebecca he had lost his father's watch. Later, this shed was renovated and made into an art studio for Penny. She practically lived in the art studio in order to get away from her family. The shed was renovated as a home for Ryan, Marielle, and Katya. The family lived there several years before they had to move because the Blair children decided to sell the house.

## Sea Ranch

Sea Ranch is the place where the Blair family goes on vacation.

## Taos

Although Bill and Penny remained married, Penny relocated to Taos where she made a living selling her artwork. James went to Taos when he went to talk to his mother about selling the house. He originally called her, but she said she wanted to see him before she would agree to sell.



# Themes and Motifs

## Impact of Nature versus Nurture in the Development of a Child's Personality

Psychologists argue if it is a child's inborn characteristics or the way he is raised that makes the most impact on his personality. There are two cases of interest presented in this novel, both of which speak to the fact that children raised by the same parents can grow up to be completely different individuals. Both the Blair children and the Vincent children show that even when children are raised by the same parents in the same environment, they can exhibit different personalities.

James, who is the most temperamentally different from his siblings, also looks different from his brothers and sister. Bill noticed early on that James was the first of his four offspring that a person looking at him could tell decisively that he was a boy, even when James was an infant. His other children remained fairly uncharacteristic of either gender until they reached puberty. In the case of Daphne and Susanna, both girls looked similar.

Just as genes can cause one child to look completely different from his siblings, genes can also cause a child to act differently than his siblings. James, for instance, was more boisterous than his brothers and sister from infancy. Ryan was more sensitive, Robert was more competitive, and Rebecca was more intelligent than the other children. These differences were inborn in the children, but they were also fostered by the way they were treated. Robert felt he had to compete for his parents' attention because there was so little to go around. Rebecca enjoyed learning, boosting her own intelligence. Ryan was allowed to go to a private school that encouraged his emotional temperament.

James, with his tendency to make trouble, found himself at odds with his mother because of their differing personalities. While she seemed the most affectionate toward Ryan, she was more tolerant of Rebecca and Robert. She could not tolerate James. This feeling that he was not accepted by his mother caused James to act out even more, desperately trying to get the attention he wanted.

When the Blair siblings talk about nature versus nurture, they look at the Vincent siblings. Even though it is easy to blame Daphne's strange behavior on her parents, they realize this is not the best explanation. Both Susanna and Daphne were raised by the same parents in the same environment, but Daphne is emotionally stunted while Susanna seems normal. It is suggested at the end of the novel that Daphne's problems were being caused by troubles at school. This result shows that it is not necessarily just nature or nurture but also the impact of thousands of outside sources that help to determine a child's personality and behavior.



## Overcoming One's Childhood

When the Blair siblings are faced with selling their childhood home, they begin trying to come to terms with the impact of their childhood experiences. Much of their troubles seem to focus on dissatisfaction with one of their parents. James, in particular, believes he was never wanted by his parents. As they discover things about their family through the course of the sale of the house, they begin to come to terms with the shortcomings of their childhood.

Perhaps, James is the sibling who has the most meaningful breakthrough when he decides he wants to sell the house. He and his mother, Penny, had always been at odds with one another because their personalities were so different. James was convinced that his mother detested him, while Penny was frustrated because James was so undisciplined and wild. James needed the money he would get from the sale of the house. However, when he learned he would have to talk to Penny in order to finalize the sale, he decided to forget about selling. This shows how strongly James felt about his mother and his desire not to talk to her.

When Penny requests that James come see her, he does so even though he is hesitant. He had not spoken to her in eleven years. They had been cruel to one another through the course of their lives together. With the buffer of time, Penny listens to James talk and realizes he had a well tuned sense of humor. As Penny shows James the art projects on which she is working, he realizes how much time and effort she puts into each project. He leaves their meeting with a sense that his mother has finally accepted him. The image of James riding his bicycle with the television person he made from a picture of himself he stole from her studio hanging from the handle bars is a picture of freedom. He is finally free from the guilt he has felt all of his life.

Robert has a different sense of guilt from his growing up years. He always felt he was in competition with his siblings as a child. When he grew up he set his father, whom he believed was perfect, up on a pedestal and tried to achieve the personal and professional perfection he believed his father had achieved. The years of measuring himself against his father had taken a toll on Robert. He was frustrated with himself when he found the three R's scratched in the concrete foundation of the shed. When he finds these letters he realizes they are the first initials of the children that his father believed he would have. Knowing that James was, indeed, a mistake makes Robert feel better about his own lack of perfection.

Ryan and Rebecca have the least amount of emotional baggage of all the children. Rebecca, of course, sees an analyst who helps her through her issues on a weekly basis. Rebecca's main concern is avoiding the pain she knows she will feel when she sees the changes that have been made in the place she once called home. For this reason, she avoids going to the property after the house is demolished. Ryan, who lives in the shed with his family, never really left home. He seems to be the most forgiving of all the children. His main concern seems to be that he is being forced to move to a



larger space, one that he will not be able to control as easily as he could control the atmosphere of the small shed.

## Women's Role in the Family

The treatment of Penny's character in this novel makes the reader wonder why her family makes her out to be evil because she decides to focus on her art once her children are in school. Penny is consistently described as being the bad parent as she follows her self-centered desire to be an artist. Instead of encouraging her career, Penny's family belittles her and treats her as if she is an enemy.

Even when they are still young, Penny's children do not understand her love of art. The children had noticed that Penny was becoming divided from the family and wanted to find something that she would enjoy doing with them. They search and search but cannot think of anything. When an opportunity for them to do something with her does arise, they do not see it for what it is. Penny had decorated a cigar box with shells. Although the children admired it, Ryan was the only one who showed any interest in making one himself. The other children turned down this perfect opportunity to do something with their mother that she enjoyed.

Although the signs were in front of Bill during their entire relationship, Bill did not understand why Penny wanted to be an artist. Even though she was not technically an artist, Penny had been making things since she met Bill. Her first gift to him was a collage of pictures. Later, after their children were older, Bill noticed how much more relaxed Penny was after she had been doing artwork with the children. For years she had been collecting art supplies and art ideas with the intention of trying her hand at some projects once the children were older.

Penny does not start her career in art in a purposeful attempt to neglect her children. In her mind she is due some time to pursue her own interests since she had been tied down caring for her children for at least the past ten years. "Since James's birth she'd been overwhelmed by the children — by James, really — but today had been lovely, and once Ryan started back to school, her time would be her own. She was almost forty, ready to start a new chapter of her life" (97-98). Since her children were in school, she saw no harm in having time to herself.

Penny reasons with herself that she is not hurting her children by spending her time away from them in her art studio. Penny's mother is particularly critical of the time Penny spends in her studio, but Penny assures her that the children know where she is and that they are welcome any time. In fact, Ryan often comes, and they make art pieces together. To her mother's constant worries about the welfare of Penny's children, Penny finally asks her the questions: "Do my kids seem undernourished? Are their clothes torn?" (220). She is hoping her mother will see the children are taken care of properly. Penny also feels frustrated because Bill will not back her up when she tries to feel her children nutritious food. When he orders her to begin coming to the house for supper again, she doesn't understand why it matters since the children do not like the





food she fixes anyway. “She wanted them to want to eat the right foods — not to complain, when she served dried fruit for dessert, that they were being mistreated” (238). Penny has desires for her children to be good kids, but cannot enforce her desires on her own.

When Penny is tired of fighting against all five members of her family, she retreats to her studio. Because she retreats, she is considered evil and hateful. One must have some respect for her because she does stay in the physical vicinity of her children until they are finished with high school, even though they seem to want little to do with her long before that time.

## Impact of Parent/Child Relationships

Rebecca points out that a child’s relationship with his parents is an important determining factor in that child’s personality and behavior. She reasons that parents are different with each of their children. Just after birth the baby begins influencing his parents and the parents begin influencing the baby.

This idea that parents act differently around each child surfaces when Rebecca is talking about the differences between Daphne and Susanna. Even though they were born to and raised by the same parents, the two girls act in entirely different manners. “Their temperament dictates how parents are with them,” Rebecca says as she explains that each child, even those in the same family, have different parents (284).

The different way the parents interact with each child can help determine how that child behaves and lives its life. For James, for instance, he felt worthless and lacked self-esteem because he sensed that his mother did not want him or love him. Penny seemed to judge her relationship between herself and Rebecca based on her relationship with her own mother. Penny, however, believed she had been a docile child while Rebecca was headstrong. Ryan was the child to whom Penny seemed to connect with the best. They shared their love of art.

The difference in relationships and impact on the Blair children can also be seen in their interactions with their father. Robert valued his father’s love and fought to find ways to impress his father. He shared things of interest, particularly in the medical field, with his father in the hopes of impressing him. Robert compares his relationship with his father to that of his father’s relationship with Rebecca. Rebecca talked to her father because she enjoyed learning things. When Robert heard the two talking, he would get very jealous and try to find some way to outdo Rebecca. James’ behavior is also influenced by his relationship with his father. Instead of disciplining the boy, Bill humors him and tries to convince him to behave correctly just by talking to him. Even though James does not respond to his father’s talks and his behavior never improves, Bill refuses to try anything different.



## Children Need Care

Bill's motto for his life is that children need care. While there is nothing wrong with caring for children, his wife and older children often feel left out. At times in the novel both Robert and Penny point out that although Bill did care for children, they often felt they were not cared for properly.

Bill's idea that children needed care was one of the reasons that he became a pediatrician. He believed he could help children and improve their lives through medical care instead of just watching them die as he had often done with the men he attempted to treat in the war. He comes to believe there is better fulfillment in caring for children than in caring for older people.

Robert first criticizes his father's motto when Bill refuses to make James leave Robert's girlfriend alone. James, who was a large child for his age, had been throwing himself at Gina, the girl whom Robert brought home on several occasions. Not only did Gina not like the boy's overwhelming attention, Robert was not able to spend time with her. Instead of seeing Robert's complaint as a valid one and explaining to James that he needed to give Robert some privacy, Bill just repeated to Robert that children needed care. Robert felt that his father was being unfair because he believed he was still a child as well, yet he did not get the care he thought he deserved.

Penny also felt slighted by her husband's dedication to children. She believed that Bill had married her only so he could have children of his own. "What about adults? They don't deserve care? Clearly I didn't" (414). When James questions her asking if Bill did not deserve care from her, she tells him that she had never felt that Bill had wanted care from her. She believes he had only wanted babies.

# Styles

## Point of View

There are a variety of points of view used in this novel. Chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 are narrated by an omniscient third person narrator. The remainder of the chapters are narrated from the first person point of view. Each of these four chapters is narrated by one of the four Blair siblings. Chapter 3 is narrated by Robert, Chapter 5 by Rebecca, Chapter 7 by Ryan and Chapter 9 by James.

The use of two different points of view is significant because the reader sees how the family members interact with one another from the point of view of a third person narrator and from the point of view of each of the children. The chapters narrated by the children give the reader a individualized look at each of the children's relationships with their parents and with each other.

## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is fairly straightforward with a relaxed tone. One specific use of words that impacts the reader is the way that Penny is generally referred to by her first name, while Bill is referred to as the father of the children. This use of words helps to bring the reader to the conclusion that Bill is closer to the children than Penny is. By referring to Bill as their father, the author connects Bill to the children by his relationship to them. By not referring to Penny as their mother, the author underscores the distance felt between Penny and her children.

Also significant are the changes in tone and attitude in the four chapters narrated by the adult children. In the sections narrated by Robert the reader can feel his frustration and anger. "I snapped, I growled, I sank into silence. The boys fought over which of them had caused my bad moods" (64). Rebecca's show her expertise in psychology. She interprets dreams and provides explanations for behaviors. Ryan's chapter of the novel is full of references to love, particularly his love for his daughter. James' section is written in a more laid back attitude than the other sections. He uses slang and foul language. "I was born with my mouth full of shit" (367). He also refers to his boss as an "asshole" (371).

## Structure

The main plot of the story includes the reactions the adult Blair siblings have to the sale of the home in which they grew up. Most of them are still dealing with issues left over from childhood. Interestingly, it is through the sale of their "home" that they are able to come to terms with some of these issues. Once the main plot has been identified, the reader can see how the author has structured the novel to tell the story both of the



children as adults but also has given the reader background about the family as a whole.

Chapters 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8 give background about the family and are the exposition chapters. They tell about the family when the children were still children and teens. The remainder of the chapters are told from the point of view of the adult children. Chapters 3, 5, 7 and 9 are expository as well in the sense that they catch the reader up with what has happened in the Blair family since the ending of Chapter 8.

Each of these series of chapters has rising action. The action begins to rise in Chapter 4 of the first series of chapters when Penny decides she wants to make a physical split from her family by using the shed as an art studio. The action begins to rise in the second section of chapters when James announces to Rebecca in Chapter 5 that he wants to sell the house. The two series of chapters meld in Chapter 10. The falling action and denouement for each section takes place in this chapter.

Each chapter is told in a fairly linear fashion. Between the chapters that describe the early years of the Blair family and the Blair children as adults there is about a thirty year difference in time. Also each series of chapters (Chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8 being one series and Chapters 3, 5, 7, and 9 being the second series) take place in a linear fashion. There are flashbacks in each of these series of chapters where the narrator give the reader background information needed to understand the inner workings of the family.



## Quotes

Bill had grown up believing virtue was a ticket to contentment, but the war had exploded that notion, and he needed something to replace it.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1: California Live Oak)

**Importance:** Because his parents and grandparents had always seemed to benefit from their virtuous lives, Bill assumed his life would follow the same path. What he saw in the war, however, showed him that just because a person was virtuous it did not necessarily mean he would be treated fairly. He bought the property surrounding the oak tree in hopes of finding new ideas about the reality of life.

Up until this point she had lived mostly inside herself, with the world of other people a destination more attractive in the abstract than in reality.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1: California Live Oak)

**Importance:** Before she met Bill, Penny was not a people person. She mostly enjoyed thinking about being around other people than actually being around other people.

He was not a man given to whims, and they viewed the story as central to their family’s creation myth, though they wouldn’t have those words for it until many years had passed and Rebecca had begun to collect terms and phrases that helped her explain people to themselves.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 2: The Party)

**Importance:** The idea of Rebecca explaining people to themselves foreshadows that she will be a psychologist when she grows up. Additionally, the quote indicates that the beginning of the family, perhaps, was done on a whim, just like his purchase of the property on which the family lived.

And then — regretful and reaching for kindness but ending up with its poor relation, charity — she took her spatula, freed the cookies from the pan, and said, “Here, take these. They won’t be terrible. Just take them and go.”

-- Penny (Chapter 2: The Party)

**Importance:** Even when Penny’s children were young, she was already short-tempered with them. In this situation she had promised the children that she would let them help her bake cookies for a party. Instead she baked them by herself. In an attempt to show her children she did not dislike them she gave them a pan of slightly burnt cookies, an offering that disappointed them.

Robert found it interesting that there seemed to be two good types and two bad types, and his father was both of the good types while his mother — well, at least sometimes she was both of the bad.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 2: The Party)



**Importance:** It is interesting that Bill and Penny's children saw their father as being the "good" parent while Penny was seen as the "bad" parent. In this particular instance, Robert was trying to determine if he was more like his mother or his father. He feared he was becoming more like his mother.

His watch was gone. He had been everywhere, retraced every step from his room to the piano to the spur; he had searched and searched, bent over examining every inch of the house and every inch of the ground. And now he was bent over again, not searching but shuffling in pain."

-- Narrator (Chapter 2: The Party)

**Importance:** Robert's nervous pain intensifies when he realizes he has lost the watch that belonged to his great-grandfather. His father had given him the gift as a special present because Robert was the oldest child in the family.

It was as if I had a flow chart in my head that began with any action I performed, any comment I uttered, any thought I had, and from which there extended two arrows, one toward my father's approval and the other pointing definitively in the opposite direction."

-- Narrator (Chapter 3: Robert)

**Importance:** As an adult, Robert realizes he has lived his entire life has been lived in an attempt to please his father. He has done things he believed would earn his father's approval while he has avoided things he believed his father would not like.

This was an October day, clear blue, and I was leaning against a fence I owned, looking at a house I owned, contemplating a gate I owned, and the world seemed a dismal and unforgiving place."

-- Narrator (Chapter 3: Robert)

**Importance:** Even though Robert has so many good things in his life, he is unable to enjoy them because he has suddenly been struck with an overwhelming dissatisfaction with himself and his life.

On his first morning in the new circle, he looked around at the other children and thought that the trick to finding something his mother would like to do with the family might be less a matter of thinking up the right thing than of finding a different way for the family to be organized."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4: The Crusade)

**Importance:** When Ryan was at school, the way the students were organized gave him an idea about the way they could structure their family so that their mother would be more content. Although Ryan would have been an ideal match for his mother, he could not decide whom he should pair with James.

He stood at an intersection with a high boxwood hedge on one corner and a row of palm trees on another, and he understood that his mother had taken the car and left them."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4: The Crusade)



**Importance:** Robert left the recital to meet his mother as she walked back from the family's car where she had gone because she left something behind. He wanted to tell her about a sculpture that he had seen. When he reached the intersection in the road he realized that his mother had taken the car and left her family at the recital.

Bill saw that the children were defining the moment as a rescue operation rather than the act of capture it actually was."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4: The Crusade)

**Importance:** When Bill and the children finally found Penny looking at the shed, they were happy. Bill realized they thought that they were successful in rescuing her. He recognized that they were not rescuing Penny but instead attempting to capture her.

Maybe she was right: it was possible that my maternal feelings toward James began as a reaction formation against an unconscious hatred of him."

-- Narrator (Chapter 5: Rebecca)

**Importance:** Rebecca considers her analysts' description of her feelings toward James and considers that she may be correct in her assumption.

Hello, dark side. James had been referring to the terms of our father's estate plan. He'd been referring to Penny."

-- Narrator (Chapter 5: Rebecca)

**Importance:** The children's act of referring to Penny as the "dark side" indicates their dislike for her.

We never get over it,' she said to me during one of our first sessions together. 'What's that?' I said, and she said, 'Having started out as children.'"

-- Rebecca's Analyst (Chapter 5: Rebecca)

**Importance:** Rebecca indicates that children will always spend their lives trying to overcome the ways that their parents messed them up during their childhoods.

Also, his father used to say it wasn't Robert's job to take care of his siblings, which was a nice idea but hardly true in real life."

-- Narrator (Chapter 6: The Studio)

**Importance:** Robert is frustrated when his father does not take seriously his complaints that James is bothering his girlfriend. Even though his father tells him that children need care, Robert believes he also needs care. He is frustrated because even though his father tells Robert he is not responsible for James, Robert has had to help take care of James all of his life.

Penny, that boy needs more discipline. Bill can't see past his healthy body, so it's going to have to be you."



-- Narrator (Chapter 6: The Studio)

**Importance:** Penny's mother warns her daughter that James needs to be disciplined. Even though Penny knows her mother is right, Bill will not allow Penny to use corporal punishment on him. He will not even punish the boy when he physically attacks Ryan.

Eight years after that, when Penny was overwhelmed by James's birth and he wanted to soothe her, he told her that when they were first married he'd truly been with her in thinking that the right number was three; and that alongside her secret sketches, her childhood drawings of two boys and a girl, he had his own secret physical proof in the form of a daydream etched into hardening concrete."

-- Narrator (Chapter 6: The Studio)

**Importance:** Bill tries to comfort Penny by telling her about the three R's that he etched into the concrete foundation of the shed. It is his way of showing her that he had never intended for them to have four children.

I loved the house, but I knew we couldn't hold on to it forever, just as I knew that Marielle and Katya and I couldn't live in the shed forever."

-- Narrator (Chapter 7: Ryan)

**Importance:** Ryan knows that even though he does not want the house to be sold and does not want to have to move out of the shed that he also must give up both the house and the shed. He knows that things are bound to change no matter how much he wants them to stay the same.

The better treatment his brothers got was a subject rich with the power to enrage him, and as he walked he felt the injustices of his life gather above him as if he were a cartoon character followed around by his own personal rain cloud."

-- Narrator (Chapter 8: The Piece)

**Importance:** James grows up resentful of his older brothers because he believes they are treated better than he is. He does not take into consideration that his brothers were also better behaved than he. James also is resentful because he is the only one of the siblings that does not have a first name that starts with an R.

She believed James's chaotic character reflected an insecure-ambivalent attachment to their neglectful and distracted mother, and that monotropy, the child's need to attach to one main caregiver, meant that despite their father's attempts to be a good substitute, James had suffered maternal deprivation. Rebecca and her brothers had tried to mitigate it by watching out for him, but they hadn't succeeded."

-- Narrator (Chapter 8: The Piece)

**Importance:** This very technical quote describes Rebecca's belief about the impact her mother's neglectful attitude toward James on the boy's development. She believes that there is no influence that can take the place of a maternal caregiver.





Penny was incensed and yet also somehow pleased by what James had done, for in crossing this line he had more or less demanded a strong reaction, and she had one in mind.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 8: The Piece)

**Importance:** After James tears up the watercolor and then runs away, Penny believes she will finally be able to plead her case for sending James to a private boarding school.

For the first time — though hardly the last; she would puzzle over this for years, until the question itself became the story — Rebecca wondered if her mother’s protracted withdrawal from the family could be seen as a response to some behavior or attitude in her father.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 8: The Piece)

**Importance:** Although the children do not seem to give much thought to Penny’s behavior once they have finished labeling her a bad person, it is not until she is an adult that Rebecca considers that her father might have done something to prompt her mother to withdraw from the family.

There was more, much more, but the thing that had everyone’s attention was at the center of the piece, held in place by four poultry trussing needles. It was Dog.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 8: The Piece)

**Importance:** Penny puts together this assemblage for the intent purpose of upsetting James. He had hurt her by tearing up her favorite watercolor. Her assemblage was intended to hurt him, the way he had hurt her.

The hospital had the air of a carnival, and in the maternity ward my mom’s obstetrician had to call three times for someone to come suction meconium from my tiny lungs. To me this says everything — not the medically historic significance of my birth date but the fact that I was born with my mouth full of shit.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 9: James)

**Importance:** James sees the irony in the circumstances of his birth since he is foul mouthed and sarcastic most of his life.

Aren’t you worried about what will happen to the Barn when you and Celia get together?”

-- Penny (Chapter 9: James)

**Importance:** Penny points out a problem with James’ plan to marry Celia that he has not thought of yet. She asks what effect their marriage might have on the collective. It is at this point that James begins to realize there are consequences to his actions far beyond just he, Celia and the children.

Isn’t that what we have in common, you and I? That we ruin things?”

-- Penny (Chapter 9: James)



**Importance:** Before James leaves Penny in Taos she mentions to him that they have a personality characteristic in common. They ruin things.

A bulldozer had cleared an area just down the hill from the house, creating a space that would be used for a swimming pool. And the oak tree was gone.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 10: The House)

**Importance:** Robert is shocked when he sees the land where he and his family once lived. To his dismay, even the huge oak tree that his father loved so much is gone.

Someone had scratched into the wet concrete a single letter of the alphabet, three times in a row: RRR.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 10: The House)

**Importance:** Robert finds in the concrete foundation of the shed that his father had etched three R's for the first names of the children he thought he and Penny would have. Robert realizes this etching is what his parents were talking about the day that his father lied and said he was telling Penny about the location of a spare key to the shed.

Regardless, by becoming in this small way less than perfect, the Bill of Robert's imagination also became gentler and more compassionate.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 10: The House)

**Importance:** Because Robert has proof, with the etching in the concrete, that his father also made mistakes in his life, Robert is able to update his vision of his father to one that is more compassionate. Robert is also able to forgive himself for his own imperfections.

He hardly recognized himself, partly because of his willpower but also partly because of something he'd gotten in Taos that was more like the absence of a thing, the Penny-shaped grievance he'd lugged around for most of his life.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 10: The House)

**Importance:** James believes it is because of the new understanding that he has formed with Penny that he is able to overcome his desire for Celia, the married woman, and remain a member of the collective.