

The Dogs of Littlefield Study Guide

The Dogs of Littlefield by Suzanne Berne

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Berne, Suzanne. *The Dogs of Littlefield*. Simon & Schuster. First Trade Paperback Edition, January 2017.

The Dogs of Littlefield is a psychological novel by Suzanne Berne which revolves around the lives of the residents of Littlefield, Massachusetts, as they cope with their own daily problems and a string of dog killings. Littlefield, not far from Boston, is home to Warren College. Quiet, staid, nearly all-white, largely secular, wealthy, and liberal, Littlefield has been voted as the sixth best place to live in the country by the *Wall Street Journal*. This is what attracts cultural anthropology professor Clarice Watkins, from the University of Chicago, to come live in Littlefield for a year while teaching at the college to study the people of Littlefield. Clarice, an African-American, approaches the issue warmly: she is tired of hearing what makes communities go wrong, and wants to find out what makes communities right. Littlefield, because of the feel of the town, becomes Clarice's subject.

The biggest issue, Clarice discovers, are dual proposals for Baldwin Park. One group of citizens wants to ban dogs from the park while another group wants them to go leash-free. The local paper reminds residents of their progressive views, and urges them to support the leash-free laws. The opposition argues that dog owners are not as tidy as they should be about cleaning up after their dogs, and loose dogs could cause problems. As the debate swirls, Margaret Downing heads to the park with her dog, Binx. There, she discovers a poisoned dog in the woods. She calls for animal control, and then recounts at home what she has seen to her husband, Bill. Margaret worries about what will come, and what their seventh-grade daughter, Julia, will think of everything. Meanwhile, Margaret has an affair with narcissistic local novelist George Wechsler while Bill lusts after Julia's good friend, Hannah. Julia herself becomes the talk of town when she falls through the ice of a pond trying to reach what she believed to be was a stranded puppy, only for the puppy to disappear.

Next door to the Downings live the elderly Fischmans, who have rented out their carriage house to Clarice. As the months pass, Clarice takes notes, attends town events and functions, and gets to know the people around her. Four more dog deaths follow the first, throwing the town into a near-panic. The suspect is identified as a scruffy-looking young man, leading the police to either ticket, stop, bother, or harass a local Pakistani student, Ahmed, twelve times in a few weeks. Speaking with Clarice, Ahmed explains that the problem with the people of Littlefield is that they complain about problems but do not realize they themselves have problems, and that they are too afraid to do anything to fix any problems.

Clarice, through her studies, comes to realize that she has been wrong about Littlefield, having mistaken a comfortable lifestyle for happiness. She realizes the people of Littlefield are not really different from people anywhere else, even though the residents of Littlefield consider themselves to be better and have insulated themselves against the world. She realizes the town has too many therapists, and is unconsciously racist. She

chooses not write about Littlefield. As the novel ends, Bill and Margaret have decided they will attempt to work through their marriage, but Bill is late in getting home.



Chapters 1 – 5

Summary

In Chapter 1, the third-person, omniscient narrator relates that when a proposal is brought before the Board of Aldermen in the winter to allow dogs to go leash-free in Baldwin Park, the town of Littlefield quickly divides on the issue. For years, dogs have gone leash-free in the meadow of the park located next to the elementary school, but now that a formal proposal has been made, people take sides. Signs begin to appear at the park, urging people to respect the rights of all to use the park. When an unleashed dog runs into a scruffy-looking young man on a bike who threatens to shoot the dog, the signs get stronger in tone. The aldermen vote to postpone a vote on the park until a task force can review everything. The town then quiets down. The spring and summer come on, and families and people return to the park in large numbers.

In the autumn, the alderman vote in favor of a three-month trial period to allow a leash-free zone in the Baldwin Park meadow for certain hours of the day. The hours will be expanded if all goes well. The Littlefield Gazette urges people to think about what could right the situation, not what could wrong it, and reminding them that Littlefield has always been forward-looking, from community gardens to gay pride. Margaret Downing brings her ten-month old Black Lab, Binx, into the meadow. Though it is not the leash-less hour, she allows Binx off his leash, who in turn bolts to the woods. She follows him, and there discovers a dead dog.

In Chapter 2, Margaret and her husband, Bill (who works for Roche Capital Management), are out in the backyard by the pool. Margaret asks about Bill's day, and the Bill asks about Margaret's day. She explains she found a dead white bullmastiff at the park, and that the animal control guy who responded said it looked like the dog had been poisoned. Margaret is still deeply disturbed by the event. Bill thinks about how he and Margaret seem to have drifted apart in recent years, and recalls how in love he was with her when they first got together. He reflects on how they have only been able to have one child (Julia); how Margaret's life has essentially come to revolve around the teenaged Julia; and how, thanks to the puppy Binx, at least Margaret gets out of the house. In the present, Margaret is worried about her marriage, and knows Julia is worried about Binx given the situation at the park. She also feels bad for the owner of the dead dog, the novelist George Wechsler. She tells Bill that someone from Chicago has rented the Fischmans' carriage house.

In Chapter 3, the narrator describes the usual weekday crowd at the dog park as being heavy. All anyone can talk about the next day is what happened to George's dog, Feldman. From what Margaret learns, Wayne of Happy Paws dog services—also a graduate student at Boston University—had been hired to walk Feldman, but Feldman got away from him. No one blames Wayne for what happened, but his lack of care in cleaning up after the dogs is blamed for the sign fiasco of the previous year. Naomi and her dog Skittles, Emily Orlov, and Sharon Saltonstall and her dog Lucky, are all present.



The dogs are jumpy, knowing something is off. Naomi, Emily, and Sharon notice a black woman with a red turban appear in the park with a yellow lab. They have never seen her before. The three women talk about how Margaret's marriage is not doing too well, and how she and Bill are in counseling.

In Chapter 4, Margaret walks Binx in the park and thinks about the woods. They are full of wildlife, including deer and coyotes. No one likes the coyotes because they kill cats and howl all the time. She runs into George at the park near the scene of the crime. As they walk, they begin talking. Margaret learns that George's wife left him the previous spring. As they walk, George thinks he sees something in the woods, but then thinks it was nothing. This causes Margaret to talk about her own life and marriage, and worries her husband would want to be with someone younger. She says she will help him get through whatever is bothering him. George calls Margaret a remarkable person, touching her shoulder as he does so. His hand feels warm.

In Chapter 5, the narrator indicates that every autumn the elderly and retired Fischmans rent their carriage house to visiting professors at nearby Warren College. Margaret and Julia go meet the newest one, a black woman, Dr. Clarice Watkins of the University of Chicago. Watkins owns a Yellow Lab named Aggie. A week later, Margaret and Hedy Fischman, both out walking their dogs, meet on the sidewalk. Hedy explains that Clarice was a last-minute renter changed at the college's request. Hedy's husband, Marv, thinks it was racism that meant Clarice could not find anything elsewhere. Margaret does not believe racism could exist in their area. Hedy reveals that Clarice Watkins, however, loves Littlefield. News also arises that a second dog has now been found dead. When they encounter Clarice, Margaret suggests everyone come over for dinner sometime. Clarice is delighted by this and also interested by how many dogs there are in the community. Hedy remarks that these are very strange times with so many dogs dead.

Analysis

The beginning of Suzanne Berne's novel *The Dogs of Littlefield* is as humble as the town seemingly is. The town has divided over whether to allow dogs to go leash-free or not in the park. The town, socially, culturally, and politically left-of-center, divides, though the paper reminds the dissenting side that the town has always prided itself on its progressivism, from gay pride parades to the community gardens in the park. Ultimately, the local elected leaders decide a limited trial run of leash-free hours each day will be the best demonstration of whether or not such a thing could work or could be expanded. Readers should very carefully note that Berne's construction of the town both in terms of its nature and its setting will prove essential in the coming chapters. Apart from occasional political disputes, the greatest problem seemingly facing the town is the coyotes in the woods.

The coyotes themselves symbolize the natural state of the wild, and symbolize human nature. The town does its best to keep the coyotes back, but coyotes can only be kept at bay for so long. The woods in which the coyotes live symbolize the world at large around the town. In essence, human nature can only be kept domesticated—like dogs—



for so long before it too flares up. Even domesticated dogs can revert to nature (as will be demonstrated by the end of the novel). Notice even with Binx, a puppy, his natural and wild state is to run, unhappy being confined by a leash. As readers note, the residents of Littlefield consider themselves better than those living around them because they are progressive and enlightened (consider, once again, the newspaper editorials).

Despite the high regard for which Littlefield residents hold for themselves, they are very much human as the reader quickly learns. One of Berne's major themes in the novel is the argument that liberals may consider themselves to be more progressive and enlightened, but they too suffer from human flaws and unconscionable behavior. Consider how Margaret and Bill, like every married couple everywhere, worry about their marriage at some point or another. Also notable is how Hedy believes racism might be to blame for Clarice having to take last-minute accommodations with her in the carriage house—but also how Margaret dismisses that racism could exist in their enlightened, progressive little town. Here, liberal elitism and self-assured assumptions are on clear display—which is, in effect, human pride. However, the calm is shattered by the poisoning of George's dog—and this will not be the last dog poisoned. Everything Littlefield thinks it is, is about to be challenged.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the newspaper editorialize that residents of Littlefield should support the leash-free proposal for the park? What does this in turn have to say about the composition of the town itself?

Discussion Question 2

When Hedy suggests that racism could have something to do with Clarice's last-minute need for accommodation, what is Margaret's response? Why? What does this have to say about Littlefield and its people, at large?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the appearance of Clarice Watkins in town so surprising to so many people? How do they react when they see her? Why? What does this have to say about the town at large?

Vocabulary

aldermen, congregated, controversy, morose, primordial, caromed, indignities, belatedly, sardonic, ingratiating, supersaturated



Chapters 6 – 10

Summary

Chapter 6 begins with autumn in full swing, and Littlefield looking beautiful. A total of four dogs have now been found dead. Littlefield is in shock. All sorts of theories are offered. Some believe the dogs are ingesting bittersweet from Halloween decorations. Others believe the dog deaths are accidental, and are the result of eating poison meant for coyotes. Others believe the deaths are actually intentional, the result of anti-leash-free sentiment meant to frighten those who want to let their dogs run free. Clarice records all of these things on her laptop, continues to befriend Margaret and her family, and makes her way into the community, such as attending one of Julia's soccer games. Clarice has decided to make a study of Littlefield, as it has been named one of the best twenty places in the country to live by the Wall Street Journal. Clarice knows most people study why things go wrong in places, but no one really studies why something goes right.

Clarice has chosen Littlefield, sixth on the list, because of its quaint settings and the strange fact that almost one percent of the nation's population of psychotherapists are to be found in Littlefield. She has also chosen it because she wants to know how such a population would register global events. In the present, she visits the Forge Café to eavesdrop on conversations about the dogs, and to see how people react. She worries that the formerly contented population, now frightened, will jeopardize her work. Her superior, Dr. Awolowo, reassures her to stay the course: the village apparently now has an issue, and its coping mechanisms can be studied. Clarice decides to especially study the Downings. She notes Margaret as being attractive and anxious, and Bill as being kind but drawn to adolescent girls.

In Chapter 7, Margaret and George correspond by e-mail. Neither one thinks the dog deaths have anything to do with getting rid of coyotes. He says that he intends to talk about the poisonings at the upcoming public hearing on the dog park. Margaret comes to realize she is relieved not to be attracted to George. George talks about study in the Times which quotes 73-percent of women saying they would cheat on their husbands one time if they could never be caught. George says this is because nobody can ever have enough of anything. He explains that his wife, Tina, left him for a massage therapist. He says that he is depending on financial help from his eighty-six year-old retired father in Bayonne, New Jersey. He explains that Littlefield is not a town normal people can afford. As Margaret and George drive to the hearing, she thinks she sees some creature in the road, and yells for George to avoid it. George pulls over to the side of the road, where Margaret then kisses him.

In Chapter 8, Mrs. Elizabeth Beale allows her daughter, Tina, to move back in with her after leaving George, though Elizabeth worries what effect this will have on Tina's two sons. Elizabeth lives in a house overlooking the park, and is horrified by the string of dog killings though she believes all dogs should be leashed or kept out of the park



altogether. Tina reflects on how her original signs asking for responsibility were later taken up by someone else and made crude. Elizabeth is even more put off by Tina's new boyfriend, a hairy, bearded man who reminds her of a werewolf. He makes Elizabeth miss George, the narcissist. She also detests Tina's idea that she should move into a retirement place somewhere, the implication being that Tina would get the house. Elizabeth returns her thoughts to the matter at hand. She, her friend Cybil, and four others have filed a proposal to ban dogs from the park altogether. The town meeting hall is packed as the six aldermen take their seats behind the bench at the front of the room. After various proposals are read to the public, the aldermen open up the floor to comments from the public. Among them, George says dogs have rights and should be free as he slams public fears about the deaths. Elizabeth speaks last, saying the town is being overrun by dogs, and they should be banned. Elizabeth must be helped back to her seat as the pressure of the moment gets to her. The aldermen explain they will consider both the park and the ban at their next meeting.

Chapter 9 turns focus to Clarice at the meeting, who knows she is making good progress getting to know the people of Littlefield. Among the events Clarice attends is a lecture by psychotherapist, Dr. Naomi Melman, about living happily. Clarice even buys one of her books, which Naomi signs. The people of town are concerned not only about the dogs, but about school budget cuts and early cold weather. Clarice sees Margaret kissing a man who is not her husband in a car, and later sees Bill out walking his dog with a look of suffering on his face.

In Chapter 10, Thanksgiving approaches. George runs into Emily, her son, Nicholas, and her dog, Boris, as he is on the way to meet Margaret for coffee at the Forge. He decides to detour with them to Dairy Barn where Nicholas has earned an ice cream cone for being polite. On the way, Emily's phone rings. Her ring tone is Piano Concerto Number Two by Rachmaninoff, which she says reminds her of the time just before the Oktober Revolution. They leave Boris tied up outside and go inside the Barn. George recognizes the black woman in line at the Dairy Barn from the town hall meeting. Emily explains to George that her husband, a professor named Jonathan, is in New York at an economics conference with his gorgeous and intelligent graduate student, Willa Clamage. Suddenly, word comes from a young Indian man that something is wrong with Boris. Everyone rushes outside to discover Boris, tied to a parking meter, is vomiting. The young Indian man attempts to administer chest compressions, but is unsuccessful. Boris dies soon after.

Analysis

Suzanne Berne has already set the stage for her novel: Quiet, pretty, heavily white, mostly secular, upper-class, and liberal, Littlefield has been ranked as the sixth of the twenty best places to live in the America by the Wall Street Journal. This contentedness of life is what attracts Clarice to write about Littlefield. She is considering that the town's left-of-center, progressive, and close-knit community lifestyle are largely to be credited for the ranking. What does Littlefield have therein, Clarice wonders, that sets them apart and makes them happy? What goes right? These are the questions she will objectively



be approaching as a scientist approaches things found in nature, though Clarice's microscope will be her studying in the field, as it was. However, human beings are not creatures or a part of nature to be studied only objectively: they also have to be understood personally. This is what Clarice does not understand, and will only serve to make her research difficult. Ironically, whereas the liberal residents of Littlefield consider themselves a step above, so too does Clarice. Readers should also note that the narrator is less personal than merely objective and descriptive, reflecting Clarice's own observations of the town. In other words, the narrator allows the reader to assume the same kind of place: a passive, objective observer.

Liberals may consider themselves to be more progressive and enlightened, but they too suffer from human flaws, Berne continues to argue. These flaws include lust, jealousy, infidelity, and so on. George, an utter narcissist, and Margaret, self-absorbed and looking for something different, end up kissing. She has betrayed her husband, undermining the assumption that residents of Littlefield are the sixth happiest in the country. Clarice observes this kiss, and is stunned by it—not because of moral concern, but because it challenges her academic endeavor. She is likewise disturbed by the look of suffering on Bill's face—which one does not expect to find on the face of one of the residents of one of America's happiest towns. Clarice's superior encourages her to stay the course, because now—especially because of the dogs' deaths—Clarice can learn how a progressive, happy town handles tragedy.

However, readers are already beginning to experience two core thematic arguments that Berne is now laying groundwork for. Human happiness is something self-made: it does not solely depend on circumstances. Margaret could very well take her marriage into her own hands and more effectively try to get close with her husband once again—but instead, she cheats on him. This underscores the second thematic argument for which Berne is laying groundwork: The problems faced by Littlefield residents are largely of their own making. Margaret did not have to kiss George—but she has, and now it has created a problem and drama that Margaret can now fill her life up with.

At the same time it appears as if Emily's husband may be poised romantically with a much younger graduate student—something which annoys Emily, but which she does not seem to be actively trying to prevent or get to the bottom of—because it spices up her otherwise mundane life. She and Margaret are like the dogs of town: well-kept and well-cared for, but without much excitement in their lives. By including drama in their lives, they are reaching out to a more basic human level—a level like that of the coyote. Note that in the Dairy Barn, Emily's ringtone foreshadows darker days to come, as the ringtone is a Russian piece of music alluding to the Oktober Revolution—and the terrible bloodshed it brought about.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Clarice worry that her decision to study Littlefield has been the wrong decision? What convinces her to stay the course? Why?



Discussion Question 2

Despite the fact that she is married, Margaret grows closer to George and kisses him. Why is this so? How do they react to the kiss? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Does the happiness of the residents of Littlefield depend upon their circumstances, or themselves? Explain.

Vocabulary

apex, baffled, sabbatical, unobtrusively, melancholy, masticate, demographic, ad nauseum, rapacious, exorbitant



Chapters 11 – 15

Summary

In Chapter 11, snow covers the town. Julia Downing is in seventh grade at Duncklee Middle School. Julia does her best to dress well and do well in school, and keeps meticulous lists of things in her life—such as ranking her fellow students at school in terms of popularity. Julia lists herself at number 73. At school, transgender Ms. Manookian hands out the class’s next assignment: as historians, she asks, what details about Littlefield would they record for future generations? Principal Anderman and Clarice sit in on the class. Ms. Manookian also attempts to get the class to draw connections between George Washington and Norman D. Mayer (a man who demanded an end to nuclear weapons while threatening to blow up the Washington Monument before being shot dead). When no one makes the connection, Manookian says that Washington and Mayer were both revolutionaries. Albert Chang asks what kind of revolutionary Mayer was—if he was more like Gandhi, or more like the dog murderer.

In Chapter 12, at Bill’s agreement, Margaret agrees to host Christmas dinner for anyone who does not celebrate Christmas, even though Margaret has been suggesting this for years despite Bill wanting to always eat at Number One Noodle House. Meanwhile, Margaret and Bill continue to meet with Dr. Vogel, their therapist. Bill, meanwhile, has been dealing with stress at work. The company is being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission. At the same time, signs bearing the slogan “LEASH YOUR BEAST” begin appearing all over. Bill cautions everyone at Christmas dinner, including Margaret, not to jump to conclusions about who may be responsible, because accusations can get out of hand. Present at the dinner are the Fischmans, the Melmans, including their daughter and Julia’s friend Hannah, as well as their son, Matthew, and Clarice Watkins. Late to the gathering is George, invited by Bill the previous week after they met at the drug store. George arrives at the dinner with his sons, twins Aaron and Bradley. In the privacy of their kitchen, Margaret expresses unhappiness to Bill that George has come, saying he is an ass. Bill counters that he thought it would make Margaret happy because she loved George’s book. Meanwhile, the conversation about the dog killer continues on. Hedy worries it could be Middle Easterners. She says her husband is right in that they are living in a secular little bubble: just because they are the way they are, does not mean the rest of the world is the same.

In Chapter 13, Margaret finishes dinner and sets it out on the table. The dinner conversation quickly turns to the subject of the dog killer once again. Margaret thinks how she and George have not seen each other in a while. She wonders how her life has turned out the way it has. She considers how Julia is growing up, and considers how Matthew was found drunk and passed out behind a steering wheel by the police after driving with only a permit to find alcohol. Margaret wonders if maybe Bill’s distance has not been an issue with their marriage after all, but the SEC investigation is causing him



stress. Margaret finally realizes she is happy to have company in her house, but then nearly passes out from too much wine. George offers to bring her upstairs, but Bill insists he will. Both men attempt to gain the upper hand, but Bill finally relents.

In Chapter 14, the narrator notes that every evening Clarice walks through the neighborhood with Addie, taking in the sights and sounds. Clarice is disappointed in the people of the town for not being happier. She expected them to be insulated, self-absorbed, and complacent, but not restless and fascinated by the idea of menace. She attends a talk given by Emily's husband on economics, after which he signs copies of his books, one of which Clarice purchases for use as a primary document in her research. Clarice, for all her efforts, cannot get a handle on the people of Littlefield who have created a refuge from the world for themselves without realizing it, and who seem to think their own sufferings rival those of anywhere else in the world.

In Chapter 15, Hedy reads the news to Marv who is in bed with the flu. The FBI and SEC confirm they are looking into Roche Capital Management, but will say nothing more about it. Hedy feels horribly for Bill and Margaret because of this. Julia, meanwhile, feels as if she is haunted by the ghost of a dead fish, and has a bad feeling about something coming. When Marv Fischman dies just after Valentine's Day, this is confirmed to her. On a walk with Binx, Julia sees a coyote at the foot of the Fischman's driveway, and she wonders whether or not it is another sign of some kind. At the park, Julia sees a puppy out on the ice. She ties up Binx and seeks to find a way to save the puppy. Ahmed Bhopali, the Pakistani graduate student who had seen Boris suffer outside the Dairy Barn, is riding his bike along, tired from work and class. The bike gets a flat, so he must pull over. He hears Binx barking, and then sees Julia out on the ice. He rushes over and calls for her to come back. Ms. Manookian also appears at the pond, telling Julia to stop. Others arrive, including the police and the fire department. Julia realizes the ice is cracking, but also sees the puppy has gone. Overhead, Julia sees a fish-shaped cloud.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Berne builds on her core thematic argument that liberals may consider themselves enlightened and progressive, but they are also very much human. Consider how, at the non-Christmas/secular Christmas dinner that Bill and Margaret host, most of the talk is about the dog killings. Rather than relying on facts, evidence, and reason—as liberals argue they do, opposing supposition and fear of the unknown—those assembled for dinner only speculate and dream up wild ideas about what is going on. It is very illiberal—especially the assumption that someone from the Middle East may have something to do with it. Here, the human flaws of liberals becomes a flat-out hypocrisy, which in turn becomes another thematic argument in that liberals can indeed be hypocrites. Even Bill, who gets a pass for working for a large financial company (the kinds of companies liberals disapprove of) because he is a liberal, finds himself under scrutiny by the FBI/SEC—for which he also receives a pass and presumptive innocence because he is a liberal. Readers can only wonder how the town would respond if Bill were a conservative.



Clarice begins to objectively understand what Littlefield actually is. The people of Littlefield have created a refuge of sorts for themselves against the world. They are dogs—evolved coyotes—and their small town is a refuge against the world—the wild of the woods. They do not recognize this, but they are very self-absorbed. They believe the problems they face are just as bad as the problems faced elsewhere in the world, and they believe the entire world exists within their community. The community, despite its progressive mindset, is not as progressive as it thinks. Readers should reflect on the stir caused by Clarice's presence in town, as the white people of Littlefield are unused to seeing a black person around. Readers should also reflect on the position of fear from which the residents of town operate, rather than from a place of rational discernment. Also notable is how George, in previous chapters, stereotypically wrote Ahmed off as an Indian, despite Ahmed being Pakistani. Ms. Manookian, the transgendered seventh-grade teacher, disturbingly attempts to draw parallels between a would-be bomber in the 1980s, and George Washington, saying they are both “revolutionaries.” From the safety of their refuge in town, residents can speak safely and admirably of people like a would-be bomber, but when confronted among themselves with something different—such as a black woman or a dog killer—the people have no real idea how to respond because their assumptive worldview has been rocked.

Indeed, the narcissism, the elitism, and the insularity of Littlefield only bespeaks the humanity of the people who live there. They are human, just like everyone else, even if they believe themselves to be above the others around them. Their true natures still show through. Every so often, a bit of their baser human instincts materialize, as represented by the symbolic appearance of a coyote in the middle of Julia's neighborhood. Pretending to be perfect does more harm than good. It is better to recognize imperfection in the self. Only by recognizing imperfections, flaws, and simply being human, can someone begin to be happy. This underscores Berne's thematic argument that happiness is really a self-made thing. Being among people exactly like oneself—in this case, wealthy, liberal, secular whites—will not make one happy. It will actually work against one's pursuit of happiness. Too often, only conservatives are accused of the potential for this same kind of insularity—but the problem is universal.

Discussion Question 1

What diagnosis does Clarice give the town of Littlefield so far in her studies? Why? Do you agree or disagree with her observations? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Suzanne Berne begins to effectively argue the case that Littlefield liberals are very much human, despite their own assumptions about their progressivism and enlightenment. Why do you believe Littlefield residents do not recognize these things about themselves—such as their human flaws?



Discussion Question 3

How have the liberal assumptions of the residents of Littlefield been rocked so far in the novel? Why is this so? How have they responded? Why?

Vocabulary

imperceptible, revolutionary, demurred, querulously, protuberant, convivial, glacially, cynicism, cataleptic, capacious, miasma, embellishments, municipalities, incomprehensible



Chapters 16 – 20

Summary

In Chapter 16, Julia falls through the ice, but is quickly rescued and taken to the emergency room. She survives. While Bill urges normalcy as quickly as possible, Margaret feels anything but normal after the incident. She is concerned especially by what caused Julia to venture out on to the ice, but Julia will not say. Margaret, Hedy, and Clarice head out to their book club. Sharon reports that the death of her dog has turned out to be natural, not poison. The guest speaker for the book club is George. George talks about himself, his life, and does a brief reading. Elizabeth Beale is present, and asks why love has gone out of novels. As a novelist, George should love what he does and should love his characters. What is needed in novels nowadays, Elizabeth argues, are honor, bravery, and decency—not supernatural creatures like zombies and strange behaviors. George is angry and rips into Elizabeth, prompting Naomi to call the club to order and wrap up the meeting. George storms out, leaving Elizabeth shaken.

In Chapter 17 as the spring comes on, people in Littlefield are in a better mood, thoughts of the dog killings now mostly far behind them. George is working on his new novel when Margaret and Binx stop by. Binx nearly bites George, so George ties Binx to the coffee table. George and Margaret then go upstairs to have sex. Afterwards, Margaret talks about her life and her poor husband, which annoys George. George now wants her to leave quickly so that he can work, but the moment passes.

The narrator relates in Chapter 18 that since Marv's death, Hedy and Clarice have dinner together at least once a week. With her eighty-fourth birthday approaching, Hedy does not want any fuss. Hedy learns from Clarice that Clarice has romantic feelings for her boss. They call it an early night, and Clarice goes to bed at nine.

In Chapter 19, Julia has regular visits with the guidance counselor, Mr. Gluskin, after the pond incident. Julia has refused to see a regular therapist, saying only freaks go to them. Julia begins babysitting for Nicholas Orlov. During a walk with Nicholas and Binx, Nicholas gets away from Julia. Matthew Melman is smoking marijuana in the woods of Baldwin Park feeling sorry for himself since he has not been accepted by any colleges. It is then that Nicholas comes across him, and Matthew tries to calm him down from being so excited. Julia loses hold of Binx in the woods, who ends up going after Matthew.

In Chapter 20 at the Forge, Clarice listens to Naomi explain what happened: Matthew had protected Nicholas against Binx, who by nature had been aggressive, and had caused Matthew eighteen stitches. Binx, Naomi reveals, has since been put down. She also reveals that since Bill's firm has been shut down, Bill has been taking antidepressants, and that Margaret has come unwound, believing she is seeing things, and Julia is finally in therapy. Ahmed, meanwhile, is unhappy at having been stopped,



ticketed, or bothered by the police twelve times recently because he matched the description of a vandal and the creator of the “LEASH YOUR BEAST” signs. He explains this much to Clarice. He explains the problem with Littlefield people is that they complain about problems and do not realize that they themselves have problems. Ahmed no longer wants to be lawyer, and so will drop out of college and take over his father’s computer repair business. He calls her a sympathetic person as he leaves. Clarice considers the Downings: overeducated, unemployed, and adulterous. She thinks of alcoholic Margaret; depressed latent pedophile Bill; and Julia, seemingly ignored by her own parents in light of her personal struggles. Clarice considers herself a fool, having confused comfortableness with happiness. She had hoped that Littlefield people would be balanced people, but this is not the case. She wonders what she has missed.

Analysis

As the dog killings seem to fade over time through the course of the winter and the spring, the comfortable complacency of the residents of Littlefield returns. With the settling of the excitement and the drama, other problems resurface. Berne effectively argues here that the problems faced by Littlefield residents are not unique to them, and their assumptions that their problems are just as bad as problems faced anywhere in the world remain unchallenged. Consider how Margaret resumes her affair with George, ever the narcissist. There is no conceivable reason for this to occur—but it adds drama to both their lives and gives them something outside the norm to thrive upon. This becomes reason enough. They are allowing the coyote to slip back in among their dog-like selves.

Clarice recognizes this all in her writing. She recognizes the supposedly-happy people of Littlefield as restless hypocrites rather than happy, exceptional citizens. While Clarice may draw correct observations about the residents of Littlefield, she does not do them full justice. She describes what they are, and what their lives are like, but she does not attempt to get to know them personally as people. She is the elitist among elitists. Although she attends things like the Christmas dinner or gets ice cream at the Dairy Barn, she is passive: she eavesdrops, listens, but does not truly open up about herself or attempt to get to know her subjects on a personal level. And this is how Clarice misses the important element of her research: happiness is not objectively quantifiable. It is self-made, existing primarily with the individual, and varying according to the individual.

Berne also begins to round out her argument that liberals can be hypocrites. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the very personal, very frank discussion that Ahmed has with Clarice. Ahmed, because he matches the description of the supposed sign-maker, is stopped, bothered, or harassed a dozen times by the police. It does not matter that he helped to save Julia’s life. It does not matter that he lives and works in town. It does not matter that he has no criminal history. All that matters is that he looks different and matches a description. Liberals, who decry racial profiling by the police, now have it occurring in their town being done by liberal police. Locals could very easily make their



voices heard and put a stop to it by taking action through confronting their elected leaders about the injustice, but they do not. They complain about things like racial profiling, but when it is happening in their own backyard, nobody even raises the concern.

Discussion Question 1

What happens with Margaret as the dog killings become a memory in Littlefield as the spring comes on? Why is this so? What larger problem does this denote?

Discussion Question 2

What do you believe accounts for Clarice's failure to truly understand the people of Littlefield, even though she correctly describes the town and its people?

Discussion Question 3

What do Ahmed's experiences in Littlefield have to say about the town and its residents? Why does this matter?

Vocabulary

litany, odious, percipience, histrionic, arrayed, scrupulously, brusquely, abject, admonitory, monograph, latent, ennui



Chapters 21 – 24

Summary

In Chapter 21, Bill is feeling better. He makes dinner for Julia. He and his friend Passano are considering beginning their own consulting firm, while Roche might not be finished as the surveillance done on them for insider trading had been illegal. Margaret has admitted her affair to Bill, saying she has been dumped by George—but now wants to try things over again with Bill. George, meanwhile, has apparently begun dating Tina. Julia and Bill find a dead mayfly in the kitchen. It makes Julia sad that they live only for one day. Bill reminds her that a day to a mayfly is an entire lifetime, and that before turning into a mayfly, it had a different kind of life. Being a mayfly—like much of life—is just something to get through. After dinner, Bill and Julia head to the middle school, where Margaret is now helping Mrs. Zigler and the chorus on piano.

In Chapter 22, the choral concert goes well, and refreshments are served afterward. While the kids talk and run around, their parents speak to each other and realize such a moment will never come again. Margaret is congratulated for her work, while Hannah is complimented for how beautifully she performed. Bill comes to realize that the problems in his marriage may not be resolvable, but they are only problems.

Chapter 23 begins in the summer, with the newspaper carrying word that the dog killer has been found. It is Orson Zigler, an environmentalist and husband of the chorus teacher. Orson explains in the newspaper he had been trying to balance out the coyote population with arsenic, but the dogs were collateral damage. He has been fined \$2,000 and may face a civil lawsuit. Still, questions remain, such as who killed Boris, who clearly did not ingest poison at the park but died in the middle of town on a busy evening, and who was responsible for the graffiti. Hedy and others wonder if more than one person could be responsible. The dog park and dog ban are back up for discussion. Littlefield, a haven for scruffy, hipster men, has now become a haven for clean-shaven men who do not wish to look like the dog killer. Naomi wonders what Clarice ended up thinking about everything before she left for Chicago two days earlier.

Hedy reveals she had spoken with Clarice to learn Clarice was actually writing about them in the town, having come to the conclusion that Littlefield people felt their tiny problems were big problems, that they suffer from “delusions” of “being in touch with the rest of the world” and that they are afraid of everything (259). Hedy also explains that Clarice believed they had too many therapists, too many people online, and that many of their attitudes were unconsciously racist. Because her notes and findings were too problematic, Hedy explains, Clarice will not be writing a book about them. That afternoon, Margaret and Julia go for a walk. Margaret tells Julia that the world is full of such beautiful things, it can hardly be stood. Julia knows she can stand it, however. Along the way, Julia sees a cute boy, Anthony, that she likes. Margaret insists they all go get ice cream. Julia is a little embarrassed, and Anthony agrees. Anthony is not very talkative, and does not say thank you for the ice cream.



In Chapter 24, Margaret waits for Bill to get home, reading by the waterfall Bill built for her some years before, but he is late in arriving. Julia, meanwhile, has been preparing for summer camp in Canada. Margaret believes she wants to try to work things out with Bill, and continues to wait for him to get home.

Analysis

You cannot attempt to understand someone only objectively, Berne argues as she rounds out her novel. At the end of the day, human beings, for all their flaws, faults, and problems, are very much prone to things like love, desire, and dreams. There is a bit of coyote in the dog in the sense that the dog is not always predictable. The same is true of human nature. Human beings are not always predictable. Margaret and Bill choose to work out their marriage rather than taking the predictable path of divorce. Yes, both have flaws, and both are insulated, wealthy, secular, white liberal elites that are often hypocritical—but Clarice does not understand there is more to Margaret and Bill than that. And this is Clarice's own greatest flaw: her desire to objectively study humanity causes her to miss the very heart of humanity itself. It is why she cannot quite get a grasp on the people and is unable to write, let alone publish, her desired book.

Human happiness, Berne concludes, is self-made. The circumstances of Bill and Margaret earmark them for divorce—but they choose to divest themselves of the situation in which they find themselves to strike out on a new path together. Rather than idling back and doing nothing, Margaret decides to become active in the community by assisting with the middle school chorus. Bill is considering beginning his own financial consulting business. Julia begins to adapt well to normal teenage routines, such as liking a boy. These are moments of happiness made possible by the individuals themselves, not by their circumstances. As noted by the mayfly discussion, much of life is a struggle to get through—but the moments of happiness make life worth living.

As Margaret waits for the belated Bill to get home, she thinks she sees something in the twilight around her. She will not even speculate as to what it is, but the symbology is clear: it is life. Life is unknown. It comes and goes, has ups and downs, is good and is bad, is uncertain and unpredictable—but it is worth living. Readers should note that, as the novel concludes, the dog killer is found and what had been a major plot point earlier in the novel is now irrelevant to Berne's deeper messages. Readers should realize, however, that liberal hypocrisy is on display here: the killer is a liberal environmentalist trying to keep the coyote population at bay. Had he been of any other political persuasion, the liberal community would have eviscerated him. Likewise, his work is to be seen symbolically as the attempt to deny human nature—beating back the coyotes—but this does more harm than good; it kills dogs, which is the symbolism of the denial of human happiness. This in turn leads to the self-creation of problems and drama, and undermines human stability.



Discussion Question 1

What are Clarice's ultimate conclusions about Littlefield? Why does she draw these conclusions? Do you believe she is right, wrong, or incomplete in her assessments? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Who is the killer of the dogs? Why did this occur? How does the town of Littlefield respond to the knowledge of the killer? Why do you believe this is so?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe human happiness is dependent upon the self, or upon one's situational circumstances? Why?

Vocabulary

counterpetition, conviction, sociocultural, companionable, rapture



Characters

Margaret

Margaret Downing is the wife of Bill, and the mother of Julia. A wealthy former teacher, Margaret is now a stay-at-home mom who is bored with her daily life and worries about the staleness of her marriage.

Despite her desire to make things work with Bill, Margaret wants to make her own life more interesting, and so has an affair with George. Margaret later confesses the affair, and seeks to actually make the marriage with Bill work.

Bill

Bill Downing is the husband of Margaret, and father of Julia. Bill is wealthy financial consultant who worries about the distance between himself and his wife. He is generally unhappy with life, but is grateful to have his daughter, Julia.

Bill is also latently sexually attracted to adolescent girls, and comes under enormous stress when his firm goes under investigation. By the end of the novel, he appears to have gotten control of himself personally and professionally, and wants to make his marriage to Margaret work.

Julia

Julia Downing is the daughter of Bill and Margaret. Julia appears to be about thirteen, may have obsessive-compulsive disorder where she must always make lists and record things, and her imagination frequently runs away from her and gets her into trouble, such as the pond incident. Nevertheless, Julia is a sweet and kind girl who seems unaffected by her parents' difficulties and flaws by way of escapism through reading.

Clarice

Clarice Watkins is an African-American sociocultural anthropologist and professor at the University of Chicago. Clarice comes to Littlefield not only to teach at the local college as a visiting professor, but to study the town itself for her own academic research.

However, Clarice's unflinching objectivity disables her from truly understanding the people of Littlefield, though she is able to accurately though not fully describe their condition. Her findings thus baffle her, preventing her from writing a book about the town and its people.



George

George Wechslaw is a local novelist, husband, and father whose wife has left him for another man. George is utterly narcissistic and brash, as well as an overgrown child. He has to rely on his elderly father for support. He has an affair with Margaret for no real reason other than to have an affair. By the end of the novel, however, he is back together with his wife in the attempt to make his marriage work.

Naomi

Naomi Melman is a wife, mother, and psychotherapist who has written a book about her practice. Naomi focuses on living happily in her work, though she, like most others in town, is bored by the everyday routine in which she finds herself. Naomi serves not only to be a gristmill for town gossip, but also finds herself wondering about Clarice and what Clarice has thought of Littlefield.

Emily

Emily Orlov is a well-educated stay-at-home wife and mother. Emily is symptomatic of the boredom of the wealthy liberals of town, worried her husband may be tending toward an affair with a college girl but doing nothing to prevent it. Emily wears her elitist education on her sleeve by setting the ringtone on her smartphone to pre-revolutionary Leftist Russian music. Emily's dog is killed tied up outside the Dairy Barn, and the killer is never found.

Sharon

Sharon is a wife and mother, and is among the first people to encounter Clarice at the park. Sharon is surprised to find a black woman in town, but rather than being welcoming, Sharon is questioning. Sharon's dog is among those that die in the novel, but Sharon's dog turns out to have died from natural causes.

Hedy

Hedy Fischman is the wife of Marv, a mother, and the next-door neighbor to the Downings. Hedy rents out her carriage house each year to visiting professors at the local college, and in the present time, rents to Clarice. Hedy demonstrates liberal hypocrisy in the novel, as she assumes Clarice must rent with her because of racism denying her rent elsewhere, while later in the novel automatically assuming a Middle Easterner is to blame for the dog deaths and signs.

Matthew

Matthew Melman is the son of the Melmans, older brother of Hannah, and is essentially a loser. He has been unable to get into college, and spends his days getting high and doing nothing. However, it is Matthew who finds Nicholas in the woods and protects him from Binx.



Symbols and Symbolism

Top Twenty Best Towns in America

Wall Street Journal Top Twenty Best Towns in America symbolizes the myth of utopia. The article brings together the twenty best and happiest towns in America in which someone can live. Littlefield appears at number six on the list. The article essentially speaks of a perfect place to live, as though a place was all that was necessary for happiness. But no such place actually exists (a utopia) because happiness is found primarily in the human heart and is largely a matter of a person's own making.

Signs

Signs symbolize the growing division and need for responsibility in Baldwin Park. People who use the park but do not have dogs become upset with those who do have dogs and do not clean up after them. Therefore, signs asking for responsibility are put up, but over time, these signs become stronger in tone. This causes a sharp division among patrons of the park, and helps to divide the town politically over the issue of leash-less dogs.

First Dead Dog

The first dead dog symbolizes a shock. When Margaret finds Feldman, the dog of George, dead, she is shocked as is the rest of the community. When poison is identified as the killer, everyone is even more shocked. However, despite the unease of the find, most people believe it was a one-time or freak occurrence in some way.

Second Dead Dog

The second dead dog is an omen. The second dead dog, Hedy says, means that they (as owners) are all living in strange times. While one could argue about leashes on dogs, it takes a different kind of person to actually poison a dog. This thoroughly undermines the staid nature of the nearly-all-white liberal community of Littlefield. People now, because of the dead dog, feel bad things are coming, and expect more dogs will have to die.

Rachmaninoff Ringtone

The Rachmaninoff ringtone on Emily's phone symbolizes unrest and trials to come. Rachmaninoff wrote music just prior to the Communist Revolution in Russia. The ringtone is not only reflective of the Leftist bent of the town politically, but serves as an



omen for trials to come based on the unrest and unhappiness over the killing of the dogs.

Coyotes

Coyotes symbolize the natural wild denied, human nature denied, and symbolize what Littlefield thinks of their fellow man. Littlefield does its best to keep the coyotes at bay, but coyotes can only be kept away for so long. Every so often, they run off with cats or appear in the neighborhoods. Human nature—passions, desires, fears, etc.—are kept at bay by the supposedly enlightened liberal mindset of the residents of Littlefield, but the coyote shows through as the novel progresses. By killing coyotes and denying their true selves (just because they are liberal does not mean they do not have flaws), the residents of Littlefield are paving the way for boredom and drama. Likewise, Littlefield residents consider themselves progressively superior to their fellow Americans, making them refined dogs against a wild of coyotes.

Dogs

Dogs symbolize liberal domesticity, and are the opposite of the coyote. Dogs are contented, well-trained, well-cared for creatures in Littlefield, just as the people are wealthy, complacent, and well-educated. The dog is, in essence, a refined coyote, just as the people of Littlefield consider themselves to be refined, progressive Americans.

Arsenic

Arsenic symbolizes death and self-inflicted problems. Arsenic is purchased by Orson Zigler to kill coyotes and balance out the population. The poison accidentally ends up killing dogs. The refined liberal lifestyle of the residents of Littlefield in turn leads to boredom, and self-inflicted problems such as adultery—which are symbolized by the arsenic. The administering of arsenic, or the creation of problems for the purposes of drama and livening up life, does more harm than good.

Mayfly

A mayfly symbolizes not only the brevity of life, but the idea that much of life is a struggle to just get through, and that life is about the few, happy moments. Bill and Julia discuss this very point when they find a dead mayfly in the kitchen while making dinner. This helps Bill to realize he wants to save his marriage, because for all the problems it has, there are bright spots like Julia.

Twilight

Twilight symbolizes the uncertainty of life. At the end of the novel, Margaret thinks she sees something moving in the darkening world around her. But what it is she cannot say, and she does not try to speculate. This reflects the ups, downs, and unpredictability of life. One never knows for sure what is coming, but life comes all the same.



Settings

Littlefield

Littlefield, Massachusetts, serves as the primary setting for the novel. Located not far from Boston, Littlefield is actually a town of moderate size despite its name. Peaceful, scenic, nearly all-white, largely secular, wealthy, elitist, and liberal, Littlefield has been voted as the sixth best place to live in the country by the Wall Street Journal. Littlefield is home to schools, businesses, Baldwin Park, and even a few churches despite its general population being so secular. Littlefield thus becomes a place of inquiry for Clarice Watkins, who watches as the picture-perfect town turns out not to be so picture-perfect after all. Its residents are no better and no worse than anyone else anywhere else in the country. Littlefield is divided by dual proposals on allowing dogs to go leash-free in the park, or to ban dogs entirely. However, all of Littlefield is rocked by the dog poisonings which occur in the autumn. Littlefield becomes a kind of mythological utopia, which exists in theory but not in reality.

The Woods

The woods border Baldwin Park. The woods in which the coyotes live symbolize the world at large around the town. In essence, it is the wild (America and the world) compared to the refined refuge of Littlefield. The coyotes in the woods cannot be kept out of town, and the woods themselves do not disappear or become irrelevant because the town has shut them out. It is in the woods that the dogs are poisoned, meaning that the refuge that has been created in Littlefield does not mean Littlefield will not be affected by the rest of the world.

Baldwin Park

Baldwin Park is located between the woods, the elementary school, and the rest of Littlefield. Baldwin Park is a beautiful expanse of land, with meadows, a pond, walking trails, playgrounds, a dog area, and a path through part of the woods. Baldwin Park is a regular spot for locals, especially stay-at-home moms who walk their dogs. It is while in Baldwin Park that Margaret discovers the first dead dog when she must chase her dog to the woods.

The Carriage House

The carriage house is located beside the Fischman house. The carriage house has been converted into a guest house, and is where Clarice stays while in Littlefield. It is in the carriage house that Clarice does much of her work and writing.

Town Meeting Hall

Town meeting hall is where the Board of Aldermen meets to discuss and vote on issues before the town. The hall is also where citizens of the town may come and make their voices heard about the issues of the day. The meeting hall plays host to a public hearing about dogs in the park. It is attended by most people in town, and demonstrates the cracks appearing in the otherwise homogenous town.



Themes and Motifs

The Impossibility of Objectively Understanding of People

One cannot attempt to understand someone only objectively, the author argues in *The Dogs of Littlefield*. This is because human beings are more than mere descriptions, numbers, and labels, but are instead unique and individual creations. To truly understand a person, one must know who that person is, not just what they are.

When Clarice arrives in Littlefield, she wants to study the town and the people to find out why they are so happy, and what they are doing right. She undertakes a year in Littlefield, where she attends local events, goes to dinner at the homes of neighbors, eavesdrops on conversations in public places, and studies people close-up and afar, but always passively and always objectively, never personally or amiably. This is done to Clarice's own detriment.

Clarice soon realizes that the people of Littlefield are like people anywhere else, despite their exceptional setting and circumstances. She is able to describe people easily, is able to objectively make claims about them, and is able to argue conclusions about them, but there are things which still elude her understanding. Because of this, there will be no book about her experiences in Littlefield because she cannot make heads or tails out of what she has gathered.

Clarice's problem is that she has refused to recognize the human being as an individual to be understood, and not just objectively studied. Only once does she ever engage anyone in any kind of meaningful conversation (Hedy toward the end of the novel) but even then, they are both tipsy and Clarice is not using the experience for work. Clarice does not understand that people are often unpredictable, that they are similar but not always the same. And each person is unique from the others, having his or her own source of happiness.

Human Happiness is Self-Made

It becomes clear in *The Dogs of Littlefield* that human happiness does not depend on the circumstances of place or sociocultural background. Rather, it is something to be found in the individual person.

Saint Thomas More famously wrote of a place of perfection he called Utopia, with "utopia" being Greek for "no place." The perfect place on Earth does not exist, in other words. The idea that such a place could exist in America is mythologized by the *Wall Street Journal's* list of top twenty best places to live in the country. For Clarice, that utopia seems to be Littlefield.



However, what Clarice fails to understand is that circumstances do not dictate happiness. A poor conservative farmer could be just as happy with his life as one of Littlefield's wealthy, liberal, suburban residents. Ironically, most of Clarice's subjects are not happy with their lives despite having stability and security. Rather, they are just as miserable as anyone else can be, and are subject to the same aspects of human nature.

Happiness will vary according to the individual, at that. From Clarice's objective perspective, the marriage between Bill and Margaret appears poised for dissolution. In reality, Bill and Margaret recommit to one another, wanting to be happy again in their lives. Bill contemplates a new business venture, while Margaret begins working with the middle school chorus. They defy expectations. Human action therein cannot always be predicted, meaning that the person, not the situation, is responsible for what happens with respect to happiness.

Problems are a Result of Individual Actions

The problems faced by Littlefield residents are brought on by their own actions. Part of Clarice's confusion about Littlefield residents is why they are not happier despite their good circumstances. She is very surprised to find Margaret kissing another man, and to find Bill looking so unhappy while out walking his dog one night.

In essence, the residents of Littlefield are like the dogs they own. The dogs are well-trained, well-kept, and well-cared for, while the people of Littlefield are well-educated, wealthy, and healthy. Yet, they are also bored. They have everything, and so they have nothing. Despite their claims about progressive living and diversity, they are generally all the same: white, wealthy, liberal, secular, and suburban. Meanwhile, they fear anything different. Consider even how surprised the accepting liberals of Littlefield are to see a black woman among them.

Because of the boredom of their lives, they invent reasons and create drama to make their lives interesting. Margaret is not even attracted to George, but begins an affair with him while claiming to want to save her marriage at the same time. The restless Bill develops latent pedophilia. Julia escapes into the world of books. Emily sees her husband approaching an affair with a gorgeous young college girl, but does nothing to intervene. The dog killings are the only things anyone talks about for months.

All of these miseries, misfortunes, and mistakes could be avoided, averted, or dealt with in some way. Margaret does not have to have an affair, but chooses to do so. Bill could seek serious counseling and therapy for his pedophilia, but lets his mind wander instead. Julia could attempt to connect more with her parents or those around her, but she chooses not to (she does so at the end of the novel, however). Emily could intervene to stop her husband from sliding down the path toward an affair, but she would rather just complain about it. The residents of Littlefield could be up in arms about the revelation of the dog killer, but because he is a liberal environmentalist (a great irony), there is no outcry.



Liberals Suffer from the Same Human Flaws as Everyone

Liberals may consider themselves to be more progressive and enlightened, but they too suffer from human flaws argues Suzanne Berne. The residents of Littlefield consider themselves to be a class apart from their neighboring towns and fellow Americans because of their Leftist bent. Yet, despite this, the people of Littlefield are still very much human.

Littlefield's population is wealthy, well-educated, mostly white, largely secular, and claims to be progressive and liberal. Their enlightened worldview and beliefs allow them to be inclusive, rational, sophisticated, and socioculturally exceptional. They welcome gay pride parades, transgender teachers, community gardens, non-Christians, and leash-free dog park hours in their midst. However, despite the image Littlefield residents project about themselves, the truth is, they are not unlike anyone else anywhere.

The residents of Littlefield gossip. They gossip even more during the time of the dog killings, jumping to even racist conclusions about who the killer could be. They live in fear for months, worried their dog might be next rather than calmly and rationally approaching the situation. Despite their wealthy and healthy circumstances, they are still vulnerable to illnesses and passions, desires and mistakes.

As such, the residents of Littlefield engage in supposition. They engage in sexual affairs. They are susceptible to unhappiness, drug use, underage drinking, and sadness. They suffer, they cry, they experience loss, and they experience daily problems like anyone else does. And like many people, the liberals of Suzanne Berne's novel consider themselves better than everyone else—a very human flaw.

Liberals Can Be Hypocrites

The Dogs of Littlefield highlights the hypocrisies of the liberal elite. Liberals often consider themselves to be progressive, enlightened, and having a unique worldview which makes them more accepting, inclusive, rational, diverse, and perceptive of the world in which they live. The liberals of Littlefield accept all of this, and project all of this about themselves.

But as previously noted in the themes section, liberals are also very much human, and can just as easily be hypocrites. Rather than welcoming the black Clarice upon her first appearance in the park, the all-white group of Emily, Naomi, and Sharon can only watch in surprise as Clarice goes by. When Hedy readily agrees to let Clarice stay in the carriage house, she blames Clarice's last-minute scramble to find accommodations on racism—which Margaret denies exists in Littlefield. Hedy herself later blames the dog killings and signs on a Middle Eastern man.



The enlightened and well-educated liberals of Littlefield also do not hesitate to engage in supposition, assumption, and gossip, either about one another or about the dog killer. They revel in a mystery of the unknown, rather than genuinely trying to do anything to figure it out. When they do discover who is to blame, they do not respond in outrage, as the killer is a liberal environmentalist. Had the killer been a Republican, the town might well have responded differently. At the same time, despite liberal opposition to big business and financial firms, Bill—himself a liberal—works for one, and does not draw the ire of his neighbors for working at one. When his firm comes under investigation, no one accuses him of anything, but everyone feels bad for him instead. One can only wonder what the response been had Bill been a conservative.

Perhaps the greatest act of hypocrisy in the novel comes through the treatment of Ahmed. While the liberals of Littlefield rightfully detest racism and racial profiling in America, their own liberal police force uses racial profiling to harass, stop, ticket, and bother Ahmed a dozen times. Rather than seeking to solve the problem in their own midst, no one even bothers to talk about it. Ahmed recognizes this hypocrisy, and in part because of it decides to leave Littlefield to return home to work with his family rather than pursuing a law degree—meaning the local residents who are lawyers will remain white and homogenous.

Styles

Point of View

Suzanne Berne relates her novel *The Dogs of Littlefield* in the third-person omniscient narrative mode, from the point of view of a detached and objective observer. The third-person narrative mode allows Berne to extensively study each of her characters in the novel, moving from one to the next as the plot unfolds. Because of this, readers have an effective understanding of each of the characters in the novel, though not a very personal one. The narrator does not exude any real sympathy for the characters, but merely relates their thoughts, actions, and descriptions to readers. This is done by way of simple narration, rather than a more expansive prose. Consider Margaret's mid-life crisis moment in Chapter 13: "What happened to me? she thought. How could my life have ended up this way?" (133). What would otherwise be a compelling situational period of self-doubt and questioning is briefly and tersely summed up with a clear intention in mind—this, in effect, reflects the work that Clarice is doing: she is a detached observer who objectively describes everything she encounters.

Language and Meaning

The language of *The Dogs of Littlefield* is simple and straightforward. This is done for the sake of brevity and reaching points quickly—just as Clarice hopes to do with her academic study of the place. As has been noted, the narrative mode of the novel is reflective of Clarice's simple, objective, and passive point of view wherein she directly seeks to get to the heart of things. So too is the language this way. It does not become poetic. It does not become very descriptive. It does not show, but merely tells. This gets readers directly to the points and messages Berne makes: a gentle reminder to liberals that they, too, are human and capable of flaws; that human happiness comes from within and not from a place; and that people must be understood as individual human beings.

Structure

Suzanne Berne divides her novel *The Dogs of Littlefield* into 24 consecutive, chronological, numbered chapters that span the course of roughly one year. The novel opens in the late summer and ends in the early summer. Each chapter progresses the reader through time, sometimes by hours, sometimes by months at a time. The simple, straightforward, and step-by-step process of the chapters builds and expands the plot, just as an academic book builds up toward a conclusion, step by step, fact by fact, piece of evidence by piece of evidence. In this method, Berne carefully constructs and lays out her arguments, themes, and points, ranging from the gentle reminder that liberals are, at heart, like everyone else; and that human happiness comes from within, not from without.



Quotes

...once an authorized off-leash 'dog-park' was proposed and a petition presented to the Littlefield Board of Aldermen, fierce arguments erupted over whose rights to the park should be upheld, and the town broke into factions...

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: From the very start of the novel, the narrator lays out the predicament of Littlefield. The proposal to allow dogs to run free in the park, however, causes the otherwise warm and friendly town to go to war with itself. People line up on different sides over the issue, and are prepared to go to war.

With all these dogs, these are very strange times.

-- Hedy (Chapter 5)

Importance: When Margaret, Hedy, and Clarice learn of a second dog killed in Littlefield, they know something is going on. Hedy expresses it best by talking about the dogs that are being killed. She explains they are living in very strange times. Normally, such a remark by Hedy would be taken with a grain of salt. But with two dogs now dead, what Hedy says is ominous.

Three more dogs had been poisoned since Margaret Downing found George Wechsler's dog in the park.

-- Narrator (Chapter 6)

Importance: The mounting number of dead dogs causes great concern, fear, and shock in Littlefield. The nearly all-white, very-liberal community, which has prided itself on acceptance, friendliness, and open-mindedness, is now the scene of horrendous activity. The community at first tries to rationalize what is happening—such as saying coyotes were the real targets. But this ultimately does not hold up.

The hearing ended with the chief alderman declaring that they would consider both proposals, for a dog park and for a dog ban, at their next meeting.

-- Narrator (Chapter 8)

Importance: After the public hearing ends, the aldermen declare they will reach a decision on the dog park and dog ban at their next meeting. Until then, the public is left to stew. People continue to take sides but settle down into an uneasy truce. The problem has not been solved, only delayed.

I'm just saying... accusations can get out of hand.

-- Bill (Chapter 12)

Importance: As signs saying "LEASH YOUR BEAST" begin to appear all over town, Margaret begins to wonder who may be to blame. Bill cautions her against any



accusations, saying they can get out of hand. Accusations can be dangerous, and more often than not, prove to be false.

What happened to me? she thought. How could my life have ended up this way?
-- Narrator (Chapter 13)

Importance: At Christmas dinner, Margaret considers her own life and the situation in which she finds herself. She has kissed George, a dog killer is on the loose, her husband appears sexually attracted to a middle school girl, and her marriage is not doing so well. She hopes things will settle, but continues to wonder how things work out the way they do.

One can view the village of Littlefield as a carefully constructed refuge... What is surprising to the outsider is that Littlefield does not consider itself to be a refuge. The citizens here believe they are no different from citizens anywhere.
-- Clarice (Chapter 14)

Importance: These form part of the notes Clarice takes about Littlefield. She has confirmed much about the place she initially believed—that it was insular and selfish. However, she is disappointed the people of the town are not happier, are fascinated by menace, and are restless. She realizes they have built a kind of left-of-center refuge from the rest of the world, but assume the rest of the world is like them without realizing there are different opinions, even among themselves. This is highlighted by the dog park issue.

I did not poison any dog... Why would I? I do not care about any dogs.
-- Ahmed (Chapter 20)

Importance: Here, Ahmed speaks with Clarice about being harassed by the police for matching the description of the "LEASH YOUR BEAST" vandal. No matter what Ahmed does, they continue to bother him. Ahmed says he would never hurt any dogs, because he does not care for any dogs. He says it is too problematic for him, and the people of Littlefield do not realize they have problems.

All people do here is complain about problems... They say they are scared about everything. But they do not realize what the problem is. The problem is that everyone has problems.
-- Ahmed (Chapter 20)

Importance: Here, Ahmed incisively sums up Littlefield. The people complain about everything, and think they have such bad problems in town, when the truth is such problems exist everywhere. They themselves have problems—an elitist kind of world view made possible by their insulated little community where they complain about things but do not actually try to fix anything. They are hypocrites. Even in liberal Littlefield, where problems with racial profiling by police could be solved—such as Ahmed being stopped or bothered twelve times by the Littlefield police—the people do nothing about it.



Why had she ever expected these people to be happy? Because they were comfortable?

-- Narrator (Chapter 20)

Importance: In considering her research on Littlefield, Clarice realizes she has mistaken their being comfortable with their being happy. They are content to live their lives as they are, but are afraid of change and seeing outside themselves because they are so wrapped up in their own lives. It is easier to live among and inside these boxes while complaining, rather than even seeing beyond them.

The world is full of beautiful things. Sometimes you can hardly stand it.

-- Margaret (Chapter 23)

Importance: After Clarice leaves and her true purpose in Littlefield has been exposed, Margaret and Julia go for a walk. They discover many beautiful things along the way, causing Margaret to comment on it. Julia knows that she could stand the beauty, and could use more of it in her life. Despite the daily drama and minor and major problems, life goes on, and should be embraced for its beauty where it can be.

Something was moving in the deep blue twilight, under the oak trees, moving toward her or moving away, it was too dark to tell.

-- Narrator (Chapter 24)

Importance: Here, Margaret waits up for Bill to get home to tell him she wants to work their marriage through. However, Bill is late in getting home. In the twilight just before dusk, Margaret thinks she sees something—but what it is and why, she cannot say. This in turn symbolizes the uncertainty of life: things come and go; things change for the better and the worse; and nothing can be predicted—but life must go on.