

# **A Fine White Dust Study Guide**

## **A Fine White Dust by Cynthia Rylant**

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## Overview

Every person must make personal decisions about God, religion, and church rituals sometime while working toward maturity. In this story Pete attends church even though his parents do not. He realizes that he has a searching need for spiritual fulfillment when a transient revival preacher comes to town and calls on Pete to help him save sinners. Pete becomes so absorbed by this preacher that he is willing to leave his parents and follow the call. Since Pete's parents do not share his zeal, he is at times ashamed that they do not attend church and he feels an obligation to get them to change.

His being born again causes trouble between Pete and his best friend, Rufus, who claims to be an atheist.

Ultimately, Pete is betrayed by his idol, and Rylant takes readers through the whole ordeal so that they can feel the turmoil and the passion of religious zeal. It is an absorbing and rewarding narrative.



## About the Author

Cynthia Rylant was born in Hopewell, Virginia, on June 6, 1954. Her years in Appalachia are reflected in her writing, notably in her books, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, and *Waiting to Waltz*, which are autobiographical.

Her grandparents were very important in her life because she lived with them from the time she was four until she was eight. When her parents separated, her mother decided to go back to school and become a nurse and could not take Cynthia with her. It was at that time that her mother took her to Cool Ridge, West Virginia, to live with her grandparents.

Her grandfather was a coal miner, and her grandmother stayed at home.

A couple of cousins lived there, and aunts and uncles came often. She listened to her relatives telling coal camp stories, and "their voices went deep inside her."

Rylant loved school not because she liked to study and learn so much as she enjoyed being with the other children. About her childhood and becoming a writer, she said, "As a kid I read mostly comic books and had no idea at all that I might be a writer someday.

That's one of the best things about life—all those good surprises waiting for you in the years ahead, like presents in a box."

As a child she read Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books as well as comic books. At the drug store she could buy three comic books for a quarter, so she collected and sold pop bottles to get the money for the comic books.

It never occurred to Rylant that she might become a writer. When she went to college, she began reading and loving literature, and when she took a job in a library at the age of twenty-three, she discovered all the children's books that she had missed as a child. Secretly she began writing and sending her work to publishers.

She now lives in Kent, Ohio, with her son, Nate, and two dogs, two cats, a goldfish, and a hermit crab. She enjoys feeding the birds, walking the dogs, going to the movies, and collecting quilts. Her *Henry and Mudge* books came from watching her son and their English mastiff together.

Rylant writes when she gets a strong feeling that it is time to write. Then she becomes deeply engrossed in the writing, but there may be weeks, months, or even years between writings. She writes her stories straight through and does little revision.

*When I Was Young in the Mountains* was named a notable book for younger readers by the American Library Association in 1982, and *Waiting to Waltz* was named a notable book for older readers in 1984. *The Relatives Came*, illustrated by Steven Gammell, was a Caldecott Honor Book in 1986. *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, illustrated by Diane Goode, was a Caldecott Honor Book in 1983.



During any given year there may be as many as five thousand books published for children. The American Library Association chose *A Fine White Dust* to be a Newbery Honor Book, in their judgment one of the four best books written in 1986. *Missing May* was awarded the 1993 Newbery Medal.



# Plot Summary

A Fine White Dust by Cynthia Rylant, is the story of thirteen-year-old Pete Cassidy's struggle to find his God. Pete is an only child. His parents love their son but do not share his spirituality and his quest to grow closer to the Lord. There is some tension in the Cassidy household over the disparate views on religion between parents and son. Pete never misses a Sunday church service. His mother goes occasionally and his father never attends. When he confronts his parents about their lack of spirituality, he complains he would like support. He would like them to attend church with him. People in their small North Carolina town, he tells them, surely must think it's strange that they never accompany him.

Walter, Pete's father, lets his son know in no uncertain terms that religion is a personal choice and something that is not to be judged by others. He tells his son that he can attend church as much as he likes but it is not his place to force them to go. There is a hint that the parents had some negative experiences in the past with organized religion although it is never fully explained. Ironically, Pete's best friend is Rufus is a dedicated atheist. The two friends have other things in common and generally stay away from the topic of religion.

With Pete's fervor and his lack of support from his parents and best friend, he is a prime target for a traveling revivalist preacher who hits town to preach for a week. Before Pete knows the man is a preacher, he sees him hitchhiking and spots him at a local drugstore where he seems to be focusing on Pete. The man is tall and slender and has piercing blue eyes that send a shiver down Pete's spine.

At the first revival service, Pete is stunned to see that the hitchhiker is the preacher for revival week. Pete longs for the spirit of God and is immediately taken with the powerful words of the man, who he refers to as Preacher Man. The admiration that Pete has for the Preacher is not lost on the stranger. Preacher Man compares himself to the Lord Almighty. He calls Pete "Peter" when he speaks of Jesus' disciples. Preacher Man is fully aware of how vulnerable Pete is and takes full advantage of it.

Preacher Man tells Pete that he should become a preacher himself. He's been touched by God, he tells him, and he can help save people. Pete senses that the man is lonely, and when Preacher Man asks him to travel with him on the evangelist trail, Pete enthusiastically agrees. Pete confesses his plans to Rufus, who is somewhat of a hero in the story. Pete leaves home, leaving a note behind for his parents about his plans with the preacher.

But through divine intervention and a little help from his best friend, Pete is rescued from what would have been a kidnapping and the potential for a harrowing and abusive experience. Although Pete is disappointed that his dreams of saving people with Preacher Man are dashed, Pete realizes that good people - like his parents and Rufus - are found in places other than in church. He also learns that people aren't always what they seem to be or . . . what he wants them to be.



# Chapter 1: Dust

## Chapter 1: Dust Summary

A broken ceramic cross has been kept wrapped in paper in a drawer for nearly a year—since the beginning of seventh grade. A fine white dust comes off of the pieces. These broken bits should be thrown away, but parting with it is difficult. The story needs to be told from the beginning—then throwing away the broken cross will be easier and the Man can be put to rest.

The narrator tells about last summer before when the Man came to town. He had been getting ready for him for a long time—maybe even since first grade. He had loved church for as long as he could remember even though his parents never really did. By fifth grade, he considered himself very religious. On Sundays at church, he was always very taken with a picture of Jesus. His eyes seemed to draw him in.

From that point on, he really liked Him—he liked Jesus. It would frighten him at times to think that "He" was going to judge him, that "He" could cast him out or that "He" would send him to hell. He couldn't stand to imagine Jesus standing before him, judging him. It frightened him. The boy wanted someone to tell him they'd save him from hell. That's when Preacher Man came to town. After the narrator finishes telling the story, he plans to throw all the pieces of the cross away and he will wipe away the fine white dust from his hands.

## Chapter 1: Dust Analysis

The narrator of the story, who is a young male, has not been identified by name yet. He is in the eighth grade and is a very religious person. He is stressing his love of religion which grew without help from his mother and father. His parents did not serve as role models for him. He is keeping a broken cross in his drawer but has not revealed what the significance of the cross is as yet. Apparently it is not associated with happy memories because he wants to throw it away. He thinks that once he tells his story, he will be ready to throw it away. The story involves a person who comes to his town who he refers to as Preacher Man. This first chapter indicates that there is some pain or anguish associated with the cross. The story of the Preacher Man and the cross will be revealed in the chapters that follow.





## Chapter 2: The Hitchhiker

### Chapter 2: The Hitchhiker Summary

It seemed as though the man came to town just when the boy needed him. The first time the boy saw him was when the man was hitchhiking. They didn't pick him up, of course, but as they passed by, the man's bright blue eyes locked on his. It was powerful and scary. The second time he saw the man was in the drugstore on the last day of seventh grade. He was looking at comic books when he looked up and the man was standing near the soda fountain. He turned away from him and buried himself in some of the books.

The boy maintained a sense of where the man was and waited for him to leave. But he stayed there, standing at the counter even when Darlene Cook put his food down in front of him. The narrator saw his friend, Rufus, enter the drugstore. He called out to him, "Hey, Pete!" Pete and Rufus left for the truck stop where Pete promised to buy Rufus a chili dog. As they left, Pete didn't look at the man but he knew the man was watching him.

Rufus had been Pete's best friend since kindergarten. Rufus was a popular boy and was practical and always honest. In fifth grade, Rufus had decided he was a confirmed atheist. The boys could not have been more different, yet they remained best friends. What Pete liked about Rufus was that he always knew where he stood. After the truck stop, they sat in front of the fire station. Rufus told Pete that the wrestling coach told him he was cocky. But Rufus disagreed—he wasn't cocky, he was confident! Pete didn't think of Rufus as cocky; in fact, in his own way, he was humble.

That summer, Pete felt especially spiritual. There was a longing deep inside him. He had stopped going to Vacation Bible School when he was ten. He missed it. He loved painting the ceramic crosses there every year. His mother still had one of his crosses hanging in the kitchen. Tensions grew at home. Pete needed to express his spiritual feelings and thoughts but his parents were not interested. He was worried about them not caring whether or not they went to hell.

One day at breakfast, Pete's feelings about his parents and religion came out. He told his mother and father that people probably wonder why they never go to church with him. His father was a little perturbed and asked his son if he was ashamed of them. Pete told his father that he just felt confused. His father, Walt, responded that there were many things he didn't understand.

Those words bothered Pete. His mother gave Walt a stern look that silenced him for a moment. He simply told Pete that he could go to church as much as he wanted to. Whether he and his mother went to church was their decision. Walt firmly told his son that it wasn't his job to save their souls. His father reminded him that the revival was starting up. Pete went to the revival that evening and met the Preacher Man.



## Chapter 2: The Hitchhiker Analysis

Pete is confused about his parents' lack of religion and their disinterest in his religion. There seems to be something in the past involving religion that turned his parents away from it. Pete is fearful that his parents will be condemned to eternal damnation. Pete ran into the Preacher Man who almost seemed to be stalking him. He felt intimidated by the man. There is a disconnect between Pete and his parents. Perhaps if they had a closer relationship, Pete would have told them about the man. Pete is a very spiritual, religious boy but he feels lonely always having to go to church alone. He'd like it to be a family experience but his father seems to be adamant about not attending church.

Pete is associated with another non-religious person—his best friend, Rufus, is an atheist. It is noteworthy that Pete's parents and his best friend are not believers yet he is very spiritual. Is it a coincidence that the protagonist's name is Pete? Peter was one of Jesus' disciples. This could be a factor that plays into the story and a foreshadowing of events to come.



# Chapter 3: The Savior

## Chapter 3: The Savior Summary

That evening at the revival service, if Pete hadn't been stuck in the middle of a pew, he would have left because it was hot and overcrowded. Pete was stunned when the assistant pastor, Woodrow Radford, introduced the revival pastor. It was the hitchhiker, the man with blue eyes. When the Preacher Man started speaking, it was as if Pete already knew the voice—as if he was speaking directly to him. The more he listened to him, the more Pete hungered for the Word. The Preacher Man's words touched Pete deeply. Tears brimmed in his eyes. The words, "make me Holy, Preacher Man," kept echoing in his mind. The Preacher Man seemed to have the same impact on most everyone. After the Preacher Man's sermon was over, everyone "belonged" to him. After the sermon, the Preacher Man greeted everyone. He took Pete's hand and asked him if he wanted to be saved. Pete answered in the affirmative and immediately fainted.

## Chapter 3: The Savior Analysis

The Preacher Man has a powerful effect on everyone, especially Pete. The fact that he was afraid of the Preacher Man when he first encountered him, puts some doubt in the reader's mind that the Preacher Man is a man of God. He has the ability to draw people to him but yet there is something off-putting, even frightening, about him. Since there is a broken cross that is key to the story, there may be some upsetting incident or even violence in store for Pete that involves this man.



# Chapter 4: The Joy

## Chapter 4: The Joy Summary

The next morning, the night before had seemed like a dream. But it wasn't. Pete reminded himself that he had been saved. He said prayers of thanks and felt joyful, his heart was full. He had been longing to feel close to God. Now he was. He felt safe. No joy he had known before in his life compared to what he felt now. Pete remembered fainting and had felt a little embarrassed. But lots of people had fainted at the Preacher Man's feet. When he came to, the Preacher Man's eyes were on his. At that moment, he knew he loved that man more than anyone.

That morning at breakfast, Pete's mother asked him about the revival. He told his mother that he had been saved. At first she seemed stunned and could only muster a weak smile. Finally she said she was happy for him. For some reason, Pete was glad his father had already gone to work and was not there to hear about his salvation. Pete rode his bike to the drugstore and just as he hoped, he found the Preacher Man there, leaning against the outside wall.

Although Pete was happy to see the Preacher Man, he began perspiring and became nervous. He started to turn his bike around, but the Preacher Man waved and called him over. The Preacher Man said that it was wondrous to wake up in heaven. They talked for a while, the Preacher Man telling Pete what happens to a soul when it's saved. His words made Pete even more joyful. He could have listened to him all day long. The Preacher Man bought Pete a soda and the two of them sat on the post office steps and talked about Jesus and salvation. Pete told him about his mother and father, about Rufus and about himself. The Preacher Man made Pete blush when he told him he thought he could be a preacher some day.

The Preacher Man had been a revival preacher for the last three years. He had sold all his possessions and traveled around from church to church. People knew of him by word of mouth and would request that he speak at their revivals. He had his wild days, too. Holiness did not come easy to him. Pete didn't feel comfortable with the conversation about his wild days and he silently wished he wouldn't talk about them.

They talked for three hours that day. Pete learned that the man's name was James W. Carson. He told Pete to call him Jim, but in Pete's mind, he was Preacher Man. He seemed like a completely different person than the man who he had seen in the drugstore. It was as if that man had never existed.

## Chapter 4: The Joy Analysis

Pete's mother seems upset to hear that Pete was "saved". But for his part, Pete felt more joyful than he ever had in his entire life. One has to consider the age disparity between Pete, who is thirteen, and this grown man. Although he is a preacher, it seems



unhealthy that a grown man spends three hours talking to a young boy that he hardly knows. Despite his "preacher" label, the man is a stranger and he's a transient person who travels from town to town. No one in town knows anything about him other than what they hear. His mother would do well to look into who her son is spending time with but she seems remote, especially when the subject of religion comes up. Pete's father seems downright hostile about it. There seems to be something ominous about the man and the fact that he's latching onto a young boy. By Pete telling the Preacher Man about his disconnect with his parents and best friend, he was opening himself up to vulnerability.



# Chapter 5: The Change

## Chapter 5: The Change Summary

Pete's father was openly disappointed that Pete was "saved". At dinner that night, everyone was quiet and there was tension in the air. He wanted his father to be happy for him but it was obvious that he was not. Pete had planned to go to church that night but after his father's reaction, he thought it would be better if he didn't go. His mother had left a new Bible in his room so he knew she wasn't angry with him, but she didn't seem to be overjoyed either.

Walt reminded Pete about the time his father, Pete's grandmother, was baptized in the river. He had refused to take his glasses off. If the angels were heading his way, he wanted to see them. They all laughed and the tension seemed to dissipate. But after a short while, his father looked sad again. Pete couldn't tell if it was because he missed his father who had passed away or if he was thinking about Pete telling him that he had been saved.

They sat on the porch after dinner. Pete had learned at a young age to be careful not to say the wrong things to his parents. He was probably six or seven when he came to that realization. After his parents went inside, Pete took off for church. The Preacher Man was in front of the church calling for salvation and ministering to those who came forward. Pete was so inspired that he wished he could be saved again. He felt joyful and prayed things would never change.

## Chapter 5: The Change Analysis

The mystery lingers about Pete's parents views on religion. They don't communicate their concerns or reasons why they are less than overjoyed about Pete's salvation. The Preacher Man continues to inspire Pete. Pete hopes nothing changes but the possibility exists that once the truth is revealed about his parents feelings and experiences about religion, it seems as though it may have a significant impact on Pete.

The family does not communicate well but not just over religion. When a six-year-old child feels he has to be careful with what he says in front of his parents, two things are obvious. The young child is bright and astute beyond his years and the parents are sending a silent message that there are things he cannot or should not discuss with them.



## Chapter 6: The Telling

### Chapter 6: The Telling Summary

The second night of the revival, Preacher Man had an even greater impact on Pete. The next morning, he didn't even bother with breakfast. He rode his bike down to the drugstore and was determined to sit there all day waiting for Preacher Man. Pete was disappointed to see Rufus coming. Rufus seemed almost like a stranger to Pete but to Rufus, Pete was still his good old friend. The only difference Rufus noticed in Pete was that he looked "dopey", a comment that didn't sit well with Pete.

When Pete told Rufus he was saved, the comment seemed to baffle Rufus. Just then Pete saw Preacher Man coming. Pete introduced Rufus to Preacher Man. They shook hands and the very straightforward Rufus asked if he had saved Pete. The Preacher corrected him—the Lord God Almighty had saved Pete. When Rufus asked where the Preacher Man came from, he told Rufus that he was from heaven. Never one to hold back, Rufus said he'd never met anyone from heaven before—or from the other place for that matter.

The Preacher told Rufus that if he had not been saved, he would burn in eternal hell fire. Rufus wasn't intimidated by the man. He looked the Preacher directly in the eyes and announced that he, indeed, had not been saved. The Preacher told Pete to be careful around Rufus so that he is not corrupted by him. The Preacher Man called him Peter. The Preacher went inside the drugstore alone. Pete immediately missed him—he felt dead without him. Rufus rode off.

### Chapter 6: The Telling Analysis

Pete and Rufus had been friends all their lives. The Preacher Man was trying to put a wedge between them. It seemed that if the Preacher Man was a man of God, it would be a "lost soul" like Rufus who he would try to save. Instead, the Preacher Man warns Pete that Rufus might corrupt him. But isn't the power of God and good stronger than that of evil and Satan? Why would Pete be vulnerable to Rufus? The Preacher Man is an adult and is very aware of the impact he's having on the impressionable young Pete. At one point, the Preacher Man calls him "Peter", another reference to one of Jesus' disciples.



# Chapter 7: The Invitation

## Chapter 7: The Invitation Summary

Pete waited outside for the Preacher Man but he could see that Darlene had him cornered and he gave up. He drove off on his bike and looked up at the sky. He remembered how, as a little boy, he'd look up at his father fixing wires on a telephone poles. He had thought his dad was the most powerful and brave man in town. But Walter had encouraged his son to become a doctor so he could people in under developed areas who had no health care. He would have become such a doctor himself but he wasn't smart enough. But the six-year-old Pete thought no one could have been braver than his father.

That night, Pete gulped his dinner down, hardly tasting it. He raced over to the revival. He couldn't wait to be brought to tears of joy once again. The Preacher Man had only two more nights in town and then he'd be moving on. He sat near the front and pictured himself preaching at the pulpit. Just like every other night of the revival, the Preacher Man had everyone on their feet, tears of joy running down their faces. During the service, Pete happened to turn around and spotted his mother sitting near the back of the church. It was very crowded and people were standing and walking to the front, obscuring Pete's view. The next time Pete could get a look at where he had seen his mother, she was gone.

Walking home, Pete was so moved by the service that he was trembling. Suddenly, there was a hand on his shoulder—it was the Preacher Man, who invited him for a soda. He talked about his youth and how he always knew he was different—at times, he even felt like an outcast. The Preacher said Jesus was fortunate because he had disciples, someone he could talk to. Pete realized that the Preacher Man was lonely. He wished he could make him feel better.

The Preacher Man paced back and forth, smiling and looking all excited like when he was preaching. He had met thousands of people in his travels—people who have fallen to their knees before him—almost like he was Jesus Christ himself. Again, he told Pete that he could see him as a preacher one day. The Preacher told Pete that if he would come with him, he could help people—save them. The Preacher Man called him Peter again and told him he was touched by the hand of God. He asked Pete to come with him. Pete said he would.

## Chapter 7: The Invitation Analysis

Pete's father may not be religious, but he shows that he is kind and compassionate. He wanted his son to be a doctor who could help poor people who had no medical care. The Preacher Man is lonely and he seems to have a Jesus complex. He feels like Jesus Christ himself, he tells Pete. He calls Pete "Peter" again and says that Jesus was





fortunate because he had disciples. He flatters Pete by telling him he's been touched by God. He tells Pete that he could help save people. He invites him to come with him out on the revival road. First of all, if Pete would slip away with Preacher Man, the holy man wouldn't be Jesus, he'd be a felon. The FBI frowns on kidnapping. The Preacher Man is not what he appears to be. He is either a dangerous man or emotionally disturbed. Either way, Pete would be in danger if he went with him. No normal adult would ask a thirteen-year-old to leave his home to travel with him.



# Chapter 8: The Leaving

## Chapter 8: The Leaving Summary

Pete felt that it was God's will that he go with Preacher Man. They made plans to meet the next night after the Preacher's final revival meeting in town. They'd hitchhike out of town. That next morning, Pete was surprised that the prospect of leaving his home was disturbing to him. But as the day wore on, the idea of being with the Preacher Man became more exciting. He worried about what to bring with him, what to say in his good-bye note to his parents and whether the police would be after him. But he knew the Preacher Man could handle everything—he had the Power.

Pete was alone in the house that morning. While deciding what to take with him, he looked at some old photos of his family that brought back good memories. He decided to take a few pictures with him. He didn't pack a lot because the Preacher Man had told him to travel light. After he finished packing, Rufus dropped by. He asked Pete if he was angry with him because it seemed he had been trying to avoid him. Pete responded that he was just preoccupied with things which he did not enumerate for Rufus. Rufus told Pete that the Preacher Man had him crazy in the head. Rufus said that when Pete's with the man, he acts like a robot.

Pete was angered by Rufus' remarks. He felt like punching him. But Rufus was undeterred and kept after Pete until he told him that he was leaving with the Preacher Man that night. He told Rufus that he had a calling to save people. Rufus was astonished. He asked Pete how he could do that to his parents—they'd be devastated. Pete responded that he could not turn his back on God. Rufus said he'd look after his parents for him and left.

## Chapter 8: The Leaving Analysis

Pete is homesick before he leaves. Rufus, sensing that something is bothering his best friend, confronts Pete about avoiding him lately. Rufus realizes that the Preacher Man has been a bad influence on Pete. He doesn't act like himself around the man. After he learns that Pete is leaving that night with the Preacher Man, Rufus does not try very hard to talk Pete out of it. But Pete had revealed the details of his departure and Rufus, being the good friend that he is, probably will tell Pete's parents and will disrupt the Preacher Man's devious plans.



# Chapter 9: The Wait

## Chapter 9: The Wait Summary

Despite the pain that his leaving would cause his parents and his best friend, Pete was certain that he would be doing the right thing by leaving with the Preacher that night. Guilty about his plans, Pete did all the chores around the house that he had been putting off. Later, his mother came home with a car full of groceries. Helping her put them away, he felt an ache seeing the things that he knew she had bought just for him. He felt pain that evening at dinner—watching his father and wishing that he'd had more chances in life.

After dinner, Pete told his parents that he was heading for church to help with the clean-up and that he'd be late in getting home. He was relieved that his parents hadn't noticed the missing ceramic cross from the wall or his duffel bag sitting out in the bushes. It was hard for Pete to tell them good-bye. He fished his duffel bag out of the bushes and headed for the filling station where he was meeting the Preacher Man.

They were supposed to meet at 9:30, so by ten o'clock, Pete began to get nervous. Joanie Fulton, the church organist, and her boyfriend walked by and said hello to Pete. She commented that the revival service had been wonderful. At one o'clock in the morning, Pete was still waiting—the Preacher Man is not coming, he thought. As Pete started to walk home, Rufus appeared out of nowhere and said he'd walk him home. When they got home, Rufus told Pete to go on in—he would not be going with the Preacher Man.

## Chapter 9: The Wait Analysis

It was difficult for Pete to leave but yet he felt he was being called to a higher purpose. It is apparent that Rufus told someone—perhaps the authorities—what the Preacher Man had planned. Although Pete is confused about the turn of events, he is relieved deep-down that their plans to leave town were disrupted. Pete has the ceramic cross with him in his duffel bag. The story began with the broken cross. How it gets broken will soon be revealed. A question lingers as to why Pete was allowed to stay at their meeting place until 1 am if the police or his parents knew what was taking place. Were police watching nearby, leaving Pete there so they could catch the Preacher Man in the act? Did the Preacher Man get wind of things and leave town to elude the authorities?



# Chapter 10: Hell

## Chapter 10: Hell Summary

The first thing Pete did the next day when he woke up was to open the unopened envelope that he had left for his parents the night before. He re-read what he had written. He apologized for leaving but explained that he had been called by God. He was leaving town with the Preacher Man who would take good care of him and see that he ate good. He asked that they don't try to find him and that they'd be hiding for a while. He said to give his bike to Rufus because his was not in good shape. He told his parents he loved them both.

The letter proved to Pete that he had tried to leave but the rest of the evening was like a dream. What had happened to the Preacher Man? He had been ready to leave with him but he didn't show up. He was angry and hurt. Would he see the Preacher Man again?

## Chapter 10: Hell Analysis

Pete is confused. He has no idea what happened. Re-reading his letter proves to him that he had intended to leave. What happened between he and Preacher Man making plans, his writing the letter and the present confusion when he wakes the next morning in his own bed is not clear to either Pete or the reader. The Preacher's nefarious plans were thwarted. The story at this juncture points to Rufus as the hero.



# Chapter 11: The Messenger

## Chapter 11: The Messenger Summary

Pete heard his name being called. Was it Preacher Man coming back for him? Suddenly, Rufus face was peeking through his open door. Pete asked Rufus how long he had watched him at the filling station the night before. Rufus responded he was going to stay there as long as it took. Pete told Rufus he didn't know what happened to the Preacher Man. Maybe he had a heart attack or an accident.

Rufus was silent but Pete knew him well enough to know that by the look on his face he knew what happened to Preacher Man. After he pressed him, Rufus told Pete that the Preacher left town the night before with Darlene Cook. Pete was so angry and hurt that he leaped out of bed and kicked his still-packed duffel bag across the floor, breaking the cross. He yelled at Rufus to get out of his house. Rufus was angry, too. He glared at Pete and slammed the door as he left.

Pete dissolved into tears, hurt and angry that the Preacher Man had left with a girl while he was waiting for him. The Preacher Man had deserted him.

## Chapter 11: The Messenger Analysis

The Preacher Man apparently picked another victim, a young girl in town. Did he tell Darlene that she was touched by God, too? Probably not. Pete does not fully comprehend what happened. He is not aware that the Preacher's intentions were less than spiritual. He escaped a potentially terrible fate but at this point, he is overwhelmed with anger and hurt. It still is not clear what role Rufus had in foiling the Preacher's plan. It is unfortunate if it turns out the Preacher escaped without any ramifications for his actions and without being exposed as a fraud.



# Chapter 12: The Light

## Chapter 12: The Light Summary

Preacher Man and Darlene left town in her car. There were rumors that they left her car at a bus station and were riding Greyhound buses around the countryside. There were also rumors that they were driving her car and were not riding buses or hitchhiking. Darlene's parents were furious and her father loaded up his rifle and said he was going to look for them. But the truth was Darlene had graduated from high school and was "of age".

Darlene reappeared after three weeks. She refused to say what had happened during the time she was traveling with the Preacher Man. Some thought the Preacher was the devil in disguise. Others blamed Darlene for casting a spell on him. Others were sure she was pregnant while others thought she made the whole thing up and hadn't been with the Preacher Man at all.

Pete was going through his darkest days. He avoided his parents when possible and had no further contact with Rufus. He was tormented and felt he was in hell. He even lost his faith. Initially, he had prayed to God but He didn't help him. Pete's desire to be with the Preacher Man lingered.

Pete's mother reached out to him. She and his dad were worried about him. She asked if they could help and told him they loved him. But Pete had closed himself off to them and refused to talk about what was bothering him. His parents left him alone that summer, which proved to Pete that he had great parents.

As Pete began to recover that summer, he missed his best friend, Rufus, and he began to forgive the Preacher Man. He wondered why God had placed the Preacher Man in his life and allowed him to be hurt by him. He still felt sorry for the Preacher and worried about him being alone. Late that summer, Pete and Rufus renewed their friendship. Pete had never thanked Rufus for sticking by him that night while he waited for the Preacher Man so he bought him a used guitar with some of the money he earned from mowing lawns. He also had his favorite photo of him and his parents blown up and bought a new frame to put it in.

## Chapter 12: The Light Analysis

Although he has no complete resolution about the Preacher Man, Pete began living the life he had before he met the man. He began to open up to his parents who he appreciated more than ever. One benefit of his experience is that he appreciates how great his parents are. Perhaps that was the blessing from God that he was looking for. He doesn't realize that divine intervention that saved him from the Preacher Man.



Unfortunately, he still feels sorry for the Preacher Man and worries about him being alone. His feelings for the man who was, in some sense, going to abuse him are still conflicted. He is not mature enough to understand that the man could not have any good intentions for running away with him. As he does mature, he will be able to look back with deeper understanding.



# Amen

## Amen Summary

Pete and Rufus enjoyed eighth grade together. They both went out for football. Rufus played more but Pete was happy to sit on the bench and cheer his friend on. Pete helped Rufus pass English. Rufus was still a confirmed atheist and Pete went to church, but not as often. Pete realized that outside of church, the real earth was comprised of all kinds of good people—people like Rufus who were non-believers and people like his parents who were not spiritual and were private about their beliefs.

## Amen Analysis

A year after Preacher Man, Pete knew he still needed God but didn't know exactly how to find Him. That was why he found it difficult to throw the pieces of his cross away. The day he saved the pieces and put them away in a drawer, he had thought he was saving pieces of the Preacher Man. Later he understood that they were pieces of him and God. The Preacher Man was behind him and God was in his present and future. He was finally able to throw away the pieces in the hopes of finding something whole.





# Characters

## Pete Cassidy

Pete Cassidy is an only child who lives with his parents in a small town in North Carolina. Pete is devoted to God and loves going to church. He has been spiritual all his life even though his parents have never been. It was something intrinsic in his make-up and something he continually nurtures. He has some conflict with his parents over their lack of interest in religion. He would like their support and attend church with him but they are just not church goers.

When Pete meets up with the Preacher Man, the preacher who comes into town to preach for revival week at his church, Pete finds someone who he thinks has the mutual love of God that he has and who he feels support from in his search for spiritual fulfillment.

However, the Preacher Man has a secret agenda. He sees himself as not just a preacher but almost like the Lord Almighty. After all he saves people and ministers to them and they kneel down before him. But it is lonely on the road and he convinces the vulnerable Pete, who he refers to as Peter, that he, like Jesus needs disciples on his mission of salvation.

Pete agrees to go with him, but luckily there is divine intervention and Pete is saved from being kidnapped. Although disappointed that he won't be traveling with the Preacher Man and saving people, Pete learns that he has great parents and friends and that not everyone in a church is what he thought them to be.

## Preacher Man

James W. Carson, who was called Preacher Man by Pete Cassidy, comes to the small North Carolina town where Pete lives with his parents. He has been recruited to sermonize at the Baptist church that Pete attends during the church's revival week. When the Preacher Man first enters the story, he is seen by Pete hitchhiking on the highway outside of town. Later, Pete spots him in the town's drugstore where the tall man's piercing blue eyes seem to look right through him and their intensity frighten him.

After Pete attends the first sermon given by the charismatic stranger, Preacher Man readily can see that young Pete is vulnerable, impressionable and full of admiration for him. He brags to Pete about traveling from town to town saving people who literally fall at his knees like he is Christ Almighty himself. Preacher Man uses Pete to bolster his own ego and evokes sympathy by portraying himself as lonely but, unlike Jesus, without disciples.

Ultimately, Preacher Man convinces Pete that he has been touched by God and that he should travel with him so he can help save people from eternal damnation. What his



true motivations were are never made clear; however, his plans are thwarted and Pete does not run away with him. Preacher Man does take a young woman with him. She returns three weeks later but refuses to talk about her experience with the "holy" man.

## **Rufus**

Rufus is a classmate of Pete Cassidy's. They are best friends but they are polar opposites in beliefs. Rufus is an avowed atheist.

## **Mrs. Cassidy**

Mrs. Cassidy, Pete's mother, is sympathetic to Pete's spiritualism. Although she doesn't attend church regularly, Pete spots her one night during revival week.

## **Walter Cassidy**

Walter Cassidy is Pete's father. He is not a church goer and tells Pete not to try to talk him into going. He works for the local telephone company and has hopes that his bright son will become a doctor.

## **Darlene Cook**

Darlene Cook works at the drugstore fountain. She leaves town with Preacher Man and is gone for three weeks. She refuses to discuss her experience with him.

## **Woodrow Radford**

Woodrow Radford is the assistant pastor of the Baptist Church that Pete attends. He introduces Preacher Man to the congregation on the first night of revival week.

## **Joanie Fulton**

Joanie Fulton is the organist at the Baptist Church that Pete attends. She and her boyfriend pass by Pete when he is waiting to meet the Preacher Man on the night they planned to leave town.

## **Billy Winfred**

Pete Cassidy threw up all over classmate Billy Winfred in first grade.

## Jesus Christ

Pete Cassidy is saved in the name of Jesus Christ from eternal damnation by the Preacher Man.



## Objects/Places

### Fine White Dust

The "fine white dust" referenced in the title came from Pete's ceramic cross that was broken into pieces when he kicked it in a fit of anger.

### North Carolina

Pete Cassidy and his parents lived in a small in North Carolina.

### Baptist Church

The Baptist Church was the biggest church in the small North Carolina town where the story takes place.

### Revival Week

Pete met the Preacher Man when his church was having revival week. The Preacher Man was recruited by the church to be the revivalist preacher.

### Filling Station

Preacher Man and Pete had plans to meet at the filling station at 9:30 the night they were going to leave town together. When the Preacher had not shown up by one o'clock, Pete went home.

### Drugstore Fountain

Darlene Cook worked at the drugstore fountain. She met the Preacher Man there and ran away with him after revival week.

### Duffel Bag

Pete packed up his duffel bag when he was going to run away with the Preacher Man. He hid it in the bushes in front of his house so his parents wouldn't see him leave with it.



## Used Guitar

After the Preacher Man left town, Pete realized he never thanked Rufus for standing by him. He bought Rufus a used guitar as a way of showing his gratitude.

## New Frame

After the Preacher Man left town, Pete realized how great his parents were. He had his favorite photo of him and his parents blown up and bought a new frame for it.

## Broken Cross

After his experience with the Preacher Man, Pete was unable to throw his broken cross away for a year. After he resolved the experience, however, he was ready to throw the pieces away and look forward to finding something that was whole.

## Setting

The story takes place in a small, remote North Carolina town with two churches—Baptist and Methodist. The most dramatic scenes occur in the vicinity of the drug store where Pete meets the Preacher Man and where the preacher meets Darlene who works there. It is also in this general area that Pete sits on the wall waiting for the Preacher Man until he finally realizes that he has been abandoned. The church is the scene of the frenzy of the revival where people cry, faint, and are born again.



# Social Sensitivity

This book is about a sensitive boy's confrontation with fundamentalist religion, and it encourages its readers to think about the subject. Although this book is beautifully written, some readers might object to its portrayal of born again Christianity and revival ministry.

However, young people who are examining what they believe will learn from looking critically at Pete's religious struggle.



# Literary Qualities

This is a first-person retelling of events that happened a year before when Pete was in the seventh grade.

The explanation of his feelings is so detailed and sensitive that it seems the religious trauma happened yesterday, not a year ago.

The sound of the language is very important to Rylant. About her style, she says, "My voice reflects the way my family talks—in that southern matter-of-fact way. I was never aware of how poetic my grandparents were when they talked. I know I echo them when I write."

Her poetic style and the flavor of rural West Virginia are evident in *A Tine White Dust*. Reviewer Julie Cummins says, "Rylant's subtle telling has a hymn-like quality, sung in a melodic, soulful way which reverberates with the reader's compassion. Although the tone is serious, Peter's recounting is personal and sensitive—like religion and friendships, presumed and assumed. Like Peter, this story has soul."

Opening the book at random, readers can see for themselves how the writing flows. For example, at church Peter sees a picture of Christ with a crown of thorns, blood running from it, and a heart "like one of those pin-on hearts.

It was bright red and glowed like it was burning."

And His eyes. They were like those brown ponds you sometimes see in the woods. So dark and shining—but when you try to see yourself in them, you can't. You look, and maybe you see a shadow of your head, but you don't see you.

When he sees the Preacher Man for the first time, Pete says, I looked over and bam, there he was. . . I mean, he was there like a small explosion. Leaning against the counter at the soda fountain, hands in his pockets, sort of a ghost in a blue suit just swallowing me up. I knew those blue eyes, and my heart flopped like a dying fish.

Rylant's use of imagery and metaphor is woven into the story. The Preacher Man tells Pete about his wild younger days, "My eyes enjoyed what the devil could paint. He could make things sparkle, make a glitter that blinded."

There are some graphic similes in the book: ". . . big Joanie Fulton pounding away on the organ like some butcher pounding at a piece of meat;" "Woodrow had a voice like a lawn mower—that dull kind of sound . . ."; "The church swayed back and forth with the rhythm of his [the Preacher Man's] voice, and it was like so many migrating birds, turning into the east all at once, turning into the west, turning and swaying and watching for the stars;" "I looked into his face and my heart swelled like the rising sun, and I knew I loved him." When Rufus stands up to the Preacher Man, Pete says, "Put those two





together on the street in front of the drug store, and it was like a tornado, hot air hitting cold and just plain getting out of hand."

There are extremely good descriptions of feelings. For example, I stood in the back of the church, the heat hitting my face and the sweat starting to bead up under my nose. I stood and felt like somebody who had just walked into a stormy sea, with the waves coming in hard and sudden and trying to take you away and later "I felt this awful ton of rock in my stomach and seemed like noth ing in the world could knock it out."

Waiting for the Preacher Man, he says that "my heart nearly pumped itself right out of my body while I waited for the Man," and when the tears come, he says, "It hurt so much and felt so good all at the same time." This kind of narration of Pete's feelings makes the story plausible.

Dust fragments appearing at the beginning and end of the book serve as book ends for the story. The dust refers to his broken ceramic cross. He hopes that if he tells the whole story behind the broken cross, he may be able to put the preacher out of his life, throw the fragments away, and begin to look for something whole.

There is some humor in the book.

Pete's parents are disturbed about his being "saved." It is as if "somebody had died." Then Pop asks if they are going to dunk him in the river like they did granddaddy. He did not take off his glasses because he wanted to see the angels, but he did take out his hearing aid. "I guess he figured whatever angels came along wouldn't be worth listening to." Pete innocently gives some hints about the Preacher Man's character and the impending betrayal that warn readers even though Pete does not pick up on them himself.

At the revival when everyone is in an emotional frenzy, the preacher holds the girls "like he loved every one of them. He held them longest because they cried hardest."

Rylant uses Pete's senses to show how he feels. For instance, when he decides he is leaving home, he realizes how much his home means to him: I never knew how much I loved the window beside my bed till that morning. Every day of my life I woke up next to that window. And if it was summer, the breeze would be coming through the screen and I'd hear the cardinals and the neighbors' old dog. On Saturdays I might hear Pop with the mower and smell that sweet smell of grass coming into my room. And if it was winter, there'd be frost all around the edges of the window and I'd lie there, looking at the sparkles and the crystals, digging deeper under the quilts and feeling good about things.

It is customary to capitalize the word "He" when it refers to God or Jesus. In this book "the Preacher Man" and "the Man" are capitalized so that he is put in the same category as God and Jesus.

And Peter, of course, is the name of Christ's most ardent disciple.



# Themes

## Communication

Part of the problems that Pete Cassidy encountered in his quest to grow closer to God was the lack of good communication between him and his parents. Open and direct discussions were never a part of the family's history. Even as a very young boy of six, Pete could remember that he had to tread lightly on some subjects. He recalled how uncomfortable his parents, especially his father, would be in discussing certain issues.

Pete learned to walk on egg shells around them but he also learned over the years to repress his own thoughts and feelings. The lack of communication is not healthy and can lead to catastrophe. One such crisis was narrowly missed in the boy's thirteenth year when he did not share how close he was growing to a revivalist preacher who eventually asked him to run away from home and go on the road with him and become an evangelist.

Had Pete's parents encouraged instead of blunting free and open discussions, he may have turned to them instead of this stranger who seemingly offered him spiritual support, although his intentions were nefarious and could have led to real tragedy. Nothing can be more helpful to a youngster, especially an adolescent who is trying to find himself, than an open dialog with the parents he loves.

## A Child's Vulnerability

Pete Cassidy, the thirteen-year-old protagonist of "A Fine White Dust," is caught up in the joyful pursuit of God. When he meets the charismatic revivalist preacher who he refers to as Preacher Man, it does not take long for the older and street-wise transient to figure out that the youngster idolizes and nearly worships him.

Pete first sees Preacher Man hitchhiking into town and spots him later at the drugstore fountain. At the time, he doesn't know who he is but he is struck by his piercing blue eyes and the intense stare that he focuses on him. Pete feels uneasy about the man until he realizes he had been recruited to preach at his church during revival week.

Preacher Man "saves" Pete during the first revival service, and the youngster is immediately enthralled with the spirit and faith of the older man. That the Preacher Man, who is really a stranger, spends hours talking with the young boy is strange and inappropriate on his part.

Preacher Man evokes sympathy from Pete by comparing himself to Jesus. But, he tells him, unlike Jesus he is lonely and without disciples. He refers to Pete as "Peter" at various times to underscore his "disciples" reference in a not so subtle way. He asks Pete to join him on the road. Pete, the preacher tells him, has been touched by God and he could help him save people from eternal damnation. Pete is totally taken in and



agrees to go. But Pete is saved from whatever Preacher Man had in mind and does not run off with him.

Preacher Man was a predator at least at some level and Pete was his prey. This story illustrates that no matter what the outward identity of a person is or where a kid meets him, an innocent child can always be the target of an adult who determines he can take advantage of him.

## **Abandonment**

There are several instances of abandonment found in *A Fine White Dust*, the story of Pete Cassidy's quest for the closeness of God. Even though his parents had not been particularly religious, Pete could not remember a time when he did not feel spiritual. It was something that was just born in him. He always attended church alone and would not miss but he longed for his parents to support him in his spiritual journey and wanted them to attend church with him.

But his father is angered by the suggestion. He tells Pete he can go to church all he wants but that it is his decision and his mother's decision as to whether they go to church or not. Pete felt abandoned by their remote attitude and disinterest in something that was so vitally important to him.

When Pete becomes acquainted with the visiting preacher at his church during revival week, he begins to idolize the charismatic holy man. The preacher, who Pete calls Preacher Man, quickly sees that the young man admires him and he takes advantage of his adoration. He uses Pete to feed his ego, telling him he's like Christ himself. People literally fall on their knees before him as he saves their souls.

The biggest difference, he tells Pete is that he, unlike Jesus, doesn't have disciples and is lonely out there on the road of salvation. He tells Pete that he has been touched by God and asks him to run away from home and join him on the road. The night that they are supposed to run off, Pete waits for hours but the Preacher Man doesn't show up. He felt hurt, pain and abandonment. Although he didn't understand then, he will later know that this "abandonment" was a fortunate outcome.

## Themes/Characters

Themes in this book include friendship, formulating spiritual beliefs, and dealing with misplaced faith. Pete's parents, "Christmas and Easter Christians," realize that their son is engrossed in revival frenzy. His mother is supportive; she places ceramic crosses that Pete made in Bible school all around her kitchen walls even though she is not religious. Although the parents worry, they try to stay out of Pete's religious decisions. The father says that there is a reason for their feeling the way they do about organized religion, but Pete does not want to hear it.

Pete's personality is developed through his first-person telling of events that happened a year ago. Feeling a need for spirituality, he attends church regularly and his conviction that he is following God's will is so strong that he is willing to run away from his parents and follow the Preacher Man wherever he should lead. He says, "I would have died for him. And in some ways, I guess I did." He believes in Hell and worries that he may not be worth the sacrifice Jesus made to save him, that his parents may go to hell, that he himself might go there, and that he has a responsibility to save other people from damnation.

The itinerant evangelist almost becomes God in Pete's mind. He commands so much power over his listeners that they faint and fall to the floor as they are born again. His sermons sound sincere, as if he really believes the things that he says. He also sounds sincere when he makes plans to take Pete to the next town, but when the time comes to leave, the preacher runs off with Darlene, the girl who works at the drugstore, and gives no thought to the boy waiting on the wall in the dark.

Courageous Rufus is the true friend, the atheist, the boy who stands up to the preacher and tries to free Pete from his spell. When he sees how set Pete is on going, he promises to look after Pete's parents for him. Then he waits out of sight behind his friend and helps him through the preacher's betrayal and his adjustment afterward.

Early in the book, Pete sums up Rufus's character exactly, "The whole world might be a question mark, but Rufus stayed a good hard period."

# Style

## Point of View

A Fine White Dust is written in the first person. The protagonist, thirteen-year-old Pete Cassidy, is the narrator of the story. It is appropriate that Pete narrate because it is his story to tell. The focus of "A Fine White Dust" is Pete's struggle to find his God. He is a very spiritual and religious young boy and has been from the time he can remember.

By telling story through the impressionable adolescent, the reader learns the conflicted feelings he has about his parents and their lack of interest in organized religion. When young Pete meets up with the revivalist preacher, who he refers to as The Preacher Man, his admiration for the stranger and his vulnerability are apparent in his words and thoughts that he shares in his story.

Through Pete's words, the reader learns that his devotion to the Preacher is growing each time he attends one of the revivalist sermons delivered by him. He is at the peak of susceptibility when the Preacher convinces him that he has been touched by God and that he should go off with him and help save people. When Pete's dreams of traveling with Preacher Man are disrupted, he tells of his anguish and pain.

In the end, however, through the character's voice, the reader is privy to his growth and understanding. He learns that his parents are wonderful and that great people are found in places other than church and that all those in church aren't what they seem to be.

## Setting

A Fine White Dust, the story of a youngster's quest to grow closer to God, takes place in a small town in North Carolina. The backdrop of the story includes the home of the protagonist, Pete Cassidy, that he, an only child, shares with his parents. Settings that are also featured in the story include the town's filling station and the town's drugstore.

The town's Baptist Church is one of the main settings of the story. The church is the one that Pete attends regularly and is described as the small town's largest church. This is the church where Preacher Man had been dispatched to sermonize during the church's revival week. The church is the location where Pete meets the Preacher who saves him, inspires him and draws him in with talk of spiritualism only to later disappoint and abandon him.

Pete first sees Preacher Man before he knows he is coming to his church. He spots him on the highway hitchhiking his way into town. And, he sees him at the drugstore fountain where he seems to stare at Pete, his piercing blue eyes intense and frightening.

After they become acquainted, Preacher Man tells Pete that he was touched by God and that he should minister to people. Once convinced that God is calling him, Pete



agrees to leave town and go on the revivalist road with Preacher Man. The two plan to meet at the filling station but Pete's friend Rufus is hiding nearby and is there to support his friend when things go awry.

## Language and Meaning

A Fine White Dust is written from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old boy and therefore the words and thoughts contained in the passages are appropriate to that age. When Pete meets up with Rufus, his best friend, Rufus, calls him "an old hound dog". Patter such as this example between the two young teenagers is typical and an indication of two young boys who are close to one another and who have a long history with one another.

Since Pete, the main character, is very religious and the story focuses on religion and spiritualism, there are a number of terms that are associated with those subjects such as revival, saved, eternal damnation, disciples, and burning in hell, among others.

Ironically, Rufus is the polar opposite of his friend as far as beliefs are concerns. Rufus is an avowed atheist and the two friends have agreed to disagree and do not speak in terms of salvation.

There is a strong use of symbolism in references to a cross that belongs to Pete. The title of the story, A Fine White Dust refers to the dust from a broken ceramic cross that to Pete represents the broken relationship between him and his idol, Preacher Man.

## Structure

A Fine White Dust by Cynthia Rylant, is separated into twelve medium-length chapters. The final section is simply titled, "Amen". The book begins near the actual ending of the story. The young protagonist, Pete Cassidy, is referencing the bits and pieces of a broken ceramic cross that sheds white dust from its shattered pieces. The story then flashbacks a year to the beginning of the episode that led to Pete winding up with a broken cross.

This flashback segment which encompasses the majority of the story is told in basically a chronological and straightforward manner. Author Rylant uses the cliffhanger in several instances. For example, in Chapter Seven, Preacher Man asks the thirteen-year-old Pete to run away from home and go on the evangelical road with him. The chapter ends with the youngster agreeing to go with him, which leaves the reader anxious to find out what happens and hoping that the kid doesn't go with the strange "holy" man.

The story returns to the present day in the ending chapter, "Amen", the title of which is symbolic itself. Pete, having described the year that led him to that point, then explains that the broken cross represented to him the broken relationship between him and the

Preacher Man. Once he had vented his emotions and anguish over his experience, he was prepared to throw the broken cross away and look for something that is whole.



## Quotes

"I figure it's got something to do with finishing things up. Maybe if I just tell, the story, tell it all from start to end, I'll finish it."

Chap. 1, p. 4

"And His eyes. They were like those brown ponds you sometimes see in the woods. So dark and shining—but when you try to see yourself in them, you can't."

Chap. 1, p. 6

"All this time I'm thinking he's some lunatic who hitched into town to murder people with a pickax, and I'm his first target." (Chapter 2, page 10)

"Moments as a little child, I guess, that caused my heart nearly to burst—some wonderful toy, the ocean, my mother coming home to me. Such moments as those I guess brought the joy."

Chap. 4, p. 23

"I would have died for him. And in some ways, I guess I did."

Chap. 6, p. 36

"When I stuck my face to the window to see what he was doing, I saw that Darlene, standing with her apron in her hand, had him cornered, and I gave up on him coming out anytime soon. Girls never shut up once they've got somebody cornered." Chapter 7, page 45)

"You think about it now and then, Of you could just get away, you could find what you want. If you could just light out on your own, you'd find out about life. You'd be free."

Chap. 8, p. 59

"Just as the Lord would have wanted it, I set my house in order."

Chap. 9, p. 72

"I wondered why God had done it all to me. Made me meet the Preacher and set me on fire. Why God was calling me away from my folks. Why he couldn't find some way to let me have the Preacher and have them, too."

Chap. 9, p. 74

"You think there aren't enough minutes in the day to do all you have to do sometimes. But watch a clock and those minutes go so slow, you wonder how anybody gets through a whole day with so much time sitting there to be filled up."

Chap. 9, p. 79

"I didn't want to get up but I didn't want to stay in bed, either. I didn't want to cry but I didn't want not to cry. I didn't want to remember but I didn't want to forget."

Chap. 10, p. 87



"I guess the secret I never wanted to find out was that life can be so hard. And that people are not always what you think they are. Or what you want them to be."  
Chap. 12, p. 94



## Topics for Discussion

What made Pete vulnerable to Preacher Man? How did Preacher Man use Pete's faith to his benefit?

What indicated that Preacher Man had a "god complex"? What lofty opinion did he have of himself? Why did he call Pete "Peter" sometimes?

What were Preacher Man's intentions when he planned to leave town with Pete? Why did he change his mind?

What were Preacher Man's intentions when he left town with Darlene Cook? Out of all the rumors about what happened during the three weeks Darlene left town, what is most likely the truth?

What demonstrated that Pete's parents were good people?

How did Pete's parents lack of communication with their son potentially place him in jeopardy?

What did the broken cross symbolize? Why was Pete able to throw it away after he was able to tell his story about Preacher Man?



## Essay Topics

1. Discuss the differences between atheism and agnosticism.
2. In this story Pete decides to leave his parents and his home to follow the Preacher Man and bring the Word to sinners everywhere. Is this believable?

Critic Betsy Hearne says, "Neither the Preacher nor his services . . . are vividly enough rendered to make totally convincing Pete's decision to leave a home he loves." Do you agree with her?

3. What about Pete's isolated environment caused him to be more gullible?
4. While reading, mark each time the phrase "the telling" is used. Why did the author repeat it several times?
5. At the beginning of the book Peter is thirteen and he begins to give an extremely detailed account of what happened a year before. He explains his feelings throughout. Is it believable that a boy could tell a story like this a year later with so much clarity and detail and without any bias against the preacher even though he knew at the time of the telling that his idol betrayed him at the end?
6. What did Pete learn from the preacher's betrayal?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research atheism. Are there any famous or important people who are atheists?
2. Research the history and doctrine of your religion.
3. Research the ministry of Billy Sunday, Marjo Gortner, Oral Roberts, Billy Graham, and other evangelists.
4. Explain the concept of "born again." Look up "evangelism" and "evangelicalism" and explain what these terms mean.
5. What is local color in literature?

How does the term pertain to this book?

6. Read and compare Rylant's books for young children with her books for older readers.



## Further Study

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*, Vol. 44. Detroit: Gale, 1986: 167-168. Provides a brief account of the author's life and a list of her published work.

Cummins, Julie. "Cynthia Rylant: A Fine White Dust." *School Library Journal* 33 (September, 1986): 138. Teachers may find that reading reviews such as this helps them prepare to teach the unit.

Hearne, Betsy. "Cynthia Rylant: A Fine White Dust." *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 40 (September, 1986): 17. This is a review of *A Fine White Dust*.

Rudin, Ellen. "The Trumpet Club's Author of the Month, Cynthia Rylant." Author kit with audiotape, New York: The Trumpet Club, 1992.

Presented in a question and answer format, this is an excellent source of information about the author. Listeners have the opportunity to hear the author's own voice as she answers the questions.

Rylant, Cynthia. "A Letter to the Class." *The Trumpet Club: Primary Years* (March 1992). Contains a picture and a short letter which gives some insight into the author.

Zeiger, Hanna B. "Cynthia Rylant: A Fine White Dust." *Horn Book* 62 (November/December 1986): 746. This is a review of *A Fine White Dust* which teachers may find useful when preparing to teach the book.

## Related Titles

Pete eventually finds that he does not need church so much, but he still needs God. This is what Margaret discovers in *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume (1970).

Both religion and regionalism are important aspects of Katherine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980); however, the plot and themes are very different from *A Fine White Dust*.

*Which Way Courage?* by Eiveen Weinman (1981) is about an Amish girl who must make decisions about religion even though it means a break from her family.

There are quite a few books that take place in isolated mountain regions with strong but poor characters. The following list of books have the regional flavor of *A Fine White Dust*, but they do not have religion as the central theme.

If one of the purposes of teaching *A Fine White Dust* is to show how regional stories are developed, some of these books could be used. *Come Sing, Jimmy Jo* by Katharine Paterson (1985) is about a boy who was taken away from the rural region where he lived with his grandmother and forced to sing in country music performances.

During this time he works through several problems, including discovering who his parents really are. Most of Robert Burch's books have a rural regional flavor. Many take place in Georgia. *Ida Early Comes Over the Mountain* (1980) and *Christmas with Ida Early* (1983) both tell of the big, unkempt mountain woman who came to stay with a motherless family and how they got along together. *Queenie Peavy* (1966) is about a girl who must overcome problems caused by poverty and her dysfunctional family, and make a decision not to be a delinquent. Vera and Bill Cleaver have written several regional books. *Ellen Grae* (1967) and *Grover* (1978) both take place in the same area and have characters who are friends. Both work through ethical problems, but not problems involving religion. The characters in *Where the Lilies Bloom* (1969) face survival problems in their isolated mountain home after the death of their father. Other authors whose books show the language and flavor of Appalachia are James Still, Rebecca Caudill, and Mildred Lee.



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