

East of the Mountains Study Guide

East of the Mountains by David Guterson

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

East of the Mountains Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1 – 2.....	5
Chapters 3 – 5.....	8
Chapters 6 – 8.....	11
Chapters 9 – 10.....	14
Chapters 11 – 12.....	17
Characters.....	20
Symbols and Symbolism.....	24
Settings.....	27
Themes and Motifs.....	28
Styles.....	32
Quotes.....	34



Plot Summary

East of the Mountains relates the story of Dr. Ben Givens, a recently widowed retired heart surgeon living in Seattle. Due to the fact he was dying of colon cancer, Ben created a plan to commit suicide and make it look like a hunting accident, so that he did not have to share his diagnosis with his family or suffer the pain of dying from the disease. The events of the story are related from a third-person, limited narrator focusing on Ben's perspective.

In Chapter 1, Ben carefully laid out everything in his home to make it look as though he was planning to come back and set out on his hunting trip with his two dogs, Tristan and Rex. However, Rex misbehaved in the car causing Ben to crash. In Chapter 2, Ben and the dogs were rescued from the car crash by a young couple named Kevin and Christine, who gave Ben a ride to a nearby campsite where they said he could hire another car.

In Chapter 3, having parted ways with the couple and having discovered that he couldn't hire a car after all, Ben attempted to hitchhike back to Seattle. While doing this, he met a drifter who convinced him to carry on with his hunting trip. The drifter gave Ben some marijuana cigarettes to help with the pain of his colon cancer. Ben smoked one and the effects of the drug brought back memories of his childhood growing up on an orchard in Washington.

In Chapter 4, Ben recalled his childhood and his mother's untimely death when he was 12 years old. He remembered meeting and falling in love with his wife Rachel when she came to work at his family's orchard. They parted ways at the beginning of World War II, when Rachel went to train as a nurse and Ben began military training.

In Chapter 5, back in the present timeline, Ben was awoken from his dreaming by his dogs Rex and Tristan. The dogs ran away from Ben to join a pack of wolfhounds. The wolfhounds attacked Rex and Ben killed one of them while trying to save his dog. The owner of the wolfhounds, William Harden, found Ben and stole his shotgun as revenge for the death of his dog.

In Chapter 6, Ben tended to Rex's wounds. He went looking for Tristan and found him dead. Ben walked with Rex in search of help, and a trucker came along and drove them to a nearby vet. In Chapter 7, Ben assisted the vet as she treated Rex's injuries.

In Chapter 8, Ben recalled his time fighting in World War II. He remembered that seeing his friend saved by a field surgeon inspired him to become a surgeon. He recalled his marriage to Rachel when they reconnected in Europe.

In Chapter 9, Ben caught a bus and intervened to save the life of a severely ill migrant fruit picker named Angel. In Chapter 10, Ben was left alone with a friend of Angel, another fruit picker named Emilio. Ben helped Emilio find work at a place called



Wolfhound Orchard, where Ben knew he could find William Harden, the man who stole his shotgun. On the way there, Ben decided that he wanted to live.

In Chapter 11, Ben and Emilio arrived at the orchard and went to sleep. Ben was awoken in the night and asked to help assist a young woman in labor because they heard he was a doctor. Ben went to her bedside and successfully delivered her baby.

In Chapter 12, the owner of the orchard, Bea Harden, thanked Ben for helping to deliver the baby. Ben told her that he came to the orchard to get his shotgun back but he didn't want it anymore. He confronted William Harden and told him he could keep the gun. Bea drove Ben back to Seattle. Ben went into his house and called his daughter to tell her that he had come home.



Chapters 1 – 2

Summary

Dr. Ben Givens is a 73-year-old retired heart surgeon whose wife, Rachel, died 19 months before the start of the novel. In Chapter 1, Ben lay awake in bed in his Seattle home the night before the day he planned to commit suicide. Ben wished to avoid the pain of dying from colon cancer by taking his own life.

Ben owned two dogs, Tristan and Rex. Ben planned to make his suicide look like a hunting accident by killing himself while on a hunting trip with the dogs, using a shotgun he'd inherited from his father. That morning, Ben carefully made sure that everything in his house looked normal and like he planned to return so that his daughter would not suspect that he had taken his own life. Ben had dinner with his daughter and his grandson Chris the previous night and had told Chris that he would go hiking with him soon. This lie – alongside a promise to his deceased wife that their ashes would be buried together under rose bushes – made Ben uncomfortable about his plan.

Ben packed the supplies for his hunting trip into his car and ushered the dogs inside. Ben drove along the interstate in the rain. Rex leapt forward into the front of the car. Ben tried to get him to go back again and took his eyes off the road, which resulted in him crashing his car into a tree.

In Chapter 2, a young couple named Kevin and Christine, came to Ben's car to check if he was okay. Ben had hit his head against the steering wheel and was bleeding profusely, but the dogs were both unharmed. The couple offered to drive Ben and the dogs to a nearby hotel where he could call for a tow truck for the car. Ben arranged for his car to be towed and the couple drove him to a nearby town where he could rent another one.

The couple told Ben about their travels around the world hiking, climbing, and skiing and it reminded Ben of his honeymoon with Rachel. Ben lied and told the couple that a friend was coming to pick him up so he could get stitches for his head wound. Ben gave them \$80 so that they could continue with their travels without having to stop and work as apple pickers. Kevin and Christine gave Ben a packet of pumpkin seeds, some Himalayan incense, and a climber's carabiner in return, and the three of them parted ways.

Analysis

The death of Ben's wife Rachel and his diagnosis of terminal cancer are the catalytic plot events that make Ben desire to end his own life.

The careful process by which Ben arranges things in his house to make it look like he plans to return serves two functions in the novel. The first is to establish for the reader



that Ben is very committed to making his suicide look like an accident so as to protect his family from discovering that he is dying of cancer and has chosen to take his own life. This is important background information, for later the narration explains Ben's motivations on a number of occasions when he must make new decisions and change his original plans in order to keep up the impression that his death is accidental.

The other function of Ben's careful organization of his home before leaving for the hunting trip is to establish a benchmark for the reader through which to judge Ben's growth as a character. When he returns home at the end of the novel everything remains exactly how he left it, but Ben himself has changed his entire outlook on life.

Ben's dogs, Tristan and Rex, are symbolic of two competing aspects of Ben's personality. Ben's old self, his past, and his desire to give up on life are symbolized by the older dog Tristan who has lost his enthusiasm for life and now needs assistance doing things that he used to enjoy. The younger dog, Rex, symbolizes hope, optimism, and the possibility of a meaningful future for Ben despite his cancer diagnosis. Because Rex represents hope for the future, the dog intervenes in Ben's plans for suicide and causes the car crash which first diverts Ben from his carefully laid plans.

The car crash evokes the theme of fate intervening in Ben's plan to commit suicide and foreshadows that the events of the novel will conspire to prevent Ben from fulfilling his goal. This element of faith and trust in a higher power is echoed when the young couple refers to Ben's escape unscathed from the crash as a miracle. Ben's escape from the crash is ironic because his goal in the novel is to die in a way that looks like an accident. Ben would have achieved his goal had he not survived the crash, but instead he must carry on with his plan of making his suicide look like an accident.

The fateful meeting with Kevin and Christine reminds Ben of the joy of his younger life, as the couple closely mirrors many of the aspects of Ben and Rachel's marriage when they were younger. Ben's gift of \$80 introduces the novel's theme of perspective and how different events can hold different meanings for different people: the money is irrelevant to Ben because he is financially secure and in any case intends to end his own life later that day. However, from Kevin and Christine's perspective, the money makes a huge difference to their plans and their happiness.

Discussion Question 1

What doubts does Ben have about his plan to commit suicide?

Discussion Question 2

How does the author distinguish between the characterizations of Rex and Tristan?



Discussion Question 3

How has Ben's life changed since Rachel died?

Vocabulary

appointed, phantoms, relentlessly, deliverance, incidental, obscured, flanks, bypass, adroit, bowlegged, unnerved, mangled, giddy, infused, laceration, scuffle, fractured, withers, caressing, clarity



Chapters 3 – 5

Summary

In Chapter 3, Ben visited a campground where Kevin told him he would be able to rent a car. However, when Ben arrived the owner told him that they no longer rented cars there anymore. Ben decided to try to hitchhike to his destination and headed to the highway with the dogs.

Ben had hitchhiked around the area as a boy and had assumed that someone would stop to pick him up, but no one did. Ben met a drifter who told him that no one was stopping for him because of the dogs. The drifter asked Ben if he had any spare change and Ben gave him \$20. Ben told the drifter that he was planning to abandon his hunting trip because his eye had swollen shut since the car accident, but the drifter convinced him that he should carry on. Ben decided he would stay and hunt. He told the drifter that he was dying of cancer and the drifter gave him three marijuana cigarettes for the pain.

Ben began hunting with the dogs. Later, he set up camp and ate one of the birds he had killed. He decided to try one of the marijuana cigarettes.

Smoking the cigarette led Ben to recall his childhood, which comprises the events of Chapter 4. Ben grew up on an apple orchard with his mother, father, and older brother Aidan. Their father taught the boys to hunt but their mother never approved. Ben's mother died when he was 12. Ben was distraught because their doctor was unable to cure her.

At school, Ben had a teacher named Miss Dietrich who encouraged him to go to college. Aidan agreed that he should apply. Their lives were interrupted by the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1942, after which Aidan was drafted into the army. An old ski instructor of Ben's wrote to him and suggested he should volunteer for the Mountain Infantry Regiment. Over that summer a girl Ben's age named Rachel Lake came to work on the farm. Ben's father encouraged him to spend time with her and they fell in love. At the end of the summer, Rachel left to begin training with the Cadet Nurse Corps and Ben began his training with the Mountain Infantry Regiment.

In Chapter 5, back in the present timeline, Ben was awoken from his drug-induced dreaming by his dog Tristan. Both dogs were disturbed by the sounds of a pack of dogs chasing a coyote and they ran away from Ben to join the pack. Ben searched for them frantically. When he found the pack one of them was attacking Rex, so Ben killed the dog with his shotgun. The owner of the pack of dogs found Ben and saw that he had killed one of the dogs. The man was very angry and stole Ben's shotgun in retaliation.



Analysis

When Ben is left behind by Kevin and Christine and discovers that he cannot rent a car from the campsite after all, he realizes that he is at the mercy of fate and has no option but to accept what happens to him and see how events unfold.

The meeting with the drifter is a major turning point in the novel because it is the gift of the marijuana cigarettes that introduces the second narrative thread of the novel: the story of Ben's childhood and his time fighting during World War II.

The drifter is also a significant character because he forces Ben to confront the fact that his perspective on the world is a subjective one as opposed to an objective one. Ben prides himself on his clinical training and his rationality in the face of death, but the drifter reminds Ben that his way of seeing things is not the only way of seeing things. The drifter broaches these topics both literally and metaphorically. On a literal level, the drifter does this by telling Ben that everyone is dying and that Ben is just closer to the moment of death. On a metaphorical level, the drifter discusses how Ben's bruised eye will affect his ability to hunt. Ben thinks it means he must give up on the idea of hunting altogether, but the drifter tells him that people with only one eye can learn to hunt by adjusting to the change in perspective.

By preventing Ben from being able to hitchhike back to Seattle, the dogs continue to guide him on his path to self-discovery and spiritual growth by ensuring that he meets the drifter and carries on with his hunting trip. The dogs continue their role in the story as catalysts and guides when they run away from Ben to join the pack of wolfhounds.

Smoking the marijuana cigarette opens Ben's mind to memories and emotions that he has not confronted in a long time, whilst also serving a narrative purpose to the structure of the novel by providing exposition about Ben's past and childhood. In this flashback sequence, the reader learns about how Ben and Rachel's relationship began. The extensive descriptions of life on the apple orchards mean that by the time Ben arrives back in this area as an adult, the landscape is as familiar to the reader as it is to Ben.

Ben's meeting with the man who owns the pack of wolfhounds (who, the reader will discover in the next chapter, is named William Harden) changes Ben's motivation in the novel. After this confrontation, Ben is faced with a dilemma because he no longer has the shotgun in his possession, meaning that he will no longer be able to use it to make his suicide look like an accident. This twist stalls Ben's plan to commit suicide and gives him a new objective in the story of finding William and reclaiming his shotgun.

Discussion Question 1

What role does the drifter play in the novel?



Discussion Question 2

Was Ben's childhood happy?

Discussion Question 3

How does Ben's encounter with William Harden change the course of the narrative?

Vocabulary

barren, unfathomably, muzzle, lassitude, petrified, desultory, ceramic, immaculate, yearling, infinite, chukars, brim, impenetrable, insistently, vertebrae, porcupines, immobilized, agitated, exasperated, vigor



Chapters 6 – 8

Summary

In Chapter 6, Ben tended to Rex's wounds and gave him stitches. Ben looked at the chain on the dead dog's neck and saw the name, address, and telephone number of the dog's owner, William C. Harden, who had stolen his shotgun. He saw that he lived at a place called Wolfhound Orchard.

Ben went searching for Tristan and found him dead. He dug a grave and buried the dog. Ben used a blanket to make a sling which he used to carry Rex.

Ben walked with Rex for several miles until they arrived at a nearby town called George. Ben went into a grocery store to buy some food and asked the clerk if there was a vet in town. She told him that the nearest vet was in a town called Quincy, which was 11 miles away. Ben and Rex carried on walking towards Quincy. They walked past a restaurant. Ben went inside and offered \$60 to anyone who would drive him and Rex to the vet. A trucker named Stu Robinson agreed to take them.

In Chapter 7, Ben, Stu, and Rex arrived in Quincy. Stu waited with Ben until the vet arrived and then they parted ways. The vet's name was Ilse Peterson and she opened the clinic out of hours to treat Rex. There was no other staff present so Ben assisted Ilse with the operation on Rex.

Ilse dropped Ben off at a nearby motel and told him he could pick up Rex in the morning. Ben called his daughter's house and had a conversation with his grandson Chris. He told him they would go hiking soon.

In Chapter 8, Ben smoked the second of his marijuana cigarettes. He crawled into bed and remembered his time in military training and fighting in World War II.

Ben trained in the mountains in Colorado in freezing conditions. When his unit was deployed in Europe they were sent to Italy. Ben kept in touch with Rachel, who was also in Europe working as a nurse. During one battle, a close friend of Ben's named Bill Stackhouse was severely wounded and Ben carried him to the field hospital. While he was there, Ben witnessed a surgeon save his friend's life. When the war ended, Ben met up with Rachel and they got married and went on a honeymoon. Ben told Rachel that he wanted to become a surgeon.

Analysis

The fate of Rex and Tristan continues to reflect the spiritual growth of Ben during Chapter 6 when it is revealed that Rex has survived his wounds but that Tristan has died. Tristan represents the old Ben, who had given up on life and saw no future for himself. Ben is now left with only Rex, the dog who represents the future and continuing



enthusiasm for life. Ben's careful tending to Rex's wounds represents a growing hope in his psyche that he may yet have something to live for, as well as reflecting the useful knowledge and experience that Ben has collected over the years as a surgeon and medic for hikers. As Ben takes care of Rex and treats the dog like his life is valuable and worth saving, he begins the process of discovering that his own life is valuable and worth preserving.

The theme of perspective continues in the restaurant when Ben offers \$60 to anyone who will agree to help him get his dog to the vet. When Kevin and Christine accepted Ben's offer of \$80, it was an amount that made a huge difference to their life and plans. When Stu Robinson accepts Ben's offer of \$60, he comments that it will be enough to buy fuel to get him another five miles up the road. Once again, Ben discovers that the same thing can hold different meanings for different people.

Like the drifter who introduced a different perspective to Ben by offering him marijuana, so too does Stu call attention to the way that various perspectives are functioning at any moment. He tells Ben that he doesn't have far left to go on his journey: only another 500 miles. This is a short distance for Stu in his truck, whereas the 11 miles from George to Quincy had felt like an impossible distance for Ben and Rex.

By assisting Ilse with her operation on Rex in Chapter 7, Ben demonstrates that he still has a lot of skill and wisdom left to offer the world, despite his illness.

The recollection of World War II in Chapter 8 informs the reader that Ben was led to becoming a surgeon after witnessing his friend Bill Stackhouse being miraculously brought back to life by a field surgeon during the war. Ben was traumatized by his experiences during the war and it was Rachel's support during their marriage that allowed him to cope with the trauma. Later in his life, with Rachel no longer by his side, Ben returns in his mind to these emotional wounds which were never fully healed at the time.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ben go to so much trouble to take care of Rex?

Discussion Question 2

What lessons does Ben learn from the trucker Stu Robinson?

Discussion Question 3

How did the things that happened to Ben during World War Two influence the rest of his life?



Vocabulary

languid, submerged, torpor, lurched, makeshift, punctured, hemorrhage, extravagant, elaborate, ravaged, sturdy, vigorous, demeanor, staunchly, acquiescing, paranoid, noxious, paraffin, helix, tremble



Chapters 9 – 10

Summary

In Chapter 9, back in the present timeline, Ben awoke in the motel in Quincy. He telephoned his daughter Renee and told her about the car accident and about what happened to his dogs. He said he wanted to continue with his hunting trip.

Ben went back to the vet's office and asked the receptionist if it would be okay for him to collect Rex later that day. The receptionist agreed and Ben walked alone to a bus stop. He met a woman who made painted ceramic figurines and he spoke with her while he waited for his bus to arrive.

Ben got on the bus, which was very crowded. The bus travelled through the region where Ben had grown up. Ben began a conversation with a young woman sitting near him named Catherine Donnelly who was studying Goethe at college. She told Ben about her thesis. At the back of the bus, a young man named Angel had a terrible cough and when Ben told Catherine that he used to be a doctor, she encouraged him to examine the young man to see if he was okay.

Angel only spoke Spanish, so Catherine had to translate for Ben. Angel was a migrant worker who was travelling the region with his brother and a friend as they worked as apple pickers.

In Chapter 10, the bus came to a stop and Ben insisted on calling an ambulance for Angel because he was severely ill. The paramedics took Angel and his brother away in an ambulance and Catherine got back on the bus, leaving Ben alone with the third migrant worker named Emilio. Emilio didn't speak any English and Ben didn't speak much Spanish but he managed to discover that Emilio was looking for work as an apple picker.

Ben and Emilio walked to a nearby bookstore and Ben bought some Spanish language translation guides to help them communicate. Ben bought Emilio dinner and made a call to a recruiting company to try to find Emilio some work. Ben requested the details of Wolfhound Orchard, where the man who stole his shotgun lived, and the recruiter told him that they needed workers.

Ben rented a car and gave Emilio a ride to the orchard. On the way, Ben had to stop and get out of the car because he felt unwell. While lying on the ground, Ben had a sudden realization that he wanted to live. He got back in the car and the two men arrived at Wolfhound Orchard.

Analysis

Ben's conversation with Renee in Chapter 9 reaffirms his commitment to committing suicide as he continues to make decisions based on the need to make his death seem like an accident so as not to hurt his daughter. Ben's decision to leave Rex with Ilse, whom the reader knows as a competent and trustworthy character, further underscores the ominous feeling that Ben intends to continue with his plan to commit suicide. One of the things that gave Ben pause in earlier chapters when considering all the potential repercussions of his suicide was what would happen to the dogs when he left them alone to cope without him. With Tristan dead and Rex safe and being cared for, one roadblock to Ben's suicide has been removed.

Ben's earlier life had been largely defined by two things: his job as a surgeon and his marriage to Rachel. With both of these parts of his life now gone, Ben struggles to find meaning in any of the facets of his life that remain. The meeting with the woman at the bus stop who finds pleasure and meaning in the eccentric pastime of painting ceramic figurines reminds Ben that there is more to life than paid employment and romantic relationships.

Catherine Donnelly, like Christine Reilly earlier in the novel, features in the narrative to shed light on Ben's loneliness and the isolation that he has felt since Rachel's death. Although Ben's interest in these young women is not necessarily romantic or sexual in nature, it is a reflection of how much he misses those aspects of his life now that his wife has gone.

Ben is given yet another opportunity to demonstrate how valuable his life is when he saves the life of Angel by intervening on the bus. Ben's interaction with the migrant workers once again steers him away from the path towards suicide. Angel's name is symbolic and reflects his role as a force that interferes in Ben's objective.

The ability for human beings to find meaning in relationships that are neither familial nor romantic is explored further in Chapter 10 when the author develops the friendship between Ben and Emilio, two men of different ages, from different backgrounds, with different goals, and who speak different languages. Despite these differences, the two men find a way to communicate with each other and develop a plan that allows them to support each other on the shared journey they have found themselves following.

The eye-opening experiences of Chapters 9 and 10 lead Ben to the realization that he wants to live after all. However, the reader is left in doubt about whether he has truly decided against suicide when he continues on his quest to find William Harden and reclaim his shotgun.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ben lie to people who ask him about his black eye?



Discussion Question 2

What motivates Ben's decision to call his daughter?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Angel's character?

Vocabulary

nimbus, corona, immovable, progeny, discord, transitory, gruff, bleakness, abide, antagonized, smelter, prosperous, plateau, undulant, sinuous, ascending, arid, emaciated, shrouded, billowing



Chapters 11 – 12

Summary

In Chapter 11, Ben and Emilio met with the contractor at Wolfhound Orchard who showed them to their cabins. Ben wished the other two goodnight and was left alone in his cabin. He decided to smoke the third and final marijuana cigarette. Ben began to dream, half sleeping, half waking, until he was disturbed by someone knocking on the cabin door and coming inside. It was Emilio.

Emilio came into the cabin and lit the fire for Ben. He covered Ben with a blanket as he continued to lie on his bed. Emilio lit a candle to better illuminate the room. Emilio wished Ben goodnight and left the cabin.

Ben lay in bed and contemplated his impending death. He remembered how happy he had been when Rachel was still alive and how much joy their marriage had brought him. He drifted into a restless sleep and dreamt he was walking through a desert.

When he awoke, Emilio was once again by his bedside urging him to wake up. One of the fruit pickers was in labor and needed a doctor urgently. Ben hurried to the woman's cabin. The woman had been in labor for more than 24 hours. The baby's shoulder was trapped, preventing the woman from giving birth. Ben assisted the woman and successfully delivered her baby girl. When Ben went outside again, it was dawn. He noticed that the orchard looked different than it had before.

In Chapter 12, Ben slept all morning until he was disturbed by a worker named Sanchez and a woman named Bea Harden who was the owner of the orchard. Bea was a similar age to Ben. She thanked him for saving the baby. When Ben told Bea his name she said she recognized it and could remember Ben's family from her childhood; she had known his mother and his aunts.

Bea asked Ben why a doctor would be working as an apple picker and Ben told her that William Harden had stolen his gun and that William's wolfhounds had killed and injured his dogs. Bea explained that William was her brother-in-law. Bea said she would speak to William about it but Ben told her not to: he said that he no longer wanted his gun back.

Bea insisted that she would drive Ben back to Seattle. She drove him to her house on the orchard then left him alone in the car while she went to tell her husband what was happening. While Ben was waiting, another car pulled up to the house and Ben saw that the driver was William Harden, the man who stole his shotgun. Ben confronted William. He told him that he came there to get his gun back but that he'd changed his mind and didn't want it anymore. The gun had always been a bad thing. Ben believed the gun was cursed – that all guns were cursed – and he passed the gun on to William Harden.



Bea drove Ben back to the vet's clinic in Quincy where he collected Rex. On the way back to Seattle, Ben told Bea the whole story of how he'd ended up in this situation, including his plan to commit suicide. Bea told Ben that his illness would not be a burden for his family and that it would help them to become more compassionate people.

Ben arrived home and found everything exactly as he had left it. Ben climbed into bed and Rex limped into the bedroom before settling down on a rug beside the bed. Ben called his daughter Renee and told her that he was home.

Analysis

Ben's arrival at Wolfhound Orchard brings the story full circle in several ways. The story has moved back and forth between the present-day story of Ben's hunting trip and his plan to commit suicide and the marijuana-induced memories of his life up until his marriage to Rachel. Ben's return to the apple picking region marks his return to the place where he was born and raised and to the place where he met his wife. It also signifies his return to the dispute with William Harden and the return to his plan to reclaim his shotgun and commit suicide.

Ben's kindness towards Emilio is rewarded when Emilio decides to take care of Ben when he is suffering. Ben's motivation for committing suicide is that he fears his illness will be a burden for his family and he does not wish for them to have to take care of him. However, Ben's interaction with Emilio gives a different perspective on this issue. Because Ben has shown such kindness towards Emilio and has given him so much unselfish help, Emilio is grateful for the opportunity to help Ben in return and wants to do anything he can to assist him, such as helping him to carry his backpack and lighting Ben's fire for him once they arrive at the orchard. This passage foreshadows a possible future for Ben in which his daughter and grandchildren are happy and grateful for the opportunity to repay him for all the good things that he has done in their lives by taking care of him in his old age.

While dreaming, Ben struggles to find any meaning in his life. However when he is awoken, a new kind of meaning is made apparent to him. Despite being unable to see any personal meaning in his remaining time on earth, his presence at the orchard still holds great life-saving meaning for other people. Ben could never have guessed when he set out on his hunting trip that events would conspire to put him in the position to save the life of a young woman and her baby, but that's exactly what ends up happening. The lesson for Ben is that people cannot always see how they will continue to contribute to the world, but that they should continue believing in the essential meaning and purpose behind their lives nevertheless. If Ben had succeeded in his original plan to commit suicide, the young woman and her baby would have died.

Ben's perspective is changed on a literal and metaphorical level by his encounter with the pregnant woman. When he leaves the cabin after the birth, it is the dawn of a new day and Ben can see the physical geography of the orchard in a new light. He can also



see the rest of his life in a new light, signifying the dawn of a new era in his time left on earth.

The narrative has been building towards another confrontation with William Harden since Chapter 5 when Ben's shotgun was stolen. However so much has happened to Ben since then that by the time this fateful meeting eventually occurs, all of the potential emotional force of the encounter has dissipated. Ben is no longer interested in committing suicide or in hunting, which is signified by his decision to leave the gun with Harden.

Bea is significant because she remembers Ben from his childhood, making his visit to her orchard a symbolic visit to his own past. Ben has returned to the point where he started in life and Bea's offer of a ride back to Seattle helps him to symbolically and physically retrace the journey that he has been on in the course of the novel. When Ben arrives home at last, everything on the physical plain is precisely the same as it was beforehand, but Ben's internal emotional and psychological reality has completely changed and he has become a new man.

Discussion Question 1

At what point do you think Ben decides not to commit suicide?

Discussion Question 2

What does the birth of the baby in the orchard symbolize?

Discussion Question 3

What role does Bea Harden play in the novel?

Vocabulary

scrutinized, cataracts, embossed, bucking, sheathed, dilapidated, resolutely, strident, disconcerting, purgative, amiss, inaccessible, pruning, inflamed, etched, absently, maimed, relentlessly, kneaded, misshapen



Characters

Ben Givens

Dr. Ben Givens is the main character/protagonist of the novel. The novel follows two different narrative strands in Ben's life. The main plot is set over the course a few days when Ben is 73-years-old and follows his failed attempt to commit suicide. The subplot relives moments from Ben's younger years, with particular emphasis given to his adolescence working on his family's orchard and his years as a young man spent fighting in Italy during World War II.

Ben learns valuable life lessons from the people he meets during his failed hunting trip and each of the other characters acts as a mirror for Ben to examine the issues that he faces in his own life.

Ben plans to commit suicide because he is dying of colon cancer. One of the main themes of the novel is perspective and from Ben's perspective at the start of the novel the cancer is his main problem. However as the novel progresses, the reader learns that Ben's real problem is his inability to see how his life can still have meaning after the death of his beloved wife Rachel.

Ben's grief is signified by his decision to take up hunting, something that he hasn't done since he was a teenager and which he doesn't start doing again until after Rachel's death. Ben's journey of healing in the novel is represented by his attitude to hunting. When Ben decides to leave his shotgun with William Harden in the final chapter, it is symbolic of his healing from the grief of his wife's death and the fact that he no longer wishes to harm others through his own suffering. Ben has found peace by the end of the novel, despite the fact that he is still dying from cancer.

Fate intervenes in Ben's life through the form of other people – and through the form of his two dogs Tristan and Rex – in order to show Ben that he is still a useful member of society and that he should not be so quick to conclude that his life is worthless because he is dying of cancer.

The key moments when Ben demonstrates meaningful contributions to the world come when he must use his medical training in order to help others: first the injured Rex, then the young fruit picker Angel on the bus, and finally the young woman in labor at Wolfhound Orchard. Without Ben's knowledge and the wisdom that he has acquired over the course of his life, none of these characters would have survived, thus demonstrating to Ben that he is still valuable and his life still has meaning.

Rachel Givens

Rachel Givens is Ben's wife, who died before the present day section of the narrative begins. She only appears in the flashback sections when she meets Ben while working



at his family's orchard and then marries him while they are both serving their country in Europe during World War II. Rachel was always supportive of Ben and encouraged him to become a surgeon.

Although she doesn't appear in the present day narrative, Rachel is the motivating force for everything Ben does in the main plot, because it is his unresolved grief and sense of hopelessness that began after her death that prompts his plan to commit suicide.

Rachel and Ben promised each other that their ashes would be buried under two rose bushes next to each other and this promise haunts Ben because he fears his suicide plan will mean he will not be able to keep his word.

William Harden

William Harden is an owner of a pack of wolfhounds and the closest thing the novel has to an antagonist. William and Ben meet when one of William's wolfhounds attacks Rex and Ben kills one of William's dogs in an effort to rescue his own.

The first meeting between Ben and William is one of the most significant turning points in the novel because William steals Ben's shotgun, which he had been planning to use to commit suicide. Without the shotgun, Ben's plan is stalled until he can get it back, by which point his encounters with other characters during his journey have convinced him that he doesn't want to die after all.

William is depicted as a dangerous, cruel, and suspicious man in stark contrast to the warm, open, helpful people that Ben meets everywhere else on his journey. When Ben decides to leave his shotgun with William in the final chapter, it is a decision to let go of the negative emotions within himself which he sees mirrored in William and to embrace the positivity he has experienced with the other characters.

Bea Harden

Bea Harden is the owner of Wolfhound Orchard, where Ben travels in an attempt to regain his shotgun. Bea is significant because she is the only character in the novel to whom Ben ever confesses his plan to commit suicide. Bea signifies the fact that Ben has come full circle from his childhood, through his adulthood, back to the place he was born because she, too, was born in the area and remembers Ben and his family from her own childhood. Bea completes the circle of Ben's journey for him by driving him back to Seattle.

Drifter

Ben meets the Drifter while trying to hitchhike back to Seattle with the dogs. The drifter plays the role of mentor in the novel by telling Ben that it isn't his circumstances that he needs to alter, but his perspective. The Drifter tries to convince Ben that there are



different ways of seeing the world and that Ben must adapt to a new plan, both literally and metaphorically.

The Drifter gives Ben three marijuana cigarettes to help ease the pain of his colon cancer. This is an important turning point in the plot as it provides a way into the flashbacks to Ben's younger years, which he reminisces about after he smokes the cigarettes.

Tristan

Tristan is one of Ben's pet dogs. He plays an important function in the plot as well as contributing to the characterization of his owner Ben.

Tristan is symbolic of Ben's older years and the extent to which he has become isolated since his wife's death and no longer wishes to participate in life. Tristan, like Ben, is not as enthusiastic as he used to be when he was younger and is much more cautious in his actions.

Tristan's death symbolizes the death of Ben's cynicism and the end of his suicidal plan although it will take several more chapters and fateful encounters after Tristan's death before Ben truly realizes that he doesn't want to take his own life.

Rex

Rex is one of Ben's pet dogs. In contrast to Tristan, Rex symbolizes the possibilities that still lay before Ben. Rex's youthful energy and enthusiasm cause him to behave in ways which derail Ben's plan to commit suicide. This younger dog causes the car crash and gets into a fight with a pack of wolfhounds, leading Ben down an entirely different path as he tries to rescue the injured Rex.

Kevin and Christine

Kevin and Christine are a young couple who help Ben when he crashes his car. Their sweet young love reminds Ben of when he was first married to Rachel. The couple is kind to Ben and offers him gifts from their meager possessions to help him with the rest of his journey.

Ilse Peterson

Ilse Peterson is a vet in a town called Quincy who treats Rex after he is attacked by the wolfhounds. By observing Ilse, Ben is able to better see the contribution that he himself has made to the world during his life. While watching her take care of the injured dog, and using his own skill set to assist her, Ben gains a new perspective on the value that his skills and experience still have in the world.



Emilio

Emilio is a migrant fruit picker whom Ben meets while on a bus. When Ben sends Emilio's friends to the hospital, he takes it upon himself to help Emilio find work and track down William Harden at the same time. Emilio shows Ben the value of treating other people well. Ben is kind and generous towards Emilio and in return, Emilio takes care of Ben when he suffers symptoms of his cancer.

Renee

Renee is Ben's daughter. Ben wishes to make his suicide look like an accident so as to avoid causing his daughter and grandson pain, which motivates him to lie to them throughout the novel. Ben feels guilty about the lies, which he does on several phone calls to Renee in the course of the story.

Chris

Chris is Ben's grandson and the son of Renee. Ben's desire to make his death appear to be an accident prompts him to lie to his daughter and grandson on several occasions. Ben feels particularly bad about his agreement to go hiking with Chris after he returns from his hunting trip.



Symbols and Symbolism

Tristan

Ben's dog Tristan is symbolic of Ben's aging self and his sense that his life isn't worth living anymore. Like Ben, Tristan used to be enthusiastic about life but has become cautious and unenthusiastic in his older years, less keen to take risks or enjoy what life has to offer. Tristan is killed by William Harden's wolfhounds, which represents the symbolic death of Ben's plan to commit suicide. After Tristan's death, Ben begins to construct a new vision of his life in which he still has things left to learn and things that he can contribute to the world.

Rex

In contrast to Tristan, Ben's dog Rex is symbolic of youthful vitality and the desire to make the most out of being alive. Because of Rex's symbolic association with life, the actions of this dog in the novel often force Ben to change any plan or direction that will result in Ben's death. Rex causes the car crash that first diverts Ben's plans for his suicide and later, when Rex is injured by the wolfhounds, Ben's desire to rescue Rex and tend to his wounds once again distracts him from his intention to end his life.

Shotgun

Ben's shotgun is symbolic of all the negative emotions in his life including anger, grief, and fear. The shotgun is particularly representative of Ben's grief over the death of his wife Rachel. Ben gave up hunting after World War II and he did not take up hunting again until after his wife's death. Ben's negative emotions have driven him to the conclusion that he must end his life and when Ben renounces the shotgun by leaving it with William Harden, it symbolizes the fact that Ben is letting go of these negative feelings and is now willing to embrace the possibility that his life still has positive value.

Pumpkin Seeds

The pumpkin seeds which Christine Reilly gives to Ben are symbolic of community values and the endless ability that human beings have to offer kindness to each other in their times of need. Although Kevin and Christine have very little in the way of possessions, they are still keen to offer any assistance they can to Ben, which results in Christine giving Ben her bag of pumpkin seeds. Ben continues to eat the pumpkin seeds throughout the rest of his journey, as they give him literal sustenance as well as the symbolic sustenance that comes from sharing in acts of human kindness and participating in the joys of life.



Rose Bushes

Rose bushes are symbolic of Ben and Rachel's love. The couple promised one another that when they died their ashes would be buried underneath two rose bushes which would grow intertwined together. Whenever Ben comes close to completing his plan to commit suicide, he is brought back to this promise. His fear that he will not be able to follow through on the plan involving the rose bushes gives him pause and helps encourage him not to end his life.

Marijuana Cigarettes

The marijuana cigarettes given to Ben by the drifter are symbolic of Ben's need to reflect on his past and give appropriate value to all of his experiences. In the narrative, the cigarettes prompt the chapters that deal with Ben's childhood and his experiences during World War II. These experiences in Ben's life give him the skills and wisdom that he needs in order to save the lives of Rex, Angel, and the young pregnant woman at the orchard. By using the marijuana, Ben is able to unlock a new perspective on his life which shows how his past means that his future is still valuable and worthwhile.

Money

Money is symbolic of the novel's theme of perspective. Ben dispenses different amounts of money to different characters throughout the novel and the relative importance of the cash to each character teaches Ben that every experience is a matter of perspective. Ben is financially comfortable and expecting to die soon so none of the money is of any value to him; however, he gives Kevin and Christine a sum of money that immediately changes their life situation. In contrast, the money given to Stu Robinson is virtually worthless in terms of its impact on Stu's life but is still valuable because it symbolizes Ben's gratitude for Stu's help and Stu's willingness to help a stranger despite there being nothing in it for him.

Angel

The young migrant fruit picker Angel is a symbolic angel in the novel because his appearance in Ben's life helps him understand how valuable life is and helps him to discover how much he has left to offer the world. Although Ben feels his life is meaningless at the start of the novel, without the skills and experiences he has gained over the course of his life, Angel's life would have come to a premature end.

Hunting

Hunting symbolizes grief and pain in the novel as it is strongly associated with the deaths of Ben's mother and later his wife Rachel. Ben's mother always disapproved of

hunting and it was an activity that Ben only participated in with his father. Ben gave up hunting for a large portion of his life after seeing too much killing during World War II, but he took it up again after his wife's death, symbolizing that his grief for Rachel had made him value living beings (most notably himself) less than he had before. When Ben gives up his shotgun – and therefore gives up hunting – it symbolizes his rediscovered value for life.

Newborn Baby

The newborn baby that Ben helps deliver at the Wolfhound Orchard is symbolic of the fresh start and new dawn in Ben's life that comes about as a result of the spiritual and physical journey that Ben undertakes during the course of the novel. Although Ben's life is drawing to a close, the newborn baby symbolizes the fact that it is never too late to start a new chapter in life.



Settings

Ben's Home in Seattle

Ben's home is the setting of the beginning and the end of the novel and it symbolizes the fact that Ben has come full circle on his journey. The physical realities of Ben's home and the fact that everything is exactly as he left it when he returns belies the fact that his entire worldview and sense of self has changed since the last time he set foot in this location.

Italy

Ben is sent to Italy as a young man to fight in World War II. It is a location of trauma for Ben due to the poverty, death, and destruction that he encounters while he is there. However, it is also a setting that inspires Ben when he witnesses his friend Bill Stackhouse being brought back to life by a field surgeon, an event which makes Ben decide that he wishes to become a surgeon. Italy is the location of Ben's coming-of-age, which is symbolized by his marriage to Rachel which occurs when he leaves Italy.

Quincy

Quincy is a town east of the mountains in Washington and it is a turning point for Ben on his journey of self-discovery in the novel. Ben arrives in Quincy due to his desire to help his injured dog Rex and the town becomes a turning point for him because he must decide whether to go home with his dog or continue on his path towards suicide. At this stage, Ben decides to continue alone without Rex.

Greyhound Bus

Ben is once again diverted from his path towards suicide while on a Greyhound Bus when his plan is interfered with by the appropriately-named Angel who needs Ben's medical assistance. The bus functions as an in-between state on Ben's journey. When he leaves Quincy Ben is still intent on suicide, but the events on the bus divert him towards events which will convince him that his life is still worth living.

Wolfhound Orchard

Wolfhound Orchard is the setting where Ben finally embraces the value of his own life when he helps deliver a baby, and where he gives up his destructive and negative characteristics by bequeathing his gun to William Harden. It is also the location that brings together the two separate narrative threads as it brings Ben back to the apple-growing community where he spent his childhood.



Themes and Motifs

Perspective

The central theme of the novel is perspective and the ways that different events can hold different meanings for different people. Ben's path as a protagonist follows his change in perspective from the opening of the novel, when he believes that his life no longer has any value or meaning, to the end of the novel where he has discovered a new sense of purpose and desire to live. Although Ben's internal perspective on his life undergoes a major change during the course of the novel, his external circumstances remain the same: he is still widowed and still dying of cancer. However, he no longer believes that his external circumstances define who he really is or what he is able to contribute in the world.

Throughout the novel Ben is confronted with other characters who challenge his perspective on his life, beginning with the young couple Kevin and Christine. Ben has convinced himself that young love and the honeymoon period of romance can never last and that real life will always eventually intrude. Although this was true for Ben, Kevin challenges this assertion and tells him that real life will only intrude if they allow it to. Later, Ben meets the trucker Stu Robinson who was married for seven months in contrast to Ben who was married for 50 years. Although Ben considers his wife's death to be a tragedy, this conversation alerts him to the fact that from a different perspective, 50 years of marriage is a rare gift.

The drifter is the character who most directly embodies the theme of perspective in the novel. Unlike the other characters Ben encounters – who alter his perspective by living lives that Ben can compare to his own – the drifter actually engages Ben in a conversation about perspective. He reminds Ben that he is not suffering an unusual fate because all of us will eventually die; Ben is just closer to the moment of death than he has previously been. The drifter also discusses Ben's need to shift his perspective in metaphorical terms by discussing whether Ben can still hunt when one of his eyes has swollen closed. The drifter tells Ben that if he adjusts his perspective – literally adjusts the way he sees the world – he does not have to be held back by his physical ailments. The drifter sums up the whole of the novel – which is a tale of a man diverted from one path onto a more fulfilling course of action – when he suggests to Ben that he should take a different route when he is hitchhiking. The drifter tells Ben that there is no wrong way to go on a journey and that Ben should just do "Whatever gets you there" (48).

Fate

Fate is the driving force in the novel, despite Ben's belief that he is in control of his own destiny. In retrospect, the opening chapter of the novel is heavily ironic due to its depiction of Ben as a man in control of his own fate. Ben carefully prepares everything for his hunting trip and arranges all the precise details which will allow him to make his



suicide look accidental. However, the moment Ben begins his plan – and over and over again throughout the novel – nothing goes the way that he intended it to go: Rex won't behave and causes a car crash; Ben can't hire a car or get anyone to pick him up via hitchhiking; the gun he was going to use to kill himself is stolen; and he is forced to get off the bus he was travelling on to help an ailing fruit picker, amongst many other inconveniences and diversions.

Ben's attempts to control what happens to him are an unmitigated disaster, but there is a different force at play in the narrative which guides Ben to be in precisely the right place at the right time. He crashes his car near a young couple who remind him of the happiness and joy of his younger years with Rachel, encouraging him to value all the good things that have happened to him in his life rather than dwelling on the difficult things. William Harden steals his shotgun, preventing Ben from committing suicide. Rex is injured, forcing Ben to take care of the dog rather than seek to harm himself.

The most overt intervention of fate comes when Ben encounters a man whose name is Angel, an encounter which eventually takes Ben to Wolfhound Orchard. At the orchard, Ben discovers a greater meaning and higher purpose to everything that has "gone wrong" (at least in his mind) when all of the events of the novel so far culminate in Ben saving the life of a newborn baby and her mother. Ben's attempts to control his fate are shown to be misguided and eventually always fail. However, the mysterious higher power which intervenes in his plans (and which is never explicitly connected to a particular religion or belief system) takes care of him and makes sure that everything that happens to him will lead to the greater good of Ben and everyone he encounters.

Death and Dying

The theme of death and dying is central to the main narrative in the novel because it is Rachel's death and Ben's subsequent discovery of his terminal cancer which set the events of the novel into motion. In the opening chapter the reader is led to believe that Ben's death will be the defining moment of the narrative, but this moment never arrives. Death and dying also permeate other levels of the plot and play a notable role in the flashback sequences which follow Ben's consumption of marijuana.

The flashbacks show that many of Ben's major decisions in life have been motivated by an encounter with death. Ben's recollection of his childhood is heavily influenced by the untimely death of his mother and Ben recalls how helpless he felt in the face of her illness and how angry he became with the family doctor because of his inability to cure her. This demonstrates Ben's frustration at his own lack of medical knowledge and his dependence on someone else to provide healing and care to his mother, revealing an early moment which hints at his later ambition to train as a doctor himself. Ben's desire to become a surgeon is triggered by another event depicted in the flashbacks: the near-death experience of Ben's friend Bill Stackhouse who is resuscitated by a field surgeon in Italy during World War II. Ben's experiences of suffering and death during the war motivate him to make one of the biggest decisions in his life when he decides to train as a surgeon upon his return to America.



Greater than Ben's experiences of the deaths of others is the inescapable fact that for the majority of the novel Ben himself is dying. Although the drifter glibly points out that all of us are dying to a certain extent, Ben is facing death in a more visceral sense than most of us because he knows for certain that it will happen to him soon. At the outset of the novel, Ben is preoccupied with the pain of dying and cannot view his impending demise as anything other than an experience of suffering. After the experiences of his unexpected journey, however, Ben has gained new perspective and begins to understand that all experiences have meaning even if they involve pain. Bea Harden helps Ben to gain a different perspective on his impending death when she tells him that his family will get the opportunity to become more compassionate people through the experience of caring for him during his illness.

Hunting and Killing

The depictions of hunting and killing in the novel are symbolic of Ben's emotional turmoil. For Ben, hunting is associated with death not just because the actual act of hunting involves the death of birds and other animals, but because Ben's participation in hunting is related to the deaths of his mother and his wife. Ben's mother never approved of hunting and insisted that his father only kill animals which they needed for food. Ben's continuation of his interest in hunting and his inheritance of his father's shotgun is symbolic of the fact that he lost his mother at a very early age and was left with only the influence of his father to guide him.

Ben quit hunting after World War II in direct response to the amount of killing that he saw while fighting as a soldier in Italy. War showed Ben how destructive killing is, which took away the glamour and the appeal of the sport of hunting. Although the novel doesn't discuss many details of Ben's life in-between World War II and the present-day, it is made clear that Ben did not participate in any hunting during this time. His return to the world of hunting was precipitated by the death of his beloved wife Rachel. Because of this, Ben's involvement in hunting is intrinsically related to his unresolved grief. Rachel's death made Ben feel like his own life was no longer worth living which, in turn, made him value the lives of other beings less, as shown through his willingness to kill birds for sport.

Ben's decision to quit hunting is tied to his decision not to commit suicide on both a literal and metaphorical level. Ben's realization that he wants to live occurs in the beauty of nature and allows him to appreciate all of the things about the natural world, including the life of birds. On a physical and literal level, Ben's method of hunting and method for suicide was the same object: his father's shotgun. When Ben's bequeaths the shotgun to William Harden, he renounces both his desire to hunt and his desire to end his life.

Finding Meaning

Ben's journey as a character is a process of searching for meaning in a life where all the previous meaning has disappeared. In his younger years, Ben was defined by his job as



a surgeon and by his close relationship with his wife Rachel. When the reader meets Ben in Chapter 1, everything that has held meaning for Ben in his life has now gone: he has retired from his medical career and his wife has passed away. At this stage, Ben is incapable of seeing any other kind of meaning in his life, prompting his suicidal thoughts. The rest of the events of the novel serve to teach Ben about the different kinds of meaning that are still available to him despite the hardships that he is facing.

As the novel progresses, Ben finds meaning in numerous different ways, gradually expanding his own sense of meaning and purpose in life beyond the confines of marriage and career which had previously defined his life. Ben finds meaning through caring for others when he tends to Rex's wounds when he is attacked by the wolfhounds and later, in a more extensive sense, when he devotes his time and energy to assisting Emilio despite the fact the two men are strangers. With Rex and Emilio, Ben's search for meaning has to be on a spiritual and emotional level because he is not able to communicate with either of them on a literal level due to the language barrier with Emilio and because Rex is a dog.

Ben also finds meaning by allowing himself to receive the kindness of others, especially through the care and assistance offered to him by Kevin, Christine, Stu Robinson, and Ilse Peterson. In gratitude for all of the care Ben has given him, Emilio also tends to Ben when he is unwell at Wolfhound Orchard. This gives a glimpse into the future and the kindness and care Ben can expect to receive from his family in gratitude for the care he has previously given them.

The marijuana cigarettes given to Ben by the drifter prompt Ben to recall incidents from his past which then go on to play a significant role in revealing the meaning of Ben's actions in the present-day events. Ben's decision to train as a doctor puts him in a position to save the lives of Rex, Angel, and the young mother and baby at Wolfhound Orchard. Although Ben feels like his usefulness is over at the start of the novel, these events conspire to show him that the experiences and wisdom he has gained throughout the course of his life still have value and meaning.



Styles

Point of View

The narrative is related in the third person in the past tense focusing on Ben's perspective. Although the narrative remains limited in its perspective in the sense that the narrator only reveals the inner thoughts and feelings of one character (Ben), the novel itself is an exercise in an ever-expanding sense of perspective. Ben's character arc shows his progress from someone with a limited perspective on the world and his place in it, who gradually awakens to a new kind of perspective that allows for different views and mindsets that Ben had not previously considered. So although the reader experiences events entirely from Ben's perspective, that perspective constantly grows, changes, and widens as the story continues.

At the beginning of the novel, the reader's understanding of Ben's situation in life is limited by Ben's own understanding of his life. The opening chapter reveals to the reader that Ben's wife has died, that he is dying of colon cancer, and that he plans to commit suicide. Likewise, at this moment in the novel, these facts about Ben's life are his sole focus. Like the reader, these are the only elements of his existence that he is aware of.

As Ben's spiritual journey continues, alongside his geographical journey, Ben becomes consciously aware of more aspects of his life that still have value, such as the kindness of strangers and his ability to offer assistance to people and animals in need through his medical training. Concurrently, as Ben's sense of self is widened, the reader's knowledge of him is also widened through the flashbacks dealing with his childhood and his time spent fighting during World War II.

Language and Meaning

The novel has two distinct linguistic styles which represent two sides of Ben's personality: his rational self and his spiritual self. Ben's rational self is reflected in language which is precise, descriptive, and focused on minute details of everything that is occurring in the physical realm. This type of language is most apparent in chapters in which Ben is involved in or contemplating some sort of medical procedure, such as Ben's involvement in the treatment of Rex with Ilse Peterson in Chapter 7 ("She used three-ought suture to bring together the subcutaneous tissue and closed the skin with a stapler" [154]) and the resuscitation of Bill Stackhouse in Chapter 8 ("He took a closer look inside, made a tamponade of gauze, tucked it firmly into the wound – packing it tightly at the edges – and taped a compress over it" [195]).

The other distinct style of language use reflects Ben's growing spirituality and sense of the wonders of being alive. These sections are more poetic and focus on Ben's visceral experiences of the wider beauty of nature, in contrast to the clinical and focused



language used to represent his rational self. This language is used in relation to the physical landscape which is the location for Ben's spiritual renewal. Ben's epiphanies in the novel all occur in a location of natural beauty, such as when he first arrives at Wolfhound Orchard ("Yet out on the low rim of the western horizon the sun streamed into the high eastern sky, which held its unearthly light" [247]).

A notable element of the use of language in the novel is that Ben's most poignant and caring moments occur with beings with whom he doesn't share a common language. With Rex the dog and with Emilio the Spanish-speaking fruit picker, Ben must communicate with actions of care and tenderness rather than through words.

Structure

The majority of the novel follows a standard chronological structure, beginning the night before Ben's journey and ending when he returns home having given up on his plan to commit suicide. There are three major exceptions to this structure, all of which occur in connection to Ben smoking each of the three marijuana cigarettes given to him by the drifter.

The first marijuana cigarette that Ben smokes leads to a flashback of Ben's childhood and adolescence spent growing up on his family's orchard in Washington. This recollection creates a smaller structural cycle in the novel in which Ben's geographical journey east of the mountains from his Seattle home is also a journey back into his own past which was spent in this area. Ben therefore follows a cyclical path in the novel both geographical and spiritual, where he returns to the location of his childhood physically through his hunting trip and psychologically through his drug-induced recollections. The novel ends with a speeded-up return, via the means of Bea Harden's car, which takes him back to where he started in Seattle.

The second marijuana cigarette that Ben smokes leads to a flashback of Ben's time spent fighting in World War II, which introduces the only section of the novel that isn't set in Washington. This section reveals important character information about Ben by revealing traumatic incidents which happened to him as a young man and the dependence that he developed on his wife Rachel to help him deal with what happened to him in Italy. This chapter helps to clarify to the reader why Ben struggles to cope with life in the present-day chapters of the novel after Rachel has passed away. The third cigarette causes Ben to have a dream about himself on a quest in the desert, which reflects his growing understanding that he is on a spiritual journey as well as a physical one.



Quotes

Tristan, in another time, had been boundlessly energetic; he'd had the habit of pursuing birds with earnest, exuberant, good intentions. Now, in his later years, he was increasingly deliberate, more reluctant to plunge into thorns, and generally stayed closer to hand. His tendency to range had been quieted.

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 10)

Importance: Ben's dogs Tristan and Rex represent two different sides of his personality. This introduction of Tristan, the older dog, represents Ben's suicidal thoughts and the extent to which he has given up on his life when the novel begins.

... when Rex hurled suddenly over the seat to settle his forepaws again on the rucksack, Ben felt a surge of anger. The dog had to learn his place in things, as Tristan before him had. He had to understand how it was.

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 53)

Importance: In contrast to Tristan, Rex represents Ben's desire to live and to continue to contribute with his life. In this moment, Rex causes a car crash which diverts Ben from his plan to commit suicide. Ben resists Rex's enthusiasm for life because he still believes that his own life is no longer worth living.

That happens," Ben said. "Reality intrudes." "Only if you let it," said the boy."

-- Ben/Kevin (chapter 2 paragraph 136)

Importance: This conversation between Ben and Kevin, who helped him after the car accident, is representative of Ben's attitude to life. Kevin and his girlfriend Christine remind Ben of his early years of marriage with his wife Rachel. Ben believes that the happiness of young love is transitory and will always be destroyed by the harsh realities of life. Kevin's youthful and optimistic attitude challenges Ben's cynicism.

Well, maybe, but it's only a mile east. Put the thing in perspective." "It's still the wrong way," Ben argued. "There's no wrong way," the drifter said. "Whatever gets you there."

-- Drifter/Ben (chapter 3 paragraph 60)

Importance: This conversation between Ben and the drifter is ostensibly about hitchhiking, with the drifter trying to convince Ben that a diversion would still get him home to Seattle. On a deeper level, it is also a conversation about Ben's life: although Ben has set out to commit suicide, the drifter implies that a different route may turn out to be a better one for him.

Nothing against duck hunting. They're just not what I've come for." "You're hunting other birds," observed the drifter."

-- Ben/Drifter (chapter 3 paragraph 70)

Importance: Ben continues his conversation with the drifter which functions on both a



literal and metaphorical level. On the surface the two men are discussing Ben's plans for his hunting trip but they are also discussing Ben's attitude to life. Ben's stubbornness about what kind of bird he intends to hunt is an outward manifestation of his stubbornness regarding his life and choices and his insistence that he must control the way that he meets his death.

He knew when he came to it, he would shoot the way beginners did, aiming deliberately with one eye shut. His view of the fleeing bird would be foreshortened, deluded, lacking in perspective.

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 115)

Importance: Ben reflects on the ways his black eye will interfere with his ability to hunt, not realizing that his reflection also applies to his attitude to life. Ben is unaware of the higher purpose of his life and the things that fate still wants him to achieve while he is alive. His limited perspective on death means that he cannot see the value of his remaining time alive, just as his black eye means he can't see the fleeing birds clearly.

He was braver than Ben had anticipated, more patient in the face of pain. Rex had always seemed too brash, too headlong and impudently eager, but now he acquitted himself with a decorous restraint, and endured nobly. Ben felt a grudging admiration.

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 14)

Importance: As Ben tends to Rex's wounds, he is given a new perspective on pain and greater hope about his own ability to endure it. One of Ben's motivations for committing suicide is his fear of the pain that he will go through if he lets nature take its course. Rex's bravery gives Ben renewed bravery about what he can endure.

How far is it up to Calgary?" Ben asked. "Not too far. Maybe 500 miles."

-- Ben/ Stu Robinson (chapter 7 paragraph 30)

Importance: Ben learns a valuable lesson about perspective while talking to the trucker, Stu Robinson. Ben's journey so far has seemed like a huge distance to him, but it is tiny in comparison to the distances being covered by Stu, who believes the miles he is covering to be a relatively short journey.

He became aware that he wanted to live, to have and hold such things as a cherry orchard in midautumn in river country.

-- Narrator (chapter 10 paragraph 111)

Importance: On the way to Wolfhound Orchard, the beauty of the natural world inspires Ben to see value in continuing to be alive.

When he went outside, it was first light. The orchards nearby were hung with ripe apples. The broad sky was pale, cloudless. Things looked different now.

-- Narrator (chapter 11 paragraph Final)

Importance: After helping to deliver a baby at Wolfhound Orchard, Ben's view is



changed both literally and metaphorically. So far he has only seen the orchard at night so the new dawn offers a new way of viewing the landscape. The events of the night before also provide a new dawn in Ben's thinking about the nature of life and death.

That gun was in my family sixty years. My father used it before I did, hunting birds. He killed a lot of birds with it. After him, I killed my share, too. But you know something about that gun? It was never anything but bad, really. A bad thing, that gun.

-- Ben (chapter 12 paragraph 103)

Importance: Ben's disavowal of his family's history of hunting is an affirmation of his newly discovered value for life. Now that Ben values his own life he is no longer drawn to a sport which involves ending the lives of other living beings.

It's me," Ben said. "I'm home.

-- Ben (chapter 12 paragraph Final)

Importance: When Ben arrives back at his Seattle residence, he calls his daughter to tell her that he has come home. He has come home in the physical sense of returning to his house, but also in the spiritual sense of returning to himself as a person who wishes to inhabit his body and continue to live what is left of his life.