

The Conservationist Study Guide

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Plot Summary

When Mehring, a businessman who owns a "hobby" farm in South Africa, is made aware that a body has been found on his property, it forces him to examine his own life and mortality. As the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s sweeps the world, the apartheid system in "old" South Africa is starting to crumble. Mehring takes in this changing scene as he deals with the black workers on his farm, his activist girlfriend, his bitter ex-wife in the U.S. and his rebellious son. Mehring must think hard about what he really wants out of life.

Farm owner and industrialist Mehring is informed by Jacobus, his head work hand, that a body has been found by the river on his property. Mehring examines the body, noting the nice clothes. No one knows who the man is. Mehring calls the police and is annoyed that they see no urgency in sending an officer to the farm. They finally agree to visit the next day.

Mehring is from the city. The farm is his escape from the stress of everyday life. His business friends think his farm is "quaint," but to him there is a lot more to it than just the tax write-off. He talks with Jacobus about the dead man as they review farm tasks. Mehring is appalled that the police just buried the body on his property, near where it was originally found.

Mehring walks by the river after a business trip and naps in the tall grass. He thinks of his girlfriend and his teenage son. His neighbors across the river, the De Beers, visit for a few hours. Meanwhile, Jacobus meets with some men looking for work at the spare farmhouse. They don't have proper work papers, but he reassures them it will not be an issue. Jacobus is a crafty fellow. He is the one in charge when Mehring is away. As such, he walks a fine line between serving his employer and fellow employees.

Mehring visits the farmhouse and remembers visiting his girlfriend, Antonia. She is an activist and taunts him constantly about his corporate lifestyle. He finds her talk intriguing, even though she berates him constantly. He tells her about his son and ex-wife in the United States. Mehring wanders the 400-acre property and ends up at his favorite place, the third pasture by the river. He feels peaceful in the reeds and willows. There, he takes out a letter from his son Terry and reads it. He considers Terry spoiled and very self-indulgent. Mehring is upset and rips up the letter, although he later picks up the pieces.

The August winter is dry and cold. The wind whips through the camps near Mehring's farm and blows garbage across the roads. One cold night, some men come for Solomon at the camp and tell him that he needs to come with them to help his brother. He is reluctant but follows them out into the night anyway. The next morning, Jacobus finds Solomon naked and unconscious but still alive in the field. He takes him to the hospital and phones Mehring to tell him what happened. Mehring is concerned. Jacobus assumes that creditors beat Solomon because of his brother's money problems. Coincidentally, Solomon is found in the third field, where the dead man was buried.



A fire starts on the other side of the river, jumps across and severely burns a portion of Mehring's property. It stops far short of the cattle, but it devastates his favorite resting spot in the third pasture. Even the water reeds and willows are badly burnt. He walks in despair and realizes just how selfish Antonia is, just like his son. Still, Mehring feels bad about Terry and the fact that he hadn't been around much for his youth. He knows the scarred land will heal quickly, but he is upset nonetheless.

The "Indian" store, run by ymigrys from India, is set up like a prison, not to keep them in, but to keep the locals out. They have completely fenced in the property, even the roof. Dogs prowl the perimeter. Still, Bismillah, the middle-aged son, paces the area cautiously. He can't stop their greatest fear, that the government will evict them for good. They have lawyers hired to delay the process. His son Dawood works in the shop with him and his frail father, William. There is a day when a local man gets in a dispute about money and leaves in disgust. William, usually just a fixture on the wall, comes to life and argues excitedly with the man.

Mehring remembers a plane ride when he is forced to ride coach and sits next to a teenage girl. Her hand brushes his thigh, and he touches her in return. The girl shows no reaction. He continues touching her for hours, until the plane finally lands. Only then does the girl go screaming to her mother. Mehring is amazed at how little comes of that situation. The family doesn't have enough social status to do anything to him.

Winter ends, and Terry comes to visit. The workers prepare for a ceremonial dance while father and son walk the property. Mehring sees some of his son's activist literature and is disgusted. Still, he is wistful that Terry might some day take over the farm. He takes Terry to the airport and retires to the farm, listening to the beat of the drums. He is truly happy on his property.

The celebration lasts well into the night. Food quickly runs out, but there is plenty of beer. Solomon asks Jacobus if he died in the field, confused over the fact that Jacobus thought he was dead. Jacobus laughs off the question as ridiculous. Solomon relates being "dead" in the field with the other dead man buried there.

The fire revitalizes the pasture down by the river. Already, it is in full bloom, with more color than Mehring has ever seen. He thinks of Antonia and how little she understands him and life in general. He walks the river and feels good. Mehring even gives a ride to some strangers on the way to work. He meets a young girl at breakfast who is a friend of Terry's. He knows her family and is shocked at lunch to find out that her father has just committed suicide over a bad business deal. This makes Mehring reconsider his legacy again. Who will continue after he is gone? He can't bear to attend the funeral and sends flowers instead. He reluctantly stops by the Indians' store to get some Christmas presents for his staff. Mehring doesn't enjoy the experience because they fawn over him and make him very uncomfortable.

On Christmas day, the workers start celebrating early. Even Mehring has a bottle of whiskey and soon reminisces with Jacobus. They watch a heat storm come in and talk about the dead man. Mehring later walks by the river alone and gets his foot stuck in the



deep mud. It is mired for some minutes before it finally comes loose. Mehring thinks that the dead man was grabbing at his foot.

One of the workers, Izak, stops by the Indians' store and finds one of the younger men painting a peace sign on the water tank. They chat, and Izak leaves. The boy's father is not pleased that the controversial symbol might draw unwanted attention to them. Meanwhile, Mehring calls to speak to his ex-wife in New York City, whom Terry is with. Mehring becomes furious when his ex-wife mentions that Terry is not coming back to South Africa. He was choosing to avoid Terry's mandatory military service, which would bar him from ever returning. Mehring is angry, not because of Terry's bad decision, but because Terry doesn't have the courage to tell him himself.

Suddenly, it starts to rain, and it doesn't stop for two weeks. It is the start of the wet season. A couple in town is killed by a flood, and Mehring is in a panic because the road to the farm is washed out. With the phone lines out of commission too, several days go by when Mehring has no news from the farm. When he finally does get through, he finds that Jacobus has done a fine job taking care of things in his absence.

Mehring picks up a young woman on the way to work who leads him to a remote area under a bridge. Mehring realizes too late that it is probably a trap. Two men come out at him as he lays with the woman. Mehring sprints to his car and leaves them all there, including the woman. He rebukes himself later, thinking that the woman might have been an innocent bystander.

Jacobus leads a procession for the dead man across the hilltop. They are reburialing the unknown man, and many of the workers are present. The man is laid to rest. He is now part of them all, and at peace.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Mehring is an industrialist who owns a farm in rural South Africa. He is going about his daily rituals on his property when his herdsman Jacobus hails him and explains that they found a dead man near the river. Mehring and Jacobus travel to the location, where Mehring examines the body from a short distance. He sees that the man was probably dumped there, because he has no mud on his shoes. He also notes the fairly nice clothes on the corpse. Jacobus explains that he was trying to reach Mehring by phone for hours. No one knows the identity of the man or how he could have gotten there. They return to the farmhouse, and Mehring reaches the police after his second attempt on the party line telephone.

After stating definitively that the death has nothing to do with his farm, Mehring becomes annoyed because the police refuse to visit the scene until the next day. He is somewhat assuaged by the policeman's reassurances that it will not reflect badly on him. He just needs to make some attempt to preserve the body. Mehring tells Jacobus to cover the remains and make sure to keep any stray dogs away. He then attempts to go back to "business." There were some boys taking native hen's eggs, and he wanted to put a stop to it.

Mehring is a citizen of the city, not really a true farmer. He perceives envy from his business peers when he speaks about his "hobby" farm. To Mehring, it is truly a place to get away. He invites friends to visit and see his quaint country living. Mehring drives from the city and passes through a built up Transvaal village to get to his property. The whole trip is almost always less than an hour. The last landmark before the actual farm is an Indian store. His friends marvel at his peaceful life.

Mehring, Jacobus and a farmhand try and repair a water pump for the cattle. Mehring questions Jacobus about the police visit. He is furious that they borrowed a shovel from Jacobus to bury the body at the site, without even taking it back to the station. He is astounded at the laziness and stupidity of it all. It is good that there are no police stumbling around his property asking pesky questions, but he still calls the police sergeant to complain. He is told that the body will be relocated once the mortuary van becomes available in the next several days. He later goes into town for a dinner party with friends.

Jacobus defends his employer to the Indians at the store. Several people are worried about police involvement. Many worry that police investigations will uncover the fact that they are in the country illegally. Jacobus explains that there is no trouble at the farm and that there will be no issues with the authorities. He walks a fine line. He is in charge of the compound when his "master" is away. They have a vested interest in keeping things quiet.



Chapter 1 Analysis

The personality of the main character, Mehring, is roughed out in the first chapter. Although practical, Mehring tries to be fair with his employees. He is a businessman and tries to run the farm operations in the same emotionless, efficient manner he is accustomed to. Mehring is not a farmer and at first thought that farming was a simple matter of learning the basic operations. After a time, he fell into seeing his farm as more than a simple "hobby." He is soon to find out that this new venture will require his heart, as well as his head.

While the dead man is considered low in social status, Mehring is still appalled and disgusted that the police are so unconcerned about what happened to him that they drag their feet about coming out to "investigate" and then lazily bury the body next to where he was found. There is some worry at first that the body will cause unwanted attention on the farm, where undocumented workers could be caught, or even blamed. The real problem ends up being the exact opposite, a lack of attention. The police couldn't have cared less. Only Mehring's consistent complaints make them come out to his property at all. Over time, the presence of the body eats away at Mehring. It releases an emotional side to his personality that he was not aware of.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Mehring returns from a trip to Japan and takes a walk by the river. They are four years into a drought, and the river is very low. He doesn't need that water, though, since he has his own well system. He lies down in the grass and falls asleep for some time. When he wakes up, momentarily confused, Mehring realizes that he bought the farm because he thought it would make a great place to bring a woman. The farm is secluded and has no pesky witnesses, at least none he cares about. He has a particular woman in mind as he continues his walk. It is his current girlfriend, Antonia, who has a "love / hate" relationship with him.

Mehring returns to the farmhouse to take a shower. An unexpected phone call brings a visit from the De Beer family. There are three generations present, with the eldest leading the conversation. They speak of business and the history of the land. When they leave, he thinks of his sixteen-year-old son.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Mehring leads a full life, but he is a lonely man nonetheless. He has what most people would consider "the good life," but he is empty inside. His family fell apart, and he threw himself into his work instead of doing inner searching to see what went wrong. As a so-called "industrialist," it seems counterintuitive that he seeks solace in nature, but that is what he does constantly. Even though he is a man of the world, he finds that he misses his home. Mehring considers the farm his refuge, particularly an area where he enjoys walking by the river and dozing in the grass. He is a bird watcher and notes the passing of the seasons by the color of the local plant life. Small nuances of life that he previously would not have noticed are now important to him. He is finally stopping to "smell the roses." The author is showing how Mehring's character grows with each passing day to appreciate his surroundings.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Jacobus is meeting with several laborers, passing out cigarettes. They are at the spare farmhouse that Mehring occasionally uses for company. Some of the men don't have proper work papers, but Jacobus reassures them he can help them work in town. He calls William at the Indian Store on the telephone as they look on skeptically and somewhat fearfully. He hangs up and replies that he will find out more that night. When he finally talks to a man just known as Dorcas' husband, he hears that there is no work in town. Jacobus is angry when one of the laborer youths, Izak, comes back from the nearby shantytown. He was sent to buy beer, which Jacobus feels is unsafe for a young man. The shantytowns are dangerous, lawless places. Even the police don't go there often, tending to let the "locals" take care of the problem themselves.

Mehring goes to the spare farmhouse and despairs that it smells of cat. He remembers meeting his girlfriend, Antonia, and showing her the house. She is a leftist and enjoys provoking him with her anti-capitalist rants. He works in the city as a pig-iron dealer, and she taunts him because of it. He taunts her in return about her socialist views. She mocks his "business" lifestyle, but that actually intrigues and excites him. Antonia is married, and her husband is away on research. She criticizes that Mehring simply has, "too much." He mocks her idealism in return. They taunt each other like this quite some time before making love. She is shocked to find he has a son, nearly grown. His wife left him and moved to New York.

Mehring makes himself some lunch at the farmhouse. He roams his four-hundred-acre property but always ends up at the third pasture, where the reeds are. He feels peaceful and takes in the scene: river, reeds and willows. He reads a letter from his son Terry, away at college. Terry is spoiled and is planning a trip to America. He berates his father for being a part of the South African "system." Mehring tears up the letter and puts the pieces carefully back in the envelope. His son's hypocrisy disgusts him. The South African "system" he mocks is the same one that pays for him and his mother's lifestyle. Terry goes out of his way to look for problems so that he can be the hero.

Chapter 3 Analysis

A contrasting character development is occurring between Mehring and his son, Terry. While Mehring is independent, driven and stable, his son is portrayed as the opposite. Terry is in his "wandering" phase, trying to find himself. He is selfish and ungrateful for the help his father gives him, particularly financially. Since Terry's parents are divorced, he plays them against each other. Terry and Antonia are similar in their liberal (unrealistic as far as Mehring is concerned) leanings. Mehring finds Terry very hypocritical and hard to tolerate, but he still misses him and feels responsibility for him. There is still hope in Mehring's heart that Terry will grow up someday and want to work



with him, Terry's father. He wants something to be passed down from his generation to the next.

Mehring's relationship with Antonia is a love/hate affair. It is also literally an affair, since Antonia is cheating on her husband to be with Mehring. Mehring sees that Antonia selfishly tells herself that it is only physical, since she doesn't need a man. She just likes to have her pleasure. This feministic shallowness strikes Mehring as a fear of commitment, but he also simply likes the sex. He has no commitments to women. While he likes Antonia, he inherently knows that they are not a match.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

August winds blow garbage from the camps and industrial sites into the air. People dig through piles of garbage, looking for anything of value. The air fills with fine dust. Passing cars make it worse. It's a very harsh environment. It is still winter and becomes cold at night.

A pair of men comes to the compound and asks for a man named Solomon. Izak watches them. The men tell Solomon that his brother needs him. Solomon questions the men for several minutes, but then he reluctantly rises from bed and follows them out into the night.

The next morning, Jacobus finds Solomon in a nearby field. He is beaten badly and stripped naked. On first glance, Jacobus thinks Solomon is dead. On closer inspection, he sees that, although very cold, Solomon is breathing. They take him to the hospital and inquire at the shantytown about Solomon's brother. He has not been seen for days. They return to the farm, and Jacobus calls Mehring to inform him of the incident. Mehring is concerned, both about the incident and the frost. Jacobus then hires a man to help in Solomon's absence. The man thanks him wholeheartedly. The farmhands try to piece together what happened to Solomon. Jacobus assumes creditors beat him up because his brother owed someone money. The children speak of bad spirits that haunt the third pasture where Solomon was found.

Chapter 4 Analysis

While the continent of Africa as a whole is generally tropical, the southern tip (South Africa) is actually in a temperate zone. In the winter months of July through September, reversed from the northern hemisphere, it can get quite cold. Freezing temperatures are common in the story and threaten the equipment on the farm. Snow is fairly unusual, although frost is a common sight in the winter months. These temperatures are nearly responsible for killing Solomon, who is left naked in the field after being beaten badly.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

A fire starts on De Beer's property and sweeps across the dry pasture, even jumping the river via the reeds, to burn sections of Mehring's farm. Jacobus tries to take credit for putting out the fire, but Mehring suspects it just burned itself out. He surveys the damage. His favorite location in the third pasture is scarred badly. He surveys the damage done to the willows and reeds. Finding no unburned place to lie down, Mehring proceeds to the farmhouse. He rests on the couch and thinks of Antonia and Terry. Mehring dejectedly thinks he should write a letter, but he knows he won't. He hears Alina, the servant in the other room, and gets some bread to eat. He realizes that the house is wasted. The true value is the land itself.

Mehring thinks more of his son and girlfriend. She has a closed way of talking that flies in the face of her "everything goes" front. He thinks of their sexual liaisons and how much she thinks of herself. She acts mysteriously by not naming her friends, like some secret agent. She wistfully says, "I wish I had your farm..." Still, she has to tear him down after sex. She distances herself from him so that she can stay emotionally unattached. He tries to explain that his mail is confidential, but she won't believe him. She has no real grasp of his world.

As Mehring looks out the windows, he worries about the burned willows and the possible loss of the water birds. Everything looks dusty, almost blurred. The wind makes his irrigation efforts almost useless. He looks out at the field and realizes that the fire is probably the result of some locals starting a fire in the grass to keep warm.

Then, Mehring thinks of Kurt and Emmy, a childless couple who spent much time with Terry growing up. They are simple, kind people who appreciate doing "father" things that he didn't have time for when Terry was young. Mehring has many regrets. Mehring walks past a line of people from the compound on the road as he makes his way back to the third pasture. He looks around and thinks that all the damage will soon be erased, as if nothing ever happened.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The irony is that Mehring, the industrialist, is emotionally devastated by the damage the fire has caused to his property. In truth, the fire stopped far short of causing him any financial losses, but the aesthetics of his third pasture retreat are stripped away. He worries about non-financial and non-practical things, "his" willows, the water birds and the reeds. He loses his dozing place, where he would lie down in the high grass and nap from time to time. This makes him think about what really is important in his life. He is forced to reevaluate his priorities. Mehring beats himself up for being "weak" and caring for things that shouldn't be significant in the scheme of things.



Mehring's character is struggling with his emotional side. He knows that the damage to his farm isn't integral to its operation in any way. The fact that he is so distraught makes him even more upset. He is a logical man, and his feelings cannot be compartmentalized in the usual, logical realm. Mehring faces his own humanity for possibly the first time. This opens up a Pandora's Box of other emotions, beginning with his own mortality.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The owners of the Indian Store, who are from India, live in perpetual fear of losing all they have worked for, through theft by the locals and confiscation or eviction by the government. Their families live in a fortified enclosure, with fences, roofs and dogs protecting them from trespass. They allow local blacks to shop of course, since they there are the store's main customers, but only under close scrutiny. Black laborers are also allowed to fix holes in the fence to keep their own kind out. Still, there is a helpless feeling against the inevitable, in the form of a government official with the power to shut them down and evict them for good. They hope the money paid constantly towards lawyers will keep the officials at bay.

Bismillah paces the outside perimeter to check for any holes and then goes in to run the counter. His son and daughter-in-law have recently moved in, and the living space is becoming cramped. His son, Dawood, has a bad cold, and he is trying to give advice on taking care of it. Bismillah goes back to the shop, where his father William is sitting. He speaks and then tends to the customers. He has to keep alert. The locals often can't count the money they shove at him. All this time, he keeps up an alternate conversation with William about taking care of colds. The conversation moves around. Soon they talk about their lawyer's new challenge. William is suddenly in an argument with a woman named Dorcas about her husband's money being withheld by the Indians. He orders her out, and she angrily complies. Then Dorcas' husband enters and argues about the Indians taking advantage. He slams his hand and breaks a table. After he calms down, he takes William's keys after he falls asleep and opens the outer gates wide. The dogs run back and forth in a frenzy all night.

Mehring remembers a return plane ride from Lisbon. There is no room in first class, and he sits next to a young girl in tourist class. Her family is further back, and she is obviously uncomfortable sitting alone. They accidentally touch hands, and he takes the opportunity to put his hand on her thigh. The lights are low in the cabin, and over the next several minutes, he advances his hand upwards with no negative response from her. He guesses her age at sixteen or seventeen. He continues moving his fingers towards their intended target. They are intimate in that way for hours, still with no response from the girl. Mehring actually falls asleep for a time, only to wake up with his finger still inside the girl. He continues until morning, when he withdraws. When they land at Johannesburg, there is polite conversation, but nothing out of the ordinary. Then the girl screams out and runs to her mother. Mehring is charged with "interfering" with the girl. It was a crazy thing to do, but he is amazed at how easily he makes the issue disappear. The girl's family is of a lower social class and therefore powerless.

Winter is showing signs of weakness. There is a warm wind some afternoons. Mehring notices the burned river bottom is coming back to life. His son is visiting, and they ride together in his Mercedes. They talk about Emmy and stop at the Indian store so Terry



can run inside. At sixteen years old, Mehring wonders at how spoiled his son is. He asks Terry about the new "liberal" term for southwest Africa, Namibia. They notice a group of trespassers on the farm's private road. They question them and find that there is a ceremonial dance taking place that night. Jacobus meets them at the main farm building. He is pleased to see Terry.

Mehring and Terry walk down to the third pasture. He shows his son where he plans to plant trees. He thinks of the nearby government uranium deposit that both Terry and Antonia despise. The hypocrisy is that it could very well improve the development of the area to the point where all would benefit. He thinks of the prehistoric people who came before them and lie unnamed below their feet. They walk back the house, and Terry runs in to grab something before going to the airport. Mehring goes through Terry's backpack and finds a publication published by "The Campaign for Homosexual Equality." He is appalled by the political drivel and debates whether he should have taken his son to some "experienced women" to learn about sex. He drops Terry off at the airport and then continues on the expressway back towards the farm. He goes into the house unnoticed and listens to the drumming outside. He thinks of an earlier affair and his ex-wife. The drumming continues. It's a nice spring evening, and he feels at one with the farm.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Mehring tries to connect with his son Terry by getting him to take an interest in the farm. He has a hope that someday Terry will return permanently to make it a family operation. There is an element of foreshadowing here when he hears Terry constantly bash the country and the South African system. Mehring becomes angry at his son's political views, but he is probably more angry at the fact that these views make it very unlikely that Terry will live up to his wishes. He is conflicted and knows that he has missed many opportunities in his son's life to really connect. This guilt makes it difficult for him to pass judgment on his son's foolish notions about life. He also keeps his son at arm's length. They are not emotionally close and never will be. Mehring has squandered possibly his last chance to be open with Terry.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

There is beer for all at the celebration that night, even though the goat doesn't supply enough meat to go around. Izak plays the radio loudly, and there is much dancing. Phineas' wife is acting strangely, as usual. Lately, she had been having dreams and thinks she is turning into an animal. She dances crazily and describes the animals she can turn into. People feel sorry for Phineas, because his wife is unpopular. Solomon avoids her and speaks to Jacobus. He asks Jacobus if he had actually died in the cold pasture. Jacobus laughs and says he appeared dead, but obviously wasn't. Solomon thinks of dying in the pasture, existing with the other dead man who was buried there and never properly laid to rest. He found the goat that was being used at the feast. They are excited because meat is rare in the laborers' diet.

Orange river lilies are blooming in fiery splendor at the riverbank. Previously the reeds covered most of them from view, but the fire has made this viewing possible. Mehring walks through the property with Antonia. It is November, and the whole hillside is blooming. He thinks of being buried by the river and passing his land to his children, or at least his child. She chides him that the blacks will repossess his land within a generation. He tries to explain pig iron to her. It's mostly managed by partners, and he really has nothing to do with it anymore. He asks about her husband, and she explains that she does respect him. Mehring counters that he thinks that Jacobus respects him as well, because he knows he can't fool him.

Mehring truly enjoys his time at the farm. He wakes earlier and shaves, noticing he feels more awake than at his apartment in the city. He watches the movement outside. He sees Jacobus "motivate" his crew to start work for the day. Mehring takes a drive and is awed by the beauty of the fields in the summer morning. He walks and gets his shoes dirty before heading off to work in the city. He even gives a couple a ride when they approach him in stopped traffic.

Mehring is early enough at work that there is no one available to get him coffee, so he walks out into the street to search for some. He finds a double espresso at a crowded coffee bar. A girl approaches him and starts talking. He recognizes her as one of Terry's friends, and she asks about his son. They make small talk for several minutes, and he smokes a cigar. The girl talks about her parents and school. Then they go separate ways. Mehring checks ore prices in the paper. He is startled to find out later in the day that the girl's father has just committed suicide over a bad business deal.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The concept of change is delved into as Mehring debates life with Antonia. She puts him in his place by telling him that all he has will be taken away soon. She is referring to the



fact that there will come a time when native Africans will want the South African land back. The Dutch colonized South Africa and ran the country as a colonial power for decades. Their system of government discriminated against the local population for much of this time. Even Mehring, though he argues with Antonia, worries about the stability of the future. In Antonia's view, this puts them on equal footing.

Mehring also tries to enjoy the finer things in his life, like nature on the property. He marvels at the quick rebirth of the flowers after the fire damage of the previous season. Mehring muses about the prehistoric people who lived long before him and are buried and forgotten in the earth. He thinks of his own death and of what will come after him. What brings him pleasure is the thought of being buried on the property. These simple pleasures delight him in a way he never would have thought possible.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Mehring muses over the suicide of the girl's father. He considers the different methods available. He knows cyanide is the quickest, but it is not the "tycoon's way" to do it. He thinks of the girl and is glad he doesn't have any daughters of his own. Mehring evades the funeral by sending a large bouquet and donation to the widow. He thinks of the girl again. All she ever asked about was Terry, but Terry wasn't interested. He marvels at the superficiality of his son.

Mehring stops by the Indians' store to get a Christmas present for Jacobus and his staff because his office assistant is unavailable. The father and son immediately jump into action while the old man stares at him, or rather, past him. The Indians put on the charm, and Mehring finds it very annoying. He is uncomfortable and remembers why he has avoided the store for so long.

Mehring is in the deep grass of the third pasture, and no one can find him. He thinks of the other man there with him, the dead man. He has a presence that both disturbs Mehring and makes him think.

On Christmas day, the farmhands are already well on the way to becoming drunk. Jacobus greets Mehring, and Mehring realizes how shrewd the man really is. Who knows what really goes on in his absence? The dust from his Mercedes on the horizon must raise the alarm that quickly goes around the farm to prepare. Mehring wonders what, exactly, must be prepared. He takes a bottle of whisky and walks across the compound. Heat lightning streaks across the sky as Mehring reaches a stone outhouse used for fertilizer storage. He finds the view of the whole farm impressive and thinks it would make an excellent spot for a guest cottage. He drinks the whisky and watches the storm, which has no thunder or rain. Jacobus lopes up the hill, and they talk for some time, mostly about cattle, because it's the one thing they really have in common. They also talk about the dead man. Mehring slips inside a sleeping bag and falls asleep.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The theme of mortality is always in the back of Mehring's mind. The specter of death becomes much more real when he meets an old friend of Terry's and finds out her father killed himself. He evades the funeral, sending money instead, and flees to the farm for escape. Still, the physical presence of the body on his property nags at him. The dead man takes on a strong presence, and Mehring wonders who he was and who will remember him. He talks to Jacobus about the dead man. His thinking stops short of obsession, but he still takes a lot of time wondering about his own legacy. He worries and obsesses about his own death constantly. He wonders if he will be remembered

and where he will be buried. Mehring wonders about the forgotten people who used to live on his land.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Izak stops by the Indians' store. The son Jalal is painting the windmill. He also paints their water tank, but he won't say what he is doing. Izak knows the symbol on the water tank because he's seen it on shirts and cars. Jalal's father is annoyed that he has painted a peace sign out in the open for all to see. They argue.

Terry calls from New York to say happy New Year. Then Mehring's ex-wife gets on the line and announces that Terry will be staying with her and not returning to Africa for his mandatory military service. Mehring is furious that Terry doesn't have the nerve to tell him in person. Beyond this, there is the point that he won't be seeing his son again unless he leaves the country to visit him.

Mehring watches Jacobus and Solomon planting small chestnut seedlings in the field. He thinks indigenous trees might have been more appropriate, even though the chestnuts will be impressive. He walks down the reeds in the third pasture and gets his leg badly stuck in the mud. He pulls and pulls with no results before trying again and just coming free, as if someone had a hold of his leg and just let him go. He realizes that he felt fear for a minute, irrational though it may have been.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The character development of Terry continues in this chapter. He shows himself to be a coward when he has his mother tell Mehring that he plans to evade South Africa's compulsory military service by traveling indefinitely. This will make him a fugitive in the eyes of the law. Another aspect that is not discussed is that this action will keep Terry out of the country. He won't be able to visit the farm ever again, which upsets Mehring. This makes it impossible for him to consider keeping the farm in the family by passing it down to his son, an idea that comforted him in the past.

Terry is not necessarily a coward for avoiding military service, if it is done on principle, but instead of discussing the situation with his father, he instead lets his mother do the dirty work. His mother, only too happy to upset her ex-husband, is pleased to demonstrate that his money and power don't help him in this particular situation. Of course, his money is still good enough to support her and their son.

The peace sign stands out as a symbol of the times when the story is taking place. It represents the idealism of the peace movement itself and the turmoil that surrounds it. Jalal's father is not pleased when he sees the contentious symbol painted on their water tank. The last thing he wants is attention from any government officials seeing them as troublemakers of some sort.

When Mehring's leg becomes badly stuck in the mud in the third pasture, the inference is that the dead man has hold of him. Mehring starts to panic slightly before he frees himself. He is shocked at his lack of composure and irrational thoughts. The author creates the illusion that something has a grip on Mehring and finally lets go.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

A cyclone-caused rain starts up and stays constant for three days. As if to tease, it diminishes for a morning, and then full tropical torrential rains come down. People carry plastic sheets to attempt to stay dry. Dirt streets turn to mud and become impassible. A torrent at a small gully turns into a sudden flood that sweeps a couple in their car away to their deaths. This closes the main road between the city and Mehring's farm. The back road is also impassable, effectively keeping Mehring in the city for two weeks. With the phone lines out, he has no way of knowing what is happening at the farm. He worries constantly.

Jacobus is frantic at not being able to contact his master, but he does handle the situation well. He keeps the farmhands in line, and they only lose one of over a hundred cattle. A woman drowns trying to cross the flooded lowland between Mehring's and De Beer's. Her body is not found. In the lowland by the reeds, the mud rises and sinks, unearthing and recovering garbage, loose debris and finally something much larger.

When Mehring finally makes it through and meets with the worried Jacobus, he finds that the situation has been handled far better than he expected. Other than superficial odds and ends, the place ran quite smoothly in his absence. Jacobus even acted as doctor and used the correct hypodermic on a sick cow. Mehring praises his work and realizes that some of his staffs' increased responsibilities will have to remain. He also considers bonuses for the men. He sends Jacobus down to start draining some of the trapped water. Jacobus returns and tells Mehring to follow him.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Jacobus' character has his shining moment in this chapter. For all his insecurities at running the farm by himself, the flood forces him to make decisions without consulting Mehring and act on his own responsibility. His decisiveness and leadership keep the farm running smoothly, even during the rains. Even though he would have preferred the option of calling his boss for consultation, he does not have this option and must think for himself. Jacobus is not a genius, but he is intelligent. He has common sense, even though he lacks confidence. From his quick-thinking actions during the flood, he learns a great deal about just what he is capable of. Instead of being threatened by Jacobus' actions, Mehring is pleased. He is a confident man who is happy to see Jacobus get over some of his insecurities.

The author strongly hints at "something large" being unearthed by the flood. The inference is that the poorly buried body has once again been exposed. The metaphor here is that life's problems need to be dealt with, not swept under the rug. Taking on and working through issues actually solves them. Merely putting them out of view, like the



poorly buried body, makes them fester in the mind, as it bothered Mehring. Eventually, problems come back when least expected. Mehring knew from the beginning that burying the body on his property was wrong. Unfortunately, he did nothing but worry. The "issue" eventually comes back. He also does nothing to take care of other "shallowly buried" issues, like discussing his true expectations with his son. In the end, Mehring never really learns much from his mistakes, except finding out how to enjoy himself on the farm purely by accident.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The rain has undermined the Indians' water tank, and now it is on the verge of collapse. Mehring thinks the symbolism of the peace sign face down in the mud is amusing. He thinks of the wet earth churning and decomposing all inside. He thinks of the people swept off the road by the flood. He knows that he will be forgotten someday. He chastises himself for falling in love with the property, although he is happy that the burned area has been "reborn." Then, a horn honks and dissolves his daydream. He is in the city, stuck in traffic. There are so many things he doesn't notice, including the people, the sports cars and the exhaust fumes. Mehring drives too slow and ends up getting waved down by a woman and giving her a ride. She remembers him as the driver who gave her and her grandfather a lift weeks ago. They chat, and he realizes that he finds her attractive. He pulls off and gives her money to buy a snack. She puts her hand on his leg and instructs him to take her to a secluded place. He obeys and pulls over underneath a secluded bridge. The woman gets out and invites him to sit next to her on the ground. They kiss and rub against each other. As Mehring goes to get up, the woman asks him to wait. He suddenly realizes how secluded they are and how far away the car is. Mehring feels panic and suspects that he has been set up. She takes off her pants, and he looks up and sees a man by the nearby overpass. Mehring's instincts tell him to act first, and he does, challenging the man. They argue, and the man warns Mehring that he's in a dangerous place. Mehring runs for the car and tears off, leaving the girl to her fate. He wonders what will happen if she is innocent.

The farm workers make a coffin for the dead man and plan a proper burial. Many from the compound are there, among them Jacobus, Alina and Solomon. Jacobus pulls the coffin on a wagon with the farm tractor. The procession follows. The women sing, and the men pray. It is a dignified event, with a religious feel to it. They bury the man on top of the hill. He is one of them now. He can finally be at rest.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The burial of the dead man signifies a sense of closure that has been lacking since the first chapter. The body is a tangible, almost living presence on the farm. Mehring feels it most severely, but many other workers sense it as well. For Mehring, the man signifies his own mortality, which he feels more strongly as the days wear on. The dead man is a constant reminder of the fate that could befall anyone at anytime. Mehring's close call under the bridge reinforces this feeling. He faults his son's lifestyle as being impractical and superficial, but Mehring also lives his life for cheap thrills. In this way, they are very similar. For a middle-aged man, Mehring should have more common sense than to continue his ongoing affair with a married woman. His morality is severely lacking in several areas. He would have a hard time justifying his lifestyle to his son.



Characters

Mehring

Mehring is the novel's protagonist, a successful businessman operating in the pig iron industry. He has common sense and regularly researches investments before he commits himself. In the case of his farm, he initially approached it as an investment. He researched all aspects of the day-to-day workings of the operation, and he was originally very paranoid about the workers leading him astray by overestimating their labor. He has come to look at his farm almost as a blessing. He loves getting away from the city and using it as a refuge from his business life. He has discovered nature and enjoys walking his property.

Mehring gives the impression that he is strong willed, but he has many internal doubts. He worries about his mortality on an almost continual basis. The dead man on his property only reinforces this fear. He also laments the way his son Terry was raised, mostly by strangers in his absence, while he was at work. He now has little connection with Terry. To make matters worse, he is divorced. His wife doesn't have much in common with him. He tries to be civil, but they don't get along well. She lives in New York City. Mehring looks at his spoiled, self-indulgent son and wishes he could use tough love, but the opportunity has long since passed, especially since Terry plays his father against his mother.

Mehring also has a secret life, which goes against his practical grain. He is having an affair with a married woman and also seeks out women for sex on a regular basis. On this level, he is somewhat of a hypocrite for his seemingly moralistic lifestyle. This pattern of behavior doesn't fit in with his world. It possibly also affects his relationship with his son, and causes his inability to be more honest with Terry.

Mehring realizes that due to family and political realities, his wish to pass the farm down in his family will probably go unfulfilled. He is still suspicious of his workers at times, but he feels they have proven themselves to be reliable and trustworthy. This trust is further reinforced when the farm is run remarkably well during the flood, when he is not available. He shows some character in being happy with Jacobus, instead of being insecure.

Jacobus

Jacobus is Mehring's right hand man, who runs the farm at an operational level. He can be considered the foreman of the farm, and he is a very quick witted and bright man who knows how to get along with his master and get results from his workers. Has a fairly good relationship with Mehring, even considering the class structure. He is a black native African and is somewhat edgy about dealing with whites. Still, Jacobus is very



conscientious about his job. He will call Mehring repeatedly on the phone until he gets an answer to a question.

Jacobus does have a mischievous side. He has a good idea of what he can get away with and what he can't. He helps out people in the camp to get jobs when they come to him. He does involve himself in some activities without Mehring's knowledge. Jacobus is canny, and he uses "spotters" to tell him when Mehring is approaching. In the dry months, it is very easy because the car puts up a huge cloud of dust to announce its entry.

Although somewhat insecure about running the farm on his own, which he usually does for the most part in any case, Jacobus proves himself when he is forced to make decisions on his own when he and the workers are separated from the mainland by the floods. He shows his resourcefulness in keeping the cattle herd safe and keeping the other workers calm. Mehring, fearing the worse, is very pleasantly surprised and grateful for Jacobus' work when he finally makes it back to the farm

Terry

Mehring's only child is his son Terry, who is sixteen years of age and traveling the world to find himself. Terry is very spoiled and self-indulgent. Like Antonia, he finds the flaws in the South African system, but he has no real suggestions to actually make it better. He manages to upset his father most of the time. He doesn't really think for himself, but he parrots the ideology of the radicals. Terry is caught up in the peace movement and eventually decides to stay out of the country rather than serve the compulsory military service. He disappoints his father with the decision to skip the draft. The consequence is that he can never return to South Africa. This decision is made easier for Terry by the fact that his parents are divorced and fairly antagonistic with each other. Mehring's ex-wife realizes that she can get to her (mostly) unfeeling ex-husband by keeping him apart from his son. Not realizing he is being used as a pawn, Terry just takes the easy way out by letting his mother happily relay the information to Mehring, sparing Terry the confrontation.

Terry was raised by family friends for the most part, instead of his parents. This is a main reason for him having little connection with his father. He is not interested in continuing the family farm after his father's passing. Terry plays his parents against each other to his benefit. He doesn't work, but instead mooches off his parents or friends. He had a local girlfriend who adored him, but he spurned her for the sake of his idealistic causes. This mortified Mehring.

Antonia

Antonia is Mehring's girlfriend and lover, who is married to a researcher who she is obviously cheating on. She is an idealist and radical whose political beliefs in the pseudo police state of South Africa have gotten her into trouble. Antonia is somewhat more practical in keeping her beliefs quieter than in the past. She thinks Mehring is part



of the establishment problem and likes to verbally spar with him about politics before making love. She also likes the farm and wonders why Mehring has a fondness for it as well, since it doesn't fit in with his business persona.

Mehring intrigues Antonia, even though she hates most of what he stands for. He is the successful capitalist, and if her Marxist ideology ever came to fruition, his world wouldn't exist anymore. While Mehring sees himself as practical, Antonia sees him as an exploiter of an inherently unfair political system, which in one sense is true. Unfortunately, her solutions wouldn't necessarily solve the problem either.

Antonia is a rather simplistic person who doesn't want to understand Mehring's world. She can't see the good things that business and competition bring to the country and is furious that Mehring thinks that the local uranium mine would be good for the economy and help some of the camp residents by bringing up their standard of living. Antonia is socialistic and similar in nature to Terry. Mehring is attracted to her, but he has no respect for her because she can't think for herself. She merely regurgitates her anti-capitalistic rhetoric.

Izak

Izak is a young man who is witness to many of the incidents at the farm and the camp. He is not old enough for men's work, but he does much of the errand running for the farm. Jacobus scolds him for going into dangerous areas that his parents send him to. He is a very independent person who often stops by the Indian's store to chat, and he happens to be at the store when one of the younger Indians decides to paint a peace sign on the water tank, much to the annoyance of his father. Izak recognizes the peace sign, but he isn't exactly sure of its meaning.

Izak is also a witness to the events leading up to Solomon's beating and near death. He is questioned later about the identities of the men who came to get Solomon in the middle of the night, but he didn't recognize them as anyone he had seen before.

Solomon

A friendly but naive farmhand who is married and lives in the camp, Solomon is a very integral part of Jacobus' team. He is lured out by himself in the middle of the night by some thugs and beaten badly. Solomon nearly dies when he is left in the freezing weather overnight. His wife is furious at him leaving her in the middle of the night and begs him not to go. Solomon thinks that because Jacobus told him he thought he was dead that he really was dead. He becomes somewhat obsessive about being dead with the other dead man in the third field, and he thinks they shared a bond.

Solomon is sorely missed when he is laid up in the hospital to recuperate. Mehring knows him by name and has to find someone to replace him temporarily. Solomon recuperates fairly quickly and joins the workers' celebration. He also takes part in the funeral of the dead man.

Bismillah

Bismillah is a middle generation resident of the Indian store. He relies almost entirely on the native population for business, but he mistrusts the same people. Bismillah constantly confirms that the store fortifications are in working order to keep out any undesirables. Still, he learns lessons from his aged father William, and he also works with his son and daughter-in-law in same complex.

Bismillah is a mild-mannered person. He lets his more abrasive, and senile, father take over when a customer causes a disruption in the store, and he is somewhat resentful at the way his whole family fawns over Mehring when he makes a rare appearance in their establishment. He is patient when trying to deal with the cramped living quarters, especially with his son and daughter-in-law. Bismillah also worries about the family lawyers. He thinks there will be a time when their legal actions fail and the group will be kicked out of the country.



Objects/Places

Lucerne

Lucerne is a perennial grass native to South Africa, which blooms yellow and blue in the spring. It covers many of the farm fields where Mehring's cattle graze.

Mealie

Mealie is the South African term for corn.

Transvaal

Transvaal is an inland South African province renowned for its rolling hills. It is also a description of the countryside, which Mehring passes through between the city and his farm.

Guinea Fowl

Guinea fowl are small chicken-like wild birds that inhabit some areas of the farm. Mehring has a fondness for them and doesn't want them disturbed.

Boer

An African word for farmer derived from Dutch, Boer is used to refer to the Dutch settlers who came to South Africa in the Boer War and colonized parts of the country. Boers are also referred to as Afrikaners. They are the colonial power that runs the country and writes the laws, which for the most part excludes natives.

Kaffir

Kaffir is slang for a black or native South African, and it is used most commonly in a derogatory fashion by the upper class Dutch descendents to describe the native population.

Afrikaans

Afrikaans is the language used by the upper class South Africans, derived from the native Dutch of the original colonists.



Veld

Slang for Bushveld, the word veld refers to an African field or grassland, similar to an American prairie. The veld is open country, which aptly describes Mehring's farm.

Piccanin

Piccanin is a slang term meaning "small child."



Themes

Rebirth and Mortality

The fire that sweeps Mehring's farm symbolizes death, and the quick new growth symbolizes rebirth. The riverbank vegetation looks dead, but it obviously isn't. Appearances can be deceiving. Not only does the plant life come back, but also it is more revitalized than ever before. It is known that some species of plants need fire to start their life cycle. There are even new types of blooms that Mehring has never seen before. The reeds that he loves so much covered up blooms that he never has the opportunity to see, until the reeds are destroyed by fire. What appears to some as merely destruction and waste is rebirth.

The idea of rebirth ties into Mehring's worries about his own mortality. He wants his son to continue in his footsteps, but he knows it will never happen. At first, it is merely a fear in the back of his head, but the fear is realized when Terry's intentions of abandoning his home country become clear. This upsets him for reasons he cannot comprehend completely. He feels that all good things must eventually come to an end, and it saddens him. Mehring doesn't want to be forgotten over the course of time. He knows that his ownership of the farm is only temporary in the scheme of things.

Mehring comes to realize that he will die someday. He has regrets and wishes that things in his life could be different. At times, he looks around himself with the knowledge that he will be the man under the ground someday. Mehring recognizes that he could have done better with his life and finds his only solace in his farm. His legacy is that he will be buried there someday, even if no one remembers him.

Apartheid and the Winds of Change

South Africa in the early 1960s and late 1970s is a very dynamic place. While the dominant apartheid system is still very much intact, it is losing ground fast, and many can see what is coming. Mehring himself sees a time when he might be uprooted from his land by the native population. It discomforts him that the option of keeping the farm in the family will probably not be available. The factor of his son Terry being an at large fugitive also plays into this. This is the same era as Vietnam, and Terry's actions are similar to Americans fleeing the draft in their country. There is also a minor reference to the peace movement.

While activists like Antonia and Terry hate the system, there is still a very rigid class structure in South Africa when this story takes place. This discriminatory system is seen as harsh and unfair by many, but it is accepted. Mehring accepts the system as it is, although he does treat his workers and servants with respect.

At the time *The Conservationist* was written, the end was in sight for apartheid, but it was not a "done deal" by any means. In fact, the apartheid system manages to remain



intact until approximately twenty years after this story was released. It is dismantled for the most part in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, the widespread return of land from white farmers to blacks does not cause the situation for most poverty-stricken residents to improve. For the most part, the white dominated system of corruption is simply replaced with black dominated corruption.

All in all, Mehring is more realistic about the world he lives in than Antonia or Terry. They are idealists. It is not just that they don't like Mehring's practical world. They don't understand it. Terry especially was not raised to survive in the real world. He has not worked a job or been educated how to really care for himself. Antonia is similar. She is supported by her husband, which allows her to stay in her own little world of idealism. If not for handouts, both Terry and Antonia would have a tough time of it.

The sense of lost cultural identity for the native Africans pervades the story, as they are trapped somewhere between modern times and their tribal roots. For the most part, they have lost their link to the land, having been reduced to living in camps, similar to the Native Americans. There is a moment of strange sadness when Mehring notes that in their celebration, the workers bang on Castrol oil drums because they wouldn't know how to make the real thing anymore. Even he feels a sense of loss, although he can't quite put a finger on what bothers him.

Closure

The issue of a man's body being dumped on Mehring's property bothers the farm owner, first because of the possible investigative issues, but later because it reminds Mehring of his own mortality. He feels for the man and wonders if he will be forgotten just as easily. The callousness of the police at not investigating (or even visiting until the next day) and then burying the body on his property angers Mehring for this reason. The improperly buried man becomes an unfinished issue that drags on throughout the story.

Mehring walks by the river and feels the presence of the man. He even panics for a moment when he becomes stuck in the mud, imagining in horror that the dead man has a hold of his ankle. The concept of the dead man becomes a near obsession for Mehring, as he wonders if he will meet a similar, nameless fate someday. The body was dumped, and no one knows who the man is. There is a sense of sadness at the situation. Certainly the police don't care. Mehring feels fear when he puts himself in a dangerous position late in the story as he is ambushed by thugs while under the influence of a young woman. He realizes later how stupid he acted and how close he could have come to death.

Closure is a real psychological phenomenon. Lack of closure causes stress, anxiety and an incomplete feeling in one's life. Mehring has many issues in his life that are incomplete. He never has a heart-to-heart talk with Terry to tell him how he really feels about his lifestyle and the fact that he wasn't always there as a dad. This chance is missed when Terry announces that he will probably never return to the country. Mehring



also avoids many situations due to his ongoing anxiety about death. In the main example, he skips the funeral of a business colleague because he is uncomfortable.

In the end, Mehring takes no action to put the issue of the unknown body to rest. His workers finally do it. They take it upon themselves to rectify the situation by giving the man a proper burial. The issue is no longer unfinished, hanging over the farm like a cloud. This ceremony brings a sense of closure that makes the residents of the farm feel good about themselves, and deservedly so.



Style

Point of View

The Conservationist is told in the third person. The point of view is taken mostly from Mehring and Jacobus' view of day-to-day life in the city and on the farm. The monotony of farm tasks is delved into, as well as the monotony of business life. Mehring uses Jacobus to ensure that the detail jobs are completed. More importantly, Jacobus is the liaison between Mehring and his workers. Jacobus is the focal point between management and employee. As such, he often finds himself in situations where he is truly torn between the two. Jacobus feels loyalty to his employer, who has done a lot for him financially but doesn't really know him. He also feels loyalty to his people, the workers, who he tries to help out when he can.

The loyalty of Jacobus is significant. Mehring thinks that Jacobus respects him because he isn't dumb enough to have the wool pulled over his eyes. He did his homework on how to run a farm for this specific reason. He wasn't prepared for the emotional hold his new life would have on him. At first, Mehring sees the world in a very practical sense. Even the farm was originally seen as a tax write-off. As the story develops, Mehring's point of view changes to see the farm as the focal point in his life. He slowly comprehends that he can't put a price of the nesting birds and graceful willow trees on his property. He grows to need the break that his nature walks give him. He even starts to see the farm as his legacy, as he realizes he must die sometime. Mehring gains compassion and learns patience. He learns to appreciate the process of taking the time to talk to people about their day, not just feeling them out for possible profits.

The change in Mehring's perception happens as he keeps up a relationship with his girlfriend and son, whose political views challenge Mehring's own. Where Antonia and Terry see injustice, Mehring sees a system that does work. Terry somewhat hypocritically rants against the South African system, even though this same system made his dad rich, which now supports his lifestyle. Terry and Antonia's point of view is idealistic and jaded, but not very realistic.

Setting

The main setting of the story takes place in apartheid-era South Africa, sometime in the 1960s to 1970s. The places range from the modern city to Mehring's farm out in the veld. While his farm is only an hour from the city by car, it seems a lifetime away when it comes to the huge contrast between the two.

Mehring is a businessman who sees the world in black and white. Everything is practical. The farm is emotional to him, though, and he finds it hard to get past the profit margins to see the beauty that he can't put a price tag on. His emotional side flares up against his realistic side, which has gotten him through life up to that point.



Mehring goes from one extreme to another. He lives the business life, traveling internationally quite often, where he wears a suit and goes to fancy dinner parties. His priorities are concentrated around keeping up appearances. His other life is the farm. There is no dress code here and no etiquette. Instead of making million-dollar deals, he worries about what wrench to use in fixing a rusty water pump. He gets dirty fixing a broken barbed wire fence or helping nudge a feed calf. In many ways, Mehring finds this real work more fulfilling than his day job. He experiences real meaning and accomplishment in his life. It also exposes the superficialities in his previous monetary exploits.

The poverty extreme is also notable. The city has apartments and skyscrapers. There are cars, trains and planes. The hustle and bustle is tangible. Out by Mehring's farm at the camp, most houses are made from corrugated metal. The lucky workers have bicycles. The sense of injustice is just starting to creep into the corners of the society. Only activists like Antonia and Terry see the blatant unfairness, but they are far ahead of their times in South Africa.

Language and Meaning

The language of the story is simple for the most part. Mehring is the farm owner trying to make a profit and keep his farm operating properly. He knows that while he does pay his workers well, racial tensions are growing nationwide, and he must be diplomatic. He works through Jacobus to ensure that small details are completed. Mehring doesn't necessarily think his workers are lazy, but he does know they exploit weakness when they see it. If he gives them slack, they will take it. He feels obligated to keep the farm busy for the most part.

The hidden meaning that gradually becomes apparent is that there is more to life than simple day-to-day existence. Mehring worries that there is a "beyond" and wishes desperately to have some kind of legacy past his simple lifespan. He seeks meaning with his girlfriend and son and fails for the most part. His epiphany is that nature can replenish him after the city wears him out. He uses the farm for solace. The secret life of the hard-nosed businessman is that he enjoys walking in the third pasture by the river most of all, just watching the willows, reeds and birds. Mehring has found a home. He is an anxious person and finds peace of mind for the first time in his life. He just wants to share it with someone.

Another aspect to the meaning of the story is the dependability of Mehring's staff. He knows they are good people, but he doesn't quite trust them. Part of this mistrust is the South African system itself, where one class is judged better than the other. The other aspect is his business experience, which tells him to always be wary of others. He is forced to trust his staff, though, when a bad storm isolates the farm for several days and Jacobus is forced to run the farm on his own. Although apprehensive, he does an admirable job, and Mehring is quite pleased when he finally makes it through. The meaning is that sometimes people do rise to the occasion and perform better than expected.



Structure

The Conservationist is divided into eleven chapters. Chapter one details the discovery of a body on Mehring's property. It also introduces the main characters, Mehring and his main hired hand Jacobus. Mehring is disgusted that the police don't even care enough to investigate the body. Instead, they bury it on his property. In chapter two, Mehring walks in his favorite part of the farm and thinks of his girlfriend and son. More of Mehring's background is unearthed in chapter three. There is more detail on Antonia and Terry. Solomon is beaten and nearly dies in chapter four when some local toughs lure him out of his compound at night. There is a bad fire in chapter five that burns Mehring's favorite walking place on his property. He is stressed, but he knows that it will recover quickly. Chapter six introduces the Indian family in depth. They have created a virtual prison to keep themselves "safe" from the local population. Mehring also has a semi-sexual tryst while on a plane ride and is later visited by his spoiled son, Terry. They walk the property together, and Mehring hopes Terry will return to take over when he gets too old. The workers celebrate in chapter seven. The burned riverbank also comes back to life with a new vibrancy. Mehring also finds out that an acquaintance of his has killed himself. After avoiding the funeral in chapter eight, Mehring muses about death with Jacobus. The two men drink together. In chapter nine, Mehring's ex-wife calls to tell Mehring that Terry won't be returning to South Africa to serve his military term. Mehring is furious that his son couldn't tell him in person. There is a torrential rain that hits the area in chapter ten, cutting off Mehring from his farm for days. He finally makes it through to find that Jacobus handled the situation quite well in his absence. In chapter eleven, Mehring is nearly mugged as he is seduced by a young woman. Back at the farm, Jacobus leads a funeral to finally bury the unknown man properly.



Quotes

"A farm is not beautiful unless it is productive. Reasonable productivity prevailed; he had to keep half an eye (all he could spare) on everything, all the time, to achieve even that much, and of course he had made it his business to pick up a working knowledge of husbandry, animal and crop, so that he couldn't easily be hoodwinked by his people there and could plan farming operations with some authority." Chapter 1, pg. 21

"He rolls onto his side, where he has the impression the reeds facing him hide him as drawn curtains keep out day. The sense of familiarity, of some kind of unwelcome knowledge or knowing, is slow to ebb. As it does, it leaves space in his mind; or uncovers, like the retreat of a high tide, carrying away silt." Chapter 2, pg. 37

"They laughed together across the table. A funny thing, the simple pretty ones disintegrate when they drink, the clever handsome ones become more beautiful, their sex comes to the surface." Chapter 3, pg. 66

"D'you think he's ever asked about your papers? He doesn't care if anyone's got papers or not, as long as you work. That's all he knows. And if the police catch you, he can just look in your face and say he doesn't know who you are, that's all, you're someone hiding with the boys on the farm. What has he got to worry about?" Chapter 4, pg. 85

"The moment of first sight, from the store, roused an anguished revulsion, an actual physical reaction, as if the python of guts in which his large weekend breakfast was warming uncoiled against some inner wall of his body." Chapter 5, pg. 88

"What had begun as their own passion to be let out had long since become a fierce passion to keep out others. The dogs held within their ring of savagery the Indians' store, house and family, and the blacks in the yard, surrounded together. It was the Indians' only form of tenure; and the Africans had papers that made them temporary sojourners where they were born." Chapter 6, pg. 108

"...there were those odd thumps, the sound of a carpet being beaten, it often seems - and then some sort of rhythm emerged. Ordinary Castrol drums they use, so there isn't that thundery resonance you get from the real thing. They don't know how to make the real thing any longer." Chapter 6, pg. 150

"A sensation of terrible cold and darkness - that must have been when he was left lying there naked - and the cold, cold edges, the freezing-edged pain over which another, warm darkness slowed - his wound and the blood flooding it. And then he died, alone in the third pasture with the one who was already dead there." Chapter 7, pg. 159

"He is not the sort of person given to morbid reconstruction of how it must be when these people are waiting for the carbon monoxide to take effect. Before you actually pass or however it comes: do they arrange themselves head in hands, registering



despair etc. Just keep eyes fixed on the instrument panel: speedometer, oil gauge, engine heat. Grit in the mouth, face-down." Chapter 8, pg. 184

"If it were as easy as that! If I stop them hitting if now that won't stop them from doing it again when I'm not here. Everything needs changing. Don't you realize, if you were here these days they wouldn't want to have you on their side, they'd want you to be a white bitch. It makes things clearer all found. If you had any sense in that intelligent head of yours, you'd know that's how you had to end up. There isn't anything else they need from you." Chapter 8, pg. 189

"It's simply a matter of getting enough leverage, with the other leg and the rest of his body, to pull himself free. As he heaves, the mud holds him, holds on, hangs on, has him by the leg and won't let him go, down there. Now it's just as if someone has both arms tightly around the leg. It's suction, of course, that's all; the more he pulls the greater the vacuum. He would get out of his boot if he could, but the leg's caught nearly to the knee. He pulls and pulls; down there, he's pulled and pulled." Chapter 9, pg. 215

"At night the noise of frogs was the drugged, stertorous sleep of the drowned earth. The pastures and fields were water-meadows; under a hot sun the area of water, that was greater than the area of burning had been, shrank back every day, leaving a stained and sodden margin." Chapter 10, pg. 233

"No one will remember where you're buried. Ah, it's not as easy, not as final as that. Couldn't recognize the place when it was burned and then when the reeds and the grass grew to high again, just as if nothing had ever happened...Oh Mehring, how you romanticize, how you've fallen for that place." Chapter 11, pg. 236

"The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them." Chapter 11, pg. 252



Topics for Discussion

Describe the relationship between Mehring and his son Terry. Why does Mehring feel so much guilt about him?

Is Jacobus loyal to Mehring?

Why is Mehring troubled by the dead man?

Is the relationship between Mehring and Jacobus more like master and slave, or employer and employee?

Is Mehring in love with his girlfriend Antonia? Explain their relationship and whether it is healthy or not.

How do Jacobus and the other farm laborers show that they can take care of the farm themselves during the flood?

Even though the book does not specifically state the reasons, speculate why Mehring's wife left him and moved to the United States?

Why is the discovery of a body of little concern to the police chief? What is Mehring's initial concern?

Can Jacobus and Mehring be considered friends? Explain.

What are the Indians afraid of that their physical security measures can't protect them from?

Describe and discuss the South African class system. What is the state of apartheid during the scope of the novel?