

Dark Places Study Guide

Dark Places by Gillian Flynn

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Plot Summary

Dark Places, by Gillian Flynn, begins with the main character, Libby Day, talking about her life. Several members in Libby's family were murdered when she was only 7 years old. To make matters worse, the killer was her older brother, Ben. Libby has been living off inheritance money and all the funds that were raised to help take care of her after the murders. Now Libby is running out of money and doesn't have any serviceable skills. She's approached by someone named Lyle, who runs what he calls a Kill Club.

The Kill Club is a group that's obsessed with studying crimes and criminals. They're fascinated with Libby because many of the members believe that Ben is innocent. Lyle is willing to pay Libby to speak with them, and she agrees because she needs the money. The club members bring up a lot of details the cops either missed or ignored, pointing out that her testimony was forced given that she didn't actually see any of the murders. It didn't help that during the 80's everyone was afraid of satanic cults. Supposedly, Ben committed the murders because he was part of such a cult.

At first, Libby doesn't believe them; but, she needs to keep seeing the group because they're paying her. After a few more visits, she finally gets the courage to see her brother in prison, something she had never done. After speaking with him, she starts to accept that he wasn't the killer, but she knows he's holding something back.

The story switches between Libby's investigation in the present and what happened on the night in 1985 leading up to the murders. This section explores the dysfunctional family relationships that Libby had. Her family was incredibly poor, and they practically grew up without Runner, their father. Runner only showed up whenever he needed money. When he did show up, he was cruel to the family. Ben was struggling at school and felt like he didn't belong in the world. He was upset and angry. His only real friend was his girlfriend, Diondra. Even Diondra treated him like a second class citizen, as did her friend, Trey, who was frequently around them.

A younger student, Krissi, has a crush on Ben when he volunteers at her class. She spreads rumors that she and Ben had gotten physical, which leads to more girls coming forward with their own stories. These lies continue to escalate, and Ben is suspected of being a child molester. These rumors evolve further, leading to Ben being part of a Satan worshipping cult. To make matters worse, this all happens while Ben is dealing with an unexpected pregnancy from Diondra. On top of that, his mother, Patty is about to lose the farm.

In the present, Libby is slowly able to piece together what happened. She finds out about Diondra and manages to track her down. She meets not only Diondra, but her and Ben's child, Crystal. Crystal lets it slip that Diondra murdered one of Libby's sisters because she knew about the pregnancy. They try to murder Libby, but she's once again able to escape. With the help of Lyle, she's able to uncover additional evidence about the crime.



She learns that Ben and Diondra were going to run away together to raise their child. They stopped at home to take whatever money they could get. At the same time, Patty had made a deal to arrange her own death. She knew she couldn't care for her family, but if they had the insurance money from her passing they might have a chance. The murderer showed up at the same time as Ben and Diondra. Libby's other sister got caught in the crossfire, along with Patty. Ben got blamed for everything because of his reputation in town. He stayed silent because he wanted to protect Diondra.

With everything they've learned, Libby and Lyle are able to present the new evidence to the police, and Ben is finally freed from prison. Ben doesn't know what he wants to do with his life because he had been behind bars so long. He felt like the world was still against him. He's determined to make things work with Libby's help. Libby herself is finally able to move on from what happened that horrible night. By the end of the book she, too, is hopeful for the future.



Chapter 1

Summary

As Chapter 1 opens, the main character, Libby Day, recounts how she had a difficult childhood because her brother slaughtered the rest of her family in an incident the press called the Prairie Massacre. Libby was only a young child when the crime occurred. Even before the murders, she had a difficult childhood because her family had money trouble and she felt like they didn't care about her. As an adult, she suffers from severe depression and has trouble just getting out of bed.

However, Libby must get out of bed so she can see her accountant, Jim Jeffreys. She sees Jim about once a year to check on how her money is doing. She inherited a small fortune from sympathizers who read about what happened when she was a child. Jim tells Libby that she's almost out of money and she needs to get a job. Libby has no idea what she wants to do with her future. Jim tells her they'll meet again next week to try and figure things out. He also gives her a few letters from some of her "fans."

One of the letters is from Lyle Wirth. Lyle reaches out to Libby, promising her money if she meets with his group. She calls him to learn more, and they arrange for an in person meeting. Lyle reveals he's part of what he calls a "kill group," which is a group that studies murders. Libby's case is so popular because many people believe her brother is innocent. She hasn't spoken to him in the 25 years he's been in prison because she's convinced he is guilty. Despite that, she agrees to show up because she knows that she needs the money and there's no way she can hold down a normal job with her depression.

Analysis

Many of Libby's characteristics are explored in the first chapter. Libby's depression is brought up right away, and the reasons for her mental state are easily understood when the details about the Prairie Massacre are told. Libby's difficult past before the murders is hinted at, with more details being given throughout the book. By the end of the story, it is evident why people acted as they did toward Libby after the young girl's tragic loss of her family.

Several themes are introduced in Chapter 1 as well. Libby's victim coddling is mentioned right away. She essentially never had to become an adult because she was always being taken care of. She lived off of the money she got for being a victim, but now that it's running out she doesn't know what to do. This also emphasizes that it can be dangerous to rely too much on other people, another theme that gets explored throughout the book.

Lyle is mentioned at the end of the chapter. He ends up being a major supportive character and is ultimately responsible for introducing Libby to the idea that Ben might



not be guilty, which sets her on the journey of finding out the truth about what happened in 1985.

Discussion Question 1

Why has Libby been suffering from depression for so many years?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the themes that emerge in Chapter 1.

Discussion Question 3

What is the Kill Club? Why is it interested in Libby?

Vocabulary

voluptuous, bungalow, subprime, jarring, poignant, crimped, bravura



Chapter 2

Summary

Chapter 2 takes place in the past on January 2nd, 1985, the day before Ben had murdered Libby's family. Libby's mother, Patty, was worried about how Ben was acting. He had become distant and was talking to people on a second phone line. Patty had no idea who was on the other end of the phone conversations. She thought that Ben was going through a rebellious teenage phase, made all the worse by his being the only male in the home since her husband was gone. The only person Ben got along with was Libby. Patty manages to get Ben to sit down and have breakfast with the family. Ben shocked them all when he took off his hat and revealed that his bright red hair had been dyed black. When the family became upset, he got up from the table and left.

Analysis

Ben's depression is explored in Chapter 2. His state of mind serves as a motivating factor for the way he acts throughout the book. More of the Days' family life is explored, focusing on the poverty and the failing state of the farm. On top of that, it's established that Ben is the only male on the farm and that he never had a strong male role model in his life. Ben's rebellious behavior is easy to see when he dyes his hair black. His actions hurt his mother and distance him from the rest of the family. At this point in the story, Ben is believed to be the family's killer. His rebellious actions support that belief.

The relationship between Ben and Libby is also examined, with Libby apparently being the only one that Ben liked and the only family member who was not murdered. This is important to the story because it offers more evidence that Ben was the killer.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the reasons given for Ben's depression?

Discussion Question 2

Given that Libby was his favorite, what is indicated by her being the sole survivor of the attack?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Ben as a character in the story.

Vocabulary

stoic, recrimination, admonish, crick, shell shock, embryonic, platonic, wry, grimace



Chapter 3

Summary

In Chapter 3, Libby goes to the Kill Club. She nearly leaves several times when she sees the strange crowd, but she doesn't want to give them the satisfaction of being afraid. She almost gets in a fight with one of the members who is there to role-play, but Lyle calms things down and brings her to meet the small group there for her. Most of the group is confrontational, especially someone named Magda. They believe that Ben is innocent and she only accused him of the murder because she was young and the cops pressured her into it. Many of them believe her father, Runner, was responsible for the murders. Libby has a hard time defending her decisions and angrily leaves.

At home, she remembers details of the murder. She hadn't actually seen anything that night, but she had heard Ben's voice while the murders were taking place. She was able to run outside where she ended up losing three toys and one of her fingers to frost bite. When she returned home, the house was filled with satanic imagery, which just made the murders all the more famous. Libby decides that she needs the money and she'll keep working alongside the group, bringing them old items owned by the family and trying to get in touch with contacts that might know more about the murders, including her father.

Analysis

Magda is introduced for the first time in this chapter. While she isn't a major character, she still offers some insight into the murders and helps set Libby on the path to proving Ben is innocent. Magda also presents the idea that Runner was the one who killed the Day family. She also brings up the initial idea that Libby's testimony might not have been her own, since she was coerced by the police. This touches upon the theme of not everything being what it seems.

The satanic imagery is something that's brought up, and will continue to be brought up as Libby explores more about the past. Even though Libby adamantly insists that Ben is the killer, she's starting to have her doubts, which is part of why she keeps returning to the Kill Club. More of her depression is explored, as well as her reliance on other people, which is why she keeps going to the Kill Club for money.

The theme of Relying on Others is demonstrated here, as the reader sees that Libby is already relying on these new people. It is part of her personality to grab onto anything that seems stable in order to use them as an anchoring point for her constantly swirling life.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Relying on Others in this chapter.

Discussion Question 2

Why would satanic imagery be used at a murder scene?

Discussion Question 3

What's the author's purpose in having the Kill Club contact Libby?

Vocabulary

grandiose, balmy, vaudevillian, ambiance, tarnished, jostling, palatable, bazaar, contrite, jargon



Chapter 4

Summary

Chapter 4 takes place in 1985. Ben was riding his bike over treacherous ice, trying to get hurt. He was upset that he had never broken a bone before or gotten a serious injury. He wanted to get hurt because he was teased by other kids who said that his mother protected him too much. He felt even worse because he thought that he wasn't a true man. His father was never around to teach him the things that the other boys knew. Furthermore, he was upset with his family because they had no money, and he thought it was irresponsible of his mother to keep having children if she couldn't even take care of him.

Ben had a girlfriend, Diondra. He dreamed about running away with her and starting a life in the next town. His fantasy was ruined when he told himself that he'd never be able to escape because he was too dumb and didn't have any real skills. The chapter ends with him having violent thoughts.

Analysis

Ben's depression is once again explored in this chapter. He feels like he needs to prove himself to everyone, and he wants others to think of him as a man. This links back to what Patty was thinking earlier, where she worried that Ben was surrounded by too much femininity and it made him uncomfortable. Ben wants to hurt himself because he thinks it will leave scars and make him appear manlier to his fellow students.

Diondra is introduced for the first time, and she becomes a major character. At this point the relationship still seems innocent, though Ben believes that he she deserves someone better than him. Ben is once again presented as being the possible murderer because of his violent thoughts.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ben want to hurt himself?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Ben's family life.

Discussion Question 3

What was Ben's mother's main concern about him?

Vocabulary

sentimental, wholeheartedly, commiserate, pristine, agenda, listless, sublime, mysterious, conscientious



Chapter 5

Summary

In Chapter 5, the story reverts to the present. Libby reveals that she's a kleptomaniac, frequently passing stolen items off as belonging to her family. Libby wants to call Lyle to work something out to get more money, but she's still upset they're defending Ben. She wants to do a better job presenting her reasons for believing his guilt. She decides to see Barb Eichel, a writer who published a book about the murders shortly after they happened. She arranges a meeting, but Barb is also defending Ben. She points out that the crime scene was contaminated, that Runner had a poor alibi, and everyone was panicked because of the apparent Satanism.

She believes that Libby was coached by her therapist because the police just wanted to close the case and Ben seemed to fit the part of a Satanist. Libby finds herself actually believing what Barb says, and questions if there's anything they can do to help Ben. Barb says she believes too much time has passed. Libby quickly leaves afterwards, losing any desire she had to talk with Barb.

Analysis

Libby's kleptomania is discussed briefly in Chapter 5. This is a trait shared by most of the Day family. Later in the story, it becomes a major point in the plot. Libby tries to do more research to prove that Ben is guilty, but all she finds is more evidence pointing to him being innocent. The police wanted to quickly close the case because they were convinced that Ben was part of a satanic cult. They wanted to make everyone feel safe, and nobody in the town really cared about Ben anyway. The idea of Runner being the killer is introduced once again through his flimsy alibi. Libby eventually investigates this. Although Runner is innocent, he provides vital clues, which helps Libby find the real killer.

Discussion Question 1

How does kleptomania figure into this chapter? How does the author use it as a positive attribute?

Discussion Question 2

What circumstances must have led to most of Libby's siblings becoming kleptomaniacs?



Discussion Question 3

What might have made the police want to close the case quickly back in 1985?

Vocabulary

solemnly, ignoramus, patchouli, kneading, perjury, recanted



Chapter 6

Summary

Chapter 6 flashes back to 1985. Patty cleaned up the mess Ben left from dyeing his hair. She felt bad for Ben because she knew how difficult it must be for him to grow up in a house with all women. She thought back to the time where Runner, her father, had briefly stopped by. He charmed the children, but he didn't stick around for long, and he stole from Patty when he left. Patty blamed Runner for all the trouble on the farm, since he never knew what he was doing. When things got especially tough he just gave up and she was never able to recover. A debt collector, Len, showed up and told Patty that she was going to lose the farm unless she came up with more money.

Analysis

The theme of Appearances is demonstrated in Chapter 6. The chapter is a flashback from 1985. Patty thinks that, from all appearances, the children loved Runner and that Ben was especially taken with him because it meant he had a man in the house. Ben later talks about how much he hated Runner and how Runner seemed to hate him just as much. He craved Runner's approval; but, Runner thought Ben was weak and might not even be his son. However, Patty was completely faithful to Runner.

The theme of Responsibility is demonstrated with the introduction of Runner. Runner was responsible for the farm failing, but he kept blaming everyone else. Instead of sticking around to try and fix the farm, he ran off and left Patty alone to deal with the farm and four children. The theme of Running Away from Problems is also touched upon with the same character. This is a trait that the other children exhibit, especially Libby.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Responsibility as it pertains to Runner.

Discussion Question 2

Why was Ben upset with his mother?

Discussion Question 3

Why didn't Ben and his father like each other?

Vocabulary

lathered, lancet, brio, chastened, platonic, decrepit



Chapter 7

Summary

Chapter 7 returns to the present as Libby starts to go through some of the items she's boxed away. She has a hard time sorting through the items and ends up getting in touch with Lyle. She meets up with Lyle at a nearby bar, and they discuss the case. Neither believes that Runner was the killer. Libby believes that Runner was too dumb to pull off a murder without getting caught, and Lyle agrees. Libby finds herself again thinking that Ben could be innocent. She is even hopeful she might be able to prove it with Lyle's help. She asks for money, and Lyle immediately hands it over, revealing that he's in charge of funds from the Kill Club. Libby feels like she's starting to like Lyle, but she does not want to have those feelings.

Analysis

Libby dismisses the idea of Runner being the killer because she doesn't believe Runner is smart enough to pull off a murder. Lyle agrees with her, but he isn't comfortable sharing his own theory because he isn't sure where Libby stands. This implies that he knows Libby is only interested in the money, but he's optimistic that he might be able to convince her. This ultimately ends up being the case. Once the two of them start working together they're able to find out the truth about what happened.

Libby starts to develop feelings for Lyle, although they are platonic, not romantic, at this point. This is still a very big deal since Libby has made it clear that she has no friends. It seems that she has never really had a friend in her life. By the end of the book, this relationship grows and Libby and Lyle do become friends.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Libby rule out Runner as the killer?

Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Libby have any friends?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Lyle give Libby more money?

Vocabulary

wanton, hassled, sporadically, pertinent, embezzling



Chapter 8

Summary

Chapter 8 is a flashback from 1985. Ben was working at the school as a janitor, trying to make money because he was frustrated with how little the family had. He once again blamed his mother for having so many children when she wasn't even able to take care of him. Ben thought back to when he first met Diondra. She had hit him with her car, but Ben apologized even though she was driving drunk. She enjoyed the attention that Ben gave her, and they started to date.

Ben was grateful since it helped spare him judgment from other students. Ben had a much younger girl he also saw at the school, named, Krissi. He enjoyed spending time with Krissi because she wrote him a poem once, and she was more of a perfect fit for his idea of femininity than his actual girlfriend or any of his sisters.

Analysis

Krissi is brought up for the first time. Although they never have an official relationship, the end of the chapter makes it seem like Ben was unfaithful to Diondra. But, that was not the case. Krissi spreads lies about Ben, which is part of what destroys his relationship and helps the police write him off as being the killer. Ben's focus on femininity is explored once again when he notes the differences between Krissi and his family, as well as Diondra.

The abusive nature of Ben and Diondra's relationship is explored for the first time. This is explored much more throughout the book, and it helps to explain why Ben acts the way he does even after he knows the truth.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Ben glad that Dioandra agrees to go out with him?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ben continue his relationship with Krissi?

Discussion Question 3

What indicates that his family is very poor?

Vocabulary

reviled, instilled, willful, malicious, negatively, giddy



Chapter 9

Summary

Chapter 9 takes place in the present. Libby has Lyle set up the arrangement to see Ben in prison because she can't be bothered to deal with all the different people she'd have to get in touch with. He sets up the appointment, and a week later Libby goes to meet Ben. At first, she's angry with him, but they both soften up. Ben is surprised at how much Libby looks like their mother. Ben talks about memories from their past, which Libby can't remember at all.

Libby asks why he didn't have an alibi or why he wasn't doing more now to get out. He says that he was just a dumb kid back then and he hadn't wanted to show weakness in the courtroom. He had believed he was going to be acquitted and didn't realize the seriousness of it all. Libby believes him and says she wants to see him get out. Ben tells her that Runner says the same thing whenever they talk, which is about once every two years.

Ben assures her that he's actually doing more in prison than he would have done with his life. He has his high school diploma and he's working on getting his college degree. He was even in a relationship at one point with a prison pen pal. Their conversation is cut short by the guards, and the chapter ends with them having just a few minutes left.

Analysis

Libby and Ben get the chance to finally speak after more than 20 years of silence. This is what finally makes Libby think that Ben is innocent. Ben starts to make excuses to try and explain his strange behavior during the trial. Libby knows that something is up, but she isn't able to learn much from Ben. Ben mentions Runner again, hinting that he might possibly be the killer and he could even be covering for him.

Ben's depression is explored when he explains that going to prison was the best thing that could have happened. He feels like there's nothing he could have ever done with his life, and much later on he even admits that his being silent was the best thing he did because it saved his family. He also feels like he belongs in prison because of all the violent thoughts that he had when he was younger.

Talking with Libby is ultimately what makes Ben want to get out of prison at the end of the book. Even then, he isn't too hopeful about his future because he's written himself off as being useless; but, Libby represents a possible bright spot in his future.

Discussion Question 1

Why didn't Ben have an alibi in the courtroom so many years ago?



Discussion Question 2

What does he tell Libby about his time in jail?

Discussion Question 3

What does Libby tell him that she's going to try and do?

Vocabulary

nostalgia, moratorium, acquitted, recommendations, wearily, bleary



Chapter 10

Summary

Chapter 10 is a flashback from 1985. Patty's sister, Diane, showed up to talk to her. Patty was embarrassed because of what happened with Ben and his hair. Diane didn't seem to care. She told Patty that she had heard rumors about Ben being involved with younger students at school. Patty was shocked, and she told Diane that Ben didn't show any interest in girls. Diane seemed satisfied with that, but she thought they needed to get Ben back to talk to him. Patty didn't know whom to call to find Ben, since she had no idea who any of his friends were anymore.

Analysis

Diane has been briefly mentioned before, but she shows up for the first time in this chapter. Diane's main purpose is to spread information to the rest of the characters. In this instance, she's here to tell Patty about the allegations against Ben. This sets everything in motion. When Patty starts to investigate the Krissi situation, she learns about the cult rumors. The theme of Appearances is briefly touched upon with Patty being surprised about Ben's lack of interest in girls. The reader is well aware that Ben has been dating Diondra and has even shown some interest in Krissi.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Appearances.

Discussion Question 2

What indicates that Ben's mother is out of touch with him?

Discussion Question 3

What actions by Diane foreshadow later events?

Vocabulary

stoically, nonchalance, fatigue, allegations, mere, slapdash, haphazardly



Chapter 11

Summary

In Chapter 11, Libby tries to get in touch with her father, but he's not at the shelter Ben told her about. She leaves a message, but the attendant tells her Runner has a habit of coming and going and has no idea when he will be back. Libby meets with Lyle and tells him about how the meeting went. She confesses that she believes Ben is innocent. Lyle tells her his theory, that Lou Cates killed the family because Krissi had just accused Ben of molesting her.

Libby has no idea about Krissi or molestation charges. The charges were never substantiated, probably because of the murder. However, word had apparently leaked out about the allegations. The rumors hurt Ben's case. Lou had previously gone to prison for manslaughter, which Lyle uses as further evidence. Libby gets in touch with Krissi's mother. She's long since broken things off with Lou and has little to do with that part of the family anymore, but she gives Libby some places where she might be able to find them.

Libby also tries to get in touch with Diane. Things were always tense between the two because Libby was difficult as a child. Libby acted out and easily got jealous. She accidentally killed Diane's dog, and that was the last time she was allowed in Diane's home.

Analysis

Libby reaches out to Runner, setting up their eventual meeting in the future. Libby finally gets to hear Lyle's theory about Lou Cates. With all of the information the reader has received so far about Krissi in the past chapters, it paints Lou as being a likely candidate. This ultimately ends up being a red herring as Libby later learns more about the case and what happened that evening. Libby hearing about Lou sets her on the road to reaching out to meet Krissi.

Libby reaches out to Diane, although she isn't able to get through to her. Her insistence shows the strength of their relationship, even though Libby admits she was a handful as a child. Libby talking about her past shows how damaged she became after the murders. The way she talks about Diane shows that Libby still cares about family, even if she doesn't have too many left. This helps to explain why she's so invested in seeing Ben freed. It also stresses her violent side, something that the two surviving Day family members have been shown to have.

The theme of Reliance on Others is touched upon briefly in this chapter as the reader sees Libby reaching out to those from her childhood, in particular Diane. She relied on her as a child, and even though she remembers being a difficult child, she is hopeful that Diane will once again allow her to lean on her for help. Also, Ben is fully reliant on



others to get him the justice that after so many years he deserves. The fact that Ben didn't speak up for himself and allowed others to suggest or speak for him when he initially went to trial demonstrates another theme, which is that of Others Speaking for You. In this case, those that spoke for Ben didn't speak out to help him, but rather to condemn him and he didn't say anything in his own defense.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Ben not speak up for himself when he initially went to trial?

Discussion Question 2

Why would Krissi spread rumors about Ben molesting his sisters?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the themes of Others Speaking for You and Reliance on Others in this chapter.

Vocabulary

corral, gait, penance, finesse, ogle, molestation, fabrication, fanciful, traipsed, fatalistic, malady



Chapter 12

Summary

Chapter 12 flashes back to 1985. Ben left a note for Krissi in her classroom. A teacher caught him and Ben lied, saying he was leaving something for his sister. The teacher noticed, however, that it was in Krissi's box so Ben quickly left. With nowhere else to go, he visited an old warehouse where the high school dropouts would go to drink and get high. He's never been to this place without Diondra, but he was hopeful he'd be accepted. When he got there, they asked about his injuries from earlier in the morning. He lied and said he got into a fight with Trey, one of Diondra's friends, a self-proclaimed Satanist. Everyone was impressed, so Ben kept lying and pretended to be a Satanist, too. Trey arrived, and to Ben's surprise he backed up Ben's claim. The two left, and Trey told Ben he might get the chance to prove his words and finally become a man.

Analysis

Ben's leaving a note for Krissi is what later gives the police evidence that he was interested in young children. Ben's feelings for Krissi show what exactly he's looking for in a relationship. He wants someone that enjoys being with him and actually tries to spend time with him. Both of those aren't things that he feels with Diondra, but he loyally stays with her anyway because he thinks it's the right thing to do.

Ben obsesses over his image again when he's at the warehouse, trying to present himself as a tough guy. He makes up the lie about being a Satanist, which is more evidence that ends up being used against him. Trey goes along with his lies, which is part of what ropes Ben into later joining him and Diondra when they go to perform their satanic ritual.

The theme of Appearances is explored in this chapter as the reader sees Ben trying to be someone that he is not. He claimed, at the time, that he had gotten into a fight with another tough guy and that he'd been involved in some satanic rituals. The kids were definitely impressed. The unfortunate thing about that was that when Trey arrived and backed up Ben, it set the stage for the accusations of his satanic involvement to be corroborated, even though no one actually 'saw' him perform the rituals.

Discussion Question 1

How does Ben's lie about his fight come back to haunt him?

Discussion Question 2

What was the series of compounding events that conspired to make Ben look guilty?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the theme of Appearances is prevalent in this chapter.

Vocabulary

emasculated, disdain, patter, irrigation, vacated, misdirection, justification, misalignment



Chapter 13

Summary

Chapter 13 takes place in the present. Libby and Lyle drive out to meet Krissi. They find her working at a strip club. She agrees to talk to them, having no idea who Libby is. Lyle starts to grill her, but Libby tries to take over and control the conversation, sensing that Lyle is making Krissi uncomfortable.

Krissi explains that Ben tricked her as a child and frequently molested her in the janitor's closet where he had an altar dedicated to Satan. Libby thinks back to how everyone suddenly had a story about Ben being a Satanist after he was convicted. Krissi says the day she told her father about it he had gone driving around the town looking for Ben. She laments that the family might have been spared if her father had found Ben.

She's no longer in touch with her father. When Lyle presses for more information she gets uncomfortable and leaves. Libby is upset because Kristi was obviously lying about what happened with Ben. The question in her mind is what possible reason Kristi would have to lie about it all this many years removed from the event. Whatever it is that is keeping her frightened, it must be significant, Libby thinks.

Analysis

Libby relates to Krissi once the two of them get to talking. Libby recognizes that they're both damaged people and share similar traits. She even comments that if she hadn't been lucky enough to receive all of the sympathy money she'd probably be doing the exact same thing as Krissi because she wouldn't know what else to do with her life.

Krissi makes Ben out to seem like a monster that frequently molested her as part of his satanic rituals. The reader of course knows this isn't true based on what they've seen from the past. Libby spitefully leaves her name and address when she leaves, something that actually causes her to have another meeting with Krissi in the future. The theme of Appearances shows up in this chapter as well, with Krissi obviously lying to Libby about her interaction with Ben when they were in school.

Discussion Question 1

How did Libby get Krissi to open up to her about her involvement with Ben?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Lyle make Krissi feel uncomfortable?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the themes that are demonstrated in this chapter.

Vocabulary

rapport, pragmatism, vulpine, somberly, placate, belligerent



Chapter 14

Summary

Chapter 14 takes place in 1985. Patty and Diane had gone driving around, looking for Ben. Patty was paranoid that the other drivers were judging her, blaming her for what Ben had done to the younger kids. Diane insisted that she was overreacting, and told Patty that she was an amazing mother. Patty wasn't able to agree with her because her depression was so bad at that time that she could barely get out of bed, much less accept praise about her parenting skills. They went to visit some old friends of Ben's, who informed them that they haven't really spoken with Ben in a year. They told Patty and Diane that Ben had been hanging out with the devil worshipping crowd, which angered Patty.

Analysis

Patty's depression is highlighted in this chapter. Patty and Libby show many similarities with their depression, where they struggle to get out of bed and just want to give up on everything. Unlike Patty, Libby doesn't have a family or anyone else to take care of, so she typically remains unmotivated. Patty at least keeps trying to make an effort, forcing herself to do what she can for the farm and the family, even though all she wants to do is to give up. Patty doesn't learn a lot about Ben, but she gets the first hint about the rumors regarding Ben being part of a satanic cult.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Patty willing to believe that her son is involved in satanic practices?

Discussion Question 2

Why has Patty not kept track of her children like she did in the past?

Discussion Question 3

Both Patty and Libby are coping with chronic depression. Describe their methods of coping with the depression.

Vocabulary

sufficient, adjacent, frequency, diligent, fortuitous, placid, vacuous, limpid



Chapter 15

Summary

As they leave the strip club, Libby tells Lyle that he was being too aggressive with Kristi. Lyle ends up apologizing, but he points out that he's financing this trip and he can do what he wants. Libby thinks that she and Krissi have a lot in common because of their similar dismal childhoods.

Back home, Libby starts going through some of her stuff that she's hoping to sell. She goes through a bunch of diaries that her snoopy sister, Michelle, kept. She's reminded of how close she used to be with her family, which surprises her. While going through the diaries, she finds a note from Diondra to Ben, talking about how she wants to sleep with him.

Libby is stunned because she didn't think Ben even had a girlfriend. She goes through the yearbooks, trying to find who Diondra was. She finds a picture from that year, 1985, but nothing from the previous year or any year following Ben's arrest.

Analysis

Libby compares herself to Krissi, again noting how similar they are to one another because in her mind they're both damaged goods. Krissi lost her family too, just in a different way. She has no idea what happened to her father, and her mother wants nothing to do with her.

Libby starts going through her old family items and discovers some of Michelle's diaries. Michelle's curious and nosy nature is highlighted for the first time, something which comes into play later. Libby discovers Diondra through the note that she wrote to Ben. This gives Libby her newest lead to follow, one that ultimately leads her to discovering the truth about the murders.

The theme of Secrets is demonstrated in this chapter. The discovery of Michelle's diaries clarifies that nearly every member in the family had something they were hiding from other people. However, they didn't hide them from Michelle because she wrote the secrets in her diary. Secrets can be damaging when they become rumors, like those spread about Ben. Kept secrets can also ruin another person's life by being kept hidden.

Discussion Question 1

How does Libby identify with Krissi?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Secrets in this chapter.

Discussion Question 3

What does the discovery of Ben's girlfriend, Diondra, indicate to Libby about how well she knew her brother?

Vocabulary

vocation, acerbic, witless, factual, grimace, beneficiary, suffice



Chapter 16

Summary

Chapter 16 flashes back to 1985. Trey and Ben drove over to see Diondra, who had spent the day shopping. She bought clothing for both Ben and Trey too. Ben was annoyed and jealous because he didn't see why she would buy Trey something. She and Trey teased Ben about his poverty, which angered Ben. He felt like Diondra was always making him mad because she liked him all riled up.

Diondra and Ben ended up sleeping together. Afterwards, she asked Ben about what was going on with Krissi, explaining she had heard rumors and apparently the cops wanted to talk to him. Ben was offended, but he hardly had time to react since Diondra then revealed they shouldn't fight because she could feel the baby kicking.

Analysis

Both Diondra and Trey show some of their cruel nature when they make fun of Ben. Ben's thoughts make it clear to the reader that this isn't just innocent teasing, despite Ben trying to treat it as such. Diondra and Trey clearly have no respect for Ben. The biggest thing that happens in the chapter comes at the end when Diondra reveals to Ben that she's pregnant with his child. This is a major part of the plot for the book and serves as Ben's main source of motivation for the series of events that unfold.

Discussion Question 1

What indicates that Diondra doesn't truly care for Ben?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Diondra's character.

Discussion Question 3

What might be Diondra's motivation for telling Ben that she's pregnant?

Vocabulary

clammy, hackles, haunches, cackle, languidly, excruciating, mellow



Chapter 17

Summary

Libby and Lyle decide to go to Magda's so they can hear more about Runner, and so Libby can sell some of her items at the local pawn shop. Lyle warns her that everyone there will be huge fans of Ben's. When she gets there, everyone has good things to say about Ben. Many of the women exchanged letters with him in prison.

The people they speak with believe that Runner was the killer because Libby's mother had pressed the courts to do something about his lack of child support. Also back then, Runner didn't know that he was out of the will and couldn't use the money to pay off his debts. Peggy Bannion, Runner's girlfriend at the time, comes to the meeting with Libby and Lyle. She explains that Runner lied about being home that evening. She says that at the time she went along with it and backed up his alibi because she didn't know any better at the time. She tells them that now she is willing to recant her testimony. Libby wants to leave, but before she does Lyle assures her that Magda will finance the trip for them to try and get in touch with Runner to learn more.

Analysis

Magda and many other women tell Libby about how great a person Ben is. This touches on the theme of Not Everything Being What it Seems. Ben's prison fan club and pen pals don't see Ben for who he truly is, but they instead just project what they want him to be. That's why so many of them talk about how he's such a kind and caring soul, even though Ben later admits that he has a very dark and violent side to himself.

The reader is once again given a hint that Runner might be the killer. Peggy tells everyone that she's recanting her testimony because she realizes how wrong she was to stick up for Runner. That night, he had been out much later than he told the police, and Peggy never had any idea where he actually was.

Runner's name is actually supportive of another theme in the book and that is the notion of Running. In particular it is a family trait to run from problems rather than face them head on. This was definitely true of Runner (who wears the name), but is also true of Ben, who just wanted things to be over with and ran away from the public scrutiny. Even stuck in prison he just wanted things to die down and go away. Libby was no better, taking the support money that was given to her after the murders and using it all up on wild parties and lavish lifestyles.

Discussion Question 1

What makes it look as if Runner is the killer?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Running and how each character in the family seems to run from something.

Discussion Question 3

Why was Peggy willing to lie for Runner back in 1985?

Vocabulary

denizens, magnanimous, tousled, altruism, recant, mortified, flaunt



Chapter 18

Summary

Chapter 18 is a flashback from 1985. Patty and Diane returned home to see if Ben had called or come back. He hadn't, but the rest of Patty's children were chaotic. Patty and Diane worked together to restore order to the house. Diane called some of her friends to find out more about the accusations flying around about Ben.

She learned that several other parents had come forward and they were all gathering at Krissi's home. Patty, Diane, and a younger Libby drove over to confront the parents. Patty was initially invited in, but then Krissi panicked when they arrived. Patty plead with the parents, saying that it had to be some kind of mistake. They made her leave. She still didn't know where Ben was, and she's warned that the police would be looking for him.

Analysis

Patty's stress with her family is shown during her brief return home. She wants to take care of her children, but she's simply too exhausted, especially since her prime focus is finding Ben. Despite how depressed she is, she does love her family and wants to help them. Patty goes to investigate Krissi. Krissi panics when Patty arrives, which at first makes it seem like Ben might be guilty. The reader knows that Ben didn't do anything, but to Patty and the others Krissi's reaction indicates Ben's guilt. The reader later learns that Krissi made up the whole thing because she was being pressured by the police.

The theme of Secrets surfaces subtly in this chapter as the reader learns that Krissi knew that what she was telling the police was wrong. As a young child she couldn't possibly understand the far reaching ramifications of her lies, but as an adult, she certainly understands. Yet, she is willing to hold on to her secret for some reason.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Patty's character.

Discussion Question 2

What indicates that Ben most likely didn't have a fair trial?



Discussion Question 3

How has Krissi's secret and compliance in sending Ben to jail impacted her life since 1985?

Vocabulary

choreographed, inanely, jive, ingratiating, hysterics, blubbering



Chapter 19

Summary

Chapter 19 is in the present. Libby has a strange nightmare about Runner returning to her life and trying to replace her injured finger. During the dream, a memory surfaces about the night of the murders. She recalls that during the night of the murder, Ben left the light on in his room.

The next day she goes to the prison so she can talk to Ben. She asks about the light and Ben says he snuck out that night because he got in a fight with their mom. She was upset because she couldn't find him when all the chaos was going on with Krissi. Ben says that she told him that she believed he didn't do anything to Krissi. Libby presses Ben for more details, especially about Diondra. At the mention of Diondra's name Ben gets upset and says he just wanted to have someone to talk to that understood him, but he feels like Libby is only interested in asking about the case. He refuses to speak to her any further.

Analysis

Libby's dream gives her more insight into what happened the night of the murder. She remembers seeing that there was a light on in Ben's room, indicating that Ben was home. Libby later discovers that Ben was indeed in the room, but not alone. When she asks Ben about it, while Ben is in the prison, he lies. Ben acts offended when Libby starts to ask for more details about the case. To the reader this could be seen as Ben possibly feeling guilty, but as the reader will soon learn, this is not the case.

The theme of Appearances occurs in this chapter as it becomes evident that Ben does not want to talk about the details of that night any longer. This leads Libby to believe that he is hiding something or protecting someone. Either way, they are both frustrated. Both believe that the other is not as they appear, and that neither is being forthright about their relationship.

The theme of Running Away is also touched upon in that Ben refuses to face any memory of that time or the night of the murder. The responsibility of it, the thought of it is uncomfortable and as a result he is unwilling to go down that memory lane with anyone, let alone his estranged sister, even if she was always his favorite.

Discussion Question 1

Why would Ben not want to discuss the night of the murder with Libby?



Discussion Question 2

What does Ben's reaction to Libby's question about Diondra indicate about Ben and Diondra?

Discussion Question 3

Though Ben admits that their mother didn't believe the rumors about him, what evidence is there to indicate that he hated his mother?

Vocabulary

gurney, docile, chagrined, commiserative, reaming, gullible, naive, unstable



Chapter 20

Summary

Chapter 20 takes place in 1985. Ben was worried about the baby that Diondra was carrying. She'd started to finally show and Ben had felt the child kicking a few times. He knew he was going to have to drop out of school and get a job, but he didn't turn 16 for several more months. Diondra had to run away because her father would be furious. His one rule had been that she would wait until marriage before sleeping with someone.

Diondra told Ben that he needed to ask Runner for money. Ben is surprised because he doesn't think Runner has any kind of money. Diondra and Trey mocked Ben because they'd been buying weed from Runner, so they assured Ben that his father did, indeed, have money. Ben was upset and started to panic as he tried to imagine what Diondra would be like as a mother, or just as a wife. She, Trey, and Ben went to find Runner to ask for money.

Analysis

Ben's abusive relationship with both Trey and Diondra is shown again when they openly mock him about knowing what Runner does. Ben is upset, but continues to take their abuse. Despite the way he's being treated, Ben is very loyal to Diondra. He spends most of the chapter thinking about how he is going to take care of Diondra and their child. This is something that Diondra never seems to do for either Ben or her child. She doesn't want to get away so she can raise her child, but just so she's away from her angry father.

To the reader, Diondra's angry father is another possible suspect. Diondra says several times that he'd be so angry that he would kill Ben and her if he found out about the child. Runner is also brought up again and still serves as a potential suspect since Libby hasn't gotten the chance to speak with him in person yet and clear him as a suspect.

Discussion Question 1

What shocked Ben about his father?

Discussion Question 2

Why would Ben be concerned about how Diondra would be as a mother?



Discussion Question 3

How must Ben feel now that he is about to be a father at 15 years of age?

Vocabulary

ballistic, decrepit, corsage, infinite, abysmal, precipitous, strife, lingered, illumination



Chapter 21

Summary

Chapter 21 takes place in the present, Libby finally hears back from Runner. He has written her a letter which says that he is dying of cancer and he knows that Ben is innocent. At the end of the letter, he asks for \$500 so he can travel to Libby and tell her everything. Libby is furious because she knows Runner is lying and just wants money from her. Libby's tantrum is interrupted by Krissi arriving at her door.

Libby lets her come inside, and Krissi reveals that she lied. She tells Libby about the strange relationship she had with Ben, and how she was pressured into lying by the police. Libby understands that part since it sounded similar to her own experience with the police on that night in 1985, when they wanted her to testify against Ben. Libby learns that Krissi's family knew the truth, but went along with the lie to get a settlement. It tore the family apart, and that's why Krissi's mother left. Libby knows that Krissi wants forgiveness, but she can't give it to her. Krissi does mention that her father didn't go out that night looking for Ben like they had originally told everyone.

Analysis

Runner's damaged relationship with his children is shown once again. This is something that comes up with greater frequency in the last part of the book. It helps show how the children were shaped into the people they are today. Many of their negative traits are a direct result of Runner. Immediately, upon reading the letter, Libby doesn't buy it and suspects a con. She discounts the letter and writes off her father as any sort of credible witness.

Krissi sets Libby onto finding out the truth about what happened with Ben the night of the murders. She gives an alibi for her father, who up until then had been the prime suspect. Runner and Ben are still technically suspects themselves, but the majority of the evidence is pointing to Lou Cates as Lyle has suggested.

The theme of taking Responsibility is demonstrated through Krissi and her family. They knew what they were doing was wrong, but they went ahead with it anyway because they thought they could get settlement money. It ultimately ended up destroying the family, since Krissi's mother stopped trusting her and ended up leaving the family. Now, making things right, Krissi is taking responsibility and confessing to Libby about the terrible injustice in which she participated.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Krissi now feel compelled to come forward?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Responsibility as it is portrayed in this chapter.

Discussion Question 3

Why did Libby not buy into the information that her father put into the letter to her?

Vocabulary

hunching, flotsam, haphazard, frenetic, granules



Chapter 22

Summary

Chapter 22 takes place in 1985. Patty and Diane spoke with a police officer about Ben. The police told the women that several girls had come forward about Ben and that when they searched his locker they found animal remains. They believed the remains to be part of some satanic ritual. Patty and Diane argued with the police, but they wouldn't listen.

When Patty returned home, Runner was there with the kids. Patty thought about how rough Runner was with the kids, a trait that she thought Ben had inherited as he grew older. Runner pressured Patty to give him money so he could go to Texas, but Patty made him leave. Runner angrily departed, and Patty readied her shotgun just in case Runner decided to come back later.

Analysis

Runner's abusive nature toward the kids and his wife is shown in this chapter. This gives the reader some more evidence to suspect that Runner was involved in the murders, something that Libby herself pursues over the next few chapters. Runner is even given some motivation because he believes that Patty is holding out on giving him money, and as Libby previously established, Runner would do anything just to get his hands more money.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Patty's character and how she feels toward her children and Runner.

Discussion Question 2

What is making Patty consider the fact that perhaps Ben is guilty?

Discussion Question 3

If the animal remains in Ben's locker weren't his, then who would have had cause or reason to plant them in his locker? Justify with support from the text.

Vocabulary

delinquent, degradation, provocative, reticent, harbinger, baneful



Chapter 23

Summary

Chapter 23 is in the present. As Libby leaves the prison, she is still confused about everything she has learned. She knows that Ben was lying about Diondra, but she doesn't know why. Unlike the reader, she doesn't know that at the time Diondra was pregnant. Libby believes everything that Krissi said, which eliminates Krissi's father as a suspect.

Against her better judgment she decides to drive out to try and see Runner, but when she gets to the men's home he's staying at she finds out he was just thrown out for drinking. She goes to the bars looking to find him. Everyone in the bar is upset with Runner, citing that he owes them money or stole from them. One patron tells Libby to check out an area commonly filled with squatters and other vagrants, as they are guessing that Runner would be there.

Analysis

Libby spends most of the chapter eliminating suspects and going over what she knows. She's aware that Ben is lying and trying to cover something up, but she doesn't know enough about Diondra yet to piece that together. She's able to eliminate Lou Cates as a suspect because she knows Krissi wouldn't lie to defend her father who is no longer a part of her life. Her only potential lead is Runner, who has been set up as a possible suspect based on information supplied in some of the last few chapters.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Runner's character.

Discussion Question 2

Why did Libby decide that she had to find and speak to Runner?

Discussion Question 3

It is apparent that neither Libby, nor many other people, know that Diondra is pregnant. Why do they not know?

Vocabulary

cadence, malicious, intent, infallible, premonition, injurious, rallied, baffled



Chapter 24

Summary

Chapter 24 takes place in 1985. Ben, Trey, and Diondra went into a bar to find Runner. They tried to get money from him, but Runner didn't have any. One of the older men at the bar convinced Trey to give Runner another 24 hours. Trey begrudgingly agreed thinking that Runner had some big score lined up. Ben was upset that Runner barely even seemed to notice him, or cared that he was there. He told Runner about the baby, but Runner didn't care and told Ben to make sure it's actually his. Ben was furious after they got out of the bar. Trey gave Ben and Diondra some strong marijuana to calm down. He started to drive them to a mysterious place. Then, he promised great things to Ben whenever they arrived at their destination.

Analysis

Trey's darker nature is shown in this chapter, and it goes beyond his verbal abuse of Ben. Ben's anger is highlighted as well, especially toward Runner. He's frustrated with everyone's lack of respect, especially Runner who barely even acknowledges him. Ben tries to bond with his father because he desperately wants someone to acknowledge his status as a man. To Ben, part of being a man means fathering children, so he believes that Runner should be proud of him and will finally give him respect. Runner doesn't care in the slightest and only responds with a crude joke, as if he can't even believe that his son would be capable of having a child with anyone. This makes Ben even angrier, which plays out in future chapters when Trey capitalizes on that rage to get Ben to commit some heinous acts. For readers, it can also be seen as a possible incentive for Ben to have murdered his family

Discussion Question 1

How did Ben feel after his meeting with his father in the bar?

Discussion Question 2

From this scene alone, what can be inferred about Ben's state of mind?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Trey's character.

Vocabulary

rictus, absurd, belittle, manliness, wholeheartedly, missive, blatantly



Chapter 25

Summary

In the present, Libby goes to see Runner. She eventually finds him among the squatters, and the two start talking. Runner isn't making much sense, but Libby is able to get a few things out of him. He keeps asking for money, but he mentions Trey, implying that he had something to do with the murders.

Libby has heard the name before, but she doesn't know exactly who Trey is. Runner asks for money, again promising to testify with the knowledge that he has. Libby doesn't fall for his lies. Runner still insists that Patty was keeping money from him back in the day, but Libby doesn't believe that either since she remembers how poor they were growing up. Runner begins to ramble again, and mentions Diondra. He talks about the last conversation he had with Ben, revealing to Libby that he never saw Diondra again; but, he's hoping that she got away because he liked the idea of being a grandfather.

Analysis

Libby's conversation with Runner brings up a few different things which ultimately help her solve the case. Runner mentions that Patty was hiding money, something that Libby doesn't believe because of the constant state of poverty at the farm. Runner implied that Patty was always hiding money, which wasn't the case. She did occasionally set aside savings, just like Ben, but she wasn't hiding the kind of fortune that Runner was implying. Patty did have plans to get money through her deal with Calvin. Runner might be implying that he knew Patty had a plan for the insurance money.

The other important things that Libby learns are Trey and Diondra's involvement, namely that Diondra was pregnant with Ben's child. With that knowledge, Libby is able to piece together more of what happened that night, and has viable leads to follow up on. Seeing Runner is also enough for Libby to clear him as a suspect. She can visibly see that he's not intelligent enough to pull off a murder and frame someone else.

Discussion Question 1

What makes Libby rule out her father as the murderer?

Discussion Question 2

After Libby's meeting with her father, what does she think about him?



Discussion Question 3

What does she learn as a result of meeting with her father?

Vocabulary

tamp, besotted, fallible, conducted, machinations, inclusion



Chapter 26

Summary

Chapter 26 takes place in 1985. Patty calmed the children down after Runner's outburst. She decided to go through Ben's room after Michelle hinted that there was something inside the room. Patty broke the lock and searched the room. She found a notebook filled with dark writing and tons of girl names, including Krissi's. She concluded that they must be a list of Ben's victims. She also found a set of old used clothing he bought when he's heard Diondra was pregnant. She didn't know that was the reason and assumed it was trophies from the young girls he slept with.

She destroyed what she believed was evidence. She got a call from Len, telling her to go out and meet him because he could help with Ben. She went out, but ran into someone else, someone that claimed to have once been a farmer. He warned her that in the next year she would need money because Ben was going to prison and she would be in danger of losing the farm. He said he wanted to help her, and she desperately believed that his intentions were good.

Analysis

When Patty searches Ben's room she finds a lot of potential evidence that could be used against him. She believes that the names are a list of all the children that he's molested; supported by the fact that one of the names is Krissi's. The reader can guess this isn't the case, and Ben later clarifies it himself by saying that the notebook was just filled with potential names for his baby. The clothing that she finds was also intended for Ben's future child, but Patty mistakenly believes that Ben is keeping trophies from the girls that he's slept with. This once again touches on the theme of Appearances.

Destroying the evidence shows that Patty loved her son and still didn't want to believe that he had done these things that others were accusing him of. Nonetheless, she knows what all of the 'evidence' in his room seemed to suggest, so she destroys it to be safe. She is formulating a plan to not only save the farm, but to make sure her children and the farm will be saved.

Discussion Question 1

What does Patty find in Ben's room that makes her believe that Ben might be convicted if the items were ever found?



Discussion Question 2

How would someone know that Ben was going to jail before he had even been arrested?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Patty's mental state during this time.

Vocabulary

clandestine, bridge, revelatory, reassuring, candid, clamor



Chapter 27

Summary

In the present, Libby returns to talk to Ben about what she has just learned. Ben is still upset that she's looking into the murders. Libby ignores him and asks about Diondra and the child that Ben supposedly had with her. Ben dodges the questions and asks what Libby has to gain. He points out that if Libby is right and Ben isn't guilty, it means that Libby has to bear the guilt of sentencing her brother to prison. If she's wrong, then Ben's a killer and it doesn't matter. She asks about Trey, and Ben seems surprised she knows his name. He ignores her questions again and tells her that she needs to pick a side, and recommends that she side with him, and leave things alone.

Analysis

Ben's actions demonstrate the theme of Responsibility. Because of him, Diondra doesn't have to take responsibility for her actions. Even Ben himself isn't taking the right kind of responsibility, since he feels he needs to be the one that goes to prison for Diondra, even though he wasn't the one that murdered Michelle. Ben thinks he has to do that because of his twisted views on how a man should be, and how relationships should work. This is in no small part because of the way Runner treated him, as shown in the previous chapters set in 1985.

Ben is also coddling Diondra, whom he believes to be a victim. Because of that, Diondra never had to accept that anything she did in her life was wrong. She spent her adult life never having to own up for all of the terrible things she did. She believes she can do whatever she wants in her life and get away with it.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the notion of responsibility as regards the characters of Ben and Diondra.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ben not want Libby to pursue this case any further?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ben want Libby to pick a side?

Vocabulary

swaddled, misguided, misinformed, ladled, beneficiary, candor, deceitful



Chapter 28

Summary

Chapter 28 takes place in 1985. Trey drove Ben and Diondra outside of the city limits and onto a farm. Once they arrived, Trey produced a series of weapons from the truck. He gave Diondra and Ben a new drug to take. Ben asked what it was, but Diondra and Trey just mocked him. He took a small amount of it and felt immediately messed up, but still in control of his body.

Diondra and Trey said a prayer to Satan and then started to murder the cows in the pasture. They coerced Ben into murdering one of the cows as well. Ben did it, but he still is mocked by them afterwards. Ben felt angry, and realized that he enjoyed getting to kill the cow because it was an outlet for his rage. He wanted to kill again, imagining himself in a field of corpses. Finally, this made Diondra and Trey stop laughing.

Analysis

Ben's violent behavior reaches a new level when he takes part in the ritual with Diondra and Trey. Even though he's taking part in their ritual, both Diondra and Trey still mock him afterward, which only makes him angrier. This reinforces how little they care about him, as they only ever seem to keep him around so they have someone to belittle. Their lack of care for his feelings is shown by the fact they force and even threaten him into taking part in the ritual. It is clear to the reader that they are just using Ben and treat him as their own personal entertainment, coming up with new and ingenious ways to upset him.

This chapter continues to mislead the reader and make them think Ben could have taken part in the murders, since he once again talks about his violent thoughts and how he wants to kill again. These violent thoughts are part of the reason why Ben wanted to stay locked up in prison because he was afraid of how he'd act if he wasn't behind bars.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Trey force Ben to take the new drug and kill the cows?

Discussion Question 2

According to their actions, how do Diondra and Trey feel about Ben? Justify with evidence from the text.



Discussion Question 3

What did Ben realize about himself after the cow killing incident that frightened him?

Vocabulary

exaltation, exhilaration, faulty, eagerness, gangling



Chapter 29

Summary

Back in the present, Libby decides that she's going to dye her hair red. She remembers what Ben said about her looking like her mother. She thinks it might be effective for getting in touch with Diane again because it could make her nostalgic. She calls back Lyle, who has left several messages after she had gone to see Runner.

He comes over, and Libby explains what happened and how frustrating it is because everyone is lying about something. Lyle tells her about a forest fire he accidentally started when he was younger and how he identifies with Libby because he knows how something you do as a child can get out of hand. He invites her to his birthday party, saying that he wants Libby there because she's his friend.

Analysis

For the first time in her life, Libby has someone who is willing to call her a friend. It's unclear whether or not Libby considers Lyle to be a friend as well, but she likes having him around. She shows him trust by sharing all of the information about Ben with him. She also talks to him about how frustrated she is with everyone lying to her. This is information that she would normally not choose to share with anyone because she always tries to keep her conversations very superficial.

The theme of Secrets surfaces again in this chapter as Libby knows that many of the people involved in the entire 1985 incident are lying. Already she's had several of the players in the tragedy come forward and confess to her that they lied about Ben. However, Ben, himself, won't be forthcoming about events or give her the truth. The secrets that everyone is keeping is only hurting those around them more, though they refuse to see that.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Secrets and what the author is saying about the nature of secrets kept too long.

Discussion Question 2

What indicates that Libby is changing as a character from the way she was at the beginning of the novel?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Libby decide to dye her hair red?

Vocabulary

dowager, patronizing, heinous, justification, litigious



Chapters 30 and 31

Summary

Chapter 30 takes place in 1985. Patty returned home from her mysterious meeting. Ben was still missing, but Patty was happy that she at least destroyed what she believed to be evidence of his crimes. She confirmed with Diane that they'd search again tomorrow, but she just wanted to sleep. The chapter ends with Patty satisfied that after her mystery meeting everything would finally change for the better and she'd be able to properly take care of her family.

Chapter 31 is back in the present. Lyle wants Libby to get in touch with Trey. Libby doesn't know where he is, but Lyle informs her that he found out that Trey works close by. They go to see him and Trey recognizes Libby right away. He's forthcoming with information, but he says he had nothing to do with what happened that night, and he's long since given up on trying to get money from Runner. When asked about Diondra he tells them how she loved to start drama and if they couldn't find her it's because she was using one of her silly fake names. He explains how she constantly came up with different aliases because she liked to mess with people, giving them one of her famous ones, Polly Palm. Lyle suddenly pulls Libby away. When they get in the car, he seems very excited about something.

Analysis

The mystery deal that Patty made is brought up again, though the reader isn't clued in to what was said or the deal that Patty made with the stranger. All the reader understands is that for having the sort of problems that she had, Patty was oddly calm about it all. This leads the reader to believe that the stranger either gave her information that would save her son, or that the man found a way to help her save the farm and provide for her family.

Trey clears himself as a possible suspect by saying that he had nothing to do with the murders that took place. There was never much evidence to support Trey as being part of the murders anyway, since the only Day family members he seemed to care about were Ben and Runner, both of who were still alive. Ben had no loyalty towards Trey, so it wouldn't make sense for him to cover for him either.

Trey gives Libby valuable information about Diondra, including her most famous alias of Polly Palm. This may allow Libby and Lyle to locate her and find out exactly what happened that night.

Discussion Question 1

What circumstances would make Patty make a deal with a total stranger?



Discussion Question 2

How was Libby able to rule out Trey as a suspect?

Discussion Question 3

Now that more information is known, discuss Diondra's character.

Vocabulary

commodity, cacophonous, incantation, milling, noxious, opulent



Chapters 32 and 33

Summary

Chapter 32 takes place in 1985. Ben and the others burned their clothes after killing the cows, destroying any evidence of what happened. Trey insisted that Ben had failed, and Ben was angry that Diondra wouldn't stick up for him. He felt like everyone else was able to get through life without hassle, but he's never caught a break. Diondra received several messages about Ben being wanted by the police. She panicked and told him they had to run now and he needed to get whatever money he could from his home since she only had a couple hundred dollars.

Chapter 33 is back in the present. Lyle brings up the tattoo that Libby saw on Ben, guessing that the name was Polly. He searches online and finds a Polly Palm that doesn't live too far away. Libby calls and asks for Diondra, and Polly immediately hangs up. Libby goes alone to investigate the house and finds it is indeed Diondra.

Diondra says she always had a feeling Libby would find her one day. She explains how she and Ben were getting ready to run away the night of the murders. Ben never came back to her, so she assumed he got scared. She later found out he was arrested for the murders. Ben didn't have an alibi because he was protecting Diondra. Diondra thinks that Runner was responsible for the murders. She says Ben was happy in prison because he knew there was a violent side to him. He's popular in prison and gets tons of letters she tells Libby proudly. Libby asks about the child, and the chapter ends with Diondra's daughter announcing her presence. Her name is Crystal.

Analysis

Diondra and Trey continue to mock Ben even after he took part in the ritual. Trey makes it clear that Ben was a failure, even though he killed one of the cows. Diondra doesn't once stick up for him, but she always seems to be defensive of Trey. Ben reiterates how frustrated he is with his life and the way he never seems to be able to get a break. Diondra discovers that the police are looking for Ben. She panics and decides they have to get away from town, taking whatever money they can get from their family.

This again shows the theme of Running Away from problems for Ben, and for Diondra it shows not wanting to accept responsibility. Diondra only wants to leave because she's worried about how her father will react. Ben initially doesn't want to run away because he knows he didn't do anything wrong, but he's convinced by Diondra.

Lyle and Libby are able to piece together where Diondra lives so Libby can finally confront her and find out what happened. Diondra explains how Ben was covering for her because of everything that had happened during the chapters set in 1985. Diondra still doesn't know all of the details, because as she explains, they didn't kill the entire



Day family. She believes that it was Runner because he needed the money, but Libby already knows that isn't the case.

Diondra continues to refuse to accept responsibility for what happened. She even tries to justify it to herself that Ben is better off in prison. She still doesn't care about him, but she wants to think he's happy so she doesn't have to feel bad about ruining his life.

Discussion Question 1

What does Libby discover after she and Lyle go to see Diondra?

Discussion Question 2

What was most likely Ben's greatest mistake during the entire event?

Discussion Question 3

What is Ben's world view?

Vocabulary

homage, pathetic, egotistical, vexing, yarrow, bellow



Chapters 34 and 35

Summary

Chapter 34 takes place in 1985. Ben and Diondra sneaked into Ben's house, looking for any money that Patty might have set aside. Ben promised her a gift, intending to show her the clothing he bought for their baby. The clothing was missing from his room, and he believed the police took it. He found his notebook filled with possible baby names, which his mother mistakenly thought was the names of his victims. Diondra caught Michelle outside their door listening to them. Michelle seemed giddy to find out that Diondra was pregnant, but Diondra was furious. She chased after Michelle, and started to choke her. Ben moved to stop her, but found himself just resting his hands against Diondra's shoulders as she strangled Michelle.

In the present, Libby is still at Diondra's home. Lyle has not gone with her. Libby meets Crystal, the child that Diondra had with Ben. Both of them are extremely paranoid that Libby will tell the police about them, and Crystal doesn't want her mother to be taken away. Both stress how they're best friends with one another, and Libby suspects that Diondra purposefully kept Crystal from meeting new people, so they'd always just have one another. Crystal asks questions about the family and Ben, stating that Ben was her hero for protecting Diondra.

Libby talks about the family, and Crystal quotes something from one of Michelle's diaries. Libby is confused, wondering how Crystal could know that unless they had the diary, making her realize she never had one from 1985. Crystal makes an excuse to leave, and then doubles back, knocking Libby out.

Analysis

In case there was any doubt, Ben makes it clear in Chapter 34 that the "evidence" his mother found earlier was just about the baby and not a possible list of victims. Michelle discovers the two of them snooping around. Diondra is upset that she knows about the child, and she's paranoid that Michelle is going to tell someone and the news will somehow reach her father. In her rage, Diondra goes after Michelle.

Ben is conflicted and while he wants to stop Diondra, he's too afraid to act. Ben later admits that he feels guilty about this because he was genuinely torn. He wanted to protect Diondra, and he was so angry and frustrated with his family.

Diondra continues to show her selfish nature. She always needed someone in her life to give her attention. With Crystal, she had the perfect person to turn into a loyal follower, just like she had done with Ben. Both she and Crystal feel like they're the other's best friend. Diondra implies that this was purposefully done because she doesn't let Crystal go out. She made Crystal too afraid to leave because she implied that if she went out everyone would discover the truth about what happened and Diondra would be taken



away, even though it had been over 20 years and nobody besides the Kill Club was even looking at the murder.

Crystal reveals how involved they were with the murder when she talks about details from one of Michelle's diary. Libby can tell by the way she recited it that she must have memorized it from the diary itself, giving her one of the last clues she needed to prove Ben was innocent.

Discussion Question 1

What is becoming clearer as Libby visits with Diondra and Crystal?

Discussion Question 2

Why didn't Ben stop Diondra from killing Michelle?

Discussion Question 3

How has Diondra rationalized allowing Ben to remain in jail all this time?

Vocabulary

goading, vantage, lilted, piousness, worthwhile



Chapters 36 and 37

Summary

In Chapter 36, this short chapter takes place in 1985. Patty woke up when she heard something coming from Michelle's room. When she went to investigate, she thought it would be too late for the mystery man to complete his task. Her thoughts are interrupted when a dark stranger stabs her in the chest. She thought to herself how it wasn't supposed to happen like this. The man panicked and grabbed an axe. He used it to murder Debby. He finished off Patty with the shotgun that she'd left on the shelf. Patty died wishing things had gone differently earlier that night.

Back in the present Libby is pinned to ground and regains consciousness. Crystal apologizes for slipping up about the diary, while Diondra presses a knee into Libby's back. Crystal goes to get a gun, and during that time Libby is able to throw off Diondra and runs into the basement.

Crystal and Diondra chase after her, but Libby is able to escape through a small chute that lead to the outdoors. She uses her head start to run into the woods where she hides in an animal den. Crystal and Diondra try to find her in the woods, but Libby is safely hidden. After a few hours, she finally crawls out and starts making her way back to civilization.

Analysis

In Chapter 36, Calvin Diehl is mentioned by the name for the first time, although his actual involvement isn't fully explained. The reader believes that he may be the 'mystery man'. Also, of note, is the fact that Patty was expecting someone to be in her home that night. And, when she is stabbed she isn't surprised that she has been attacked, but is more shocked at the way in which she has been attacked. Patty makes it clear that she had some role to play in the murders because she thinks about how it was happening in the wrong way. Patty's involvement is explained more in the next few chapters that focus exactly on what Calvin was doing there.

In Chapter 37, Diondra and Crystal continue to show how little regard they have for anyone but themselves. They naturally assume that they have to kill Libby because neither one will accept responsibility for what has happened. Libby is able to get away, but she has to run into the woods and hide in a small den. This mirrors the exact same situation she was in during the night of the murders, where she was able to escape but almost froze to death in the woods while she was hiding.



Discussion Question 1

Given the evidence, what is the most likely explanation for Patty's behavior when the stranger appeared in her home?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Diondra and Crystal.

Discussion Question 3

How do the events in Chapter 37 mirror the events of 20 years ago?

Vocabulary

abhor, abrasive, tangent, nullify, credible



Chapters 38 and 39

Summary

Chapter 38 takes place in 1985. Diondra finished killing Michelle, just as the mystery assailant finished off Patty and Debby in the other room. Diondra thought it was a sign from Satan that their ritual worked. The man ran off, apparently unaware that there were others in the house.

Diondra tried to track down Libby, insisting that Ben should kill her too so they could collect any insurance money from the rest of the family dying. She said everyone would forget about Krissi because Ben would now be a victim. She insisted that this was the way they could finally start their life over, but Ben had to pretend not to know her, otherwise she'd get arrested and they'd take the child away. Ben was hesitant, but eventually decided that this was what a man had to do. He tried to find Libby, but she was long gone and hiding in the woods.

Chapter 39 is back in the present. Libby manages to get back to Lyle, whom she left waiting at a bar while she spoke with Diondra. She explains everything that happened. Lyle tells her about a man named Calvin Diehl, who had just been caught hours earlier. Calvin Diehl had been killing people since the 80's, though he believed he was simply committing assisted suicide, since he never killed unwilling victims.

People would go to him for help for their families. He would murder them so the family would get the inheritance money or insurance payouts. He kept notes from each murder to absolve him of any wrongdoings, and they found a note from Patty. When he was brought in, he confessed to murdering Debby and feeling apologetic, because that was never supposed to happen. Libby goes to the police and turns in Diondra and Crystal, but they're long gone and burned down their house to destroy any evidence. Libby gets the note that her mother wrote to Calvin, and one that was written for the family, explaining why she did it and hoping that her death would allow her children to live.

Analysis

Diondra wants Ben to kill Libby because all she cares about is Ben getting the insurance money. Ben clearly struggles with the decision, but because of his twisted views he feels like he has to protect Diondra because that's what a man is supposed to do. He tries to find Libby, but she manages to stay hidden, just like she was in the present. This is just another way that Ben is trying to ignore taking responsibility for what happened. He knows what he's doing is wrong, but he keeps convincing himself that he has to do it.

The final details of the murder are put into place when Lyle tells Libby about Calvin Diehl. Calvin is the one that killed Patty and Libby's other sister, although that part was an accident. Calvin felt bad about the murder because everyone else that he killed



wanted to die so they would be able to provide for their families or just to escape the pain of their lives. Like many of the other characters, Calvin couldn't take responsibility for what he had done. He admitted that killing Libby's sister was a mistake, but he feels like he's justified in all of the other murders and he refused to accept that what he did was manslaughter.

Libby gets the note from Patty. As she points out, Patty's death didn't help the family. Patty might have been trying to do what she thought was best, but to Libby it seemed like Patty was just running away because in her depressed state she couldn't handle her life. The family wasn't any better off for what Patty did. If anything, Libby suffered more because she never had anyone in her life to help her become an adult, and while she did get some money, she was still miserable in her life and needed someone to raise and support her.

Discussion Question 1

How does learning the truth impact Libby?

Discussion Question 2

How did Calvin justify what he did?

Discussion Question 3

What happened to Diondra and Crystal?

Vocabulary

reprehensible, laceration, blatant, tedium, pliable



Chapters 40 and 41

Summary

Chapter 40 takes place in 1985. Calvin murdered Debby and Patty. He never intended to murder Debby, but she came out of her room because of everything else that was happening with Ben and Michelle. Calvin felt terrible because he was always able to justify what he did as helping people. Debby was an innocent victim that he only killed in a panic.

Chapter 41 is set in the present. Many days have passed since Libby turned in Diondra. The police ended up finding her, but not Crystal. Thanks to some items Libby had stolen from Diondra's house, they are able to connect her DNA to the original crime scene. Libby is hopeful that Ben will be getting out of prison soon in light of all the new evidence. Libby goes to see Ben, who wants to know about Crystal. Libby admits that she's very messed up because of the isolated way that Diondra raised her. She tells Ben that she forgives Crystal because she knows it isn't her fault that Diondra did the things she did. Libby makes sure to be vague giving statements about Crystal, leaving out that Crystal had tried to kill her. At the end of the chapter, Libby admits to Ben that they're very alike.

Analysis

Chapter 40 explains Calvin's mindset, which was explored earlier. The only new detail is how he botched the murder and ended up killing Debby as well as Patty. Still, in this chapter he is rationalizing what he did and why he did it. His only regret was killing Debby because she was, in his words, an innocent.

Libby wanted to protect Crystal because, just like with Krissi, she knows how damaged she is. Part of that feeling of protection was that she knew that protect Crystal because she knew that Crystal was only messed up because of her mother. Even still, she knows that Crystal is going to have a difficult life, since just like Libby, she doesn't have a family to take care of her. Libby acknowledges that not only are she and Crystal damaged, but also Ben. By the end of the chapter, she has accepted Ben back into her life, and realizes how alike they are.

Discussion Question 1

How does Calvin rationalize what he did to so many people over the years?

Discussion Question 2

What happened to Diondra and Crystal?



Discussion Question 3

How does Libby finally come to a resolution in her life?

Vocabulary

bolster, tentative, curtail, tenuous, bargain



Chapters 42 and 43

Summary

Chapter 42 is in the present. The chapter focuses on Ben. He thinks back to everything that happened. He was quiet for so many years because he wanted to save Diondra and Crystal. He felt like he could at least save his second family after being too much of a coward to save his first family. He knew that if he had been free and stayed with Diondra he would have snapped and hurt her. He doesn't know what will happen when he's freed from prison, but he's trying to aim small, and he is hopeful that he'll at least be able to start some sort of new life with his last family member, Libby.

In Chapter 43, Libby finally meets up with Diane, who is happy to see her. They spend two hours talking before running out of things to say. Libby drives by her old home and sees that a new family has moved in and turned it back into a proper farm. She drives away, feeling hopeful about the future and finally feeling like she's moved away from her dark past.

Analysis

In Chapter 42, Ben explains the twisted logic that he had for protecting Diondra and Crystal. He feels like he was a failure to his original family, but by staying quiet he could protect his second family. Ben also felt like he had nothing going for him in life anyway. He was clearly afraid that he would end up just like Runner, and he didn't want to hurt anyone in his life. Having finally gotten Libby back in his life, Ben is starting to feel some semblance of hope. He doesn't think that he'll be able to do much with his life, but he's at least hopeful that he and Libby will be able to make some sort of future for their own selves.

The theme of Secrets is examined and shown to be detrimental to all of those around. For 20 years Ben kept the secret of who really killed everyone in his house, and never said anything because of a misguided concept of what it was to be a 'man'. He was able to convince himself that what he was doing was noble, but in the end he finally had to see that there was nothing noble about it and that keeping the secret ruined many lives and left his daughter to be raised by someone who was mentally ill equipped to raise a child.

In Chapter 43, for once in her life, Libby is feeling hopeful. This is a big deal since throughout the book all she's done is talk about how miserable she is and how she never has the energy to do anything. Libby goes by the house and sees that there's a new family there. She recognizes that it's possible for things to move on and change. Libby believes she can do to her life what the new family has done to the farm and finally turn things around.



Discussion Question 1

How has the novel resolved the conflict that was presented at the beginning of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What does the author seem to be saying about the nature of Secrets?

Discussion Question 3

How has the lack of taking responsibility ended badly for many of the characters?

Vocabulary

flimsy, arrogant, tribute, expression, unbiased



Characters

Libby Day

Libby is the main character of the book. Libby starts the book very depressed because of the murder that she witnessed when she was 7. Libby never had anyone to take care of her in life. She feels like she has no skills whatsoever, and doesn't have the energy to try and get a job or go to school. Libby has a hard time talking and connecting to people.

Libby is a kleptomaniac, although by the end of the book she's making an effort to start paying for things again. At the start of the book, she only agrees to speak with Lyle and the rest of the club because she's running out of money and they're willing to pay her. Even then, she doesn't make too many real connections, but by the end of the book she has formed some kind of friendship with Lyle. Once she finds out the truth about what happened to Ben, she's able to move on and starts to feel hopeful about her life.

As a child, Libby was described as being either very overdramatic, or not seeming to react at all. She seemed the calmest out of all the Day children. Libby is a very good judge of character and is always able to tell when another character is lying to her. While she doesn't make many friendships, there are a couple of characters that she can sympathize with because she recognizes that they're just as damaged as she is.

Aunt Diane

Diane is frequently mentioned in the book, but she doesn't make too many appearances. In the chapters set in 1985, she helps Patty search for Ben when he goes missing. Patty implies that Diane helps to take care of the children and is very supportive. Diane tries to raise Libby after the murders, but Libby is too rebellious and frequently acts out. Diane finally gets rid of Libby after Libby accidentally kills her dog. During the book she's avoiding Libby. However, by the end, the two finally reconnect.

Ben Day

Ben is another main character in the book, appearing mostly in the chapters set in 1985. At the start of the book, Ben is in prison for murdering the Day family. Lyle and the others believe he was innocent, and they manage to convince Libby of this as well. Libby discovers that Ben was just protecting Diondra and his unborn child, Crystal.

As a youth, Ben was very depressed and felt like he could never catch a break. Everyone was always making fun of him or judging him for how poor he was. He didn't have many friends, and he eventually drifted to Trey and Diondra, both of whom were negative influences in his life. Ben was constantly seeking acceptance.



Ben was obsessed with being a proper man, but he had no idea what that was because his father was never there to raise him. Ben twisted these values and convinced himself that he was doing the right thing by protecting Diondra and Crystal. Even when he's given freedom, Ben's thoughts are bleak because he doesn't believe that he's worth anything. Libby's return to his life gives him some hope.

Michelle and Debby Day

Michelle and Debby are both frequently mentioned, but they appear on rarely. Debby, in particular, is a side character who is mentioned only in relation to the murders. Michelle is another character who plays a small role except for being a gossip. She frequently listens in on conversations and blackmails people for either money or food. Michelle's snooping is the reason why she is murdered.

Lyle

Lyle is a member of the Kill Club and the original person who approaches Libby. Lyle is socially awkward, which frustrates Libby because it makes it that much harder to interview people when she's trying to find more information about Ben. Lyle once started a devastating forest fire when he was younger. He relates that to the guilt that Libby feels over naming Ben as guilty. Neither one meant to do something bad, but their actions had a negative impact on other people. Lyle considers Libby one of his friends and is generally very supportive of her.

Patty Day

Patty is the mother of Libby and Ben. Much like her children, Patty is very depressed. She has a hard time getting out of bed in the morning because she's overwhelmed with being a single parent and the debt she's accumulated. Patty wants to take care of her children, but she doesn't know how to do that. By the end of the book, Patty has given up on life. She arranges for her death so her family has insurance money they can use to save the farm and live a good life.

Runner Day

Runner is the absent father in the Day family. Runner only shows up for a couple of months when he doesn't have anywhere else to go. Runner refuses to accept any responsibility for the things that go on in his life. He doesn't want to be a father to his children, and he frequently complains about them. The children think that they're too weak and don't do enough for him. However, Runner is resentful toward them because he doesn't want to spend any money to raise them. He'd rather have the money for himself. Runner is shown to be very rough and borderline abusive toward his family members.



Magda

Magda is one of the members of the Kill Club. She only appears a few times throughout the book to give evidence to Libby. The evidence shows why Ben is innocent. Magda is very affectionate toward Ben. It's implied that she even has a crush on him.

Diondra

Diondra starts off the book as Ben's girlfriend. Diondra is described as being a very dramatic girl who only cares about herself. Diondra is spoiled by her rich parents, who spend most of the time living out of state. Her parents' absence is a main reason why she's so attention starved. Diondra is constantly cruel to Ben. She treats him more like a pet rather than a person. She buys him outfits and dresses him the way that she wants to see him.

Diondra expects everyone to take care of her. She doesn't bother to clean up around the house, a trait that continues into her adulthood. Diondra doesn't feel bad that Ben is in prison for her. All she cares about is having someone in her life to give her attention, which is why she keeps Crystal. She turns Crystal into the new Ben, someone who is completely devoted to her. Diondra treats Crystal kindly because she knows that if she drives Crystal away, she'll have no one.

Barb Eichel

Barb wrote a book about the Day murders when she was younger. She realizes later that she was wrong to condemn Ben. When Libby reaches out to her, Barb apologizes for what she did and explains how in the 80's everyone was afraid of Satanic cults.

Krissi Cates

Krissi is a young student who has a crush on Ben. She flirts with him and writes him notes, something that Ben appreciates because he's so attention starved. She makes up stories about how close she was with Ben. When her parents hear about this, she panics and changes the stories to make it sound like Ben was assaulting her. Other girls do the same, and the rumors continue to grow. Krissi eventually tells her parents the truth, and it destroys the family.

As an adult, Libby recognizes how damaged Krissi is as a person. Krissi works at a strip club, and she shares many traits with Libby, including kleptomania. Krissi apologizes to Libby once she recognizes her and comes clean about what really happened in 1985.



Lou Cates

Lou is Krissi's father. He only appears briefly in the book. He's considered a suspect in the Day murders. Eventually, Libby clears him when she speaks with Krissi and finds out that her father knew Ben was innocent.

Trey

In the chapters set in 1985, Trey is an older teenager who is a friend of Diondra. He treats Ben horribly throughout the book, constantly insulting him for every little thing that he does. Trey is heavily into drugs and Satan worship. After Ben gets arrested, he eventually changes his behavior. In the present day, he operates his own store. He's very forthcoming about the events of the past when Libby questions him. He even seems remorseful for some of the things that he had done.

Peggy Bannion

Peggy was dating Runner during the 1985 murders. Peggy comes forward in the present to tell the Kill Club that she was covering for Runner and she didn't know where he was the night of the murder.

Crystal Day

Crystal is the daughter of Diondra and Ben. She only appears at the very end of the book. It is implied that Crystal has spent all of her life alongside Diondra. She refers to Diondra as her best friend. She is incredibly loyal toward her mother. She panics whenever she thinks that Diondra might be taken away. Crystal is even willing to kill Libby if it means protecting Diondra.



Symbols and Symbolism

Sympathy Money

As the name implies, the money that Libby inherited represents the sympathy and the guilt that everyone felt after the murders. Most of the money was donated to her from the community.

Death

Many of the Day family idealize death because to them it represents the ultimate release. Death is a representation of how depressed Libby, Ben, and Patty are at various points throughout the book. During those times, they completely give up on everything and just want a release.

Libby's Injuries

Libby constantly focuses on the injuries she received the night of the murders. To her, they're a constant reminder of the horrible things that happened the night she lost her family.

Ben's Phone Line

In the chapters set in 1985, Ben wants to get a second phone line. To Patty, this represents his secretive side and how he wants to pull away and distance himself from the family.

"Dirty Bugger"

Libby and Ben always had a close connection in the 1985 sections of the book. They use the "dirty bugger" phrase as an inside joke. It is a way to show how close they are. Ben uses this phrase again when he meets Libby years later in prison, but Libby doesn't remember it, showing how far apart they've grown.

Dyed Hair

Both Libby and Ben dye their hair at different points of the book. Both times they do it because they want to distance themselves from the Day family and their distinctive red hair. When Libby dyes her hair back to its original red, it signals a return to her childhood roots and who she really is as a person.



Leaving Lights On

Libby is unable to go to sleep with the lights off. Leaving the lights on represents her paranoia and fear of another attack, similar to when she was younger.

Baby Clothing

When Ben purchases the clothing for a young child, it represents the hope that he has as well as the duty he feels as a father.

Diondra's Gift of Clothing

Diondra is frequently buying outfits and making Ben wear them because she hates his “poor” clothing. This represents that Diondra doesn’t care about Ben in the slightest and just wants to reshape him into her ideal version of a partner.

Ben’s Injuries

During the early chapters set in 1985, Ben is trying to injure himself. To Ben, having scars and injuries represents manliness and will earn him respect.



Settings

Day Farm (1985)

The Day Farm is located in Kansas. It is where the majority of the 1985 flashbacks take place. Patty says the farm used to be thriving when she was a child. However, in her and Runner's hands the farm has fallen apart because they don't have the money to maintain it. The farm is described as being very run down. Several members of the Day family are murdered inside the house in 1985. In the present, Libby sees the farm is owned by a new family who has restored it to its past glory.

Libby's Home

Libby lives in a small, isolated home in Kansas. She rarely lets any guests inside of her home, and she always leaves the lights on because she doesn't feel safe.

Diondra's Home (1985)

Diondra lives in a very high class home. She does very little to take care of her house. Whenever Ben goes to visit Diondra in the chapters set in 1985, she's usually in her home.

Diondra's Home (Present)

In the present, Diondra lives in a smaller, run down house. Just like in the past, she doesn't do much of a job taking care of her home. When Libby goes to visit Diondra, she nearly ends up getting killed, but she manages to escape through the basement.

Abandoned Building

When Libby meets with the Kill Club, they organize in a large abandoned warehouse. Lyle says that not many building owners are willing to rent out to their particular club. Also, the abandoned building has a fitting atmosphere.

Prison

Ben spends nearly all of the present in prison. Libby goes to visit him several times after hearing from the Kill Club that Ben might actually be innocent.



School (1985)

In the 1985 sections of the book, Ben works at the school as a janitor. It's there where he meets Krissi and where a teacher catches him leaving her notes. This leads to the rumors that Ben was a child molester.

Stoner Warehouse (1985)

Ben goes to the Stoner warehouse when he's waiting for Diondra. He makes up a story about being a Satan worshiper along with Trey. These rumors come back to bite Ben after the murders.

Men's Clinic

Libby briefly goes to the men's clinic in Oklahoma when she's looking for Runner. By the time she gets there, he has already been thrown out.

Toxic Landfill

When Libby goes looking for Runner, she finds out that he and other homeless people are squatting in an old toxic dump in the boonies of Oklahoma.



Themes and Motifs

Relying on Others

This theme is largely shown in the beginning of the book with Libby. After the rest of the day family was murdered, Libby received a large sum of money. Some of it was from insurance and the rest was money that the community raised to take care of her. Everyone was sympathetic toward Libby and walked on eggshells around her. As a result, an adult Libby was completely unable to take care of herself. She was so used to receiving money she couldn't imagine how she would get a job.

While the theme is demonstrated primarily with Libby, it is also shown with other characters. Diondra exhibits a similar behavior. She relies entirely on her rich parents to take care of her. She doesn't even clean up after her dogs when they make a mess in the house because she just naturally assumes that someone else will do this for her. When she gets pregnant, she forces Ben to take care of her because she doesn't know what else to do.

The theme is also shown in some of 1985 sections that focus on Runner. Patty talks about how it used to be easy to get a loan from the banks. Runner happily took out as much money as he could from the bank, but he ended up squandering it all away. Runner relied on the money from the bank to get by. When it was spent, he left.

Since then, Runner has always relied on someone else for money. He does not return to Patty to be a husband or a father. He returns because he needs money and doesn't know what else to do. He does the same when he reaches out to Libby in the present, still being completely reliant on his family or some other outside source to provide for him.

Appearances

This theme of Appearances is shown several times throughout the book. The theme is first presented with Ben being in prison. Libby starts the book believing that Ben must be guilty because of what she remembers from her past. Once she talks with Lyle and the rest of the Kill Club she realizes that she never personally witnessed the murders and just heard things. The rest of what she said was testimony fed to her by the police. She later learns the police didn't properly investigate because of the rumors of Ben being a Satanist.

Ben's reputation in 1985 is an example of Appearances as a theme as well. Everyone around town mistakenly believes that Ben is a horrible person. Even Patty starts to believe that Ben was a criminal. She finds a hidden bag in his room containing clothing for little girls and a notebook filled with names. Based on everything she's heard, she thinks all of those belong to Ben's victims. The truth is Krissi had lied about Ben's reputation, and the name and clothing were for Ben's daughter.



The night of the murders is an example of the theme of Appearances. Originally, Libby thought it was Ben that committed the murders. After that, she runs through a list of suspects. As Libby discovers the truth, she learns what really happened. Patty had arranged for her own murder because she wanted all her insurance money to go to her family so they could save the farm. Michelle was murdered because she found out about Diondra's child. The murders had nothing to do with Ben's uncontrollable rage or Satanic affiliations.

Letting Others Speak for You

This theme of Letting Others Speak for You is first shown when Libby is looking into Ben's case. She doesn't remember it because she was so young, but Lyle and the other members of the Kill Club bring up the fact that her testimony was perfectly recited, something a 7 year old shouldn't be able to do. Libby starts thinking back to everything that happened in court, and she realizes that she was simply reciting what the police were telling her to say about her brother and the murders.

Krissi goes through a similar experience when she accuses Ben of molesting her and other children. Krissi admits to her parents that she made things up when she realized how out of hand they were getting. Her father didn't let her tell anyone else this, and the police once again kept pushing for her to say what they wanted. They kept accusing her of not being brave whenever she tried to tell the truth.

Letting Others Speak for You is also demonstrated in a more subtle way with the way that Ben, Diondra, and Trey all interact with one another. Trey will frequently speak for Ben. When Diondra notices that Ben injured his head, she tries to find out what happened. Trey responds that Ben fell off of his bike, having no idea what happened, but choosing to go with the option that was most degrading and hurtful to Ben.

Diondra speaks for Ben several times after she announces her pregnancy. She talks about getting money to go to all the places that Ben said he wanted to live. Ben notes that she's saying places she wants to go and just implying Ben was the one who said it. This pressures Ben into starting a family with her. It is part of why he was silent for so long in prison.

Running Away Makes Problems Worse

This theme of Running Away Makes Problems Worse is shown with several different characters throughout the book. Diondra demonstrates the theme when she wants to run away with Ben. She knows that her father will be incredibly angry, stating that he will kill her if he finds out about the child. Diondra wants to get as much money as they can and run away. As a result, they steal from the Day family, and Michelle ends up getting killed.

Both of the Runner parents demonstrate this theme as well. Runner spends his life trying to escape from his problems. When the farm starts to fail, Runner just gives up



and leaves Patty alone to take care of the farm. What's even worse is he's leaving her alone with not just the farm, but also four children. Runner consistently owes a debt to people. When Libby goes looking for Runner in Oklahoma, he's hiding from everyone in the bar because he either owes them money or stole something from them.

Patty is running away at the end of the book, but in a different way compared to her husband or Diondra. Throughout the book, Patty struggles with her depression. She wants to give up on her life because she's too overwhelmed. At the same time, she cares about her family members. Patty wants to give up and run away from her problems by letting Calvin kill her. In her mind, her death gave her the chance to escape while still providing for her family. As Libby points out, both she and Ben ended up incredibly damaged by what happened and they needed family, not money.

Taking Responsibility

This theme is first shown when Libby must confront what happened with Ben. Part of the reason that Libby doesn't want to accept that Ben could be innocent is because it means she was responsible for putting him into prison for over 20 years. Ben even points this out to her when she does eventually visit him in prison. As difficult as it is, Libby accepts what she had done to Ben and manages to get over her guilt to work with Lyle and the Kill Club to find out what really happened to the Day family.

Ben himself is an example of this theme, although in a twisted way. While most characters don't want to take responsibility for the negative things they've done, Ben doesn't want to take responsibility for the negative things he's accused of. Ben takes responsibility for the murders, even though he didn't kill a single member of the Day family. Ben purposefully stayed silent because he couldn't bear the thought of Diondra going to prison, even though she killed his sister.

Lyle briefly touches upon the theme of taking responsibility as well when he tells Libby about the forest fire that he started. When Lyle was younger, he was walking through the woods, mindlessly playing with fire. He was tossing matches behind him, having no idea that they were catching and quickly spreading.

Lyle had to own up to what he did because he knew it was the right thing to do, even though he could have theoretically gotten away with it and nobody would have known. Lyle tells Libby this story because he wants to make her feel better about what happened with Ben. Also, he wants to let her know that it is possible to move on.

Secrets

Throughout the novel it becomes apparent that many of the people who were involved with the case against her brother, Ben, are lying. Libby just doesn't know why they are lying or why they are keeping secrets. Nearly every character has some sort of secret.



Ben, of course, has the greatest secret. He knows he didn't commit the murders; but, he is allowing others to believe that he did commit the crime. He has justified this to himself and is willing to take his secret to his grave.

Diondra keeps the same secret. She knows that Ben didn't kill Michelle because she is the one that did it. Later, she justifies the fact that Ben took the fall for her because he is doing so well in prison and is popular.

Patty had a horrible secret. The farm was failing and her children were starving. She paid a hit man to kill her so that her children would inherit the insurance money and they could lead better lives.

All of the secrets that the various players kept only tore them up inside and didn't lead to happier lives. In fact, the freedom they thought they were getting by keeping the secret actually only served to bind them further to a life of fear and paranoia.



Styles

Point of View

Dark Places is told from two different perspectives. The chapters in the present are told from the first person point of view of the main character, Libby Day. The first person perspective allows the reader to see exactly what Libby is thinking. Libby's emotions and true thoughts come across, which is important because Libby frequently lies to other characters or just chooses to remain very quiet.

The chapters that are set in 1985 are told in the third person. Each of these chapters switches between the perspective of either Patty or Ben, with one chapter near the end also being told from Calvin's perspective. This gives the reader insight into what the other characters were going through and the events that led up to the Day murders.

Language and Meaning

The language used differs based on which character is focused on in the chapter. The chapters that focus on Ben tend to demonstrate anger. The word annihilation frequently appears in Ben's chapters to represent the darker, violent urges that he feels. In comparison, Patty's chapters tend to focus more on her depression and the helplessness that she's feeling. Libby's chapters are a combination of the two depending on what's happening in the book.

Structure

Dark Places is told in a very structured fashion. The first chapter starts with Libby explaining about what happened in the past and how she has become the person that she is in the present. The next chapter takes place in 1985. The story continues to alternate between one chapter occurring in the present and the next chapter having taken place in the past. There are a few exceptions toward the end of the book, where one chapter is from the present day Ben and one chapter focuses on Calvin. Also, toward the end more chapters are written about 1985. The final chapter takes place in the present.

The events in the past always coincide with whatever Libby is investigating in the present. For example, when she's investigating Krissi and Lou in the present the chapters in the past will focus on Patty finding out about the allegations against Ben, or Ben forming a relationship with Krissi in the first place. Libby's chapter tends to set up the mystery, and the past chapters explain what actually happened.



Quotes

“I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ. Slit me at my belly and it might slide out, meaty and dark, drop on the floor so you could stomp on it. It’s the Day blood. Something’s wrong with it. I was never a good little girl, and I got worse after the murders.”

-- Ben (Chapter 1 paragraph Paragraph 1)

Importance: Very early on in the book, this quote establishes the darkness that Libby feels inside of her, something that she believes is shared with her family. It also establishes that Libby has witnessed murders in her life, which is the driving plot of the book.

“But the meanness usually wins out. My brother slaughtered my family when I was seven. My mom, two sisters, gone: bang bang, chop chop, choke choke. I didn’t really have to do anything after that, nothing was expected.”

-- Libby (Chapter 1 paragraph Paragraph 4)

Importance: This passage highlights the severe depression that Libby faces throughout the book. It also clarifies that the murders she witnessed were those of her family members.

““Dirty bugger,” Ben said, and poked her in her side. It was some old joke with them, that phrase.”

-- Ben (Chapter 2 paragraph Paragraph 33)

Importance: Ben and Libby had a very close relationship, especially since Ben seemed to despise his other family members. At this early point in the book, it makes it look like Ben was the killer, but he spared Libby because of their close connection.

“. If I disappeared, the cops would have a place to start. Of course, if I had a friend, maybe the friend would tell me, No way am I letting you do that, sweetie, the way women always said things, in that protective voice.”

-- Libby (Chapter 3 paragraph Paragraph 3)

Importance: This passage once again highlights the depression that Libby feels, but it also emphasizes that she doesn’t have anyone in her life, something that will change by the end of the book.

“In truth though, I wasn’t proud of my family. No one had ever liked the Days. Me and my two sisters had been the cause of at least four lice infestations in our short grade-school experience. Dirty Days.”

-- Libby (Chapter 3 paragraph Paragraph 6)

Importance: This passage brings up the poverty that the Day family struggled with, and it also touches on the abusive nature of Runner.



“No. I saw what I saw that night, I thought, my forever-mantra. Even though that wasn’t true. The truth was I didn’t see anything. OK? Fine. I technically saw nothing.”

-- Libby (Chapter 3 paragraph Paragraph 152)

Importance: This is the first time that Libby admits she might not have really known what happened the night of the murders. As a result, she is intent on proving Ben’s innocence.

“He’d been too young when his dad left. He never had a chance to learn anything practical.”

-- Ben (Chapter 4 paragraph Paragraph 7)

Importance: Ben constantly obsesses over what it means to be a man. This is a huge part of his motivation to cover up what happened with Diondra after the murders.

“The actual stuff my family owned, those boxes under my stairs, I can’t quite bear to look at. I like other people’s things better. They come with other people’s history.”

-- Libby (Chapter 5 paragraph Paragraph 4)

Importance: This passage shows Libby’s desire to escape from the past. Her kleptomania ends up being a plot point much later on as well, since that’s how she gets some of Diondra’s DNA.

“Her legs puddled and suddenly Patty was sitting on the floor. She didn’t have enough energy to leave the farm, ever.”

-- Patty (Chapter 10 paragraph Paragraph 3)

Importance: Patty’s depression is a major part of her character, and this passage highlights just how much she was suffering and later explains why she wants to end her life.

“Maybe I can have one person from my family still in my life and I won’t be so fucking lonely, because—and I mean, I know you talked to Magda, believe me I heard all about that, and so yeah I have people who visit me and care about me, but they’re not you, they’re not anyone who knows me except as the guy with the ... and I was just thinking it’d be so goddam nice to be able to talk with my sister.”

-- Ben (Chapter 19 paragraph Paragraph 77)

Importance: This passage shows the depression that Ben faces. It also shows that he’s hiding something from Libby, which she later discovers to be the fate of Diondra and his daughter. Ben’s desire to have a family again is emphasized in this part as well.

Ben pressed his hand against the glass, and my brother and I matched palms.”

-- Libby (Chapter 41 paragraph Paragraph 33)

Importance: Both of the Day children are recognizing how damaged they are. Libby



finally presses her glass against the palm, her way of accepting Ben back into her life, as well as admitting the damage that they share.

““You really give her a pass?” “I know a little bit about trying to do the right thing and fucking up completely,” I added.

-- Ben and Libby (chapter 41 paragraph 33)

Importance: This is the first time that they meet after 20 years. They discuss their mother and their own particularly damaged lives.