

The Five People You Meet in Heaven Study Guide

The Five People You Meet in Heaven by Mitch Albom

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Plot Summary

The novel *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* was published in 2003 and is about a character named Eddie, who is a crippled veteran of World War II. Life has been hard for him, beginning with his birth to an abusive drunk who earns his living maintaining the equipment for an amusement park named Ruby Pier. The only bright and redeeming feature of Eddie's growing-up years is his mother, who loves him unconditionally but does not prevent his father from neglecting him, beating him and abusing him verbally and emotionally.

The story begins with Eddie's death at eighty-three years of age and then through flashbacks reveals his entire life. He wears a badge that reads "Eddie Maintenance." The children call him that, as if Maintenance were his last name. He is in charge of the rides at Ruby Pier along with his assistant, Dominguez. Eddie takes pride in the accident-free safety record at the Pier. In the first chapter, readers learn that a young man has lost his car keys, and eventually the keys cause the most popular ride, Freddy's Free Fall, to malfunction. Eddie directs the rescue of riders whose cart has tilted. The ride starts again. Eddie sees that the cable has been shredded, but he is unable to make himself heard in time to prevent one of the carts from falling towards a little girl. He leaps to save her, and that is the last thing he remembers on earth.

The remainder of the novel is told in alternating present-tense encounters in Heaven and flashbacks that are organized around Eddie's birthdays. He is told that he will meet five people in Heaven, and the purpose of those meetings is to help him understand his life on earth. The first person he meets is the Blue Man from the freak show on the Pier, who died when Eddie was eight years old. The Blue Man reveals that eight-year-old Eddie was responsible for the Blue Man's death when he ran in front of the car the Blue Man was driving. In Heaven, the man tells Eddie his life story, and the lesson Eddie is to learn from this first person is that there are no random acts. All lives are interconnected, and fairness does not govern life or death.

The second person Eddie meets is his captain from the war. Four of his men, including Eddie, were captured with him in the Philippines. The captain was killed by a landmine as they were escaping after several months as captives of brutal enemy soldiers. Eddie was sure that there was a child in a tent he had torched, and he was going into the fire to rescue it. As he headed into the fire, Eddie's leg was shot, leaving him a resentful cripple for the rest of his life. His chief resentment is an unproductive life spent maintaining rides in an amusement park as the result of the war and the injury. He discovers in this second encounter in Heaven that his captain shot him in order to save him from being burned in the tent. He comes to accept the act of the captain, who was determined to leave no one behind. The lesson he learns is that no one dies for nothing and that when you sacrifice something precious, such as a leg, you always gain something. Eddie just doesn't know yet what he has gained.

The third person Eddie meets is a woman named Ruby, for whom Ruby Pier was named long before Eddie's time. He meets her near a diner, where Eddie is shocked to



find his father. She takes him to a scene in his family's kitchen where an old friend of his father's, Mickey Shea, attempts to assault his mother. His father comes home and chases Mickey with a hammer but ends up rescuing him from an attempted suicide-by-drowning off the pier. Ruby tells Eddie that his father is angry but that he can't let an old friend die without trying to save him. Mickey befriended Eddie's father in times of need. Besides, Mickey has just lost his job because of his drinking and is drunk at the time. His father gets them both out of the water, but he is unable to get himself up from the beach for several hours. He dies of pneumonia a few weeks later, and Eddie ends up working on the Pier to save his father's job. Once his father dies, he stays on the job, and he and Marguerite move into the same apartment house where he had grown up. The lesson he learns from this encounter is taught by Ruby. She tells him that anger is self-destructive and that he must forgive. Eddie goes back to the diner and kneels beside his father, who is not able to hear him or speak to him because he has already moved on in Heaven. Eddie tells him that he has forgiven him and is letting his resentment go.

The fourth person Eddie meets is his wife, Marguerite. Their relationship was a rewarding and fulfilling one although it went through a bad period when Eddie lost money at a racetrack. The money would have paid for the adoption of a child that Marguerite wanted very much, since she was unable to bear children. He called her from the racetrack to tell her that he was winning, and she was angry and begged him to come home. In retaliation for her anger, he foolishly gambled away all he had won. She was remorseful that she was angry when he called and drove to the racetrack to tell him so. On the way, she had an accident and was seriously injured. Eventually, they got past the damage that had been done, and for the last three years before she died of a brain tumor, they were once again close and supportive. Now they have a happy reunion in Heaven, organized against the backdrop of several weddings from different countries. The lesson that he learns from this fourth encounter is that lost love is still love. It just takes a different form. Although life has to end, love doesn't.

The fifth person Eddie meets is a little girl, named Tala, whom he tried to rescue in the burning tent in the Philippines in the war. She asks him to take a stone and wash her as her mother had done. When he does, all the damage done by the fire is washed away. She asks him why he was so unhappy on earth, and he tells her it was because he never accomplished anything. She tells him that he was where he was supposed to be, keeping children safe on the rides for her sake. She also tells him that he did, in fact, save the little girl from the falling cart and that as he died, the hands he felt in his were her own, Tala's. She was bringing him to Heaven to keep him safe, she tells him. At last, Eddie feels peace. Eddie is then transported back to Marguerite to spend eternity with her at home in Heaven.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

"The End." The story begins with the end. Eddie is at Ruby Pier, an amusement park, which has a new ride, Freddy's Free Fall, where he will be killed. Eddie works in a maintenance shop - spreading grease, tightening bolts and performing other mechanical tasks. He hadn't planned to spend his life doing this, but his plans never materialized. He gave up and accepted this as his fate.

Today is Eddie's birthday, but there is no one to celebrate it. He gives a co-worker twenty dollars to spend on his wife on a vacation they are preparing to take. At one time, Ruby Pier was a popular summer retreat with animals, dance contests and fireworks. It has gone into decline because of competition from theme parks.

Eddie's combat service in the war earned him medals and a crippling wound to his leg. The wound is rumored to have come from an argument with another soldier. In fact, Eddie has many scars and poorly healed fractures. He has led a colorful life on the Pier, which is where he met his one true love, Marguerite. Their first date was at a dance there. Her memory now is a wound that does not heal.

The telling of Eddie's story is interrupted by an account of another episode on the Pier, a recent one, when a young man loses his car key. Then, readers return to Eddie's story. He is remembering the night in the Stardust Band Shell with Marguerite before he was crippled and when he danced gracefully with her to "You Made Me Love You." He can feel her hand on his shoulder.

A little girl breaks Eddie's reverie, a little girl he has seen several times this summer. "Scuuse me," she says. "Eddie Maint'nance man?" (p. 12, l. 9) He makes a rabbit for her from pipe cleaners that he keeps in his pocket. Today is Eddie's eighty-third birthday. Friends and family are long gone. Readers get a glimpse of Eddie's philosophy: "When your time came, it came, and that was that." (p. 13, ll. 20-21) Eddie's last words will be, "Get back."

Eddie is shaken from his musings about Marguerite by a commotion at Freddy's Free Fall. A car is tilted, and passengers are hanging on for dear life. Eddie takes charge and barks instructions to the two attendants for getting the passengers out. He thinks of disasters at other parks and feels proud that Ruby Pier has a perfect safety record. He tries to figure out in his mind what could have caused this malfunction. The two attendants right the cart and rescue the passengers, following Eddie's directions.

Then, unexpectedly, the cable begins to unravel. Now readers learn that the car key lost by the young man earlier this summer has been lodged against the cable for some time, slowly shredding it. Eddie suddenly realizes what is happening and shouts to the attendant not to release the cart, but because of the roar of the cheering crowd, he



cannot be heard. Then he sees the little girl with the rabbit he made for her sprawled on the platform of the ride, crying for her mommy. He abandons his cane and painfully lunges to rescue her as the cart is plummeting toward her. The last thing he is aware of before he dies is the feeling of two small hands in his own.

This chapter closes with a flashback to the day of Eddie's birth in 1920, titled "Today Is Eddie's Birthday." This flashback device to a previous birthday of Eddie's will be used several times in the story. In this first one, his father is led from the waiting room to the nursery, where he views his tiny son for the first time.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This story is very well crafted. The introductory paragraph lays out the essence of the story by giving readers a vignette of the protagonist, Eddie, as a kindly maintenance worker who is popular with small children. At the outset, Eddie saves a child, and at the end, a child, another little girl, who loses her life through Eddie's actions when he is a young man, helps him understand and reconcile with not only her death but also the life he has lived keeping children safe.

Through a flashback, readers are also introduced to Eddie's father at the time of the child's birth. This same father neglects and abuses his son as long as he lives. This device, "Today Is Eddie's Birthday," is used throughout the novel to weave the story.

Eddie is based on Mitch Albom's Uncle Eddie Beitchman, who was much loved by his nieces and nephews. Uncle Eddie was a World War II veteran and a taxi driver who died at the age of eighty-three, the same as the Eddie of our story. He, too, rarely left his home city and felt that he didn't accomplish what he should have. Mitch's Uncle Eddie often told the children of a near-death experience when he saw dead relatives waiting for him at the end of his bed.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

"The Journey." Eddie is not cognizant of his final moment on earth. Unlike other stories about the hereafter, he does not get a chance to come back and set things right. Rather, he is floating in a pumpkin-colored atmosphere. All he remembers of his last moment is the cart falling, the little girl - Amy or Annie, he is unsure of her name - crying and her two small hands in his. As at a distance and without emotion, Eddie wonders whether he saved her. The only feeling he has is one of calmness. The pain he has endured for much of his life is gone.

The colors of the atmosphere change constantly, and then Eddie is over a yellow sea, which is also changing colors. He feels himself falling until he is under water. Everything is quiet, and Eddie has no worries or pain.

"Today Is Eddie's Birthday." This flashback takes readers to Eddie's fifth birthday, which is being celebrated at a picnic at Ruby Pier. His birthday gift is a cowboy hat and a play pistol. His Uncle Mickey, who works with his dad at the Pier fixing rides, holds him upright by his feet and lightly bumps his head, once for each year of his life. He flees to his mother's arms for refuge. She tells him that he has been a good boy on his birthday.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Heaven in this book is not the Heaven of the Book of Revelation. There are no streets of gold, and there is no reunion with dear ones. Changing landscapes and colors will set the stage for the various places Eddie will visit in his Heaven.

Mickey Shea is introduced in this chapter's flashback to a birthday. This scene also foreshadows the role that Mickey will play in Eddie's father's death. His insensitive treatment of the small boy, even though not malicious, sets the stage for the later tragic events.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

"The Arrival." Eddie wakes up in a teacup on one of the rides on Ruby Pier and finds that he can get out without his cane. He feels wonderful but alone and surprised to find that he is still at Ruby Pier. It is different, though. It is the Ruby Pier of his childhood, seventy-five years ago.

Eddie tries to talk but can't. He is fascinated that his body is young again. He runs around the park of the past because he can. He stops running in front of the freak house, which was shut down fifty years ago. He goes past all the peculiar human beings to see a man whose skin is blue. The man says, "Hello, Edward. I have been waiting for you." (p. 31, l. 10)

Chapter 3 Analysis

Readers see once again the weaving together of past with present as the encounter with the Blue Man is set up.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

"The First Person Eddie Meets in Heaven." The Blue Man tells Eddie in a soothing voice not to be afraid. He suggests that Eddie's body feels like that of a child, and Eddie agrees. "You were a child when you knew me, that's why," he says. "You start with the same feelings you had." (p. 32, ll. 10, 11)

The Blue Man walks outside, Eddie following, to find an empty amusement park. He asks Eddie about one of the rides from that seventy-five-years-ago time. He tells Eddie that things don't change where they are now. Eddie asks the Blue Man how he (Eddie) died and when. The Blue Man answers that he died in an accident, and he has been here a minute, an hour or a thousand years. Eddie asks where he is now, and the Blue Man tells him that he is in Heaven.

When Eddie expresses shock that Ruby Pier is Heaven, the Blue Man responds that people often belittle the place where they were born but that Heaven has many steps. For Eddie this is the first one. For the Blue Man, it is the second one. Eddie has spent his entire life trying to escape Ruby Pier and can't accept that it is a blessed resting place. Eddie still can't speak, but the Blue Man tells him that his voice will come. People are unable to talk when they first come because it helps them listen.

The Blue Man tells Eddie that there are five people he will meet in Heaven, each having been in his life for some reason. Heaven is for understanding one's life on earth, the greatest gift that God can give you. Eddie asks the Blue Man what he died of, and the Blue Man answers that Eddie killed him.

"Today is Eddie's Birthday." Today is Eddie's seventh birthday, and his gift is a baseball. He plays catch with his brother Joe on the Pier until a man and woman from the freak show interrupt them. They frighten the boys, who run home.

Readers return to the exchange between Eddie and the Blue Man. The Blue Man tells the story of his life. He was brought to this country as an immigrant and as a small boy worked alongside his father in a factory. However, he was a very nervous child and was terrified of the foreman. He once dropped a sack of buttons in the presence of the foreman and was so severely reprimanded that he wet his pants, causing his father to be humiliated. The boy became a bed wetter, which was a stigma in the eyes of his father, and he went to a druggist to get something to help him with his nerves. The druggist sold him silver nitrate, a poison, which he took in larger than recommended doses because it didn't seem to help. As a result, his skin began to turn a blue color, and he couldn't get a job because of it. He happened to meet a group of carnival workers, who persuaded him to join the carnival. He traveled with carnivals for several years before he came to Ruby Pier one winter and found a home. He worked in the



freak show and had a room of his own over a sausage shop. People were not scared of him, and he played cards at night with the workers at the Pier - even Eddie's father.

On a rainy Sunday morning, the Blue Man was driving a Ford Model A that belonged to a friend when he nearly ran over a boy chasing a baseball on the street. He managed to get the car to a side street, where he had a heart attack as a result of his fright. He died on that street. The boy had been Eddie, chasing the ball he had been given on his seventh birthday. Eddie is horrified when he realizes what his role has been in the death of this man.

"Today Is Eddie's Birthday." This flashback is to Eddie's eighth birthday. His gift is an erector set, but he can't play with it because he must go to a funeral.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Readers are transported to an earlier time. The treatment that turned the Blue Man into a freak has long since been prohibited. The automobile underscores the time differential. Some writers use a time machine to achieve this. Albon uses flashback techniques, and he ties it all together with his "Today Is Eddie's Birthday" device.

This story has sometimes been criticized as being oversentimentalized. All the encounters focus on the healing of damaged emotions, as does the story of the Blue Man, who finds a home and a life at Ruby Pier. The Blue Man tries to soothe Eddie as he encounters the strangeness of Heaven for the first time.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

"The First Lesson" Eddie assumes that he is now being confronted by the Blue Man because he must pay for his role in his death, but he finds that the purpose is quite different. The Blue Man is here to teach him something. He tells Eddie that all the people he will meet are here for that purpose - to teach him something.

"That there are no random acts. That we are all connected. That you can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind." (p. 48, ll. 1-3) He tells him that fairness does not govern life and death.

Eddie and the Blue Man are suddenly transported to a cemetery, and they witness the funeral of the Blue Man. He points out that there are many people gathered there, including Eddie. He says that people do that because "...the human spirit knows, deep down, that all lives intersect....death doesn't take someone, it misses someone else, and in the small distance between being taken and being missed, lives are changed" (p. 48, line 19, ff.).

Eddie views the funeral that he attended so resentfully when he was eight years old and says that he does not understand why he lived and the Blue Man died. They barely knew each other, he says. "I might as well have been a stranger." (p. 49, l. 16) The Blue Man responds that strangers are just family you have yet to know.

The Blue Man puts his arms around him and Eddie feels everything the Blue Man has felt in his life. Eddie asks the Blue Man whether he saved the little girl, but he gets no answer. The Blue Man vanishes. Eddie is lifted into the air, looking down at the Ruby Pier of his childhood, and then it is gone.

"Sunday, 3 P.M." Readers are now back in the present at the Pier. People are stunned by the carnage and wait for the ambulance to come.

"Today Is Eddie's Birthday." This flashback is to Eddie's seventeenth birthday. His mother is grilling steak. Joe tells the family that Eddie has told him that he has found the girl he is going to marry. Eddie had not intended that his brother reveal this confidence, and the two brothers get into a fight. After dinner, the family listens to news about the war in Europe. His mother switches to a station that has music, and she dances with him and assures him that it's all right about the girl. Then she coaxes the brothers to dance together, and they make peace with each other.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The Five People You Meet in Heaven is didactic in nature. That is, it intends to teach. The lessons are not subtle or obscure. The teachers are the people Eddie meets, and



they deliberately present him with lessons for living. This characteristic of this story is also criticized sometimes by people who feel that fiction should not be a sermon. Whether it is a positive or negative attribute, the genre of the story is that of a parable, a story that teaches a lesson.

The reader will find it useful to remember that Mitch Albom's old teacher, who was dying when Mitch reconnected with him, taught him many lessons in those last few weeks of his life. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Albom writes of how valuable and important the lessons of Morrie are to him. There is, no doubt, some connection between the experience with Morrie and Albom's concept of Heaven as presented in *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. Later, readers will see what some of the lessons he learned from Morrie are and how they are expressed in this novel. In this story, Albom has put together his Uncle Eddie's near-death vision of the members of his family at the foot of his bed and Morrie's teachings when he was also near death.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

"The Second Person Eddie Meets in Heaven." Eddie finds himself in a godforsaken terrain in a rainstorm, and he comes upon a rifle stuck in the ground topped with a helmet and with his own dog tags hanging from it. Eddie is saving money to go to engineering school, since he likes building things. Then, he enlists in the army over his mother's objections. His father is indifferent. One day after he enlists, he is practicing shooting in one of the arcades on the Pier when Mickey Shea comes up to him and forcefully says to Eddie: "War is not a game. If there's a shot to be made, you make it, you hear? No guilt. No hesitation....You want to come home again, you just fire, you don't think." (p. 59, l. 25, ff.)

Readers are now back to the present with Eddie in Heaven. He recognizes this desolate place as a battlefield he was on when he was a soldier. Then he discovers his captain from the war in a tree and climbs up to join him. The captain is talking to him. Now Eddie is wondering whether he killed him, too, like the Blue Man. He tells the captain that he went back to the amusement park and spent his life working maintenance.

In a flashback, readers are taken to a battle scene. Four soldiers and the captain are captives of four enemy soldiers and are confined to a bamboo barracks where they endure months of deprivation and misery. Eventually, they are moved to a coal mine where they are forced to strip coal. Rabozzo, the weakest of the four captives, becomes ill and is eventually murdered in front of the others by one of the soldiers guarding them. Bombing can be heard in the distance.

A few weeks later, one of the guards is trying to juggle two stones. Eddie sees his opportunity, since he had become an accomplished juggler on the Pier. He coaxes the guard to let him have the stones, and he performs dazzling tricks for all the guards. He, the captain and the others attack the distracted guards, using the stones to overcome them and to gain weapons. They all flee, leaving the four guards dead, taking vengeance for Rabozzo. They find no other enemy soldiers once they are outside, and they decide to blow up the mine and burn the barracks before they escape.

"Today is Eddie's Birthday." The birthday celebration is also a farewell. Eddie is going into the army. Marguerite comes, and she and Eddie walk on the beach. She offers to wait for him. The scene shifts back to the battle. The three soldiers are to burn the barracks while the captain goes to secure a transport vehicle. However, in the last tent that Eddie is setting on fire, he thinks he sees a child, and he tries to go back in to rescue it. He is shot in the knee and badly burned before his fellow soldiers pull him out and put him in the vehicle the captain has found.

Now Eddie and the captain are back in the tree, and the captain is recalling the fire and the injured knee. Eddie tells him that it destroyed any life that he might have wished for.



The captain reminds him that he promised his men that no one would be left behind, which was the idea he believed in that kept him going. Then he reveals to Eddie that he (the captain) was the one who shot him. Eddie lunges at him with all the pent-up anger he has harbored all these years. They both fall out of the tree.

The captain tells Eddie that if he hadn't shot him, Eddie would have died in the fire. "I took your leg," he says, "to save your life." (p. 88, l. 2, ff.) He couldn't let him die in the fire, he says. He thought that a leg wound would heal. Now, Eddie finds that the captain was killed by a landmine as they tried to escape. He was trying to get his men out alive.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 is a pivotal episode in this story. There is, in fact, a child in the tent, and that child will be the tool that Albom uses to tie the story together. A child is saved in the first chapter. The second child is not saved, but she helps the protagonist resolve the action of the story.

The conflict in this story is between Eddie and a hostile world. His world starts out unfavorably because of a neglectful, abusive father. He has no means of defending himself from the emotional scarring caused by the neglect and the beatings. His war experience not only cripples him but also prevents him from realizing his dreams. In this way, his physical crippling is symbolic of emotional crippling. Eddie battles these forces until the day he dies. Only in death does he realize that he has come out the winner. He has lived his life in a meaningful way and has been true to himself by working so hard and so diligently to protect children from harm.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

"The Second Lesson." Now Eddie knows that the spot where they are standing is the captain's burial ground. There was no funeral or coffin. The captain says that dying is not the end. It is only the beginning. He says that he has been waiting for Eddie all these years. The captain and the Blue Man are part of Eddie's life, and once this encounter is over, the captain will be able to move on.

The captain tells Eddie that sacrifice is essential. People don't die for nothing. All the men in the truck might have driven over that landmine, he says, and all would have been lost. Besides, he says, he got to keep his promise to leave no one behind. When you sacrifice something that is precious, he says, you don't actually lose it. You pass it on to someone else. Eddie sacrificed his leg and lost something, but he gained something as well. He just doesn't know what yet. Eddie forgives the captain for the injury. The captain goes away, and the landscape becomes lush and green and unscarred. Eddie still doesn't know whether or not he saved the little girl at the amusement park.

Now readers are back at Ruby Pier on the day following the accident. The park is closed. The two maintenance workers feel at a loss because Eddie is not there to get the workday started.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Suspense is an important tool for a writer. If it is used well, the reader will keep reading to find out what the resolution of the story is. An important reason that readers enjoy fiction is that they are able to experience resolution, a very important aspect of our lives. Resolution is even built into the music we listen to. Music will build to a climax, and then eventually, there will be resolution. In our daily lives, we are curious about what's in the mail, and we feel resolution when we open the mailbox and remove its contents. When a young person is on a quest for someone to spend his or her life with, once that person is found, there is an immense feeling of resolution for both parties.

Albom artfully uses the little girl - Amy or Annie - to build suspense until the very last chapter, when readers find out whether or not Eddie has saved her life. The resolution the reader experiences in the last chapter is one of the reasons this book has been so popular.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

"The Third Person Eddie Meets in Heaven." Eddie is in Heaven again and has been transported to a mountain range. There is snow on the ground, and he is wondering whether there are no more people to meet. Then he sees an old-fashioned diner with a sign reading "EAT" above it. He sees people in the diner and then someone he knows - his father.

"Today is Eddie's Birthday." Eddie is in a V.A. hospital, and his family and Marguerite are there. His mother has brought a cake. He is in bed and is deeply hurt because of his father's indifference. The author comments now. "All parents damage their children," he writes. "It cannot be helped." (p. 104, ll. 1, 2)

Then the author tells the story of the neglect and abuse of Eddie by his father throughout his life. Eddie's father drinks excessively, and he beats his two sons for no reason. There are brief moments when he lets a little bit of pride break through. When Eddie attacks the kids who are bothering his brother, his father tells him to be his brother's keeper and that he is the strong one. Early on, Eddie mimics his father's summer schedule of getting up early and staying at the park until evening. He works in the repair shop with his father. There is never any praise; still, Eddie loves his father and longs for his approval.

Joe, meanwhile, works at the pool. He comes home in the evening clean and smelling of seawater, which causes Eddie to feel envious because Eddie comes home dirty and stained with grease. He also begins imitating his father's denial of feelings and affection.

After Eddie returns from the hospital, he withdraws from everyone and everything. This irritates his father, and he insists that Eddie get a job, which leads to a physical confrontation. For the first time, Eddie defends himself against his father's violence. From that day forward, his father never speaks to Eddie again. Eddie moves into an apartment, takes a job driving a cab and gets married, but his father remains silent. His mother tries to intervene to no effect.

Now, in Heaven, Eddie must meet his father again. An old woman that Eddie does not recognize is the third person he will meet, and she is talking to him about herself. Eddie's father can't hear him, and Eddie wants to know why. The woman tells Eddie that his father's spirit is part of her eternity, but he is not really here.

The woman takes Eddie to the bottom of a mountain, away from the diner. He doesn't understand why he is meeting a stranger here. He expected to see in Heaven the people he knew and loved on earth. He asks her why he can't have peace with himself now that he is in Heaven, and she answers, "You have peace when you make it with yourself." (p. 113, ll. 3, 4) Eddie denies the truth of this and thinks about his life after the



war. He thinks about the bad dreams, about not caring much about anything and about going to the docks alone and watching the helpless, flopping fish and seeing himself.

Now the woman tells her life story and her connection to Eddie. She grew up poor and worked as a waitress at the Seahorse Grille, a diner, now long gone, where Eddie ate breakfast from time to time. She met and married a wealthy man who was a patron of the diner, and he built Ruby Pier for her. Her name is Ruby.

"Today Is Eddie's Birthday." Eddie is thirty-three. He awakens from a nightmare, reliving the fire in the Philippines, where he lost his leg. He has had these recurring nightmares since he returned from the war. He is married to Marguerite now, and she has made him a cake and bought taffy as a reminder of their first date on the Pier. The celebration is interrupted by a phone call.

Readers are back in Heaven now, and Eddie and Ruby are conversing. He realizes why she looks familiar to him. He saw an old photograph of her. Her face adorned the original entrance to the park, and now he learns that a Fourth of July fire destroyed not only the entrance but the entire park. Her husband's fortune was lost, never to be recovered. He never got his health back, even though they went on to raise three children. She was widowed in her fifties. Eddie doesn't understand what Ruby's life has to do with him, but she replies that she is here to tell him why his father died.

Now readers flash back to the thirty-third birthday. The phone call is from Eddie's mother. His father is ill. Earlier in the week, he came home one evening wet and smelling like the ocean. He continued to go to work even though he was ill. Eventually, he went to the hospital, and the doctor called the illness pneumonia.

Eddie works at the Pier in the evenings after driving cabs all day to protect his father's job, doing what he was trained by his father to do. When Eddie was growing up, if he said anything disparaging about the work at the Pier, his father's answer was always, "What? This ain't good enough for you?" Again the author takes time out to philosophize: "Parents rarely let go of their children, so children let go of them." (p. 126, ll. 13, 14)

After Eddie's father's death, his mother cannot come to grips with his death, so Eddie takes a job at the Pier and an apartment in the building where he grew up. This way, he and Marguerite can be near Eddie's mother and look after her. Eddie is angry at his father and feels that he is laughing at Eddie from his grave because now the job is apparently good enough for him.

"Today Is Eddie's Birthday." Eddie meets a friend, Noel, for breakfast on his thirty-seventh birthday. They discuss a fatal accident at another park, and Eddie shudders. He fears that such a thing might happen on his watch. He and Noel agree to go to the horse track that evening.



Chapter 8 Analysis

Characterization is a term that means the way an author develops a character. For example, readers might come to know a lot about a character because of his or her speech. A character's actions are, of course, very important to understanding a character. Physical description also plays an important part in understanding a particular character. The reaction of other characters can also give clues to what a character is like.

Readers know a lot about the protagonist, Eddie. Mitch Albom has created him based on an image he knew well, his Uncle Eddie. The author's description tells the readers much about Eddie. He is solidly built and is always able to look after himself and his brother. He is crippled and must use a cane. He wears a badge that tells everyone who he is and what he does: Eddie Maintenance. His actions are important to understanding him. He loves his wife very much, and his life loses its luster after she dies. He tries to rescue a small child despite the danger to his own life in the war, and he does give his life to rescue a small child at the Pier. He is very good at what he does. The safety record at the Pier is exemplary because of him. Everyone depends on him and trusts him to keep things in perfect shape. He knows and understands the machinery.

Perhaps the best clues to this character's personality, though, are in the reactions of other characters. The children love him. His fellow workers depend on him, and his wife is devoted to him.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

"The Third Lesson." Ruby and Eddie discuss his troubled relationship with his father, and she points out that although the last thing he said to Eddie, to get up and get a job, was hurtful, Eddie did pick himself up. His father had, in fact, been helpful.

Now Ruby takes Eddie back to his parents' kitchen, and he witnesses a scene with his mother and Mickey Shea. Mickey tries to assault Eddie's mother, and his father comes home. With a hammer in his hand, he chases Mickey out of the house. Then Eddie sees Mickey at the pier, rolling himself off and into the water. He sees his father, hammer in hand, looking for his friend, who is bobbing in the water. Eddie's father gets out of his belt and manages to get one shoe off before he plunges in the water to save Mickey. Eddie's father is able to get both of them out of the water, but he is unable to get up and lies there on the beach for several hours.

Eddie is outraged and wants to know what his father was doing, and Ruby says he was saving a friend. He was enraged about what Mickey had done to his wife, Ruby says, but he knew Mickey's shortcomings. Besides, many years earlier, Mickey vouched for Eddie's father when he needed a job. He also loaned them money when Eddie was born to meet the extra expenses. His father took old friendships seriously, she tells Eddie. She also tells him that Mickey was fired that afternoon because of his drinking and that he was very drunk. His act was one of loneliness and desperation and was done on impulse. Eddie's father acted on impulse also, she tells him, at first to kill and then to keep a man alive. This is the incident that caused his father to die at fifty-six years old. He died of loyalty to a friend.

Eddie also learns that on the night his father died, his mother had at last gone home to get some rest, and Eddie's father awakened in his hospital bed to find himself alone. He went to a window and tried to get out, calling out to her and to Joe and Eddie. It was cold, and he was hanging half out of the window when they found him. He died soon after. Then Eddie finds out how Ruby knows all of this. The room his father occupied in the hospital had another bed, and in it lay Emile, Ruby's husband, who was also dying.

Ruby talks to Eddie about harboring anger. It is a curved blade, she says. It does not attack the person who has harmed you. The harm is to you. She tells Eddie that he must forgive. Eddie thinks about all the things that brought on his anger toward his father, including being stuck in the maintenance job because he needed to look after his mother. He goes back to the diner, makes his way to his father's side and tells him that he is going to let his feelings of anger toward his father go, even though his father cannot hear him.



Eddie's funeral is paid for by the park owner, using the paycheck that Eddie will never be able to pick up. In trying to find some unique qualities to mention at the funeral, his coworker says, "Eddie really loved his wife."

Chapter 9 Analysis

While this novel has been criticized for being too sentimental and too didactic, it has touched a nerve with readers. A skillful writer is able to pull his or her readers in and get them emotionally involved with the characters. Albom has demonstrated that skill, and it accounts, in large part, for the continuing popularity of *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*.

By the time readers come to this point in the story, we are emotionally involved with Eddie and his difficulties and his feelings. We have also become involved with the family. This is the story of a family that has suffered greatly, and we feel that suffering. We do not feel very sympathetic towards the brutal father, but we do now have some sense of compassion for him. Eddie is a sympathetic character - that is, he is a character that the reader identifies with and who inspires sympathy, compassion and loyalty on the part of the reader.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

"The Fourth Person Eddie Meets in Heaven." Eddie finds himself in a round building with many doors, and behind each door is a wedding reception from a different country. At last, one of the bridesmaids turns out to be a youthful Marguerite.

"Today Is Eddie's Birthday." Eddie and his brother Joe are sitting in the maintenance shop. Joe is now a salesman for a hardware company and wears a business suit. Eddie has been promoted to head of maintenance, but Joe is making three times as much money. Marguerite enters and is wearing a Ruby Pier uniform. She is working in a ticket booth this summer. She leads him outside, and a group of children are lighting the thirty-eight candles on a birthday cake and singing "Happy Birthday, Mr. Eddie." Marguerite is unable to bear children, and they are talking about adoption.

Readers are back in Heaven now, and Eddie and Marguerite are together. She tells him that she chose this place for their reunion because weddings are about possibilities, and brides and grooms are convinced invariably that their marriage will break all the records. Marguerite says that she met five people and then waited for him and that she knows that he loved her dearly. He tells her that he is sorry and that he has missed her so much.

"Today Is Eddie's Birthday." Eddie and Noel are at the racetrack to celebrate Eddie's thirty-ninth birthday. Eddie wins big and goes to call Marguerite to tell her about it. She just wants him to come home, and it makes him angry that she is not pleased. He goes back and angrily bets everything he has won. This is money they need because a soon-to-be-adopted baby is on its way. Marguerite feels bad that she has been angry at him on his birthday and decides to make the ten-minute drive to the racetrack to make amends. On the way, drunken teenagers throw a beer bottle from an overpass, and the bottle strikes her windshield. She is seriously injured as her car goes out of control.

Marguerite is in the hospital for six months, and her relationship with Eddie suffers from the fallout of the incident at the track and the accident. Eventually, they come to terms with the loss of the baby they were to adopt, and they become close again. Three years later, she develops a brain tumor and eventually dies from it.

Readers are back in Heaven now, and Eddie and Marguerite are together. Eddie tells her about what has happened on earth since her death, how he died and his experiences in Heaven up to now. She asks him what happened in the war, and he tells her, "I lost myself."



Chapter 10 Analysis

Contrast is a useful device that a writer can use to highlight points he or she is trying to make. Alбом uses that device in showing the older brother who has gone on and made a successful life for himself - successful, that is, in Eddie's mind. Not only does he get to wear good clothes and stay clean, but he has also been able to save for retirement. Most important of all, he has children. Through the brother's achievements, readers can see more clearly Eddie's disappointments with his own life. These disappointments play a major role in the point Alбом wants to make in this story. Alбом does not feel that his Uncle Eddie lived his life in vain.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

"The Fourth Lesson." Eddie and Marguerite talk about the pain of being apart and of her early departure at only forty-seven. She assures him that she has always been with him, and that his love has continued. The lesson is that lost love is still love; it just takes a different form. Life has to end; love doesn't.

Readers are now back in the present on the Pier, and Eddie's co-worker and an estate attorney are going through Eddie's apartment to find a bank statement and any other valuables that Eddie might have had. The attorney finds the statement he needs and congratulates himself on his own nest egg. He thinks how this poor slob ended up with nothing to show for his life.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Only a skillful writer could do what Albom has done with this story. The reader visits many time periods, spread over a span of seventy-five years, and yet this writer controls the story line. The reader is able to make these switches without losing track of what is going on.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

"The Fifth Person Eddie Meets in Heaven." Eddie sees only white now, and there is only silence. Marguerite is gone. He hears shrieking noises and finds that they are the voices of brown-skinned children playing in a river, and then he sees one small girl standing apart and beckoning him to come to her.

"It Is Eddie's Birthday." Eddie is fifty-one, on his first birthday since Marguerite's death. He doesn't celebrate any more. Then he is sixty, and he goes to work and uses some bologna from his sandwich to fish. Then he is sixty-eight, and his brother Joe calls from Florida to wish him a happy birthday. Then he is seventy-five, and he works at the park. Then at last he is eighty-two, and he takes a taxi to the cemetery to visit his parents' graves, his brother's grave and, at last, Marguerite's. He thinks about their life together.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Seeing in these skimpy flashbacks that Eddie's life has little meaning for him is heart-wrenching for the reader. Readers are so involved with Eddie by this stage of the story that we grieve for his unhappiness. Albee again uses the sharp contrast of these unhappy years with Eddie's reunion with Marguerite not only to underscore the difficulty of those years but also to highlight the happiness and completeness of his reunion with Marguerite.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

"The Last Lesson." The little girl tells Eddie that her name is Tala, and she points to one of the children washing the other with a stone. She tells him that their mothers used to do that for them. She finds the pipe cleaners in his pocket, and he twists some of them into a dog for her. Then she reveals to him that he caused her death in the fire when he was a soldier. She was hiding in the tent because her mother told her that she would be safe from the soldiers there. He is overcome with remorse and horror in the realization that he killed this lovely little girl. Finally, Tala hands him a stone and tells him to wash her, which he does. As he washes, the wounds from the fire vanish, and she becomes whole.

Tala wants to know why Eddie was sad when he was on earth. He tells her that it was because he accomplished nothing. She tells him that he was supposed to be at Ruby Pier because he was keeping children safe. "You keep them safe. You make good for me," she tells him. "Is where you were supposed to be, Eddie Main-ten-ance." (p. 191, ll. 18, 19 and 21-23)

Then, Eddie asks Tala about the little girl at the Pier and whether he saved her. She tells him that he pushed her out of the way of the cart and that she was safe. He says that couldn't be true, because he felt her hands in his. He couldn't have pushed her. She tells him that the hands were her own and that she has brought him to Heaven to keep him safe. Now he feels that he is being washed, and all the pain and weariness, the scars, the wounds and the bad memories are being washed away. He sees in a vision the many children, fathers and mothers who are alive because of the mundane things that Eddie has done in his life. He sees the accidents he has prevented and the rides he has kept safe. He feels peace. The children are gone now, and Marguerite is back, "and the voices melded into a single word from God: Home." (p. 194, ll. 4-6)

Chapter 13 Analysis

Now readers have resolution. We know what happened at Ruby Pier with the little girl. She is safe, and Eddie died in her stead. We also know now what happened in the Philippines. We feel resolution when we see the girl's wounds healed by the washing. Although Tala died, she has continued to watch over Eddie. She participated in the work he did to save children, and she was there when he gave his life to save the other little girl. The conflict in Eddie's mind all the years after the war about not accomplishing anything is resolved. He has, in fact, lived a meaningful life.

Given that the conflicts in this story are between Eddie and a hostile world, this chapter is the climax. Eddie now knows that the world has not won. He has overcome. He is the victor. His life has counted!



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

"Epilogue." Three days after the accident, the park reopens. Eddie's assistant is promoted to Eddie's job. He packs Eddie's things away in a trunk to be stored with other Ruby Pier memorabilia. Readers learn here that the young man whose key cut the cable was the great-grandson of Ruby, for whom the park was named.

People still come to Ruby Pier and wait in lines. Amy or Annie will grow old and die and will meet an old man in a place called the Stardust Band Shell to show her that each person affects the other and that the other affects the next. "The world is full of stories, but the stories are all one." (p. 196, l. 24)

Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter provides a fitting ending to this story where readers have bobbed back and forth between what is happening at Ruby Pier and Eddie experiencing his Five People in Heaven. It is all tied together by another visit to the here-and-now at the Pier. The little girl whose life Eddie has saved will one day meet Eddie in Heaven. He will be one of her Five People. The story comes full circle. This chapter is the denouement in the plot. All the loose ends are tied up, and the final action plays out in this chapter.



Characters

Eddie Maintenance

Eddie is the protagonist in this story. Readers get to know him through flashbacks from the time of his birth until his death at eighty-three. Even as a child, he is strong of mind and body. He looks after his older brother, Joe. Life is difficult for Eddie. His father is an abusive drunk. Eddie experiences neglect from the one person in the world he most wants approval from. Even worse than that, he is constantly beaten, not because of anything he has done, but to satisfy the father's rage. He intends to become an engineer because he likes to work on things; however, he enlists and becomes a soldier in World War II instead. He is injured in the war and is crippled for the rest of his life. When Eddie comes home, he is despondent and unable to pick up his life where he had left off. He becomes a taxi driver only after his father angrily tells him to get up and get a job. His anger toward his father spills over, and as a result of this episode, his father never again speaks to him. Eventually, because of his father's death, he must move back into the apartment building where he grew up so that he can look after his mother, who is disabled when she finds herself alone. He also takes over the job that his father held and spends his life in maintenance at Ruby Pier, just like the father he so despised. Except for the time spends in the service, he spends his life on the Pier.

At the Pier, Eddie meets Marguerite, the love of his life. Theirs is a touching love story. Even though Eddie is unhappy with the way his life is going, their love for each other survives. It takes a blow when Eddie goes to the racetrack and wins big, but in retaliation for Marguerite's anger that he is gambling, loses it all foolishly. Because of this, Marguerite has a crippling automobile accident, and they are unable to adopt the child they intended to adopt. When readers first meet Eddie, it is at the end of his life, and he is an old war-horse, toughened by a difficult life but tender and loving with children and his wife and kind to his fellow workers. He is stocky, broad-shouldered and strong not only physically but mentally. The story is Eddie's story.

Eddie's Father

Eddie's father is a hard-drinking, rough, abusive man who supports his family by working in maintenance at Ruby Pier. He is a very unsympathetic character. His life consists of his work in maintenance at the Pier, his drinking and his brutality toward his family. His more redeeming qualities are revealed when he rescues an old friend from certain death from drowning by his own hand, even though Eddie's father has caught this old friend trying to assault his wife. Eddie's father demonstrates loyalty and forgiveness in his effort to save this friend. There is also the suggestion in Eddie's encounter with his father in Heaven that he did, in fact, try to jolt him out of his depression after the war.



Mitch records in *Tuesdays with Morrie* how Morrie's father abused him in much the same way that Eddie's father abuses him in this story. This is another example of the way this writer weaves together his own experiences to make this story memorable and credible. He has taken parts of his Uncle Eddie and embellished them with what he has learned about life elsewhere.

Joe

Joe is Eddie's older but weaker brother. Eddie looks after him when he is the target of bullies. He and Eddie are close during their growing-up years even though Eddie resents the fact that Joe is able to work at a job as a lifeguard where he can come home clean in the evening while Eddie has grease-stained hands and clothes. Joe is rejected for service in the war because of his flat feet but has gone on to make a successful life for himself as a salesman. He has children and retires to Florida. He provides a useful contrast to Eddie's "unproductive" life.

Marguerite

Eddie and Marguerite meet on the Pier, and they fall in love on their first date. They dance to "You Made Me Love You" and joust over pieces of taffy. She doesn't wait for him to ask but volunteers to wait for him when he goes off to war. She demonstrates extraordinary love and forgiveness in her relationship with Eddie and never complains about the limitations of the life he makes for her. She very much wants a child but is unable to conceive, so she works out the details on an adoption, which is thwarted when Eddie goes to the racetrack and gambles away the money that would have made the adoption possible. Marguerite has a serious automobile accident when she drives to the track to try to make it up to him for being angry and spends six months in a hospital. She is supportive and loving in all the circumstances readers see her in, even forgiving him eventually for the loss of the child they were to adopt and the disastrous car-wreck that results ultimately from his foolish gambling of the money for the adoption. She is the fourth person Eddie meets in Heaven. Their reunion is as close as we come in this story to the traditional concept of Heaven, the notion that we will be with our loved ones in the hereafter. It is with Marguerite, readers are told, that Eddie will live out eternity.

The Blue Man

A very nervous child, The Blue Man once embarrasses his father by wetting his pants in the factory where they work. He continues to be a bed wetter and seeks help from a pharmacist, who sells him silver nitrate, a poison. As a result, his skin turns blue, and he becomes a freak in sideshows in carnivals. He eventually makes his way to Ruby Pier, where he finds a home and friends. He dies of a heart attack after the car he is driving almost strikes a child, who happens to be Eddie, our protagonist. He is the first person Eddie meets in Heaven.



Ruby

Ruby is the widow of the wealthy man who created Ruby Pier and named it after her. Her husband was in the same room as Eddie's father when he died, and as the second person Eddie meets in Heaven, she helps him understand his relationship with his father and the need for forgiveness.

The Captain

In the Philippines, Eddie's army captain is held captive along with Eddie and other soldiers for several months. The captain's father was in the military, and he has never known anything else. He is a rough and tough commanding officer. His commitment to leave none of his men behind drives his life. He shoots Eddie in the knee in order to get him out of a burning tent. He is, in turn, blown up by a landmine as he leads his men to escape. If he had not gone ahead of them, they would all have been blown up by the landmine.

Tala

Tala is the little girl who dies in the fire in the tent Eddie torches in the Philippines as he is trying to escape. She is the fifth person he meets in Heaven, and she helps him reconcile his role in her death and his life on earth as a maintenance man. She shows him that his life has, in fact, had meaning because he has kept children safe.

Amy or Annie

Eddie is trying to rescue a little girl named Amy or Annie when the falling cart kills him. She is often at the park alone, apparently the object of neglect by her mother. She loves Eddie, as do all the other children at the Pier. She asks him to make her a pipe-cleaner animal, and she calls him Eddie Maintenance. Readers learn at the very end of the story that Eddie does, in fact, manage to save her life.



Objects/Places

Ruby Pier of the Present

Ruby Pier is a large oceanside amusement park, and it remains popular even though its numbers of customers have declined with the advent of giant theme parks. Even though they are much more expensive, they have replaced the oceanside parks in popularity. It teems with people in the summertime and has rides as well as booths where skills are used to win prizes.

Ruby Pier in the Beginning

Readers get a glimpse of the Pier years ago when Eddie meets Ruby in Heaven. Ruby's face is on a grand entrance. Eddie recognizes her from pictures he has seen. The park is built by her wealthy husband and named for her, but it has since been rebuilt, after a fire that caused the man who created it to lose his fortune and his health.

Ruby Pier in Eddie's Childhood

Readers also see the Pier when Eddie is eight years old, when he visits the Blue Man in Heaven. At that time, it was a freak show, but it is later done away with when the viewing of deformed people for entertainment comes to be seen as unacceptable.

The Model-A Ford

The Blue Man is driving a Model-A Ford, which belongs to a friend, when he nearly runs Eddie down in the street. Readers have already been told that he is of a nervous disposition, and he steers the car to a side street where he dies of a heart attack.

The Philippines

The scenes in the Philippines occur in two places: when Eddie meets the captain and when he meets Tala. The first instance is a war zone where Eddie is injured for life. The second one is a peaceful spot where children play.

The Rifle and Bayonet

When Eddie arrives at the place where he will meet his captain, the first thing he sees is a rifle stuck into the ground by its bayonet. On it are a helmet and Eddie's dog tags. It is only after he has seen this that he meets his captain.



The Bamboo Prison

Eddie, his fellow soldiers and his captain are imprisoned for several months in a room made of bamboo on stilts. They suffer deprivation and abuse during those months.

The Coal Mines

When Eddie and his comrades are taken from the bamboo shelter, they are placed in a coal mine, where they work as miners. One soldier, Rabozzo, is murdered by the captors here. Eddie engineers their escape, and they kill their guards and blow up the mine.

The Tent Barracks

After Eddie and his fellow prisoners have blown up the coal mine and find themselves alone in the encampment, they burn the tents. Eddie sets fire to one of the tents and senses that there is a child in the burning structure. His attempt to rescue the child results in his being shot in the leg by his captain and in his being severely injured by the fire.

The Apartment House

Eddie and his family live in an apartment. When he returns from the war and his father dies, he and Marguerite move back into this apartment house and live out their lives here.

The Maintenance Shed

The maintenance shed is where Eddie spends his days repairing parts from the rides. His assistant, who works with him in the shed, is Dominguez.

Freddy's Free Fall

The Freddy's Free Fall ride plays a major role in the story. It demonstrates how important Eddie is to the maintenance of the rides. He is the only one who knows what to do when the people are trapped in a cart. He is the one who realizes that the danger is even greater when he sees that the cable is being shredded.

Heaven

Heaven is pictured in this story as a place where the people from one's life serve as guides to achieve understanding of what has transpired and why. It is also a place where the person who has died can come to terms with his life and where lessons are



taught and learned. It is a place where resolution occurs. It is not the Heaven described in the Book of Revelation in the Bible. It is not attained by any great deeds done in one's life, but it is a place where the puzzles of one's life can be worked out.

The Stone

Tala asks Eddie to wash her with a stone, as her mother did when she was on earth. As he does so, he sees her burned flesh become whole.

Themes

Love Wins

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the author's old teacher taught Mitch Albom that love always wins (p. 34, *Tuesdays with Morrie*). This theme is at the core of *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. Eddie devotes his life to keeping children safe, the epitome of love. His encounter with Tala at the end confirms Morrie's philosophy that love always wins. He gives his own life to save a little Amy or Annie, and it is out of love and concern for a child that might be burned to death that he risks his own life in the Philippines. As a result of his effort to save that child, he receives the wound that makes him a cripple for life.

Even though he goes to work at the Pier in maintenance by default (or so he feels) because of the injury, his mission there is, in fact, to keep children from harm on the rides. He is supposed to be there, Tala tells him. We know that he loves the children because they love him back. Eddie Maintenance, they call him, and they seek him out for the toys he creates for them from pipe cleaners. He agonizes over the child he is unable to save in the Philippines and has nightmares about it. He spends the remainder of his life on earth feeling that his life has no meaning. He worries about his failure to accomplish anything significant in his life, but he overlooks the loving care he is providing to the children who come to Ruby Pier. He understands that this is his reunion with Tala. She opens his eyes to the reality of the meaningfulness of his life on the Pier. She rescues him and brings him to Heaven, and she helps him realize that love always wins. This theme can also be seen in Eddie's relationship with Marguerite. They have an enduring love story in spite of the many unfavorable events in their lives. Their feeling for each other suffers damage when Eddie loses the money for the adoption and Marguerite is so seriously injured. Nevertheless, they recover their feelings for each other and live out their few remaining years loving and supporting each other.

Then, when they are reunited in Heaven, they know, and readers know, that love always wins. On page 173, Marguerite tells Eddie, "Lost love is still love, Eddie. It takes a different form, that's all." Also, "Life has to end, love doesn't."

Making Peace with the Living

The theme of making peace with the living also comes from Morrie (p. 154, *Tuesdays with Morrie*). Eddie's Heaven is about making peace with the people from his life. He meets the Blue Man, whose death he precipitates without knowing it. He meets his father, whose brutality erects barriers that Eddie needs to break down in order to have peace. He meets the captain who crippled him for life, and he meets Tala, whose life he was unable to save. These are all difficult, painful relationships from his years on earth. This is a departure from the traditional concept of Heaven, where everything is beautiful and one is reunited with loved ones. In fact, Eddie's journey in this book is purgatorial,



providing a rite of passage through his earthly concerns before achieving Heaven. Eddie must come to terms with these troubled relationships before he can find peace in Heaven.

Eddie does not know that he has caused the death of the Blue Man, even though he attends his funeral when he is eight years old. Nevertheless, facing up to his role in this man's death and being forgiven brings him peace. In the case of Eddie's father, he has plenty of cause for his bitterness. Nevertheless, as Ruby points out, the hatred harms Eddie more than it harms the one who is hated. Letting go of his rancor requires that Eddie have a better understanding of his father, and Ruby makes that possible. She also lets him know that in his final moments, his father cried out for his sons as well as his wife. He died trying to get out a window to come to them.

Eddie accomplishes the difficult task of telling his father that he is letting go of his anger, even though his father cannot hear him. Understanding the cause of his crippling injury in the war is also necessary before Eddie can find peace about it. Knowing that the captain injures him in order to save his life and, in fact, loses his own life as he tries to save his men makes it possible for Eddie to find peace. His reunion with Marguerite gives him an opportunity to tell her that he is sorry and to experience her loving forgiveness. Most important of all, the resolution of his anguish over the child he was not able to save brings comfort. Even more, the knowledge that this child has loved him through the years and has purposefully brought him to be in Heaven brings him the greatest peace of all. The knowledge that he has, in fact, saved the life of Amy or Annie is the final element in this search that brings ultimate peace.

"Greater Love Has No One Than This..." (John 15:13, NIV)

The biblical allusion that the greatest gift of love is to lay down one's life for one's friends is the major theme in this story. The story is bookended with Eddie's attempts to save the lives of two little girls at the risk of his own life. His failure to save the one haunts him for his entire life on earth, and he loses his life in his successful rescue of the second one. Because of this brave act, he is reunited with the first little girl and finds resolution for the agony that has burdened his existence. Whether or not Albom intentionally alludes to the Bible is uncertain, and perhaps unlikely. He is Jewish, and this is a New Testament scripture. However, whether or not the author intended a biblical relationship, the meaning is the same - the nobility of being willing to sacrifice one's life for that of another person. It's important to understand that Eddie, in his life on earth, does not see himself as a hero. He sees himself as a person who is trapped in a meaningless life. Only in Heaven and only in his encounter with Tala does he see clearly that his life has had meaning and that his actions with the two little girls are, in fact, heroic.

Another example of the theme of martyrdom is in Eddie's father's death. This brutal, coarse, drunken maintenance worker actually gives his life to save a friend who has wronged him. The knowledge of this makes it possible for Eddie to reconcile his feelings

for his father. Only in this heavenly revelation does the reader have a different glimpse of Eddie's father's character. His treatment of his family is inexcusable. His brutality toward Eddie does not deserve forgiveness. Yet even in someone where there is so little to admire, there are redeeming qualities. He gives his life to save his friend because that friend reached out to help him when times were bad. It is the knowledge of this side of his father that makes it possible for Eddie to resolve his hatred and bitterness and find peace and forgiveness in spite of the suffering his father has caused.

Style

Point of View

The point of view is third person. Readers learn what Eddie is thinking and feeling, but no one else. This is sometimes called third person, limited omniscient narration. In this story, the point of view draws the reader into Eddie's life, leading us to become emotionally involved with this character. We cry for his sadness; we suffer with him in his anguish. We are outraged when he is abused by his father; we rejoice in his reunion with Marguerite. That close connection with a character is only possible when readers are allowed into his thoughts and feelings, and third person limited omniscient narration makes that possible.

Setting

Ruby Pier as the physical setting for the story allows Albom to make the points he wants to make about his Uncle Eddie's life, although reconstructed and reshaped. It provides the means for illustrating a career that is not respected or admired. It also provides the venue he needs for his protagonist to have contact with children. The story spans eighty-three years, and readers are allowed to see the amusement park in its earlier stages in the encounter with Ruby in Heaven. We also get a contemporary glimpse of it. The teenager's lost car key that precipitates the accident that ends Eddie's life could only happen in an era when teenagers own cars.

The Heaven of Albom's vision is an important feature of the setting for this story. The character floats from time period to time period in a gossamer cloud of many colors. Colors are a very important part of our vision of Heaven as this writer has created it. This is not the Heaven of the Book of Revelation. There are no streets paved with gold, no golden candlesticks and no angels. There are only the people from Eddie's life with whom he needs to make peace.

Language and Meaning

Albom, the sports writer, has a direct, no-nonsense style that gets straight to the point. Readers don't get long dissertations on such things as love, sacrifice and children. We do see illustrations - stories and characters - and short messages on those topics in the style that is typical of a sports writer. The points are made not so much by words as by the scenes and actions of the characters. Perhaps this style is more effective in modern times, when people get their information more from television than from the written word. The extraordinary popularity of this book would indicate that this is true.

Structure

The story weaves back and forth between the past and the present. Except for brief visits to the Pier before and after the accident, the present is reserved for the scenes in Heaven. In flashbacks, the story is told by visiting the various stages of Eddie's life organized around his birthdays. A very creative use of structure is the "bookending" of the life and death encounters with the little girls - Amy or Annie and Tala.

Quotes

"Young men go to war. Sometimes because they have to, sometimes because they want to. Always, they feel they are supposed to. This comes from the sad, layered stories of life, which over the centuries have seen courage confused with picking up arms, and cowardice confused with laying them down." p. 57, ll. 23, ff.

"Sacrifice is a part of life. It's supposed to be. It's not something to regret. It's something to aspire to." p. 93, ll. 9, ff.

"Sometimes when you sacrifice something precious, you're not really losing it. You're just passing it on to someone else." p. 94, ll. 1-3.

"All parents damage their children. It cannot be helped. Youth, like pristine glass, absorbs the prints of its handlers. Some parents smudge, others crack, a few shatter childhoods completely into jagged little pieces, beyond repair." p. 104, ll. 1, ff.

"Parents rarely let go of their children, so children let go of them. They move on. They move away. The moments that used to define them - a mother's approval, a father's nod - are covered by moments of their own accomplishments." p. 126, ll. 13, ff.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the willingness of Eddie to give his life twice to save a child. Do you know instances where one person has sacrificed his or her life to save another? Parents sometimes give up careers and things they enjoy doing in order to care for their children. Is this the same thing? Discuss.

Eddie hates his father. Discuss the effects of hatred on the lives of people. Do you agree that it is a curved blade? What can one do about self-destructive hatred that is justified as it is in Eddie's case?

Why do some abused children become stronger because of abuse, as Eddie did, and why are some weakened or even destroyed by it? Discuss.

Eddie and Marguerite fall in love when they are young, and yet their love endures and overcomes serious difficulties. How important is young love to the sustaining of a marriage for the long run? How do people preserve their marriages over a long span of time, fifty years or more? Are there any lessons in this book that would help couples keep their marriages alive?

Should Joe have made an effort to help Eddie achieve his dreams? Is it fair for one child to be so successful when the other one is not? Is life fair? Discuss.

Do you think this story is too sentimental? Would it be as good a story if the lessons had been left out? Discuss.

What does it take to make a person successful? Eddie feels that he has failed, and yet this story makes the point that he is a success. Discuss.

What are the five lessons that Eddie learns? Discuss why each of these lessons is important in your own life.

Ruby tells Eddie that people have peace when they make it with themselves. What does she mean by that? Is this good advice? Discuss.

Could you seriously wound another person in order to save his or her life? What does this say about the captain? What kind of person is he? Discuss.