English Creek Study Guide

English Creek by Ivan Doig

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

English Creek by Ivan Doig is the coming of age story of Jick McCaskill. Set just after the Great Depression in rural Northern Montana, the story begins with Jick's brother Alec making a shattering break from the family which leaves Jick examining his own identity as the summer races him toward his fifteenth birthday. Left to fill the space his brother has left, while also struggling to understand his own place, Jick examines each event of the summer with the lyrical intensity of a boy who sees childhood closing behind him.

Jick's father, Mac McCaskill, is the ranger in the Two Medicine National Forest. The year is 1939, and the Depression, coupled with drought and grasshoppers, have driven off families who once populated the ranches bordering the National Forest. Wendell Williams, who survived the Depression on a rich inheritance, has bought up much of the mortgaged and abandoned property and consolidated it into his Double W Ranch where Jick's older brother Alec has been working as a hand for the past two summers. When Alec drops in to announce his plans to forgo college and instead marry the town beauty and pursue a life of ranching, Jick and his parents are devastated. Alec's gift for math was, his parents believed , his ticket out of the hard rural life of their community and the entire family had set aside savings to send Alec to college in Billings come the fall.

Jick joins his father for the annual count of sheep on the leased forest lands, but the tradition is filled by an awareness of Alec's absence from the routine. A chance encounter with Stanley Meixell, whom Jick only vaguely remembers to be a family friend, results in Mac's curious decision to send Jick off with the man. In their brief time together, Jick realizes Stanley is an alcoholic but his curiosity about the man's long absence from their lives and Mac's curious tension in seeing Stanley hang as an unanswered question in Jick's mind as the summer progresses.

One August afternoon, when a quick moving thunderstorm drives Jick to seek refuge in the Double W bunk house, the two brothers meet up once again and it soon becomes clear to Jick that Alec has been demoted from ranch hand to scatter raker for haying season. In addition, the engagement to Leona appears to have fallen by the wayside since Leona decided to return to school at the end of the summer. Alec swears Jick to secrecy and Jick agrees out of fraternal loyalty.

Jick is still struggling to keep his secret when a fire breaks out in the Two Medicine Forest. Sure that Alec would help his father battle the blaze, Jick tries to convince Alec to return in a desperate phone call, but is met with Alec's firm refusal. When Jick's mother brings Stanley Meixell in to help, Jick joins Stanley and as the Two Medicine National Forest burns, Jick learns the secret hidden behind the tension which has visibly hung between his father and Stanley Meixell.

English Creek, Part 1, Pages 1-35

English Creek, Part 1, Pages 1-35 Summary

Jick McCaskill is looking ahead to one final summer before turning fifteen. With rain greening the Montana side hills, and the Depression finally seeming to loosen its grip, Jick's young thoughts stretch little further than to the Gros Ventre Fourth of July rodeo and a summer riding the scatter rake for Uncle Pete during the haying season. When Jick's older brother Alec suddenly announces he will not be attending college but instead will marry a local girl and follow his cowherding fancies, Jick's world is suddenly shattered. Jick finds himself questioning what defines a man and realizes his own identity is straining to find its path.

Jick 's home is in the English Creek region of the Two Medicine National Forest where his father, Varick McCaskill, or "Mac" McCaskill as he is known to his friends, has served as a forest ranger for almost as long as Jick can remember.

The McCaskill family had emigrated from Scotland in the 1880s and settled on the North Fork of English Creek alongside other sheep herding Scottish immigrants in an area known as Scotch Heaven. Both of Jick's grandparents on his father's side had died in the 1918 Flu epidemic, long before Jick ever had a chance to know them. Their house had since been occupied by the Hebner Family who had let it deteriorate.

Jick's mother, Lisabeth Reese had grown up on a ranch in neighboring Noon Creek with her parents and her brother Pete who now live on and work the Reese Family Ranch.

Jick and his father are getting ready to leave the next morning for the counting of sheep that has to be done annually on the National Park range allotments. It's a trip Jick has always enjoyed. He enjoys riding alongside his father and brother through the country of Two Medicine and visiting with all the neighbors along the creek, though there are few ranch families left. Depression and drought have taken a toll on the families along English Creek. The banks of Noon Creek had once been populated with cattle ranchers, but when drought and the declining prices following the war came together, a stretch of ranches had foreclosed. Wendell Williamson had bought the land up or leased it to extend his Double W Ranch where Jick's older brother, Alec McCaskill, had been working as a ranch hand for the past two summers.

As Jick is washing up for supper, he spots his brother Alec riding in with his girlfriend Leona. The plan is for Alec to attend college in Bozeman in the fall, due to Alec's skill with numbers.

When Alec announces his plans to marry Leona and stay on as a ranch hand instead of going to college in Bozeman, the family is shattered. The scene deteriorates until Alec storms out with Leona leaving a rift in the family which hangs over Jick as they set out on the counting ride.

As they ride along the North Fork, Mac sends Jick to check on Walter Kyle's ranch which Walter leaves vacant each summer when he leaves to herd his own sheep. Jick attributes the assignment of this task as nothing more than proof that his father is also preoccupied with Alec.

He meets up with his father again down the road and they approach the Hebner place where Garland Hebner, his wife, and countless children run about the dilapidated grounds.

English Creek, Part 1, Pages 1-35 Analysis

The main characters, setting and time period are all established within the first twenty pages of Part One. This is where we are first introduced to the McCaskill family members.

Jick McCaskill is looking forward to the annual counting ride with his father. Jick enjoys being included in responsibilities that offer him a chance to work beside his father and share responsibilities caring for the land.

Jick is about to turn fifteen. At this point in his life he identifies himself as a McCaskill, the forest ranger's son and the little brother of the larger than life Alec McCaskill. He sees himself as part of a set with his father and brother. "The three of us" is how he refers to the males in the family who share a love of the lore and legend of local history.

Jick's mother, Elsbeth, is the voice of practicality, reminding her "boys" (this includes her husband, as well as her sons) to keep looking ahead to the future, instead of getting lost in their romantic visions of the past. Her strength is clear as the household manager who provides structure, nourishment, and practical advice. Jick prefers to analyze and contemplate each moment and sees his mother's sharp and direct orders not as being harsh, but as fulfilling her role which is to keep the family grounded.

Jick's father, Mac McCaskill, has responsibilities as a Forest Ranger, but regulations are not his strength. It is Jick's mother who sees to it that Mac has paperwork ready and stays on schedule for the reports to headquarters. Mac's strength lies in his connection to the land, its people, its history and its physical beauty. Mac is most alive when he is traveling and surveying his section of the Two Medicine National Forest. Jick feels this in himself as well, and has always assumed both he and Alec are just like their father in this way.

Alec has just graduated from high school and the plan has been made for him to continue on to college where he will be the first McCaskill to break out of the rural Montana life. Jick sees that this is a great opportunity, though the fact that it conflicts with Jick's assumption that Alec too loves the land seems to go unnoticed to Jick. All Alec seems to see is that decisions about his life are being made for him.

Whereas Jick is at an age where he enjoys being defined by his father, Alec is approaching manhood and finds the connection suffocating. Rebelling against plans

made for him, even though they are plans designed for Alec's individual abilities, Alec announces he will marry Leona and remain in ranching.

Alec's parents see this as a boy rebelling and acting on an impulse that will have long term damage on his potential. Jick is shattered by it not only because he knows the family's investment in the plan for Alec, but also because it causes a rift which drives his brother apart from the family. The role Alec plays in Jick's understanding of his own identity is already confusing to the young Jick. He knows Alec is a different person, more dynamic than Jick. Alec is handsome and good at roping and has a beautiful girlfriend and incredible skill with numbers. To Jick, Alec has everything you could want, but there is also a part of Jick that has watched Alec grow up just ahead of him as though Alec is a preview of what he himself would become. Alec has reached a point where he wants to define himself clearly as something separate. Jick has not yet reached a point where he can accept his identity not being tied into Alec's.

For Elsbeth and Mac, the devastation of Alec's choice is that he is making a terrible decision that will destroy his future potential. For Jick, the devastation is that his brother would choose to take a direction away from the family. It is a devastation of finding out that his brother is neither who Jick thinks he is, nor who Jick wants him to be. It is the devastation of Jick losing his own identity as Alec defines a separate one for himself.

As Jick and his father set off on the counting trip, both are quiet since their minds are on Alec. When Mac sends Jick off on his own to check on Walter Kyle's vacant ranch, Jick spends his survey of the property in conversation with the absent rancher about the curious effect of women on men. Jick, just on the edges of puberty, knows Leona produces a curious effect on him, but the hormonal stirring he feels seems a weak excuse for destroying a future.

The sparse tidiness of Water Kyle's ranch meets with Jick's approval. He considers that the bachelor made a good choice in keeping the complication of women out of his life.

Jick rejoins his father as they approach the Hebner place, noting that his father is still preoccupied. Mac's mood shows an increased irritation which his riding alone seems to have only fed.

The scene at the Hebners is a summary of a life without purpose or direction. Good Help Hebner's laziness has led to deterioration all around him. His once pretty wife simply looks worn. The numerous children populate the farm with faces that replicate Good Help's own pale misshapen face. The buildings have deteriorated due to neglect. The children have been driven, one after another, to work hard in order to escape their father. Jick understands from what each has been running away since Good Help's place, shaped, or rather left to decay, under his lazy, dishonest, irresponsibility offers no future.

The fact that the Hebner place had once been the McCaskill homestead makes Jick think how his father must hate seeing what has become of the farm his parents had built. Mac's past died with his parents. The homestead Mac had known no longer exists.

In addition, Mac never learned much of the home from which his parents emigrated, and so Mac's own identity is not rooted. Jick believes that Mac's desire to listen to the old stories told by locals has to do with Mac's desire to find some footing and identity. Jick also knows that when his father had gone from the traditional life of ranching to serving the US Forest Service, he had been considered a traitor. Many felt settlers had a right to claim the land and didn't want Government staking out parts that couldn't be farmed or ranched. Jick speaks of his father being "between and between and between." Mac is not so much a defined man, as he is a man wandering or straddled between two worlds. Now that Jick feels Alec has broken his connection to Jick's identity, Jick is examining his own father all the closer. Jick's need to define himself becomes all the more dependent on understanding his father at this point.

English Creek Part 1, Pages 36-102

English Creek Part 1, Pages 36-102 Summary

The counting ride continues in silence. After a lunch stop, Mac leaves Jick to wait for Dode Withrow and his herder, Pat Hoy, while Mac goes off to inspect the forest for potential fire hazards left from winter. When Dode and his herder arrive, Jick rides with them to the counting V where his father is waiting. Working the sheep through the counting V and visiting with Dode and Pat lifts the mood. After Dode and Pat leave, Jick and Mac ride on to Flume Gulch which has always been Mac and the boys' favorite spot in the National Forest.

They stop here for the night and begin fishing for brook trout and bantering about a long standing bet Mac had made. The person who does not catch at least ten fish owes the others a milkshake.

After their pan fried trout dinner, Jick starts filling in his father's daily diary entry. This is a job required of Mac by the National Park Service, and Jick had regularly taken over the job by imitating his father's style and writing entries for him.

As they get comfortable for the night, Jick asks his father if he had ever wondered what it would have been like to be someone else , a question which has been running through his mind. The question leads to some discussion of Mac's time spent as an association rider for Noon Creek, which brings up the Williamson family and the Double W Ranch. When Jick probes for more details on how Mac had gotten his Forest Ranger position, Mac changes the subject and asks Jick if there is someone he thinks he would rather be. Jick says no, but is thinking about how often he has wondered what it would be like to have been born Alec.

In the morning Mac slips up and mistakenly calls Jick "Alec." Jick finds the mistake bothers him and takes it as a bad omen.

Their ride out of camp takes them past Phantom Woman Mountain. The mountain's side is still scarred from a 1910 burn , before Mac had become Forest Ranger. Jick notes that his father always looks at that site as if he despises it and Jick attributes Mac's reaction to the fact that fire is the natural enemy of Forest Rangers.

Mac and Jick stop for an early lunch. As they are finishing, a rider appears on the trail. Mac's first reaction is to move quietly for his gun, but then he sits and seems to hardly notice the man approaching. Jick recognizes the man, but the memory is so distant that Jick thinks it illogical to remember the rush of little details that he does, including the man's name, Stanley Meixell.

Stanley has been employed by the Busby Brothers to deliver supplies to their sheep herders out on the forest allotments. Jick detects a tension between the two men, even as Mac inquires about how Stanley hurt his hand. Jick notices only then that Stanley's

hand is wrapped in a blood soaked handkerchief. Stanley tells them that the pack mule with him had tried to kick him when Stanley had been loading up that morning. Mac offers Jick to help Stanley with camp tending for the remainder of the trip saying Stanley will need the help due to his hand. This offer takes Jick by surprise and, though Stanley protests, Mac insists. Infuriated with his father, Jick departs with Stanley and is surprised that within fifteen minutes Stanley has pulled his own horse aside and suggests that Jick take the lead. Jick quickly realizes that Stanley is hanging back on the trail to take swigs of whiskey.

They reach the allotment where Canada Dan is watching a herd of the Busby Brothers' sheep only to discover eighteen head of sheep had eaten death camas and are lying dead and bloated in the field. Canada Dan claims he had been waiting for Stanley to help with skinning. When Stanley shows Canada Dan his bandaged hand, the job passes to Jick. As Jick guts and skins the rain soaked corpses he realizes Canada Dan is doing very little of the work. By the time the pelts are ready to load onto the pack mare, Jick is working alone. After having nothing but rough grey soap and a gunny sack to wash off, Jick is then served a plate of mutton congealing with grease.

A storm begins blowing in and Jick is relieved to hear Stanley tell Canada Dan they he and Jick wouldn't be staying there that night. Stanley and Jick ride on in silence until they reach a cabin fenced in by barbed wire. As Jick reaches to lift the gate's wire hoop Stanley explodes and Jick jumps back. Jick realizes he knows better than to touch a wire fence during an electrical storm and his oversight only adds to his frustration with the situation. Jick unpacks the horse and mule as Stanley holds the halters and moves their supplies into the cabin. As the temperature drops and the rain rolls in, Jick gathers some wood, fetches a bucket of water and retreats into the cabin where he uses cloth torn from his shirttail to re-bandage Stanley's hand.

They sit in the cabin, Jick counting the distance of the lightning as he eats a second supper fixed from the packs with Stanley drinking until Jick, exhausted, drops off to sleep.

In the morning Jick suggests that they split up so the two of them could reach both remaining herds that day. Jick sets off for Andy Gustafson's camp with the stubborn pack mule and the Winchester rifle which Stanley insists Jick carry with him.

On his route, Jick comes to a fallen tree blocking the path on a steep hillside switchback. Not wanting to bother with using his small ax to clear it, Jick decides to lead each animal under the log. His own horse crosses under, but the mule startles and slides down the hill dragging Jick with him. The fall leaves the boy and mule unharmed, but a pack has split and needs to be re-secured to the mule. Jick improvises with one of his boot strings and proceeds with a twenty minute struggle to get back on the trail.

Despite the ordeal, the sheepherder, Andy Gustafson, notes no complaints and Jick is back to the cabin by the late afternoon. Since it is too late in the day to begin heading back to English Creek, Jick resigns himself to another night in the cabin with Stanley.

Jick re-bandages Stanley's hand with a new strip of his shirttail and salvages a dinner from what remains in Stanley's lone pack.

As Jick watches Stanley pull out the bottle of whiskey, he clears his throat and asks for a swig. Stanley and Jick talk and drink. Jick is at first fascinated to hear Stanley's personal history, but his interest swiftly declines as he becomes more intoxicated. It is only after Jick has stumbled to the bed that he thinks to ask Stanley how he had known about this cabin being here. Stanley tells Jick he had helped build the cabin, and then tells Jick that he, Stanley, is the ranger who had set up the boundaries of the Two Medicine National Forest. Jick drifts off as he tries to recall all he had grown up hearing about the legendary "Forest arrangers". (p.99)

In the morning, Jick is hung over but Stanley fixes him a breakfast which restores his strength for the ride home.

English Creek Part 1, Pages 36-102 Analysis

Mac has Jick stop and check to make sure the gear is tied securely to the horses. Jick knows that packing is a craft and mentions Isidor Pronovost here. Isidor's job is to pack animals to deliver goods to camps and stations located throughout the rural area. This is an obsolete craft in the 21st century, but Jick knows that in this time and place it is a detail which provides life sustaining supplies.

As Jick is checking the ties, his father pauses to look out across the view of Roman Reef onto Rooster Mountain. This landmark becomes central in the story's climax.

As they stop for lunch, Jick surveys the view. Jick's contemplations all morning have been about his brother Alec, but now Jick says, "If a person can take time to reflect on such a reach of land other matters will dim out." (p. 38) The land gives Jick perspective or, perhaps, just an escape from his own preoccupations. In this way it has a spiritual facet in Jick's life.

While Jick looks at how green the land appears after the recent rains, his thoughts immediately jump to the Dust Bowl. He does not name this event directly, but his description of a wind that is part of Depression History is an account of the Dust Bowl. Jick stares out at the lush green landscape, but turns his mind to history when the Dust Bowl had first begun as an ordinary wind but eventually had grown into a disaster. This image of the land's unpredictable switch from nourishing green to devastation is a theme that runs through the book. The potential for devastation lies in the very things which may be loved or beautiful or comforting in one moment.

Jick goes from thinking about the impact of the Dust Storm on the land, to the impact of the Depression on the farm families. Along Noon Creek had been a string of ranches. On one end had been Dill Egan and on the other had been the Williamson's Double W Ranch. Dill Egan had never trusted the banks and so the crash had not affected him. The Williamsons own a bank as well as additional property beyond Montana. This had allowed them to profit as the properties in debt to the banks had gone under. What had

once been a balance of family farms has become Dill Egan holding his own as the Williamsons have taken up the entire remainder of land along Noon Creek. The prosperous Williamson family represents the power of wealth and the affects it can have on a community and its people when it goes unchecked. In this sense it is the symbol of unregulated capitalism.

Jick recalls how one rancher, Carl Nansen, whose land had been bought up by the Double W, had hanged himself unable to take the humiliation of failure. When Jick then recalls Alec telling the family that Wendell Williamson will let Alec and Leona live in the Nansen place, the indifference of Nansen's suffering, the injustice of this seeming generous move by Williamson, and Alec's complicity with this man and his ways are all connected in Jick's mind.

The introduction of Dode Withrow takes place in this section. Dode is the same age as Mac and has a daughter around the same age as Jick and Alec. He is a sheepherder, and as such gives Jick an alternative view of what his own father may have been. Jick notes that Dode and his father "were out of the same bin. At least it doesn't stretch my imagination much to think that if circumstances had changed sides when the pair of them were young, it now could have been Dode standing there as an employ of the U.S. Forest Service and my father in possession of a sheep ranch." (p.48) This is one of Jick's contemplations on identity.

The camp Jick and his father set up that night is in a place which Jick calls the most beautiful section of English Creek, Flume Gorge. It is the favorite spot of Jick, Alec and their father. It is also the scene, we later see, of the story's disastrous climax.

Jick and his father jump into their traditional competition to catch brook trout. In Part Four, there is another reference to this bonding ritual Jick shares with his father.

That evening as they lie down to go to sleep Jick brings up the questions he has about identity. Does his father ever wonder what it would have been like to be someone else? How does a person know what job is going to be right for them? They are typical questions of a boy trying to figure out his own identity.

The conversation foreshadows the character of Stanley with the mention of the Phantom Woman Mountain burn at the top of page 55, and then in Mac's comment about the Double W: "The Gobble Gobble You, as the gent who was ranger when I was association rider used to call it." When Jick presses his father to say more about how he had gotten the job as ranger of English Creek, Mac avoids answering and changes the subject, which is the first sign of a tension of hidden history behind that event.

When Mac turns the conversation and asks Jick if he has ever thought about what it would be like to be someone else, Jick lies to cover the fact that he wonders what it would have been like to be Alec. Thinking about their similarities only leads Jick to realize there is much he does not understand about Alec, and then he wonders if this means he does not understand what he himself will become. This confusion probably

fuels the irritation Jick feels when his father slips up and calls him Alec the next morning.

The end of the section on page 58 is Jick's explanation of what his name means. A "Jick" is the jack that shares the color of the jack of trumps in some card games. It is a lower card than the jack of the same color, but a higher card than the joker. Since a joker can be wild and potentially as valuable as the highest card, this gives a "Jick" a sort of outsider ability to remain undefined. As Jick is trying to define himself, this name of his becomes part of his questioning. This section at the bottom of 58, where Jick notes the name had been given to him by "some visitor," is brought up again in Part 3 and resolved at the book's conclusion.

In the morning, as Jick and his father ride past Phantom Woman Mountain, Jick describes how his father always glares at the spot as though he despises it. Jick attributes this to his father being a ranger and forest fires being the worst threat, but this is actually foreshadowing . There is a reason Mac hates the memory of that fire and it is part of the same tension of hidden history which makes Mac not want to discuss how he had come to be ranger of English Creek.

The tension increases with the appearance of Stanley Meixell. When Jick's father sends Jick off alone to tend to Stanley, Jick feels used. When Jick looks to his father for any kind of explanation his father only says, "Jick, he's worth knowing." What Jick comes to know of Stanley is that he's an alcoholic, and this leads Jick to dismiss Stanley, crediting him with as much work ethic and intelligence as Good Help Hebner. But then Jick begins to see glimpses of dry humor, common sense, wisdom and intuition in Stanley, though Jick's bitterness at being "used" makes it hard for him to accept that Stanley is not pulling his weight due to the injury to his hand. He doubts Stanley will have the initiative to report Canada Dan's negligence to the sheep owners.

Having gotten it into his mind that Stanley is a person with little to contribute to the world, Jick is later surprised to hear Stanley's life story. At first, the idea of Stanley running off to become a cowboy sounds like a moral tale that Alec could use: dream of being a cowboy and you will have no future. So when Stanley tells Jick he had been one of the original rangers who had helped plot out the national forests, Jick cannot figure out how to process that information. He considers the men who had done that work to be legends. The idea of such accomplishment in life leading to what Stanley is now completely unsettles Jick. His mother has taught him that you cannot control the past, but has also implied to Jick that a person can make certain choices and control where the future will lead. Now, Jick feels, choices and hard work seem almost irrelevant. The future seems beyond control.

Stanley, with some foreshadowing, has already told Jick, in reference to Canada Dan's poor behavior, that the choices a man makes are sometimes self destructive. (p.90)

By the end of his time with Stanley, Jick has to fight his own urge to quit time and again. Jick has had to skin dead sheep, and he does. When, exhausted, Jick still has to unpack the horses and mule at the cabin, and he does. When he has to make his own

supper, he does. When Jick is too lazy to saw through a log obstructing the path, the mule drags him in a fall down the mountain and Jick has to not only drag the mule back up, but also improvise a new strap to make up for the packing strap that is broken. Though Jick is on the verge of bailing out, claiming this is his father's idea and not his own, Jick, instead, sticks it out.

Whether Jick makes this choice because he is too shy or timid to assert his own wishes, or because he knows it is the right thing to do, is somewhat unclear to Jick. He does say at one point that he knows he should help Stanley because, "At least in my father's universe matters fell that way." (p.81) He is picking up a moral code taught to him by his father. This morality is part of Jick's identity, but he does not yet realize it has become internalized.

When Jick is faced with having fallen down the mountain after trying to force the mule under a log, he contemplates abandoning the situation and running home to make his father come back and fix everything. Though he justifies this tactic by the fact that it is his father's fault that Jick is here, Jick also realizes it is his own choice that has caused the problem and that getting any help is asking to be rescued. He makes the mature choice to take responsibility but talks about how difficult the choice is, because he is on the line dividing childhood from adulthood. Jick has an equal urge to go either way. It is subtle literary irony author Doig uses to have a rural Montana boy describe a problem involving a mule as being, "Hung between two schools of thought, neither one of which you wanted to give in to." In philosophy, that is the classic human dilemma of free will known as "Buridan's Ass."

As Stanley and Jick part, Stanley thanks Jick for his help. This is not the first time Jick has noticed that Stanley takes account of Jick's feelings. When Jick tells Stanley it has been an education, he means it as a polite answer, but there is more truth in it than he realizes.

Part 2, pages: 103-124

Part 2, pages: 103-124 Summary

Mac has to go to the Missoula Headquarters for a week long refresher course on Fire Danger. Mac gives Jick the task of digging a new seven foot deep outhouse pit while Mac is away. On his third day of digging, Jick's mother goes off to an English Creek ladies club meeting and Jick is left alone on the property.

When Jick spots Stanley Meixell coming over the rise, Jick ducks down to avoid talking to him.

On the following day, Jick gets a break from digging when Isodor Pronovost shows up and Jick helps Isodor make up packs of supplies to deliver to the fire lookouts in the area towers.

Just after Isodor leaves, Jick's Uncle Pete, his mother's brother, arrives and Jick invites him to stay for dinner. Over dinner, Jick, his mother and Pete discuss the upcoming haying schedule. When the subject of Alec comes up, Jick's mother ends the conversation quickly.

After Pete leaves, Jick is glancing through the local paper and sees a story on the page of the paper which sometimes devotes space to bits of town history. The piece is about a wagon trip Jick's mother and her brother Pete had taken with their own mother to visit their father who had been delivering workhorses to help build the Glacier National Park roads.

After another afternoon of excavating the outhouse hole, and a quiet dinner, Jick asks his mother to tell him more about the wagon trip which the paper had mentioned and eventually leads her into talking about her courtship with Jick's father.

Part 2, pages: 103-124 Analysis

The reason Mac has to travel to headquarters for a week is to attend "Fire School." The contrast between the rules and regulations of the forest service and what seems to be instinctual or, even better, learned from experience, is hinted at as this section opens. The class being the idea of "desk jockeys" is in direct opposition to Mac's instinct to keep riding through the forest to address potential fire hazards such as dead fallen trees.

What bothers Jick most about the job of digging a new outhouse hole is not the job itself. His father had told Jick that he would be the "man of the house" while Mac was gone, and Jick had taken it as an honor. When Jick is then told that his main duty would be an outhouse hole, he feels blindsided. It is the romantic vision of adulthood contrasted by the reality of responsibilities. To Jick, it seems like a cruel joke to imply

the labor is a form of "being in charge," but the reality is that being in charge often includes the hard work of taking care of responsibilities.

This concept of being "blindsided" by the future comes back as Jick tries to draw his mother into discussing her past. Though Elsbeth does discuss it some, she concludes with a reminder to Jick that he should not "pass up chances because they're new and unexpected." (page 124)

During their conversation, Jick asks his mother about Stanley Meixell. The unexplained tension between Stanley and Jick's father has peaked Jick's curiosity. His mother gives no straight answers on Stanley and changes the subject.

In this section, Jick compares the breaking of sod for the new outhouse hole to the initial ripping plow of human settlement. He talks about the combination of anticipation and uneasiness as the land is broken and turned by homesteaders "seeing a new life uncovered for them." (page 107)

In describing the land in this section of Montana, he uses the metaphor: "A toupee of grass on a cranium of rock." (page 107) Jick's colloquial speech often employs metaphors when describing the land, many of which personify it as the one above does. The importance of the land and environment is emphasized by this metaphoric language.

Part 2, pages: 125-176

Part 2, pages: 125-176 Summary

Part 2, pages: 125-176

On the final day before his father's return, Jick is finishing up the outhouse pit. Alec drops by to pick up a shirt from the house to wear in the upcoming 4th of July rodeo. Jick and Alec engage in some banter and then Alec warns Jick about not being seen with people like Stanley Meixell. Jick asks his brother why the family will not talk about Stanley. Alec, just as Jick's mother had previously, gives no answer.

When Alec goes in to get the shirt, Alec and Jick's mother get into an argument on the subject of Alec's future. Alec rides off with the shirt and when Jick comes in for supper he finds his mother in no mood to talk.

Jick's father returns the next day and approves Jick's finished outhouse hole.

When the Fourth of July arrives, Jick's parents allow him to ride one of the horses into Gros Ventre instead of driving in with them. They tell Jick he can spend the night in town with his best friend from school, Ray Heaney. As Jick saddles up to leave, his father gives him a half dollar for spending money.

When Jick arrives in Gros Ventre, he heads for the park where the picnic is being held and locates his parents in the crowd. They are seated with Jick's Uncle Pete, his wife Marie, and her father Toussaint Rennie. Jick joins his Uncle in making the ice cream and then the two of them return to the picnic blanket for lunch as Toussaint reminisces on Gros Ventre history. During the course of the picnic Rennie makes an aside to Jick in reference to Jick getting drunk with Stanley.

After ice cream and coffee, the school superintendent steps to the podium and announces that Beth McCaskill will be making a speech. Jick's mother proceeds to the podium where she reads a speech she has written about English Creek, its founder Ben English and things that have changed since the Depression.

After the picnic, Jick rides over to the rodeo where he is meeting Ray Heaney. Before meeting up with Ray, Jick stops to buy a soda and meets up with Dode Withrow who is drunk. Jick invites Dode to sit with him and Ray, but Dode declines the invitation. Then Jick runs into Alec who asks Jick to keep an eye on Leona for him while Alec is getting his horse ready for the rodeo. Jick spends a few moments visiting with Leona before Alec returns then Jick takes off to meet up with Ray on the arena fence.

Part 2, pages: 125-176 Analysis

When Alec appears and warns Jick not to be seen with Stanley Meixell, Jick wonders aloud why everyone in the family is spooked by Stanley. Alec gives no response. It is a pattern that repeats throughout the book every time Jick tries to get someone to answer the question of Stanley's past.

Alec has returned home to pick up a shirt. The fact that his mother had predicted that this would be the only thing to bring him home shows she knows her son. She tells Alec that Wendell Williamson is using Alec, just as Wendell uses the land he grabs up. Jick perceives his father as using him when his father asks Jick to dig the outhouse hole as well as when he asks Jick to stay with Stanley. The task of watching Stanley benefits Stanley and the people to whom Stanley is responsible, while also offering Jick growth through challenge. Digging the outhouse again requires Jick to challenge himself and the end result is a new outhouse to serve the family. In comparison, Wendell makes a personal profit from Alec's labor, while Alec loses value and opportunity.

After Alec leaves, Jick notices his mother is deep in thought. He is not sure what she is thinking, but knows she is deep in contemplation. At the end of this book, Jick mentions that, many years later, when only he and his mother are left, his mother finally asks out loud, "Could it have come out different? If your father and I hadn't had our notions of what he should do?" (page 337) It is after this visit that Alec's parents stop trying to influence him. Jick does not know what his mother is thinking. We only know that after this evening she does not try to contact or influence Alec.

It is also on this evening that Jick overhears his mother on the phone agreeing to do something. It turns out that is the moment when Elsbeth agrees to deliver a Fourth of July speech, so it is no surprise that her speech contains her deep anger at Wendell Williamson. The speech is born out of her deep contemplations that night.

The resentment Jick feels over the outhouse task has been replaced with a feeling of accomplishment, heightened by how impressed his father is by the job Jick has done.

The author devotes almost a third of the book to the Fourth of July. This one twenty-four hour section of time receives nearly twice as much space as the entire five days surrounding the book's climax. This section includes Jick's history of the town of Gross Venture as well as character sketches of Toussaint Rennie and the members of the Heaney family.

What gives this section its length is the detail in which Jick remembers it. Reflecting the heightened senses typical of the transitional time of adolescence, Jick sees significance in each detail of the day. When his parents allow him to ride one of the "big horses" into town instead of riding into Gros Ventre with them, it makes Jick feel more mature. His father then handing him a half dollar to spend only increases the sense he feels of being more "adult." Jick's heightened senses are captured in his thought that, "If a sense of life, the blood racing beneath your skin, is not with you at a Fourth of July creek picnic,

then it is never going to be." (page 145) Jick devotes close to a page to describing the food at the picnic which he downs, like any growing boy, with gusto.

At one point, Toussaint leans over and whispers something to Jick about Jick having gotten drunk with Stanley in the cabin. This immediately triggers an internal panic for Jick who torments himself wondering how Toussaint knows. If Toussaint knows, how many other people know? Does his mother know? Jick's anxiety is mixed with a touch of pride since, to be in the knowledge bank of Toussaint, is to be in the running history of English Creek.

While Jick is still recovering from the shock of hearing that his drunken binge with Stanley has become public, the school superintendent, Max Vennaman steps up to the stump and announces that Jick's mother will be making a speech. Jick is completely flustered by the news. To the degree that Jick is still a child, it is difficult for him to imagine his mother being anything other than his mother. His increased level of maturity comes out since he not only listens to his mother's speech, but understands it and is moved by it. Jick also watches his father and the interaction between his mother and father from that point in the day forward with an attention to the way in which they are not just his parents, but two people in love. As Jick feels more mature, he also sees more of his parent's youthfulness. The parent/child dynamic is shifting into a stage where the identity of Jick's parents begins to separate from an authoritarian role into something more individual, multidimensional and human.

When Jick comes across his brother, Alec,at the rodeo, Alec asks Jick to keep Leona company for him while Alec prepares his horse for the rodeo. Jick quickly understands that Alec is assigning Jick to keep an eye on Leona. This evidence of Alec's insecurity is not out of character. As much as Jick describes his brother as larger than life and blessed with gifts and fortune, Jick also has picked up that Alec's relationship with Leona is not effortless. Alec does doubt himself, despite the confident picture which both Alec and Jick paint. Jick perceives this even if he does not acknowledge it.

Jick's tangible discomfort of being left alone with Leona is another instance of the magnified importance of every detail during this self conscious time in life. When Leona addresses Jick by his full name, Jick delves into an interior monologue questioning why she would know his name, and concluding this must mean he has been a discussion topic, the thought of which affects Jick to the point of near paralysis.

Part 2, pages 177-200

Part 2, pages 177-200 Summary

Part 2, pages 177-200

Jick and Ray watch the rodeo from the fence by the corral. The announcing booth is just above them with Tollie Zane announcing over his new system while the newspaper editor serves as scorekeeper. The arrival of timekeeper Velma Simms evokes many whispers when she climbs the tower ladder in her tight pants.

The rodeo events begin. Bareback riding and steer wrestling are followed by the calf roping, which Alec wins to the applause of the crowd. The bronco riding follows. When Dode Withrow enters the ring, everyone is surprised to see him there considering his age and drunken condition. Dode manages a spectacular ride but, as the whistle blows, Dode falls to the ground and does not move. Jick is immediately off the fence running to Dode and soon the community is in action as the men divide up between tending to Dode, rounding up the bronco, and the women arranging rides for Dode's wife and daughters. The fall turns out not to have caused major injury, but it is the climactic moment of the rodeo and the crowd begins to disperse.

As Jick and Ray head toward Ray's house, they pass the Medicine Lodge Saloon where Jick sees Stanley sitting at the bar. Jick hands his horse off to Ray and tells him he'll meet Ray at the Heaney's house. JIck then steps into the Medicine Lodge and approaches Stanley hoping for a chance to ask Stanley some of the questions that had been bothering Jick since their night of drinking together in the cabin. Jick is still failing to get any straight answers when Velma Simms appears and sidles up to Stanley ending Jick's conversation with him.

Part 2, pages 177-200 Analysis

Jick tells Ray about the encounter that he had with the drunken Dode Withrow. Jick mentions here, and again later in the book, that he thinks Ray is interested in Marcella Withrow, Dode's daughter. In fact, it is Jick who, years later, marries Marcella. It could be telling of his age that he does not even realize his own interest. Jick assigns his own interest in Marcella to Ray and Jick even claims he has trouble imagining a time when girls would be more interesting to him than rodeos.

The sexual awareness which Jick is beginning to experience continues as he listens to the comments made around him while Velma Simms climbs the ladder to the announcer's booth. Though Jick describes Velma with such words as "hypnotizing" and "stunning," he is taken aback when Ray joins in with a comment. It is as though the rituals of men are coming up on him faster than Jick can either process or accept. In fact, despite Jick implying that Velma is of no tremendous interest to him, when Jick

later comes face to face with Velma he is even more paralyzed by her presence than by Leona's.

As Jick watches his brother Alec deliver a flawless and winning calf roping performance, Jick finds himself conflicted. Jick is wanting Alec to win, admiring Alec's ability, and, without even realizing it, cheering Alec on out loud. At the same time, Jick is wishing Alec would be bad at being a cowboy so that the ranch life would never have tempted Alec away from college.

Dode Winthow's accident serves, on one level, as a foreshadowing. The idea that alcohol weakens the ability of a man to face the dangers of nature and, consequently, leads to disaster is echoed on a larger scale in the character of Stanley Meixell. Since the tragedy in Stanley's story is still unknown to Jick, the wild bronco throwing Dode to the ground foreshadows the secret Jick has yet to unveil.

Coffee Nerves first appears when Jick sees "disaster in a spotted horsehide charging full tilt at me."(p.185) The intensity of this detail, with its direct and immediate threat, puts the reader in anticipation which builds into a victorious ride.

The effect of Jick's narration as this scene comes to a climax creates a suspended moment with language, not at all unlike the use of slow motion in a film: "Coffee Nerves and Dode soaring together while the crowd's urging cry seemed to help hold them there, a wave of sound suspending the pair above the arena earth so that we all could have time to fix the sight into memory everlastingly." The next paragraph stretches to unfold piece by piece each moment in detail, forcing the reader to slow and see the picture as it develops. Triumph breaks to tragedy as the horse throws the victorious Dode to the ground. As he hits the dust, the narrative moves back into real time, dialogue kicks back in as the people in the surrounding break back into motion running to attend to Dode. The author's ability to control the rhythm of the storytelling helps immerse the reader in the experience.

The rest of the rodeo is anticlimactic by comparison, and quickly summed up to take us into Jick and Ray walking home from the rodeo. When they pass The Medicine Lodge, the town bar, Jick spots Stanley Meixell. Jick goes in to talk to Stanley, drawn by his nagging curiosity about Stanley's past and how it has caused tension with Jick's family. Jic is finally able to ask Stanley why it is that Stanley quit his job as ranger in the Two Medicine Forest. Stanley avoids answering the question, just as Jick's mother and brother have. Naturally this increses the sense of mystery and only stokes Jick's curiosity. The mystery of Stanley only grows for Jick when Velma Simms appears as Stanley's partner for the night.

Part 2, pages 201-217

Part 2, pages 201-217 Summary

While sitting in Ray's room waiting for the evening square dance to begin, Jick tells Ray that the summer so far has left Jick feeling unsettled. Ray tells Jick he thinks too much.

The boys walk down to the Sedgewick House for the evening square dance. When Alec and Leona arrive, Jick notes their arrival. After Alec and Leona dance some, they stop and visit with Jick. While they are talking, Mac and Beth McCaskill arrive together making an entrance that brings them applause. As the room's attention turns to them, Alec excuses himself from Jick and takes Leona saying they have more dancing to do.

Jick's parents join Jick and Ray. There is visiting and dancing as the night proceeds, but Alec and his parents avoid each other. When the caller for the square dance asks Mac to step in for him, Jick dances with his mother and then Jick and Ray decide to start home. When they step outside, they find Alec in confrontation with Leona's old boyfriend, Earl Zane. Their exchange escalates and Alec punches Zane who doubles over. Zane's brother, Arlee, suddenly bursts through to throw a punch at Alec, but Ray stops his hand causing Arlee to turn on Ray and Jick. It is just then that Jick's father steps out with Jick's Uncle Pete and several other men who break up the fight. Mac and Alec exchange a stare and then each of them turns and walks away, Alec with Leona, and Mac with Elsbeth.

That night, as they fall asleep in Ray's bedroom, Jick tries to sort out the events of the day.

Part 2, pages 201-217 Analysis

Reinforcing the events of the picnic, Jick's experience at the dance is one of seeing his parents as young and in love. That Jick talks with Alec and Leona, but then sits with his parents who do not speak to Alec and Leona, heightens Jick's feeling of being caught in the uncomfortable in-between. He holds it against neither Alec nor his parents. He enjoys watching his parents dance and talk with their friends. When his father calls the dance, Jick asks his mother to dance. Again, this is a section with small joys and dramas such as a boy's first dance with his mother, or Alec throwing a punch. Just as with almost every other event of the day these are neither epic, tragic not particularly dramatic. Despite that fact, Jick has spent a significant time describing the day and his own roller coaster of preadolescence which filled it. When Jick concludes Part 2 by describing that one day as "that immense day, that never-can-be-forgotten-Fourth," and "a set of hours worth the price of the rest of the life," it shows something of the values of the man he is becoming. Truly, as he narrates this story from years down the line, the fact that he so cherishes this day of community and family captures not onlhy the

perspective of the excited fourteen year old boy, but also the older adult looking back and finding the perspective on what what matters most in life.

Part 3, pages 218-230

Part 3, pages 218-230 Summary

Part 3, pages 218-230

Haying season has begun and Jick is now riding over to the Reese Ranch every morning to put in a day of haying for his Uncle Pete. In the first days of the season, Jick works beside his uncle fixing up the haying equipment. As they work side by side, Jick tries to get Uncle Pete to give him some information on the history of Stanley Meixell, but Uncle Pete avoids saying much on the subject.

The hay crew begins to arrive. First Bud Dolson, the mower, then Perry Fox who rides the dumprake, and finally, the stackman, Wisdom Johnson, who has been dropped off at the Reese ranch by Jicks parents who had picked Wisdom up on their way back from a headquarters trip. They had pulled him out of a brothel and Wisdom is still drunk on arrival.

The crew also includes a stacker team driver and this job is being done by twelve-year-old Clayton Hebner.

Jick's job is to run the scatter rake which is a ten foot axle with two iron wheels. Each wheel is edged with curved teeth that rake up the scattered hay. The entire device is hitched to a team and driven across the field.

Part 3, pages 218-230 Analysis

This section returns to the topic of life's unpredictability. Jick calls this, "The summer when not even haying turned out as expected. The summer when I began to wonder if anything ever does."

To Jick, haying is a job he loves. He loves the feeling of independence and responsibility that come as he rides over to his uncle's farm to spend the day in honest labor on the land.

There are similarities to Alec here in that Alec too loves the independence and responsibility of work. Though Alec also loves working on the land, it seems that Alec loves the recognition of his skill. Alec finds satisfaction in excelling as a roper working for the Double W. Jick loves the camaraderie on the haying team. Jick loves the land with its family history and the connection he has to it through his uncle.

Jick tries to ask his Uncle Pete for details on Stanley Meixell and the pattern continues as Pete also passes the questions off without answer.

Part 3, pages 230-278

Part 3, pages 230-278 Summary

Part 3, pages 230-278

Fire season has begun and Jick's father is informed that in efforts to decrease costs, the forests east of the Continental Divide, which include English Creek, will not be assigned fire guards unless things begin to burn.

The hay season moves quickly and soon the hay crew is moving the equipment to the alfalfa fields where they will spend the last ten days of the season. Since these fields are farther up into the mountains, Marie brings the men a lunch every afternoon in the alfalfa fields. One of the afternoons, she arrives with Toussaint Rennie who joins the men for lunch. Jick sees another opportunity here to find out something about Stanley Meixell's history. Rennie, too, refuses to give a direct answer.

When Clayton sprains his ankle, Good Help shows up to take his place driving the stack rake. His sloppy work leads to uneven stacks and eventually leads Wisdom to suffer a fall. Though Wisdom is not badly hurt, it is clear that Good Help needs to be sent away. Good Help cannot see the problem as his own, and continues to blame Wisdom until Pete declares that Good Help is right. Pete says he will fire Wisdom and Good Help can do the work for both of them. Good Help declines and excuses himself from the hay crew. The crew change means that Jick now has to ride the stack rake.

When a night of rain makes the fields too wet to work, Pete sends Jick into town with the scatter rake which needs repair after Clayton had accidentally driven it into a ditch breaking one of its brackets. As Jick is driving the scatter rake toward Gros Ventre, a lightning storm begins to approach. Not wanting to get caught in the storm on the huge metal rake, Jick begins to look for a place to turn off for shelter. The road he is on is the stretch of ranches owned by The Double W and the gates of the abandoned properties are locked up. The first gate Jick finds that he can actually access is the main ranch gate.

Jick unhooks the team and places the horses in the shelter of the barn, shoves the scatter rake in with other metal equipment and then runs up to the house to notify the Williamsons that his horses are in the barn and he would like to wait out the storm in the bunkhouse. After checking with Meredice Williams, Jick heads to the bunkhouse. There is no one there, but Jick can see which bunk is his brother's by the picture of Leona. Soon the hay crew arrives with Alec at the tail end. Alec is surprised and looks less than happy to see his brother. When the ranch foreman comes into the bunkhouse with two more ranch hands and announces he'll take one of the men into town with him later, a dispute breaks out about who will get to go. The men decide to play a game of cards to decide who will go. The card game leads one man to ask Jick where he had gotten that name, as a Jick is the name of one of the Jacks in a game of pitch, which the men are

playing. Jick admits he doesn't know. A phone rings and Jick is surprised to realize there is a phone in the bunkhouse. The phone call is inviting Jick to join them all for dinner, and Jick guesses it must have been Meridice Williamson.

He goes to the house and takes a seat around the table with the crew, staff and Mr. and Mrs. Williamson.

After dinner, the storm has passed so Alec walks Jick out to the barn and helps him reharness the horses to the scatter rake. It occurs to Jick that his brother had come in with the hay crew and so he asks Alec what job Mr. Williamson has him doing. Alec admits he is running the scatter rake for the haying at Double W. Then Jick asks about Leona and when Alec's response is only "She's okay," (p.275) Jick realizes that Alec and Leona's relationship must be fading. Alec swears his brother to secrecy and Jick promises to tell his parents nothing about Alec's situation.

Jick takes the rake on into Gros Ventre and spends the night at Ray's before returning it the next morning to the Reese Ranch. Since the hay is still too wet, Jick rides home where he tells his parents about having to take refuge at the Double W bunkhouse. His father asks only if he had seen Alec. His mother asks Jick if there is anything new going on with Alec. Jick keeps his promise and says nothing.

Hay season comes to a close. The haying crew disperses and Jick returns to daily life at home in English Creek.

Part 3, pages 230-278 Analysis

These pages begin the final buildup to the story's climax. The history of forest fires in the National Parks is laid out and then followed up with the information that Mac will have little to no help spotting and preventing fires due to cutbacks in the US Forest Service budget. Once this has been established, Jick returns his focus to haying season at his Uncle Pete's.

Jick relates the routine of riding the scatter rake, daydreaming as his rolls through the field, enjoying the lunches brought out by his aunt and the lazy afternoon post-lunch rests. The pastoral routine is interrupted by what Jick terms as "events" such as the spotting of Marcella Withrow running a scatter rake or Toussaint Rennie joining them for an afternoon lunch. As with the detailed enthusiasm Jick had shown for the Fourth of July, the idea of seeing a local girl or being joined by an extra face at lunch seem small things to qualify as events. In hindsight, we understand Jick's eventual marriage to Marcella probably adds impact to her appearance, and the visit by Toussaint is an event to Jick because Jick once again tries to solve the mystery of Stanley by asking Toussaint. Certainly Toussaint, as the walking talking historical archives of the area, must know the answers to what Jick wants to know, but even Toussaint gives no answers to Jick.

Then, on page 242, Jick states that the buildup to the story's climax is being set into motion: "You could raise and lower the anchor of an ocean liner on the string of links

that began to happen now." Jick has been a somewhat unreliable narrator as his pre-adolescent perspective has placed high importance on events which in hindsight seem less so. The buildup to Dode Withrow's fall, for instance, results in no significant or long lasting injuries. If anything, it has only patched up the annual split he is having with his wife and returns Dode to sobriety. Jick's conviction that these events hold weight are connected in his mind. The reader is drawn into trying to find the connection as the events unfold.

When Clayton Hebner injures his ankle, it leads to Good Help stepping in for a day. Good Help's incompetence leads to Jick having to switch from the scatter rake to the stacker team. When Clayton returns and is put on the scatter rake, Clayton crashes it and the rake is damaged. It is this set of circumstances which leads to Jick traveling into town on the scatter rake when a thunderstorm arises and drives him to seek shelter at the Double W.

As Jick faces the wire gate he will need to open in order to get the horses and rake to shelter, the lightning storm is moving closer. He immediately recalls Stanley's warning, but can find no stick to use; he plunges in to open the gate, aware the entire time that if lightning strikes any point on the fence, he would be killed. On one hand, this is simple fact and a necessary risk under the circumstances. Jick's recollection of the moment, however, is weighted with a significance that gives the reader pause. "Grant me three moments which could be erased from my life, and that Double W gate scene would be one," Jick states. Such a comment would imply the moment leads to something tragic and irreversible, but the opening of the gate goes without incident. The reader is left to wonder: Is the emphasis Jick puts on that memory symbolic of the anxiety of things beyond our control?

Upon entering the empty bunkhouse Jick begins a description which, typical of his character's speech, is filled with metaphors and similes. The empty bunk house is like a ghost ship, the beds are a "medley of odors." Jick then launches into a list of the orders to bring the bunkhouse alive to the reader. He specifies the smells and how they represent "the scent of men and what it takes them to lead a ranch hand's life."

When Alec arrives his reaction is not one of pleasant surprise which brothers' relationship so far would have led the reader to expect. Alec is startled and unwelcoming. As Jick waits out the storm the other ranch hands converse with him but Alex remains silent and restless. The haying crew is in the bunk house with the ranch hands and Jick begins to look over the haying crew and and figure out which man had which job. It is significant that the phone rings to interrupt his line of thought just as he is getting to figuring out who their scatter rake driver would be.

There is a moment of foreshadowing when the men in the bunkhouse are playing cards and one of them asks Jick about his name. Jick tells the men it was given to him by a friend of his parents and notes as he says it that it was probably Dode Withrow. Since Jick does not know this to be a fact, he simply tells them "Somebody with an imagination, I guess." (267)

The following scene over dinner at the Double W is side step from the culmination of events, but at its conclusion the rain has stopped and Alec is helping Jick to saddle up. It is only then that it dawns on Jick that Alec must be the scatter rake. In Jick's mind this is a serious demotion. Alec has gone from lasso tossing cowboy to doing the same job as Jick, only Alec is doing it from Wendell Williams and Jick is doing it for his own family. Without the draw of the cowboy life Jick now sees a chance to talk Alec back into the college plan, but Alec stubbornly refuses Jick's thoughts as just siding with their parents against him. When Jick questions Alec about what is so great about the life Alec has planned Alec tells him simply: "That it's my own."

Jick promises Alec not to tell their parents about Alec's demotion to scatter rake out of loyalty to his brother. He then asks about Leona to gauge where that relationship stands. When Alec gives a flat answer instead of saying something more upbeat, Jick realizes that relationship must be deteriorating. Jick knows better than to try to argue further and leaves.

Jick urge is to tell his parents about his whole adventure at the Double W, and share his new knowledge of Alec's situation. A part of Jick feels as if he holds information that could change Alec's future if only Jick were allowed to put the news into his parents hands. His promise to his brother has stranded him, however in what Jick calls "a wilderness (that) is the thicket of family."(page 276)

Part 3, pages 278-308

Part 3, pages 278-308 Summary

Part 3, pages 278-308

August is half over and the temperatures are sweltering. Jick's mother is busy with canning, pickling and preserving food for the winter. The ranger station, staffed with a dispatcher, Chet Barnouw, an assistant ranger, Paul Eliason and Ranger Mac McCallas is busy keeping track of the small pocket fires with which the smoke chasers have so far been able to deal.

Jick spend his days fishing, checking on Walter Kyle's place, reading and sometimes passing time in the ranger station. In search of things to keep himself busy, Jick decides to wallpaper his porch bedroom.

On the evening of August 25, a lightning storm moves across Montana and when Jick awakes the next morning there are 200 fires in Region One, six of them in Mac's English Creek district. After breakfast, Jick follows his father to the ranger station.

When Jick comes home mid-morning, he tells his mother that four out of the six fires are under control. By the following day, a Sunday, a fifth fire has been stopped, but the sixth has managed to spread. By Monday, Mac decides to join Paul and his crew rather than wait in the Ranger Station for reports.

Alone with his mother at supper that night, his father up in the mountains fighting the blaze, Jick breaks the subject of Alec and Leona with his mother. Elsbeth confirms that she has learned from conversation with Leona's mother that Leona is trying to decide between marrying Alec and finishing high school. Jick suggests that his mother and father go to the Double W to talk to Alec, but Elsbeth tells him no, they will wait and see.

The following morning Mac requests the dispatcher to round up fifty volunteer fire fighters and extra lunches for everyone, as well as a cook for the fire camp. When Jick's mother decides to be the one to drive into town and pick up lunches Jick tells her he'll stay behind.

Jick uses the time to call the Double W Ranch bunkhouse where he is able to reach Alec. He tells Alec about the fire in Flume Gulch and asks Alec to go help fight the fire with their father. Alec refuses.

When Jick's mother returns from town she brings both the lunches and Stanley Meixell with her. The dispatcher is glad to see the lunches but hesitant to bring on Stanley. Stanley offers to serve as cook and the dispatcher reluctantly agrees. When Stanley fills out the paperwork with a false last name, neither Jick nor his mother mention it.

As Stanley saddles his horse to head out to the fire, Jick pleads with his mother to let him go and help Stanley at the Fire Camp. She agrees and Stanley and Jick ride together to the site of the fire.

Upon arriving, Paul sets them up, though he doubts both Stanley's qualifications as a cook and the wisdom of having a fourteen-year-old up there.

As they begin unpacking to cook, Jick catches Stanley taking a swig from a whiskey bottle. When Jick blows up, Stanley tells him to take a sip. Jick argues and then gives in only to find out that the bottle is filled with water.

Jick and Stanley work side by side preparing food to sustain the firefighters as they come in shift after shift.

Part 3, pages 278-308 Analysis

When an August storm leaves six fires burning in the English Creek district, Mac becomes busy attending to the fires. Left alone with his mother, Jick manages to bring up the subject of Alec and, though he never breaks his promise to keep the scatter rake job secret, he does try to encourage his parents to go and talk to Alec. Jick is convinced that they would have the ability to talk Alec back on path. Jick's mother's answer is a resigned refusal. She has decided that she has no control and will wait to see what time brings.

The one fire that fails to be contained is the fire in Flume Gulch. While Jick is feeling impotent to stop the fall of the brother he idolizes, he now learns that the land he cherishes most, "that extreme and beautiful country of Flume Gulch," as Jick calls it, is being consumed by flames. One event seems to accentuate the other, but to Jick the burning of Flume Gulch is a chance to bring Alec back in. Alec's choices have been incomprehensible to Jick. Jick continues to want to believe that some supreme form of logic will break through the error of Alec's poor choices. Jick wants to believe that there is some avenue of control. Taking advantage of his mother having left for a run to town, Jick calls Alec and pleads with Alec to come help fight the fire. Alec refuses.

Jick pleads with Alec saying their dad needs Alec's help. When Alec turns down this argument, Jick states what is obvious in his own mind: "Do it because the goddamn country's burning up." Alec's answer is reminiscent of what Stanley Meixell had said about the first forest fire he had seen. Stanley had asked why no one was stopping the fire he saw then, and the response had been, "Belongs to the government, not nobody around here," (page 96). Alec's response is: "The fire is Dad's job, it's the Forest Services job, it's the job of the whole crew they'll bring in there to Flume Gulch. It is not mine." (page 295)

This difference between Jick's tie to the land and its indistinguishable tie to family contrasts with Alec's need to carve out an independent identity even if it means following another man's orders on another man's land while a place he knows and loves

burns. This moment in which Alec removes himself from any communal responsibility is the moment that ends Jick's hopes for his brother.

Jicks mother returns from town and has brought Stanley. It is Stanley who will be stepping up to help his father, not Alec. The fact that Jick's mother has retrieved Stanley shows that her instinct is to invest trust in Stanley's ability to help. When Stanley signs up to be the camp cook, he uses the false name "Stanley Kelley." This false name hides Stanley's identity, though Stanley's choice shows his humorous sense of irony. Later the reader understands why Stanley would not want his own name used, and how that relates to the Major in Charge of the Forests of that region, but for now this just adds to Jick's curiosity about Stanley.

Jick feels he needs to go with Stanley. Whereas Jick's first instinct had been to call on Alec to help, Jick now sees that he himself can take some responsibility. Jick yearns for his mother to see it too. As Jick says, "That she would not automatically tell me I was too young, that she would let me play a part." (page 297) Elsbeth's first reaction is a look of surprise which Jick says is the same she had when he had asked her to dance. It is not the surprise of being shocked or disapproving of the idea; it is a mother's surprise at suddenly seeing a man where there once was a child. Elsbeth's consent shows Jick that she is beginning to accept his maturation.

When Stanley asks Jick if he knows what he is getting into, Jick responds with a lesson he has figured out through repeated experiences during the summer. He simply says, "Does anybody ever?"(page 298)

The sight of the smoke from Flume Gulch makes Jick's thoughts turn to what he has heard from his mother, father and Stanley about the fire of 1910. He recalls how Stanley had described the wind turning the fire into the fire camp and how Stanley has said he would never forget the sight. This foreshadows what Jick will later see.

Jick confronts Stanley when they arrive at camp and Jick sees Stanley pull out his bottle. The scene has dramatic rhythm the author has used earlier and will use again at the climax. Jick argues with Stanley to stop drinking, Stanley tells Jick to just take a sip. Jick becomes increasingly frustrated with Stanley until the tension peaks. Jick grabs the bottle and then there is one word, dropped alone into its own space on the page, "Water."

It turns out Stanley is drying out because somehow he understands he cannot be drinking now. For Stanley, not only is stopping the fire of greater importance than his own need to anesthetize himself, it is also Stanley's chance for some redemption. As the reader comes to realize, this particular situation is the exact redemption Stanley needs to find but, even then, redemption does not undo all damage.

Mac's reaction to seeing Jick and Stanley is an angered shock. Jick explains that it is Elsbeth's idea that he and Stanley come up to cook. Mac cannot discount an idea that Elsbeth has thought through. Jick has mentioned earlier that his father is the one who is unrooted. He has no family left in the area, has little knowledge of his Scottish culture,

and feels most comfortable when he is roaming over the land. Elsbeth represents all that is solid and rooted by contrast. The chaos of fire demands that the order of Elsbeth's reasoning stand for Mac. He makes no further objection.

Part 3 pages 308-320

Part 3 pages 308-320 Summary

Jick, Paul and Stanley take lunches up to the fire line and Mac asks Jick about Stanley. Jick assures his father that Stanley is staying sober. Later, Jick and Stanley are preparing food when the men bring an injured firefighter down from the fireline. A fallen limb had crushed his arm and collarbone so Paul instructs the men to get him down to the trailhead and drive him to Gros Ventre. Later in the day, Stanley asks Jick to take a walk with him. The camp is located beside the creek which runs through the base of Flume Gulch. The fire is now on the top of one side of the slope and Stanley and Jick walk up the opposite side. Jick figures Stanley wants to view the fire from there, but Stanley seems more interested in walking around the slope. They notice how hot it is up on the slope.

When the men come in for supper, Mac tells Jick and Stanley that the fire has jumped their fireline in three places and is headed down toward the creek. Dark begins to set in and Mac takes Paul and the foreman along the creek to stake out where the new fireline should be built.

When they return and start into the tent to make their plan, Stanley pulls Mac aside and asks to talk to him. Jick follows the men as they walk a ways off to speak. Stanley warns Mac that his plan to battle the fire at the creek bed at the base of the gulch would be a mistake. Stanley suggests that it would be better to make the fireline up at the top of the opposite slope, which is the Rooster Mountain slope topped with rocks. Mac says he'll consider the idea, though he hates to let the fire take another entire slope.

Part 3 pages 308-320 Analysis

Jick's description of the fire uses the metaphor, "Orange flames were a dancing tribe amid the trees;" (page 308), as well as the details, not of smell this time as Jick used describing the bunkhouse, but of sounds: "Flames crackling, and continual snap of branches breaking as they burned, and every so often a big roar of flame as a tree crowned out." (page 308)

Jick uses a simile to tie the fire to the men fighting it, "It was as if the fire's hunger for the forest had spread an epidemic of appetite among us all." (page 309) In this sense, Jick's job as cook parallels that of the firefighters.

Contrast between common sense and the regulations of the bureaucracy is intensified in this emergency. Mac is required to report by 10:00 each morning if he has the fire under control. If he misses the 10:00 deadline, then the new deadline is set for the next morning at 10:00. This concept of a fire having some sort of schedule or predictability is clearly ludicrous to anyone in the midst of fighting a fire.

When Stanley takes Jick for a walk up the opposite slope, Jick figures it is just to get a better look at the fire across the gulch. Jick notes the heat on the slope, which he contributes in part to the lack of shade. When Stanley feels the ground, Jick assumes it is to see if the ground is cool enough to sit on, which it is not. Jick watches the fire through binoculars and Jick figures Stanley is waiting to use them as he seems to be wandering about "here, there and elsewhere" on the slope. When Jick offers the binoculars to Stanley, however, Stanley turns him down and starts back to the camp.

That night, there is no sign of getting the fire under control. As Mac is about to go into a conference with Paul and the foremen to decide where to attack the fire next, Stanley asks if he can have a word with Mac. At first Mac brushes Stanley off, but Stanley is insistent. Jick notices that what persuades his father to listen to Stanley are Stanley's words: "You know how much it takes for me to ask."

Stanley's radical recommendation to let the fire cross to the other slope instead of stopping it at the creek is, at first, appalling to Mac. The idea seems to give up trying to stop the fire and sacrificing more land instead. If Mac can stop it at the creek, then no more land would burn, he would have the fire under control and woulde meet with desired results passed down by the authorities. Mac is still thinking, as the regulators who created the rules have always thought, that to fight a fire you overpower it with human effort. Stanley knows the nature of the land, and the ways of fire. Stanley's suggestion is to work with nature to gain the wanted result. The method of letting the other slope burn seems to run against all logic, but it is the method that accepts and employs nature. Throughout the summer, Jick has been realizing that what you have to work with is what happens, not what you have planned. Life does not have enough predictability for an individual to keep tight control over events. The fire represents life, its circumstances, and events that run outside of individual control. The best plan is to understand how the fire interacts with the landscape, similar to how events interact with lives. Only when one has this understanding can they see far enough ahead to have any kind of control over a situation.

Mac allows himself to trust that Stanley's idea is based in wisdom , experience, and an understanding of the land which exceeds the logic of rules and regulations made by men. Mac accepts Stanley's plan and in the morning sends a perplexed crew to the top of the opposite slope from the fire to work on stopping the fire from there. Paul's trust in Mac's wisdom is apparent when he is willing to hold off on reporting the tactic until it has a chance.

Part 3 pages 320-330

Part 3 pages 320-330 Summary

Part 3 pages 320-330

In the morning, Mac orders Jick and Stanley out of the camp by noon, and the two retreat up to a rock outcropping. The slope where the fire is currently burning is blocked from view, but they can see the camp by the creek and all of the Rooster Mountain Slope from where they are. The fire crew is working on making a fireline at the top of Rooster Mountain where Stanley had suggested.

When the fire moves in toward the creek, there is an avalanche of smoke and fire that suddenly fills the gulch before jumping in what Jick describes as "An exploding wave, a tide" (p.324) which engulfs the slope of Rooster Mountain. The new fireline against the rocks is what stops the fire.

After supper that night, Mac comes to acknowledge that Stanley had been right about how the fire would travel. Jick takes this opportunity to ask the two men what had caused the tension between them. Jick's father dismisses it as old history, but Stanley says he thinks Jick should know. Stanley tells Jick that he had been the ranger of the English Creek district when Phantom Woman burned. At the time, Mac had been the ranger at Indian Head, but he had come down to help fight the fire. In that fire, an opposite slope, superheated by the oncoming fire and the direct sun shining down on it had also burst into flame, which is how Stanley had an idea that the same would happen with Rooster Mountain. However, the blowout at Phantom Woman happened under Stanley's watch and Stanley had been drinking. Mac had known about Stanley's alcoholism for some time by then.

When Mac had been about Alec's age, he, too, had a falling out with his father. Mac tells Jick now that it had been Stanley who had taken him in when Mac and his father had their break and it had been Stanley who had encouraged Mac to take the ranger test. Once Mac had become a Ranger at Indian Head, and Stanley had still been the Ranger at English Creek, Mac had noticed that Stanley's drinking was getting worse and having an effect on his job.

When the fire at Phantom Woman had gotten out of control, Mac hade decided it was time to report Stanley, figuring the Forest Service would transfer Stanley, but instead they had fired Stanley and given Mac the post at English Creek.

By the next morning, the Flame Gulch fire is well enough under control that the fire crews are being released and Mac leaves the situation in Paul's hands. Mac asks Jick to drive into town with him, where Mac wants to report the fire events to the local paper. While Mac goes over to the Gleaner office, Jick walks over to visit Ray Heaney. As the boys stand on Ray's lawn talking about how the summer has flown by, Mr. Heaney

steps out on the porch and announces the news that another war has just begun in Europe.

Part 3 pages 320-330 Analysis

Something has finally broken in the tension Mac has been holding against Stanley. When he tells Stanley and Jick to evacuate the camp by noon he states plainly, "You know what happened the last argument you and I had. This time let's just not argue." This direst reference to an argument is the closest Jick has heard to an admission of the tension. When Mac adds, "I need you to be with Jick, Stanley," we have yet to learn how much it takes Mac to say this. The tension Mac has harbored has kept him struggling to keep Stanley out of his life, but the fact is that Stanley had once been a father figure to Mac. That Mac now entrusts his son to Stanley's care is a sign that some redemption for Stanley has been gained. When Jick is first sent off to help Stanley, it is because Stanley is drunk and wounded and needs Jick's help. Something in Mac prompts him to offer Jick's assistance. It is a responsibility task for Jick to fulfill. Now Mac is asking Stanley to protect Jick.

The climax occurs on page 323 as the fire, which is working its way to the creek, chooses its path and fulfills Stanley's prophecy. With the economy of words the author has used repeatedly in moments of dramatic impact, Jick is debating which way the fire will go when Stanley simply says,"There." (page 323)

"There" then unfolds into a description of the fire camp being engulfed. Had the crew been down at the creek to fight the fire, they would have been instantly smothered. Stanley's foresight has saved their lives. His foresight has saved Jick's father, if not from death in the fire, than from a lifetime of the deaths of others weighing on Mac's conscience. Stanley's prediction has created the only solution which could stop the fire. This is the true moment of Stanley's redemption.

Jick had begun having little to no respect for Stanley, but Jick has noticed more spine, wit, thought and ability than he would have ever have expected of Stanley. When Jick realizes that the trip up the slope the previous day had been for Stanley to gather information to make his prediction, Jick fully realizes that he has not given Stanley the credit he has deserved.

Sensing that the tension has broken, Jick asks his father and Stanley to tell him about the argument which had created the split. It had been when Stanley had served as ranger of English Creek that Phantom Woman had burned. In a situation almost identical to the one Jick has just witnessed, a superheated patch of land burst into flame at Stanley's point on the fireline. Mac had blamed Stanley's drinking and had reported Stanley, thinking that Stanley would only be transferred or demoted. Major Kelley had not only fired Stanley, but then had given Mac Stanley's position (thus the irony of Stanley using Kelley's name to cover his own identity as a disgraced ranger). It had not been Mac's intent to end Stanley's career. This unplanned result of Mac's action had resulted in damage to both men.

Here Jick learns the history of his father's relationship with Stanley. Mac had had a falling out with his own father, just as Alec has with Mac. Mac had been taken in by Stanley who had mentored him to become a Forest Ranger. There is reassurance to the reader when Mac states, "Eventually he (Mac's father) got over it and I got over it and that's all that needs to be said about that episode." History repeats itself. The split with Alec will pass on its own, the message seems to be. We dismiss the imbalance of the histories. Mac had been taken in and mentored by a man who loved the land. Alec has been employed and used by a man who hoards and exploits the land. The situation of Stanley and Mac had been man in concert with nature. Wendell Williamson represent s man against nature.

When Stanley had been fired due to Mac's report, Mac felt he had betrayed Stanley, especially when he had taken Stanley's own position as ranger of English Creek. In addition, the fact that the Forest Service administrators would completely remove a man so in touch with nature had left Mac bitter about how little the administrators understood the land they regulated. Mac had known that Stanley's drinking had continued. Perhaps that fact helped Mac justify the damage that his report had brought, but the reader also senses that Mac is afraid that Stanley would harbor deep anger towards him for the betrayal. Mac's initial instinct when he had seen Stanley approaching on that afternoon during the June sheep count, had been to reach for his gun. When Mac had first seen Stanley in the fire camp, his rage had possibly been fear of Stanley's intent. Mac knows that with the fire in Flume Gulch, he himself is now in the situation in which Stanley had met his own downfall.

Though it would be comforting to think redemption has led to Stanley's reentry into their lives and a final break from alcohol, the author does not indulge in this outcome. Stanley admits that, though sober for the endurance of the fire, he would not be able to remain that way. His own history has shown him unable to fight the alcoholism and so, the men part. Jick leaves with his father and Stanley stays to cover the camp as things wind down.

Part 3 does not end with this one resolution. The story line of Alec still hangs with only a hint that time will heal the rift. Part three ends instead with a beginning. It is the beginning of World War II and the beginning of the resolution of the story line for Alec.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

Part four is Jick's summation. A Sunday phone call from headquarters on December of 1941 brings the news of Pearl Harbor to the house. Alec has been transferred to another ranch owned by the Williamsons and has still not spoken with his family. The events at Pearl Harbor lead Alec to enlist and he comes home just before leaving to say goodbye to his parents. Jick does not know how to describe the scene since he had not been there, but off at a basketball tournament at the time of the visit. Alec is killed in a desert in Tunisia when his unit is shelled.

Jick and Ray Heaney also enlist. Ray fights in Europe and now runs an insurance agency. Jick fights in the Aleutian islands and sustains a bullet injury in combat with the Japanese.

Jick uses his GI bill to study forestry and works as the ranger of the Custer National Forest until his Uncle Pete asks Jick to take over the Reese Ranch.

Soon after his return to English Creek, Jick marries Dode's daughter Marcella and together they have two daughters.

More than thirty years have passed. There are fewer sheep in English Creek, more cattle and agriculture with irrigation systems and aluminum sheds. The Double W has been bought out and is now run by a company.

Jick returns to the subject of his father and tells how, following the fire and the start of World War Two, the Ranger Station is moved into the town, but his father continues as ranger of English Creek until his retirement. Mac dies the spring following his retirement while out fishing for brookies.

Alec's mother, now eighty-four, lives alone in her house in Gros Ventre, more reflective on the past now than anyone.

Part 4 concludes with Jick's final memory of Stanley Meixell which had occurred that summer in the fire camp. As Jick had been preparing to leave, he had told Stanley that he did not know if Mac had done the right thing or not by turning Stanley in, but that Jick was sorry how it turned out. Stanley notes how unusual it is for a McCaskill to apologize and then tells Jick that he had been right when he told Jick's parents long ago that their younger boy looked like "the jick of the family." (p. 338)

Jick's mother says the past is a taker, not a giver. Jick sees the history of the depression everywhere he looks in that summer of 1939.

Alec breaks from the family because he wants to run his own life. How does the Double W relate to Alec's "freedom?" Is it an illusion of freedom? Would college and engineering have been the true freedom?

When Mac sends Jick off with Stanley, Mac gives no explanation for this spontaneous decision other than, "Jick, he's worth knowing." How does Mac mean this? Is Stanley a moral lesson in bad choices? Or is Stanley a man with history, experience and wisdom that Jick could benefit from? What dies Jick gain from his relationship with Stanley by the end of the book?

Part 4 Analysis

English Creek is Jick's own coming of age tale, and the backdrop is both the mystery of Stanley Meixell, and Alec's split from the family. Against this backdrop, Jick is trying to carve out not only his identity but his understanding of life. The mystery of Stanley is answered within the story. It is part of an event which Jick experiences and tells the reader about first hand. Alec simply drifts from the story. His last actual scene is the phone call with Jick. In the book's summation, Jick says, "Left to my own devices, I would not tell any further about Alec. Yet my brother, his decisions, the consequences life dealt him, always are under that summer and its aftermath like the paper on which a calendar is printed."

It is telling that, to Jick, the phone conversation and Alec's distance after that point had been the end of their brotherhood. Alec's death only cements the break, but the pain of losing Alec happens to Jick in that phone conversation.

Jicks own future brings no huge drama. Despite one of his lessons having been that you can never know what life will bring, Jick becomes a forest ranger in Eastern Montana, until returning to take over his uncle's ranch. The forest and the ranch are clearly his love. One unremarkable marriage and divorce is followed by Jick's marriage to Dode Withrow's daughter. Marcella is a girl he has known all his life and whose life he thought of as parallel to his own.

The Double W, having eventually been sold off to a faceless corporation, completes its symbolism as the disconnection from and exploitation of land.

Mac eventually retires from his job as Forest Ranger which has moved with modern times into being a more desk bound, town centered job of allotting resources. The change in the job symbolizes a movement away from nature. Mac's death is quiet and quick. The father/son bond which Jick had loved in their brook trout competitions is the moment captured at Mac's death. Mac's tenth brook trout is still on the hook when his body is found. Whereas Alec's death had come without closure, Mac's death concludes with a moment of small victory. Alec dies a stranger, isolated, but Mac dies as he lived — engaged with his family, even when alone, in an informal father/son tradition, beside a brook in the woods of English Creek.

A final piece of mystery is solved when Jick concludes with the information that it had been Stanley Meixell who named him. The connection between Jick's emerging identity and Stanley Meixell can be found through the story, so it is appropriate that it is Stanley who had first assigned the name to Jick.

Characters

Jick McCaskill

Jick is the central character and narrator of the story. He is fourteen when the book opens, with his fifteenth birthday approaching at the summer's end. He's at an age where he is just beginning to try to define himself as something entirely separate from his brother to whom he has always looked up. When Alec defies his family by turning down the chance to go to college in a sudden rebellion to run his own life, Jick begins to question whether he really is like Alec.

Jick is an extremely contemplative boy who loves to think about the history behind people and places. He is constantly trying to prod people into telling him stories of the past. He also will ask his parents, Stanley Meixell and his best friend Ray about philosophical questions that are always brewing in his head.

Jick enjoys accompanying his father while his father works as Ranger of the English Park District. Though Jick is disoriented by his brother breaking away from the family, he values the connection he has to his father, and is enjoying the time he gets to ride at his side through the National Forest for the annual sheep count. When his father passes Jick along to help Stanley Meixell for a few days, Jick is angered that his father has passed him off instead of keeping Jick at his side. When Jick realizes that Stanley is a drunk, he feels that his father has used him. The time Jick has to spend gutting and skinning bloated sheep, unpacking in the cold rain, and dragging a pack mule back up the steep side of a mountain are all events which reinforce Jick's feeling of being used and advantage being taken of him. When Jick and Stanley part, Stanley even says that he hopes Jick does not feel he has been used. Jick answers that no, it has been an education.

Upon arrival home, Jick's father announces he'll be out of town for the week and Jick will be in charge. Jick seems to like the idea that his father is investing some responsibility in him, but when Jick examines the situation, he doesn't quite understand what he really is being left to supervise. When it turns out that his father has plans for Jick to spend the week digging a new seven-foot pit for the outhouse, Jick is again infuriated with his father, but says nothing and does the job. By the time his father returns, Jick is pleased with his accomplishment and appeased by his father's satisfaction with the job.

As the story progresses, the pattern of Jick feeling used, and then realizing some achievement in shouldering the job, repeats. The pattern fuels his search for self definition which is at the core of the book's themes of coming of age, identity, and the individual's role in the community.

Varick

Mac McCasgill is the forest ranger of the English Creek District and the father of Jick and Alec. Mac is the son of Scottish immigrants who settled to raise sheep in the area near the English Creek North Fork known as Scotch Heaven. Both of his parents had died by 1919, though Mac had left in 1917 to fight in World War I. The extent of his service had been at Camp Lewis inside the state of Washington.

After the war, Mac is hired to be the association rider for the Noon Creek Cattle ranchers during the summers. For the remainder of the year Mac would go from job to job, feeding, herding, shearing, and birthing sheep or cattle; it made no difference as long as it was work. He meets Lisabeth Reese while picking up Reese cattle to take on a drive. Within the first year of their marriage, Alec is born and Mac doesn't want his son to grow up in a life of trying to make a living season by season.

Mac studies to become a National Park Ranger and once he passes the exam he is assigned as Ranger of Indian Head district which is south of English Creek in the Two Medicine National Forest. He has since become Ranger of English Creek which is where he lives with his wife, Lisabeth, and two sons, Alec and Jick.

When Alec tells his father that he is giving up the chance to go to college because he wants to marry a local girl and settle into a life of ranching, it goes against everything Mac had deliberately chosen to give his son a different chance in life. Though his anger and disapproval are clear, he first attempts to reason with Alec. Once Mac realizes he cannot change Alec's mind, he retreats.

Mac also loves history and seeks out the local tales told by the men who had lived through the days of Indians, buffalo and cattle drives. Jick attributes this to Mac having little sense of the Scottish life from which his parents had come, but being the first generation in a land that is still being shaped. Jick feels his father uses the stories to build a footing to place himself in time.

While Mac loves his family, he is often seeking solitude and enjoys the rides deep into the National Park land. The winter months that keep him close to home cause a decline which only lifts once Mac begins riding out into the land again.

His decision to join the Forest Service causes some rift with the community of settlers who do not like the idea of government taking parts of the land for itself. Mac is left to oversee the leasing of federal land to the local ranchers. He straddles the world between government man and the ranch families he grew up amongst.

Jick describes his father as "between and between and between" (p.35), and as having a life motto of "just trying to stay level." (p.29)

Alec McCaskill

Alec, the first born son of Mac McCaskill, is Jick's older brother. At eighteen, Alec is now taller than his father, but has his red hair, blue eyes and freckled nose. Larger-than-life, Alec is a go getter who seems to be good at anything he tries. His ability with numbers is discovered when Alec is twelve, which leads his parents to work toward getting Alec to college, the first McCaskill ever to go to college, to study Mechanical Engineering.

Alec is impatient to go to college until he falls in love with Leona Tracy, who has the reputation for being the most beautiful girl in town. Alec's many skills have earned him a job as a hand for the Double W Ranch, where he has been working as a cowhand for the past two summers. The cowboy life and his infatuation with Leona overthrow the dream of going to college. Alec decides instead to marry Leona and go into ranching. His parents resistance to the idea only escalates Alec's determination. He now sees this choice as a matter of him running his own life.

Alec is working hard to define himself as older than Jick by calling Jick "Sprout" in front of Leona. Despite his many talents and a personality which fills a room, Alec harbors insecurities which are evident when he asks Jick to keep Leona company while Alec prepares his horse for the rodeo.

When Jick later discovers that Alec has been demoted to driving the scatter rake during haying season, and that the relationship with Leona seems to be falling apart, Alec makes Jick swear to secrecy. He doesn't want his parents to know that the life he has fought to have is not turning out to be what he thought it would. Alec is both too proud and stubborn to turn back. He sees any move toward reconciling with his parents as giving in.

Elsbeth Reese McCaskill

Elsbeth, or Beth, or Bet as she is called by various characters, is Jick's mother. She is also Alec's mother, Mac's wife, and the daughter of Issac Reese who has been a horse and cattle rancher on Noon Creek. Her brother Pete now runs the family ranch.

Elsbeth grows up on the Reese Ranch and spends some time as a school teacher before she marries Mac McCaskill. Elsbeth prides herself on her cooking and spends the hottest part of the summer in the heat of the kitchen canning and preserving supplies for the winter. She is a practical woman who keeps her men grounded by reminding them to look forward to the present instead of getting lost in stories of the past. She takes orders from no one, not even her husband when he sends her a message to not worry about him. She is not one to mince words. Elsbeth is direct and finds little use for polite niceties. She is an anchor for her family.

When Alec breaks from the family, deciding to marry Leona and stay on as a ranch hand at Double W, she explodes and is only stopped by Mac's stepping in. When Alec later stops by, she brings the subject up again. Alec does not give her another chance to

discuss the matter, but at the Fourth of July Picnic she makes a speech to the crowd about the founding settler Ben English. In her speech, she moves to the topic of the families taken down by the Depression. It is a speech which concludes, "I think it could not be more right that we honor in this valley a man who. . .honored the earth instead of merely coveting it," as an obvious jab to the Williamsons and their ranch which have not only taken all the land, but have stolen her son's future.

Stanley Meixell

Stanley Meixell appears first on horseback. A man of few words, his dark eyes and slicked back black hair are hidden beneath his tipped down Stetson. Jick has memories of this stranger as a younger man who could make him and his brother laugh, but the memories are distant. What strikes Jicks most, when Stanley appears after ten years of absence, is a tension and wariness between Mac and Stanley.

Stanley Meixell had worked with the Geological Survey and had served as the original ranger who first set up the boundaries of the Two Medicine National Forest. In the Forest Service, those men had been considered as legendary. However, Jick can remember no stories being told of Stanley, nor can Jick understand why his father is so tense and wary around the man who had preceded Mac as the ranger of English Creek.

Despite his alcoholism, Stanley is a sharp and observant man who has more wisdom than his laid back demeanor, raspy voice, worn face, and general outsider appearance lead others to think.

Pete Reese

Pete is Jick's uncle, the brother of Elsbeth. He is a good natured man whose humor with his sister and nephew show his warmth. He's a rancher who runs his ranch with the skill of a man who had grown up in that world. He understands the land and the people and how to adjust with the seasons. Pete and his wife are childless, their only son having died in birth and Jick is close to his uncle.

Dode Withrow

Dode is a friend of Mac's since they had been young riders together. Dode has always been a fancy dresser and good on a bronco. He is now a sheep rancher who is married with three daughters. Once a year he and his wife have a fight. Dode is kicked out, gets drunk and, within forty- eight hours, it all blows over.

Toussaint Rennie

Toussaint Rennie is the unofficial area historian. Though easily over eighty years old, his high humor and his constant use of his long memory have kept him looking and acting

much younger. He is a mix of tribal blood and French Canadian. He is the grandfather of Pete's wife Marie.

Garland Hebner

Garland Hebner is lazy, dishonest, and only sees the errors in others. He is man without drive or direction who is always looking for the shortcut out.

Marie Reese

Marie is Pete's wife. With Irish beauty, shoulder length black hair, humor to rival her grandfather Toussaint, and cooking to rival Jick's own mother's, Marie is a favorite of Jick's with her warmth and smiles.

Leona Kelly

A teenage beauty with golden hair and a figure that turns heads, Leona is a polite girl to the adults, but knows she has an effect on the boys.

Canada Dan

Canada Dan is a coarse, skittish and inexperienced sheepherder with no work ethic. He is hired to watch a herd of Busby Sheep until he is fired after 18 sheep die from eating poisonous plants.

Ray Heaney

Ray Heaney is Jick's best friend. Though Jick describes Ray physically as looking "more like he was carved out of a pumpkin than born" (p.173), he seems to be a normal prepubescent boy in every other way. He has his mind on girls, does funny impersonations of radio voices, and thinks Jick thinks too much.

Earl Zane

The brawny and dim ex boyfriend of Leona.

Ed Heaney

Ray's father, owner of the lumberyard. A punctual man by whom you can set your clock. His life and home are built on order and structure.

Velma Simms

The town vamp. Three times divorced, the Gros Ventre resident is often seen sauntering about town in her tight revealing clothes.

Wisdom Johnson

A roaming Montana ranch worker. While sober, he's an earnest worker and a "maestro" of the haystack. Between seasonal jobs he is often inebriated in a brothel.

Wendell Williamson

Wealthy son a of a banker who inherited the Double W Ranch, his expansive girth and swollen figure reflect his greed for land. Bad tempered and unfriendly, he is never seen as a member of the community.

Meridice Williamson

Wendell's wife, a Los Angeles attorney's widow, this outsider seems completely out of place and out of touch at the Double W Ranch where she only appears in the summer.

Paul Eliason

Paul is Mac's assistant Ranger. Moved to English Creek after running the CCC crews building trails in the Olympic National Forest, Paul is a gloomy character still weighed down by his recent divorce. Nervous and unassertive, Paul's character actually experiences some growth toward the end.

Chet Barnouw

Chet is the Dispatcher at the English Creek Ranger Station and is appropriately low key.

Pat Hoy

Dode Withrow's sheepherder who is sober ten months of the year when he works with Dode's sheep.

Isidor Pronovost

Isidor is the Packer for the area, which means it is his job to pack the cargo onto mules and horses that will carry it out to various stations across the National Park.

Issac Reese

The father of Elsbeth and Pete Reese, now deceased, was a Danish immigrant. A hard working Scandinavian with shrewd determination, he built his success with work horses and The Great Northern Railroad. He finally settled in Montana where his teams of work horses were needed for irrigation and reservoir projects and for the building of road and park trails.

Major Evan Kelley

The government appointed director who gives the orders for all the National Forests in Montana and northern Idaho, never appears in person but is referenced throughout the book. Though the book is fiction, Regional Forester Evan W. Kelley is a true historical figure.

Genevieve Heaney

Ray's mother, tidy and soft spoken, never let so much as a scratch go untended.

Marcella Withrow

One of three daughters of Dode Withrow. Jick mentions she is the only other kid his age in the one room school house in English Creek. Now they have both moved to the bigger school in Gros Ventre. Though Jick makes several notices of Marcella, he always says it is because he thinks Ray likes her. Many years later, we find out Jick marries Marcella.

Lila Sedge

The widow of the former hotel owner in Gros Ventre. Lila only appears in public after her husband dies of pleurisy. Lila, tall and bony in her long old-fashioned dresses, drifts about the streets in a fog.

Perry Fox

A Texas cow punch in his seventies, Perry Fox rides from ranch job to ranch job until he gets too old for that work. Now, he spends his winter working in the saddle shop, and helps with haying on the Reese Ranch every summer.

Bud Dolsen

Bud Dolson is a quiet man who has a regular job in a smelter in Anaconda. He comes up to the Reese Ranch in the summer to drive the mower.

Objects/Places

Two Medicine National Forest

The National Forest in which the story is set. Located in Northern Montana, Two Medicine borders Glacier National Park and sits along the eastern side of the Continental Divide. Two Medicine consists of six hundred square miles divided into three districts: English Creek, Indian Head and Blacktail Gulch.

English Creek

The district of the National Forest where Varick McCaskill is the ranger. Located in the northern most portion of the National Forest, the English Creek district is named after the creek which runs along the southern base of it. The North Fork of English Creek runs along the district's eastern side. The northern section of the district is a collection of reefs and mountains which edge the Rocky Mountain Range.

Gros Ventre

The nearest town which is located about nine miles away from the Ranger Station for English Creek.

Noon Creek

The next creek to the north of English Creek. Once populated with cattle ranches, the span of the creek is now populated by only three ranches: Dill Egan's, Pete Reese's and the sprawling Double W. Noon Creek lays outside Two Medicine National Forest.

The Double W Ranch

Warren Williamson, who owns a bank and property in "San Francisco or Los Angeles, one of those places" (p. 40) buys the Double W before the Depression and leaves it to his son Wendell. As farms and ranches go into foreclosure around him, Wendell and then his son grab up the land to consolidate into his property. Whereas Warren has a reputation for running his cows not only on his forest lease but on any other land where he could sneak them, Wendell has a reputation for buying up or leasing everything he can.

The Double W is the Ranch where Jick's brother Alec has been working as a cowhand for the previous two summers.

The Reese Ranch

The Reese Ranch is the property of Pete Reese, Jick's uncle, and the brother of Elsbeth Reese.

Flume Gorge

Flume Gorge is a section of the English Creek district where the creek's North Fork cuts between Roman Reef and Rooster Mountain.The wooded slope beneath Roman Reef and the grassy slope coming down from Rooster Mountain meet at the creek in a V.

Phantom Woman Mountain

The mountain north of Rooster Mountain and the site of a terrible fire in 1919.

Roman Reef

A steep rock outcropping running along the North Fork of English Creek across from Rooster Mountain and Phantom Woman Mountain.

Rooster Mountain

A mountain whose grassy slopes lead up to a rock outcropping like a Rooster's Comb. Rooster Mountain makes the North slope of Flume Gulch.

The Hebner Place

The Hebner Place is the childhood home of Mac McCaskill. Mac's parents had died in the flu epidemic and the property now belongs to the Hebner family who have let it deteriorate. Abandoned cars and rusting equipment are scattered around the yard. Structures are falling down and the ground is brown and barren.

Walter Kyle's Ranch

Walter Kyle leaves his ranch during the summer to tend his own sheep. His log and chinking house is sparsely decorated and tidy. His barn is made of log, his tools are stored in a shed, and his red coupe is sheltered in a three quarters shed.

The Heaney's House

The Heaney Family's house in Gros Ventre is a big two story house with a wide porch on St. Ignatious Street. A giant cotton wood shades the mowed lawn. Mrs. Heany keeps the house dusted and "doilied." Mr. Heaney, who runs the lumberyard, walks through the door every night at 6:05, and sits down in his rocker to listen to his two-tone Silvertone floor radio every night at 7:00 on the dot.

The North Fork

The North Fork refers to the North Fork of English Creek which runs up the eastern border of the National Park and then turns to cut through Flume Gorge.

The CCC

The Civilian Conservation Corps is a work project put in place by Franklin D. Roosevelt and The New Deal. In response to high unemployment rates following the depression, FDR begins this program which employs, feeds and houses a quarter of a million men between the ages of 18 and 24 who are out of work. The main job of the CCC is the conservation of public lands and, during its time, the CCC constructs 800 National Parks across America. Throughout the book, there are references to the CCC crews doing everything from building trails to fighting forest fires.

The USFS

The United States Forest Service. In the late 19th century, Congress had passed a law that allowed the President of the United States to set aside land for National Forests. These lands had been taken from the public domain and, especially in the West where settlers were still staking out territory, the idea had been met with some opposition. These public lands are the property of all Americans; however, ranchers can lease parts of the forests for grazing and logging companies have leased out portions of the forests for logging. Jick mentions this happening in English Creek during World War II in the campaign, "Let's Deliver the Woods: Sharpen Your Ax to Down the Axis."

Themes

The Individual in Society

Jick is a boy who sees himself as one part of a larger whole. He thinks of himself as one person in a unit of four, his immediate family. He considers himself a member of his community, a Park Ranger's son, a worker on the haying crew, Ray Heaney's best friend, a member of the community of English Creek and a Montana native. He repeatedly seeks out his links to people and tries to identify himself as a part of the groups to which he feels connected. He wants to hear the local history upon which the community life is built. He wants to hear of other people's experiences of youth and reflects on the universality of certain experiences. Just as the name "Jick" suggests, Jick is a boy who can be identified by a suit while still holding an individual place.

Contrasting Jick's attachment to his family and community is Alec's desire for independence. Alec is willing to lose the close relationship of his parents and brother in his desire to become his own man. He takes work from Wendell Williams, the one man who sets himself against the rest of the English Creek community as an outsider who arrives and begins buying up the land from under them. Alec's refusal to attend college is not because he lacks the funds, the ability or even the desire, as Jick tells us. Alec had been eager to get to college only months earlier.

When Alec falls in love with tthe idea of the life he has built for himself, he throws aside all connections to his family of origin in order to take on a life of his own making. In the end, Alec's vision falls apart. The rift he has created with his family never heals, the marriage he has planned never happens, and he never lives to see the dream of owning his own ranch .

Alec's choice of freedom at the cost of such isolation is incomprehensible. Jick is fed spiritually and emotionally by community and his connection to the people around him.

Jick's father actually represents a man somewhere in between Jick and Alec. He can understand Alec's rash choices that have come from the desire to be independent, but Mac also maintains a strong love for his wife and Jick, while retaining friendships with others in the community. His job as ranger, in charge of leasing out the public lands to area ranchers, could be seen as an adversarial role, but Mac is rooted in the community and retains strong relationships with many of its members. Though his friendships and family connections are strong, Mac also values solitude and tends to be most comfortable in self imposed isolation in the woods.

Coming of Age

Jick's memoir of the summer before he turns fifteen shows a boy seeking reason and identity as often a child passing through adolescence will. The reader gets the sense that Jick has always been a particularly reflective child, but now he examines and

reexamines every event and comment for potential hidden meaning. He wonders obsessively about potential repercussions and finds connections between people, events and everything surrounding him.

Becoming more and more aware of his hormones, Jick still cannot understand how women manage to affect men the way in which they do. The loss of reason which women seem able trigger in men to is a frightening idea to Jick.

Childhood is often protected by structure, but growing up requires there be more freedoms, including the freedom to fail. As the protective structure of youth begins to fade, Jick is unsettled by the randomness and illogic he sees as the protection no longer shields him.

Some coming of age tales are about an outside event having a life changing impact on the central character, but Jick's coming of age is a more internal process. Though outside events touch on it, it is the way in which Jick perceives these events and either attempts to accept or reject them which force him to come to terms with the fact that certain things are beyond his or anyone else's control. Whereas Jick begins with a certain confidence that adults can solve all the problems, he begins to culture a desire to take on more of his own problems and struggles to accept that there are some things which no one can fix.

Man's Relationship to the Land

The Montana landscape enters the story immediately, the environment being almost a character itself in the story.

The rural community holds a respect for the land as it is their livelihood. Rain, wind, and insects can all have a major impact on their lives. They watch the skies and read the mountains to follow the progress of seasons. When fire breaks out, there is a communal effort to stop it, since there is a shared memory of the devastation of fires past.

The ranchers in English Creek take their cues from the land and season. They will switch between sheep and cattle and crops of hay to make their living off the small piece of land which is theirs to call home. There is reverence in their relationship to the land shown in modest use and patient hard work.

The characters in contrast to this image include Garland "Good Help" Hebner, and Wendell Williams. Good Help's aversion to hard work translates into an abuse and neglect of the land. Wendell Williamson's unstoppable need to take control of more and more area is seen as covetous and isolates him. His Double W ranch has been nick named "The Gobble Gobble You," and physically Wendell Williamson is described by Jick as a swollen man shaped like a pile of sacks.

The National Parks are a third entity in the equation. Their preservation of the land looks to many in the community as a sort of remoteness. The ranchers have plowed and irrigated the land to make a home out of a wilderness. The National Parks want to

preserve the wilderness for its own sake, and the reverence Jick feels for the beauty of the park around him, as well as his own decision to later become a ranger, reflect a spiritual connection he has with unadulterated nature. When digging an outhouse hole, Jick contemplates deeply on the repercussions of overturning the earth which has never before been disturbed by human hands.

The most devastation occurs when the remote administrators with no connection to the land make sometimes well-intentioned decisions about the forests. There is a clear message through the book that to live on the land or tend to the land, you must be there and connected to the land.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in English Creek is first person. The narrator has temporal distance, telling the story from a point forty years later, but the distance is downplayed by a feeling of immediacy in the voice. He addresses the reader in an intimate confessional tone, letting the reader know his thoughts and questions as they occur to his fourteen-year-old self. He is a limited omniscient narrator, omniscient in that he knows what the future will bring, but limited in that he cannot know the internal thoughts and motivations of the other characters.

The confessional quality is important to the coming of age tale, because it tracks the internal journey which personal growth involves. It is especially important for the character of Jick who has been raised in a time and tradition of children being compliant. He is a polite and helpful boy becoming a polite and helpful young man. His coming of age does not involve a rebellion and the events in his life are not particularly dramatic. The narrator shares his internal dialogue so that the reader can experience the small events with the impact they have on the boy.

In part four, the narrator gives the reader the promised conclusion of the memoir style. By this point in the book, the reader has an intimacy with the narrator. As Jick relays each conclusion, the reader has emotional responses to the facts. The reader now holds Jick's emotional memories attached to these people and it is because of his fourteen-year- old self sharing the joy of a trout fishing tradition that the reader is able to follow Jick's last phone conversation with his father, hear the love between father and son in the banter, and smile to know that as Mac dies there is a tenth brook trout on his hook.

Setting

English Creek is set in and along the Two Medicine National Forest in Northern Montana. The McCaskill family lives at the ranger station, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. The forest covers the foothills and beginning rock cropping of the Rockies. The English Creek District, in which the story is set, surrounds a creek that feeds the line of sheep and cattle ranches built along it. The North Fork of the creek runs into the National Forest.

The year is 1939 and the surrounding ranch families are still trying to rebound from the Great Depression.

Part I takes place at the ranger station, and then in the Two Medicine National Forest as Jick and his father do an annual survey of the land being leased out for grazing.

Part II takes the reader to Gros Ventre which is the nearest town to the ranger station nine miles to the east. It is a typical western small town settled by pioneers in covered wagons. The Fourth of July Picnic is in the public park which is an acre of lawn with a speaker's stump that sits along the creek. The following rodeo takes place across the bridge from the park in the rodeo grounds. In the evening of the Fourth of July a dance is held in the hotel "ballroom" dance hall. The hotel sits across the street from the Medicine Lodge saloon which is heavily decorated with stuffed animal heads mounted on the walls. The hotel and saloon are on the edge of a downtown made up of the usual small town establishments such as a post office, drugstore, barber shop and grocer.

Part III takes the reader to The Reese Ranch. Jick's Uncle Pete and Aunt Marie live on the ranch where Jick's mother grew up. It is where Jick's grandfather raised his work horses and dug irrigation ditches to keep his land lush and green.The acres of wild hay meadows sit along Noon Creek.

Also along Noon Creek is the Double W ranch, which Jick visits in Part III. The Double W has engulfed all the ranches that once sat on the flat stretch of open meadows high above Noon Creek. The sign across its entrance hangs on giant posts over a cattle guard, behind which are "buildings and more buildings," including a two story white house which Jick compares to a governor's mansion.

Part III concludes back in the Two Medicine National Forest, in the section called Flume Gulch. This area, cradled between the slopes of Roman Reef and Rooster Mountain, is a favorite spot of Jick and his father and brother. It has a combination of beauty with woods on one slope, and a grassy meadow stretching up to a dramatic crest of boulders on the other. The creek which runs through the bottom is rich for catching brook trout.

Language and Meaning

The story is told in the voice of Jick McCaskill. His colloquial speech reflects a rural dialect. Each section opens with a quote from the local paper, the Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, which reports in a style remarkably close to Jick's own. Fewer of the younger characters seem to have picked up the same flair for words which Jick shows. His is a style mostly associated with the storytellers and old timers. Jick has absorbed the colloquialisms of men who have spent their lives telling tall tales and legends of the west..

Both Jick's narration and dialogue are filled with colorful metaphors and figures of speech. His style is at times ornate and florid using the word "splendiferous" instead of splendid, for instance, or instead of saying, "I look forward to eating," Jick says, "An imminent meal is my notion of a snug fortune." Hyperbole runs through much of the narrator's words in sentences such as, "A sheepman could have the whole Seventh Cavalry pushing his band along and he'd still seem glad of further help." Hyperbole is a trait greatly associated with the tall tales of the west. Metaphors, similes, and/or synecdoches appear several times on each page, giving the narrator a strong and

distinct personality and humor which drives the reader forward as much, if not more so, than the plot itself.

Raised to seek a metaphor to fit each description has shaped Jick into a boy who loves to examine the meanings and connections in everything he sees. Though his best friend accuses him of thinking "too much," there is familiarity in the way in which Jick over analyzes everything at fourteen which provides both humor and comfort by assuring the reader that adults were once teenagers, full of doubts and questions.

The book is never slowed down by the rich detail of the descriptions. Rather than use a passive list of adjectives, the author gives Jick words which sharpen the image by picking sights, smells, sounds and textures which transport the reader. Both the specificity and the originality of the details used bring the reader right into the place, or allow them to see the face Jick describes. In this sense, the author has a poet's ability to choose just the right part to capture the whole.

Structure

This novel is comprised of four parts. The first three are the memory of Jick's summer before he turns fifteen. The fourth part is an aftermath which summarizes the events of the subsequent forty years. Each of the first three parts is approximately one hundred pages and together they cover the three months of summer . Part I is June of 1939; Part II is July of 1939; and Part III is August of 1939. Part IV is only about seven pages long. The parts are not named, though each is introduced with a different quote from the local newspaper. There are divisions within the parts, but they are only marked by a single line. They usually illustrate a more significant jump forward in time or activity than the simple paragraph breaks which are given an extra space.

The absence of titles keeps a certain formality out of Jick's memoir. The absence of titles reflects Jick's ongoing process of forming an understanding, rather than suggesting he has drawn conclusions.

Though the narrator's story of the summer of 1939 is linear, he often deviates with historical information and personal memories. In addition, the narrator sometimes reminds the reader that the story is being told forty years later. The narrator returns to his own present time, forty years after the summer, in Part IV. Part IV summarizes the story lines of the different characters individually, and so it is several pieces which overlap and parallel one another temporally.

Quotes

Whether substantially the same person would meet you in the mirror if your birth certificate didn't read as it does. Or whether some other place of growing up might have turned you wiser or dumber, more contented or less. (Part I, page 3)

Resemblance isn't necessarily duplication, though, and I see in my mind's eye that there also was the message of that as promptly as my brother and my father were in the same room that evening. (Part I, page 6)

You can mend the place, peg it and splint it and work to strengthen it, and while the surface maybe can be brought to look much as it did before, the deeper vicinity of shatter always remains a spot that has to be favored. (Part I Page 19)

This is part of the pondering I find myself doing now. Whether some other name would have shifted my life any. (Part I, page 58)

Everywhere over there, acre upon acre upon acre, a gray cemetery of snags and stumps. Of death by fire, for the Phantom Woman forest fire had been the one big one in the Two's history except for the blazing summer of 1910. (Part I, page 59)

"I stopped beside my father long enough to see if he was going to offer any explanation, or instruction, or edification, of any damn sort at all. His face, still full of that decision, said he wasn't. All I got from him was: 'Jick, he's worth knowing.'" (Part I, page 64)

. . .how I was supposed to follow events that sprung themselves on me from nowhere. How do you brace for that, whatever age you are? (Part I, page 67)

That wasn't too bad under the circumstances, for the situation called for either hard language or hot tears, and maybe it could be pinpointed that right there I grew out of the bawling age into the cussing one. (Part I, page 85)

"I asked why somebody didn't do something about it. 'That's public domain,' I got told. 'Belongs to the government, not nobody around here.' Damn it to hell, though, when I saw that forest being burned up it just never seemed right to me." (Part I, page 96)

Unearthing the sod was the one part of this task that made me uneasy, and it has taken me these years to realize why. A number of times since, I have been present when sod was broken to become a farmed field. And in each instance, I felt particular emotion of watching that land be cut into furrows for the first time ever—ever; can we even come close to grasping what that means? (Part II, page 107)

"'All this interest of yours in the way things were. I just hope you don't go through life paying attention to the past at the expense of the future. That you don't pass up chances because they're new and unexpected.'" (Part II, page 124)

Not that very many of those people there in the park could be called the human equivalent of flowers, nor that the sum of them amounted to a colossal civil snake. But just the point that there, that day, they seemed to me all distinctly themselves and yet added up together too. (Part II, page 152)

"A silent echo I suppose sounds like a contradiction in terms, yet I swear, this was what my mother was ringing into the air: after every 'sold—foreclosed—gone from here,' the reverberating unspoken fact of that family ranch swallowed by the Double W." (Part II, page 161)

"'I think it could not be more right that we honor in this valley a man who savvied the land and its livelihood, who honored the earth instead of merely coveting it.'" (Part II, page 162)

What travelled to Alec from my father was a stare, a studying one there in the frame of hotel light as if my father was trying to be sure this was the person he thought it was. And got back from Alec one of the identical caliber. (Part II, page 216)

"'The summer when,' I have said my mother ever after called this one. For me, the summer when not even haying turned out as expected. The summer I began I began to wonder if anything ever does." (Part III, page 219)

The example of Stanley bothered me no little bit. If the wanderer's way was as alluring as it seemed from my seat on the scatter rake, how did I account for the eroded look around Stanley Meixell's eyes? (Part III, page 237)

No more enlightened than I when I started. The chronic condition of Jick McCaskill, age fourteen and eleven twelfths years, prospect for a cure debatable. (Part III, page 242)

Even if they were the cattle of the damn Double W, even if it mattered nothing to me that they got out and scattered to Tibet; if you have been brought up in Montana, you close a gate behind you. (Part III, page 260)

So much did my brother want to be on his own in life, he would put up with a bad choice of his own making—endure whatever the Double W heaped on him, if it came to that—rather than give in to somebody else's better plan for him. (Part III, page 274)

"The Alec of the Fourth of July would have cracked 'Fine as frog hair' or 'Dandy as a field of dandelions' or some such. This Alec just said: 'She's okay.'" (Part III, page 275)

Distance and isolation create a freedom of sorts. The space to move in according to your own whims and bents. Yet it was exactly this freedom, this fact that a person was a speck on the earth sea, that must have been too much for some of the settlers. (Part III, page 281)

Alec and his insistence on an independent life. Was it worth the toll he was paying? (Part III, page 281)

The house was empty, yet they were everywhere around me. The feel of them, I mean the accumulation, the remembering, of how life had been when the other three of my family were three, instead of two against one. (Part III, page 295)

With everything in me I yearned that she would see things my way. That she would not automatically tell me I was too young, that she would let me play a part at last, even just as a chaperone, in this summer's stream of events. (Part III, page 297)

I can never—I want never—to forget what went through me then, as I realized that would be happening to my father and his fire crew if they had been in the gorge as the avalanche of fire swooped into it. The air itself must be cooked, down in there.

The expression on my father: I suppose here was my first inkling that a person could do what he thought was right and yet be never comfortable about it. (Part III, pages 327-8)

Up against a decision, my father had chosen the Two country over his friend, his mentor, Stanley.
Up against a decision, my brother had chosen independence over my father.
Rewrite my life into one of those other McCaskill versions and what would I have done in my father's place, or my brother's? Even yet I don't know. I do not know. It may be that there is no knowing until a person is in so hard a place. (Part III, page 328)

My last words with my brother were those on the telephone when I tried to talk him into going to the Flume Gulch fire. I do have a hard time forgiving life for that. (Part IV, page 332)

Marce and I are agreed that we will try whatever we have to in order to hang on to this land. (Part IV, page 334)

Topics for Discussion

When Jick's mother says the past is a taker, not a giver, what does she mean? Though things have been lost in the past, especially in the Depression years just preceding the story's setting, Elsbeth is referring to the damage of reflecting on the past. What is taken away by looking at the past? Can the past also be a giver? If so how?

At the top of page 281, Jick says "Distance and isolation create a freedom of sorts. The space to move in according to your own whims and bents. Yet it was exactly this freedom, this fact that person was a speck on the earth sea, that must have been too much for some of the settlers."

Alec, Stanley, and Wendell Williams are a few characters who display isolation. What kind of freedom do these characters have? Could they have chosen less isolated paths. Why or why not?

What are the relationships that the characters have with the land? What are differences in the way Jick, Mac, Elsbeth, Uncle Pete, Wendell Williamson, and other characters view and interact with the land?

Is the author making a comment about alcohol in characters such as Stanley, Dode and Wisdom Johnson? What are the different ways in which alcohol has intercepted the lives of these men. Why might the author choose to not keep Stanley sober at the end? What sorts of conditions and situations does Jick see alcohol connected to, and does he pass any judgment in his observations?

Jick is between childhood and adolescence. He says his father is in the first generation born to immigrant parents, between the "Old Country" and the new. Jick's own name is the name of a playing card which is neither the best of its suit, nor the worst, but something in between. "The middle" and "between" are recurring themes in the story. Where else are things "between" in the story? What effect does being in the middle have? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Does Jick think it is a good thing or a bad thing?

How do the characters physically reflect their personalities? Does assigning certain physical traits make the characters more symbolic of specific ideas or does it characterize them?

Compare and contrast Jick and Ray's families. Are the families more alike or different, and how much of the friendship between Ray and Jick is based on the similarity or difference? Think of the question in terms of how Mac compares to Ed, Elsbeth to Genevieve, or the little sister as opposed to a big brother? How do the two home environments compare?