

# **The Christmas Box Study Guide**

**The Christmas Box by Richard Paul Evans**

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# Plot Summary

*The Christmas Box* is a sentimental Christmas story written by Richard Paul Evans for his daughters. The story centers around a Christmas box Richard finds in the attic of the home of an elderly lady with whom he and his family have come to live. The box, originally intended to hold a Bible, has within it several letters that the owner has written to a dead loved one. Through the discovery of this box and the letters within, Richard discovers the true meaning of Christmas. *The Christmas Box* is a lesson in life that will bring a tear to the eye of all who read it.

Richard and Keri Evans have only been married a short time and Richard is attempting to begin a new business. They live in such a cramped apartment that their daughter, who is four, is forced to remain in a crib. When Keri finds an ad in the paper advertising for a young couple to live and take care of an elderly lady, she jumps on the opportunity. Keri convinces Richard to talk to the woman. Richard and Keri for an interview with the woman, Mary, and find her kind and generous. Mary offers them the entire west wing of her home in exchange for a few household chores they would have to do in their own home anyway. Richard and Keri quickly move in with Mary and the four of them promptly become a family.

While moving in, Richard and his brother-in-law store a bunch of their furniture in Mary's attic. Barry, the brother-in-law, finds a cradle covered by a sheet, surprising both men because Mary has said she has no children. Then Richard finds a tie press. Finally, Richard finds a Christmas box that is beautifully carved. Richard admires the box before putting it back where he found it. Later, Richard has vivid dreams about an angel. After these dreams, he hears music that leads him back to the Christmas box in the attic. Upon opening the box, Richard finds what he thinks are love letters inside. Richard reads one of these letters, feeling like a voyeur, and leaves the rest.

Mary is diagnosed with a brain tumor just a few weeks before Christmas. Mary begins to urge Richard to spend more time with his daughter and asks him odd questions about the first gift of Christmas. Richard finds this behavior odd, and thinking it has something to do with her past, he takes one of the letters from the Christmas box to a friend of Mary's. This friend promises to explain the letters on Christmas Eve. In the meantime, Mary takes a turn for the worse and is hospitalized. When the friend comes for Richard on Christmas Eve he takes him to a cemetery close to the house. In the cemetery, the friend describes the terrible grief of a woman he witnessed as a child. Soon he shows Richard the grave of a child that is decorated by a great stone angel, the same angel from Richard's dreams. This is how Richard learns that the letters were meant for a child Mary once lost. Richard returns to the box and reads the rest of the letters, finally understanding Mary's pressure on Richard to spend more time with his daughter. While saying goodbye to Mary in the hospital shortly before her death, Richard tells Mary that he finally understands what the first gift of Christmas was. The first Christmas gift was the love of a parent for her child. Shortly afterwards Mary dies and returns to the arms of her beloved child.



# Chapter 1, The Widow's Mansion

## Chapter 1, The Widow's Mansion Summary

*The Christmas Box* is a sentimental Christmas story written by Richard Paul Evans for his daughters. The story centers around a Christmas box Richard finds in the attic of the home of an elderly lady with whom he and his family have come to live. The box, originally intended to hold a Bible, has within it several letters that the owner has written to a dead loved. Through the discovery of this box and the letters within, Richard discovers the true meaning of Christmas. *The Christmas Box* is a lesson in life that will bring a tear to the eye of all who read it.

Richard Paul Evans decides that it is important to write down the story of the Christmas Box. There is great debate between him and his friends and family regarding the magic of the Christmas Box, with friends insisting that it was carved by Santa Claus himself and his wife insisting it was the objects it once held that make it magical. Richard does not think the origins of the box are as important as the lessons that he learned from it.

Richard is born in the Salt Lake Valley, but moves to California as a teenager. He attends college and marries his college sweetheart, becoming a father shortly after their first anniversary. Richard and his wife, Keri, return to Salt Lake and begin a new business, so finances are tough. They live in a small one bedroom apartment with their four year old daughter, Jenna. The apartment is so small, Jenna must remain in a crib in her parents' bedroom.

Keri finds an ad in the newspaper regarding an elderly lady looking for a young couple to move into her home and help her with household chores. Keri thinks this is the perfect answer to their space problem. Keri talks Richard into calling the number in the ad. Richard and Keri go to the home for an interview and are amazed by the Victorian beauty of the mansion. They find the woman, Mary, just as charming. The three of them discuss the living arrangements and the work expectation. Mary offers Richard and Keri the run of the east wing of the house in exchange for some minor household duties and lawn care. Mary also tells them a little about herself, how she has been widowed for many years and that she has no children. After a discussion regarding lifestyle, Mary asks how soon they can move in.

## Chapter 1, The Widow's Mansion Analysis

The chapter opens as the author states his reasons for writing the novel. Richard Paul Evans feels that the story of the Christmas Box is an important one and he wants to write it down not only for the sake of future generations but so his daughters will know how deeply he always loved them. Richard then introduces the mystical powers of the box without elaboration, talking about it as though it is magical. This box seems to symbolize for Richard all that is magical about the Christmas season. This section

foreshadows the rest of the novel, leaving the reader curious just why this box might be magical and what happened to make Richard feel this way.

The true story begins a few pages after this explanation with Richard introducing himself with some background information, and introducing his wife and child, who will be two supporting characters within the development of the plot. Richard is a business man, clearly at the beginning of his career, with a devoted wife and a child that is clearly loved. This chapter introduces each of the main characters, but also opens up the theme of family, especially when Richard and Keri meet Mary and the reader gets the impression that this woman is actually looking for a family, not a live-in housekeeper.



## Chapter 2, The Christmas Box

### Chapter 2, The Christmas Box Summary

Richard and Keri move into the house the following weekend. They borrow a truck and enlist the help of Keri's brother, Barry. When they arrive at the house, Barry is fascinated by their luck in finding such a luxurious home. Richard credits Keri with the find. Barry and Richard take some of Richard and Keri's furniture up to the attic. There they find a cradle covered by a sheet and then Richard finds a tie press that must have belonged to Mary's deceased husband. Then he finds a box. The box is an ornate wooden box of "burlled walnut, intricately carved and highly polished. The box is about ten inches wide, fourteen inches long, and a half foot deep, large enough for a sheet of stationery to lie flat inside. It has two large brass hinges crafted in the form of holly leaves. Two leather straps run horizontally across the lid and buckle securely by silver clasps on each side. The lid has a skilled and detailed etching of the Nativity."

Richard believes it is a Christmas box meant for stationary, Christmas cards, and small ornaments. Richard puts the box back where he found it without attempting to open it and returns to unpacking the truck. Later, Barry and Richard find Keri in the kitchen where she has prepared dinner for the four of them. Keri tells them that Mary has come to see her and she has invited Richard, Keri, and Jenna to dinner the following night. It is time for Jenna to go to bed, but Richard refuses to read her a story because he has too much work to do.

### Chapter 2, The Christmas Box Analysis

Richard and Keri move into the house, foreshadowing the development of the plot in which they become accustomed to living in their new home and co-existing with Mary. Barry finds a cradle in the attic despite the fact that Mary has said she does not have any children, though Richard does not think anything of it at the time. Then Richard finds the Christmas Box. The name of the novel is the Christmas Box, so the reader is aware that this find will have significance in the development of the plot, although there is little hint as to what that significance might be. Later, Richard learns that Mary has invited his family to dinner, foreshadowing the dinner in the following chapter. Then Jenna goes to bed disappointed because Richard is too busy to read her a story. This not only foreshadows a time later in the plot development where this behavior will become habitual, but it also touches again on the theme of family, showing an obligation of family that Richard has failed to fulfill.



# Chapter 3, The Bible Box

## Chapter 3, The Bible Box Summary

After church, Richard, Keri, and Jenna join Mary in the dining room for dinner. Mary has gone to a great deal of trouble to present an elegant dinner, although her Victorian manners cause her to deny the trouble. Mary offers a prayer and then begins to serve the meal. Richard mentions that Mary has many wonderful things in her attic. Mary agrees, telling them how her husband liked to collect things. Mary tells them how he once collected Bibles. Mary sold all of them after his death except three. One is a rare Bible in which the seventh commandment is missing the 'not', making it a passage that condones adultery. Another is a Bible that has the nativity painted on the pages, called fore-edge painting. This Bible came with an eloquently carved box with a matching painting on it. Richard recognizes Mary's description as the Christmas Box he found in the attic and mentions it to her. The third Bible is one that Mary keeps with her so that she can read through it. Mary then turns her attention to Jenna, praising her for sleeping in a big girl bed now and offering her some Christmas pudding. Mary seems especially fond of Jenna.

Soon Richard and Keri come to realize that Mary did not advertise for a family to move into her home out of need, but out of a desire to have family around her. Mary would even hire out chores that Richard and Keri seem unwilling or unable to do in order to make their stay with her easier. They also decide to get one Christmas tree so they can all share the holiday together. Jenna has taken to Mary as a surrogate grandmother. Richard has bought into a tuxedo and wedding dress rental business that a friend found for him. Christmas time is a busy time for formal wear, so Richard is extremely busy. Richard works long hours with the attitude that one day he will be able to enjoy the fruits of his labor with his family.

## Chapter 3, The Bible Box Analysis

Mary tells Richard and Keri how her husband liked to collect things, especially Bibles. Mary still has three of the Bibles, two rare ones and one that she keeps to read. The Christmas Box came with one of these Bibles, the true purpose of the box being to house the Bible. This informs Mary that Richard knows of the box, an important piece of information later in the novel's plot development. Most important here, however, is the developing relationship between Jenna and Mary. Mary has taken a special interest in Jenna, adopting her as a surrogate granddaughter, and Jenna seems to feel similarly towards Mary. This again touches on the theme of family. Mary has clearly been lonely and loves the idea of having family around her again. This also foreshadows a time when Richard and Keri will learn more about Mary's past. Richard's job, mentioned at the end of the chapter, is clearly foreshadowing as well, foreshadowing his absences from the home and the impact it will have on his family and on Mary.



# Chapter 4, The Dream, the Angel, and the Letter

## Chapter 4, The Dream, the Angel, and the Letter Summary

Richard repeatedly dreams about an angel. The dream occurs before moving into Mary's, but continues and seems more vivid since the move. Richard is in an open field and can hear music. When he looks up, Richard can see an angel coming down toward him. When he looks into the angel's face, it turns to stone. On one particular night after having this dream, Richard wakes and can hear music. Richard gets up, checks on Jenna to make sure the music has not wakened her, and then follows the sound. Richard discovers that the music is coming from the attic. Richard makes his way up there with a flashlight and finds that the music is coming from the Christmas Box. Richard had not been aware that the box played music and now he cannot find a way to turn the music off. Richard lifts the lid and the music stops. Inside the box, Richard finds several letters. Richard reads the first one, believing it to be a love letter from Mary to her husband. Embarrassed by his nosiness, Richard puts the letter back and returns to bed. The next morning, Richard cannot convince Keri that anything strange has occurred. Richard needs to leave for work. He rushes up to say goodbye to Jenna and finds her cutting paper. Jenna wants him to help, but Richard must leave.

Mary has a habit of sitting in the front parlor reading her Bible, especially during the Christmas season. One morning Jenna comes to see what she is doing. Mary offers to read to her from the Bible. Jenna is happy to have her do this since her daddy is often too busy to read to her. Richard has become busier, often coming home after dinner. Keri has begun the habit of dining with Mary and sharing a cup of tea afterward. One night after Richard has come home and Keri has gone to do the dishes, Mary gives Richard a book and suggests strongly that he go read to his daughter. Richard does as she asks, reading to Jenna about a young girl whose father is often too busy to tell her stories. When Richard returns downstairs, Mary tells him that she and Keri have been discussing which sense is more engaged during the Christmas season. Mary thinks it is sound because the music, bells, and paper wrappings of Christmas always bring her the most joy during the Christmas season. Richard says he thinks it is smell, not just food, but candles and leather boots, things that remind him of his childhood.

On the sixth of December, Mary goes unexpectedly out for a walk without telling Keri. Keri goes into the den looking for her and finds a Bible open on her chair. Keri finds that many of the Bible's pages are stained with tears and that there are fresh tears on the open pages. Later Mary goes out again, again without telling Keri where or why. Keri is so concerned that she paces the house, checking the windows over and over. Finally Mary comes in and tells Richard and Keri that she has been to the doctor and they have told her she has an inoperable brain tumor. Over the next few weeks, Mary, Keri, and





Richard fall into a pattern of denial, pretending that there is nothing wrong except on the few occasions when Mary has a headache. One day Mary gets angry with Richard for not knowing what the first gift of Christmas is. Richard is shocked by her behavior. Richard asks Keri the next day if maybe the tumor has affected Mary's behavior. Keri refuses to believe it is the tumor. Keri tells Richard about the tear-stained Bible and suggests that maybe Mary is simply attempting to tell Richard something and he is not hearing her.

## **Chapter 4, The Dream, the Angel, and the Letter Analysis**

Richard has a dream about an angel that turns to stone when he looks into its eyes. This dream is important because not only does it lead him to the Christmas Box again and the letters inside, but the angel is symbolic of something that Richard will discover in the next chapter, something that will explain to him things about life and Mary that he has not suspected up to this point. The music that leads him to the Christmas Box is also important because it seems magical, a sound that comes out of a box that has no musical mechanics within it. Christmas is a magical time and is at work in this house for reasons that Richard cannot yet appreciate, foreshadowing a time when he will be giving a chance to do just that.

Mary's illness is a complete surprise to everyone, especially the reader, since it was not foreshadowed in any way. Mary's behavior after her diagnosis, especially toward Richard, is curious and might be credited to her illness, as Richard suggests at the end of the chapter. However, this anger foreshadows information about Mary that the mysterious cradle may help explain. Mary is angry with Richard because he spends all his time working and little time with his wife and daughter. Mary is also angry with Richard for not knowing what the first gift of Christmas was. This confuses Richard and may confuse the reader as well, but it foreshadows the major theme of the novel, a truth that Richard will learn very soon. Keri is right, Richard is not hearing what Mary is trying to tell him. However, her attempts foreshadow a time when Richard will begin to listen. Also Mary's behavior and the tear-stained Bible also foreshadow a time when Richard and Keri will learn what Mary still grieves over, something terrible that no parent can imagine, let alone wish on another.



# Chapter 5, The Stone Angel

## Chapter 5, The Stone Angel Summary

Richard sees Steve out the window, Mary's friend and neighbor, and decides to ask him about the letters in the Christmas Box, hoping they will shed some light on Mary's odd behavior. Steve reads the letter and tells Richard that it is a love letter, but not meant for a lover. Steve then tells Richard that he has something to show him and that he will show him on Christmas Eve when he comes to Mary's to visit. Richard then goes to work, dealing with a wedding party that is chaotic. Then a man comes in and asks to buy a suit for his five year old son. When Richard questions him about the suit, the man reveals that the child has died and they plan to bury him in the suit. Richard offers to make alterations and to discount the price.

While Richard is at the store, Keri fixes Mary's breakfast, calls Mary, and leaves it in the dining room before returning to the kitchen to do the dishes. Halfway through the dishes, Keri returns to get the dishes, she discovers that Mary has not come down to eat. Keri goes to Mary's room and finds her unresponsive on her bed. Keri calls for an ambulance and then goes across the street to get Steve. Steve comes to Mary's side and manages to get a response out of her. The ambulance comes and Keri follows it in Mary's car. Richard joins her at the hospital and they both learn from the doctor that Mary has entered the final stages of her disease and all they can do now is make her comfortable.

That night, Richard hears the music from the Christmas Box again and goes up to the attic to read another letter. On Christmas Eve, Steve comes over and asks about Mary. After Richard tells him that Mary is the same, Steve takes Richard across the street behind his own house. Steve takes Richard through a hidden gate that leads into a cemetery behind his property. While they walk, Steve tells Richard how he and some of his childhood friends used to play here despite being told not to. Steve says that they never played in the east end of the cemetery because one of Steve's friends once heard a wailing there that he thought was a ghost. Steve did go to the east side of the cemetery once and heard the wailing. However, it proved to be a woman grieving in the snow beside a mausoleum. Steve shows Richard the mausoleum which has a stone angel on top, the same stone angel Richard has seen in his dreams. Under the angel is a plaque that reads, Our Little Angel. Richard suddenly realizes that Mary has lost a child. Steve responds that it was a little girl named Andrea who died at age three. After leaving Steve, Richard goes back to the house, takes the Christmas Box from the attic, seeing it for the first time in bright sunlight, and reads the final letter in the Christmas Box. This letter is especially touching to Richard as it talks about the gifts of Christmas and the love of a parent for her child.



## Chapter 5, The Stone Angel Analysis

Richard takes the first letter from the Christmas Box to Steve, a friend of Mary's, and learns that it is a love letter, but not one meant for a lover or for Mary's husband. Steve is cryptic about this letter and promises to tell Richard more, foreshadowing the end of the chapter when Richard will learn the truth about Mary's secret correspondent. Richard then goes to work and in the middle of the Christmas season and helping a bride prepare for her wedding, Richard is approached by a man who wants to buy a suit for his dead son. This brings tragedy to the Christmas season as well as foreshadowing the truth behind Mary's secret. It also touches on the theme of death and grief as Richard bears witness to this man's pain.

Later, Keri finds Mary has taken a turn for the worse in her disease and is forced to call an ambulance. Keri is heartbroken, as are Steve and Richard. Mary's illness has progressed quickly, foreshadowing her eventual death and touching on the theme of death and grief. Finally, Richard goes with Steve to a cemetery where he learns that Mary has buried her child. This answers many questions for Richard, including whom the letters were intended for and why Mary has been so upset by his busy work schedule and inability to spend time with his daughter. Mary knows that time is terribly short with a child and it should not be allowed to pass without notice. Richard then reads the final letter and learns what the first gift of Christmas was and why it is so important to Mary. This too foreshadows the next chapter in which Richard will tell Mary that he now understands her fears regarding him and Jenna.



## Chapter 6, The Angel

### Chapter 6, The Angel Summary

Richard is filled with awe and grief as he finally realizes the wisdom behind Mary's odd behavior of late. Keri comes home from the hospital with Jenna, exhausted. Richard sends her to rest while he prepares Jenna for bed and makes them dinner. Jenna shows Richard a gift she has made for Mary, an angel. A phone call comes from the hospital, telling them that the end has come for Mary. Richard, Keri, and Jenna rush to the hospital to say their goodbyes. Jenna gives Mary the angel she has made. Mary asks Richard if he knows now what the first Christmas gift was. Richard says he does now. Richard thanks Mary for all she has done for him, the gift she has given him. Mary then tells Richard that she wants for him to keep the Christmas Box as her gift to him. Mary says goodbye to Keri before Keri takes Jenna out into the hallway. Richard stays and witnesses a magical moment. The music from the Christmas Box suddenly fills the room although the Christmas Box is back at the house. Richard knows this is because Andrea, Mary's child, has come for her mother.

When Mary's brother arrives, Richard goes home. Richard and Keri sit by the Christmas tree and Richard thinks about the first gift of Christmas. Richard now knows that this gift was the love of a parent for her child. Richard finally knows that he needs to spend more time with his daughter because a child is a precious gift that cannot be taken for granted.

### Chapter 6, The Angel Analysis

Richard has finally found the theme of this novel, the precious gift of a child. Richard has realized that he has taken his child for granted and he has not spent enough time with her these past few years due to his heavy work load. Richard now knows that everything Mary has said to him was an attempt to get him to see this fact. Mary has lost a child who was around the same age as Jenna, so she knows better than anyone that taking a child for granted is a mistake because tomorrow that child may no longer be there. Mary is dying now and will soon see her child and her husband again, a fact that she clearly welcomes. However, she leaves behind Keri, Richard, and Jenna who will grieve for her as though she were their family, illuminating the other two themes of this novel, death and grief and family. Mary has become a part of the Evans family and she will be greatly missed for her kindness and her wisdom. Mary leaves Richard with some of that wisdom which will change his life and help him to enjoy the short time that his daughters are young despite a hectic work schedule and the demands of everyday life.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

Mary dies on Christmas morning. After receiving the news, Richard takes the letters from the Christmas Box and burns them. Mary is buried in the cemetery beside her daughter. When Keri is asked what should be written on her headstone, she says simply, a loving mother. Every Christmas Eve, Richard and Keri return to the grave site and lay a white lily at the feet of the angel. Richard and Keri continue to live in Mary's house for several years until the family decides to sell it. Richard still owns the Christmas Box and it continues to remind him of the precious gift that his children are to him. Richard decides to write this novel in order to express this love to his children, so they could read the story and always know that he does love them and they are a priority in his life. The novel was originally intended to only be a family heirloom, the story to be passed down among the generations. However, after reading the book, many of Richard's family and friends convinced him to have it published in order to share it with the world. Richard did have it published and now the whole world can read about the gift that Mary has given to Richard and his daughters.

## Epilogue Analysis

Mary has died, again touching on the theme of death and grief. Richard burns the letters that Mary has written to her daughter, a symbol of the diminished need of those letters now that Mary and Andrea are together as well as an attempt to preserve Mary's privacy regarding her grief. Later Mary is buried appropriately beside her daughter, since this is where she has wanted to be since her child's death. Keri has "a loving mother" put on her headstone because it sums up everything Mary was to them as well as to her daughter and it is the only thing that Mary clearly had wanted to be remembered as. Finally, the family continues to live in Mary's home as though they were the children Mary missed having, touching on the theme of family. The message that Mary gave to Richard through the Christmas Box will live on for the rest of his life and hopefully for the rest of eternity thanks to Mary, illuminating one final time the theme of the precious gift of a child.



# Characters

## Richard Paul Evans

Richard Paul Evans is the author of the story as well as the first person narrator. Richard is a young man who has recently settled in the Salt Lake Valley after having lived in California for many years. Richard was raised in the Salt Lake Valley and has jumped at the chance to move back with his wife and small child. A friend of Richard's meets a man who is beginning a formalwear rental store and convinces both Richard and this man that they would work well together. Richard talks with the man and is offered a chance to buy into the business, which he does. Now Richard is attempting to get the business off the ground while beginning a life with his wife and child.

Due to their tight finances, Richard and his wife, Keri, live in a one bedroom apartment that is too small for their growing family. Keri finds an ad in the newspaper asking for a young couple to move in with an elderly woman in exchange for doing some minor household chores. Richard and Keri jump at this opportunity. They quickly settle in and Richard goes back to his hectic work schedule, often coming home too later to tuck his daughter into bed with hours worth of work still left to do. Mary, the woman with whom he and his wife live, chastises Richard for not spending more time with his daughter, but she does it in a subtle way that Richard does not fully understand at first. Richard believes it is in his family's best interest to establish his business now and enjoy his family later. However, Mary knows better.

Richard finds a box in the attic that he calls the Christmas Box. Inside this box he finds several letters from Mary to an unknown person. After Mary is diagnosed with a brain tumor and begins to act oddly, Richard goes to a friend of hers and asks about the letters. It is through this friend that Richard learns about the death of Mary's child many years before. The letters are expressions of grief for this young child. Finally Richard realizes that Mary is trying to tell him that spending time with his daughter now is more important than growing a business or any of the other things that might distract him from his child.

## Keri Evans

Keri Evans is Richard's wife. Keri is a stay-at-home mom who spends most of her days taking care of household chores and caring for both Mary and her daughter Jenna. Keri becomes close friends with Mary, often spending her evenings sharing a meal and tea with her while waiting for Richard to come home. Through these moments alone together, Keri becomes very close to Mary and Mary is like a surrogate mother to her. It is Keri who first notices Mary's odd behavior when she is diagnosed with a brain tumor. By this time, Keri has grown so close to Mary that she is deeply concerned when Mary goes out and does not tell anyone where she is going. Finally when Mary does reappear and tells Keri and Richard about her illness, Keri is devastated.



Keri makes Mary breakfast one morning as she normally does and finds that Mary has not come down to eat it. Keri goes to Mary's bedroom and finds her unresponsive in her bed. Keri panics, calls an ambulance and then goes to get Mary's good friend, Steve. Keri accompanies Mary to the hospital and spends the next few weeks at her side, keeping her company during her time of need. Finally when Mary has come to the end of her illness, Keri goes to her with Richard and Jenna to say her goodbye. When it is over and Richard burns the letters in the Christmas Box, Keri watches silently with understanding. Keri gives directions to put "a loving mother on Mary's headstone, knowing this is what Mary was and would have wanted.

## Jenna Evans

Jenna is Richard and Keri's nearly four year old daughter. Jenna is about the same age as Mary's daughter when she died which makes her extra special in Mary's eyes. Mary and Jenna grow close during their brief time together, spending many evenings reading stories from the Bible together. Mary is saddened by Richard's lack of time to spend with Jenna and often suggests to him that he put his work aside in order to read to or play with Jenna. Jenna loves these special times with her father. Jenna is a typical child, a source of joy and wonder to all the adults in her life. Although she is not a big part of the overall plot in the sense of character, she is the most important part of the major theme of this novel, that of the precious gift of a child. Jenna is Richard's child and his most precious gift, a gift he has overlooked and neglected until he meets Mary and she convinces him of his mistake and works to help him remedy it.

## Mary Parkin

Mary is a kind widow who has no children. Mary has been alone for a long time and has decided to offer a home to a young family in exchange for simple household tasks. Mary does this, not out of necessity, but because she wants a family around her. She misses the noises and companionship of a family. Soon after she meets Richard and Keri, Mary invites them to move in and she also hires out many of their chores so they do not have too much on their shoulders. Mary offers to buy Richard and Keri a separate Christmas tree, but in a short time they have all become such a close family that they decide to share a tree, much to Mary's pleasure.

Mary has told Richard and Keri that she has no children, but Richard and Barry find a cradle in Mary's attic the day they move in. Later Richard will learn that Mary has had a child, but that her child died when she was only Jenna's age. This loss has made Mary sensitive to the actions of other parents and she finds Richard wanting in the sense that he does not spend enough time with his daughter. Mary makes many attempts to convince Richard that he must spend more time with Jenna. Her efforts fail until Richard finds the letters Mary has written to her daughter in the Christmas Box. Richard finally sees the depth of Mary's grief and the precious moments with his daughter that he has been missing. Mary changes Richard's life by sharing her own wisdom and experiences.



## Steve

Steve is Mary's neighbor and friend. Steve has known Mary since he was a child. When he was a child, Steve would play in the cemetery that borders his property. One day he hears wailing in the east side of the cemetery and finds a woman there kneeling in the snow and crying at the grave of a child. Steve is frightened by the depth of this woman's grief and never returns to that section of the cemetery until Richard shows him the letters he has found and asks about Mary's past. Steve then takes Richard to the cemetery, shows him the grave and tells him the story of the day he saw Mary there. Steve tells Richard that Mary had a child roughly the same age as Jenna and that she died. Steve says that Mary went to that grave every single day for a year despite the weather, which could be rather cold or wet in that area, crying the same way for her child. Steve has never seen grief like that before or since. Steve is a good friend to Mary and does all he can to help Richard understand her.

## Barry

Barry is Keri's brother and the only family that either Richard or Keri has in the Utah area. Barry helps them on moving day and is very impressed with Mary's wonderful Victorian mansion. While helping Richard move furniture into the attic during this move, Barry finds a cradle that has been stored under an old sheet. Barry finds it interesting since Richard has already told him that Mary has no children of her own. Barry is also present when Richard finds a tie press and the Christmas Box. He later learns it was intended to hold a special Bible with a painting of the Nativity scene on its pages. Barry then accompanies Richard downstairs where they have dinner together and discuss Mary, who seems very mysterious to them at this early point.

## Andrea

Andrea is the young daughter that Mary has lost. Andrea died when she was only three, roughly the same age as Jenna. Mary misses her daughter deeply and she spends nearly every day visiting her grave for the first year. Mary has held on to this grief and she remembers it strongly when Richard and Keri move in with Jenna. Mary sees the way Richard is with Jenna, how he does not spend as much time with her as he should, and she feels anger and hurt that he is wasting what could be precious few moments with his daughter. Mary would like to have those moments with her own daughter again and she tries to express this to Richard without opening her old wounds and telling him the truth about Andrea. Eventually Richard understands after Steve takes him to Andrea's grave. Later, while saying goodbye to Mary in the hospital, Richard feels Andrea's spirit join him and Mary in the room. Mary is going to be with Andrea now and is very happy.





## The Angel

There are two angels in this story who are eventually revealed to be only one angel. First, Richard has intense dreams about an angel who comes down to him from heaven while he is standing in an open field. When the angel comes to him and Richard looks it in the face, the angel turns to stone. After Richard has this dream in Mary's house, he hears music that leads him to the Christmas Box in the attic. Richard goes there and finds several letters from Mary to Andrea. Later when Richard asks Steve about these letters, Steve takes Richard to the cemetery where he finds the same stone angel adorns Andrea's grave. It seems the angel on the grave and the one in the dream symbolizes Andrea's desire for Richard to know her story so that he will finally realize what it is that Mary has been attempting to tell him, that he should never take his daughter for granted.

## The Grieving Father

While working in his store one day, Richard is approached by a man who wants to buy a suit for a five year old boy. Richard suggests that the man only rent the suit since young boys grow quickly. Richard also asks questions, such as what colors the jacket should be in order to match the other people in the ceremony, assuming it is for a wedding. However, the man quietly tells him the suit is for the boy to be buried in. Richard is quickly sorry for what he has said and for the man's heartache, quickly picking out a jacket for him and promising to have it discounted. The man is grateful as he leaves the store. This episode is symbolic of everything that a parent can lose and it underscores the major theme of the novel, the precious gift of a child. This episode helps Richard to be ready to accept and understand the truth about Mary's loss and to find the time to spend with his daughter despite his hectic schedule.

## David Parkin

David is Mary's husband. David has passed away long before the novel opens, but his presence is felt throughout the house. David was a collector, someone who enjoyed gathering expensive and rare objects. One of his collections is of rare Bibles. After his death, Mary receives many offers to sell the Bibles. Mary sells all but three. One is a rare addition in which the "not" is left out of the seventh commandment, essentially giving those who read it permission to commit adultery. The second is a Bible that has the Nativity scene painted on the edges of the pages so that when one flips through the pages it seems to come alive. This Bible belongs to the Christmas Box Richard finds in the attic. The third is a Bible that Mary keeps and reads herself. Through these objects, the reader feels David's presence in the house and the deep love that he and Mary must have shared.



## Objects/Places

### The Christmas Box/The Bible Box

Richard finds a box in the attic with a painting of the Nativity scene on it. Richard thinks this is a Christmas Box due to the design, intended to hold Christmas cards and other accoutrements of the season. However, Richard later learns that this box was designed to hold a Bible that has the same painting on the edges of its pages. The box holds several letters that Mary has written to her deceased daughter.

### The Cradle

Richard and Barry find a cradle in the attic despite Mary's claim that has no children.

### The Mansion

Mary owns a large mansion where she invites Richard and Keri to come live with her in exchange for a few simple household chores.

### The Cemetery

There is a cemetery that runs the length of Steve's property where Steve takes Richard to see Andrea's grave.

### The Secret Gate

There is a back gate to the cemetery that has a hedge growing across it. Steve and his friends discovered it when they were young and used to play in the cemetery.

### The Stone Angel

A stone angel guards Andrea's mausoleum. Richard has seen this same angel in his dreams.

### Mysterious Music

Richard hears music three times, twice from the Christmas Box although it has no musical mechanism and once in the hospital shortly before Mary's death.



## **The Three Bibles**

Mary's husband collected rare Bibles before his death and Mary has kept three of them. One is a Bible with a misprint of the seventh commandment, thereby condoning adultery. The second is a Bible with the Nativity scene painted on the edges of its pages. This is the Bible that belongs with the Christmas Box. The third is a Bible Mary has kept to read from.

## **Formal Wear Business**

Richard owns a share in a formal wear business that keeps him very busy during the holidays.

## **The Salt Lake Valley, Utah**

The Salt Lake Valley is in Utah. It is where Richard was raised and has returned in order to begin a business and raise his family.



# Themes

## The Precious Gift of a Child

From the beginning of the book Mary has learned that Richard spends little time with his daughter and she encourages him to correct this. Richard does not understand why Mary is always nagging him about working too hard and giving him books to read to his daughter. When Mary comes to Richard and asks him what the first gift of Christmas was, Richard is deeply shocked and surprised when Mary becomes angry at his flippant answer. Richard blames Mary's brain tumor for her attitude, but Keri tells him that Mary is trying to tell him something but he is not listening. Richard continues to fight Mary's message however, even after discovering that inside the Christmas Box there are letters that Mary has written to someone, a lover perhaps. Richard goes to Mary's friend and asks what the letters are, hoping it will be an answer to Mary's strange behavior that might help make peace at home. Steve tells Richard that Mary has lost a child and she is deeply hurt by the loss. Richard reads the other letters in the Christmas Box and slowly begins to realize what Mary's message is.

Mary has lost a child who was approximately the same age as Jenna, Richard's daughter. Mary once went to her daughter's grave every day, rain or snow, and wept for her child. Mary knows what it means to only have a few precious moments with a child. Mary watches Richard work so hard that he does not have time for the simple things with Jenna: making art, reading stories, or simply putting her to bed and giving her a goodnight kiss. Mary cannot stand to watch Richard waste the few precious moments of childhood or take for granted that Jenna will always be there, that there will always be another time for these moments of quality time. Mary knows better and she wants Richard to know it too. Mary reads the stories of Christmas in one of her husband's Bibles every Christmas. Through these stories, Mary knows that the first gift of Christmas was the love of parents for their child, going to extremes to make sure their child is born safely despite their unconventional surroundings. Mary wants Richard to learn this lesson and eventually he does. Richard writes this story down so his children will know how much he loves them and will always remember the lesson that Mary taught him.

## Family

Mary is a widow, alone without any children to care for her. Mary advertises for a young couple to come live with her in exchange for a few simple household chores. When Richard and Keri move into her home, they expect an almost business-like relationship but quickly find themselves taken under Mary's wing as if they were her own children. Mary even goes so far as to hire out jobs that she is afraid Keri and Richard will find too difficult or time-consuming. Mary has really advertised in an attempt to have family around her.



Family is very important and can be defined in many ways. Although Mary is not related to Richard, Keri, and Jenna, she has become a member of their family and them hers simply by coexisting in the same house. Mary is a kind woman who Richard and Keri take to immediately, a woman they will do anything for and grieve for when they learn of her deadly disease and impending death. Richard and Keri know Mary for only a short time, but in that short time Mary makes a large impact on their lives, changing everything about the way they look at their own family. Richard has always taken his family for granted, certain that it is more important to make a living now so that they can enjoy the fruits of his labors later in life. However, Mary shows him that it is not the later years that he should look to but the here and now. Mary teaches Richard the most important lesson a mother can teach her child, making her a surrogate mother to him. Despite the lack of blood relationship, Mary takes her role in both Richard and Jenna's lives seriously and gives them both the greatest gift anyone could give, the encouragement to not take each other for granted. Mary is just as much a mother to Richard and a grandmother to Jenna as any blood relation could be, making the theme of family one of the most important underlying elements of this story.

## Death and Grief

Despite the fact that this is a novel about the happiness and wonder of Christmas, death and grief underline every element of the story. The first death to enter the story is that of Mary's husband, leaving her alone and lonely, looking for a family to fill her large house in the final days of her life. Mary misses having people around and especially the sight of small children, so she welcomes Richard and Keri into her home with their daughter Jenna, delighted to have the company and to be a part of a family again. This family brings life back to Mary's home.

The second death in the novel is the death of a child whose father comes to Richard's store in order to buy a suit for his son. This death is especially sad due to the fact that it is nearly Christmas time and while no child should have to die at anytime, such an event must be especially hard to bear at this time of the year. Richard is deeply touched by this child's death. This death foreshadows the revelation of a third death, that of Mary's child, Andrea. Mary lost her daughter when she was only three years old and has spent many years grieving for her child. Mary once went to the cemetery day after day, despite the weather, to sit with her child and to cry for all that was lost. This child's death has profound affect on Mary and it underscores Mary's desire to make Richard see the precious gift he has in his own child, Jenna. Mary constantly urges Richard to put his work aside for Jenna's sake, to spend time with his child and to enjoy this time. Mary knows how short time can be with a child and she does not want Richard to suffer the same fate she has.

The final death in the novel is Mary's. Mary suffers from an inoperable brain tumor and dies at the end of the novel. However, before her death, Mary manages to convince Richard of the importance of not wasting a single moment with his daughter. While convincing Mary that he now knows what she has been trying to say, Richard hears music that has a mysterious origin. Mary tells him that her daughter is there and that

finally the two of them can be together. Mary dies and Richard and Keri make sure she is laid to rest beside her daughter. Mary has changed Richard's life with her wisdom and insured that, should the unthinkable happen to his child, he will not have taken a single moment for granted.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The narrator, Richard Paul Evans, is also the author and he has written this novel with himself and his wife and child as the main characters. Although the novel is a work of fiction, the use of real people as the main characters gives it a feel of being a true story, a work of non-fiction, which adds weight to the message presented within the development of the plot.

The first person point of view works well for this story because it is an intimate story of self-discovery. The third or second person point of view might not have made the same impact. The first person point of view almost takes the narrator out of the story and allows the reader to become the narrator, viewing the events of the story through their own eyes rather than the eyes of a character who may or may not have attributes that the reader cannot identify with. This point of view makes the story a deeply personal experience and helps the moral of the story make a larger impact.

## Setting

The novel is set in the Salt Lake Valley of Utah. This setting gives the novel a nice Christmastime feel, putting snow on the ground and making the air chilly. However, it is not really the area in which the characters live that is the true setting of the novel, but Mary's mansion where Richard and Keri go to live. The mansion is Victorian, adding to the Christmastime feel of the novel, and is very large and decorated with expensive antiques. The home is warm and cozy especially after they buy and decorate a Christmas tree for the season. In this home, Jenna has her own bedroom rather than sharing a room with her parents as she did in their apartment, where she had to sleep in a crib because of the lack of space for a real bed. Richard and Keri also have a room of their own and a den with a fireplace, the rooms in which they live bigger than the whole apartment where they lived before. Keri also has run of the rest of the house, especially the kitchen where she prepares the family meals, including Mary's meals. This setting gives the novel the family feel that is important to the main themes of the novel.

Another setting important to this novel is the cemetery. The cemetery borders on the property owned by Steve, a friend and neighbor of Mary's. This cemetery has a secret gate on Steve's property where a hedge grows to hide it, in order to discourage children from playing in the cemetery. Steve and his friends ignore this discouragement and play there anyway. This is where Steve sees Mary crying in desperation over the loss of her child. It is also here where Steve brings Richard in order to explain the letters Richard finds in the Christmas Box and to tell Richard about the death of Mary's only child. This setting is important to the plot of the novel because it explains the underlining themes of the novel and the message Mary has been trying to tell Richard, not to take life for granted, especially the life of his child.



## Language and Meaning

The novel is written in simple English with very little slang and no foreign words. The novel is very easy to read, written in simple sentences and with a logical progression. The writer has used few words that a reader might not understand because his original intention was for his three daughters to read the novel so they might understand his deep love for them. It is a short novel that tells a simple story, uncomplicated by multiple story lines or exaggerated characters.

The writer tells his story as though he is having a conversation, stopping from time to time to explain the importance of the box in modern culture or to explain why he felt it necessary to write this story in the first place. In order to tell his story this way, the author uses language that is simple, containing no large, complicated or unnecessary words. By doing this, the writer gets his message across clearly without confusion, allowing the reader to extract the exact message the author intends, that taking a moment with a child for granted is a mistake. Slang or complex language might have distracted from this simple message. Thus the language is perfectly appropriate to the story.

## Structure

This novel consists of six chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter is named for an object or objects that are key to the development of the plot within the chapter. This technique alerts the reader to the elements within the chapter that they should be aware of. The novel is told in equal amounts of exposition and dialogue, breaking up paragraphs with sometimes witty dialogue that keeps the novel flowing at a quick pace.

There are two story lines within the novel, one following Richard and his relationship with his daughter and the other that follows Mary's secret past. Richard is the main character in both plot lines. In the first plot line he is a father too busy to spend time with his daughter. Richard has just bought into a formalwear rental business, a new concept at the time, which keeps him occupied a large portion of each day. Richard works at the business for a certain number of hours during the day and comes home to spend more time still working over the books for the business. This work schedule keeps him from spending time with his daughter. In the second plot line, Richard must learn something from Mary. Mary has a secret in her past that Richard accidentally discovers when a strange music leads him to find letters in the Christmas Box. Richard reads one of these letters and assumes they are letters to a lover, but soon learns that the letters are meant for a child that Mary lost once. Through these letters and the sight of the child's grave, Richard learns that Mary has been trying to convince him to spend more time with his daughter because this is the most important thing in life, more important than making a living or starting a business. Richard finally learns his lesson as these two story lines come together and end the novel.





## Quotes

"It may be that I am growing old in this world and have used up more than my share of allotted words and eager audiences." Chapter 1, The Widow's Mansion, p. 15.

"My wife, Keri, maintains that the magic of the box had nothing to do with its physical elements, but all to do with the contents that were hidden beneath its brass, holly-shaped hinges and silver clasps." Chapter 1, The Widow's Mansion, p. 16.

"It is not my intent to launch upon a lengthy or sanctimonious dissertation on the social significance and impact of the lowly box, well deserved as it might be. But as a box plays a significant role in our story, please allow me the indulgence of digression."

Chapter 2, The Christmas Box, p. 33.

"It was an ornate wooden box of burlled walnut, intricately carved and highly polished. It was about ten inches wide, fourteen inches long, and a half foot deep, large enough for a sheet of stationery to lie flat inside. It had two large brass hinges crafted in the form of holly leaves. Two leather straps ran horizontally across the lid and buckled securely into silver clasps on each side. The lid had a skilled and detailed etching of the Nativity." Chapter 2, The Christmas Box, ps. 38-39.

"Sunday was not proclaimed the 'day of rest' by a mother with a family to ready for church, but such is the irony of piety." Chapter 3, The Christmas Box, p. 46.

"The ritual of cohabitation took on a natural and casual openness welcomed by all. It soon became clear to Keri and me that Mary had solicited a family to move in with her more for the sake of 'family' than real physical need." Chapter 3, The Christmas Box, p. 55.

"Perhaps if I had seen my daughter's longing eyes staring back at me from the gold-plated scales, I would have rethought my priorities." Chapter 3, The Christmas Box, p. 59

"Denial, perhaps, is a necessary human mechanism to cope with the heartaches of life. The following weeks proceeded largely without incident and it became increasingly tempting to delude ourselves into complacency, imagining that all was well and that Mary would soon recover." Chapter 4, The Dream, the Angel, and the Letter, p. 84

"...Have you ever seen the Bible that she keeps in the den?' I shook my head. 'The pages are stained with tears.' She turned away to gather her thoughts. 'I just think that there is a reason that we're here. There is something she is trying to tell you, Rick. You're just not listening.'"

Chapter 4, The Dream, the Angel, and the Letter, pp. 87-88.

"In the silence of the lights we faced the death of a friend." Chapter 6, The Angel, p. 113.



"I looked again at the weary face. It was filled with peace. Her deep eyes sparkled and the smile grew. Then I understood and I too smiled. Andrea had come." Chapter 6, The Angel, p. 117.

"I set the box near the hearth, then one by one, let the flames devour the letters as Keri watched in silent understanding. The Christmas Box was at last empty." Epilogue, p. 123.



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss family. Why is family important? Who makes a family? Can a family consist of people who are not related? Why is family important to this novel?

Why does Mary invite Richard and Keri to come live with her? Does Mary really need Keri to cook and clean for her? If so, why does she hire out some of the heavier chores? Is Mary really looking for a family of her own? Why does she not invite a friend or relative to move in with her?

Discuss the Christmas story. What do you think was the first gift of Christmas? Why does Mary think it was the love of a parent for her child? What in the story of Christ's birth suggests this? Do you think love is really a gift or do you think it is something that parents are just suppose to give to their children?

Why does Mary not tell Richard and Keri about the death of her child? Do you think if she had, it would have been easier for Richard to understand what she was trying to tell him? Do you think Mary avoided this to be difficult or because the wound was still too tender?

Why is it so important to Mary that Richard spend more time with Jenna? Do you agree or disagree? Is it more important to make money or to spend time with your children? What do you think defines quality time and do you think Richard passed up opportunities in this novel to spend this time with his daughter? Why? Who do you think is right about this subject, Mary or Richard? Why?

Discuss the Christmas Box. Why does Richard burn the letters it holds? What made the box play music on the nights Richard had his angel dream but not other nights? Do you think the box was magical? What was the source of the magic? Does the box lose its magic after Richard burns the letters?

Discuss the angel. Why does Richard dream of an angel? What does the angel symbolize? Why does Richard's angel look like the angel that adorns Andrea's grave? Is Richard dreaming of Andrea?