

Dancing at the Rascal Fair Study Guide

Dancing at the Rascal Fair by Ivan Doig

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Plot Summary

Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay arrive on a ship bound for America from their native home of Scotland. They plan to go to Montana to find Rob's uncle, Lucas Barclay, who has sent money home to his family each Christmas. The money makes Rob and Angus certain that they can make better lives for themselves by going to America. Once in Helena, Montana, they are unable to locate Lucas and spend a great deal of time searching for him. When the annual money arrives in Scotland, Rob's family forwards the letter along with Lucas's new location - Gros Ventre, Montana. Rob and Angus make their way to Gros Ventre, going part way by the only transportation available, which is freight wagon. Once there, they find that Lucas owns a saloon known as the Medicine Lodge, having given up mining after an accident took both of his hands.

Lucas's live-in mate, Nancy, is part Indian, and Rob is soon smitten with her. Angus, fearing a family fight in the making, plans to leave, but Lucas offers to help the two get homesteads started, including the purchase of sheep, and Angus and Rob move immediately onto the land near Gros Ventre. They establish homesteads and tend the sheep, often struggling to make ends meet. Rob marries a young woman named Judith Findlater and Angus takes a job as a school teacher. When he meets another young school teacher named Anna Ramsay, Angus falls in love, but Anna refuses to marry him immediately, citing the need for them to take some time before making such an important decision. Meanwhile, Rob's younger sister Adair arrives from Scotland, obviously with the hope of marrying Angus. When Anna returns to the valley in the fall, she tells Angus that she's going to marry a horse trader named Isaac Reese. Angus tells Adair that Anna has turned him down and asks Adair to marry him. She agrees and they endure two miscarriages before Adair gives birth to a son, Varick.

Angus's love for Anna never dissipates and when Rob realizes it, he calls Angus on it. The two men fight and Angus holds onto the hope that when Anna's own children are grown, she'll come to him. When Rob can't make Angus stop loving Anna, he tells Varick of the love that Angus has harbored all his life. Varick feels betrayed and spends some time hating Angus, though he eventually comes to an understanding with his father. Varick marries Anna's daughter, Lisbeth.

When Lucas dies, he leaves one thousand, five hundred head of sheep to Angus, Rob and Adair, but with the stipulation that they must tend the business together for three years before selling, unless all three agree to sell. Adair holds out against selling, insisting that Lucas wanted them to keep the sheep. When the third year is drawing to a close, Angus and Rob are no closer to mending their broken friendship than before. After an argument during a feeding time, Rob takes Angus's horse to drive the sheep over the dam of his reservoir and the horse stumbles. Both fall into the water and both drown.



Scotland and Helena; Gros Ventre

Scotland and Helena; Gros Ventre Summary

Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay are boarding a ship in preparation for the crossing of the Atlantic bound for America from their homeland of Scotland. There's a dead horse at the dock and Angus questions whether that is a bad omen. Rob predicts that the two men will be safe "as long as we don't let them hitch a cart to us." Angus and Rob have left their childhood homes in the Scottish town of Nethermuir, crossed the country to the ocean, and are now boarding the ship. It's immediately clear that Angus is going to be uncomfortable in his bunk, which is too small and which Angus describes as being like a coffin.

During an early phase of the voyage, Angus recalls the Rascal Fairs held in their hometown. The Rascal Fair is an event at which the farmers and laborers get together and come up with wages and terms of employment for the current season. There are musicians, peddlers and members of the community in attendance, making the event something of a "fair." It's also during an early part of this voyage that Angus buys some limes from a young peddler who tells him that it will help erase the taste of being seasick. When Angus and Rob are both in the throes of seasickness, the limes do help. Eventually, they arrive in New York. Angus notes that the arrival in New York is "thrilling" and that they - like every other newly-arrived emigrant - would never want to repeat the event.

Angus and Rob plan to go to Helena, the capital of the Montana Territory, where Rob's uncle, Lucas Barclay, has apparently made a fortune mining. Lucas sends a one hundred dollar bill to Rob's family every Christmas and Rob now plans to find Lucas. The two make their way to Montana, and Rob predicts that they'll find Lucas the following day. They don't find Lucas the first day and wind up renting a room at Mrs. Billington's house. When they can't find anyone who knows Lucas, Angus cites Lucas's outgoing personality and says that Lucas must not be in town any longer. They consider the fact that he might be buried in an unmarked grave but decide that they'll wait until Christmas, see if the money arrives from Lucas to the relatives in Scotland, and settle in on their own. They both get jobs, Angus working at Cariston's Mercantile and Rob working in a wheelwright's shop.

In the chapter titled Gros Ventre, Angus and Rob receive a letter from Scotland indicating that Lucas has mailed his letter from a place called Gros Ventre. They decide that they will go to Gros Ventre and catch a stage for the first leg of the journey, stopping over in Augusta to wait for the freight wagon that will take them the rest of the way. The driver of the freight wagon is a man named Herbert, though he doesn't say whether that's his first or last name. Herbert says that he hasn't been to Gros Ventre before but feels confident he can find the way based on the trail beat out by wagon tracks of others who have traveled the route. They are soon caught up in a small



snowstorm that is sufficient to hide the trail, prompting Angus and Rob to take turns walking along the front of the horses to find the trail.

When Rob and Angus arrive in Gros Ventre, Rob asks a hostler if he knows where they can find Lucas Barclay. The man answers that Luke is almost always at the Medicine Lodge, a saloon. The two walk in and spot Lucas behind the bar. Rob walks over and says, "Mister Lucas Barclay, I've come an awful distance to shake your hand." The room goes silent and everyone stares at Angus and Rob. Lucas is first hostile and then, recognizing Rob and Angus, changes to another emotion, though Rob can't immediately identify it. Both feel that they aren't welcome and Rob eventually asks outright if that's the case, prompting Lucas to share the secret that he hadn't shared in his annual letters home - that he's lost both hands up to the forearms. Lucas tells the story of having been involved in a blasting accident, the Army post hospital where the amputations had been completed, and the years of trying to make a life for himself with this handicap. Lucas says that he's somehow relieved that the family will now know the story, including the reason he stopped writing letters and sent only the annual gift of money. He then pours drinks with his stubs and Angus notes that he does it as easily as a person with hands would have.

Lucas is filled with ideas of how Gros Ventre is on the edge of a boom and predicts that the town will grow over the coming years, especially since Montana became a state while Rob and Angus were still in Helena. Lucas points out that there's homesteading land available "for the taking," and believes that will become a major draw to settlers willing to work the land. He then takes Rob and Angus home where he introduces them to Nancy, a beautiful young Indian woman, who is his live-in mate. Later, Lucas says that Nancy had been part of the deal when he'd bought the house and saloon from the previous owner. Lucas gives some history of the area, including that the Blackfeet had died by the hundreds when the buffalo gave out. He says that a young half-breed named Toussaint Rennie, married to Nancy's aunt, had taken Nancy into his lodge when, at twelve, Nancy became an orphan.

Rob and Angus begin trying to decide what to do and have almost come to the conclusion that they should leave Gros Ventre in search of opportunities elsewhere. However, they will have to wait several days for a freight wagon and Rob is asked by the local wheelwright to help with some work until the transportation is available. Meanwhile, Angus helps Lucas in the saloon, and when the next wagon passes through, Rob and Angus don't go with it. The two decide that Angus will scout the area to see if there's a place suitable for a homestead while Rob continues to work. On the fourth morning, Angus rides north and finds Noon Creek, a place that immediately captures his attention as being the answer to their quest for a place to settle. There he meets Ninian Duff, one of the few who have already settled the area. Ninian takes Angus home to meet his wife, Flora, and tells him about some of the other settlers, Donald and Jen Erskine.

When Angus arrives back in Gros Ventre, he steps into Lucas's kitchen to find Rob and Nancy alone together there and realizes that he'd interrupted something. The next day, Rob tells Angus that he believes they should wait to begin their homesteading venture.



He says that he believes he'll remain at work in Fain's wheelwright shop and Angus realizes that Rob really wants to remain in town to be near Nancy, though Rob says he wants to stay in town to be near Lucas. Angus searches for answers to the problems at hand but decides that his only option is to leave town. He makes that announcement to Lucas, hints of the budding attraction between Rob and Nancy, and says that he plans to tell Rob that night. That night, Lucas leaves Toussaint in charge at the saloon and says that Nancy has gone to visit relatives, leaving the three men to eat supper alone. Lucas then says that he will forward Rob and Angus the money to start their homesteading enterprises, complete with a herd of sheep, and Rob is immediately caught up in the idea. Angus, realizing that Lucas has done what's necessary to diffuse the situation between Rob and Nancy, agrees to remain in the area to homestead.

Scotland and Helena; Gros Ventre Analysis

The perspective of this story is important because the reader must realize that the story is being written by Angus with Rob as the intended reader. When Angus writes of "you," he's referring to Rob. What the reader doesn't learn until the end of the book is that Rob has died when Angus is writing this story. It's also important that the reader understand the ties that bind Rob and Angus together. Rob will at one point tell Angus that they are the best of friends and almost family, a situation that will change when Angus marries Rob's sister. However, the fact is that Rob takes their friendship for granted. An early example of this is seen when Rob makes a remark about Angus's height, a fact that Angus is somewhat sensitive about. It seems that if Rob were really interested in Angus's feelings he would do what he could to help Angus's self-esteem on this point. Instead, soon after their arrival on the ship, Rob makes a remark about Angus's height, a fact that pricks Angus's feelings. Angus's forbearance is also immediately seen when he says that Rob is always saying things like that and that there's nothing to do but accept it.

Angus's father had believed that Angus should become an apprentice wheelwright, but his mother had been determined that he be educated. Angus had clerked part time at the Barclay's wheel shop and taught part time, but both jobs had dried up with poor economic conditions. It seems that Angus's decision to go to America is based mainly on the fact that he can't find a job and that Rob is planning to go. Rob's decision is somewhat less clear but is tied to the fact that his uncle, Lucas, seems to have made a huge success and Rob wants the adventure. Angus says that both he and Rob were swayed by the fact that Lucas was able to send money to his Scottish relatives each year.

Rob's initial reaction to the news that Lucas is about to introduce them to Nancy is the belief that Lucas must have gotten married. When Lucas corrects Rob, saying that they aren't married and that Nancy is his "housekeeper," Rob is taken aback and seems to be on the verge of condemning the situation. Angus steps in, as is typical of Angus, who always tries to diffuse situations in which Rob might lose his temper. When they go inside and see the beautiful young Indian woman, both Rob and Angus are immediately bowled over. Lucas is obviously proud of the fact that he was able to obtain the affection



and companionship of this young woman. Rob will become infatuated with Nancy in a way that creates a serious problem for the extended family, but Lucas and Angus diffuse the situation when it occurs. On their first night in Gros Ventre, Rob is critical of Lucas, but it seems likely that he's shaken because of finding that Lucas doesn't have his hands. Another interesting point is Rob's initial words, that he'd come to shake Lucas's hand. Those who are in the bar don't realize that Rob doesn't know about Lucas's hands and there's an air of hostility that Rob and Angus don't initially understand. Rob seems to be floundering and Angus finds this at least slightly humorous.



Scotch Heaven, Pages 88 Through 140

Scotch Heaven, Pages 88 Through 140 Summary

The area where Angus and Rob choose to settle is populated by a number of Scottish settlers and is soon called Scotch Heaven, which is the title of that chapter. Rob and Angus build a cabin first on Rob's homestead claim, planning to spend their first winter there and to build Angus's cabin the following spring. They decide which of the two houses to build first by betting which of two magpies, perched on a limb, will fly first. Rob's land is higher than Angus's choice, Angus having selected land nearer the creek. Rob making plans to build a reservoir. The two quickly discover that sheep are difficult animals to predict and are constantly leaving their work on Rob's cabin to find out where the sheep have gotten off to.

One day Lucas and Nancy arrive at Rob's cabin to look over the progress. Lucas has news from town, including that there's to be a stagecoach line soon from Helena. Rob tells Lucas that there are three more families soon to be settling in Scotch Heaven. Lucas compliments the pair on their work and Angus agrees that they've both worked hard. Lucas asks about the sheep and Angus notes that the sheep were fine the last time he and Rob had seen them but that they could easily have found a way to kill themselves in the hours between then and now, though they tell Lucas that the sheep are fine.

There is soon a new batch of settlers, including the five members of the Findlater family, a widower named George Few, George's daughter and his cousin Allen, all from Scotland, followed by a man named Tom Mortensen and the Speddersons, described as a "tumbleweed family of Missourians." One day Ninian Duff arrives at Angus's place with three other men, Donald Erskine, Archie Findlater and a settler from the nearby area of the South Fork named Willy Hahn. Angus expects the riders to have bad news but Ninian reveals that their purpose is the establishment of a school board and asks Angus to join the three-member board with Ninian and Willy. Angus is asked to immediately advertise for a teacher and to help build a school which will be on the South Fork side of the settlement because more of the children live in that area.

Winter is quickly approaching and Angus and Rob work harder at fences, Angus's house and the school building. Angus wins the option to go to Gros Ventre one day for supplies and there hears warnings from Lucas of the harsh winter to come. The winter arrives, first with only a few snows, though the creeks are iced over. The settlers gather often to escape the confines of their own cabins. That winter, two young single women arrive. Mavis Milgrim, hired to teach at the school, and Archie Findlater's sister Judith are on hand for the gatherings, which often include dancing. Angus once tries to kiss Judith but she boxes his ears and is soon paired off quite regularly with Rob. Rob and Angus are soon snowed in together and the tempers naturally become short on a few occasions. Whenever they are outside, chopping holes in the ice for water or doing other chores, they can hear the same sorts of noises from their neighbors' homesteads. They eat a



great deal of elk, a meat Rob complains of often. It's during that winter that Rob raises the question of adding more sheep to their herd. Angus says sheep are a good investment in theory, but in reality are likely to drop dead for no apparent reason. He puts Rob off by agreeing to talk about buying more sheep in the spring.

The two experience a Chinook, a sudden warming wind that melts the snow and leaves the area warming dramatically. Rob later jokes that it's that first winter, cooped up in his cabin with Angus, that prompts him to marry Judith Findlater. Angus notes that Rob and Angus are the two bachelors in the valley who are reasonably good catches and believes that Judith simply picked, her father cementing the deal by frequently inviting Rob to share meals with the family. Angus says that the years pass and with the arrival of 1893 - their third since arriving in the valley - financial problems hit with a drop in the price of both sheep and wool.

One day Ninian asks Angus to teach at the South Fork School, the school on their side of the valley while the Cold Creek School remains in operation on the far side of the valley, promising that it's only for a year. Angus, realizing the need for the income because of the falling income from the sheep operation, agrees. There are several students missing and Angus initially fears they aren't coming for some reason, but when they appear late he makes it clear that he won't tolerate tardiness. One day Angus finds the girls' outhouse tipped over. When it happens again, Angus comes up with the plan to have the boys give up their outhouse to the girls, forcing the boys to use the bushes. Angus shares prunes with the class, meaning the students have to use the outhouse very regularly. The cold weather makes this uncomfortable for the boys and when they set the outhouse back to rights, it isn't tipped over again.

Angus buys a horse named Scorpion from a trader named Isaac Reese. As the school year comes to an end, Ninian says that the other members of the school board want Angus to remain as teacher, promising that it's still temporary and only for one more year. Rob learns of the death of his father, which is followed soon by the death of his mother. There are some deaths in the valley as well and the family from Missouri abandons their homestead without saying a word to anyone. Rob and Judith have three daughters over the coming years and Rob plans to keep as many sheep as possible, hoping the market will improve. In 1897, Angus is teaching at South Fork for the fourth year and learns that the Noon Creek School has a new teacher. He's asked by Ninian to ride over and introduce himself and he does so, expecting a "battle axe" similar to the woman who'd just left the position. Instead he finds a young Scottish woman named Anna Ramsey who is very beautiful, and Angus is immediately taken with her. She asks to borrow some books and he takes them to her a few days later, prompting talk among the people of the valley, including Rob. Angus invites Anna to a dance at South Fork School and she says she'll attend with others from Noon Creek.

Scotch Heaven, Pages 88 Through 140 Analysis

When Lucas visits Rob and Angus at Rob's new cabin, Angus notes that Rob's attitude to Nancy is cool, as if she's not even there. It's not clear what that means. It could be



that Rob has come to realize that a relationship with Lucas's mate is not a good idea and is seeking to distance himself. It could also be that Rob and Nancy had words on some level after he opted to leave town in favor of homesteading. In any case, the situation is passed except that Rob studiously ignores Nancy. Lucas makes a veiled statement that the sheep have been worth the money he'd invested in them "so far." It seems that he's referring to the fact that he stopped a budding relationship between Rob and Nancy, but it could have been referring strictly to the sheep and his financial investment.

Lucas talks to Angus briefly about his need for a wife, a "sermon" Angus questions. Lucas says that Rob is not to be worried about, that he'll find someone who feeds Rob's self-esteem and that Rob will latch onto that woman as his life's mate. But Lucas says that Angus is different and that he needs "the right partner." Lucas doesn't point out anyone in particular and doesn't seem to have any advice other than it's time Angus considers marriage. Angus laughingly points out that he's partnered with "a pair of Barclays" and that the partnership is keeping him busy all the time. This is probably a foreshadowing of the fact that Lucas is going to marry a Barclay, Rob's younger sister, Adair.



Scotch Heaven, Pages 141 through 200

Scotch Heaven, Pages 141 through 200 Summary

On the day of the dance, Davie Erskine helps Angus clean up the school room. Angus dances with Anna and it's quickly obvious to everyone that there's an attraction there that will likely lead to marriage. Angus soon goes to visit Anna at her home, making his intentions public. There he finds that her parents are something less than welcoming, especially her mother, who is the more outspoken of the pair. As spring arrives and school is about to be dismissed for summer, Anna says that she is going to travel with her parents to work for Isaac Reese. Angus asks her to marry him then, but she says that they haven't known each other very long and that she wants to wait until the fall to give him an answer. They have a sexual encounter as the time for her May departure grows nearer and Angus learns that she is not a virgin.

In June, Rob appears one day and asks Angus to go with him to meet the train, citing the fact that he's purchased a cream separator for Judith and has to go pick it up. Angus agrees to go and he and Rob spend a night in the Indian village with Toussaint, a part of the trip Angus had particularly looked forward to. There are a great many children and Angus says he can't keep track of all of them. Angus continues to watch for signs of Anna at the various encampments and small settlements they pass, and when it's obvious that he's not going to find her on the trip to the train station, he wants nothing more than to get home. At the train station, he encounters a young woman who has the voice of people from Angus's Scottish home of Nethermuir and finds that it's Rob's younger sister, Adair, who has come to visit. It's only then that Angus learns that Rob had tricked him with the story of the cream separator and that they are really there to pick up Adair.

They begin the return trip, and when they are stopped to let Adair go to the bathroom in the bushes, Angus asks Rob when he'd planned Adair's trip to America and why. Rob admits that he had hoped that Adair and Angus would get married and Angus angrily tells Rob that he can't "tie lives together." Rob finally admits that Angus had met Anna after Rob had invited Adair to America and says that he'd held out hope that Angus would "come to his senses." The return trip takes more than a day and they spend the night on the trail, Adair in the wagon and Rob and Angus underneath. The next day, Angus manages to slip in the news of his approaching marriage to Anna, though Anna hasn't actually agreed. Adair recovers her shock almost immediately and offers congratulations.

There's an event at the end of the shearing season in which the final few sheep are part of a contest. Angus and Rob make up a team against Allan and George Frew. Rob and Angus are obviously behind the superior skills of George and Allan but gain some by working through break time. When it comes down to the final moments between Angus and Allan, Angus purposely drops a bit behind and allows Allan to win, hoping that it will make him seem better in Adair's sight. During the dance that evening, Allan's courting of Adair is obvious.



As the summer passes, Angus and Rob spend a great deal of time high in the mountains with the sheep, where there is free range for grass. The summer months are hard on Judith, who is left with the responsibilities of the house without Rob. Angus tries to hurry the time until school's starting will prompt Anna's return and he writes to her often. One day when Angus comes down from the mountains he sees Adair and asks if she's seen Allan lately. She announces to him that Allan is "stupid as a toad," dashing any hopes Angus might have had that Adair would settle down with Allan. Angus admits that he does agree with her on the point that Allan is stupid.

On the last day of August, Angus goes to the Noon Creek School and finds Anna already there. She kisses him hello and reminds him of their sexual encounter, then tells him that she's had those kinds of encounters with Isaac Reese over the summer and that she's agreed to marry Isaac. Angus goes to see Lucas and feels bitter when Lucas tells him that time will heal the hurt. Angus goes to Adair and tells her of Anna's betrayal, then asks Adair to marry him. She agrees. Angus notes that it's a good bargain for both because he wants a wife and Adair, who'd come to America with the hope of marrying Angus, doesn't want to return to Scotland, especially without a husband. As the wedding is nearing its end, Anna arrives with Isaac, ostensibly to quell any talk that might arise as to hard feelings between Anna and Angus. Rob climbs onto a chair and offers a toast, saying that he and Angus have been "all but family" all their lives, and that this marriage has sealed it so that they now are family.

Scotch Heaven, Pages 141 through 200 Analysis

There's a scene at the South Fork School dance in which Angus, Rob and Lucas perform a traditional Scottish dance with Lucas singing. Angus notes that he believes all good dancing could be traced back to the Scots. Angus says that he'd danced during the evening with most of the women and that Flora Duff, who is apparently at least a bit overweight, "moved like a rumor." Angus doesn't elaborate as to whether it's because he was her partner or if he's referring to the fact that Flora herself is Scottish. The dancing scene is not repeated though Angus tells Anna that Noon Creek is now obligated to host an event of their own.

Angus never seems to try to say that life in Montana is terribly easy, but he seems to always keep in mind that life in other places has difficulties as well. An interesting point of this story is that Angus never wants to leave Montana after staking his claim. It could be that the land holds onto him or that he's simply poured so much work into his homestead that he doesn't want to leave it. At one point, Anna tells him that the country can be alluring, but only when it wants to be, indicating that she also sees the harsher side of life in Montana. Adair seems to hate it almost from the first moment she sets foot in Montana, making it unclear why she feels that she should enter what is certainly a tenuous marriage.

Anna's reasons for marrying Isaac are not spelled out by Anna, but Angus says that he believes her parents are at least part of the equation. He points out that Isaac has a better financial status and believes that to be an important aspect of the choice for Anna



so that her parents will be cared for. Anna says that she loves Isaac, but Angus discounts this. It does seem possible that Anna has told Angus that she loves Isaac in order to forestall any argument he might have made. The perspective, limited to Angus's point of view as it is, means the reader doesn't know what Anna feels or the content of any of the letter she's supposed to have written over the course of the summer. Angus has hardly known Anna long enough to establish a deep, abiding love for her, but he will cling tenaciously for the rest of his life to the emotions he holds for her. This seems to be one of Angus's major character flaws, that his obstinacy will never let him realize that Anna's action is the epitome of a self-centered woman who would not have made him happy anyway.

Lucas goes to Adair and tells her that he and Anna have broken off their engagement. He says that he doesn't tell her of his hopelessness and this seems to be unfair to Adair. Angus tells her simply that his relationship with Anna is over and that he now wants to marry Adair. She agrees, but it leaves the question of whether she would have married him if Angus had been honest about his deep feelings for Anna. It seems that Adair might have been clinging to the hope that Angus will come to forget Anna and to love Adair. Angus seems to have set himself from the very first moment of his life with Adair to survive without loving her, and to hold onto his unrequited love for Anna.

There's an interesting point made when Lucas comes to the wedding and encounters Angus. He doesn't really offer best wishes or congratulations, and in fact seems to say nothing at all. It seems likely that Lucas is disappointed at the turn of events, especially because Adair is his niece and he knows that Angus has chosen her for a wife because his dreams of Anna have fallen through. However, Angus says that Lucas's silence is "a lodge greeting of the maimed," putting himself in the same category as Lucas with regard to having lost a vital body part. Angus's selfishness on this point seems overrated.



The 'Steaders

The 'Steaders Summary

Angus says that the only way to be successful at sheep is to always have them at the back of your mind, even when you're not really, consciously, thinking about them. He says that Anna is the same way and that it sometimes startles him to find her there because she is very quiet and unobtrusive. Angus is soon certain that Adair doesn't like the homestead life and, in fact, hates Montana. One night Adair is lighting the lamp when the glass chimney breaks. She is not cut, though Angus initially fears that she is. The next day he takes her to the barn and teaches her to saddle Scorpion. When she refuses to get on the horse, he insists and finally picks her up and puts her onto the saddle. Angus doesn't fully explain his reasoning to her, but admits to himself that he fears what would happen if she were injured or needed help with no way to reach it. He tells Adair that the homestead is all he has to his name, which means it's all she has, and urges her to find a way to be happy with her life here.

As they settle into life together, Angus continues to think of Anna and says that if he were to talk to Adair about it he would swear that he doesn't invite thoughts of Anna into his head and heart, though they are constantly there. Adair asks a neighbor to bring her a deck of cards and Angus sees that she often has solitaire dealt out as a way to help pass the dreary days of Montana winter. They sometimes attend the dances and Angus always thinks of his dances with Anna. Angus notes that Adair loves the dances and never pitches in when the other women put out the supper because Adair always puts dancing above food. Angus and Adair want children and Angus holds to the hope that this will be what Adair needs to be happy. He notes that they both want "soon and several," but that he can't stop thinking about his own family and the fact that he is the only child of four to survive.

Spring comes and Adair is becoming happier with the warming days. One day Adair and Angus decide to make a trip into town and Adair is driving when Angus sees a saddled horse acting very nervous near a gate. He takes the reins and hurries in that direction, soon realizing that young Davie Erskine's foot is caught in the stirrup of his horse. Angus gets near and is finally able to catch the horse and is able to get Davie's foot loose from the stirrup. He has Adair bring the wagon closer and they put Davie onto their coats in the back, then rush as fast as they can for the home of his parents. They soon learn that Davie will live, though Angus says that he will lead a "limping half-atilt life" from the shattered bones that never completely heal. Two days after Davie's accident, Adair has a miscarriage. Angus notes that Adair doesn't come right out and blame him, and in fact says that there was no option except to hurry home with Davie and that the wagon ride might have had nothing to do with it, but Angus seems to blame himself. He says that Adair also doesn't blame their life as homesteaders in Montana because without that, he and Adair don't have a life together. Angus says it's more than the loss of a child, it means another winter during which Adair will be miserable and lonely instead of being a mother with a child to care for. In December, Adair miscarries



again, this time at four months. That May it snows and Adair is angry at the harsh weather, though Angus says any moisture is a welcome boost to the grass necessary for the sheep.

At one meal, Adair takes one bite of food, rushes out and throws up. Angus believes that it's the strain of their failing marriage, coming so close on a discussion of whether Adair will remain in America or return to Scotland, then discovers that she's pregnant. Adair is especially careful and Angus says that he "cossets her every way he can think of." Angus says they spend all their time waiting, and one day Ninian asks Angus to be at the school to accept a load of coal. Angus agrees and Isaac, Anna's husband, makes the delivery and tells Angus that he and Anna are expecting a child. In November of 1899, Adair gives birth to a son, early but healthy, and learns that she won't be able to have any more children. She names him Varick Alexander.

Angus talks of Varick's youth, his escapades that make both Angus and Adair worry, and his attachment to Rob, who Varick calls "Unk." Anna has a daughter named Lisbeth and a son named Peter, and Rob has four daughters, Ellen, Dorothy, Margery and Mary. In 1907, Angus and the other sheep farmers learn that the mountains are to be turned into a national forest and grazing will be allowed only by allotment. There's an outcry, but Angus comes to believe in the plan, though Rob hates it for limiting the ranchers' potential expansion of herds. At one point, Rob and Angus have words over the national forest.

In 1910, there's an incredible series of fires. Angus tells Adair that she can throw a fit to ease her frustration over the situation and she responds that she would if she thought it would help. It's during the worst of these that Angus is called away to a meeting of the county's school teachers. Anna is there, and at noon Angus asks if she'll sit beside him during their picnic lunch. They are seated only a few minutes when Rob drives up in his automobile and tells Angus that there's been an accident. Angus gets in with Rob and they head back to Gros Ventre. On the way, Angus learns that Verick had been chopping wood and a splinter flew up, striking him in the eye. When he arrives, he learns that the doctor has done all he can and that there's nothing to do but wait with Verick, who has a bandage over his eye, to see what the long-term damage will be. When the bandages come off, Verick can see fine and the eye has normal appearance and movement.

When Angus goes to tell Rob and Judith the good news about Verick's eye, Rob asks to talk to him. Rob says that he can't sit idly by without confronting Angus about how he's treating Adair and says that he knows Angus is still carrying a flame for Anna. Angus asks if Adair had complained and Rob says that Adair isn't the kind of woman to complain, adding that it's bound to hurt her. Angus says that Adair isn't complaining and that Rob has no right to say anything.

It's in 1910 that Rob and Lucas come up with the idea of becoming "land locators" for settlers arriving in the area. These settlers, "too late or too poor" to lay claim to the prime acres of real estate with ready water, are homesteading on poor land with no water except what falls as rain. When Angus takes the first family to see the barren land



remaining as available for homesteading, he returns home and tells Adair that he can't do it a second time but suggests that they add a second herd of sheep. Angus and Rob go in partners on the new herd, with Rob making a deal to lease land from the Indians for grazing. Angus notes that the sheep are taken to pasture in Two Medicine Country in June of 1914.

The 'Steaders Analysis

Angus says that he'd expected Adair to be a formidable presence in his life, but she is actually a very solitary person by nature and her quiet presence is much less obtrusive than Angus seems to have expected. He says this as if he believes it to be a good thing but doesn't seem happy with it after all. It seems obvious that Anna would have been very much the opposite and Angus would likely have been unhappy with that. It seems that he also worries about Adair and her solitude, fearing that it's a sign that she's not happy. He seeks a way to solve that and believes that a child is the answer. It should be noted that Angus isn't immune to Adair. He genuinely cares for her, but any love that he might have come to feel for her is overridden by his feelings for Anna. Angus also feels at least slightly guilty about Adair. When he considers the possibility of having her injured and unable to find help, he grows panicked. He is fully aware of Adair's dislike for the homesteading life and says he would be unable to live with the idea that she died because she was unable to go for help. Angus seems to feel a bit guilty at having her live in this place she hates. He realizes that without her, he would be alone and he doesn't want to be alone. He also comments that their lovemaking is good for both of them.

There is a time when Adair talks about the possibility of returning to Scotland. Angus refuses, saying he'll never go back, even for a visit. He does, however, tell Adair that he'll find the money for the trip if she wants to go, that she can go whenever she wants and stay for as long as she wants. He then asks her if this is what she wants and she doesn't say that will go but also doesn't say that she'll always stay with him. Angus takes this as Adair's way of saying that the fact that she and Angus are married does not mean that he and Anna could never be together. Angus doesn't elaborate on this but seems to believe that Adair would simply leave if there came a time when Anna offered herself to Angus.

When Lucas and Rob come up with the idea of being land locators, Angus fights it, saying that he can't imagine telling anyone that the land still available in the region is good for homesteading. He initially refuses to be part of the business, though Rob and Lucas say they'll be charging for the service and that Angus can expect to make a good profit. Then Adair, having likely heard about it from Rob, tells Angus that she wants him to do it so that they can set some money aside for Verick's future and for her own, if she should decide to return to Scotland. Angus agrees, but tells Adair that he can't after that initial encounter. Instead, he produces the idea of adding a herd of sheep, promising that all the profits from that endeavor can be put aside to help Verick get a good start in life as an adult.



Two Medicine, 1918 and 1919

Two Medicine, 1918 and 1919 Summary

The first time of shearing the sheep at Two Medicine Country begins and Angus is in the midst of helping when Anna and her two children ride up, bound for the place where Isaac is currently working as part of a road crew. Angus almost immediately invites Anna to spend the night at the camp and Anna accepts. Rob arrives and is furious to find Anna there, telling Angus that he can't continue to take these actions that are bound to hurt Adair. Angus points out the number of chaperones and Rob seems to cool off. The following morning, Angus and Anna walk off a short distance together, ostensibly to watch the sunrise. There, Angus asks if there's any hope that Anna will come to him when the children are old enough to leave home. Anna tells Angus that she can make decisions ahead only as far as she can see and doesn't really give him an answer at all. It's obvious that Anna's daughter Lisbeth figures out that the two of them were off together in the pre-dawn hours, though Angus says there's nothing he can say to the girl to make it any better.

Rob leaves ahead of Angus, who decides to stop by the Forest Service ranger station where Varick has a summer job. As soon as Angus arrives, Varick confronts him about Anna, and Angus quickly learns that Rob had told Varick his version of what happened at the shearing camp. Angus admits that he loves Anna but says nothing untoward has happened between them, and that Adair knows of his love for Anna. Varick says that he won't return home but will room in town to finish school. Angus is furious with Rob for interfering and for dragging Varick into it. When Adair learns of the situation, she tells Angus that she'll live with Varick during the school year and return to the homestead in the summer.

Angus and Rob have a physical fight, with Angus coming out the winner. They then dissolve their partnership, selling or dividing everything that had been part of their business endeavors together with the exception of Scorpion, Angus's horse that Rob had helped pay for soon after their arrival in Montana. As the years 1914 and 1915 come to a close, Angus notes that the prices of everything is up and the sheep business - as well as any other farming enterprise - brings top dollar. In 1917, America joins the war and Lucas dies. Rob and Angus have not spoken since they dissolved their partnership, and when Angus asks for permission to write Lucas's eulogy, Rob refuses. Rob, Judith, Angus and Adair are together for the reading of the will, which gives all the property to Nancy except the sheep - one thousand, five hundred head to be divided equally between Adair, Angus and Rob but only on the condition that they raise them as partners for three years or that they all agree to sell before them. Rob and Angus, citing the fact that they can't work together, are for selling, but Adair insists that Lucas wants them to work together and that they must do that.



Adair comes up with the idea that Angus and Rob will cut a deck of cards, low card winning, to settle every disagreement. They have an excellent year and the lambs sell for a high price, making a hefty profit all around.

In the chapter titled, "1918," Angus puts Scorpion out to pasture and continues to teach school, a task he calls the one sane action of his life when faced with dealing with Rob, both trying not to speak unless absolutely necessary and the tension remaining high despite the passage of time. The war is in full swing and Varick is nearing his eighteenth birthday, which will make him eligible for the draft. One day Rob comes riding in with Davie, the young man who is charged with herding sheep on the mountain. Davie has fallen victim to influenza and is barely conscious. Angus and Adair ride into the mountains to search for the sheep that have been left untended and find about four hundred missing.

The influenza tracks through the valley. Davie lives, but his father dies with his mother falling ill not too long after and dying as well. The schools are closed because so many are ill and Angus falls victim while school is out. Adair manages to get him to bed and he knows that he called out for Anna in his delirium but Adair doesn't say so. There's a notice in the newspaper of all those who died of the influenza and Angus reads, glad to find that Varick's name as well as Rob's family are not on the list. Then he finds that Anna's name is there, dead at age forty-four.

In the chapter titled "1919," Angus says that their first year of dealing with Lucas's sheep is an excellent year. The second is a break-even year because of the four hundred head lost when Davie fell ill. The third was a loss and the coming winter looked bleak. Angus and Rob argue about the amount of hay needed to get the sheep through the winter and come to a compromise. Long before the spring thaws, the sheep begin to die of starvation and it's obvious they aren't going to have enough hay. Varick, safely home from the military and working cattle for a neighboring operation, marries Anna's daughter Lisbeth. The relationship between Varick and Angus remains shaky but better than it had been. One day Varick arrives at Angus's farm and says that he's borrowed horses from Isaac, presenting a plan to pull three sleighs to a nearby train depot to pick up some scrub grass being sold and used as hay. The three men make the trip and face a horrible blizzard on their way back, but make it safely. Even then, sheep continue to die from the bleak diet and weather.

One day Rob tells Angus that he should put Scorpion down, citing the hay being fed to the horse which is no longer being used for work. Angus refuses. As spring arrives, Rob and Angus have to move the sheep to a different pasture. On the way, Rob wants to use Scorpion to drive the sheep and Angus again refuses, citing the fact that they could drive the sheep on foot. Rob snatches the reins from Angus's hands and takes off on Scorpion, driving sheep across the dam of Rob's reservoir. Halfway across, Scorpion loses his footing and Rob falls with the horse through the ice and into the water. Angus slides into the water as deep as he can without losing his footing but is unable to reach Rob. Both Rob and Scorpion drown. Angus recalls the hours after the drowning, including the men who came and found the horse in the reservoir, hooking a rope to



Scorpion so that horse and rider could be dragged out. It's only then that Angus sees that Rob's oversized work boot is stuck in the stirrup.

Two Medicine, 1918 and 1919 Analysis

Angus seems to believe that Rob's lack of a son makes him envy Angus's son, and believes this to be the catalyst behind Rob's decision to tell Varick about Angus. In truth, it seems likely that Rob would have tried to talk to Adair about before going to Varick and that Adair probably wouldn't listen or take Rob's side in the matter against Angus. Rob's decision to draw Varick into the situation seems ill-conceived at best and may have been, as Angus suspects, an effort to drive Varick and Angus apart. It may also have been that Rob honestly felt this to be the way to bring Angus to his senses.

There's an interesting conversation between Adair and Angus on the subject of Anna. When Adair says that she'll go live with Varick in town during the school year, Angus believes that she might be about to leave him completely. When he asks if this is the case, Adair points out that Angus hasn't been able to wipe Anna out of his mind in all these years, and says that she won't be able to leave Angus either. This seems to be Adair's way of saying that she deeply loves Angus though the words remain unspoken.

Adair chooses to go with Angus into the mountains after Davie falls ill and doesn't explain her reasons. However, once there, the two are companionable and have sex on their first night together. Angus puts it down to an energy left behind of all the lonely men who have tended the camps such as this. It seems that their marriage would have been complete and fulfilling if Angus had simply allowed it to be so.

As Angus and Rob go their separate ways, it's clear that Angus had been the steadying influence in Rob's life. After the end of their partnership, Rob tries an array of schemes aimed at making money but none of them work out and Angus fears for Rob though his anger continues to prevent him from taking any action.



Characters

Angus McCaskill

The character who provides the point of view, Angus is a young man born in Scotland who moves to America in search of better opportunities for himself. Angus is best friends with Rob Barclay, with Angus being the more reasonable of the two. Angus tends to think things through whereas Rob tends to react, often with only his emotions guiding him. Angus's marriage to Adair Barclay is an example of that reasoned, thoughtful planning, though it may seem like something of an emotional response to Anna's refusal to marry him. Angus, having been refused by Anna, realizes that he cannot be happy alone and that Adair, who'd traveled from Scotland with the idea of marrying Angus, won't want to return to her homeland. He believes their marriage to be an acceptable response to his situation. Angus is a hard working man who is willing to do whatever is needed. He loves poetry and is among the better educated people populating the immediate area, a fact that earns him a position as the teacher of one of the two small schools in the area where Angus and Rob decide to homestead. Angus is also more reserved than Rob. When Rob says that he believes they should buy more sheep for their herds, Rob declines, citing the need to build more slowly and risk less. Over the years, Rob and Angus have serious problems which Angus seems to be often trying to smooth over. When Rob dies, Angus is obviously hurt deeply, though he maintains a matter-of-fact tone that is typical of his character.

Rob Barclay

Best friend of Angus McCaskill, Rob is obviously the more flamboyant of the two and is more easily moved by his emotions. Rob comes to America with the hope of making a better life for himself, but is prone to bouts of hopelessness, especially when he can't immediately locate a relative he's searching for. It seems that Rob sometimes voices his fears, despair and anger in an effort to elicit the reasonable words from Angus, which serve to soothe Rob. Rob is easily swayed by his emotions and the situation. When he becomes interested in a young woman who is the live-in mate of his uncle, he quickly dismisses the idea of homesteading land in favor of working in a blacksmith shop simply so that he'll be nearer this woman. When his uncle offers the money to make an immediate homestead claim, Rob becomes caught up in the excitement of that and readily leaves the blacksmith. Rob has a great deal of trouble with the trials of the sheep ranching business and seems to take every failure personally. He and Angus have serious problems between them over the years and there comes a time when they are barely able to talk to each other, so great is Rob's animosity. He is angry and puts himself in a dangerous situation which ends with his drowning.



Lucas Barclay

Lucas is Rob's uncle who sends gifts of money to the Barclay family every year, prompting the idea that America is a place where anyone willing to work can make their fortune. Lucas is actually operating a small saloon after having been involved in an accident involving dynamite. He is missing both hands and has only his arms down to the forearms. He still manages to do a great many tasks for himself, though he depends on others for some things such as cutting up meat at mealtimes and buttoning his shirts.

Adair Barclay McCaskill

Rob's younger sister Adair is still in Scotland when Rob and Angus travel to America. After the death of her parents, Adair travels to America at Rob's invitation. The obvious purpose is for her to marry Angus, though he has fallen in love with someone else by the time of her arrival. When Angus's intention to marry Anna falls through, he asks Adair to marry him, believing that she will agree because she would rather marry him than to return to Scotland. She does agree, but it's because she genuinely cares for Angus, and she devotes herself to making him happy.

Nancy

The young Indian woman who lives with Lucas Barclay and is a member of the Blackfeet tribe, though Lucas says that Nancy is divided between the world of her Indian people and the whites. Nancy takes care of those tasks Lucas can't handle for himself. She seems to genuinely care for Lucas, though he reveals that she'd been part of the deal when he'd bought the saloon and house in Gros Ventre. Nancy is a young woman herself and is naturally drawn to Angus for what might have been nothing more than a mutual attraction or could have been a very brief affair.

Ninian Duff

A Scottish homesteader who owns property along Noon Creek where Rob and Angus settle, Ninian is a straight-forward man who seems to have little sense of humor and dedicates himself to work. His first encounter with Angus is somewhat tense, but once he decides that he likes Angus he is very cordial.

Anna Ramsay

A young woman who teaches school at the valley's second school. Anna and Angus are drawn to each other from the beginning. Angus pleads with her to marry him, but Anna feels the need to travel over a summer with her family, promising Angus to give him an answer in the fall. They write to each other over the summer, but when Anna returns in the fall, she breaks the news that she's agrees to marry Isaac, a horse trader who



Angus knows has been chosen in order to provide financial security for Anna and her family.

Toussaint Rennie

Described as a "half-breed," though he may have been more or less Indian than half, he spends a great deal of time at Lucas's saloon and strikes up something of a friendship with Angus. Toussaint is married to Nancy's aunt, and together they took Nancy in when a great many of their tribe had died of starvation.

Varick McCaskill

Son of Angus and Adair, Verick is an important child to Anna because he comes after several miscarriages and is the only child the couple can have. Varick comes to hate his father for his apparent love of Anna Ramsay. Varick meets and marries Lisbeth, Anna's daughter.

Davie Erskine

The young man who is trampled by his horse, Davie is brutally wounded but recovers. The event prompts Angus and Adair to ride hard for the home of Davie's parents in a jostling wagon, and Adair miscarries soon after. It's never certain that the ride caused the miscarriage but Angus seems to suspect it's so, though Adair says that there simple wasn't another option open other than the rough, hurried ride.



Objects/Places

Nethermuir

The town in Scotland where Rob and Angus live as children.

The Rascal Fair

An event in Nethermuir that brings farmers and farm workers together to decide wages and terms for the coming season and draws peddlers, musicians and members of the community.

New York

Where Angus and Rob arrive on the ship from Scotland.

Montana

Where Angus and Rob are planning to go once they arrive in America, based on their belief that Lucas Barclay lives there.

Helena, Montana

Where Lucas Barclay's Scottish relatives believe he lives while earning a living by mining.

Cariston's Mercantile

Where Angus gets a job while he and Rob are staying in Helena.

Gros Ventre

Where Lucas Barclay owns a saloon.

Medicine Lodge

Lucas Barclay's saloon.



Noon Creek School

The school where Anna Ramsay teaches.

South Fork Creek School

The school where Angus teaches.

Scotch Heaven

The name given to the area where Angus, Rob and several other Scottish families settle.



Themes

The Complications of Love

Angus claims to have fallen in love with Anna Ramsay the first time he sees her and claims to hold to that love throughout his life. It's never really clear whether Angus is holding onto the dream of what he felt his life with Anna would be, or if he fully sees her for what she is - a woman who was willing to enter an engagement without telling the man who had already proposed. A further evidence of Anna's selfish nature is seen when she makes arrangements to stop by the shearing camp where Angus is working, though she must have known that it would create problems for them both and for their families. And even when she does stop by there, she is unwilling to make any commitment to Angus regarding the possibility of a future together. By the same token, Adair seems to hold to some level of love for Angus, though she doesn't spell it out as love as Angus does. Adair tells Angus that their marriage need not stand in the way of a future with Anna, if the time ever comes when he can have Anna at his side. Angus seems to selfishly cling to this hope despite what it's bound to cost Adair. However, when Adair plans to move into town to live with Varick, Angus is crushed. He asks Adair if this means she's leaving him and she assures him that she's not, comparing the possibility of her leaving Angus to Angus forgetting about Anna - an indication of her love and her understanding.

The Importance of Dreams

Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill leave their homes and families behind in order to search for an opportunity for better lives. Soon after their arrival in Gros Ventre, Rob points out his own dreams of being a wealthy landowner by predicting that he will own all the land in one direction from the center of town and Angus will own all in the other. Rob doesn't find this dream, and the lives of the two men are filled with hard work and many disappointments, though Angus tells Adair that life anywhere will have hardships. Adair is another example of a character in search of a dream. In Adair's case, she wants a new life as the wife of Angus. She achieves this, though not exactly in the way she'd intended. Angus realizes this is her dream and counts on her desire for a husband to outweigh any trepidation she might feel for marrying him immediately after his breakup with Anna. He says that he believes she would rather marry him as he is rebounding from Anna than return to Scotland without a husband, and he's apparently correct on this point. Rob's search for the wealth that is at the heart of his dream will take him through a series of schemes, including a plan in which he, Angus and Lucas are to work as "land locators." Angus hates his role in this and drops out after assisting only a single family. In this plan, Angus is to show the land available for homesteading to families new to the area. Angus notes that they have unrealistic dreams and his own sense of fair play won't allow him to sell these people on the idea of homesteading without telling them the truth, including the hard work that's required.



Man versus Nature

Rob and Angus put their lives on the line as they work to make their homesteading enterprises pay off. Angus chooses his homestead site based largely on the presence of water, a fact that drives others to choose specific sites as well. Rob chooses based mainly on the lofty location with the plan to someday build a reservoir. In both cases, the men realize the need for water and that the Montana weather won't often provide what's necessary for the animals being raised there. The water situation is sometimes so desperate that the summer grass is barely adequate, forcing those who raise both sheep and cattle to move their animals often. The creation of a national forest creates a hardship and forces those dependent on grasslands to move elsewhere. The harsh weather includes wind and Adair feels the effects almost immediately after her arrival. The winters are harsh and Rob and Angus, during the final year of shepherding to meet the demands of Lucas's will, are faced with dying sheep because of a shortage of hay. When the two men and Varick travel to buy what is passing as scrub hay, they are caught in a blizzard that almost takes their lives. The summers are equally harsh and there's a winter during which smoke from forest fires make the daytimes look like dusk. Angus tells Adair that she could vent her frustration by screaming and she says that she would gladly do so if it would do any good. Though Adair hates the weather, she eventually comes to reconcile her existence in Montana.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the perspective of Angus McCaskill, a young Scotsman who has traveled to America in search of an opportunity to build a better life for himself. An interesting aspect of the perspective is that Angus is writing the story to Rob and Verick, though he is writing it upon Rob's death years after their arrival in America. Verick is the son of Angus and Adair. While the story is presented merely as a story, Angus often talks of "you" seeing some particular site or acting in some particular way. The "you" he's referring to in the early part of the book is Rob. This isn't generally a problem, though the story will be clearer to the reader if the reader keeps in mind that Angus is speaking from his memories and is speaking to Rob or Verick. This perspective doesn't become completely obvious until the middle of the book when Angus is obviously talking to Verick. The "you" other than Verick is not explained fully until the final pages, when Angus outlines Rob's death and the week following his death. With this knowledge, the reader can fully understand the opening during which Angus talks about his personal dread of the crossing of the Atlantic. He says, "You would remember too well," indicating that he is talking to Rob. The use of the word "you" can be somewhat disconcerting for some readers, especially if the reader doesn't keep in mind that Rob and Verick are the intended readers. It should be noted that this perspective makes the story somewhat more believable, especially with the idea that the story is written almost as if it were Angus's diary.

Setting

The story begins as Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill are leaving Scotland. The settings include the ship that takes them to America and New York, upon their arrival, though both of these scenes are presented only briefly in setting up the scene that will take up the rest of the book - the Montana Territory just as it becomes a state. Rob and Angus briefly remain in Helena, which is touted as the capital of the state. Helena is a real place and the descriptions of it seem reasonably accurate considering the period. The majority of the book is set in a rural area near Gros Ventre, Montana. While it's unclear if there's actually a town called Gros Ventre in Montana, there is an Indian tribe that was located in the area at the time of this story. It should be noted that there is a modern-day town in Montana called Gros Ventre Island, but it seems to be too far from the towns of Helena and Augusta to be the actual location of the story. The descriptions of the settings are full of details, including the scenery. As a rule, Angus presents the details in a very positive light, making it clear that he is enamored with the country. He does admit to the hardships faced by the people who choose to live in this area of Montana, but it's clear that he doesn't think land in some other area would be any easier.



Language and Meaning

The overall tone of the story is one of hope against adversity. The story is written in English and is generally straight-forward, though there are a few words and terms that could be unfamiliar to the American reader and there are some that seem might have been used in this time period, such as "achievable," which is how Angus describes the vast amount of work he and Rob accomplish. These are typically explained, often through the context. The book is written in past tense as Angus recalling events from his life. There's an instance of foreshadowing at the opening of the book when Angus says that Rob, "in those times," was light-hearted about any situation, and Rob is referred to a "you" in that sentence. An interesting deviation to the past tense occurs several times. For example, Angus says that, "I so wish," using present tense, that he and Rob had done a ritualistic salute to the country when they arrived at Two Medicine Country. This use of presented tense seems to be Angus's way of pointing out that he didn't wish this upon his first glimpse of the country, but that he wishes it at the time of the writing. This is a subtle difference but is important upon the realization that Rob's life comes to an end in this story some twenty years after the story begins and that the story is actually presented as something like a diary. An interesting point regarding the tone of the story is Adair's frequent reference to herself in the past tense. This lends an air of humor that would not likely otherwise be there.

Structure

The book is divided into chapters that are not numbered but are merely named. Several of the chapters are named for the places Angus and Rob are at the time and the final two are named for the years of the happenings. The chapters begin with quotations, most apparently from apparently fictitious sources. For example, there is a quote from the Gros Ventre newspaper, the "Gleaner," and another from Choteau Quill. These quotes give insight into what's going on in the chapters though are sometimes veiled. For example, as Angus and Rob are preparing to travel to Gros Ventre, the quotation is from Choteau Quill, apparently the name of the Choteau newspaper. That quote includes the words that "Gros Ventre is gaining a reputation as Hell with a roof on it." The author has an interesting way of presenting scenes in which a great deal of time passes. These are told as a series of brief conversations between any group of characters. For example, as Angus, Rob and Herbert are making their way slowly toward Gros Ventre through the snow, there are four of these brief conversations between Rob and Angus. In one of these, Rob imparts the news that Herbert had said "it could have been worse." Angus retorts that Herbert is "a fund of happy news." As a rule, the first is presented, and the word "later" precedes the next. In this case, the next includes the words "later again" and "still later."

Quotes

"My first night in steerage I learned that I was not born to sleep on water. The berth was both too short and too narrow for me, so that I had to kink myself radically, curl up and wedge in at the same time." Scotland and Helena, p. 9

"Vare Barclay promised me full clerkwork whenever the times found their way from bad to good again, Adam Willox promised I could come in with him as a schoolkeeper whenever pupils grew ample enough again. But promises never filled the oatmeal bowl." Scotland and Helena, p. 17

"I knew something new now. That simply being afraid was nowhere near so bad as being afraid and retching your socks up at the same time." Scotland and Helena, p. 20

"No human sign was anywhere around, except for the tiny pair of homesteads just above the mouth of the North Fork, one of them undoubtedly that of the old Bible-banger Whoojamadinger whom Lucas mentioned to me. Other than those, wherever I looked was pure planet." Gros Ventre, p. 74

"A little of that an in your mind you soon not only have no sheep left, you possess even fewer than that - cavities of potential loss of however many sheep you could ever possibly buy to replace the ones that right now are out there searching for ways to die." Scotch Heaven, p. 107

"As if we two men were jars of jam on the table and she was saying, this is strawberry, this is plum. I'll have plum from now on." Scotch Heaven, p. 192

"I mean this better that it will sound. Adair was the biggest change my life had known since sheep came into it." The 'Steaders, p. 201

"The 'steaders. Settlers who were coming too late or too poor to obtain watered land and so were taking up arid acres and trusting rainfall instead." The 'Steaders, p. 259

"Delivering this man and his wan family to their 160 acres of delusion couldn't come too soon for me." The 'Steaders, p. 266

"'The three of us couldn't pet a cat together,' from Rob now, thoroughly incredulous, 'and Lucas full well knew that! So how in the hell are we supposed to run fifteen hundred head of sheep?'" Two Medicine, p. 306

"The newspaper shook in my hands as I opened it to the third page, as I dropped my eyes to the end of the remainder of the list and forced them, the tears already welling, back up to the Rs. Reese, Anna, wife of Isaac, mother of Lisbeth and Peter. Age 44." Two Medicine, p. 344

"Rob. My friend who was my enemy. Equally ardent at both, weren't you, bless you, damn you." 1919, p. 400



Topics for Discussion

How do Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay come to know each other? How do they make the decision to go to America? What are their plans once they arrive?

Compare the characters of Anna and Adair. How are the two similar? How are they different? Why are these similarities and differences important?

How do Angus and Lucas find Lucas? What is the shock Angus and Rob receive when they first find Lucas? What are Rob's first words to Lucas and what is the significance? What is the role Lucas plays in the lives of the two?

What does Lucas predict about Angus and Lucas and their future wives? How does this prove true?

Why does Adair come to America? What is the outcome of her decision to come to America?

Who is Ninian Duff? Davie Erskine? Judith Findlater? Isaac Reese? Lisbeth Reese? Donald Erskine? Nancy? How do each of these characters interact with Angus and Rob?

How does Angus meet Anna Ramsay? What is the outcome of their relationship? What might have happened if Anna had not died?