

The End of the World as We Know It: Scenes from a Life Study Guide

**The End of the World as We Know It: Scenes from a
Life by Robert Goolrick**

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Plot Summary

"The End of the World as We Know It" is a courageous novel about the struggles of a man who was sexually abused as a child by his father. It portrays a life in the late 1940s and early 1950s that is externally perfect, while that same life is internally disintegrating due to alcoholism and the secrets he held to hide the shame of his family life. It is only as an adult that the author is able to reflect back on his own life to discover that the causes for his own wayward existence lie in his upbringing and in the abuse he endured.

"The End of the World as We Know It" is a story of the dangers of alcohol, the hidden lives of the perfect family in the 40s and 50s, and the horrific consequences of childhood sexual abuse. Robert Goolrick, the author, has spent his entire life miserable, unable to make human connections, to create lasting relationships, or to love other human beings in a long lasting way. Over the course of his life, he has abused drugs, alcohol, and other substances. He has attempted suicide and has mutilated his own body to the point of near death. As the book goes on, readers learn that Goolrick likely learned his alcoholic habits from his parents, who were severely addicted. In addition, readers learn that many of Goolrick's problems stem from the sexual abuse he endured at the hands of his father and due to the mental and emotional abuse handed down by his mother, who witnessed the event and did nothing. For many years, Goolrick felt his parents emotionally and verbally abused and shunned him, due to their feelings of guilt and also in fear that if he told the true story, he could destroy their family. As the alcoholism grew worse, his parents' abuse also worsened, along with their health and mental capabilities. Eventually, both his parents died from complications of alcohol and Goolrick found himself mourning them along with his lost childhood. In the end, Goolrick hopes both to heal himself as well as to save other children the same fate.

"The End of the World as We Know It" is a difficult read, at times humorous and at other times scathingly painful, but always honest and sincere. Goolrick's journey to understand himself and his life through the lens of his abuse is revealing, as it explains many of the effects of sexual abuse on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well being of the victim. Readers are left with the pain of Goolrick's life, but also with a deeper understanding of the power of abuse and the never-ending hope of the human spirit.



Both Now and Forever

Both Now and Forever Summary and Analysis

"The End of the World as We Know It" is a novel about a man's broken life and his eventual search for healing. Robert Goolrick, the author, was sexually molested as a young boy by his father and the novel follows Goolrick's life, both before and after the abuse, to understand the true reasons for Goolrick's misery throughout his existence. The story is painful, sincere, and illuminating, but does shine a harsh light on growing up in America in the 1940s and 1950s.

"Both Now and Forever", Part I, begins with Goolrick's assertion that both his parents passed away from alcoholism and that he himself is also an alcoholic. Both parents were cremated and Father was buried near Mother, in the back yard of the house they lived in much of their lives. The house, Goolrick notes, had gone into disrepair since his father's decline, including an infestation of rats, garbage in the car inside the carport, and plates of food lying all over the floor. His father was a recluse in the end, going to town for books, mail, and fast food only. He would sit in his bed on the main floor so he wouldn't have to walk up the stairs drunk and read his novels, talk to his dog, and drink bourbon. Following Father's death, family and friends came to the house with food and kind words, and while Goolrick admits he was kind to them, he also admits that he hated his father.

On the day of the funeral, Goolrick, extremely hung over, dug the grave in the yard and continued to drink throughout the day, waiting for the funeral. By the time his sister arrived to drive him, he and the other family members had realized the hole was not big enough and so he dug further, staining his funeral attire. At the funeral, Goolrick realized that although he hated his father, he still felt grief for his passing. After the luncheon, the family moved to the yard and Goolrick placed his Father's ashes beside Mother. Along with his sister, he covered the body with dirt and stomped down the grave. Goolrick admits that none of these actions changed anything. He admits now he still completely and totally despised his father.

In Part II, Goolrick explains that his mother was diagnosed with varices, a disease of alcoholics, and spent six weeks in a hospital to recover from her abuse of alcohol before entering rehab for several more months. She told Goolrick her life would never be wonderful again, and he understands her meaning, in that he knows an addict sees their life with the drug as ideal, regardless of how it is in reality. Goolrick knew she was unhappy and miserable, and she soon began drinking again, although in secret. Goolrick recalls telling her that the family knew, but rejecting her when she said she would quit for him, as he knew she had to quit for herself in order to stay sober. Months later, he was visiting the house, and was late for dinner, so they ate without him. After an argument, he took Mother to the back yard, where she fell, scraping her arm. He attempted to patch her up, but in his hurry to leave for a party and in his own drunkenness, he put Icy Hot on her wound. She and Father no longer slept in the same



room, as she would wake at midnight from her drunken haze and play solitaire for hours. He left her alone in her room, with her wound burning in pain.

When Mother was admitted again for varices, Goolrick flew home, as his friend, a doctor, warned him that he had little time before she died. For days, he drove his father, who refused to face her dying, to the hospital each morning. Although her breast cancer had returned, the doctors refused to treat it, knowing she was already dying. Goolrick's sister had difficulty facing Mother's impending death, as she loved her, and his brother delayed coming from Atlanta, as he hated hospitals. Goolrick hoped, each day, that his mother would wake enough from her haze to tell him that everything that happened between his parents and himself was not his fault, but she didn't. After nine days, Goolrick arrived to find that she had lost her mind and was dying. After telling her he loved her and would miss her, he left her to die alone. His father refused to leave his bed for three days following her death. Many people arrived to mourn her and Goolrick, his brother, and his sister were left to entertain them. Goolrick recalls his mother once telling people that she was like Lady Brett Ashley, in that she believed, as Ashley did, that you first destroyed your own life, and then slowly destroyed the lives of those around you. Goolrick mentions that everyone remembered her as witty and bright and not the way she behaved towards the end of her life. He notes that, in his memory, she was both vicious and adoring and that he often did not know where he stood with her.

Following a drunken binge, Goolrick woke the night after the funeral, and found himself crying at the loss of his mother. He sobbed as he moved from room to room in the house and spent the next six months of nights in his New York apartment either drunk, high on cocaine, or both, often sleeping with a variety of men and women he would not recognize the following day. One night, he began playing solitaire and for several months, he would play each night, drunk, until he played the perfect game. He never played it again.

In Part III, Goolrick discusses his aunt Dodo, his father's sister, who was severely mentally retarded and physically handicapped. With the intelligence of a four-year-old, Dodo was the perfect playmate for the children, although she drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes. She lived with her mother, Jinks, and became retarded after contracting Scarlett fever at age two, after which her father, a drunk, never took another drink. Dodo, whose real name was Virginia, loved movie stars, and often wrote them letters, even though she could not actually read or write. Jinks was horribly mean to Goolrick as a child and thus although he adored Dodo, he cared little for his grandmother. With the assistance of a cook, Jinks often served large breakfasts and lunches and spent the rest of the day drinking with Dodo. When Jinks died, Goolrick attended the funeral at the age of fourteen. He and Dodo were outside when she asked him to kiss her, like the movie stars kiss. He refused and the two never spoke of it again, nor does Goolrick recall seeing her alive again. Many years later, he attended her funeral, and as the minister gave the funeral rites for children, Goolrick realized Dodo had a better life than most in his family, as her childlike innocence made her immune to the negativity, hatred, and misery most in Goolrick's family were prone to. He had tried to commit suicide several years before, and as he attended the funeral, he realized Dodo's urges were childlike in nature and not sinister like those of the rest of his family.



Maybe I'm Amazed

Maybe I'm Amazed Summary and Analysis

In "Maybe I'm Amazed," Goolrick discusses his brother's brain aneurysm. Growing up, Goolrick and his brother often played roughly, smashing rocks on one another's heads, and going to Grandma Nell, who they lived with, for bandaging. Goolrick had a strong fondness for Nell, and continues to reside in her home, long after her death. At thirty-five, though, Goolrick's brother was diagnosed with a berry aneurysm. Goolrick flew immediately to Atlanta, even though his brother's wife hated him, because he once told his brother he needed to figure out what to do with his life. Goolrick stayed with his sister-in-law, driving back and forth to the hospital each day, trying to comfort the woman who hated him. His parents flew down also, packing their bourbon, but spent much of the time in the house, expecting Goolrick to transfer news back and forth from the hospital. Goolrick notes that at least they cared enough to come at all. His sister and her husband also arrived, leaving their young daughter with neighbors at home. On the day of the operation, the aneurysm burst, nearly killing Goolrick's brother. The doctor said he would be brain damaged, but would survive. During the night, the neighbors watching the sister's home phoned, and informed them their house had burned down. Everyone was relieved that the phone call was not the hospital. After telling his sister the news, Goolrick drank himself into oblivion and passed out.

In the following days, the surgeon removed parts of Goolrick's brother's frontal lobe to help reduce the damage from brain swelling. Goolrick's parents left and he stayed behind, caring for his brother's pregnant wife, and visiting his brother who was in a coma every day. One night, Goolrick talked to him about scratching his new Paul McCartney album, hoping to get a rise from him. It worked and his brother woke long enough to tell Goolrick to take care of himself as well as everyone else, and to sing a McCartney song. He lapsed back into the coma, but Goolrick had hope. For weeks, he continued to go to Atlanta on the weekends, but he eventually stopped, as he could no longer pretend to get along with his sister-in-law, who was selfish and self-centered. When she finally had the baby, Goolrick's brother came out of the coma, and although he was never the same, he also continued to improve.

It is clear in this chapter that Goolrick's family is severely affected by alcohol, as his parents struggle to even deal with the situation, and refuse to do so without the alcohol they require. It is equally clear that Goolrick takes on the role of caregiver no matter who he is caring for. By this point in the novel, it is apparent that he and his parents do not get along, and that he and his sister in law do not get along, and yet Goolrick continues to cater to and care for these people who are so cruel to him. This, combined with his alcohol addiction, shows Goolrick to accept being a doormat for others, which contributes to his already existing emotional and mental issues later in the novel. This also shows he is capable of care and love, but incapable of self-worth. The comparison between how Goolrick and his brother are treated in this chapter also shows a clear favoring of the brother over Goolrick by the parents.



Burn

Burn Summary and Analysis

In "Burn," Goolrick describes the environment he grew up in during the late 1940s and early 1950s. To Goolrick, the era is represented by hairdos and cocktails, both of which were widely discussed and a major part of each day. The ability of men to make a perfect cocktail was vital during the endless stream of parties held in the neighborhood, and the wittiness and charm of all the guests was as important as their clothing. The people Goolrick remembers lived life as though they were taken out of New Yorker magazines at the time. There were constant cocktail parties and dinner parties, and Goolrick's mother and father dressed and acted as though they had money, as everyone did, even though they did not. Goolrick and his siblings would work at the parties, passing food and drinks, as they listened to the guests talk of their adventurous lives. He recalls one couple who had quiet domestic issues, because of the man's drinking, but notes that most went home before they drank too much to drive. He recalls that everyone smiled a lot and told a lot of jokes, and talked as though they were happy. Goolrick notes that his parents were thought of as witty and charming, as well as loved them for their good looks and high fashion. His mother ate little, in order to keep her figure, and often took the children to the parties to play with neighborhood children. Cocktail hour and dinner hour, Goolrick notes, were the focus of life. The children learned to smoke and drink during this hour.

Mother was, as Goolrick puts it, "publicly elegant but privately slovenly" (pg 67). She wore expensive perfumes, put on makeup, did her hair every day, and wore lovely fashions. Later in life, Goolrick admits, he would buy his mother lovely clothing to try to make her happy, although neither of his parents ever showed any gratitude toward him for anything. He admits that his family was miserable, bitter, and depressed, and that the facade fell away when the dinner guests went home. He knows now they were poor, as were the other people in the neighborhood, but they all acted wealthy and talented. When they ran out of money, they would ask one another for a loan for bourbon until the next payday.

Goolrick realizes everything was about perfection and that anything imperfect was cast off. He recalls his mother burning a small hole in a dress and immediately coming home to change because she could no longer wear the dress. It wasn't perfect anymore. Goolrick knows something happened that evening, perhaps a fight, as he notes they fought often, viciously. They pointed out one another's failures, and they were both miserably unhappy. Goolrick attempted, often, to buy them things to make them happy, including a house, but always failed as they rarely even said thank you. Even close friends eventually began to see through the veil of happiness and charm.

Goolrick knows his mother was good to them, but also remembers extreme cruelty. When Goolrick wrote his first novel, which contained touching scenes of happiness from his childhood, his mother was furious, as there was an unwritten law that no one spoke



of the family at all outside the family. His father often berated him, even though Goolrick was highly intelligent, winning several fellowships, and even though he paid for his own education. Goolrick came home one Christmas and saw that his parents were falling apart. Their thin veil of perfection had given way and they could no longer pretend to be who they once were. As a young man, Goolrick remembers his mother always asking, after he came home "Did you talk about us?" That Christmas when his parents berated him for hours about his novel, Goolrick realized that the era of his parents was dead, and that they were old and no longer witty and charming. He saw that their secret lives of misery had come to the surface, as had the secret lives of all the others of their generation. His mother accused him of writing the novel simply because he was wicked and as she went to bed, he could smell her, unwashed, dirty, and anguished. His father ignored him and as he drove out to the country to think, he realized that his life was never happy.

Playing the Zone

Playing the Zone Summary and Analysis

In "Playing the Zone," Goolrick discusses his time in a mental hospital. He notes that there were two wings, one for alcoholics and drug addicts and the other for the mentally insane. He was in the mental wing, after spending months severely cutting himself. He was also addicted to Afrin. He gained weight while in the hospital, and went through several therapy sessions a day, where he discussed his painful life. The only other thing he did, he now recalls, was participate in gym, where they were led through calisthenics and forced to play the drunks and drug addicts in volleyball. They were mean, aggressive, well built, and always beat the mental patients without a single point against them. When a young man came to the ward who was severely depressed, the others found themselves filled with a pity for the man that they were unable to feel for themselves. Goolrick himself believed he suffered more than the others, because their issue was a lack of pain, whereas his was an abundance of pain. One patient was a psychiatrist who had attempted suicide several times, and it was she who devised a plan to beat the addicts at volleyball. She pointed out that the addicts played for themselves, not as a team, and thus, wherever the ball was placed, the entire team went to get it. To win, they just needed to play the entire court. Following her directions, the mental patients solidly defeat the addicts, and never lost to them again. Goolrick recognizes that this single victory did not solve their problems, and that they continued to live miserable lives, unable to cope with their unique pain and sufferings. He notes that anyone can become unstable and that the difference between the unstable and the stable is sometimes vague. However, he notes, at least they won the volleyball game.



The Summer of Our Suicides

The Summer of Our Suicides Summary and Analysis

In "Summer of Our Suicides," Goolrick discusses his suicidal tendencies and his cutting behaviors. On his thirty-fourth birthday, Goolrick had decided that he would commit suicide in a year, if his life did not improve. On the night of his thirty fifth birthday, he slit his wrists, recognizing the clarity that comes with bleeding to death. He had written notes to loved ones, including a note to a bookie friend who had loaned him money. The bookie, too, had attempted suicide earlier in the year. He had gone to a hotel room, turned up the air conditioning, and slit his wrists to the point of severing nerves, and when that wasn't enough, he slit his throat. He did not die, however, and when he was discovered, he was hospitalized in a mental institution, where Goolrick went to see him. Drugged and dazed, the bookie noted that he was simply tired of his mundane life. The bookie was generous and caring, but simply felt his life was too dull to continue. For months, Goolrick went to see him, thinking perhaps his own suicide could be avoided, and he watched as the bookie became a zombie. Instead, Goolrick began to see his friend as a symbol of a way of out his own pain and suffering. The bookie began shock therapy treatments and slipped further into mental illness as Goolrick began to carry a razor blade, promising himself he would use it when the cardboard slipped off the blade. As he neared his own death, Goolrick found a tenderness for the world he had lost, but this tenderness made him only happier to leave the world behind. He realized he had never been happy, and had wanted to die since he was twelve years old. He was miserable his entire life, and never knew love or affection. Having begun to drink heavily at thirty-one to cope with his life, Goolrick realized he hated himself.

He was, at the time, ending simultaneous affairs, one with a married man and one with a woman. The woman wanted a baby in two years while the man wanted a lover without a permanent commitment. Goolrick loved both individuals deeply, but he also knew his love was never enough for either of them. With the woman, Goolrick knew he was, in a sense, making love to himself through her in a way that celebrated his own masculinity. With the man, he was making love to the man he wished he could be. When he broke up with both simultaneously, he began drinking a liter of gin a day, doing cocaine, and having random intercourse with strangers. He has never, since that time, woken up with someone he loved, nor kissed someone goodnight.

Three years later, he knew, as his birthday loomed, that he had no choice but to commit suicide. He had hallucinations of someone holding his skin taunt as he slit his wrist, only realizing later that the hand belonged to his father. On the morning of his birthday, he saw a psychiatrist, to no avail. After dinner with friends, he slit his wrists, only to watch the blood glisten on his skin. After an hour, he bandaged his cuts and went to sleep. This cutting continued for months, with Goolrick feeling relieved with each deep wound, each hour of endless bleeding. He began cutting at work, in taxis, while on dates, sometimes so deeply he had to ice the wound to avoid needing to go to a hospital. Bloodstains littered his apartment, as he neglected to clean for weeks. One night, a



psychotherapist friend called from Kentucky, and Goolrick told her everything. She convinced him to come down and enter a mental hospital, and although Goolrick knew he wanted to die, he also knew the woman had saved his life. His brother was supportive, although he did not want to know the details, while his mother was accusatory. When he left, his doctors told him to avoid alcohol and his old apartment, neither of which he did. He continued to carry a blade in his pocket and admits that, just two weeks before the novel was released, he cut himself again.



Butter Day

Butter Day Summary and Analysis

In "Butter Day," Goolrick describes the school environment he participated in as a child. In kindergarten and first grade, Goolrick and others went to a one-woman school, run by Mrs. Lackman. Mrs. Lackman was abusive, in that she would not allow children to use the bathroom, and then would make fun of them for wetting themselves. One young boy in Goolrick's class was tormented each day, as she made him sit in a high chair for being a "baby" while she continued not to allow him access to a bathroom. Goolrick's brother claimed to be taught to read in one day at Mrs. Lackman's school, but Goolrick knows his brother often pretended not to know how to do something until he could do it perfectly.

Lackman had a son as well, but he was schizophrenic and was often closed upstairs where he wouldn't hurt anyone. Twice a year, the class put on pageants with the best looking and brightest children always getting the lead parts. During one pageant, Goolrick notes, his father participated, and Goolrick was proud of him, able to momentarily forget his hatred and disgust at the man. Goolrick recalls playing several parts in the May Pageants, but he notes that his memories of childhood are blurry with vague images that are incomplete.

Once a year, however, the children had Butter Day. They came to school with a pint of cream and sat in Mrs. Lackman's kitchen. Mason jars were filled with the cream, lidded, and given to the children to shake. After a time, the cream would separate, and Mrs. Lackman would remove from each jar a small pat of butter. The children were given two crackers smeared with the fresh butter, and they were thrilled at the result of their efforts. The rest would go into Mrs. Lackman's freezer, and Goolrick notes that he now understands the real point of butter day was for Mrs. Lackman to retain free butter. Goolrick notes that they got through the harassment, and that public school in second grade seemed boring in comparison.

Several times throughout the chapter Goolrick makes it clear that the point of this inclusion in his book is to show that his disastrous life was not only a product of his family, but also a product of the times, where teachers such as Mrs. Lackman were able to emotionally and verbally abuse children without care or concern for authority. Being subjected to such an environment clearly left its mark on Goolrick and the other children and shows the effects such abuse can have on people.



He Was So Fat

He Was So Fat Summary and Analysis

In "He Was So Fat," Goolrick discusses bullies that he encountered as a child. The family often charged goods and services in town, and when Goolrick or his siblings wanted something, they claimed to need it for school, and were sent to town to charge it. Goolrick set out one Saturday to town, a two-mile walk by the erotic stream, where a boy found an endless sea of beer bottles, condoms, and other objects. Goolrick notes that while his siblings were given bicycles, his parents never purchased one for him, so he was left to walk.

On the way to town, Goolrick met up with five boys from school who began to harass him, claiming he said something crude to one of them the previous week. Goolrick was unafraid at first, believing the boys to just be stupid and uneducated, and not dangerous. However, when they began to threaten him, Goolrick knew the boys didn't know he was as poor as they were, as unhappy as they were, and he began to be afraid. When the leader of the group pulled a switchblade, Goolrick realized he was far smaller than the group as the leader was very heavy. Goolrick had been hoping to go into town to buy something new, something impressive, something he felt would change his life, but he realized at that moment that boys such as this would never care about such objects. When the leader threatened to cut off his ear, however, Goolrick feigned bravery by telling him he doubted his sincerity. The leader placed the switchblade to Goolrick's ear, but at that moment, a group of Girl Scouts singing crested the hill, and the boys walked away. Goolrick made it to town, purchased the item, and called his mother for a ride. He notes that the boys never spoke to him again, but that the item he purchased didn't matter, either, as it didn't change anything. He knows he has spent his entire life looking for the thing that will change him, make him whole, make him who he wants to be, and he has yet to find it. He notes that he is still miserable and that he knows he will never be really happy.



How I Went On

How I Went On Summary and Analysis

In "How I Went On," Goolrick asks how his family went on, knowing their terrible secret. He wonders how his grandmother went on, even after he had told her what happened, and how his family always believed he was insane as a result of not being able to deal with normal life, not knowing his own secret. He wonders how his parents ate each day, pretended to be normal and happy, how they prepared for parties and told jokes. He asks how his parents continued to teach them things like how to make snow angels, or how his father continued to be pampered, with his mother always cleaning up after him. He asks himself how they continued to go on family vacations, hold birthday parties, help them with homework, and how they sent his siblings to dancing school but left him behind. He wonders how they listened to his made up stories of his real parents, who lost him one day. He asks how they sent him to Washington to receive a medal on behalf of his Grandfather.

Goolrick questions how they continued to garden, continued to care for sick children with love and compassion, how they tolerated the endlessly dying pets, the letters to Santa, and the Thanksgiving dinners. He asks how they continued the fights, and how they made love "in the bed in which it happened" (pg. 150). He wonders how they could listen to him tell them of the time he was thrown out of his friends house after being told his family acted as if they were too good for everyone, all because he was late for a sleep over because his father refused to interrupt cocktail hour to drive him over. He wonders how they lived these pretend lives they made, over and over, how they made gifts for friends because they couldn't afford to buy any. He questions how they continued to wear their fashions, how they could call him into a cocktail party to laugh at his Adam's apple, and how they could continue to slowly fall apart as they aged. He wonders how they tried to continue to be good parents, and continued to try, long after their friends had left them. He asks himself how much they remembered, and how much they forgot. He questions at the end of the chapter, how they continued to celebrate his achievements without congratulating him, and how they became so pathetic that they no longer dressed or took care of themselves, or stopped themselves from alcoholism and disease and filth. He notes that he knows how he went on, but that he can never understand how they went on, knowing what they knew.

Although Goolrick never says it in this chapter, it is clear that he is discussing the family secret that has ruined not only his life, but the life of his parents, and their relationship with him. This chapter reveals much about Goolrick's life, and how he was treated by his parents, and it foreshadows the revealing of the family secret that has caused Goolrick such immense pain.



The Cowboy Sandwich and Such Charming Hands

The Cowboy Sandwich and Such Charming Hands Summary and Analysis

"The Cowboy Sandwich" discusses Goolrick's brother and their lives together as children. Goolrick notes they used to play in cowboy costumes, loving their role playing. The loved the swagger and the manliness, and the act of being an outlaw. One day at lunch, Goolrick's brother refused to eat unless Mother said "Eat your lunch, cowboy". She refused, and the two began an afternoon long battle. Mother was already on tranquilizers by then, or Goolrick believes she would have strangled him. He notes that mother's in that era had things rough, as they had to make perfection from nothing, and had to deal with boys who had wild ideas from movies. Goolrick doesn't remember how the standoff ended, but he does know that life went on. Years later, Goolrick's brother was kicked out of college, after months of failing to attend class and spending much of his time drinking or sitting on his bed. Goolrick suggested a psychiatrist, but the family balked, noting that they didn't discuss issues with other people. When his mother discussed the issue with brother, he noted that it all started when she refused to call him cowboy, and the two laughed heartily. Goolrick notes this is the way they handled issues in the family, by either ignoring them, or shifting their direction so that reality no longer mattered.

In "Such Charming Hands," readers finally learn the secret that has plagued Goolrick throughout the novel. When he was four years old, in 1952, Goolrick's father sexually molested him after a drunken party. It was the night before his aunt's wedding, and there had been a party, so Goolrick was sleeping in his parents bed. He awoke to find his father's hands, admired as being beautiful, running over him lightly, tickling him. His hands continued to tickle him, wandering under his pajamas and over his small nipples. His other hand began to play with Goolrick's mouth and tongue, and Goolrick was still giggling. Soon, however, the hand inside his mouth pushed deeper, muzzling him, while his father penetrated him. Goolrick recalls his father was moaning, and that he could smell the bourbon on his breath. He recalls his father was handsome, and that everyone admired his good looks, and he can remember enjoying his father's touch, before the molestation. Years later, he knows he cuts himself because pain and suffering are the first sensual experiences he knows, at the hands of his father. He knows that he can never enjoy human touch, because of his molestation. Loving hands, to him, mean cruelty and anguish.

Goolrick struggled, but to no avail, and he cried out but the hand in his mouth prevented anyone from hearing. Goolrick watched as his mother woke up, and saw what was happening. She cried out and hit Goolrick's father once. Father released him, and went to the bathroom to clean up while his mother watched silently as Goolrick pulled up his



pajamas. She did nothing but rolled over and went back to sleep. His father returned, and was immediately asleep as Goolrick spent the rest of the night avoiding his touch.

Goolrick knows that nothing was ever the same again. He could never again be touched by a human being without revulsion, and he knows his parents were equally affected, although in different ways. Goolrick's entire life was ruined as the next morning, there was blood and Goolrick began to fear that part of his body. Goolrick told his grandmother the following day, who simply told him never to tell anyone, because bad things would happen to the family. On the way to the wedding, Father pulled over and vomited and Mother always said he had a hangover. Goolrick admits that he thinks the molestation happened again, but that he thinks his siblings were spared. He knows he went on, pretending to be happy, as his parents were always afraid he would tell and they treated him like a disease because of it. They hated him for his knowledge, and for his power to destroy them.

For the rest of his life, Goolrick is plagued with fears that he has a sexual disease, and he is tormented by the event. Even in telling his lover about the rape, he finds there is no relief. He has lived alone for most of his life, has never married, or had children, and he blames all of this on the molestation by his father, the neglect to act on the part of his mother, and their resulting lifetime of hatred and brutality as a result of their guilt.



The End of the World As We Know It

The End of the World As We Know It Summary and Analysis

In "The End of the World As We Know It," Goolrick admits that he thinks it wasn't just the molestation, but what happened afterward, that caused his lifelong anguish. He told his mother, in the following days, that he was bleeding when he defecated, and his mother made him take down his pants in front of her friend, a nurse, so she could "diagnose" the problem, which was likely "something he ate". When he started first grade, his mother told him to make sure that he liked girls more than boys and Goolrick interprets that as his mother's way of saying he was a whore who let adult men make love to him. Goolrick notes his father never physically touched him again, in terms of passing gestures of parenting.

When he was ten, he watched a friend of his brother's masturbate and later tried it at home. He never saw his parents naked and so the young man was beautiful to Goolrick, and he knew he wanted that pleasure, to know that feeling of happiness. He recognizes now that it was his way to stop pretending to be a child, to stop pretending to be happy with himself. For the moment, when he masturbated, he could be himself. He began to masturbate often and noticed a small deposit of white fluid under the skin of his penis. He began to fantasize that he was dying that his father had given him a disease that would with a single touch, kill others as well. He began to squeeze the white spot, only to have boils develop, and he began to associate pain and pleasure. In his dreams, his testicles were rotten and worms could be pulled from his body. And still he would masturbate, often in pain as he orgasmed. He began to hope for death. As he matured and came into puberty, his body did not develop as he wanted it to, and he longed to look like the boy by the river who taught him to masturbate. He began to hate himself more as he grew less and less like he wanted to be.

As a young adult, Goolrick and Roy, a beautiful young man down the road, became friends. Roy was popular with the girls, and one day, he was wishing he could practice making love as he and Goolrick and Goolrick's brother lay in the forest. Goolrick pulled down his pants, and offered to practice. Roy orgasmed inside him as his brother watched, and they never discussed it. Goolrick went on to imagine his children as deformed monsters, and his lovers as dying corpses. One day, he touched his sister's friend on the hand, came, and ran away, fearing he had killed her. When he was thirteen, a young girl a year older befriends him, and the two make love in a field. He tells his brother and his friend, and they don't believe him. The following day, they force him to make love to her again as they watch.

In high school, Goolrick falls in love with a twenty-one-year-old heterosexual who tells him he loves him. Their relationship is sensual and erotic without being physical, and Goolrick knows it was one of the most important in his life, as he felt love without the fear and pain of sexual relations. He was the man Goolrick would never be, and he



believes that if he could have, for just a moment, been that man, his entire life would have been different. Their relationship changed when one night, the man asked Goolrick to drive him to the airport to pick up a friend, and the car broke down. Goolrick's father refused to come get him, and they were forced to take a bus. When he arrived home, his parents endlessly berated him, until finally his mother asked if he was sleeping with the man, and threatened to put him in a mental institution, and have the man arrested. The following day, Goolrick left for college, and his mother befriended the same young man as Goolrick went on with his life.



A Persistence of Song

A Persistence of Song Summary and Analysis

In "A Persistence of Song," Goolrick recognizes that even when bad things happen in a life, good things continue to happen as well. He knows that his life has had positive moments, and that, at one time, he adored his parents. He recognizes his own want and need for love and companionship, and he knows he feels the loss of his parents. Goolrick also understands that all people want to be what they are not, that they want to be someone else.

He points out that his mother was a kind woman and that she did care for him, as much as she could. He also understands that his father was not a monster. But on that night, both his mother and his father took into themselves a fear, a hatred, and a shame that no time and no amount of liquor could ever solve. Their thin veil of perfection shattered, and their lives fell apart. That night, too, Goolrick lost his soul, and with it, his future of happiness and joy. Although he understands that his father did not mean to take away his childhood, he recognizes that this happens every day, to millions of children. He also understands that because his parents couldn't love him, he sought love for the rest of his life, in any way imaginable.

He admits that he is afraid to tell this story and that he has not told his family prior to the book. He tells it, he says, in the hopes that he can save one small boy or girl from the same fate, that he can serve as a warning for one parent not to touch their child. He hopes that at least one person can avoid the pain and fear of intimacy, and the anguish of a lack of love, as a result of their molestation. Goolrick imagines a world where everything is sensual and beautiful, and he thinks he missed this world because of his pain. He lists the medications he takes each day just to survive his depression and suffering, and it is lengthy. He makes a point to note that he tells his story, in part, so those he loves will know that he didn't mess up his life because he was in a bad mood, and because he has lied throughout his life, and he wants to explain why. He wants people to understand. At the end of the novel, he apologizes, as he knows that watching his pain is difficult, but he reassures readers by noting that he does believe in the persistence of song, that there is a beauty to any life that does not fade, regardless of circumstances.



Characters

Robert Goolrick

The author of the book, Robert Goolrick, is the primary person within the novel, as he is both the author and the subject of this memoir. Goolrick is a highly depressed and extremely dysfunctional individual who has spent his entire life trying to overcome or hide from the abuse and molestation he received from his mother and father. Goolrick, as a four-year-old boy, was molested in the night by his father and although his mother woke up long enough to stop the rape, she did nothing in response. This episode, along with the resulting abuse heaped on Goolrick by his mother and father, led him to very deep feelings of self-rejection, self-hatred, and problems with self-worth. His sexuality morphed into dysfunction as well, as shown by his feelings that he is diseased, and that any sexual contact with others can only result in their death. Goolrick imagined worms inside his body, particularly in his sexual organs, and he experimented early in masturbation and homosexuality. His sexual relations have been numerous, but were mainly one-night stands with few meaningful relationships. Like his parents, Goolrick sought to overcome his depression through alcohol, only to find the alcohol causing even more problems but not being enough to take away his inner pain. Finally, Goolrick resorted to suicide, only to find some relief in self-mutilation. Finally, after a lifetime of suffering, Goolrick is able to find treatment, and write his memoir. He claims to do this not only to help himself heal, but also perhaps to help save other children from the same fate. Goolrick points out that he wants his family and friends to understand what has happened to him, so that they understand his dysfunctional life is not entirely a product of his own choosing.

Father

Goolrick's father, who remains unnamed in the book, is the perpetrator of the molestation against Goolrick. When Goolrick was four, his father, in a drunken moment, molested him while they slept in the same bed following a party. Father was a severe alcoholic and probably was abusive to Goolrick's mother, as well. Goolrick's father came from an alcoholic family, where his own father was often drunk and abusive. A professor at a local college, Goolrick's father was well educated, but also found it necessary to pay attention to what others thought. Much of what he did day to day at the frequent neighborhood parties was influenced by those around him. As his drinking progressed, and after the death of his wife, Father became increasingly home-bound, venturing out only for groceries and fast food. Goolrick continued to care for his father, although he now admits he hated him.

Father's behaviors throughout the novel are all clearly a direct result of his alcoholism, but it is unclear whether alcohol was entirely to blame for his behavior during the molestation. Goolrick admits he thinks it happened more than once, although he cannot recall it and the constant fear in the house about Goolrick's own sexuality as he grew



older suggests that there are deep questions within Father about his own. The fact that Goolrick does not believe the abuse happened to his brother or his sister does imply, however, that alcohol certainly played a role. Throughout the rest of their lives, Goolrick notes, Father feared him and abused him verbally, mentally, and emotionally as a result of the fear of his secret. When Father died, Goolrick not only felt relief, but also sorrow and grief.

Mother

Goolrick's mother, who also remains unnamed in the novel, was abusive as well to Goolrick throughout his life. Mother was an alcoholic, who cared greatly about how she, her home, and her family appeared to others, but who was also wildly depressed, and miserable. She was vain and liked to appear wealthy and in fashion, even though she and her husband were not. She was the perfect homemaker on the outside, even though she often passed out drunk at night, after the party guests went home. She continued to abuse alcohol throughout her life, eventually dying from varices, caused by alcohol abuse.

Mother awoke during the molestation of Goolrick by his father and screamed Father's name, slapped him. In effect, she did make Father stop. However, as Father got up to use the restroom afterward, Mother only watched as her four-year-old son pulled up his pants and cried. She did nothing to assist him and nothing in the following days to acknowledge the horrific event. From that point forward, however, Goolrick notes that she too was verbally, emotionally, and mentally abusive and that she treated him very differently from his siblings. It was Mother who later accused Goolrick of being homosexual, likely showing her own fears about her husband. It was Mother who constantly berated him, whereas Father's abuse was more silent. In his own way, Goolrick eventually had his vengeance, as he left her alone to die, but he admits that her treatment of him, and her unwillingness to confront what had happened, made him as angry with her as he was with Father.

Brother

Goolrick's brother is another character in the book. He is mentioned several times in the novel in relation to Goolrick's memories of childhood, and the memories are generally happy, showing that Brother was a part of Goolrick's minimal moments of a normal childhood. Brother keeps his distance from the family as an adult, as he lives in Atlanta, and he doesn't visit often. Goolrick admits that Brother often discussed the abusive nature of his family. Goolrick, for many years, pestered Brother to do something with this life, as he appeared to be a constant slacker, although his parents always seemed to support him. This difference between his relationship with his parents and Goolrick's simply shows the power the molestation had over the rest of Goolrick's life. At thirty-five, Brother discovered he had a berry aneurysm and was operated on. The surgery was a disaster and the surgeon told the family Brother would die. Hours later, the surgeon told them Brother had massive brain damage, but would likely live. Still later, pieces of his



brain are removed to lessen the swelling and Brother eventually recovers well. Throughout the ordeal, Goolrick's parents are staying at Brother's home with his pregnant wife, drinking bourbon and listening as Goolrick runs news back and forth from the hospital. While he is not a principal character, Brother does serve to show the vast difference in family relationships, as well as to show the inadequacies of the parents in the family.

Sister

Sister is another character in the novel that shows how different Mother and Father treat their other children. Sister is a loving woman, who cared for Father as he neared his death. Her relationship with her parents appeared to be better than that of the relationship between them and the boys, suggesting that their relations with the boys were strained by the abuse by Father. Sister lived nearby and seemed to genuinely care for her parents as well as her siblings. Sister also goes to Atlanta when her brother has surgery for his aneurysm, showing her concern. While there, her house is set on fire and she and her husband lose all their belongings. Sister's character in the book represents the lighter side of the family relations.

Dodo

Aunt Dodo is Goolrick's severely retarded and deformed aunt, the sister of Goolrick's father. With a mental age of about four, Dodo's real name is Virginia, and she lives most of her life with her mother and father. She dresses like a child, but also chain smokes, and drinks wine most of the day. Goolrick admits they loved to play with Dodo as children as she was strange and fun to be around, because she had a mind like theirs. Dodo has a crush on Frank Sinatra, and often writes him letters, even though she cannot actually write. One evening, as she and Goolrick, fourteen, are sitting watching the stars, she asks him to kiss her, and then attempts to pull him to her passionately. He pulls away, and nothing is ever said about it again. Many many years later, Goolrick attends her funeral, and finds himself crying as the minister says the prayer of children, realizing Dodo was never more than a child. Goolrick, at that moment, realizes that Dodo, in her childlike wonder, was better off than most of them, who lived lives of extreme unhappiness and anguish.

High School Lover

In high school, Goolrick meets a twenty-one-year-old artist and falls in love with him. Although their relationship is secretive, Goolrick does recognize that his love for the older man was one of the only times he was truly in love with someone. The artist was a beautiful man and one who loved to possess women. When he kisses Goolrick on the head one evening and tells him he loves him, Goolrick is both shamed as well as deeply in love. Goolrick now believes this man was what he himself could never become, and if he could, Goolrick thinks, his entire life would have been different. The man was self-



assured, as well as self-absorbed and happy. Although nothing happened sexually between the two of them, Goolrick's relationship with the man sets the bar for relationships throughout his life.

Married Lover

Goolrick takes on another lover in the book, this time during his stay in Greece, although the affair continued for five years. The man was married to a wonderful woman whom Goolrick knew. She was not aware of the affair, although she suspected. His relationship with the man was the strongest he can recall in terms of love and sexuality, and it was with this man that he felt the safest and the most comfortable. However, Goolrick does note now that, again, he knows he was, in part, making love to the man he wanted to be. He was handsome, successful, had a seemingly happy marriage and a good career. While he cared for Goolrick, he also made sure Goolrick knew he was not the primary person in his life. This relationship, one of the happiest of Goolrick's life, ended when Goolrick was dragged into the divorce of the man and his wife, and Goolrick now regrets his decision to leave the man behind.

Female Lover

In addition to the married lover, Goolrick also had a female lover at the same time. The female lover was passionate, but also knew what she wanted, and warned him from the outset that she wanted a child within two years. Goolrick made no commitments, but the two did move in together. Goolrick enjoys his relationship with the woman, in part, because he knows he is essentially celebrating that part of him that is male, essentially making love to himself through her body. Goolrick admits he loved her, but that her need for a deeper love than he could give ended their relationship two years later. The female lover was the last, along with the married male lover, of Goolrick's long term relationships, as he never again allowed someone to become so close to him.

The Bookie

In the book, Goolrick has a good friend, the bookie, who attempts suicide just a few months prior to Goolrick's own attempt. The bookie is a nice man, married with a small child, but he also has a secret life of drugs and homosexuality. At the time of his suicide, he claims he simply cannot take the mediocrity of his life. Goolrick goes to see him in the insane asylum each day, and returns to his apartment at night to cut himself, sometimes deep enough to pass out. The bookie is allowed, finally, to leave the asylum, but finds he cannot tolerate the outside world anymore. Shortly thereafter, Goolrick checks himself in for treatment. The bookie in the novel is one of the only friends Goolrick has and it is clear he is extremely unstable. This again shows Goolrick's own inability to form lasting and positive relationships.



Objects/Places

Varices

Varices is a disease of the liver where it can no longer process alcohol. As a result, there is a backup of blood into the throat and stomach, where it causes anemia.

Dementia

Dementia is a condition where the ill individual begins to forget things, people, and places and has difficulty communicating with others.

Berry Aneurysm

A berry aneurysm is a congenital weakness of a blood vessel in the brain, which can rupture, causing death.

Alcoholism

Alcoholism is a disease in which a person is physically, mentally, and emotionally addicted to alcohol. Goolrick's mother and father were both alcoholics. Goolrick also is an alcoholic.

Pousse-Cafe

A pousse-cafe is a mixture of liquors that do not blend well due to density, thereby making a rainbow of alcohol.

Anhedonia

Anhedonia is the inability to experience pleasure.

Cutting

Cutting is a form of self-mutilation that involves the cutter using sharp instruments on his or her body in an effort to release pent up pain, suffering, anger, or aggression.



Electroshock Treatment

Electroshock treatment is a psychological treatment where seizure is induced in the patient using electricity pulsed through the brain.

Masochist

A masochist is a person whose sexual pleasure is often derived from suffering, pain, and humiliation.

Butter Day

In the book, Butter Day is a day when young kids bring heavy cream to school where their teacher teaches the children to make butter.



Themes

Child Sexual Abuse / Sexual Dysfunction

One of the primary themes of the novel is childhood sexual abuse, and the disastrous effects of that abuse on the victims, including the sexual dysfunction that can occur subsequently. Goolrick reveals that he is bisexual, enjoying sex with both men and women, but he freely admits he has never really had a true relationship with another person that went beyond the physical. He has had a few lovers he believes he did love, but even those were never relationships that were adult in content or in nature. From an early age, Goolrick masturbated several times a day, but often with strange or disruptive fantasies, and he notes that with orgasm often came a tremendous amount of pain. He tells readers of vast numbers of sexual encounters with strangers, both men and women, all of which leave Goolrick both sexually and emotionally empty. In his teens, Goolrick fantasized that he was diseased and that any sexual contact with anyone would kill them, since he was so diseased himself. As a result, he mentions several missed opportunities for love and affection. As an adult, Goolrick reveals he suffers alcohol addiction, depression, and has several times either attempted suicide or cut into himself as a way to relieve his inner anger.

His revelation at the end of the novel, that his father sexually molested him at an early age and that his mother saw the episode and did nothing, helps explain these behaviors. In addition, the abuse also explains Goolrick's inabilities to form lasting relationships, as well as his varied sexual encounters. The feeling of shame stemming from his father's abuse has left Goolrick in a state where he hates himself and believes he is not worth love and affection. The knowledge that his mother knew of the abuse but did nothing serves to deepen these feelings. Goolrick reveals his belief that his entire life and all of his dysfunctions are likely caused as a direct result of his father's sexual abuse of him. However, it is clear that Goolrick's childhood was filled with both verbal and mental abuse from both his parents, which are likely causes for some of his issues as well, but the sexual abuse by his father left a lasting open wound that Goolrick has carried with him throughout his life. Goolrick's entire point of writing the novel, in fact, is to save other children from the same fate, and the reader is left to hope that by writing his story, Goolrick is able to heal himself, as well.

Family Dysfunction

Another theme in the novel is that of family dysfunction. Goolrick's parents are severe alcoholics from Goolrick's very early memory. His parents often held parties or went to parties during his youth and the children were left primarily to fend for themselves. His family was not wealthy, but they were well enough off to care about how things, including themselves, looked in the eyes of others. The children were merely dolls presented to the public as artifacts of a life well achieved. In this type of life, his parents easily fell into alcoholism, which progressively worsened over time. Goolrick believes



that his parents did not get along well in reality, but that they hid their true feelings behind their constant smiles and stories of their good life together. Goolrick knows his family was not unique in their dysfunctions and that many other children of his age had similar problems.

However, Goolrick also knows that this constant need to have the approval of others is the reason his own abuse was overlooked, and why his family eventually fell apart. Goolrick is aware that the great secret of his mother witnesses his father sexually molesting him, put a tear in the carefully woven story of their lives and they were unable to merely overlook it. Goolrick became the enemy to his parents, because they couldn't bear to look at themselves in the harsh light that his abuse shone onto them. His parent's abuse of him grew exponentially as their alcoholism deepened, and eventually Goolrick was alienated. Although his parents cared for him in some way and he loved them, they could never again be a family because of the secret they held.

Alcoholism

The theme of alcoholism is a primary theme in the novel and the root cause of several events. Goolrick's parents were clearly alcoholics throughout his childhood and even late into their lives. His father's molestation of him, in fact, was likely partially a result of alcohol, although it is possible the event would have occurred without alcohol. In addition, countless other incidents in Goolrick's life were caused by alcohol abuse. He remembers his entire childhood with alcohol constantly in either the background or the foreground with endless neighborhood parties and cocktails. He can recall drunken arguments, his mother's own deterioration as alcohol killed her body, and his father's refusal to deal with his own issues, choosing instead to drink. His parents' relationship was marred by alcohol abuse and both his parents eventually perished from the disease.

Goolrick himself uses alcohol to hide from his problems and became a raging alcoholic for many years of his life as well. He blames alcohol for his horrible treatment of his mother, although it is more likely that Goolrick's own anger with her for betraying him as she let his father rape him are likely culprits, as well. Alcohol helps numb him enough to cut himself, to attempt suicide, and even to bury his father and mother, when the time comes. However, in the end, Goolrick does realize that his and his parents's abuse of alcohol is likely just as much a cause of their dysfunction as a symptom.



Style

Perspective

This memoir is written in the first-person narrative point of view of the author, Robert Goolrick. This perspective is vital to the story, as the writer explains his own heartache, pain, and suffering as a result of an abusive childhood endured under the control of alcoholic parents. It is only by using the first-person narrative that the reader can see through the author's own eyes and can understand the deep pain the author is feeling. However, this perspective is also extremely biased, since his tale accuses many others of several wrongdoings and their defense or even a third-person perspective of the fact surrounding these events is not presented.

The first-person point of view focuses the story entirely on Goolrick, how he views the world, and the situations that occur to him. Since the story's focus is principally the abuse Goolrick suffers from his father and mother, and his resulting dysfunctional behavior, using a first-person narrative helps the reader to view situations through the emotional perspective of a very hurt and damaged Goolrick. His perception of the world is tainted and this point of view helps to display his own inadequacies in a way that helps the reader understand him without judgment.

Tone

The tone of the novel is extremely varied. At times, the tone can be combative, as he describes arguments and emotional outbursts with loved ones in the throws of alcoholism and abuse. At other times, the tone of the novel is intimate, as though Goolrick were passing secrets between friends. Always informal, Goolrick's tone changes during different parts of his story for clear reasons. When he discusses his parents, his tone is not only aggressive and combative, but also sarcastic. When discussing his own shortcomings, Goolrick's tone changes to somber and depressive, with undertones of self-hatred. When speaking of those he does love, such as his siblings and his other relatives, his tone is endearing and even playful at times.

The tone of the novel is important, particularly in this type of writing, as it reveals more about the situation than the author sometimes intends. Goolrick's tone toward his mother and his father show an underlying anger and fury that even he tries to mask through his words. There can be no question how he feels about these situations and individuals, as it comes through clearly. It is this same tone, when turned toward himself, that lets the reader really understand how negatively Goolrick views himself, which allows the reader a deeper understanding of the effect of the molestation on Goolrick and his life.

Structure

'The End of the World as We Know It' is comprised of twelve chapters of unequal length. The book is 213 pages in length. Each chapter is named and each name depicts some aspect of what the chapter is about, although this reference can be indirect at times. The language of the text is informal, modern, and easy to follow. However, the content of the memoir is extremely graphic in nature. This is necessary to show the abuse Goolrick endured and to explain each situation as he views it, but it is also highly disturbing, and can be difficult at times to read. His recap of his own sexual fantasies, often gruesome, as well as his depictions of his molestation, are vividly descriptive. Sexual references abound throughout the novel, as do references to alcohol, drugs, self-mutilation, and other very dark topics. This book is not meant as light reading, so although the wording is simple, the text is far from light and carries a heavy emotional weight. The vivid descriptions bring an intimacy and a realistic feel to the structure of the novel, as they create an honest feeling to the book that might otherwise be missing.



Quotes

"My father died because he drank too much. Six years before, my mother had died because she drank too much. I drank too much. The apple doesn't fall very far from the tree" (pg. 1.)

"People told us what a wonderful man my father was and how much they would miss him. I can't tell you how much I hated my father, but I agreed with all of them anyway, because that's what you do, as well. Anyway, what good would it have done to say it now?" (pg. 10.)

"I still think of drinking with a light and a sweetness that in no way resemble the actual circumstances of those days. Except for a few occasions, it was just being rode hard and put away wet, and I wept at my own behavior almost every night. I lost a decade of my life, just lost it, the way you might lose an umbrella on the bus" (pg. 13.)

I sat with her and held her hand and told her I would miss her; then I went to find the nurse and told her to call the doctor right away because my mother's condition was so grave. I used the word grave. And then I went back and kissed her and told her I loved her and I left. I don't know why I left her to die alone, but I did" (pg. 19.)

"Everybody smiled, and kissed each other, and the men got drunk but not too drunk and spilled whiskey on their neckties and wrapped their beefy arms around one another's shoulders and people took black-and-white photographs of all the people in their dense perfection. It was proof that matter can, in fact, be created out of nothing" (pg. 62.)

"And maybe the green and blue dress stood for something that had existed long before any of that. Maybe the dress stood for a kind of perfection that was no longer attainable, even as an illusion. Youth fades. We are never where we meant to be, and it always seems hollow and stupid and a waste of time. We become, finally, the biggest burden we have to bear, the burden of our own known selves" (pg. 81.)

"I didn't know what they wanted of me, either of them. my lovers. I didn't know who they thought I was. I was ugly and fatal. They must have seen that. But I know this: During the time I was sleeping with them both, I was happier than I've ever been" (pg. 108.)

"Here's my question: How did they go on? Knowing what they knew, and knowing that each knew the thing the other knew, although my grandmother, I suppose, was alone in what she knew; I mean I guess she never told anybody" (pg. 144.)

"My legs were restless as though running and the pain was sudden and startling and excruciating and I couldn't get away, could not run away from the hand on my nipple or the fingers down my throat or this strange hard thing inside me. My father" (pg. 169.)



"The rest is just a life, just the story of a life deformed. The rest is just a life in which nothing else, no other moment, really matters. I don't know if it ever happened again. I think it did" (pg. 175.)

"I knew, I always knew, that one day I would find somebody I loved enough to tell this story to, and years later I did, one cold morning, lying in bed naked in Philadelphia while his wife was away at work, I knew I had found somebody I loved with all my heart, and I told him the story. I told every detail. In the telling, I thought, would be the expiation; but it didn't make one bit of difference" (pg. 176.)

"I knew, finally, that I was going to die, that something had happened in that bed with my father eight years before that would kill me. And I knew that I could kill others. I knew that whatever disease I had gave my touch the power to make others sicken and die. It was sex. The terror of sex" (pg. 183.)

"Life replaces things. It replaces things once vital to you, to make room for other things in your heart. I think of him almost every day. I say his name when I pray for the people I have loved. Not for who he is now, I don't know who he is now, but for who he was then. He is untouched by time, in my prayers. In my prayers, I am untouched by time, and nothing fades" (pg. 196.)

"In a life, in any life, bad things happen. Many good things happen, of course, we know what they are - joy, tenderness, success, beauty - but some bad things happen as well. Sometimes, very bad things happen" (pg. 202.)

"I tell it to you now because I'd like to think that somewhere, sometime, one thirty-five-year-old father will look at his four-year-old son and not touch him and not whisper in his ear and not put his hand down his son's throat and not invade his son's body with his own and they will both turn away and sleep in innocence" (pg. 210.)



Topics for Discussion

What role do you think alcohol played in the destruction of the author's family and in his molestation? Do you think that any of the situations in the novel would have occurred if alcohol was not involved? What does this say about the dysfunction of the family? What does this say about alcohol?

In the novel, Goolrick participates in many acts of self-destruction, from drinking to cutting and sexual promiscuity. Why do you think Goolrick participates in these behaviors? Do you think they are a consequence of his own abuse during his childhood? Are they merely actions he willingly chooses to participate in that he blames on his early family life? Why?

Goolrick admits he hates his father for what he did to him as a child. How does he feel about his mother? How does this compare to the hatred he feels for his father? Why is there a difference? Why do you think Goolrick left his mother to die alone in the hospital? What does this say about his inner feelings for his mother?

Goolrick's sexuality has shifted between men and women throughout his life. Do you think Goolrick is capable of feeling love for others? Why or why not? Why has he been unable to maintain healthy relationships? Why do you think Goolrick struggles so much to love? Are Goolrick's odd sexual fantasies related to his abuse or are they simply part of him? Why do you think this?

Goolrick admits that he spends many days heavily medicated. Do you think Goolrick's issues stem only from his childhood or are his own behaviors also to blame? Do you think guilt and shame have any role in his emotional state? Why does he feel these emotions? Are they in response to his childhood trauma or in response to his own actions as a result of that trauma?

When Goolrick's father dies, he expects to feel happiness, but instead feels a great amount of grief. If he hated his father, as he claims, why would his death result in such grief? What does the death of his father mean to Goolrick?

Cutting is something Goolrick does several times throughout the novel. What does Goolrick cut himself? What do the cuts represent? How do they seem to help him, in his opinion? Whose hand is the third hand he sees in his imagination? What does this represent? Why is this important to understanding his actions?