

Deathwatch Study Guide

Deathwatch by Robb White

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Contents

[Deathwatch Study Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Plot Summary..... 3](#)

[Chapters 1-3..... 5](#)

[Chapters 4-6..... 7](#)

[Chapters 7-10..... 9](#)

[Chapters 11-14..... 11](#)

[Chapters 15-17..... 13](#)

[Characters..... 15](#)

[Objects/Places..... 18](#)

[Themes..... 20](#)

[Style..... 22](#)

[Quotes..... 24](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 25](#)



Plot Summary

Deathwatch is the award-winning novel by Robb White. Ben is a young college student who agrees to act as a guide for a rich executive who has been given the opportunity to hunt bighorn sheep. However, when the executive accidentally shoots and kills an unknown prospector, he turns on Ben in fear that Ben will testify against him in court. Ben finds himself stripped naked and forced to face the elements of the desert while a madman outthinks him every time he makes an attempt to save himself. Deathwatch is a novel filled with suspense that will leave the reader on the edge of their seat until the final chapter.

Ben is quietly unhappy to be spending the next few days with Madec, an executive who hopes to bag a perfect bighorn sheep. Ben would never have chosen Madec as a hunting partner, but he needs money to continue his college education and Madec is paying him enough to cover at least one semester, hopefully two. Three days into the trip, Ben takes Madec into the mountains where they find a herd of sheep. Madec takes aim, but Ben warns him to wait until he sees the horns. Madec shoots anyway. When Madec goes into the mountain to check on his kill, he makes Ben promise that if the sheep is not perfect he will allow him to continue hunting. Ben agrees, thinking of what he could do with the promised money, but promising himself he will not take Madec where he will find more sheep.

Madec checks out his kill and then comes running back, assuring Ben that he missed. Ben, who has seen blood on the rocks, does not believe Madec and goes in search of the animal anyway. Instead of an animal, Ben discovers that Madec has shot an old prospector. The old man is not someone Ben recognizes. Madec begs Ben to bury the body and forget about it, but Ben insists they must take the body back to the sheriff and explain what happened. While Ben is gone gathering the necessary tools to take the old man out of the mountains, he hears his rifle fire twice. When he returns, Ben discovers that Madec has shot the old man twice with Ben's rifle.

Madec tells Ben that he cannot risk going to jail and if Ben insists on going back to town he will tell the sheriff that Ben killed the old man. Ben argues. Madec then forces Ben at gunpoint to strip naked. Madec wants to make it appear that Ben went insane from dehydration and heat stroke. Ben has no choice. Ben strips and runs off at gunpoint. Ben then double backs and waits for Madec to leave the area, hoping to take the boots and clothing from the old prospector. However, Madec is once again one step ahead of Ben and has stripped the dead man of all his clothing. Ben then goes in search of the prospector's camp only to find that Madec has also found it and stripped it of all usable items.

Ben finds water the next day, but Madec fires the rifle at him, forcing him away from the water. As Ben sleeps, Madec comes up the mountain and destroys the water hole. This leaves Ben desperate and only hours from death. Ben decides to make his way to a butte where he suspects there might be water caught in a tunnel-like fissure. Ben walks all night and climbs through the morning, finally making it up the butte and finding water.



Ben spends a day recovering and eating small birds who come to drink the water. Then Ben realizes that Madec has found him and is attempting to climb the butte.

Ben slips off the butte in the middle of the night and hides not far from Madec's camp. In the morning, Ben creates a distraction and forces Madec to come running back to camp. As he does, Ben fires on Madec with a slingshot he found in the prospector's camp. Ben then ties up Madec and goes back to town to the sheriff's office. Unfortunately, the sheriff's deputy believes Madec's story over Ben's. Ben faces murder charges and aggravated assault charges until the new doctor in town testifies that there is no way Ben killed the prospector with his smaller gun or shot Madec with his rifle. Ben is finally free of Madec and his lies.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

Deathwatch won the Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America shortly after its publication in 1972.

In Chapter 1, Ben, a college student, is acting as a guide for executive, Madec, in the desert near his hometown so that Madec might hunt and kill a single bighorn sheep. On their first night in camp, Madec told Ben about some of his business deals and Ben has gotten the sense that Madec is not only ruthless, but that he enjoys hurting his business rivals. Ben cannot wait until this week is over so that he can take the money he has earned and get away from unpleasant Madec. Now, three days into the trip, Madec is drawing down on a herd of bighorn and Ben has reason to hope that this trip will soon be over. Ben warns Madec not to fire until he sees the horns, but Madec fires anyway, promising Ben he saw horns. Madec asks Ben that if this kill does not have good horns, will he hide the animal and help him find something better. Madec promises Ben a great deal of money, enough to pay for several semesters of college. Ben agrees, silently swearing to take Madec away from where he knows there are more bighorn sheep.

Ben follows Madec into the mountains as he searches for his kill. Madec rushes up ahead and then quickly turns back, telling Ben that he missed. Ben does not believe him because he can see blood on a rock ahead of him. Madec says he might have nicked it, but did not kill it. Ben insists on looking anyway. When Ben climbs the final stretch of trail, he discovers an old prospector who has been shot cleanly in the chest.

In Chapter 2, Madec swears to Ben that he saw horns before he fired, but Ben insists he could not have. Madec then asks if Ben knows the man. Ben, who has lived in the area all his life and knows many of the prospectors who continue to search the desert for gold, admits he does not know this man. However, in Ben's mind this does not change anything. Ben insists they must take the body to the sheriff. Madec reluctantly agrees. Madec tells Ben to leave his rifle as he goes to get his jeep. Ben walks down to the jeep and drives it higher into the mountains before gathering a sheet and rope. As Ben walks back to the spot where Madec waits, he hears Madec fire off Ben's rifle twice. Ben thinks nothing of it until he arrives at Madec's side.

In Chapter 3, Madec begins telling Ben how bad any investigation into this death could be for him and how much he would be willing to pay Ben to hide the body and get rid of the evidence. When Ben refuses, Madec shows Ben that the body now has two more bullet wounds. Madec tells Ben he will tell a different story to the sheriff and that his story will be more believable than the truth. When Ben continues to refuse to agree to Madec's scheme, Madec turns the gun on him and forces him to strip down to his underwear. Ben suddenly realizes how precarious his situation is. Madec forces Ben to run off. Ben does, but circles back around to watch Madec's next move.



Chapters 1-3 Analysis

In these early chapters, the author introduces the main characters and the conflict that will propel the plot of the novel. Ben is a college student who has great dreams of becoming a geologist and getting a job with an oil company. To pay for this, Ben agrees to act as a guide to executive Madec as he hunts bighorn sheep in the desert near Ben's hometown. Unfortunately, things go badly quickly. The reader knows that Ben is a smart kid who has lived in this area all his life, therefore he knows this desert well and all its perils. For this reason, if anyone has a chance to survive in the desert, it is Ben. At the same time, the reader meets Madec, a ruthless business man who thinks he can buy and sell anyone. When Madec accidentally kills a local prospector living in the mountains, he panics and decides to pin the crime on Ben.

The conflict of this novel is not only man against man as Madec attempts to make it appear that Ben went crazy with the heat and lack of water, but also a conflict of man against desert. Ben must not only fight Madec, but he must fight the conditions of a desert that can kill a man in any number of ways. Ben must do this without the protection of clothing, water, and food. Ben's outlook is grave as the novel's plot continues to develop.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

In Chapter 4, Ben watches the area where the prospector was killed and discovers that Madec has already moved on. Ben slips closer to the body in hopes of stealing the man's boots, but discovers that Madec has completely undressed the body and taken off with the sheet and rope Ben brought to the area. Ben then goes in search of the prospector's camp, hoping the old man had some food and water that would help Ben. However, when he finds the camp, he discovers that Madec found it first. Everything of use to Ben is gone or damaged, including a water can. Ben does find a locked box that Madec overlooked, but inside all Ben finds is a wallet with very little money and a large, well-made slingshot. Ben takes the slingshot.

In Chapter 5, Ben follows a sheep trail in hopes of finding water, but comes to a cliff instead. Ben is about to lose hope when he spots a water basin at the bottom of the cliff. The basin is filled with sand that experience tells Ben hides water left from the last rainstorm. After contemplating the damage to his bare feet, Ben jumps down from the cliff. As Ben begins making his way to the basin, Madec spots him from a terrace across the desert floor. Madec begins firing at Ben with the small Hornet rifle belonging to Ben. Ben is not sure what Madec's trying to do, but quickly realizes that Madec is trying to keep him from the basin. Ben stands and holds his hands up in defeat before retreating to a shaded area where he can sleep.

In Chapter 6, when Ben wakes, he begins to survey his options. They are too far from any city or town for Ben to walk. To get away from where Madec can see him, Ben would have to go to the north side of the mountain, but there is little over there in the way of water or food. To Ben, his only option seems to be a butte some distance from the mountain where he sits. Ben waits until it is completely dark before coming off his mountain and beginning the trek across the desert. Ben uses leaves from several plants to create sandals for his feet to protect them from the desert rocks. When it gets close to dawn, Ben begins to run despite his exhaustion and dehydration.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

The moment that Ben realizes how serious his situation is, he begins to search for ways to get out of this situation alive. Ben is acutely aware of how long a man can go without water in the heat of the desert, therefore he knows he only has a matter of time before he descends into hallucinations and death. For this reason, Ben makes finding suitable protection and water his first priority. However, Madec outthinks Ben every step of the way. Madec shows how he has become such a successful business man. Madec thinks of everything that Ben might try to do and he is one step ahead of him at every moment. This makes it seem that Ben is without much hope. Either Ben will die or he will become



so sick from lack of water that he will descend into madness. Either way, Madec will be able to convince the authorities that Ben is responsible for the old prospector's death.

As the day progresses, Ben becomes more and more desperate, especially when the toll on his body from the heat and lack of water becomes more and more apparent. Ben finds water, but Madec fires at him to keep him away from it. However, Ben knows this area better than Madec, giving himself and the reader some hope when he begins making his way across the desert floor to a butte.



Chapters 7-10

Chapters 7-10 Summary

In Chapter 7, Ben reaches the butte and moves to a side where he hopes Madec will not see him right away. Ben searches for handholds to help him climb the side of the butte but has such a hard time that he nearly gives up. Finally Ben finds a single handhold and pulls himself up the side of the slick rock with pure determination. Naked now because he has used his underwear to wrap his swollen and torn feet, Ben slides across a ledge on the butte that slowly takes him up the side. When Ben reaches a fissure in the rock, he cannot find a way around it. Instead, Ben falls into the fissure and slides on his back and bottom along the new ledge until once again he finds himself rising up the side of the rock.

In Chapter 8, when Ben reaches the edge of the ledge, he finds that he has come to another fissure in the rock. Ben feels cheated because there is no way around this fissure and it is too wide for him to get across it. Ben studies the fissure and discovers it is shaped something like a funnel. As Ben contemplates his situation, Madec fires on him with the Hornet. Ben realizes he has been shot in the arm but there is little pain. As Madec gets into the jeep and begins to move closer to the butte, Ben knows he has no choice. Ben takes a running start from the ledge and runs up the edge of the funnel-like fissure fast enough that momentum takes him to the top where the rock begins to level out once more. When he reaches a cave-like structure at the top, Ben discovers water.

In Chapter 9, Ben drinks his fill at the rain created lake. Within a short time, Ben begins to recover from dehydration, but the abrasions and cuts on his body begin to hurt. Ben also begins to notice hunger. Ben practices with the slingshot, first with pebbles and then with the buckshot he found with the weapon, until he becomes very good. Ben kills several birds and eats them raw. Ben vows to never eat them raw again, but to let the sun cook them.

In Chapter 10, Ben sleeps through the night and kills more birds for a meal later in the day. Ben spies on Madec from a place where he can see Madec but Madec cannot see him. In a short time Ben comes to realize that Madec plans to climb the butte to get to Ben. Ben realizes that Madec has no intention of allowing Ben to live, but he also has no plans to leave Ben in the desert in such a manner that someone might guess the truth. Then Ben sees a helicopter fly into the area.

Chapters 7-10 Analysis

It takes brute strength for Ben to get himself up the side of the butte. Ben is severely dehydrated and is suffering from cuts and bruises on his feet and face. This is compounded by abrasions he gets on his back as he makes his way up the butte and then by a gunshot wound to his forearm given to him by Madec when he spots Ben on



the side of the butte. Ben is in terrible shape and dying, but he refuses to give up. In fact, Ben throws away caution and takes amazing chances in order to make his way to a tunnel in the butte that reveals water.

At this point in the novel, Ben's biggest challenge has been finding water because the lack of water is killing him faster than anything Madec could do to him. Now that he has found water, Ben can turn his attention to Madec. Ben has outsmarted Madec and found both food and water, turning the tide of the game Madec is playing. However, Madec knows where Ben is and has no intention of letting him get away. Therefore, the tension only becomes more intense as Ben becomes aware of Madec attempting to climb the butte to reach him. Some hope is injected into the plot at the end of chapter 10 when Ben sees a helicopter coming their way, but the reader must wonder what Madec might tell the pilot that could keep Ben from rescue.



Chapters 11-14

Chapters 11-14 Summary

In Chapter 11, Ben screams down to the helicopter as it lands near Madec's camp, but the sound of the engines is too loud for anyone to hear him. Ben hopes the pilot will turn off the engine, but he does not. A game warden gets out of the helicopter, but Ben does not know who it is because this man is not in uniform. Ben tries to get the man's attention as he talks to Madec, but he cannot be heard. Unfortunately, the helicopter flies off without ever seeing Ben. Madec returns to the side of the butte and continues to attempt to create handholds in the side of the rock. Ben studies Madec's camp and his prints heading to and from the butte. Ben has an idea. When Madec returns to his camp and goes to sleep, Ben begins to descend from the butte.

In Chapter 12, Ben walks to a large boulder that is near Madec's camp and begins to dig a deep hole. Using tubing from the slingshot for a breathing tube and a tube to hear through, Ben buries himself in the sand. Ben fights panic most of the night as he waits for Madec to walk back to the butte in the morning.

In Chapter 13, Ben finally hears Madec walk past his hiding place. When Ben is convinced that Madec is back at work on the side of the butte, Ben quickly runs to Madec's camp. Ben grabs the Hornet from the jeep, but discovers that Madec has removed the bolt. Ben then investigates the tent and discovers that Madec has hidden both Ben and the old man's clothing among his locked luggage. Ben returns to the jeep, determined to just drive out of the desert, only he discovers that Madec has removed the rotor from the engine. Unable to escape, Ben decides he must draw Madec to him. Ben uses the oil from the lantern to catch the tent on fire, finally getting Madec's attention when the lantern explodes.

In Chapter 14, as Madec runs toward Ben, Ben begins firing on him using buckshot in the slingshot. Madec is hit three times, but continues to attempt to retrieve his large .358 rifle to shoot at Ben. Finally Madec is down. Ben ties him up and puts him in the jeep. Ben dresses and then drives to the place where he last saw the prospector's body, placing him in the jeep as well. Ben then drives himself and Madec back to town. On the drive, Madec offers to pay Ben ten thousand dollars if he will just forget everything that has happened.

Chapters 11-14 Analysis

The helicopter gives Ben hope until he sees Madec speak to the occupants and then watches them fly away. The reader must wonder what Madec said to the occupant of the helicopter and how it might impact Ben as the plot continues to develop. It seems Madec has been one step ahead of Ben all along and that this might not be an exception.



Ben becomes desperate, realizing he must do something before Madec gets onto the butte. Ben leaves the butte and buries himself. This seems ironic to the reader, that Ben would place himself in a grave while fighting to preserve his life. However, the trick works and Ben is able to get into Madec's camp and use it to get the better of Madec. For once Ben is smarter and quicker than Madec. However, it is quite clear that Madec is not done when he threatens Ben and then offers to pay him ten thousand dollars to forget the whole ordeal. This foreshadows the confrontation with police that could leave either Madec or Ben behind bars.



Chapters 15-17

Chapters 15-17 Summary

In Chapter 15, Ben and Madec arrive at the sheriff's station to discover that the sheriff has gone home and one of his deputies, Strick, is left in charge. Ben tells Strick he has a dead body in his car and wants to report an accident. When Strick finds Madec tied up in the jeep, he orders Ben to free him and take him to the local clinic. Ben does as he is told, waiting while Madec's wounds are cared for. When it is Ben's turn to have his wounds cared for, he is so exhausted that he barely notices the hostility shown him by the nurse. The doctor takes careful note of each of Ben's wounds before treating them and releasing him. Strick then takes Ben back to the sheriff's office to question him. When Ben grows too tired to answer questions, Strick tells him he is under arrest.

In Chapter 16, Ben is placed in a jail cell where he sleeps all night. In the morning, Ben asks the guard who brings his breakfast what is going on, but the man is hostile toward him. Ben gets a visit from his uncle. A few minutes later, Ben is led out into the main part of the office where the justice of the peace and some lawyers for Madec are waiting. Ben tells them the story and answers their questions. When Ben is taken back to his cell, his uncle tells him Madec's story. Madec has told everyone that Ben got into a fight with the old prospector and killed him with the Hornet, then shot him with Madec's gun to make it look as though Madec had done it. Madec then claims that Ben went crazy when Madec refused to go along with his story. Ben tells his uncle this is all lies, but his uncle does not believe him. Later, when the deputy comes with his dinner, Ben asks him to search for the slingshot that has somehow gone missing.

Later Ben is called back out to the lobby. Ben is again questioned. Les, a supervisor with the Game and Fish Department, tells the justice of the peace that he found no evidence that Ben had been on the butte. In fact, Les seems to agree with Madec's version, the Ben wandered off to go hunting alone. Ben questions Les, attempting to put holes in the evidence, but no one believes him. However, Ben recalls that Les was dressed in clothing other than his uniform and asked about that, seeming to prove that he was not hunting but up on the butte.

In Chapter 17, as Ben is being led back to his cell by Strick, the doctor from the clinic comes in with Madec's lawyers. The doctor testifies that Ben's injuries are consistent with a man who was naked when he was injured and that the bullet that killed the prospector was not the Hornet bullets, but a larger bullet fired from Madec's gun. The doctor then shows the justice of the peace the buckshot taken from Madec's arm and the slingshot he saw Madec throw away at the clinic. In the end, the doctor's testimony proves that Madec's story is a lie. Ben is told he is free to go and the justice of the peace asks if Ben will testify against Madec. Ben refuses.



Chapters 15-17 Analysis

Ben is finely freed from Madec's torture and returns to town, the same town where he has lived all his life, only to find himself under arrest for aggravated assault. Ben can hardly believe people he has known all his life would believe Madec over him, but he finally convinces them of the truth with help from a doctor who is new to town and Ben does not know well. In the end, the truth wins out, but Ben is so disgusted with the whole thing that he does not want to testify against Madec. In truth, Ben proves to everyone that he is a better man not only than Madec, but all of them as well. Ben has just gotten a taste of what it's like to be the odd man out and does not like it. At least justice is served in the end.



Characters

Ben

Ben is a young college student who lives in a small desert town. Ben is hired by an executive called Madec to take him into the desert and show him where the bighorn sheep live. Ben dislikes Madec from the beginning, but the man is paying him enough money to pay for a semester of school, maybe even two. For this reason, Ben puts up with Madec's attitude. When they spot a herd of sheep in the mountain ahead of them, Madec fires before Ben sees the horns, making Ben think Madec has shot something other than the large, male bighorn he has a permit to shoot. When they check out the kill, Ben discovers that Madec shot a man. Ben wants to take the body to the sheriff and explain what happened, but Madec is afraid of going to jail.

Madec strips Ben of his clothing and sends him out into the desert to die. Ben outwits Madec, however, and gets the better of the executive, dragging him into town with the body of the dead man to face justice. However, Madec twists the truth in such a way that Ben is arrested instead. Ben faces years in prison unless he can convince the people he has known his whole life that he is innocent of the crime. With the help of a new doctor to town, Ben does convince everyone of the truth.

Madec

Madec is an executive who has won a chance to hunt bighorn sheep in the desert. Madec is determined to get a large, perfect specimen that he can brag about to his friends. However, when Madec fires prematurely on a herd of sheep, he shoots a man instead of a sheep. Madec is afraid that if Ben testifies that he told Madec not to fire his weapon without spotting the horns of the sheep Madec will go to jail. Madec does not want this. When Madec cannot convince Ben with money to forget about the dead prospector, claiming no one cares about the old man anyway, Madec strips Ben of his clothing at gunpoint and forces him into the desert without protection, food, or water. Ben nearly dies of dehydration, but manages to survive and capture Madec. Unfortunately, Madec has had several days to think of a good story that will sound much better than the truth. The police believe Madec, but the evidence does not hold up and Madec is charged with assault.

Uncle

After the deaths of his parents, Ben was raised by his uncle. Ben's uncle comes to the jail after Ben's arrest and tries to offer support, but it is clear to Ben that even his uncle does not believe him. Ben's uncle repeatedly advises Ben to be quiet and to wait for a lawyer, but Ben fights for the truth and eventually convinces everyone his story is true when the town doctor comes forward with evidence that supports Ben's side of things.



Strick

Strick was a classmate of Ben's in high school. Strick always wanted to be sheriff and takes his job very seriously as a deputy sheriff. For this reason, Ben does not know him very well. Strick is the deputy in charge when Ben arrives with the dead prospector and Madec. Strick immediately believes Madec's story and refuses to believe Ben, arresting him for aggravated assault.

Sergeant Hamilton

Sergeant Hamilton is the sheriff in Ben's hometown and a close friend of Ben's. When Hamilton learns what has happened, he is forced to place Ben in jail and to allow the justice of the peace to conduct an investigation. Hamilton is of little help to Ben as he struggles to clear his name of this crime, because both the evidence and the reputation of Madec block his progress.

Dr. Saunders

Dr. Saunders is a young doctor who took a job in this small desert town soon after finishing his training, a fact that makes many wonder what he might be running away from. Ben does not know this man well, but finds him cold and professional. Dr. Saunders seems to be on Madec's side until he comes to the sheriff's office and informs the investigators that there are holes in Madec's story. In fact, Dr. Saunders has found the slingshot that Ben shot Madec with, proving a huge portion of Ben's story. This allows Ben to go free.

Emma Williams

Emma Williams is a nurse in the clinic in Ben's small town. Emma and Ben know each other well and Emma is usually kind to Ben, but after hearing Madec's story, Emma treats Ben poorly. However, Ben is so tired he does not recognize Emma's hostility. Emma is the one who tells Uncle the story Madec has told everyone, giving Ben some insight into what is going on around him.

Les Stanton

Les Stanton is a supervisor with the Game and Fish Department. Les was the supervisor on the helicopter that Ben saw while he was hiding on the butte. At first Ben did not believe it was Les because of the way he was dressed, but later was able to prove he was on the butte and not seven miles away hunting alone as Madec claimed by being able to tell the investigators what Les was wearing that day. Les is also able to testify that Ben did not have his Hornet rifle with him that day because he saw it in the jeep. This testimony helps to clear Ben.



Barowitz

Barowitz is a big city lawyer paid by Madec to defend him in the case against Ben. Barowitz comes up with several arguments that supposedly prove Ben's story to be untrue, but in the end the doctor comes up with enough testimony to prove Madec a liar.

Hondurak

Hondurak is the justice of the peace in the small town where Ben lives. Hondurak conducts the investigation into Ben's charges in order to decide if Ben should be held over for trial. It is during this investigation that the doctor is able to give evidence that proves Ben innocent.



Objects/Places

Sandals

Ben makes sandals for his sore feet first out of bird nests in old cactus and later out of the leaves of hardy sobol plants.

Climbing Gear

Madec manufactures makeshift climbing gear out of metal tent stakes he found with Ben's tools in an attempt to climb the butte where Ben has found water.

Luggage

Madec has brought a suitcase and duffel bag on the hunting trip. Madec becomes outraged for an unknown reason when he learns that Ben left his suitcase in the burning tent.

Bird Bones

Ben asks Les to return to the butte and find bird bones in the tunnel that prove that he was in there during the time in which Madec claims Ben was hunting alone.

Slingshot

Ben finds a specially made slingshot in the old prospector's camp that he later uses to injure Madec in order to escape his ordeal in the desert.

Buckshot

Ben uses buckshot that he found with the slingshot in order to injure Madec and take him prisoner to end his ordeal.

Hornet

A Hornet is a small, .22 caliber rifle. Ben uses the Hornet because he has had the gun a long time and is comfortable with it. Madec uses this gun to shoot the prospector twice in order to make it appear that Ben killed the prospector. Madec also uses this gun to shoot Ben in the arm.



.358 Magnum Mauser

Madec's gun is a large caliber .358 Magnum Mauser on a Winchester 70 stock with a powerful scope. Madec uses this gun to kill the prospector.

Tent

Ben and Madec have a tent that they use to camp in during their hunting trip. Later, Ben lights the tent on fire to draw Madec to him.

Jeep

Ben uses his white jeep to travel into the desert on this hunting trip with Madec. After Madec forces Ben to strip and run into the desert, Madec takes control of the jeep. Ben tries to steal it back only to discover Madec has removed its rotor.

Helicopter

Ben sees a helicopter fly down near Madec's camp and someone get out to speak with Madec. Ben later learns that this was Les Stanton, a supervisor with the Game and Fish Department.

Prospector's Camp

After Madec kills the prospector and forces Ben to escape naked into the desert, Ben finds the prospector's camp in hopes of finding food, water, and clothing. Instead, he discovers that Madec has already found the camp and destroyed everything.

Butte

Ben climbs a butte in the hopes of finding water in one of the many fissures that mar the butte's surface. Ben is successful and is able to plan a way to escape his current fate.



Themes

Survival

Ben finds himself in a dangerous situation at the beginning of this novel when a wealthy man forces him to strip and run out into the desert without any protection from the elements. Having grown up in the area, Ben knows more about life and death in the desert than anyone. Ben also knows exactly what to expect when a lack of water begins to take its toll on his body. Ben is more frightened by his situation than the madman who has placed him in it could possibly know.

Ben struggles to find water and protection from the elements from the moment Madec forces him out of his clothes at the beginning of the novel. However, every step Ben takes, Madec has already thought of and removed. Ben finally finds water despite everything Madec has done to stop him, including shooting Ben in the arm. Unfortunately, Madec is still determined to find Ben and kill him. Ben must get the better of Madec before Madec can get him. For this reason, Ben sets Madec up and shoots at him with a slingshot until Madec stops fighting. Ben wins this fight for survival, only to find himself fighting for his freedom when he is arrested for assaulting Madec.

Trust

By going hunting together, Ben and Madec made a sort of pact that requires a certain amount of trust. However, Ben realizes from the beginning that Madec is not a good man and that he enjoys the pain he can cause others in his business dealings. For this reason, Ben is weary of Madec, but not enough to see Madec's tricks after the death of a prospector leads Madec to set Ben up for the crime.

As a stranger, Ben realizes that he could not trust Madec as much as the situation seemed to demand. However, Ben believes he should be able to trust the people of his home town as much as he knows they can trust him. Unfortunately, Ben learns that with Madec telling lies about him that the people of his hometown are more willing to trust a wealthy man like Madec than a nobody like Ben. For this reason, Ben finds himself fighting for his freedom against men who should have been able to trust him and take him at his word. For this reason, trust is a theme of the novel.

Wealth

Madec is a wealthy man who clearly thinks that his wealth can buy him anything that he wants. At the beginning of the novel, Madec offers Ben a great deal of money to be a guide for him in the desert. When Madec fires his weapon and comes to believe he did not kill a bighorn as he had planned, he offers Ben to hide whatever animal he shot and to help him continue to search for bighorn. Finally, when it is discovered that Madec shot a man, he offers Ben money to cover up this crime.



Madec is used to getting everything he wants. Even when Ben finally gets the better of Madec, injuring him and forcing him to turn himself in at the sheriff's office, Madec continues to offer money to be set free. In the end, however, it is not money but a story that is more believable than the truth that Madec relies on to get himself out of trouble. The people of Ben's town seem more willing to believe Madec because of his wealth and his position in life than they are Ben. For this reason, wealthy is an important theme of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is limited and omniscient third person from Ben's perspective. The author allows the reader to see all of Ben's thoughts and emotions throughout the novel, but remains only in Ben's mind, creating a point of view that is limited omniscient because the author does not move from mind to mind in the telling of his story.

The point of view of this novel works well with the plot of the novel because it shows the story through the eyes of Ben, the character who finds himself at the mercy of a madman. In this way, the reader is able to see the struggle Ben goes through as he attempts to survive his ordeal. At the same time, the reader can see the frustrations Ben has as he attempts to prove his story to the authorities back in his hometown. For this reason, the point of view of this novel works well with the plot.

Setting

The novel is set mainly in the desert, possibly the Mohave Desert in California. The author never names the desert, but describes it quite well throughout the novel. The novel's setting switches at the end of the novel when Ben takes Madec back to face the consequences of his actions, only to find himself arrested for assaulting Madec. This small town is a place where Ben has lived all his life, compounding the insult of the actions of those who have known him for so long.

The setting of this novel is important because the danger that the plot is built on would not be as great if the novel were set somewhere else. The situation in the plot is dependent on the setting, beginning with Madec's hunting trip for bighorn sheep and ending with Ben's struggle to survive without food, clothing, or water in the desert. If the novel were set in another location, the plot would not work nearly as well. For this reason, the setting of this novel becomes something of a character in the novel and works exceedingly well with the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The author has written a novel for the average adult reader and therefore his language reflects that of the average adult reader. The novel does not contain any foreign words and or words that are incredibly technical. Although there is a part in the novel in which the author describes the creation of a butte on the desert floor, the words used are all common words that most readers will have little trouble understanding.



The language of the novel works well with the plot because it is language that is common to the intended audience and it is language that the reader can imagine the characters in the novel would use in such circumstances. Should the language be more formal or less formal, the language would not reflect the characters the author has chosen to write about. For this reason, the language of this novel works well with the plot.

Structure

The novel is divided into seventeen chapters. Each chapter is of average length. The novel is written mostly in narration as Ben, the narrator, spends a great deal of the novel on his own attempting to survive his ordeal in the desert. In other portions of the novel there is a great deal of dialogue. All this dialogue is well written and believable, making the characters speaking sound intelligent and well developed.

The novel contains one main plot and a few subplots. The main plot follows Ben as he struggles to survive the desert after being forced to relinquish all his clothing, water, and food. One subplot follows Madec's attempts to foil Ben's chances at survival. Another subplot follows Madec's attempts to make it appear as though Ben is the crazy one rather than Madec. All the plots of the novel come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the book.



Quotes

"Ben had never known bighorn sheep to behave this way. There had been five of them on the ridge but something had alarmed them and they had disappeared. By now they should be half a mile from here and still going." (Chapter 1, p. 9).

"He tried not to think of Madec at all as he climbed down the long slope of the mountain, picking out a path for the Jeep as he went." (Chapter 2, p. 21).

"It was a small satisfaction, but as Ben studied the ridge he thought, Okay, Madec, now you've made your first mistake." (Chapter 3, p. 42).

"If he could find a catch basin somewhere in these hills and could squeeze as much as a quart of water out of the sand, it would do him no good at all." (Chapter 4, p. 44).

"At first Ben didn't know what had waked him, but he awoke with dread, as though some enemy was close on him, threatening him." (Chapter 6, p. 68).

"Ben stood at the base of the butte and hated it." (Chapter 7, p. 81).

"The sun was the most fearsome thing Ben had ever seen." (Chapter 8, p. 98).

"It was insulting; the thought of being killed here in the desert where he had always lived by this man from the city was insulting and outrageous." (Chapter 11, p. 125).

"This is my grave. I'm in my grave. I'm buried alive." (Chapter 12, p. 139).

"Now, Ben thought as he put a buckshot into the leather holder, he's coming to me. The way I want him to." (Chapter 13, p. 154).

"'It means you're not going home,' Strick said, his voice different now; tough. 'It means you're going to jail.'" (Chapter 15, p. 179).

"Nobody said anything. Nobody even looked at Ben." (Chapter 17, p. 219).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Ben? Why is he in the desert with Madec? What are they attempting to do? Why does Ben dislike Madec? What did Ben expect from Madec? Why has Ben agreed to remain with Madec? Why does Ben agree to help Madec find a larger and better bighorn sheep after he fires at what they both think is a bighorn? What does Ben plan to do if he and Madec continue to hunt for bighorn?

Who is Madec? Why is he hunting bighorn? What does Madec hope to get when he finally shoots a bighorn? Why does Madec insist that he saw horns before firing his weapon? Why does this become important later in the novel? What did Madec really shoot? In how many ways does he try to keep this truth from Ben? Does it work?

What does Ben find when Madec insists that he missed the bighorn? Why does Ben continue to force the issue of viewing the kill? What has Ben seen that he believes proves that Madec shot his prey even though Madec insists he missed? Should Ben have believed Madec missed and continued on without insisting on checking for an animal? What might have happened differently if Ben had believed Madec?

How was the old prospector killed? What was the prospector doing in the hills? Does Ben know him? What might have happened differently if Ben had known the man? Why does Ben insist on telling the sheriff about this shooting? How does Madec react to Ben's insistence?

What does it say about Ben that he refuses Madec's continuous promises of money if he hides the death of the prospector? What does it say that Ben previously agreed to take money for showing Madec more bighorn, but silently decides not to show Madec where the bighorn are? What would you have done in Ben's situation?

Why does Ben decide to climb to the butte? How does Ben manage to get onto the side of the butte? What cost does Ben have to pay for climbing the butte? Is this cost worth it? What does Ben find when he finally enters the tunnel in the butte? What does Ben find to eat in the butte tunnel? How does this help Ben to survive his current situation?

What story does Madec tell when confronted with the sheriff in town? Why do the sheriff and his deputies believe Madec over Ben, someone they have known for years? Why does Ben find himself having to prove his innocence? Whose story seems more believable? How does the doctor prove the prospector was killed? How does this information help or harm Ben? How does Ben finally prove the truth?