

# **Fourth of July Creek Study Guide**

## **Fourth of July Creek by Smith Henderson**

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## Plot Summary

Pete is a social worker for the Department of Family Services, working in Tenmile, Montana, at the beginning of the 1980s. He encounters a variety of cases, but none which are so intriguing as the Pearl family. When young Benjamin Pearl wanders into town, half-starved and suffering from vitamin deficiencies, Pete makes it his mission to find out everything he can about the family, even though Ben's father, Jeremiah, warns him that he'll kill him before he lets him have his son. Pete learns that the Pearls have been living in the wilderness for years after Pearl's wife, Sarah, had a vision of an apocalypse ending the world. Since then, Jeremiah has been waging a secret war on the government by defacing coins and redistributing them into the system. Pete is warned that the Pearls are highly dangerous, but he continues to take them supplies. Jeremiah eventually begins to let down his guard around Pete, who in turn bonds with Ben. The other family members are mentioned but never seen; Jeremiah indicates that they are hiding in the woods and that he doesn't trust Pete enough to meet them.

In the meantime, Pete deals with other personal issues. His brother, Luke, is on the run from the law, and his parole officer, Wes, is trying to pester Pete into revealing his location, even going so far as to burn down his house as a warning. Pete is estranged from his wife, Beth, after discovering that she was cheating on him; he has also essentially abandoned his daughter, Rachel, who has always feared her father cared more about his cases than her. This certainly seems to be the case, with Pete continuously choosing to devote his life to help other children but having almost no time for her. Rachel begins experimenting with drinking, partying, and boys, and soon runs away from home. This is the wake-up call that Pete needs, and he devotes his time to trying to find her, though Rachel does not want to be found and constantly evades him. She gets involved with a variety of lowlife characters, finally ending up with a pimp named Pomeroy who leads her into a life of prostitution.

Unable to find Rachel, Pete returns to Tenmile and the Pearls. Just as they are beginning to trust him, Wes follows Pete to the Pearls' camp, believing that Pete has been going to visit Luke. Thinking that Pete has betrayed them to the authorities, Jeremiah and Ben threaten Wes and Pete. Ben shoots and kills Wes. Pete has no choice but to tell the authorities what has happened, and he learns the government has been searching for Jeremiah for quite some time. They also uncover the Pearls' hidden camp, where they find the bodies of Jeremiah's wife and other children. Jeremiah and Ben have gone missing, but their disappearance causes riots in the town, where people begin threatening local authorities and blowing up post offices.

Pete learns that Rachel has been spotted in Seattle and goes to track her down. There, it becomes clear that the social workers and police force are at least partially complicit in allowing teenage girls like Rachel to become prostitutes. Rachel tries to leave, but Pomeroy threatens her, so she arranges for some rival pimps to take him out. In the fray, Pete sees Rachel, but she runs away, unable to face him or herself. Pete reluctantly lets her go, hoping that someday she will come back to him.



Pete returns to Tenmile to learn that Ben has been found. He tells Pete the truth about Sarah and the other children: they became sick and Jeremiah tried to go for help, but Sarah had gone mad with the illness and killed herself and the other children instead. Jeremiah and Ben have been on their own ever since. Pete convinces the authorities to release Ben to foster care. Jeremiah comes looking for Ben, and Pete helps them run off together.



# Chapters 1-4

## Summary

The novel opens with social worker Pete Snow being called to moderate a domestic dispute case. A neighbor called the police because fifteen-year-old Cecil has been arguing with his mother, Debbie, and is spotted with an air rifle. The police seem distrustful of Pete because he is from out of town and is much more educated than most people from the rural environment. Pete realizes that no one has seen the youngest child, Katie, and runs into the house to find her. She has been hiding from the police and clings to Pete as a father figure, even though he acknowledges to himself that he isn't a very good father. Pete convinces the officer not to take them to prison. He tries to talk to Debbie about parenting Cecil but she wants Pete to take him away. Debbie and Cecil fight. Cecil wants to go off on his own, but Pete takes him to the Cloninger family where they will watch over him while Pete arranges for Cecil's uncle to take him in.

The narrative switches to an interview with Pete's daughter, Rachel, though who is interviewing her remains unclear. Rachel reveals that she wants to be called Rose. She and her mother aren't getting along but when asked if she wants to live with Pete, she says she doesn't quite trust her father either. She recalls an incident where they almost drowned in a river because her father was drunk and lost his footing while holding onto her.

Pete is called to a local elementary school, where they found a young boy, Benjamin, who refuses to tell them his name and has been biting anyone who gets too close. He wears old hunting gear and boots that are too big for him, and he smells badly and seems to have scurvy. It soon becomes clear that he has had no upbringing in normal society; he is unfamiliar with hot water and poops in front of Pete without shame. Pete tries to give him some new clothes and medicine but the boy insists on going home. He explains that his father won't like him taking things from Pete. Pete takes him back to the woods and learns Benjamin has five siblings. He came into town to scavenge for food. Someone shoots at them as they approach--Benjamin's father, Jeremiah Pearl. Pete tries to explain why he's there but Jeremiah insists that Benjamin takes off the things Pete gave him. Jeremiah tells Pete to leave and that if he ever comes back, he'll kill him. He takes the boy and disappears into the woods.

Pete returns to his cabin and finds his brother, Luke, there. Luke asks him for money and the two begin to scuffle. Pete asks him to leave. Luke tells him that their father's new wife, Bunnie, wants him to come see his father, who's been ill. He also reveals that he's on the run from the law for beating up his parole officer. Luke is going off to stay with some people he's met from church, which Pete doubts will do him much good. Luke leaves. Pete visits a family, the Shorts, who own a brace of Rottweilers. The dogs attack Pete and draw blood on his hand, though he manages to escape into his car. Pete fantasizes about burning down the house, reasoning that the kids will just turn out like



their parents anyway. He settles for macing the dogs and writes a report recommending the children be removed from their parents' custody.

## Analysis

From the very beginning of the novel, it becomes clear that Pete is going to be an anti-hero figure. The reader is first introduced to Pete from the perspective of a local policeman who notes that Pete tries too hard to be likable and disarming, which makes the officer instinctively distrust him. Although Pete is in a position to help children, and seems for the most part to genuinely want to do so, it is also clear that Pete is not a saint and is not intended to be viewed this way. Although the reader sees some heroic behavior from him, such as rescuing Katie and standing up for Benjamin to his father, there are also some incidents that show a darker side to his personality, such as macing the dogs, fantasizing about burning down the Shorts' home, and especially in the way he is viewed by his daughter, Rachel.

Rachel's point of view segments further set up Pete's anti-hero personality by relaying incidents such as him nearly drowning them when he was drunk. She also indicates that her own experiments with alcohol and sex have been caused by his neglect as a father. Though the reader doesn't know to whom Rachel is speaking, there is some indication that it is a counselor or psychiatrist who seems to know particular details about Rachel and her relationship with her parents; alternately, it may be a future version of Rachel talking to herself. There is some suggested foreshadowing that something bad has happened in the future that is causing Rachel to go back and re-live these memories.

Pete's family problems extend beyond just his relationship with his daughter. His altercation with Luke suggests that Pete understands firsthand some of the issues that the families he's counseling are dealing with. There are also hints of estrangement from his father. This also contributes to Pete's status as an antihero. Although he clearly has family members, many of whom are trying to reach out to him, he has chosen to isolate himself in his work and in this town. Even the name of the town--Tenmile, meaning it was ten miles from the nearest settlement when it was founded--contributes to this feeling of being separated and secluded from others.

Much emphasis in the first few chapters is placed on setting up the dynamic of the town, which is working class, uneducated, and brimming with domestic problems. Instead of focusing on one case at a time, the reader is introduced to many of the problems Pete has to encounter on a daily basis, showing how unrelenting the demand is. It may be difficult to keep all the names straight at first, but that is perhaps intentional, since--much like the town itself--it is only as the reader continues to learn more about these characters and see beneath the surface that he/she understands how deep these problems truly run.



## Discussion Question 1

How is the story impacted by including the interview segments with Rachel? Do these cast Pete in a new light?

## Discussion Question 2

Both Cecil and Benjamin are introduced as "problem" children who are having issues with their parents. How are they similar to one another? How are they different?

## Discussion Question 3

The setting is a very important part of this novel. What are some clues revealed about the setting that help to shape the idea of what this town and the people who live in it are like?

## Vocabulary

saunter, flimsy, colander, crude, bickering, dismembered, unnerve, ornery, wrangles, tailgate, scoffed, shorthand, paranoia, priors, restitution, pending, infraction, fluency, amiably, eight-track, stunted, thrummed, affixed, razorous, stale, angling, vigorously, welts, ungovernable, pistoned, ember, regal, trellis, docile, hospitality, kismet, hillocks, perilous, fervid, indulgent



## Chapters 5-8

### Summary

Pete goes to Missoula to see his wife, Beth, and Rachel. He still wants her but can't forgive her for cheating on him. He berates her for moving to Texas with Rachel without discussing it with him first. Beth says he can take Rachel if she wants, but she won't go. Rachel doesn't want to talk to Pete. He asks her to ask Beth not to go. Beth resents his interference when he was the one who left. Pete goes to a bar and drinks until he gets kicked out. Pete remembers better times with Beth: such as being in love at seventeen and getting pregnant with Rachel. Pete joins up with some old friends in town and goes to another bar to drink more. He meets and fools around with a barfly named Ursula.

When Pete returns to the house the next day, Beth and Rachel are gone. Still hungover and in bad shape, Pete goes into the main social work office in town to arrange to take some time off and meets another social worker named Mary. She treats his bitten hand for him, which he's left to get infected. Pete asks her out but she laughs at him. Pete remembers playing poker when Rachel was still a toddler. His father seeks him out and berates his choice to play poker, go to graduate school, have a kid so young, and essentially throw his life away. He gives Pete a check, which Pete tears up. Pete goes back and asks Mary out again. She tells him she got a call from Clonginger saying that Cecil can't stay there anymore.

Rachel describes her trip to Texas with her mother, on their way to meet up with her mother's new "friend," a truck driver named Jimmy. Things start out okay but the town is boring and when Jimmy comes back he's abusive. Her mother starts to notice that Rachel is growing up and starts shopping with her and telling her stories about men. She warns Rachel to never have babies because that's what killed her relationship with Pete. Rachel reveals that Jimmy has started to look at her differently. Beth has been drinking more and partying with strangers. Rachel starts meeting up with some local kids in town to smoke and drink. She starts to like the attention from boys.

Cecil is kicked out by Clonginger because he was fondling the family dog. When Pete tries to take him to his uncle's place, Cecil attempts to run away at a diner, but a rancher finds him trying to sneak away in his cab and brings him back. Pete drives Cecil to his uncle's. Cecil's aunt bargains with Pete for the money they'll get for taking in Cecil. Pete ends up paying out of his own pocket so Cecil can stay there. Pete warns Cecil about messing up his chance at his uncle's place. The next stop is a treatment facility where he'll be turned into a real criminal. Cecil laughs him off, so Pete punches him in the gut and warns him to stay put.

Luke's parole officer, Wes, tries to track him down. Wes warns Pete that their father won't be able to keep Luke out of trouble anymore. Pete finds a coin with a hole in it and learns Jeremiah Pearl is the one making them. Pearl rants about how the government is





trying to remove all real value from currency and claims that they're at war. Pearl is preparing for some kind of fight.

## Analysis

The more the reader learns about Pete, the more it becomes clear that he is battling his own demons. Even though he pays Cecil's uncle to take him in and keep him out of an institution, he still steps out of line, letting his frustration overtake him and punching Cecil in the stomach. His memories of his father indicate that there was a lot of antagonism between them, but Pete still could have put his family first by taking the check his father gave him; instead, to salvage his own pride, he tears it up. Similarly, he could put aside his hurt feelings with his wife to try to be there more for his daughter, but instead he runs away to take care of himself.

The reader learns that Pete is only 31 and had his daughter when he was 17, which puts into perspective some of his immature behavior, as well as suggesting why he might have wanted to become a social worker in the first place: to help other teenagers have a better chance at life than he feels he did. Ironically, Rachel is one such teenager who could benefit from Pete's help, though she has been effectively abandoned by him and has to seek outside sources to fill in that gap: drinking, partying, and especially looking for attention from men. Again, there are strong indications that these things are leading her down a path which will put her into just as much trouble as some of Pete's clients.

The constant references to the weather, outside elements, and wildlife reinforce the rural nature of Tenmile and indicate an undercurrent of danger that is constantly present throughout the novel. This occurs again once Pete begins learning about Jeremiah Pearl's coin campaign and how he is building some kind of war. Combined with this, as well, is Pete's brother on the run from the law. All of these things also reference a kind of wild west mentality that exists in Tenmile. The town doesn't follow by the normal rules that the reader might expect to encounter in "normal," civilized society. This may also reflect Pete's inner conflict as he finds himself becoming more and more wild and less and less hampered by the rules. He is educated, comes from a wealthy family, and seems to know how to function in society, but increasingly his urges and impulses are making him just as feral as the townsfolk around him.

## Discussion Question 1

If Rachel misses her father so much, why does she run away when he tries to see her?

## Discussion Question 2

If Pete is so angry at Luke, why does he lie to his parole officer about him stopping by?



## Discussion Question 3

What does Pete mean when he tells Cecil that he wasn't the one who punched him, but that he was an agent from his future?

## Vocabulary

grub, liable, recriminations, kindling, trundled, leered, cognizant, outlandish, simpleton, cadaverous, crone, leonine, whirl, referral, fetching, penance, scoundrels, pomade, paragons, myriad, deviancy, coaxing, slunk, alighted, gale, orb, perforated, granite, terminated, perpetually, stipend, bewildered, glowered, pagoda, extracted, cadre, upholstery, taxidermy, pungency, sovereigns, alloy, conspiracy



# Chapters 9-12

## Summary

Cecil runs away from his uncle's place. He quickly runs out of money and tries to beg for money but gets ignored. He meets a girl, Ell, who invites him to come back to her place with her because she doesn't want to be alone, though she warns him she's pregnant and that her man's getting out of prison soon. Cecil agrees. Cecil and Elle grow closer. Cecil confides that his mother started to molest him when he turned twelve years old. Cecil says he was just experimenting with Cloninger's dog and that he didn't mean to hurt anyone.

Pete goes back to the dropoff spot and leaves more things for the Pearls, despite knowing it won't get used. He returns to Missoula and runs into Mary. They go back to her place and sleep together. Mary asks him what made him run to Tenmile. Pete tells her about his wife. Pete learns at a party that Mary grew up as a foster child and has a dark history. Pete calls Rachel, who reminds him on behalf of Beth that he owes them child support. Rachel tells him she hates Texas and wants to come home. Pete asks her to try it out for a few months, and Rachel accuses him of hating her, then hangs up on him.

Rachel recalls hating Texas. Other girls dislike her. Her mother lets her have friends over to drink but gets jealous of the attention she gets, including from Jimmy. Rachel likes the validation she is starting to get from men. Rachel tries to run away from home. When she comes back, Beth slaps her, then tells her they're moving to Austin. They leave Jimmy.

Pete learns that Cecil has run away. He goes back to the dropoff spot and finds the clothes and medicine he left for the Pearls untouched. On the way back he encounters some men growing marijuana plants. They pat him down and take him back to their plantation. Pete explains that he's a social worker and has come to see the Pearls. The men spook at the name and pack up camp immediately. They met Pearl years before when he came upon their camp. Jeremiah said his wife had a vision of the end of the world approaching, so they sold all their worldly possessions and moved into the woods. The marijuana growers kicked him out. Later, Pearl shot at the men, letting them know he could have killed them if he wanted to.

## Analysis

This segment breaks up the established points of view from Pete and Rachel and moves to Cecil, which reveals a new side to him that the reader may not have expected before. In Pete's point of view, Cecil comes across as sullen, wild, and angry. While this continues to be somewhat true in Cecil's point of view, the reader also understands that he is desperate and scared. The revelation that his mother abused him casts his violent



confrontations with her into a new light, as well as his molestation of Cloninger's dog. The fact that he is so gentle with Ell, and almost even afraid of her, makes Cecil seem far more vulnerable than he has at any other point in the narrative. This also calls into question the reliability of Pete's narrative, since he has so badly misjudged Cecil and so deeply misunderstood his motivations for trying to run away.

Pete's relationship with Mary also reveals some new things about Pete. The fact that she has such a dark and troubled past indicates that Pete may have something of a hero complex. Even though his own life is in disarray, he is drawn to people he feels he can help. This is also one of the main points of friction between him and Rachel, since Rachel believes that Pete would rather be off helping other peoples' families than taking care of his own, which may be an accurate assessment. The lack of Pete's presence in her life has caused her to seek attention from boys and even men old enough to be Pete's age. The interview seems to focus quite a bit on this aspect of Rachel's life, which suggests that this may be leading her down a path that will turn her into the kind of person her father should be helping. This may subconsciously be her desire: to force Pete to pay attention to her by becoming the kind of problem he likes to solve.

Bit by bit, more is revealed about Pearl and his plan. Pearl seems to be deeply distrustful of organized government, preferring to take matters into his own hands. His method of creating "war" on the United States is fairly passive so far--distributing altered coins--but his encounter with the marijuana growers indicates that he is a violent man who holds a grudge. There is foreshadowing that this may become a serious problem for Pete in the future, particularly since Pete continues to show interest in the Pearls instead of leaving them alone like he's been warned to do.

## Discussion Question 1

Pete describes Mary as someone who has experienced some of the worst things that can happen in life, then goes on to call her innocent. How can someone go through such terrible things and still be innocent?

## Discussion Question 2

How can Rachel think Jimmy is disgusting but still like the attention she gets from him and the other men?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Pearl let Charlie and the other marijuana growers live if he has a chance to kill them?

## Vocabulary

scant, silhouette, mincing, visages, molten, mounting, down, surmised, traipsing, wavered, opaque, tropism, hued, disintegrate, pastime, doleful, cache, dense, iterations, benign, cargo, impinged, pungent, epiphany, makeshift, unnerving, denominations, skein, tribulations



# Chapters 13-16

## Summary

Pete finds out from an old friend of his father's that his father has passed away. Nobody has bothered to tell him. Pete remembers his father, Charles, as a hard but savvy businessman. Pete goes to visit his stepmother, Bunnie, and learns that his father was run over by his own truck. Looking through his father's things, Pete remembers his wedding to Beth and how Charles told him he was ruining his life. Pete asks Bunnie if anyone has told Luke. Bunnie claims Luke is in good hands--with people from her church. Pete is uncomfortable with how religious the funeral is. Various people ask him about where Luke is, including Luke's parole officer, Wes. Pete leaves, and assures his stepmother he doesn't want any of his father's things.

Rachel talks about Austin. When her mother is away at work, she has friends over to party at the house. She reveals that some men remind her of her father, but claims that she no longer misses him. She resents him for always being off helping other people instead of being with her.

Ell's man, Bear, returns. Ell invites Cecil to come out with them to Hamilton. Cecil is overwhelmed by the intimacy between them, which brings back bad memories of his mother. Cecil refuses to go but quickly regrets it once he's on his own again. He sees Pete in a bar with Mary and waits for them to come out, but misses them. He starts to make his own way to Hamilton.

Pete continues to ask around about the Pearls. He comes into contact with a logger named Vandine, who ran into Pearl a year before when Mount Saint Helens erupted. Pearl and his son held Vandine up, believing there was an apocalypse. When Vandine told him otherwise, Pearl instructed Benjamin to shoot him. Benjamin was scared but shoots at him and misses.

Cecil is found by a farmer, passed out, with a honey bear plugged up his behind. Cecil asks Pete to help him get to Ell and Bear. Pete takes him to a temporary house with some other troubled kids. Cecil daydreams about taking his sister Katie to stay with Ell and Bear. Pete returns from talking to Ell and reveals that she told him about Cecil's mother. Cecil refuses to acknowledge it. Pete tells Cecil he's taking him to Ell's and Bear's but instead takes him to a juvenile facility. Cecil freaks out and begs him not to leave him there. He vows he'll die before staying there through Christmas.

## Analysis

Pete's distrust of religion comes to the forefront at his father's funeral, both in the preachy sermon that is given and in learning that Luke is being "rehabilitated" by members of Bunnie's church. Pete notes that his father never seemed to have any use for religion until he came close to dying, implying a kind of hypocrisy with spirituality that



is similar to Luke continuing to break the law and use his friends and family while professing to be a man of God. This distrust is not directly tied to politics, but there do seem to be some similarities between Pete's feelings toward God and the impending election where Ronald Reagan will be elected as president. Though for many Reagan is remembered as a great conservative leader, for others he is remembered for a repressive, secretive period of United States history. The same could be said with how people view organized religion.

Rachel's feelings for her father keep coming to the surface in these interview segments. She admits to be searching for him in the men she interacts with, but stubbornly insists that she doesn't need him, that she has learned to live without him because he has so clearly learned to live without her. The recurring theme of these interview segments seems to be her relationship with her father, which suggests that whatever has caused her to be placed in this interview position has something to do with him.

Cecil's history of abuse with his mother continues to plague him in his interactions with others. He is deeply uncomfortable with sexuality but also pursues it in ways that are often detrimental and embarrassing to him, such as the honey bear incident. Despite his complicated relationship with Pete, he seems to have placed him in a position of trustworthiness in his mind, or at least has become desperate enough to rely on him now that he is truly all alone. Pete's subsequent betrayal of him parallels the overarching theme of distrust of authority. Pete's earlier description of what would happen to Cecil if he went into juvenile detention may prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, as part of Cecil's breakdown for going in comes not only from the betrayal that he feels from Pete, but also because of what Pete warned him a place like that would make him become. Pete's warning, intended to keep him out of the facility, may actually cause his experience there to be much worse than it would have been had he gone in unprepared.

The foreshadowing of danger surrounding the Pearls continues in this segment. The reader learns that not only is Jeremiah a danger, but Benjamin is as well; although Benjamin likely missed on purpose when he had the chance to shoot Vandine, the fact still remains that Benjamin is being trained to be a killer by his father. His attempt to come into town may indicate that he is trying to escape from this lifestyle, but he still shoots at his father's command, which does not bode well for Pete if he continues to pursue the family.

## Discussion Question 1

What role does religion play for Pete? Are there any parallels between how Pete feels about religion and how Jeremiah Pearl feels about the government?



## Discussion Question 2

Pete is constantly having to remind people that he isn't his brother's keeper. What are some indications that he does feel responsible for Luke, even though he doesn't want to?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Cecil refuse to go with Ell and Bear when he has the chance?

## Vocabulary

slumming, sentiments, barony, misanthropy, shorn, aptness, ineffable, wafting, heaving, predicament, lair, dray, bier, apparitions, punitive, bygones, curdles, inimitably, periphery, salvation, congregants, procured, gibberish, ferocity, pine, hazarded, absurdities, egress





# Chapters 17-20

## Summary

Pete works on an increased caseload as the holidays approach, including searching for Cecil's sister Katie (who has disappeared with her mother) and trying to find the Pearls. He resolves to spend more time with Rachel later. He tells Mary about Cecil, and she berates him for the way he handled the case. Mary and Pete spend more time together. He takes her back to Tenmile for the first time and begins skipping work to spend more time with her. He sends Rachel a box of gifts, including his phone number at Mary's place. Pete comes back to his cabin to discover someone has been there and assumes it was Luke or his parole officer. Pete drinks and parties with his friends.

Rachel sifts through Pete's gifts. Beth is taken aback by Mary's phone number and goes on a bender, partying and drinking. She tells Rachel that Pete will forget all about her. Rachel doesn't care; she's started seeing a boy named Cheatham and plans to run away with him. Beth is too distracted by her own partying to notice.

Pete realizes that others have investigated the Pearls in the past. He continues to take food and supplies and realizes that someone has started to take them. He waits for Benjamin, who confesses he's been taking the supplies, but his father thinks he's been stealing them. Pete wants to go back to their camp, but Ben warns him that his father will hurt him. Ben runs and Pete tries to follow but loses him. Later, Benjamin comes for his help because Jeremiah's gone blind. Jeremiah resists his help, believing it is a sentence from God. Benjamin convinces him to let Pete help. They talk about Jeremiah's beliefs about the monetary system and the conspiracies he implicates the government in. Pete asks about Pearl's wife and other children, and Pearl says they're hidden in the woods.

Pete goes to Mary's apartment building and sees another man coming out of her apartment. He follows him, then goes back to confront Mary, who denies knowing him. Pete thinks that Mary has proven to be just like his wife, Beth, who cheated on him. Mary makes him realize that he went to the wrong apartment by accident. They sleep together. Pete wakes up to Beth calling him to tell him that Rachel's been missing for four days. Pete flies to Austin and searches for Rachel. He searches for other runaways, contacts all her friends, and does everything else he can think of, but there's no sign of Rachel. Pete becomes so frantic that he does cocaine with the people staying in the hotel next to him. In their grief and worry, he and Beth sleep together. Beth asks him if he'll go to church with her and Pete agrees but slips out while she's in the shower.

Rachel ends up with Cheatham, but makes a stop first at a party and loses her virginity to a boy in the back of a car.



## Analysis

The various issues plaguing Pete continue to ruminate, with the Pearls coming to the forefront. Pete initially sees Benjamin taking his supplies as a sign that the Pearls are warming up to him; indeed, Benjamin comes to him for help when Jeremiah is in trouble, even against his father's wishes. However, throughout the encounter with Jeremiah, Pete begins to realize how much of a danger Benjamin might actually be. He suspects that Jeremiah might have given Benjamin a signal to shoot him, and Pete watches with growing suspicion as Benjamin disappears first into the tent, then into the forest. It remains unclear if Benjamin really was just going about his tasks or if Jeremiah was using this as a scare tactic to put him on his guard. At the end of their conversation, the last thing Pete recalls is Benjamin listening to his father's mad ramblings and grinning, suggesting that he is firmly under his father's thumb and may be just as dangerous as Pete is beginning to fear.

Pete's relationship with Mary has begun to shift. They are growing both closer and further apart the more they get to know each other and realize just how damaged the other is. Mary's issues with being abused and distrusted in her youth begin to manifest in her sexual relationship with Pete, such as when she tells him times she was molested in the past to become aroused with him. Similarly, Pete's distrust of his wife and women in general due to Beth cheating on him comes to a head when he blatantly accuses Mary of cheating on him. The cracks in their relationship are beginning to show, even more so when Pete goes to Austin and reconnects with Beth.

He and Beth speak frankly about what went wrong between them and how both of them were at fault. They also agree that they haven't been there for Rachel and agree they are guilty of not being good enough parents and not loving her enough. This may be a fairly standard conversation for parents facing a crisis with their child, but for Beth and Pete, this may not be an unfair assessment. Through Rachel's accounts, the reader has learned of Beth's partying, her absence, and her jealousy of Rachel's attention from men. In this section in particular, Pete has proven to have very questionable judgment, including the fight he has with Mary, which brings him to the edge of physically assaulting her, and in his choice to do cocaine. He is becoming more and more like the parents that he is assigned to counsel and reprimand.

As a result, Rachel has started on a dangerous path of running away from home, drinking, and having sex with strangers. Because of her father's absence in her life, she seeks out these sexual encounters and attention from men. This is a contrast to Cecil, who shies away from intimacy and women because his mother wasn't absent enough. Both could greatly benefit from Pete's influence in their lives, though he is proving to be too caught up in his own problems to be of much help to anyone.



## Discussion Question 1

Benjamin sometimes seems to be afraid of his father and sometimes seems to be on his side. Is it possible to love someone but fear them too? Why doesn't Benjamin just run away when he has the chance?

## Discussion Question 2

If Rachel is searching for Cheatham to run away with him, why does she stop first at a party to sleep with a random stranger?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Beth feel the need to find religion? Why does this make Pete leave?

## Vocabulary

tenants, custody, dysarthric, reimbursements, errant, apocalyptic, yowled, fickle, quack, forthcoming, philosophical, smitten, vaulting, slaughtering, spewing, inventory, hysterical, corrosive, slick, aforementioned, predecessor, trod, virid, traversing, pantomimed, suppurating



# Chapters 21-24

## Summary

Pete goes back to Tenmile and continues to worry for Rachel. He goes to stay with Mary but there is a weird distance between them, though she tells him she loves him and he says he loves her back. He searches for Rachel in Spokane but there is no sign of her. Back in Tenmile he tries to do his work but is distracted. Pete tries to visit Cecil but Cecil doesn't come out. He takes more supplies to the Pearls but doesn't see them. Pete and Mary get into an argument while driving and are stopped for drinking but are let off the hook because the cop has a soft spot for DFS workers. He gives Pete a copy of the New Testament.

Pete takes more supplies for the Pearls and encounters Jeremiah. Jeremiah demands to know where he was and starts to leave when Pete isn't forthcoming. Pete confesses about searching for Rachel, and Jeremiah commiserates with him. A plane flies overhead and Jeremiah panics, suspecting a conspiracy. Pete insists it was just coincidence and manages to convince Jeremiah that he really was searching for Rachel. Jeremiah believes Pete is part of God's plan. They take Pete to their camp and Jeremiah accidentally gives away that he's from Gnaw Bone, Indiana. He asks Pete to disperse his coins. Pete reluctantly agrees.

Rachel stays with Cheatham until his roommates start to give them a hard time, so they go to Oklahoma. Cheatham starts to get moody with Rachel. He often abandons her behind to go drink and gives her the silent treatment when he's back. He leaves her in a hotel for a few days and she gets taken to the shelter. She escapes, goes to Spokane, and gets a new boyfriend name Pomeroy.

Pete goes to Mary's and finds her screwing the lawyer she denied knowing earlier. Mary tells him being raped so often messed with her mind and that she needs to compartmentalize Pete differently from what she has with someone like the lawyer. Pete leaves her and goes on a bender. He gets a call from social services saying they've found Rachel in Indianapolis. By the time he gets there, Rachel's gone. He goes to Gnaw Bone and finds Benjamin's grandmother. They tell him Jeremiah fought in Vietnam and was always odd. He and Veronica were deeply in love and had lots of children. They soon become religious zealots and Veronica changes her name to Sarah. Sarah begins having visions and they begin to sympathize with some Nazi ideals. They leave to go to the woods.

Pete feels as though he's being watched. Luke's parole officer, Wes, pays him another visit and threatens him. Pete goes to visit Cecil and sees he has a black eye. Cecil blames the guard. Pete tells him he didn't know it would be this way in here, but Cecil is too far gone now. He's gotten in trouble for burning another kid. Pete gets a lead in Reno and follows Rachel there, but misses her. He uses Pearl's coins in a casino and gets kicked out. Pete goes hunting with the Pearls. Pete accidentally lets slip that he



went to Gnaw Bone. Jeremiah is angry and accuses Pete of being a spy. He tells Pete he won't hesitate to kill him if he needs to.

## Analysis

The further Rachel gets from Pete, the closer he gets to the Pearls. Both father and daughter are putting themselves into precarious positions, trusting people who could very well mean them harm. Pete's obsession with the Pearls is beginning to cloud his judgment. Not only is he putting himself into situations where they could wound or even kill him (such as his argument with Jeremiah that results with a gun pointed at his chest), but he has also begun to distribute Pearl's coins for him. Though Pearl is careful not to tell Pete too much about his background, Pete is revealing more and more about himself to Jeremiah. Although some trust does seem to be forming between them, every interaction has the feeling of a ticking time bomb hanging over it, foreshadowing something dark to come.

The revelation about Mary further pushes Pete toward the Pearls. Even though she has been lying to him, in some ways she parallels Cecil, in that she has become what Pete expects of her. Because of Beth, Pete anticipated Mary would cheat on him and hurt him, and she does. Pete warns Cecil before going into juvenile detention that it will turn him into a hardened man, and it does. Neither of these comes as a direct result of Pete's actions, but they do foreshadow what potentially may come from his interactions with the Pearls and his fear that it will result in some kind of violence.

Pete's helplessness in searching for Rachel and constantly being one step behind her mirrors Rachel's search for Pete throughout the rest of the novel. Rachel has been looking for Pete in her encounters with various men but can't find what she is looking for. Though she tells herself that she doesn't care about her father's approval anymore and that she doesn't need him, the fact that she continues to try to fill a void in her life with these men suggests that isn't true. Similarly, Pete tries to fill his days by looking after his other cases and engrossing himself with the Pearls, but none of it can make up for not being able to look after his own daughter and not knowing if she's safe.

Learning more about Veronica/Sarah casts Jeremiah into a slightly different light. Up until this point, it might be easy for the reader to assume that Jeremiah forced his family to go into the woods, including his wife. Instead, Veronica seems to have spearheaded many of the decisions with her visions and her religious devotion. Jeremiah's deference to her as a prophet and as the spiritual leader of their family is surprising, considering that he seems as though he might be more stereotypically chauvinist and patriarchal and determine his family's religious practice. The fact that Pete hasn't yet seen Veronica and the other children becomes increasingly problematic as the story continues to unfold, calling into question whether something terrible has happened to them.



## Discussion Question 1

How can Jeremiah be starting to warm up to Pete but still not trust him? How can Pete think Jeremiah's beliefs are crazy but still respect him?

## Discussion Question 2

How do Mary's actions change the way she is perceived? Does her wardrobe metaphor justify her actions?

## Discussion Question 3

How has Cecil changed since going into the rehabilitation center? Does Pete bear responsibility for this change?

## Vocabulary

unstinting, trestles, shards, smithereens, iotas, alacrity, lynch, sullen, guileless, caterwauling, augur, feasible, skeletal, hale, catenary, duff, patronize, clambered, wick, dexterity, chortled, discourse, inured, vandalized, integrity, grandiose, waxing, valence, abeyance, barricading



# Chapters 25-28

## Summary

Pete goes to visit Debbie and Katie but ends up getting caught in a police bust. Debbie is taken in for drugs, Katie is taken to a home, and Pete is beaten and questioned about his involvement with Pearl. A detective named Pinkerton reveals his own background with Pearl: he used to work undercover before Pearl was on the FBI's radar and is partially responsible for entrapping him into the trouble he's currently in with the law. He was run off by Sarah and the kids, who shot at him and attacked him with rocks. Pete is flagged for distributing Pearl's coins.

Rachel learns that Pomeroy has a girlfriend, Yolanda. They all travel together, meeting up with groups of other kids. They drink and do drugs together and dine and dash. Pomeroy orders Rachel around to do his errands and fetch things for him. She discovers that Yolanda is working as a prostitute. Yolanda tells her she doesn't have to do the same, that she can stay with them anyway. Rachel panhandles for a little while but isn't very good at it. She loses some of the money when she goes to Pomeroy's rescue. Rachel observes Yolanda working and starts to do her own tricks, getting better at it as she goes. She gets herpes and goes to a free clinic to be treated.

Debbie has a heart attack in jail and dies. Pete takes Katie to the Croningers', where he discovers that Croninger knew the Pearls back in the day. Their families used to interact together before the Pearls took off into the woods. The last time Cloninger saw any of them, it was Benjamin coming down by himself to ask for olive oil.

Cecil works in an outdoor crew with some of the other boys from the juvenile facility. Pete takes him out to go to his mother's funeral. Cloninger regrets overreacting with Cecil before and says he can come back to stay with them along with Katie, but Cecil is rude to him at the funeral when he expresses his condolences for his mother. No one has much of anything kind to say about Debbie, so Pete lies for Katie's benefit. Pete is supposed to take Cecil back but instead takes him to Spokane to be with Bear and Ell.

## Analysis

Pinkerton's background about Pearl casts him in a completely new light. Pearl no longer seems so paranoid about the government, particularly since Pinkerton essentially guided him in the direction that made him an outcast with the law. It also explains why Pearl has been so suspicious of Pete, since Pinkerton lived amongst them for so long and pretended to be their friend. Pinkerton makes it clear that Pearl is right in his assessment that the law is after him, and has even been trailing Pete now that he has been associated with the altered coins.

Pete doesn't interact directly with the Pearls in this section, but he is still metaphorically growing closer to them, both learning more about Jeremiah's background and



sympathizing with his distrust for the government. Pete's encounter with the authorities makes him understand why Pearl is so distrustful of the government and why he's resorted to such drastic measures to get away from him, which is radically different from his attitude toward Pearl at the beginning of the novel. This section also elaborates on how Sarah has instigated much of Pearl's lawlessness, and paints him in a different light as someone who is merely trying to provide for his family and help them survive the best way he knows how.

This sympathizing with Pearl also seems to bleed into other aspects of Pete's life. He seriously considers taking Katie in as his daughter but refrains, not out of consideration for himself, but out of consideration to what is best for her. He also breaks the law and the rules of his job by allowing Cecil to escape and go live with Bear and Ell, which is perhaps the only option that will save him from the dark path he's been heading down. Pete has never particularly been a rule follower, but in the past his infractions have generally been to benefit himself. The fact that he is now doing so for Cecil may show some of Pearl's lawless influence, but also his own growth, particularly since Rachel ran away from home.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Rachel decide to start working as a prostitute even though Yolanda tells her she doesn't have to?

## Discussion Question 2

How does knowing that a member of the government essentially guided Pearl into a life of crime change the way he's been presented throughout the rest of the novel?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Pete leave Cecil with Bear and Ell before he can say anything to him?

## Vocabulary

tactical, compressed, scuffles, plainclothes, splotch, tethered, flopping, fascist, aborted, sinister, convulsed, expectant, livid, separatist, spurious, impassively, anarchist, moonlighting, pertains, condolences, askance, tribulation, vying, transactions, stupefied





# Chapters 29-32

## Summary

When Pete returns from dropping off Cecil, he realizes his house has been burned down. He suspects Wes, who basically confirms it when he follows Pete to the Pearls' house. Pete meets up with the Pearls again in the abandoned ghost town of Deerwater. Pete tells Jeremiah about Pinkerton and how he refused to turn them in; the Pearls can trust him. Jeremiah tells him they never will.

Rachel is arrested by an undercover police officer. She is released by a social worker, Butler, to Yolanda and Pomeroy. Rachel wants to quit but Pomeroy threatens her. They take in a new girl, Brenda, who is being followed by her pimps from Sacramento. Rachel decides to use them to make Pomeroy pay.

Benjamin reveals that all of his siblings got sick and died, and implies that Jeremiah told him it was his fault. They are interrupted by an intruder; Wes has followed Pete to the camp, believing Luke is there. Pete tries to defuse the situation but Wes refuses to leave and Benjamin shoots him. Pete turns himself in and asks for Pinkerton's help. Pete tells the FBI all the known locations of the Pearls. They find the Pearls' old camp and find the bodies of Jeremiah's wife and children, who have been shot through the head.

Pete gets a call saying that Rachel is in Seattle. He goes there and finds out she's been released to Yolanda and Pomeroy. Pete tracks them down, but Rachel has run away from them. He follows Pomeroy and realizes what he's up to. He threatens him, and Pomeroy suggests that Rachel might be running away from Pete. He tells Pete a story about Rachel being kind to a woman in a diner who takes advantage of her; that's part of Rachel's problem--she's still too nice. Pete tracks down Luke and asks for his help. They tail Pomeroy and see him get jumped by the boys from Sacramento. Pete sees Rachel and calls out to her, but she runs away and he loses her. They search for her but find nothing, except for a body in the river: Brenda.

Rachel explains how she set up Pomeroy with the Sacramento crew. She goes to visit him in the hospital to let him know it was her. She says she ran away from Pete because she was too ashamed.

## Analysis

The distrust of the government is continued and deepened in this section, particularly in Rachel's interactions with the system. There are some implications that the social worker, Butler, is complicit in returning Rachel back to prostituting with Yolanda and Pomeroy. Though Rachel is taken off the streets by a police officer, no effort is made to rehabilitate her; she is merely put aside in the most convenient manner possible. Later, Pete's interactions with Butler suggest that Butler knew Rachel had a family looking for



her but moved her along anyway. Later, Pete observes Pomeroy interacting with police officers, who clearly know what he's up to but do nothing to stop him.

The mystery of Pearls' wife and other children is finally resolved. It has been implied that there's something wrong with them for quite some time, but considering Jeremiah's devotion to Sarah and his deference to her as the spiritual leader of their home, this still comes as a surprising resolution. It is unclear at this point what "sickness" they had, why Jeremiah thought the only option was to kill them, and why it is somehow Benjamin's fault, but this clarifies Ben's and Jeremiah's reliance on each other and their distrust of other people.

Pete's relationship with the Pearls finally comes to the violence that has been hinted at from the very beginning. Wes has also been encroaching on Pete's space with increasing violence: threatening him, following him, burning down his home. When the two intersect, Pete escapes unscathed, leaving the others to suffer the consequences. Wes is dead, Benjamin has become a murderer, and Jeremiah once again has to go on the run.

With everything that Rachel has faced with drug dealers, child molesters, pimps, and whores, the thing she seems to be most afraid of is facing Pete again. This fear is intermingled with a sense of shame. Even though Pete could remove her from the bad situations she's been in, she continues to run. This perhaps parallels how Pete has long been running from his own family and problems by attempting to solve the issues of others.

## Discussion Question 1

Does Wes deserve what happens to him? Is there anything Pete could have done to avoid this situation, or was it out of his control?

## Discussion Question 2

Does Pete betray the Pearls by telling Pinkerton where they are, or is it his duty to turn them in?

## Discussion Question 3

If the policemen and social workers know what Pomeroy and the prostitutes are doing, why does no one try to stop them?



## Vocabulary

aspect, remnants, diminishing, cinders, remote, grime, ricocheted, obscene, habitable, otherworldly, configuration, efficient, composed, ferocity, invective, lagged, somberly, yearning, jurisdiction, fractals, jurisprudence, decomposition, inured, revenant, omen



# Chapters 33-Epilogue

## Summary

Pete goes on a bender. People are paranoid about Pearl and rumors abound about missing food, equipment, and near-encounters in the woods; it's unclear how much of this is actually Pearl, and how much is paranoia. Sympathizers begin running confederate flags and protesting against the police. There are bombing attempts and a bombing of a post office where two people are killed.

Benjamin is found by a trucker, sick and wandering on the road. Pinkerton brings in Pearl to speak with him. Someone takes shots at the headquarters downtown, though Pinkerton doesn't believe it was Pearl. Ben apologizes for killing Wes, but Pete makes him promise not to tell anyone it was him. Ben tells Pete the truth about what happened to his mother and the other children. Sarah caught Ben watching "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and told him he put poison into their family. When she and the children got sick, Ben believed they have the same symptoms as the dwarfs and that God was punishing them. Jeremiah tried to go for a doctor but Sarah, in her paranoia, killed the children and herself. Pete tries to convince Ben the sickness came from contaminated ice chips (from deer's blood) but Ben is adamant that it came from God.

Pete goes to Pinkerton to try and tell him the truth about Pearl but the other officers won't let him through. When Pete goes back to the hospital, Ben is gone. Pete finally gets through to Pinkerton, who lets him take Ben to Cloninger's. Ben refuses to watch the television and keeps to himself. Pete offers to let Ben live with him, but Ben either doesn't hear him or ignores the offer. Pearl comes to Pete's house, looking for Ben. They watch some of the home videos Pete got from Jeremiah's mother-in-law. Pearl mourns for his lost family. Pete takes Ben and Jeremiah to live with Luke in the woods.

Pete goes to work, finding a new family who are living out of their car and giving them some supplies.

Rachel reveals that she eventually goes home, but it takes time.

## Analysis

The excitement surrounding Pearl suggests that the political climate is teeming for some kind of eruption. The paranoia surrounding him mirrors the paranoia of the Reagan era, with no one knowing who to trust and the threat of danger causing more problems than the actual danger itself. The fact that so many people sympathize with Pearl and even begin to initiate violence on his behalf suggests that he is not the only one with issues with the government.

Ben's fear that his television watching caused the illness and eventual death of his mother and siblings goes to great lengths to explain why he has been so indoctrinated



into his father's wilderness lifestyle. Though Ben clearly is curious about the outside world--shown in how he is continuously sneaking into town, wanting to learn chess from Pete, etc.--his guilt prevents him from ever leaving his father or fully exploring this curiosity.

Pete has been playing with the idea of stepping up to become a father figure throughout the novel--first to Katie, then Cecil, then his own daughter Rachel. When he finally steps up and makes the offer to Ben, he is either ignored or rejected. While it seems like this should deter Pete, the ending, in which he helps Pearl and Ben start a new life and aids a new family on the side of the road, suggests that he is attempting to find a healthier balance in allowing himself to care for others without letting it overtake his own life. Though he is still somewhat responsible for Jeremiah and Ben, he turns them over to the care of his brother Luke. Throughout the novel, there have been references to Pete being Luke's keeper and Pete feeling responsible for him, but now it is Pete who is going to Luke for help and trusting him to take care of one of his problems for a change. There is also now a physical distance between himself and the Pearls, even though he remains emotionally attached.

The mystery of who is interviewing Rachel throughout the novel is never explicitly solved, though a similar style is used in rehashing the events of Sarah's murders and suicide in Jeremiah's mind, which suggests that Rachel may have essentially been interviewing herself the entire time. In the end, there is no definitive closure in her storyline, though there is suggested hope and hints of a reunion between Rachel and Pete.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Pete compare social work to a kind of priesthood?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Pete mean when he thinks "Pearl is Snow is himself is everyone"?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does the author choose to cut off Rachel before she can finish her sentence? What effect does that have on the end of the novel?

## Vocabulary

sloshing, obelisk, transom, hazard, yonder, cordon, precedent, cacophony, meager, palpable, rendering, elicits, materializing, priesthood, roiled, ointments, enraptured, anoint, bawls, slew, secreted, atone, badinage, viscous, helpmeet, cauterized, contingency, haggard



# Characters

## Pete

Pete begins the novel around 31 years old. He is a counselor who works for the Department of Family Services and has recently uprooted his life to move to Tenmile, Montana, a small rural town. Pete married very young because his girlfriend, Beth, got pregnant with their daughter when they were 17. Since then, the marriage has dissolved after Pete discovered Beth cheating on him, though later conversations indicate that he feels he was to blame as well, since he resented the life he was forced into living at such a young age and perhaps subconsciously attempted to drive her away.

Pete's family issues also include his strained relationship with his father, who has always mocked his life choices. Pete grew up in a wealthy family and there seem to be many implications that his father used his money to get Pete and his brother out of trouble, though Pete has never lived the life his father wanted him to leave and seems to be very skeptical of his father showing him any favoritism. Pete also has a difficult relationship with his brother, Luke, who has long been involved with drugs and defiantly ended up on the wrong side of the law. Pete resents being referred to as Luke's keeper and refuses to help him when he's on the run from his parole officer, Wes, though he also refuses to tell him Luke's whereabouts. Even when he doesn't particularly like his family, he shows a strong sense of loyalty toward them, especially in the face of outside opposition.

For the most part, Pete is shown to be a devoted case worker, often at the expense of his own well-being, safety, and sanity. Many times in attempting to help his clients, he is attacked and held at gunpoint. He also often turns to alcohol and occasionally drugs to cope with the horrors of what he faces in the field. Pete falls short many times, making questionable decisions, such as punching one of the teenagers he's attempting to help and becoming so embroiled with the Pearl family that it takes over virtually everything else in his life. He also neglects his own daughter, Rachel, in attempting to help these other people, and doesn't fully acknowledge this to himself until she's gone.

Pete seems to be particularly drawn toward those who are damaged and most in need of his help, though it is unclear if this is a result of working the job that he does or if he has always been this way. It is implied that part of why Rachel runs away is so that she can become the kind of person Pete would devote his time to helping; this is seen also in his romantic relationship with Mary, a fellow social worker who grew up in the system and details to him the many men who took advantage of her as a child. Though there are no indications that Pete himself suffered any kind of physical abuse as a child, he is perhaps drawn toward these broken souls because although he felt he could never do right in his father's eyes he can instead be a hero to these people who need him the most.



## Rachel

Rachel is Pete's daughter and is 14 years old as the novel begins. She is right on the border between being a child and being an adult, and though she goes through some very dramatic life changes throughout the course of the novel--such as running away from home, losing her virginity, and becoming a prostitute--in many ways she still reads as being very young and in need of protection. This is reflected when her pimp, Pomeroy, details a story in which she is taken advantage of because of her kindness. This can also be seen in her longing to get Pete's attention, even as she refuses to acknowledge that she misses him or that she wants to see him; and in her fear of going back to Pete--not because of what he'll do to her, but because of what he'll think of her.

Rachel is one of the few characters apart from Pete who gets her own point of view sections. In these sections, it is suggested that she is perhaps older and reflecting back on what caused her to run away years before, though this remains unclear. In these sections, Rachel details her burgeoning attractiveness and sense of sexuality as she starts to be noticed by men. At first, these are men that her mother, Beth, brings into her life, such as her boyfriend Jimmy. Soon Rachel begins to seek out this attention for herself, going to parties and throwing parties of her own so she can experiment. For the most part, Rachel seems to be searching for a replacement for her father, whom she feels has abandoned her, but only seems to be disappointed as she is abandoned again and again by various men.

Rachel is soon drawn to Pomeroy, who seems as though he will take good care of her, until it becomes clear that he is less interested in her as a romantic and sexual partner and more in her potential as a prostitute. Rachel initially avoids becoming a prostitute but seems drawn to the possibilities and to the validation she can receive from her partners. Though Rachel craves love, she does not necessarily seem to connect sex with this, since she lost her virginity to a stranger at a party and does not romanticize her relationship with her clients.

In the end, Rachel's story remains unresolved. It is again unclear what point of her life she is at as she recounts these events, and what has led her to this point beyond what is told in the novel, though there is a suggestion that she has found some kind of peace and is ready to reunite with her family again.

## Jeremiah Pearl

Jeremiah is written as one of the most dynamic characters in the novel. He is both dangerous and trustworthy, insane but wise, vengeful but forgiving. He is a man shrouded in mystery, and his perception by Pete (and, by extension, the reader) changes drastically from beginning to end.

Jeremiah is first introduced as a crazy zealot who lives in the wilderness with his son. He holds Pete at gunpoint, refuses any help from him, and threatens to kill him if he ever returns. Yet Pete remains intrigued by him, and the more he learns about



Jeremiah, he begins to become obsessed with him. Most of what the reader knows about Jeremiah is learned from encounters being told by other people, including some marijuana growers, a pawnbroker, and an FBI agent.

As Pete finally begins interacting with Jeremiah himself, his perception begins to change. Jeremiah is very distrustful of the government and genuinely believes the end of the world is nigh, but he also shows concern and caring for Pete when Rachel goes missing and seems to enjoy his time with Pete. He is also very protective of his son. Later encounters with Jeremiah's mother-in-law show that he was deeply in love with his wife and genuinely wanted what was best for his family, even if he went about protecting them in a strange way.

By the end of the novel, Jeremiah is shown to be not nearly as dangerous as he is painted in the beginning. His violence seems more of a way to keep people at bay than something he genuinely wants to use to harm others. Though it is hinted at throughout the novel that he may have killed his wife and children, in actuality he did everything in his power to keep them alive, just like he is trying to do with his only remaining son, Benjamin. In the end, though, he and Pete may not completely understand one another, they seem to have gained a mutual respect and leave each other as equals.

## Benjamin Pearl

Benjamin Pearl is Jeremiah's only surviving son and provides much of the catalyst for the main conflict of the novel. He is the one who goes to town, draws Pete's attention, begins to use the supplies Pete leaves for his family, asks for Pete's help when his father is sick, and kills Wes in the end, forcing himself and his father to become even more in trouble with the law than they have been previously.

Much like Rachel, Benjamin is equal parts innocence and canniness. He, too, has been forced to grow up far too soon, not only in surviving in the wilderness with his father, but believing himself to be responsible for the sickness that claimed his mother and siblings. Yet he also purposefully misses when he is instructed to shoot an intruder and sneaks into town to watch other children play, indicating he is not as hardened as he tries to make himself seem. When Pete enters his life, he attaches himself to him, perhaps not fully understanding why, as somebody who can help him, who will be kind to him, and who will treat him like a child (teaching him how to play chess and encouraging him to have fun).

Most of the story revolves around setting up Jeremiah as a dangerous figure, but it is actually Ben who pulls the trigger and kills a man. This paranoia and distrust of strangers has been instilled in him by his father, but at too young an age; Jeremiah knows how to moderate himself and shoot to frighten, not to kill. Ben has not yet learned these distinctions and still sees things with the black and white mentality of a child. Similarly, this is why he continues to blame himself for the deaths of his family members, even though Pete explains to him that it was a disease caused by eating





tainted ice chips. Sarah told Ben it was his fault; he believes his mother to be a prophet; and so he believes he is responsible.

## Cecil

Cecil is one of the recurring clients whom Pete helps throughout the course of the novel. When Cecil is first introduced, he is being investigated by a police officer who comes to the house after hearing reports that he has been threatening his mother with a gun. Even after Pete arrives to dissolve the situation, Cecil threatens to run away and gets into a physical altercation with his mother. Later, when he is taken to temporary foster care, he is kicked out for molesting the family dog. Cecil tries to run away at a truck stop but ends up getting into a fight with a trucker. Pete finally resorts to punching him to force him to listen to reason, and leaves him at his uncle's place, where he soon runs away again.

It seems as though Cecil is beyond help, though much like Jeremiah, there is more than meets the eye. As the novel switches to Cecil's point of view, he begins to interact with another young runaway named Ell, who is pregnant and turns to him for protection. Cecil reveals that he was raped by his mother growing up, which casts his violence toward her in a new light, as well as his sexual deviancy. Cecil feels safe with Ell and begins to build a home with her, but is spooked off when her boyfriend is let out of jail--not because he sees Bear as a threat or a rival, but because he is uncomfortable with their sexual intimacy, which dredges up too many bad memories from his own molestation. Though they offer to let him live with them, he goes off on his own, only to immediately regret it.

Cecil once again turns to Pete for help, though Pete ends up betraying him by taking him to a juvenile detention. Cecil begins to become hardened inside, seemingly to the point of no return, though he experiences another surprising shift as Pete breaks the rules by releasing him so he can live with Ell and Bear. Cecil's tears at being reunited with Ell suggest that he is not past hope. Though he will still have many issues to deal with in his lifetime, there is still a part of him that can be reached.

## Mary

Mary is a fellow social worker who works with Pete and soon becomes romantically involved with him. Mary has a dark past: she was raised in the foster care system and has been molested throughout her life. Mary is seemingly frank and forthright about this with Pete, even using some of these memories as part of their sexual foreplay. However, it has also left more of a mark than she seems to want to admit, causing her to cheat on Pete and to lie about it outright. When finally confronted in a way she cannot deny, Mary explains that she cares for Pete and wants to keep him around because he's kind to her, but that she also feels as though she should be punished and needs men who will treat her badly. The connection is never explicitly made, but Mary may



represent what a future version of Rachel could look like if she continues to commodify herself in her relationships with men.

## Beth

Beth is Pete's wife (soon to be ex-wife) who seems to be grasping at something to give her life meaning. She admits to cheating on Pete so that he would find out and leave her, but also indicates that this may have in part occurred because he has been pushing her away. She and Pete were married very young because she got pregnant with Rachel when she was seventeen; Pete still finds her attractive, but she seems to be searching for her lost youth by receiving validation from various men, and even Rachel's younger friends, which Rachel finds embarrassing because she is "too old." Beth exhibits some jealous behavior once Rachel begins to receive attention from men, though she at least is there with her daughter and seems to be working to support her. After Rachel leaves, Beth has a religious awakening, believing that she is being punished by God, and invites Pete to have a spiritual re-connection with her, which he refuses.

## Veronica/Sarah

Veronica is Jeremiah's deceased wife who acted as the spiritual leader for their family and who convinced Jeremiah that the end of the world was approaching because of visions she had. She changes her name to Sarah and begins to make prophecies from the woods. These "prophecies" take a great toll on her, giving her crippling headaches. She and Jeremiah seem to be deeply in love by all appearances, but Sarah is perhaps even more of a zealot than Jeremiah, refusing to let her children interact with the outside world and blaming Ben for her sickness because he watched "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." Sarah also instigated the attack on the FBI agent Pinkerton which led to their family becoming fugitives on the FBI's radar. Though the sickness caused by the deer blood is ultimately what causes her to take her own life and the lives of her sick children, it is unclear whether she would have made a different decision had she been in her right mind, since she so adamantly refused to let Jeremiah go for any help.

## Yolanda/Pomeroy

Pomeroy is the pimp who recruits Rachel to work as a prostitute. Yolanda is one of his whores, although Rachel initially mistakes her for being his girlfriend. Pomeroy is particularly manipulative, pretending to be romantically interested in Rachel at first to play on her desire to be loved. He leads her in baby steps toward becoming a prostitute, first sleeping with her, then introducing her to Yolanda to make her jealous, then making her run errands for him and be at his beck and call. Yolanda also manipulates Rachel to a lesser extent, telling her that she doesn't have to be a prostitute, but also showing her how easy it could be, how profitable, etc. When Rachel tries to leave, Pomeroy threatens her with physical harm. He lies outright to Pete when he comes searching for



Rachel there, and is shown to have sway with the police force, which turn a blind eye to what he's doing. Pomeroy accuses Rachel of being too kind, though she is the one to turn a rival gang on him that leaves him nearly dead and hospitalized.

## Luke

Luke is Pete's brother, who has been in trouble with the law for the majority of his life, but who also seems to have been reborn as a spiritual man. Pete expresses frustration at various points in the novel for being expected to watch after him and be his "keeper." Luke also seems to represent some of Pete's frustration with religion, since Luke claims to have been born again as a man of God, is hiding out with a religious group, and since Pete's references to being his "keeper" allude to the Bible story of two brothers, Cain and Abel. Luke seems to have taken advantage of Pete's responsibility for him a great deal; his parole officer, Wes, is so convinced that Pete is helping Luke out that he refuses to leave him alone, burns his house down, and eventually gets shot and killed for following him into the Pearls' camp. Luke ultimately redeems himself by finally being the one to come to Pete's aid, first as they search for Rachel in Seattle, and then again as he offers the Pearls a place to escape when they're on the run from the law. Though no formal resolution is offered between the two brothers, it seems as though Luke has become someone that Pete can rely on instead of only being someone who takes from him and never gives back in return.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Dogs

Dogs appear repeatedly throughout the novel. For example, dogs attack Pete as he goes to visit one of the families he's meant to help; Cecil arouses the dog at the Cloningers' house; dogs in town are killed when they attempt to attack a moose passing through; and dogs at Cecil's uncle's house attempt to attack Pete. In most instances, dogs seem to be an extension of their owners and the other townsfolk. Some are mean and vicious and attack for no reason; others are beaten and abused and don't really understand what's happening to them. Having these creatures present only re-enforces the helplessness of Pete's situation and the impossibility of saving everyone when so many people, and animals, are in need.

## Coins

Coins are also a commonly occurring object throughout the text. They act most significantly as tools of rebellion for Jeremiah Pearl, who buys up old buffalo coins, alters them, and then re-distributes them into circulation. Their subversion comes in part because Pearl is pointing out how empty the government's currency is by putting his own currency into circulation. Pete uses these altered coins to trace Pearl and discover more about him by finding other people who have also encountered the coins and Pearl. A pawnbroker tells Pete that Jeremiah's work on the coins indicates a great deal of skill. Much of the artwork he scratches into the back has some kind of similarly subversive meanings, such as Nazi symbols. Pete embraces his own act of rebellion by distributing the coins for Pearl at a casino, which gets him kicked out and red flagged by the government.

## Images

Ben tells Pete that he is forbidden to use the coloring books Pete brings him because they contain graven images, such as those that people are warned against putting before God in the Bible. Pete learns from Cloninger that Ben was once reprimanded by his mother for being caught watching television, though Pete learns from Sarah's mother that before they abandoned their possessions to live in the wilderness, Jeremiah and Veronica stocked up on various "worldly" items such as televisions and video camera equipment. He also learns Veronica was embarrassed when a photograph developer came across some personal pictures Jeremiah took of her, which her sister believes is part of what started her religious zealotry. Ben's television viewing coincidentally came before the sickness which caused Sarah to kill herself and her children, and she tells Ben it is because he has poisoned them by watching these graven images. Even though Pete tells Ben it wasn't his fault, Ben still refuses to watch



television when he is left at the Cloningers'. For him, graven images are a poison which opens the door for Satan.

## Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

"Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" is the cartoon that Ben's mother catches him watching shortly before she and his siblings all get sick. Part of why Ben is convinced that he is to blame is because his siblings display some of the same symptoms as the dwarfs. He tells Pete that Paula was the sneezing one, Ruth was silly and couldn't move her limbs, Jacob couldn't stop laughing, and Rhea was grumpy. This is not the first time Ben has shown a curiosity for the "civilized" world; indeed, his curiosity is what brought him to town allowing him to meet Pete in the first place. However, despite this curiosity, Ben believes his siblings' sickness is a direct punishment for having watched the cartoons, and this is part of why he is so devout in following his father--to try to atone for inadvertently causing their deaths. This is also why he is so paranoid, which leads to him shooting Wes at the end and inviting the point of no return for himself and his father with the law.

## Drawers/Compartments

When Pete catches Mary cheating on him, she explains a metaphor to him that she's used to organize with her life and cope with all the bad things that happened to her as a child. She remembers an antique drawer in a room where one of her foster fathers would take her to rape her, and how she would take her mind off what was happening by thinking about what was in the drawers and how she would organize them. Later, she uses this as a metaphor for organizing her memories and her encounters with men. There is a drawer for good men like Pete, and a drawer for bad men like the lawyer she was with, and she needs them both, but she also needs them to stay separate and organized. This metaphor is ultimately unsatisfactory to Pete, who leaves her regardless of her explanation; however, it remains notable that Mary is given this chance to explain herself instead of merely being painted as a cheater. Mary's method of managing her past and her memories may not convince Pete to stay, but it has allowed her to survive and function as best she can despite everything she's been through.

## The Letter P

Many characters in the novel are named with the letter "P." Pete, Pearl, Pinkerton, and Pomeroy are four important characters to the narrative, and all are named with this same letter. The significance is not entirely clear, though it may be meant to establish a connection between these four men. Each represents a different touch-point with the law: Pete is a social worker who often resorts to illegal means to accomplish what he believes needs to be done; Pearl is an outlaw who deeply distrusts the government; Pinkerton is an FBI agent who basically entrapped Pearl into becoming an outlaw in the first place; and Pomeroy is a pimp who manipulates law enforcement to keep his



business running. In all instances, the government is shown to be a fallible thing that should be regarded with suspicion.

## Wildlife

Encounters with wildlife occur constantly throughout the book, such as the wild moose that comes into town and the bear that damages Pete's home. These may be meant to establish the rural-ness of the setting, but they may also act as a metaphor for the inability to control life. With his hero complex, Pete desires to help everyone and control everything, but there are matters which are far out of his hands. Civilization is supposed to provide a barrier of safety against these forces of nature, just like government institutions are supposed to prevent the kind of horrors that Pete witnesses in his job every day. However, this wildness continues to encroach, and will continue to do so no matter how many fortifications are erected to keep it out.

## Blindness

Jeremiah Pearl experiences a real, physical blindness when he is out of the snow for too long. It is because of this that Ben goes to get Pete's help and Jeremiah begrudgingly begins to trust Pete, at least enough to allow him to bring them more supplies into camp. There are other instances of metaphorical blindness that happen in the text, particularly with Pete. He is especially blind to Rachel: to how much she needs his help, how lonely she is, and how much she has changed in his absence. Pete also has a sort of willing blindness toward the Pearls. Though he hears from various people how dangerous they can be and even fears for his own life when he's with them, he continues to put himself in harm's way, which eventually leads to Wes's death and Benjamin's transformation into a murderer.

## Alcohol

Pete identifies as an alcoholic and goes on many drinking binges throughout the novel, particularly when he is under times of great emotional stress due to his cases, his relationship with Mary, and his issues with Rachel. In one particular incident, Mary and Pete are pulled over because they are arguing on the side of the road in their car, drunk. When the police officer learns they work for the Department of Family Services, he lets them off with a warning because he knows how stressful the job can be. Clearly, Pete is not alone in using this coping mechanism, but in many ways it creates a distancing effect not just with his problems, but with his life. Rachel also uses alcohol for its distancing effect; she begins going to parties and just pretending to drink so she can feel like a part of something, but as her life gets more and more complicated, she begins to drink and use drugs to separate herself from the pain.



## Sex

Sex, much like alcohol, is used throughout the novel as a coping mechanism. Whenever Pete is at his lowest, he often engages in sexual encounters with strangers he would most likely not find remotely alluring in his day-to-day life. His relationship with Mary is initially built almost entirely upon sex and wanting a distraction from the horrors of his job. Mary also has sex with strangers, which in many ways acts as a punishment for what she endured as a child. Rachel initially has sex in an attempt to get men to want to stay with her and be her protector, but also starts using it as a way to validate herself. Debbie feels discarded and worthless and forces her son into sex, which in turn makes him become terrified of sexual intimacy and only able to explore it in subversive, unhealthy ways. Sex is never glorified or romanticized in the text, but rather viewed almost exclusively as a vehicle for escaping--and causing--pain.



# Settings

## Tenmile, 1980s

The novel's primary setting is Tenmile, Montana, in the early 1980s. Tenmile used to be a trading station named for its distance to a nearby mining town, which was ten miles away. It is a small town, with about 2,500 people living there, and its citizens are mostly uneducated, blue-collar people who work as loggers or at the nearby mill or mine.

Children are expected to go to work as soon as they can, and education isn't a priority. The locals seem distrustful of outsiders, particularly those who are educated, like Pete. They also tend to mind their own business and try not to get involved in other peoples' problems. The town is near enough to the forest that wild creatures, like moose and bears, often wander in and wreak havoc.

## The Pearls' Camp

As remote as Tenmile is, the Pearls' camp is even more remote, located deep in the forest. It is so far off the road that Pete and Ben have to park the car and walk some distance to get there. Jeremiah is paranoid about being found by the government, so they don't build structures or roofs or anything that can be seen from the sky. Their camp is kept very mobile so they can move around as needed, with tarps, bedrolls, and a fire pit. The Pearls usually camp near fresh water and in dense forest or ghost towns, like Deerwater. No matter where they are, Ben and Jeremiah become very familiar with their surroundings, hiding weapons in the woods and in abandoned buildings and keeping careful watch as people approach.

## Missoula

Missoula is the closest "big city," though only comparatively to Tenmile. It is big enough that not everyone knows everyone, and people can hide secrets. Pete used to live there with Beth and Rachel, but moved to Tenmile once he learned that Beth had been cheating on him. He is very familiar with the area and often goes there to drink with old friends, as well as to check in with the Department of Family Services and keep them apprised of what he's doing in Tenmile. This is where he meets Mary, and a great deal of time in Missoula is spent in her apartment. The apartment itself is fairly nondescript, though some clues about Mary are given when Pete first goes there and the elevator operator curtly informs him that no overnight guests are allowed; at first, this reads as him being overly strict about the rules, but once the truth about Mary becomes known, it can also serve as an indication that she has a revolving door of guests coming and going at all hours of the day.





## Texas

After leaving Missoula, Beth and Rachel move to a couple places in Texas, including Waco and Austin. Not much is offered as description as to what these places are like, but Texas is several states away from Montana, and it would be a fairly dramatic move to completely new scenery, weather, and types of people. Rachel initially hates Texas and calls her father, asking him to let her move back. Texas is ultimately where she begins to have her sexual awakening, caused in part by the attention she receives from her mother's boyfriend Jimmy and from the parties Beth holds to try to recapture her lost youth. When Beth leaves Jimmy and goes back to work, Rachel begins to host her own parties, which puts her on the path that leads to her running away from home and becoming a prostitute.

## Seattle

Though Seattle is a much bigger city, in many ways it is painted as being just as rough and lawless as a town like Tenmile. This is where Rachel begins working as a prostitute, and it is where her pimp, Pomeroy, is shown to be dealing with police officers, implying that they know about his business and are turning a blind eye to it. Rachel's social worker also turns her back over to Pomeroy, seemingly with the understanding that he is a pimp, and delays telling Pete that he's found her, which indicates that he is also complicit in the prostitution ring. One of Pomeroy's other whores, Brenda, is on the run from pimps based out of Sacramento, and they end up beating Pomeroy nearly to death and drowning Brenda in the river. Rachel's uncle, Luke, is also staying nearby with a religious group as he outruns the law. In the end, Jeremiah and Benjamin Pearl join him in their attempt to escape from the law, as well.



# Themes and Motifs

## Religion

Religion is a very complex issue within the novel. In some ways, it is portrayed to be a positive thing. Arguably the most upstanding character within the novel is Cloninger, who takes in various wayward children and who openly professes to be a Christian; he is also shown at various points to be praying with his family. When Beth is at her lowest point when Rachel runs away, she is sustained by rediscovering religion. Luke also rehabilitates himself by turning to religion, becoming someone that Pete can finally rely on instead of just being a burden on his older brother. Pete tells Pearl that he has worked with people from a variety of religious backgrounds and has sometimes found it to be a positive experience, such as some Mormons he knew who were the best neighbors he ever had.

However, religion is also shown to have a very negative influence on people. Pete's stepmother, Bunnie, is deeply religious but also stingy with her money and distrustful of Pete. Her church takes over Pete's father's funeral, seeming more interested in trying to gather new members than paying honor to his memory. By Pete's account, his father was an unkind, ungenerous man, but toward the end of his life he started using religion as a way to buy his way into heaven. Pearl accuses various organized religions, such as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses, as running more like a corporation, trying to recruit as many people as they can.

Perhaps the most obvious example of how religion can go wrong is with the Pearls. Jeremiah and his wife Sarah are devoutly religious. Believing that Sarah is having visions from God prophesying an impending apocalypse, they uproot their children and alienate the rest of their family to move into the wilderness. Sarah's unwavering religious beliefs cause her to blame Benjamin for her sickness and death, as well as the death of his siblings, which plunges him into deep guilt that eventually actually turns him into a murderer. Jeremiah's stubborn adherence to his beliefs have made him a fugitive of the law and nearly cause him his life.

Yet religion is also shown to be a positive influence on the Pearls, such as when they learn that Rachel is missing and bond with Pete by praying for her to be returned. More than anyone else in the novel, perhaps, Pete has a complicated relationship with religion, resenting it, putting it down, and even running away from it, though he is deeply touched by the Pearls' prayer. He also finds himself praying on his own for Rachel, indicating that there is still a place for God in his life, if not organized religion.

## Ronald Reagan

The Reagan administration was an era of American history heavy with paranoia and distrust of the government, much like some of the overriding feelings in this novel. As



the narrative begins, Ronald Reagan is running for president. Though Reagan does not remain the focus of the novel, the narrative touches back in with him sporadically throughout, showing that he has been elected, and that an assassination attempt has been made on his life. Though the novel does not explicitly detail issues of the Cold War or the Reagan administration's dealings with Iran, these things might be in the background of the reader's mind and help to color some of the underlying paranoia running throughout the novel.

Jeremiah Pearl is established early on as a religious zealot who is distrustful of the government, to the point where he takes his entire family into the woods, fires on strangers who he believes might have a tie to any government agency, and hides from planes flying overhead. As the novel progresses, his paranoia is shown to be somewhat grounded in reality, since it was an undercover agent, Pinkerton, who persuaded Pearl to obtain legal weapons and thus put him on the radar of the U.S. government and then turned on him and his family. This may be a parallel to the Reagan administration's selling of weapons to the Islamic Republic of Iran, which proved to be one of the biggest black marks on his presidency.

Pearl's paranoia may also be a reflection of the Cold War taking place during this time, during which many Americans were worried that tensions with Russia would escalate into another World War, this time involving nuclear weapons. Reagan, in particular, was known for his unyielding stance against communist governments, which led many to believe that a confrontation was inevitable. This inevitability can be seen in the interactions with Pearl, all of which suggest some kind of violence will be taking place; though Wes's death is perhaps not the expected route for this violence to take, the fact that this level of violence occurs is unsurprising.

The assassination attempt on Reagan's life is another point of intersection between Pearl and Reagan. Though Jeremiah has nothing to do with the assassination attempt, Pinkerton reveals that another reason that Pearl has been flagged is because he was writing threatening letters to the president. In a conversation with Pete, Jeremiah reveals that he believes Reagan to be the Antichrist. Though this can be read as the babbling of an insane man (and, indeed, Pete interprets it this way), this may also tie back into the paranoia of the time. Pearl has gone into the wilderness with his family because he genuinely believes the world is going to end; many in the time believed that the Cold War would, in fact, prove to bring about the end of the world. Pearl has just made the connection between the two more explicit by naming Reagan as the person to bring this about.

## Fatherhood

The novel offers a variety of examples of fatherhood, showing the often complicated relationship between fathers and their children. The foremost example is Pete, who loves Rachel but doesn't seem to realize how much until she's gone. Rachel repeatedly reaches out to him, but Pete is so caught up in his own problems that he continuously puts her on the back burner, telling himself that he'll get to her later when he has more



time. It is further implied that there's a part of Pete that resents Rachel for trapping him in a marriage with Beth so young and putting him on the path that he is now on. By the time Pete realizes how much Rachel means to him, she's gone; she has been searching for him in the men around her, but when Pete comes after her, she is too ashamed to return with him. Pete has to accept that Rachel is on her own journey and trust that she will come back to him someday.

Jeremiah is different example of fatherhood in the story. He is at times rough with Benjamin and makes decisions that make Pete question his ability to be Ben's father. For instance, Ben looks up to his father so much that he has been indoctrinated by many of his stranger beliefs, and has even been encouraged by his father to shoot people. Jeremiah also refuses to let Ben have access to the kind of food, medicine, and an education that civilized life could provide. However, in many ways, Jeremiah is a more devoted father than Pete is. He is always aware of where Ben is and will stop at nothing to keep Ben at his side, even breaking the law. Jeremiah was also as devoted to his other children; though he loved his wife and looked to her as the spiritual leader of their home, he was willing to go against her orders to get medical help for the children when they become sick with the deer's blood.

By Pete's account, his own father was not much of a father to him. Charles Snow could be cruel and manipulative; he always let Pete know what a disappointment he was and how his life choices were a letdown to the entire family. Yet other sources, such as Luke's parole officer Wes, seem to indicate that Charles has been supporting his sons all along, bribing people to get them out of trouble and paying their way toward a better life, perhaps without their knowledge. Pete seems dubious about this, and it is never confirmed one way or another, though perhaps his father was more supportive than he believed, in his own way. Toward the beginning of the novel, Luke encourages Pete to visit their father, who is ill, but Pete refuses. Charles dies before Pete can go to see him, and he only hears about it second-hand from an old family friend. Despite his rough relationship with his father, Pete is still shocked and troubled by this news, perhaps most so because he never gets to have a chance to have any kind of resolution with Charles.

At various points in the novel, Pete considers becoming a surrogate father to some of the children he is looking after, including Katie, Cecil, and Ben. Katie, in particular, seems to inspire Pete to want to be a better person and a better father, though he also seems frightened to take these children under his wing, perhaps not believing himself capable of being a good father. Pete instead takes all three children to Cloninger, about whom the novel does not reveal much, though by all accounts he seems to be a good man and a good father--perhaps the kind of man and father Pete wishes he could be.

## Running Away

The most immediate example of running away in the novel is Rachel, who spends most of the text running from her mother, from dangerous men, and mostly from Pete. At first, it seems as though Rachel is looking for love; however, the methods she uses indicate



that Rachel is looking for something more and that she is perhaps running away from herself. This is reflected in her changing her name to Rose and refusing to answer to her childhood name. When she has the chance to go back with Pete, Rachel runs away again, unable to face him and what he'll think of her. Rachel ends the novel still running, though there are some indications that she is progressing toward making peace with Pete and with herself.

The novel begins with Ben running away--not as dramatically as Rachel, but he still goes against his father's wishes by coming into town to explore. Ben seems to immediately regret this decision and goes back as soon as he can, but he still has the inclination to break away from his father's strict rules. This is not the first time Ben has explored this curiosity for civilization. His sneaking into Cloninger's house to watch television can also be seen as a "running away." However, once Ben actually gets taken away from Pearl and has the chance to live amongst normal people, he wants nothing more than to return to his father.

Pete helps a couple of people run away throughout the course of the novel. The first is Cecil, whose other alternative will be returning to a juvenile detention center and potentially becoming a hardened criminal. Pete lies to Cecil to get him into the detention center by telling him it is only temporary before he can go to live with Ell and Bear; Pete then makes that lie become true by getting Cecil released for his mother's funeral, then helping him run away to Spokane to stay with Ell and Bear. Pete also helps Ben and Jeremiah run away from the law to escape being charged for Wes's death.

Pete himself is adept at running away. He moved to Tenmile because he was trying to run away from his wife Beth after he learned that she was cheating on him. He is continuously running away from his responsibilities, especially Rachel. When Beth tries to include him in her religious re-connection, Pete pretends to go along with it, then leaves as soon as she's out of the room. Mary's actions toward him are questionable at best, but instead of attempting to listen or work things out with her, Pete leaves, though he continues to think about her long afterward. Perhaps part of Pete's reluctance to take in some of the children he helps is because he fears it will tie him down and he won't be able to pick up and run when he needs to.

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness is one of the main themes of the novel, and occurs in many forms. Pete leaves Missoula to go to Tenmile because he is so angry at Beth for cheating on him. Most of their conversations are volatile, ending in screaming and recriminations. It isn't until Rachel runs away that Pete and Beth begin to have honest communication with each other again. Beth admits she cheated on Pete knowing he would leave; Pete confesses that he was attempting to drive her away. Their relationship is not completely healed, but they are beginning to take the blame for their own actions, with the common goal of finding Rachel.



Rachel harbors some deep feelings of abandonment and betrayal by Pete. Her sexual exploration and running away both come as a result of the neglect she feels from him and trying to seek to fill the void he has left in her life. Rachel cannot fully know how much time and effort Pete spends in trying to find her, but may suspect as much once she sees that he has tracked her down in Seattle. By this point, however, her need to forgive has expanded beyond just Pete. She also needs to learn to forgive herself. Even though Pete has come to rescue her, she needs to come to terms with herself first.

Pete's resentment toward Rachel is more subdued, but is present nonetheless. He loves her and cares about what happens to her, but he also seems to resent the burden she is on him and the life that she has caused him to lead by being born and trapping him in a marriage at such a young age. Pete may not consciously blame Rachel for this, but it is not only Beth he abandons when he leaves Missoula. Visits and phone calls to Rachel are rare and perfunctory, and he is constantly telling himself he'll do better the next time, even as he finds another reason to forget her. It isn't until Rachel leaves that Pete realizes how much she means to him and how much he has let her down. Searching for her is his atonement, but perhaps his greatest act of forgiveness is allowing her to go and trusting her to come back to him someday.

Jeremiah, too, perhaps harbors some resentment toward Ben. Though he keeps Ben close and is fiercely possessive of him, there are some implications that he blames Ben for Sarah's and the children's death, at least in part. When Ben first tells Pete the story about how the others have died, he claims it is his fault, and Jeremiah doesn't argue with him. Though Jeremiah is a deeply religious man, logically he must know that Ben watching a cartoon didn't cause his wife and children to die, yet that resentment still remains. Much like Pete, Jeremiah doesn't seem to know just how much Ben means to him until they are separated. Once Pete offers Jeremiah the concrete knowledge that it was deer's blood and not the television viewing which caused Sarah's death, Jeremiah is able to reclaim his son and put the past behind them.



# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view of the novel is mainly third person omniscient, though it does occasionally break into first and second person, but only briefly. The third person narration mainly stays with Pete, though there are also regular breaks in which it switches to a third person, interview-style segment with his daughter Rachel, in which the interviewer is never identified. The interviewer's questions are distinguished in bold. The third person narration also occasionally follows Cecil, and once there is an interview-style second person narration which addresses Jeremiah Pearl in bold text, though he does not respond like Rachel does; the questions are left unanswered, hanging in the air. This second-person narration also pops up sporadically throughout Pete's narrative, sometimes switching mid-sentence from the third-person narration to address his inner thoughts, but almost as if he is being told what he thinks, rather than telling the reader.

These shifts in narration seem to be intentionally jarring. The uneven, sporadic shifting of point of view is perhaps intended to parallel a post-modern, Brechtian style of theater in which the fourth wall between the play and the audience is broken down. Switching back and forth between these points of view reminds the reader that this is a piece of fiction being told in an unusual way, but it also draws the reader in by occasionally turning the focus toward him/her. The use of the second person narrative implies a sort of culpability (e.g. Instead of reading "he thinks this" or "I feel this," it becomes "you feel this"). Even though the narrative is discussing a particular character with this "you," it could also be read as interpreting what the reader is thinking and feeling.

## Language and Meaning

Though the novel deals with very difficult subject matter, it is told in an unflinching, unsympathetic manner. None of the characters (with the possible exception of the little girl Katie) is painted as being entirely good or entirely bad. The reader may perhaps be invited to sympathize with a specific event or moment, but almost never with a character as a whole. Part of how this is accomplished is through the heavy use of dialogue and descriptive text. Most of the book is spent detailing what a character says over how he or she feels; the novel is mostly told from a third-person narration following Pete, though often when his feelings are discussed, it switches over to a second-person narration, creating a further distance between the reader and the character. Rachel's segments are reliant entirely upon what she says to learn who she is; no descriptors are given of her feelings or any actions that clue the reader to what her feelings might be.

The language of the novel is sparse and clean but sophisticated. The vocabulary is not too dense but occasionally employs a word that is more complex, perhaps mirroring the rural setting in which Pete lives. Though Pete interacts with mostly people from



backwoods Montana, the narrative rarely uses inflections or vernacular to describe the way they speak, instead occasionally inserting in a slang word here or there. The prose is simple but lyrical, suggesting an almost poetic quality, especially in the segments which switch to second person point of view. In addition, most of the narrative is told in past tense, though occasionally--particularly in the Rachel interview segments and in the second-person point of view breaks--the novel switches to present tense, though usually not for very long.

## Structure

The structure of the novel is fairly straightforward, with most of the chapters taking place in third-person, present-day narration, interspersed with occasional breaks to the interview segments with Rose. These segments are not numbered and can be considered addendums to the chapters to which they are attached, or as brief intermissions to the main narrative. The latter idea would fit into the potential theatricality suggested by the breaking down of the fourth wall with the switches into second-person narration. These interruptions in the narrative generally occur every second or third chapter, though there is not a set allotment for their distribution.

There is no prologue but a brief epilogue, which is also book-ended by one of Rachel's interviews, which ends the narrative, though Rachel's last sentence is cut off abruptly, left unfinished. This implies that her story, too, is left unfinished, and that it cannot be resolved neatly to fit into the parameters of a book. Similarly, the epilogue which closes Pete's story reads in many ways more like a beginning, suggesting that while this particular string of events in his life has come to a close, his story as a character will continue to go on after the novel has ended. There are many loose ends in the novel that are never completely resolved, such as his relationship with Beth, his issues with his father, the legal troubles he may have encountered by helping the Pearls, and his association with religion and God.





## Quotes

It was Wyoming, which means to drive forever through ugly shrubscapes the color of dirty pennies. It was just Wyoming along. They were Wyoming forever. You could Wyoming all day and not make any progress. To Wyoming was to go from nowhere to nowhere. Through nowhere. To see nothing. To do nothing but sit. You turn on the radio and Wyoming through the dial slowly, carefully in search of a sliver of civilization only to find a man talking about the piece of stock animals and feed. You listen to a dour preacher Wyoming about your bored and dying and Wyoming soul.

-- Rachel (Chapter 6 paragraph page 79)

**Importance:** This describes the attitude of many of the characters in the novel, who seem to not know what it is they want out of life, or maybe more accurately, how to get what they want out of life. Pete, in particular, seems to be someone who wants to accomplish great things with his life, but despite his (mostly) good intentions gets tripped up by his own weaknesses: his cynicism, his short temper, his alcoholism, and his distance from the people who should mean the most to him. Rachel initially uses this term of "Wyoming" to describe her mother, passing from man to man and place to place, but later applies this term to herself and her path to find herself.

She is proof that there is nothing that cannot happen to someone. That the world doesn't need permission, that there is no novel evil it won't embrace.

-- Narrator/Pete (Chapter 10 paragraph page 127)

**Importance:** Pete thinks this in reference to his girlfriend, Mary, who is a survivor of the foster care system, but he could just as easily be thinking about any one of the children that he endeavors to help throughout the novel, including his own daughter. The novel is very dark in that it details some of the worst things that can happen to children, sometimes even at the hands of their parents; however, despite the bleak nature of this quote, the novel ends on a more hopeful note. Though it doesn't shy away from the terrible things that can happen to people, particularly runaways and those embroiled in the foster care system, in most cases these children are seen being at least guided toward a better future where they will have the potential to be happy. Evil might happen, but it can also be overcome.

She used to favor him, the way girls sometimes favor their fathers over their mothers. She would pine for him when he was gone all day and into the night. And later, when she was older and started to understand what he did for a living, she would wonder why does he help these other families when I miss him so much when I need him here why does he have to be the one?

-- Narrator/Rachel (Chapter 13 paragraph page 162)

**Importance:** This quote sums up the major conflict between Rachel and Pete and her reason for running away. Pete's endeavor to help less fortunate children seems very noble, and indeed in many ways is; but it also comes at a cost to his own family. Pete is so invested in the lives of other people that he neglects his own well-being, which



poisons his marriage and alienates him from his daughter. It is only natural for Rachel to wonder why Pete has to be the one, and why he cannot simply be her father and make her as much of a priority as he makes his clients. By the time he does, it is unfortunately too late.

He wondered did all abuse simply come down to children so irritating that they engendered violence or neglect, the reverse of the way adorable children got toys, got spoiled, and got fat.

-- Narrator/Cecil (Chapter 16 paragraph page 183)

**Importance:** Cecil's musings strike on an important point in this novel. With the exception of Cloninger's children, who are rarely mentioned, there are no real examples of happy, normal children who have lived the kind of "spoiled" life to which Cecil alludes. Even Pete, who was probably arguably raised in the most stable household, had a highly volatile relationship with his father and became a father himself at the age of 17, with a brother constantly on the run from the law. Yet even though this kind of "happy" childhood might be more of a fiction than a reality, this novel still raises the questions of why some people seem to have life so much harder than the rest, and if that is at all inevitable or something certain people are predisposed to.

And he said to himself all these days, Oh Christ what have I done. I have let her down in every meaningful particular, above all failing to love her enough that she knew his love and would come home to him.

-- Narrator/Pete (Chapter 20 paragraph page 238)

**Importance:** Up until Rachel running away from home, Pete has remained blissfully unaware to the struggles she has been going through, choosing instead to focus on his clients, his career, and himself. A few times, Pete has half-heartedly entertained the idea of being a better father, but for the most part, Rachel has been kept safely in the background of his mind, particularly in his obsession with finding the Pearls. Even when Rachel explicitly asks him to let her stay with him and leave Texas because she is deeply unhappy, Pete is not there for her. This moment of awakening, when he realizes that he has not been there for her as he should have been, unfortunately comes too late. Pete's fears come true later on when he encounters Rachel face-to-face, but she is so afraid of his disappointment that she runs away again instead of going home with him. This quote is also significant in that, although Pete may be using Christ's name in vain, it can also be interpreted as a prayer, echoing his ongoing struggle with religion.

He'd seen so much suffering, but he'd only ever suffered it secondarily. To have it fresh and his own. The scope of it. He'd had no idea. He'd known nothing.

-- Narrator/Pete (Chapter 20 paragraph page 238)

**Importance:** Part of Pete's disengagement with his own life and obsession with the lives of his clients is that he can detach himself from experiencing any personal pain. This may seem counter-intuitive, since the horrific nature of the lives of most of his clients clearly impacts him negatively and has caused him to turn to binge-drinking and even on occasion drugs. However, there is an emotional distance created by focusing



on other peoples' problems. Pete gets to exercise his hero complex by swooping in to save other people, but when real problems come into his own home, he is forced to realize he is not so very different from his clients.

It didn't bother her, him looking her up and down a moment, nodding like he liked what he saw or just that she'd grown up in that moment. She didn't care, or she told herself she didn't care, if there was a difference, which perhaps there wasn't. Men were supposed to look at women. They were supposed to.

-- Narrator/Rachel (Chapter 24 paragraph page 319)

**Importance:** This quote addresses some important gender issues, but it also reflects the lack of a strong father figure in Rachel's life. Rachel feels as though she has been abandoned by her father; the other men that Beth brings into her life, such as Jimmy, who could potentially act as father figures, sexualize her and teach her that her worth lies in her attractiveness to men. This will eventually lead to her running away and working as a prostitute, as she has been taught to see herself as a commodity.

He'd gotten it all wrong. Once again. Idiot. Is there anything you touch that doesn't turn to shit?

-- Narrator/Pete (Chapter 25 paragraph page 321)

**Importance:** In many ways, Pete is shown to have admirable intentions. Going into a career like social work suggests he has a strong desire to help people, and perhaps that he feels a need to atone for something. Yet despite these good intentions, Pete is constantly making mistakes, losing his temper, giving into his weaknesses, and failing the people he is most meant to help. In this particular instance, Pete feels as though he has let down Katie, a little girl whom he has always felt particularly protective toward. Katie is one of the only truly innocent people in the novel, and Pete feels a strong desire to keep her that way. Yet though he has opportunities to take her in and try to better her life, Pete always resists, perhaps fearful that he would only end up making her life worse in the long run, just like he's done with Rachel.

I am dynamite, Mr. Snow. And you, you are a functionary of Satan. You cannot say you were not told. You cannot say that no one told you what you are.

-- Jeremiah (Chapter 30 paragraph page 393)

**Importance:** There are a few themes coming to a head in this quote. The first is Jeremiah's inherent danger, which acts as an undercurrent throughout most of the novel. The reader, like Pete, can never forget for long that Jeremiah is capable of great violence, though ultimately most of Jeremiah's actual violence is threatened, not acted upon. This also, perhaps, acts as foreshadowing for the attack on the post office with a stick of dynamite. It is unclear if Jeremiah actually made the attack, though it seems unlikely; however, the use of dynamite in both instances suggests a connection, even if it is not explicit. The second theme is religion and Jeremiah's accusation of Pete as a tool of Satan. Though Pete has a difficult relationship with religion, he may not entirely disagree with this idea, since he so often brings disaster to the people around him.



When it had gotten dark, the man choked but would not die. Suffocating, but not yet dead. It was unbearable to hear, and finally Pete palmed the dying man's nose and mouth, thinking, I'll bear some of this, some of this is my fault, maybe the better part of it. But when the man's breathing ceased, nothing stirred in the woods, and Pete was even more profoundly alone. That was unbearable too. But there was nothing to do about it.

-- Narrator (Chapter 30 paragraph page 397)

**Importance:** This quote comes at the climax of the novel, when the promised danger of the Pearls finally comes to a head and Ben shoots Wes after following Pete into the woods. Pete is not directly responsible for Wes's death, but his involvement with the Pearls and his refusal to tell his brother's whereabouts have inadvertently led to this moment. This quote also highlights how, although Pete is surrounded by people who need something from him, he is ultimately alone, left to shoulder all of the burden by himself.

I'm a disaster can't wait to happen.

-- Pete (Chapter 32 paragraph page 419)

**Importance:** This quote is said by Pete to Pomeroy, the man who has been acting as his daughter's pimp. In the moment, Pete is threatening Pomeroy, letting him know that he won't let anything stand in the way of getting Rachel back. This quote also has a broader meaning, reflecting Pete's fear that he only brings disaster to himself and to everyone around him. Though he is holding his life together as best he can, Pete, as well as the reader, can sense that it is only a matter of time before everything falls apart.

You see your daughter now in toto, from a vantage not even fatherhood has given you, a new place. You don't know her trajectory, weren't meant to know it, because of her or by circumstance. You simply wish her well. A voice in you is saying to keep her safe, warm, to light her way, for her to know little fear and to have bravery and joy. After a while it occurs to you that this is a prayer.

-- Narrator/Pete (Chapter 32 paragraph page 430)

**Importance:** This moment represents a moment of emotional closure for Pete. He has not stopped worrying about Rachel or caring what happens to her, but he has been forced to realize that she is on her own path and that chasing her is fruitless; he must wait for her to choose to come back to him. This perhaps represents a parallel experience to his own relationship with God, against whom he rebels for a majority of the novel, then--almost without realizing it--returns to in prayer in a time of need.