

# **Desperation Study Guide**

## **Desperation by Stephen King**

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# Plot Summary

Desperation by Stephen King, is a horror novel set in modern day, about a group of tourists who are captured by an evil spirit as they attempt to pass through a section of US Highway 50, in remote Nevada. The novel tells of the desperate struggle between the evil spirit and the two characters who represent good. David Carver, a young boy whose family has rented an RV for the trip, has recently had a profound religious experience, and feels God is speaking to him directly. Johnny is an aging writer, who is in search of something that will make him feel human again.

The evil spirit is Tak, who has mistakenly been released from imprisonment in a nearby copper mine. He cannot move about unless he is occupying a human body, or a body strong enough to hold him, such as a wolf or an eagle. As he possesses a body, he causes death and destruction, even to the body he is in. At the beginning of the novel, Tak has possessed the strong body of Collie, the town police man.

The group of humans who band together to escape, then fight this evil spirit are: Ralph and Ellen Carver, their daughter Kirsten, and son David; Peter and Mary Jackson, Stephen Ames and a hitchhiker named Cynthia; Tom Billingsley, local vet; Audrey the mining engineer; and Johnny Marinville, writer and motorcycle rider.

The beginning chapters introduce the major characters, and reveal the high level of danger for the humans. Kirsten is killed by Tak, who quickly kills Peter Jackson. Mary struggles to kill Tak, but her unfamiliarity with a gun prevents her from causing him any damage. The remaining group is locked in the police station cells. Tak takes Ellen Carver with him to the mine. David, responding to a voice in his head, lathers himself up with soap and squeaks through the cells. He finds a key to the cells and releases the rest of the people. Tom suggests they hide in the abandoned movie theater until the dust storm subsides. In the meantime,

Stephen Ames is on his way to find Johnny after a confusing cell phone call he received just as Johnny was being arrested by Collie. Stephen picks up a young hitchhiker, Cynthia, and the two head toward Desperation. They try to find help at the mine and encounter strange statue fragments that make them feel violently sexual. They are able to resist the urges and decide to go into town. They see many strange events and Cynthia's intuition keeps them away from the police station. A very strong dust storm is coming, and visibility is reduced, but Johnny sees the van go by and uses his cell phone to contact Stephen and tell him to come to the theater. Just before they reach the theater, Stephen and Cynthia find Audrey and bring her with them.

The group assesses their situation as the storm batters the movie theater. They have encountered many gruesome dead bodies, hordes of rattlesnakes, scorpions and spiders, and yellow-eyed coyotes that follow the humans around. The group has no communication with the outside world and are realizing they are the only live people in the town. They are beginning to realize that Collie is no longer human, but they have no understanding of what he really is. They are also realizing that David Carver, although



just a boy, has power beyond those of a human, and he attributes his abilities to God speaking inside him.

Tom Billingsley is attacked by a cougar who comes through the window, but is able to tell Stephen something is wrong with Audrey before he dies. Audrey becomes evil, partially possessed by Tak, and tries to kill David. Tak, now in Ellen's body, comes to the theater and steals Mary. David lapses into a trance-like state and has a very vivid dream. He travels back to the place where he had his religious experience, a platform built by himself and his best friend Brian. David had gone to that platform the day he got out of school early to visit his friend Brian at the hospital. Brian had been in a terrible accident and was dying. David prayed for Brian, and God spoke to him. God told David to leave his school excuse pass at the platform, a place he and Brian had named "Viet Cong Lookout," so he left it at the sign. In this dream, a man in his twenties is David's guide, and talks to him about the mine where Tak was from, about God, and about Brian. When David wakes up, he tells everyone they must band together to fight Tak, at the China Pit.

Johnny is against the idea, and leaves the others. He goes to the mine office and tries to find keys to the ATV. David finds Johnny's wallet, sees a picture of Johnny as a younger man, and realizes this is the man who guided him in the dream. He tells everyone else to go to the China Pit to help Mary, and he rushes off to find Johnny. When he and Johnny meet up, the conversation turns to God and what He wants the group to do, and Johnny finally stops resisting and joins up with David.

Johnny and David take one of the ATV's to the pit and find the others. Mary has escaped from Tak and is with them. The ones who are left are David, Johnny, David's father Ralph, Stephen, Cynthia, and Mary. They all look to David for guidance and he tells them they must find the explosives and cause the mine to fall back in on Tak, imprisoning him again. As the group makes its way to the bottom of the mine, Johnny takes Stephen aside and asks him to hold onto David when Johnny tells him to do so, saying that David thinks he is to sacrifice himself but it will be much more difficult than that.

As the group compiles the explosives, they know they will encounter Tak again. Tak used up Ellen's body before he could transfer to another human, so he took the body of an eagle and hid in the mine. As the group reaches the bottom, Tak attacks David, but Ralph comes between them and saves David. Ralph dies and David is determined to die as well, defeating this creature who has taken his whole family. Johnny signals Stephen, who drags David out of the mine to safety. Johnny stays behind when all the others are gone, and explodes the mine. Mary comforts David, and as they are all leaving Desperation, David finds the school early excuse pass, the one he left nailed to a tree in Ohio, in his pocket, and there is a message from Johnny saying that God is Love.



# Part I, Chapters 1-4

## Part I, Chapters 1-4 Summary

Peter and Mary Jackson are driving a car through the desert of Nevada, on US Highway 50. The car belongs to Peter's sister, Deidre. Peter and Mary are headed towards their home in New York. As they are discussing the vast wilderness and the nature of people who would choose this part of the country to make their home, Peter sees a dead cat nailed to a speed limit sign. Mary reminds him that one of their acquaintances warned there were strange people living out in this desert, and perhaps it was a black cat, and there was witchcraft involved.

A few minutes later, a police car passes them wildly a few minutes later, then turns around and begins following them. Mary criticizes Peter for worrying about the officer, and when the cruiser's lights direct Peter to pull over, Mary is afraid, and tells him not to do it. Peter respects the law, knows he has done nothing to cause any problems, and pulls over. Peter and Mary are uneasy, but the officer explains the reason he pulled them over was because their rear license plate was gone. As he assists them in moving the front plate to the back, Peter and Mary relax their guard. When the officer finds a bag of marijuana in the trunk, suddenly everything becomes deadly serious and they are unceremoniously thrown into the back of the patrol car. Mary believes that Peter's sister left the marijuana in the trunk and she is concentrating on that fact rather than the craziness of their situation.

As the officer drives into town, they see an RV abandoned down the road, another dead animal nailed to the town welcome sign, a series of objects askew in the streets, and the officer is saying strange things to them. As he is telling them their rights, he interjects another phrase into the familiar lines: I am going to kill you. Mary looks at Peter to see if he heard it, and they are both horrified.

When they reach the police station and enter, there is a dead child on the stairs. Peter tries to resist the officer and go to the young girl, but the officer quickly shoots Jackson, killing him. Mary escapes by running up the stairs.

In Chapter 2, Mary runs up the stairs and there are more people up there, locked in cells. She grabs a shotgun that is lying on the desk and attempts to shoot the cop who has run up after her. The people in the cells scream at her to shoot him, and she tries, but she misses. The cop throws her into a cell with the others.

Ralph Carver and his wife Ellen are in there, and it is their daughter who is lying dead on the stairs. She had been pushed down the stairs by the cop, and at this point, Ralph and Ellen are in shock, unable to believe she is probably dead. Ralph and his family had been driving an RV to Lake Tahoe when all four tires of the RV were punctured and they were tricked by the officer into believing he was saving them from a random killer out on the highway. As the family is taken away from their RV, Kirsten the little girl is crying for



her doll, and David sees it lying on the side of the road, in the sand. David has been very quiet, watching everything that is happening, and is not in the same cell with his mom and dad.

Ralph is tormenting himself at this point for convincing the family that Nevada was the place for their vacation. Ralph loves to gamble and now realizes he has been putting his own needs ahead of those of his family; his family is now paying a dear price for his choice.

In Chapter 3, John Marinville parks on the side of the road to urinate, and when he returns to his motorcycle, there is a police car behind it. John is a famous, but aging writer who has lost his way in his career. John is jaded with life, spending too much time chasing shallow relationships with women and drinking. He has insulted all of his friends, and his reputation as a good writer is diminishing with every book he publishes.

One day he was talking to Terry, his first wife, about his plans, and she reminded Johnny about some essays he wrote when they were together, years before. She suggests that he take that Harley motorcycle he bought for show, get on it and head across the country, writing essays similar to that. Johnny thinks about it for a few months, then approaches his editor.

When Johnny and the cop begin talking, the cop recognizes Johnny, and compliments him profusely on his work. Johnny is lulled into thinking he will soon be able to resume his trip. He even offers to give the cop an autograph and returns to his motorcycle for his notebook. As he walks to his motorcycle, he sees that the saddlebag flap is open, and he realizes the cop must have opened it.

When the officer finds a bag of marijuana in Johnny's motorcycle saddle bag, Johnny realizes that everything has changed rapidly. Johnny resists and is kicked and beaten by the cop, then thrown into the back of the police cruiser. Johnny manages to make a call on his cell phone to Steve Ames, the man who is backing him up on this trip, but the reception is not strong, and he does not know if Steve got the message. He has to hide the cell phone before the cop returns to the car, after pushing Johnny's motorcycle off the road. While all of this is happening, there are coyotes howling and coming close to the cop and Johnny, and the wind is rising.

The cop's body is beginning to deteriorate, and as he is driving Johnny back to the police station, the cop is bleeding profusely and when he sneezes, pieces of his lungs scatter across the car. Johnny assumes the guy is suffering from some weird disease, and the sooner he is dead, the sooner this ordeal will be over. He begins to lose heart though, as the cruiser goes past the abandoned RV and the dead animals stuck to the street signs.

## **Part I, Chapters 1-4 Analysis**

These chapters represent the exposition and introduction of the major characters. They also set the mood and tone of the novel. The author uses the remote highway, the lack



of traffic and the vast expanse of desert to create the feeling of helplessness in the face of a greater force, such as nature. The dead cat on the speed limit sign is a symbol of something ordinary being utilized to convey evil and death. The author is using a very mundane experience, driving for miles with nothing to look at while safe inside a working, air conditioned vehicle, to create a sense of safety, then ripping the people from that complacency in a matter of minutes, depositing them into a nightmare scene of evil and horror.

The characters are well defined in these chapters, so the reader can be alternately surprised or not with their subsequent behaviors. The evil spirit inhabits the body of a police officer, allowing it to use that inherent power of a uniform and a government vehicle to force the tourists to stop in their travel. The author is setting the stage for horror, as he presents characters that any reader can relate to, and places those characters in extraordinary circumstances. Each of the characters were completely fooled by the officer, and submitted to his commands readily, with only minor protests.

The author is blending respect for authority, the belief that things will all be worked out once the truth is revealed, and the refusal to face reality in the form of a supernatural being to set the stage for almost anything to happen next.



# Part I, Chapter 5

## Part I, Chapter 5 Summary

David Carver is the young boy whose sister was killed by the cop, and as the group is sitting in the cells after Mary is thrown in, David thinks about how he ended up here. His family was on vacation in an RV, and now his sister is dead and he, his father and his mother are in a police jail cell. When Mary was fighting with the officer, David was able to secure one of the shotgun shells off the floor, and places it into his pocket. He does not know why he did this, but feels it is very important.

David has recently had a profound religious experience, and feels very close to God. When his best friend was hurt in an accident, back in Ohio where the Carver family lived, David wanted to go see Brian in the hospital. David's mother thinks it is a bad idea, because Brian is not expected to live, but David's father, Ralph, agrees to take him. David gets an Early Excuse Pass from school and carries the pass with him to visit Brian in the hospital. Brian's parents are shattered, and tell David that Brian will probably die very soon.

When Ralph takes David home, David is restless, and goes for a walk, to the place he and Brian built on one of the paths kids use to go to and from school. It is a couple of boards set up on the side of a small hill, and he and Brian have named it Viet Cong Lookout. The boys have even painted a crude sign and nailed it to the tree next to the platform. David thinks about death, and does not want Brian to die, so he begins praying. His family is not religious, but David senses this is the time to pray. David has a religious experience where he hears a voice deep inside him. After a while he realizes it is God speaking to him and David believes God is answering his prayers, but that something will be required of him to complete the contract. He is told by the voice to leave his Early Excuse Pass on the sign, and he does. When David returns home he is told that his friend Brian was completely healed.

After this experience, the voice tells David it is his duty to learn about God, so he finds a preacher nearby who he can learn from. In a very short time, David reads the entire Bible, committing many lines to memory. David prays every day, three times per day, and he feels as if something important inside him has changed.

In the police station in Desperation, Tom tells the group he was the town vet, and the officer's name is Collie Entragian. Tom tells the people that Collie has changed, grown larger. Tom cannot explain what is happening to all of them, but they do realize they are in terrible danger. The group hear the police car returning.

When Collie drives Johnny away from the motorcycle, Johnny is amazed to see coyotes with strange eyes along the side of the road, as if they are an honor guard for this strange police officer. When they reach town, Johnny is shocked to see Collie run over one of the last survivors in town, and laugh while he is doing it. When Johnny and Collie





are out of the vehicle, Johnny screams at him and Collie calls down a vulture to attack Johnny. Johnny is still being sarcastic and resisting, but is realizing this is no ordinary cop and no ordinary town.

## Part I, Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter provides background on David, and hope for the reader that someone might step forward with the strength of good on their side in order to fight the evil demon. The concept of a small boy having the power to defeat evil is fortified with the unusual voices that David hears, and the miracle of Brian's healing. However, there is not enough evidence at this point that David is the hero, so the reader looks again to Johnny, the aging writer. Johnny is not doing too well in the battle because coyotes and vultures appear to follow the cop's commands.

This chapter enforces the strength of the evil spirit occupying the cop's body. There are signs of destruction everywhere, dead animals, empty buildings, and coyotes and vultures close by. The fact that the cop's body is failing shows the reader the evil spirit does have some weaknesses.



## Part II, Chapters 1-2

### Part II, Chapters 1-2 Summary

Steve has been hired by Johnny's editor to follow up on Johnny and keep him safe. Johnny is a famous writer, but his career has slipped somewhat over the years because of his drinking and poor lifestyle choices. His editor is afraid if left alone, Johnny will ruin this chance for a comeback. Steve drives a rented Ryder Truck so the motorcycle could be placed inside when and if Johnny tires of driving it. Steve picks up Cynthia, a hitchhiker, right outside of Ely Nevada.

Steve likes Cynthia instantly, even though she is much younger than him. He admires her spunk and her courage, and is glad he broke the editor's rule about picking up hitchhikers on this mission.

Steve had received enough information from the aborted cell phone call from Johnny to understand the writer is somewhere on Highway 50, and in some sort of danger. Steve and Cynthia find the motorcycle and know something bad has happened. Johnny's notebook is there on the highway, and the motorcycle is off the road, almost like someone was trying to cover it up. Johnny and his motorcycle helmet are nowhere around. Cynthia trusts her intuition and tells Steve she has a bad feeling about this area, but they head into Desperation for help anyway. On the way, they pass the abandoned RV, and Cynthia wonders why the local police would allow this vehicle to be left on the side of the road. She feels very uneasy when she sees the little doll left outside the RV. She and Steve decide to find help, but Cynthia cautions against expecting help from the police. She suggests that they stop at a business or factory to call for the state police instead, and Steve reluctantly agrees.

Back at the cells, Collie puts Johnny in with David, and then removes David's mother from the cell. He leaves a coyote to guard the rest of them. David hears a voice inside telling him to do something with the bar of Irish Spring soap. Steve and Cynthia pull over at the mine because there are lights on. They go inside but do not find anyone. They find an aquarium with a human hand cut off in the bottom of it, and the answering machine is playing a strange chant. Collie is driving Ellen out of town, and as she is pleading with him not to kill her, pieces of his body are falling off.

In Chapter 2, David has taken the soap and lathered up his naked body and the bars of the cell. His father is screaming at him to stop, and the coyote is watching him closely. Somehow David is able to squeeze through the bars and get out, while Johnny distracts the coyote with his leather jacket. Steve and Cynthia go further into the warehouse where they find several bodies hanging like sides of beef in a butcher shop. They find a strange carving of a wolf with alligator parts and a snake coming from its mouth. The carving seems to hold a power over them so they get away from it. There is a very strong windstorm and dust storm rising. As David goes downstairs he finds the dead



bodies of several people besides his sister. He finds a master key for the cells on one body, picks up a loaded gun, and heads back up the stairs, praying with every step.

## Part II, Chapters 1-2 Analysis

These chapters introduce Steve and Cynthia, who could save the group from the cop. An unlikely pair of heroes, the only advantage they seem to have is that they have yet to encounter the evil spirit directly. The statue fragments they encounter at the mine office are incredibly powerful, and it is only Cynthia's heightened sense of danger that pulls them away.

Ellen criticizes her son for praying, and ironically, she is the next one to die. David's father is very afraid, and begs his son not to try to escape, but David displays his strength and his unnatural abilities by escaping from the cell. Even though the boy is smaller, there is really no way he could have slipped through the bars in real life. The group refuses to analyze this though, as they are desperate to get out.

One of the evil spirit's weaknesses is revealed as its body must be replaced, and can only be transferred back at the mine. The experiences of Steve and Cynthia as they survey the horror of dead bodies and pieces of bodies everywhere overcomes any relief the reader might feel about the evil spirit weakening.



## Part II, Chapter 3

### Part II, Chapter 3 Summary

David opens the door, shoots the coyote and opens the cells. The group get out and begin to round up guns, ammo and flashlights. As the group begins moving around the police station, they find death and destruction everywhere. Johnny begins to be attracted to Mary, and to look at David with curiosity as to how this little boy can command so much authority. Johnny is still being a wise cracker, and his sarcasm and jokes are not well received by the group.

The group finds weapons and ammunition for all but one gun, and Johnny is given the gun without ammunition. He does not like that. The group looks outside and see the windstorm picking up and the coyotes and buzzards sitting together watching them. As they are deciding what to do and looking out the door, suddenly a truck drives by.

Steve and Cynthia are in town, but decide against stopping at the police station. Cynthia says if the police were effective, they would have seen the Carver RV open on the side of the road. Cynthia wants to go to Ely immediately, but Steve wants some sort of proof. Steve drives through town, then stops at a house on the edge of town. When he goes inside, Cynthia follows, and they find a horribly mutilated family at the dinner table, and there are snakes and scorpions everywhere in the house. They flee and decide to head to Ely immediately. However, as they drive down the road, big trucks and house trailers are suddenly thrown into the road to block it and buzzards are hitting the window of the truck, killing themselves. Escape in that direction is not possible, and as they sit there deciding, a horde of scorpions and rattlesnakes come towards the truck. The only recourse is to head back to town, and as he backs up, the venomous attackers recede. They go back to the town of Desperation.

### Part II, Chapter 3 Analysis

Some relief from tension is obtained when the group are released from the cells, but that soon departs with the descriptions of the threatening weather, the lack of sufficient ammunition, and the experiences of Steve and Cynthia. Tension heightens, and the lack of communication with the outside world causes even more suspense.

The evil spirit Tak is not mentioned in this chapter, but the evidence of its power is everywhere. Steve and Cynthia are thoroughly convinced now they are in the middle of some kind of supernatural event, and something is preventing them from escaping.

Evil is winning at this point in the novel, exercising command over rattlesnakes, scorpions, dangerous spiders, and even the weather. Good is having a rough time, encountering disbelief, refusal to accept reality and a sense of overwhelming disorientation.



## Part II, Chapters 4-5

### Part II, Chapters 4-5 Summary

Tom, who knows the town, suggests that the group of survivors go to the American West, the closed movie theater. As they walk, Johnny decides to go inside the bar to get some aspirin, and grabs a bottle of whiskey. Johnny recognizes that Tom is a last stage alcoholic and knows the old man will need to keep it in his bloodstream in order to function at the level they need from him. The group is being watched closely by five coyotes.

Steve and Cynthia talk about the carved rock they saw in the warehouse, and then they both begin acting very strangely, talking and thinking about unnatural sex acts. The two of them struggle to pull away from those thoughts, but suddenly a huge wolf appears and has one of the statues in his mouth. The wolf drops the statue and stares at them. Cynthia and Steve are overwhelmed by the urge to get that stone, and just as they are about to open the doors to the truck to get out, the cell phone rings. Nearby David has the cell phone and was able to make it work even though Johnny could not. David speaks to Steve, and while he is talking to him, Cynthia honks the horn at the wolf. After a few minutes, the wolf picks up the stone and leaves with it. David tells Steve where they are and to meet them there. Johnny goes out to the coyotes and yells at them. David goes over, says a blessing and tells them to leave, and to the surprise of everyone except David, the coyotes leave.

In Chapter 5, Steve and Cynthia decide to hide the truck at the Conoco station, and when Steve goes inside, there are several brown recluse spiders there. As he opens the garage door, a crazed rat springs at him, and he kills it. When the truck is safe, they head towards the movie theater. At the theater, David and his group are there, and Tom has shown them a way in. Steve and Cynthia encounter a woman who is half crazy with fear, and says she has seen Collie kill many people. They take her with them. Soon Steve and Johnny are reunited. The new woman's name is Audrey, and she was a geologist at the mine.

Collie returns to the police station, in Ellen's body now. It uses a statue fragment to call fifty spiders to it, and speaks to the spiders. They all leave, intent on a mission.

### Part II, Chapters 4-5 Analysis

David's supernatural abilities are coming out more now, as he increases the cell phone's power enough to contact Cynthia and Steve. When Steve answers the phone, David not only knows who and where he is, David also knows Steve and Cynthia are in terrible danger at that moment. David approaches the coyotes, representatives of the evil spirit Tak, blesses them and turns them away. This gives the reader more hope for rescue,

and shows that at this point in the book, David's power of good is more powerful than Johnny's human bravado.

This chapter reinforces the power of the small statue fragments. They are described as unbelievably ugly carvings, with grotesque and unnatural engravings. The author uses unnatural sexual acts to demonstrate the level of evil and degradation caused by exposure to these statue fragments, so as they continue to appear in the novel, the reader has a heightened sense of fear for the humans in their presence.



# Part III, Chapter 1

## Part III, Chapter 1 Summary

The group in the theater are talking about what to do next. For the moment, they are safe, and can reassess their situation. The wind howls outside reminding them constantly that this security is only fleeting. They attend to basic survivor needs, like going to the bathroom and finding food and water. It turns out that Tom has met his drinking buddies from town in this building over the past few years and knows his way around.

The creature that used to be Collie has returned to the police station, now in the form of Ellen's body. The evil spirit is known as Tak, and it realizes the boy David was the one who freed the prisoner. Tak is not afraid of David, but realizes it is more than just a little boy. The spiders return and spell out that the escapees are in the theater. The creature is called Tak. Tak realizes that Ellen's body is not as strong as Collie's was, and it will soon become necessary to obtain another one.

While Johnny is telling his story of what he has seen, and Audrey is countering every statement with disbelief that Collie is anything but a mass murderer. Audrey's comments seem strange, coming from a woman who has spent two days hiding in a laundromat listening to Collie terrorize the town and murder over one hundred people. The group begins to think this is not a supernatural experience after all, sitting as they are in relatively safety and thinking about what they have seen.

David goes around the theater to find food, because Tom has told him one of his drinking buddies often brought a few crackers and a can of sardines. When David returns, Johnny notices that the box of crackers never empties, and there are many cans of sardines.

Tak calls a cougar to him, and the animal is reluctant to be among humans, but cannot resist the will of Tak. It leaves to seek out the humans who have escaped.

## Part III, Chapter 1 Analysis

The group has been through horrible, mind numbing experiences, and it is easy for them to believe Audrey, the new addition to the group is correct about Collie. They begin to question what their eyes saw, and wonder if it was lack of food or the unusual weather that made it all seem supernatural. They let their guards down again, and are vulnerable.

David's divine skills are demonstrated again, when, like Jesus with the multitudes, he is able to feed the entire group from just a few crackers and a can of sardines. The adults are busy denying the power of the statues, the behavior of the animals and even the



number of crackers they are eating. Only Tom has something bothering him, something about Audrey and the dress she is wearing.

Johnny continues establishing his role as the sarcastic wise guy who criticizes everyone and tries to draw attention to himself. Ralph, David's father, and Steve are emerging as the strong silent types of men, who are changing from ordinary lives to being the protectors of this group. Tom, on the other hand, is reverting to the crutch of drink, and becoming weaker. The roles of each person are being strengthened. Mary and Cynthia, both independent women are using this time to eat and strengthen themselves.

Tak is an ironic name for the creature, a shortened version of attack, or an abbreviation of take. The creature is attacking people and taking their bodies away from them. Its vulnerability heightens the need to obtain a new body, which causes increased tension for the reader, who is wondering whose body will be possessed next?





## Part III, Chapter 2

### Part III, Chapter 2 Summary

After everyone tells their stories, Audrey tells her story. Audrey is described as a tall woman wearing a sexy, if somewhat soiled dress. This dress keeps playing at Tom's mind, and he remembers being attracted to her when she first came to town. He was called out to her house to care for her horse, Sally. He does not ever remember seeing her in anything but jeans.

Audrey's story is somewhat confusing. She is an engineer, but on the day of all the destruction, she was going to meet the comptroller of the company at the mining headquarters and decided to dress up. She had missed most of the mayhem in town because she had gone camping in the wilderness, accompanied only by her horse. When she went to the mining facility she had seen her murdered colleagues and went to town to report it to the police. Upon arriving in town, she had seen Collie running down people and shooting them. She was surprised by his laughter each time he murdered people. Audrey reports that she saw Collie shoot someone and then put their hat back on their head respectfully, as if he was two people, a murderer and a young man. Audrey says that she finally found a place to hide in the laundromat, and that even though Collie had come into the business several times, he had not found her hidden under the desk.

No one questions the story, and they are all thinking about their own lives and their own experiences. As they are resting, the cougar sent by Tak comes to lie outside the men's restroom window of the theater.

### Part III, Chapter 2 Analysis

Clearly, the role of Audrey in this story is to create a scenario for the characters to turn away from the belief that they are involved in a supernatural occurrence, as she relays a story about one man gone wild, horribly insane. There are no yellow-eyed coyotes or dive bombing buzzards in her story, just the actions of a mass murderer.

A careful reader though, will see some holes in the story. Why would she need to explain to the group about wearing a dress? Why would Collie, whose senses were heightened and who had the hordes of spiders and snakes at his command, not find a woman whose hiding place was merely under a desk with a chair pushed in front?

Her long story is an attempt by the author to suspend the feeling of tension, and to lull the reader into a momentary complacency, just as Collie did with the Jacksons and with Johnny, before capturing them. There, on the edge of the story, are the waiting cougar and Tom's puzzling thoughts about Audrey.



## Part III, Chapter 3

### Part III, Chapter 3 Summary

Mary tells Johnny that Tom is drinking too much, so Johnny takes the booze away from Tom, distracting him by asking him to tell the story of China Pit, the name given to the copper mine. The group settles down uneasily in the dark theater, while the storm continues to batter the old building, and unbeknownst to them, a Tak-directed deadly cougar hovers outside.

Tom says back in the 1800s, the mine was dangerous and the owner could not get white men to work it so he hired Chinese. There was a massive cave-in with forty of the Chinese men inside. The owners of the mine, wealthy white men from the East Coast, decided that since it was just Chinese men and not white men trapped in there, it was not worth their time or effort to free them, so everyone died. A week later some Chinese men came to town and killed several people, but were both killed. The men had said they escaped from the mine, but no one believed it. Audrey listens to the story and says there was no way to escape that mine. She confirms though, that the China Pit is the area of the mine that the modern miners had just uncovered. She says there were no earth spirits in there, and that the story of angry entities is just myth and not scientific fact.

After telling the story, Tom remembers he always hid some whiskey in the men's bathroom of the theater, so he makes an excuse to leave the group. He keeps thinking about Audrey and that short skirt, and replays his memories about her. His thinking is slow because of the drink, and just as he realizes what was bothering him, the cougar breaks through the window and attacks him.

Steve and Johnny rush in and kill the cougar, but it has already done so much damage, Tom cannot be saved. With his last breath, Tom tells Johnny Audrey was much taller than she used to be, that is why her skirt is so short, and she has probably been compromised by her exposure to Tak. Tom warns them she could be dangerous.

### Part III, Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter, while providing action at the end, is used to develop the characters of Johnny as a hero, Tak as an evil spirit released by the modern miners, and the strength of Mary.

Johnny acts for the first time to defend someone else while placing his own precious self in danger. He shoots the cougar just as it is about to kill Steve. Tom's story of cruelty and death heightens the sense of a harsh Nevada world, then and now. Tom's weakness for drink leads him to death, and the reluctant cougar is quickly relieved of her mission. Tak is whittling away at the group of survivors.



Tom's weakness is forgiven, though, as he alerts Johnny to the danger of Audrey.

Mary is observant and sees the danger of Tom drinking, but turns to Johnny to handle the situation instead of taking care of it herself, showing her to be a woman who is used to having a man deal with the distasteful aspects of life.

The mystery of what an evil spirit is doing in this remote part of Highway 50 is hinted at with this story of innocent foreigners being trapped and forgotten after serving the white man; although the premise that the Chinese miners created a supernatural being to wreak their revenge seems weak.



## Part III, Chapter 4-5

### Part III, Chapter 4-5 Summary

Johnny and Steve return to the main part of the theater, and notice that Audrey and David are no longer in the room. Johnny tells them what Tom has said, and Mary goes to care for Tom in the men's room. Steve, Cynthia, Ralph and Johnny begin searching for David, knowing that he is in danger. Audrey finds David and tries to strangle him, but Steve reaches her in time, throwing her off David. Ralph rushes to the side of his son, who is now in a trance like state and barely breathing. Cynthia checks on David, saying she has some experience in first aid from when she worked at a women's shelter.

Mary goes to care for Tom, but he is dead. She hears Ellen outside and begins to let her in. It is dark outside and Ellen sounds strange to Mary, but Mary decides the woman is grief stricken. As Mary leans out the bathroom window to help Ellen come in, she realizes too late this is not Ellen. Tak grabs Mary, pulling her from the theater, and drives out to China Pit so he can replace Ellen's body with hers.

In Chapter 5, Audrey falls apart and disintegrate. The group realizes that Mary is gone, and David is alive, but dreaming.

David has a very vivid dream where he is home but also in Desperation at the same time. He sees all the dead people, including his sister, talking to him. He encounters his mother, and she asks what kind of God would allow this to happen. She argues with him, but David realizes this creature is not his mother, and he makes her disappear. He continues walking, in his dream, back to the place in Ohio where he first spoke to God. He comes to the spot where he and Brian built a little stand, and there is a young man who seems very familiar to David, sitting on the platform. The man tells David he is a very special person. The young man begins asking David about God and what he thinks about Him. David and his guide use the Viet Cong Lookout platform to travel across time and back to Desperation, where the guide shows David the China Pit, tells him that Tak and what is happening to this area is an affront to God and must be fixed. David agrees. The guide talks about God's cruelty and his love.

### Part III, Chapter 4-5 Analysis

The idea of a dark theater, full of inquisitive brown recluse spiders and a woman intent on harming the young boy David create a tremendous fear in the group and the reader at this point. Johnny has changed from a self serving smart aleck to a man who saved Steve's life. Steve attains hero status as he saves David from Audrey.

Ralph, Cynthia and Mary all assume caretaking roles at this point of the story. Ralph holds on to his son, fearing that he has lost the only one left in his family. Cynthia becomes stronger, using her limited first aid skills to ascertain that David is actually still breathing. Mary leaves the rest of the group to care for Tom, a stranger to her. It is



understandable that her strength could be failing her, as she has had time to absorb the fact that her husband is dead. She is in this weakened state when Tak, in the form of Ellen, calls out to her. Rational thinking would have alerted Mary that a murdering cop would not have allowed Ellen to live, much less escape, and that Ellen would have no clue as to the whereabouts of the group, but Mary wants so badly to believe that something good has to happen, so her defenses drop completely.

David's role as a rescuer sent from God is reinforced by an additional entity, in the form of a young man wearing a Yankee baseball cap in David's vision. This guide has all the answers, and is there to give David direction and purpose again. Barely escaping with his life after being attacked by Audrey, David receives the strength and power he needs to resume his role. Who is this guide who seems vaguely familiar to David? It's another mystery for the reader to solve.



# Part IV, Chapter 1

## Part IV, Chapter 1 Summary

David awakens and tells the group that Ellen is dead, Mary is still alive, and they cannot leave town, they must go to China Pit and fight Tak.

Ralph believes David, and prepares to leave. Cynthia convinces Steve to listen to David as well, and the group moves from the theater outside. Steve and Cynthia go to get the Ryder truck, and notice that the vultures, coyotes and other creatures have disappeared. The weather has even changed. As the group gathers around the truck and prepares to head for the mine, David continues to tell them what the guide says. Johnny is saying they need to get away from this place, not endanger themselves worse by going to the mine, but David asks that Johnny listen to what he has been told by God before Johnny makes any decisions.

David says they must all be together when they confront Tak at the China Pit. David explains that they have all been chosen by God to confront Tak the evil one. David talks about the can tahs, the strange figures that have power over people. David begins talking about the real story of the China Pit, and how the men discovered the can tahs and were bound by them. There were two Chinese brothers who saw what was happening and ran away. The two brothers were able to bring the ceiling down and trap the crazy people, the ones who had been affected, in the mine. However, the two brothers were eventually taken over by Tak, and died. David ends the story by saying that God is cruel.

Mary wakes up in a dark place and manages to find a flashlight. When she turns the light on she sees she is in the mine with dead bodies, scorpions, snakes and spiders. She realizes that she is the next person whose body will be used by whatever took over Collie and Ellen. The Tak is in the mine too, in another area, closer to the well, the hole where Tak came from. Tak is thinking about Mary, and knowing that even though its body of Ellen is rotting away, it needs to wait before taking over Mary. Tak is afraid of the boy, but does not know why.

## Part IV, Chapter 1 Analysis

David has regained his strength, and is now using every bit of his power to keep the group together. He knows instinctively that Johnny is the key to the group's success, though he does not know why.

There is power in his story because he is touching on everything that happened to each of them, especially with Steve and Cynthia hearing the explanation of the strange effect the statue fragments had on them. Everyone but Johnny is facing the fact that if the group of survivors does not face Tak and destroy him, everything in the world will be lost, not just their own lives.



The truth about the mine is revealed, that it was the prison of the evil spirit long before the Chinese people arrived, and it was the distribution of the statue fragments that really broke down the people and made them crazy.

This chapter allows the reader to suspend fright for a bit, while an explanation for the insanity and horror is revealed. David's strength and conviction, and the support of the adults around him, allow the reader to feel better about the possibility good might defeat evil in this story.



## Part IV, Chapter 2

### Part IV, Chapter 2 Summary

David continues his story, despite Johnny's sarcastic and biting remarks, and tells them of the first one to be possessed, Cary Ripton. When the mine blasters opened the pit where the can taks were, Cary tells the men to leave it alone and mark it off limits, but that night Ripton goes into the mine and pulls all of the fragments out, seduced by their power. He distributes the can taks all over town that night. When he returns to the mine he sees all sorts of animals and insects there, all carrying can taks and taking them around the countryside. Tak has possessed Cary Ripton, and Cary then systematically kills everyone on his crew. David describes how Tak moves from Cary to Brad.

As Johnny is listening to the story, he gets a cola and accidentally drops his wallet. When David finishes his story, Johnny tells everyone he is leaving, that he is using one of the mine cars to drive to the next town and call the FBI and the cops. Johnny tells them they are on their own with this crazy idea of confronting Tak. David is very upset, saying that they must all stay together. As Johnny walks away, David finds Johnny's wallet and picks it up. There is a reaction inside David's head when it happens. Inside the wallet is a picture of Johnny when he was a younger man, and David suddenly realizes it was Johnny as a younger man in Vietnam who was the tour guide in his dream about the China Pit.

Mary is still in the mine, and she decides to be like David and ask God for help. A voice she attributes to God tells her that these creatures cannot hurt her. She realizes that must be true, because if her body is harmed by a snake bite or spider bite, it is useless to Tak as a vehicle for its spirit. Emboldened by the knowledge that these creatures will not harm her, Mary begins searching for a way out. The voice tells her to hurry, and directs her to a hole behind the dryer. Mary works frantically at the hole and when it opens more, she realizes that when she goes through the hole she will land on a pile of rotting bodies. She jumps and is free. She finds the police cruiser and realizes that she does not have the key. She disables the car so Tak cannot use it. She then begins climbing out of China Pit, feeling very determined to escape.

### Part IV, Chapter 2 Analysis

Tension is growing again, with David drawing to an end of his explanations. Johnny increases the tension by striking out on his own. The mystery of the guide's identity is solved as David recognizes Johnny as a young man from the photograph in his wallet, but Johnny's ability to be in two times at once and enter David's vision is not explained.

The urgency to return Johnny to the group is strong, but the author leaves the group to return to Mary, trapped in the mine and surrounded by creatures of every imaginable level of horror.





Mary turns to God for help, and is rewarded. She is no longer under any misconception about Tak and its ability to destroy her, so she takes steps to remove herself from its reach. She knows instinctively that if she is not near the creature, it cannot transfer to her body. This is a return to the character of Mary's initial introduction to the reader, as the one who talked back to Collie at the arrest, and tried to kill him when she had the opportunity in the jail cells.

In this chapter, David and Mary are growing stronger, Ralph, Steve and Cynthia are united behind the leadership of David, and Johnny is forced to make a decision about staying with the group or saving his own skin.



## Part IV, Chapter 3

### Part IV, Chapter 3 Summary

Johnny is in the mining hut looking for the keys to an ATV, intent upon saving himself. He continues to hear his ex-wife Terry's voice in his head, and having arguments with her. He seems unwilling to disappoint her, and recognizes he divorced her long ago because she knew him so well. Johnny tries to ignore the bodies around him, tries to focus his mind on saving himself. He does not realize that the voice he attributes to Terry is actually God speaking to him about his decisions.

Suddenly, a wolf arrives in the unlikely area of a Nevada mining office, and confronts Johnny. Johnny has only a hammer in his hands, he is emotionally and physically exhausted, and his self confidence and self esteem is at low ebb as he faces this new danger.

Mary is pushing herself to inhuman lengths in order to get as far away from Tak as she can. She is struggling with the incline of the pit walls, the darkness of the night, and the fear that is threatening to overcome her. She does not know if any of the others have survived, or even where she is going, just that she needs to get away from Tak.

Tak is at the mine, facing the fact that Ellen's body is rapidly failing. Tak is trying to figure out what David is doing, but before Tak can concentrate on that, it realizes Mary has escaped. As Tak pursues Mary, it soon realizes that Mary has also damaged the police car, which means it must push this battered body of Ellen even further. Tak uses one of his animals to find Mary, then begins to gain on her as she climbs out of the mine.

David directs everyone else to go in the Ryder truck to find Mary, as he is being told by God that she needs their help desperately. David decides to go after Johnny and runs into the darkness before anyone can stop him.

### Part IV, Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter provides the inciting forces for the main characters, which in turn will trigger the conflict that must be resolved.

Tak must have a new body, but Mary has escaped. Johnny has chosen to leave the group, and David knows that he cannot fight Tak without Johnny by his side, so he leaves the group to pursue Johnny. Johnny is facing a wolf armed only with a hammer.

The author creates seemingly insurmountable barriers to keep good from overcoming evil in this chapter. Johnny is a grown man, intent upon leaving, and David is only a ten year old boy trying to stop him. Mary is a human woman, tired, hungry, and suffering great personal loss; Tak is a superhuman spirit with hordes of creatures at its disposal.

This chapter takes the plot level a point where the tension must be released and the action must rise.



## Part IV, Chapter 4

### Part IV, Chapter 4 Summary

Johnny, relying on his skill as a pitcher in college, throws the hammer at the wolf. He knows as soon as the hammer leaves his hand that the pitch is wild, but amazingly, it hits the wolf in just the right spot between the eyes and kills it.

David shows up a moment later, gives Johnny his wallet back and asks him to stay in help. David turns on his most persuasive voice, telling Johnny about the dream, and that he thinks Johnny's spirit died back in 1966 or 1967, when he was in VietNam. David tells him about the sign Viet Cong Lookout, and about the guide in the baseball cap, and how David believes it was Johnny who was the guide. Johnny resists these arguments, resists the urge to believe Terry, to believe David, and accept the fact that Johnny is just an instrument of God in this horrible fight between good and evil in remote Nevada.

Finally Johnny falls to his knees and he allows David to instruct him on how to surrender himself to God. Johnny and David find the keys to the ATV and leave the mining office to meet up with the others and fight Tak.

Back at the China Pit, Mary is running but she is injured and scared. Just as Tak is about to reach Mary, only moments away from touching her, the Ellen body finally gives out. Tak is frantically seeking something else to hold its spirit, and summons a creature from the sky to hold it.

### Part IV, Chapter 4 Analysis

Good seems to be gaining in this chapter, as Mary escapes Tak, Johnny relinquishes his will to God and David.

Just as the reader believes Tak is defeated by the loss of another body to occupy, Tak is reborn in the body of some winged creature. Action rises as the group heads towards their ultimate confrontation with evil, at the China Pit mine.



## Part IV, Chapter 5

### Part IV, Chapter 5 Summary

Tak has taken the body of an eagle, and is watching Johnny and David and the rest of the group, using the eyes of his other creatures to spy. The eagle moves to a hiding spot near the entrance to the mine, waiting for the group. Tak cannot occupy this body for long, but he knows the others will come to him in their quest to destroy him, and his is confident he can make the transfer to one of their bodies before this one gives out.

Mary has been rescued by the group in the Ryder Truck, and they are waiting together for David to rejoin them. As Johnny and David are driving to the pit, Johnny suddenly is struck with a vision and almost drives off the road. David asks him what is wrong, but Johnny realizes he cannot tell David what he has just seen, so he blames the momentary faltering on being an old guy.

When Johnny and David meet up with the rest of the group at the edge of the China Pit mine, everyone looks to David for guidance, and are confused to see him depend so heavily on Johnny now. The group has grown accustomed to him being obstructive and sarcastic, and thinking of himself. David keeps everyone focused on their purpose, so everyone gets into the Ryder Truck and Steve drives it further into the mine. They stop at the base, having decided the best way to close up Tak inside the pit is to cause the ceiling to fall in, as the Chinese brothers did long ago.

They break into the explosives room, and gather up the materials they need. They do not have any means of starting the explosion, but Johnny tells them he has an idea. Ralph is protective of David, Mary is eager to be a part of killing Tak, and Steve and Cynthia are working together, almost as a couple.

At one point, Johnny asks Steve to step to one side so they can talk. David is very suspicious of this, but allows it to happen. When Johnny and Steve are alone, Johnny tells Steve that they will need to grab onto David. When Steve questions this, Johnny tries to explain that he has his own message from God as well and he knows this is the right thing to do. Steve is doubtful, but remembers that Johnny had saved his life when the cougar was about to kill him.

The group gathers up the explosives and walk further into the mine. David asks them all to pray with him, and Johnny watches the boy, knowing that David fully expects to die in this battle. When they reach the head of the drift, David seems uncertain, but Johnny is not. Johnny knows somehow what is going to happen, and David doesn't anymore. David screams in frustration, but continues to act as the leader.

As the group enters a smaller space, where they intended to ignite the explosives, Tak attacks them. The eagle that is Tak comes towards David, but his father falls on him and saves him. The eagle begins to destroy Ralph. Steve and Johnny fight with the eagle,



but Ralph is dead. The eagle has disintegrated and they all know that Tak is close by. David crawls out from under Ralph. David is crazy with the loss of his father and wants to keep going, but Johnny and Steve hold him tight. Johnny tells them all to leave quickly before Tak takes over one of them. Johnny holds David close, and without David seeing it, puts one object in the boy's pocket and removes another one.

Johnny goes deeper into the hole, and is almost consumed by Tak, but he keeps the explosives close by and his motorcycle helmet on his head so the creature cannot enter his nose and mouth. He falls into the pit then, and crashes along the sides. When he hits the bottom, Tak tries to seduce him into changing his mind, but Johnny persists, resists, and finally blows up the cave, using the explosives and the shotgun shell that David had sneaked from the cell floor that first day.

## Part IV, Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter represents the fight between good and evil, with good in the form of Ralph and Johnny emerging as the true heroes of the tale. Timid Ralph who was so afraid to cause trouble by resisting the cop, who kept forbidding David to take risks, and who has been in the background for the entire story, makes the decision to come between a horrible evil spirit and his son. Ralph displays more bravery and courage than any other character to this point.

Johnny is acting on the vision he received on the way to the mine, and responding to David's comment that Johnny's essence actually died back in Vietnam. It only makes sense that God would choose Johnny, a dispirited broken man who needs to redeem himself to his fellow man, to confront Tak, rather than a young man who has lost so much, is so innocent, and has his whole life ahead of him.

Steve, Mary and Cynthia are minor players in this battle, but are key to removing David from danger. Mary returns to caregiver mode when she comforts David.

The danger from Tak ends as the mine falls in on itself.



# Part V

## Part V Summary

Steve, Mary, David and Cynthia return to the truck safely, but the danger still exists because they are parked too close to the mine entrance. Steve rushes them into the truck and guns the motor to put as much space between the truck and the explosion as possible. The women scream at him to slow down but Steve does not, and when the explosion does happen, the truck is almost lost in the collapse.

As they reach the town of Desperation, they find dead animals everywhere and the town itself deep in sand. They wonder what people from the outside will think when they see this carnage. They are sure now that Tak has been imprisoned. David is crying, Mary is comforting him, and Cynthia and Steve are realizing they have survived something awful. They are also realizing they have come away from this together, and want to stay together.

As the group pulls away from town, Mary decides she wants her own vehicle, and has Steve stop at the car she and Peter left when they were arrested by the cop. Mary wants to experience the car and its memories and smells as a way of remembering her dead husband. She asks David to ride with her, and he does.

There is a frightening moment as the four people stand on the side of the road and look at the smoke from the mine explosion. There are recognizable shapes of the statue fragments in the smoke, but David reminds them that the smoke is dissipating .

As Mary and David get into the car, David reaches into his pocket to put something away and finds that the shotgun shell he had been carrying around is now gone. In its place is the Excuse Pass he got the day Brian was cured, the pass he had left nailed to the platform back in Ohio. On it, Johnny had written a note to David and he references a Bible verse that says God is Love.

## Part V Analysis

Good has triumphed over evil, but the reason is not easily explained. The reader understands that Johnny sacrificed himself to imprison Tak, but there is no explanation of the Excuse Pass left in Ohio showing up in David's pocket in Nevada, placed there by Johnny. Did Johnny really exist, or was he an apparition sent by God to test these people and assist David?

All of the other loose ends are tied up in this chapter, with the dangerous animals and insects either dying or returning to their natural habitat, the sands of time covering the doomed and aptly named town of Desperation. Steve and Cynthia, who bravely fought off the desire to attack each other sexually while under the influence of the statue

fragments have found romance. Mary has found a new person to care for in David, and David is returning to his prayerful state, with plenty to think about in the years to come.





# Characters

## Daid Carver

David Carver is one of the heroes of this story. Though just a ten-year-old boy, but he took a profound religious experience and explored its meanings. After his experience, which involved saving the life of his best friend through a miraculous medical recovery, David decides to explore the meaning of his contact with God. He is sent to the home of a local pastor, and begins getting religious instruction from him. David's questions and observations are intelligent and insightful, and the pastor knows he is dealing with something other than a ten year old boy. David realizes that by asking for his friend's life to be saved, David has entered into a contract with God, and there will be payment. When his family goes on vacation and are trapped by Tak, David realizes now is the time for him to meet his destiny. Although the adults around him seem dazed and uncertain about their predicament, David emerges as an unlikely but capable leader, rescuing them and protecting them with his aura. David assumes the only way to save these people, his family, and the world from Tak is for David to die in the battle of good and evil.

David is intrigued by Johnny from the beginning, and often gazes at him in the group. He is compelled to pick up Johnny's wallet when he finds it, and to examine its contents, leading him to discover that it was the young Johnny who appeared in his vivid trance at the theater.

David loses his younger sister, his mother and his father. He remains strong and capable, and resists Johnny mightily when he learns that Johnny will not allow David to die. The lesson he learns is that sometimes God's cruelty extends to allowing someone to live after loss, rather than die with it. However, Johnny's last message to David is that God is love, giving David more to explore as he tries to find meaning in religion.

## JohnnyMarinville

Johnny is tall man who once was very attractive to women. He was a famous and talented writer, but his cynical outlook on life and failure to accept responsibility has made him old before his time. On a search to regain his belief in life and in himself, Johnny has embarked on a motorcycle trip across the country. Fate leads him to a remote and ugly stretch of US Highway 50, where he encounters an evil spirit intent on destroying the world. Johnny is a reluctant hero in this story, making inappropriate comments and failed attempts at humor while the rest of his companions are trying to protect each other and survive.

Johnny seems intent on saving himself, and even leaves the rest of them in an attempt to escape when they decide to go back to the pit to fight Tak. David finds him, forces



Johnny to confront his real nature, and there is a moment when Johnny falls to his knees and prays with David.

When Johnny speaks to Stephen about pulling David out of the mine, Stephen is at first skeptical because Johnny has been such a selfish jerk for so much of the time, but he decides to do as Johnny asks. Johnny sends everyone else away, and then dies as he blows up the mine, imprisoning Tak once again, and saving the world.

## Ralph Carver

Ralph Carver is a middle aged man, married to Ellen, with two children, David and Kirsten. He has taken his family on holiday to Nevada, and encounters a horrible spirit that destroys his wife, his daughter, and himself. Ralph is timid at first, because he just cannot recognize the evil facing him.

Ralph is a typical father who is trying to protect his family, but does not want to over react. He is upset with his son at first for endangering himself, but then becomes his strongest supporter. Ralph loses his daughter first, as she is killed by Collie the officer who is taken over by Tak. As he is trying to recover and comfort his wife, Ellen is taken by Tak to host his body. Ralph is surprised at David's actions, but learns to trust the boy. At the end, when the small surviving group confront Tak head on, Ralph gives the ultimate sacrifice of his life to save David.

## Steve Ames

Steve is an aging roadie who has been assigned to look after Johnny Marinville on his latest publicity and writing adventure. Steve is a decent sort of man, who surprises even himself by his bravery in this horrible experience. Steve cannot believe what is happening, but after seeing the dead people at the ranch, and the spiders and snakes everywhere, he learns that extraordinary events are surrounding him. He is very protective of Cynthia, who is younger than him, and eventually they begin to realize they are attracted to one another.

Steve is one of the ultimate survivors, and his character remains consistent throughout the story. He is strong, good and does the right thng, no matter how it might endanger him.

## Cynthia

Cynthia is a drifter, a young woman who is hitch-hiking even though there is great danger. She trusts her own judgment, and is insanely brave. Her intuition serves her well. Her role in the story is to be the one who immediately knows there is a bad spirit capable of killing them all, and to move the group forward in connection with David's advice.



## Tak

Tak is the evil spirit that has been loosed from its prison in the mines, and is taking over bodies while it attempts to destroy the world. Tak's personality is comedic at times, using parts of songs, TV shows and slang to lull the people into thinking he is the person whose body he is currently occupying. The act is never adequate, because Tak's true nature continually shows itself. Tak has the ability to attract animals and insects to its will, and uses these minions to frighten and persuade its victims to do as it wants. Tak is not all powerful, though, because it cannot move without a body of some sort, and when covered up with dirt and rocks, as in a mine, it cannot escape.

## Tom Billingsley

Tom is an older man who lived in the town of Desperation before all the trouble began. He knew Collie and Audrey before their take-over by Tak, and was able to provide a critical clue to the group about Audrey's increase in size. Tom was an alcoholic man, but good-hearted.

## Audrey

Audrey is a mining engineer who joins the group when they are entering the movie theater. They do not realize it, but Tak is using her to hurt them. Audrey is a young and attractive female who has witnessed Collie killing and maiming many people. Still, she maintains that he is just a mass murderer, not an evil spirit. Her role in the novel is to cause disbelief, offer alternative answers, and delay the group from taking action. She is killed by the group when they discover what she really is

## Mary

Mary is a middle aged woman who is accompanying her husband through Nevada as a favor to his sister. When they encounter Collie, she stands up to Tak right away, first verbally, then with a shotgun. She is a strong woman who refuses to believe she is a victim, and her determination allows her to be one of the few who survives. She is also compassionate, and when David's father dies, Mary takes him under her wing. Mary's strength and courage make her one of the most likable and believable characters in the novel.

## Ellen

Ellen was David's mother, and when Tak inhabits her body, Ellen dies. Ellen is a woman who does not approve of much praying, nor does she believe David has undergone any sort of real transformation. Ellen is in a sort of shock once her daughter is killed, and never recovers.



# Objects/Places

## China Pit

China Pit is the underground mine where Tak had been imprisoned. It is called China Pit because many years ago some Chinese miners had been employed to work the dangerous mine where white men refused to go. The legend was that the mine collapsed, imprisoning the miners, and the white management decided it was not worth their time, money or effort to rescue the Chinese because they were only Chinese. When David learns the truth, he tells the group that the Chinese found these small pieces of statue, and the power in these pieces was so strong everyone went crazy. Two Chinese brothers managed to escape, bring the ceiling down, and it was not re-opened until the modern miners blew it open again.

## Town of Desperation

This is a fictional town in Nevada, along Highway 50. The town had approximately 200 residents, a bank, a school, and other businesses, but when Tak took over Collie, the police officer, Collie killed everyone but a few people. At the time of the novel, only Collie, the veterinarian, and one woman from the mines are still alive.

## Statue fragments

These are ugly pieces of statues, each depicting some animal with another animal coming out of its mouth. The fragments have immense power, encouraging any human who touches them to behave violently sexual or murderous. The fragments were found all over the floor in the China Pit.

## Johnny's wallet

Johnny has a large wallet, the kind motorcycle riders wear, and it contains his money, credit cards, identification, and some photos of himself through the years. He accidentally drops the wallet in the Ryder van, and it is found by David. When David sees the picture of Johnny in VietNam, he realizes the younger Johnny is the man he saw in his trance-like dream in the theater.

## Town signs

The signs represent every day items, like a speed limit sign or a town welcome sign that have been perverted and damaged. Just as Collie is no longer Collie, but Tak, the signs represent a normal town which is now a place of mass murder and unspeakable acts.



## **Collie's police car**

The police cruiser is the method by which Tak is able to gather more people besides those in the town. With the police lights and equipment, Tak can pull over tourists such as Mary, the Carver family, and Johnny. It is symbolic of human respect for authority.

## **Mining office**

The office is another symbol of industry, of a town emerging from a depression; yet when the miners open up the wrong cave, they are all murdered. This mass murder of the miners and engineers also symbolizes the author's pro-environment views.

## **Carver RV**

The Carver family rented an RV to take their vacation in, symbolizing family unity. When the RV is left on the side of the road, open, and exposed, it was a clear signal to anyone passing by that all was not right in this area. It was symbolic to Cynthia that it was left and not towed. The RV is opened and abandoned, just as the little doll that belonged to Kirsten Carver, symbolizing the rendering of the Carver family.

## **Viet Cong Lookout**

This is the name of the little platform built by David and Brian near the path back in Ohio, and also the name of a bar that Johnny and his friends frequented in VietNam. These two locations, set years and miles apart, bring the story together in the last sections, when David finds Johnny's wallet and his picture.

## **Early Excuse Pass**

This was a pass that David obtained from school many months before the trip to Nevada, and he had left it on the sign at the Viet Cong Lookout. He had not seen it since, and was shocked to see it in his pocket after Johnny saved everyone. The pass symbolizes Johnny taking David's place as the sacrifice God demanded to kill Tak.



# Themes

## Good vs Evil

Tak is a very evil spirit, taking over innocent people and causing them to cause mayhem and murder in a small town in Nevada. To fight this evil, the author sends God, in the form of David Carver, a young man who has recently had an intense spiritual experience. The group of tourists who are pulled into this evil spirit's path are a mixed crew, and the strength of David's convictions gather them together to fight the evil.

Tak appears to be winning the battle, and since this is a horror novel, the traditional success of good in literature could be overturned. However, good does win out in the end. Many are sacrificed first though. Mary's husband is weak, and he is killed immediately. Kirsten whines too much, Ellen comes out against praying, and Tom is an old alcoholic. Audrey was terrified by Tak, and that made her weak. David and Johnny are very strong, although Johnny's personality underwent an extreme shift from good to bad when he left VietNam. David says Johnny died in VietNam, and it is the young Johnny who comes to David in the dream and gives him the strength to continue. At the end, Johnny recovers enough of his courage and goodness to make the final sacrifice to save the world.

Good versus evil is a very profound theme in novels, but is seldom as direct as in this novel. There is no question as to the evil character, as its behavior never deviates from wrongdoing. The remaining characters are all good, but then must be graded according to how good they are, and whether they are good enough to represent "all" good as they battle this strong evil spirit.

## Man and God

In this novel, many of the conversations relate to God and His interaction with man. Some of the characters disregard the helpful spirit that appears to be standing by waiting for an invitation to assist, while others ask for his help only as a last resort. David prays three times a day, and speaks out against the evil Tak by saying his God is stronger. David's closeness to God is so strong the animals can sense it.

Johnny has long rejected God, and when a voice speaks to him in the turmoil, he would rather attribute it to his ex-wife Terry than think it is God. Cynthia counts on her intuition and trusts it implicitly, yet would not say it was God speaking to her. Those characters who do not talk about God decide to believe in David's guidance instead. The ones who refute David (Ellen and Audrey) end up dead rather quickly.

Johnny questions whether God is cruel or uncaring, and throughout the novel is a wise cracking, irreverent, independent whiner; but at the end, when all hope is lost and he finds himself being led into a haunted mine by a little boy, Johnny becomes what he was



always meant to be, a hero. When he writes on the Early Excuse Pass to David, knowing this is the last thing the writer will ever write, he tells David that God is Love.

The novel uses this theme because humans have always questioned the motive and purpose of their deities, and especially when they are confronted with pure evil.

## **Independence and courage**

In this novel, ordinary people are placed into an extraordinary and supernatural situation. The reaction of these various characters to the evil of Tak is just as different as they are from each other.

The author gives the reader characters who are dependent and slow thinkers, and these characters are either consumed by the evil Tak or they are murdered. Independent personalities who are free thinkers and unafraid of how others see them, such as Johnny, David, and Cynthia, emerge as the heroes in this novel.

All of the characters are initially shocked and disturbed when their normal worlds are disrupted; however, some characters are never able to rise above the moment of reality. Events wash over them and carry them away, and they do not lift a finger to help themselves or others. Other characters, like David, Johnny, and Steve, somehow shake off the stark terror and move forward to help not just their own situation, but those of others around them.

# Style

## Point of View

This story is written in third person omniscient. There is a narrator who can see into everyone's mind, even the mind of an animal, and relate the events to the reader. The narrator can be trusted to tell the truth.

With this style of writing, the author can include the reader on every moment of the action, blending one scene into the next, from the mind of the evil spirit, to the mind of the cougar sent to attack someone, to the mind of the person being attacked. The truth of the narrator allows to see mistakes made by every character, and to learn about those characters as they are seen by others.

The author uses third person in every scene, in every chapter. When a character is thinking to themselves, or if a character who is not present, like God or Johnny's ex-wife, the words are italicized.

## Setting

The entire story is set in Nevada, in or near a town called Desperation, and off Highway 50. The novel is set in present day, in the summer. The desert, its animals and insects, and its bleakness play an important part in setting the mood and tone of the novel.

The author uses a biting sandstorm to heighten the tension and suspense in the novel, cutting the characters off from sound and assistance. Bonding and character development occurs in the abandoned theater, while the evil spirit closes its circle on the unsuspecting group.

By choosing a remote section of one of the sparsely populated western states, the author has increased the sense of solitude and remoteness for the characters. Added to this is their unfamiliarity with the town or the land, since they are mostly tourists. The author has chosen a vast wasteland for the ultimate fight of good and evil.

## Language and Meaning

The writing style of this novel is crisp, with considerable dialogue and little description. The events are brutal and gory, and the author does not cheat on the blood and guts expected from a horror novel.

The language is current day American slang, with a fair measure of timely references to songs, television shows and name brand products, such as Irish Spring soap. Tak's speeches are comedic and bumbling, typical of an evil spirit in the wrong person's body. The language of Tak flows from obscenities to "good gosh" and jokes. There are few





long speeches in the novel, as it goes from one scene and character to the next, in an attempt to rise and sustain tension.

The story uses few multi-syllabic words, keeping the dialogue and action crisp and fast. Explanations concerning the mine and its operations are incorporated into a story about Chinese miners. Religious references are presented in the form of Tak's enemy, and not the traditional Biblical terms.

## Structure

Desperation by Stephen King, is 690 pages long. It is broken into five parts, with 1-5 chapters in each part, with the exception of the last part. The chapters are very short and full of action, following a fast paced plot. Within the chapters are numbered sections, indicating a break in the action, a change of character view, or a method to increase suspense.

Part One of the novel introduces the main characters and reveals the horrible danger the humans face with the evil spirit of Tak. As the chapters progress, the evil capabilities of Tak are revealed. The only hope for the humans is in a small boy named David Carver, who has recently undergone a radical spiritual conversion and has already performed a few miracles. The characters are all brought together as captives of the spirit, who is currently possessing the body of a very large police officer. As Part One ends, the last one to join the group in the cells is Johnny, and Tak is back to torment them.

Part Two covers the characters as Ellen is removed from the cell, David escapes and releases the remainder of them, and they regroup and join up with Steve and Cynthia.

Part Three of the novel defines the characters and their roles in the fight of good versus evil, with more losses to their numbers, and the emergence of unexpected bravery on the part of Johnny, and more miracles and visions from David.

In Part Four, the group falls apart and then comes back together as they decide to confront Tak in the mine. This section of the novel has increasing tension and rising action to the point where the ultimate conflict is reached, where David personally confronts Tak, only to be saved by his father, and replaced in the struggle by Johnny.

Part Five is very short, and represents the aftermath of Tak's return to prison. The surviving characters look to the future, and begin the attempt to recover from this supernatural confrontation.



## Quotes

Part I, Chapter 2, Page 49, Narrator

What Mary Jackson recalled, what caused her to reach for the shotgun even though she had never actually held a gun - rifle or pistol - in her entire life, was the memory of the big cop mixing the words I'm going to kill you into the Miranda warning.

Part I, Chapter 3, Page 158, Narrator

Like most spiritual conversions, David Carver's was dramatic only on the outside; on the inside it was quiet, almost mundane.

Part II, Chapter 2, Page 255, Narrator

It was a rendering of what might have been a wolf or a coyote, and although it was crude, it had enough power to make them both forget, at least for a few seconds, that they were standing sixty feet from the leftovers of a mass murder.

Part II, Chapter 3, Page 303, Narrator

Maybe there were people alive back there, doctors and lawyers and Indian chiefs, but there was also something very bad back there.

Part III, Chapter 2, Page 417, Narrator

The outsider, the one from the earth, was in the cougar's head, its will caught in her mind like a fishhook. That one spoke in the language of the unformed, from the time before, when all animals except for men and the outsider were one.

Part III, Chapter 3, Page 426, Tom Billingsley

"There were all kinds of stories about it. One is that they dug up a waisin, a kind of ancient earth spirit, and it tore the mind down. Another is that they made the tommyknockers mad."

Part III, Chapter 3, Page 436, Narrator

And suddenly it all came together in his mind, not with a click but with a big loud ka-pow, and for a moment, before the cougar uttered her coughing, rising growl, he thought the sound of breaking glass was in his mind, that it was the sound of understanding.

Part III, Chapter 5, Page 490, Steve Ames

Steve suddenly found himself hoping Mary Jackson as dead. That was awful, but in a case like this, dead might be better, mightn't it?

Part III, Chapter 5, Page 499, Johnny:

"That's right, God is cruel. We slow down, the mummy always catches us in the end, and God is cruel."

Part IV, Chapter 1, Page 517, David

"What I'm doing is trying to get you to listen. Everyone else will if you will. He doesn't



need to send his can tahs or can tak against us if we're in disagreement with one another - if there's a broken window, he'll get in and tear us apart!"

Part IV, Chapter 1, Page 546, Johnny

"David thinks God means him to die in order to close Tak up in his bolthole again. The final sacrifice so to speak. But David's wrong. It's not going to be that easy for him"

Part IV, Chapter 5, Page 658, Johnny

"Go to your friend Brian, David. Go to your friend and make him your brother. Then start telling yourself there was an accident on the highway, a bad one, a no-brain drunk crossed the centerline, the RV you were in rolled over and only you survived. It happens all the time. Just read the paper."



## Topics for Discussion

Compare the characters of Ellen and Mary. Both encounter Tak, but one survives and the other does not. Why? What traits do these characters have that contribute to their endings? Does the author imply that one is smarter than the other, or is it just a matter of timing and fate?

Who do you think is talking to David in the dream? Is it Johnny from the past or present? Is it God just using Johnny to make David feel more comfortable?

Why do you think the author chose spiders and snakes as Tak's minions instead of prairie dogs and house cats?

How does the desolation and emptiness of the Nevada desert contribute to the book?

If Johnny had lived, do you think he and Mary could have formed a romantic relationship?

Compare Johnny and Steve. Which is more likable? Why?

David remarks that Johnny died in 1967 or 1968. What does he mean by that?

What is Steve's role in this novel? Is he Johnny's sidekick, or is he the true hero of the story?

Why did these tourists follow Collie so completely? Was it respect for authority or guilt?

Does good or evil win in this novel? Is evil just temporarily set aside?