

Fugitive Pieces Study Guide

Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels

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Plot Summary

Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels is partly a memoir by the poet Jakob Beer about his life as a Holocaust survivor and reflections on Jakob's poetry by a scholar, Ben, who is indebted for helping him understand his Holocaust-surviving and scarred parents. It is about struggling to cope with the past.

Fugitive Pieces is divided unequally into two parts. In Book I, sixty-year-old poet/scientist Jakob Beer looks back over his life from the time he escapes death at the hands of the Nazis until he succeeds in writing poetry, splitting his time between Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and his adoptive home during World War II, Greece. He owes his survival after his family is killed and his rich education to a Greek geologist, Athanasios (Athos) Roussos, who happens upon him in the mud of Poland and spirits him off to Greece. There he opens to Jakob all of the mysteries of the universe. After the war, during the brutal Greek civil war, they emigrate to Canada, where Athos teaches, Jakob studies, and begins a career as a translator.

Jakob marries twice. The first union fails because he is insufferably obsessed with his sister Bella's fate and all of the lives tragically cut short by the Nazis. Jakob wants to write poetry but cannot produce fruit until his second wife plants love in his soul. Around 1970, Jakob and Michaela move to Greece and he begins writing in the Roussos family home on Idhra Is. There, he produces the memoir that constitutes Book I.

Book II is told by a young scholar in Toronto, Ben, who meets Jakob and Michaela at a party. Ben's second wife, Naomi, is instantly attracted to Jakob. After Jakob's tragic death in Athens in the summer of 1992, Ben addresses to him meditations on how Jakob's poetry has helped him deal with his own parents, Holocaust survivors. Ben chronicles the burden of growing up in a paranoid, foreign home and gradually breaking free. Ben edits Jakob's writings for publication and studies weather in relation to literature and history. Ben's marriage is dying when he goes to Idhra to rescue Jakob's journals. In the Roussos ancestral home, Ben comes to understand how Jakob can write about horrors, finally having the love of a good woman. Ben hopes that he can return to his abandoned and betrayed wife and find the love that he needs.



Book I, The Drowned City

Book I, The Drowned City Summary

A young boy, Jakob Beer, emerges from the bog at the Beskupin archeological site as though he were an artifact reborn. The site, twenty-five centuries old, has been perfectly preserved in peat. It is uncovered over several years by archaeologists, and then deliberately smashed and reburied by the Nazis. He hides in the bog as Nazis smash in the door, kill his parents, and make off with Jakob's beautiful, fifteen-year-old sister, who is too big to hide behind the wallpaper. From his hiding place in the river, Jakob sees the spirits of the dead ascending. He feels his mother inside him, saying goodbye. Jacob runs into the dark forest, where he seeks food by night and hides, terrified, by day, dreaming about Bella. One morning Jakob senses that Bella has died. One autumn day, Jakob approaches a digging man, Athos, who hides him under his coat and in his car and spirits him away from his parents' remains and his best friend Mones to Zakynthos Island, Greece. Bella remains inside Jakob.

Book I, The Drowned City Analysis

The first chapter establishes that the narrator of Book I as a seven year old sees his family exterminated, flees into the forest, and after living an undisclosed length of time in terror, emerges from the earth like Tollund Man or Grauballe Man. These are ancient naturally-mummified bodies unearthed in the 1950s in Denmark. Both appear to be victims of human sacrifice, a theme taken up in the next chapter in relation to the Holocaust. The narrator is Jakob Beer. His identifying with postwar archaeological discoveries suggests that the telling is a good deal after the fact, but he captures the anxiety of a child, lost alone in the dark for the first time. The exact time of Jakob's writing is late in Part I revealed to be the summer of 1992, shortly before his death at age sixty.

The first chapter also establishes that Jakob is for life obsessed with his sister Bella's fate. She is first depicted as a lover of novels, including Romain Rolland and Jack London. Jakob hangs from her shoulders as she reads, demanding that she share with him the mystery of the black marks on paper. She also traces letters on his back with a finger to help him learn to spell. These are major services for a future poet. Jakob refers to Bella as smallest Russian matryoshka doll nestled inside him, as he himself is nestled inside Athos, the Greek scholar who rescues him from what is clearly Nazi-occupied Poland, where Jakob's family falls victim to the Holocaust. Jakob mentions a best friend, Mones, whose character will be filled in gradually, from Jakob's memory.

The first chapter establishes the importance of language to Jakob. Entering Greece, he notices that its unknown alphabet and Hebrew are strangely complementary. This motif will be repeated, and Athos will often emphasize how the two cultures resonate. Jakob



also picks up the belief that the souls of the dead do not remain inside the earth. No one is born only once.

Anne Michaels' prose reveals that she is a poet. Scarcely a paragraph can be found lacking a rich simile or metaphor or evocation of sights, sounds, and smells. The text is emotive: a young boy scared witless but somehow knowing how to survive, but told through the eyes of the same person who has grown into a scholar, knowing about the preservative nature of peat.



Book I, The Stone-Carriers

Book I, The Stone-Carriers Summary

With Athos, high on Zakynthos, in two rooms, Jakob misses the most important events in his life. Athos's stories evoke images of Jakob's faceless family and friends. He lives in constant fear of the kicked-in door, writes letters to the dead, and suffers nightmares. Athos is a geologist specializing in peat, limestone, and archaeological wood. The last of a seafaring family, he passes to Jakob his own nautical history to replace what he has lost, but insists that he retain his Hebrew. Jakob remembers Bella, who used to be obsessed with Beethoven, and he has nightmares about incomplete lives. He wonders if his remembering is painful to the dead. Athos's stories in English and Greek begin to make sense. Athos opens his rich and diverse library, expanding Jakob's horizons, interesting him in ancient cultures. Jakob feels Bella watching him.

Athos lives a two hour walk from town, atop a steep hill. When he goes there, Jakob stays indoors, beside an old sea chest in which he hides at the first sign of danger. Jakob learns from Athos how stones hold human time, and Athos fills him with stories about Antarctica. Always hungry, Athos and Jakob commiserate with the starving explorers, who hallucinate about food before starving to death.

On Zakynthos, the Nazis loot the fruit groves and Jakob suffers from scurvy. Athos forages for food and uses ancient sources to learn how to cook them. The Italian troops that first occupy Zakynthos do not persecute the Jews, but when the Germans take over in 1944, the Jews bury their valuables and disappear into the hills. Jakob sleeps, listening, prepared to hide in his sea chest. Their friend and benefactor Old Martin's son Ioannis tells of losing his family on Corfu when the Gestapo sinks a boat full of Jews. The sinking reminds Jakob of the sea, where he dreams his family also drowns. Athos draws images from nature to fight despair. He insists that he cannot save Jakob; Jakob must save him.

Jakob's situation is luxurious compared to that of Jews across Europe, about which he then knows nothing. When the Nazis leave Zakynthos, Jakob emerges to sunlight and slowly regains strength, wondering whose life he has entered. Athos talks of an invisible world, citing the serene-looking sacrificial bog bodies. Biskupin had enjoyed a glorious culture before being inundated and abandoned two thousand years ago. When archaeological work begins in 1937, Athos takes part. After he leaves, the Nazis destroy the work and kill his colleagues.

After musing about the effects of rivers, winds, and currents, Athos remarks that railroads, cutting across land, eventually serve the Holocaust. Prisoners forced to dig up mass graves handle the gore of lost lives and are sanctified. The dead influence the world just as magnetic lines of force form in minerals. Jakob wonders how long the spirit recalls the body and where in the galaxy the victims screams are, as they move toward the Psalms.



Book I, The Stone-Carriers Analysis

The second chapter takes its title from a reference to forced labor in the Golleschau stone quarries, a part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau system of work camps. The men haul huge blocks of granite back and forth, mindlessly. One looks to the stars and remembers beauty when all other hope is lost. This combines with a Zohar, a book of Jewish mysticism, to define how Jakob views the Holocaust. The Zohar says: "All visible things will be born again invisible" (p. 48).

Jakob emphasizes that he does not see the horrors that visit European Jewry during World War II. He endures hardships on Zakynthos and lives in constant fear of the door being bashed in, as had happened in his home in Poland, but most of the time he benefits from Athos's breadth and depth of knowledge of the natural sciences. The chapter ranges over this learning in great and colorful detail. Jakob happily learns English and Greek because they free him of painful memories connected with Hebrew and Yiddish. Athos encourages Jakob to retain his heritage and enriches it with his own background as the son of generations of seafaring Greeks and a Western-educated scholar.

The chapter describes how all of Zakynthos's Jews are saved from the Nazis through the courage of the Christian mayor and archbishop. By comparison, most of the Jews on nearby Corfu perish by drowning or in concentration camps. A relative on Zakynthos gives a harrowing, if somewhat confusing, description. Late in the chapter, Jakob paints in wrenching, fast-paced sentences and paragraphs what he later learns about the horror of the Holocaust, mixing specific instances of brutality with generalized depictions of inhuman conditions. He ties in the invention of the railroad, which ought to have been a boon to humankind, but makes possible the systematic slaughter.

Jakob is haunted by not knowing the fate of his beloved sister, Bella, who had been obsessed with the composer Ludwig van Beethoven's personal habits and would clown about in disguise, but when she turns to playing piano turns serious and precise. This establishes a musical motif that runs through both parts of the novel. Jakob wonders about how the dead feel about being reborn invisible. At one point, Jakob tells Athos about underground synagogues in Poland, a detail that seems unlikely to be in the mind of a seven-year-old, but in describing how the Jews of Zakynthos prepare for likely martyrdom, the elders fill the minds of the young with minute details in order that any survivors might revive Jewish life and customs. Relatively safe, Jakob is filled with the lore of science and becomes interested in ancient cultures.

Rather like the aside on Bella and Beethoven, Athos tells Jakob about Capt. Robert Scott's doomed expedition to the South Pole in 1912. Jakob is particularly drawn to Dr. Edward Wilson's talent for painting scientifically-accurate watercolors of the Antarctic skies. Jakob notes that Wilson is also a poet and Canadian. This points to Jakob's career path in emigration. Jakob notes that his nightmares also follow him to Toronto. This becomes significant in later chapters. He always feels that Bella is watching him.



The chapter ends with Athos talking about "remote causes" and an invisible world like that of the serene-looking bodies that he has excavated from bogs. They show signs of being human sacrifices. Athos tells about ancient Biskupin culture and his work to preserve the ruins. After the war, he learns that the Nazis had destroyed the excavations and killed Athos's colleagues shortly after he spirited Jakob to safety. It is the basis for Athos's belief that Jakob is responsible for saving him, more so than vice versa. Jakob meditates on how prisoners are forced to dig up the mass graves of early victims of Nazism as the perpetrators seek to cover up evidence. He pictures workers forced, like the stone carriers of Golleschau, to do the unthinkable: handle the gory remains of the dead. It becomes a sacred vocation, taking on the lost lives that pass through their fingers. Jakob sees the dead influencing the world of the living by analogy to magnetic lines of force form in minerals. The scientific description of magnetism actually helps make sense of the mysticism. Jakob asks pointedly how long before murder and death cease to be different categories. The entire chapter is both harrowing and humane.



Book I, Vertical Time

Book I, Vertical Time Summary

Athos takes Jakob, now thirteen, to Athens to search for information about Bella and Aunt Ida's fate. Greece is in ruins from the war and communists and British are fighting. They stay with Athos' old colleague Kostas Mitsialis and his wife Daphne, the adults talking politics and Kostas describing the various occupations. Jakob pictures events from his childhood similar to some of the Greek anecdotes about British and Australian soldiers singing, Germans marching, stealing, and taunting, and Greeks blackmarkting or collapsing from hunger. Kostas tells Jakob about the beloved poet Palamas and Sikelianos, who preaches freedom at Palamas' funeral. Athenians are on the roof, greeting one another the night before the Germans withdraw. They hear news of one thousand vanished villages. There are too many dead to bury. The Americans bring food, which the communists steal as they hunt down and kill anyone well-off, even relatives and recent allies. The Greeks seem to catch the virus of violence from the Germans. Jakob learns to live a normal life from Kostas and Daphne as Athos prepares for their move to Canada. Daphne's goodbye squeeze reminds him of his mother and Bella.

Before leaving Zakynthos, Athos performs a ceremony of remembering at the shore, and they eat a memorial meal together. He reminds Jakob that one's good deeds morally advance the dead and advises him to be buried in ground that will remember him. Jakob sees plenty of birds, which Athos says is the sign of prayers comforting the dead. For years after the war, Jakob can do nothing hurriedly. During the last week in Greece, Kostas takes Jakob on a tour of Athens and tells him - without details - that Athos had been married. Helen had died in World War I. Kostas says that Athos has left Greece many times for various purposes but now finds it too changed to remain. As Athos is prone to depression, he will need Jakob's help at times; he is, however, as everlasting as his beloved limestone. Pointing out graffiti that still points to Greek courage during the occupation, and describing the culture wars as vernacular poetry replaces the formal. Jakob grasps the power of poetry.

Athos has had an invitation to teach at the University of Toronto since 1938, when Griffith Taylor discovers they have much in common. Two more members of Scott's Antarctic expedition, Frank Debenham and Silas Wright, help persuade Athos to go to Toronto but are gone before he and Jakob arrive. Athos crates his books and has Kostas send some to Canada and some to the family home on Idhra Island, to be safe from earthquakes on Zakynthos. In 1953, an earthquake does, indeed, destroy Athos's home there along with most structures; the animals' strange behavior forewarns islanders, so casualties are few. Luck requires heeding warnings, says Athos, who hopes to grow to love his new landscape as he does Zakynthos. Without this, one is an exile. The Mitsialises see them off, exchanging gifts and well wishes. Kostas gives Jakob an anthology of Greek poetry that plants seeds for a lifetime. Kostas remembers his sister and friend Mones.



Book I, Vertical Time Analysis

The third chapter is transitional, as Athos and Jakob prepare to leave Greece for Canada. It opens with them walking across the war-scarred Peloponnese (southern Greece), where the Nazis are said to have destroyed some one thousand villages, leaving too many bodies to bury. They pass Kalavrita, another instance of mass retribution against civilians. On the heels of World War II comes civil war to Greece, with former allies quickly falling out ideologically and murdering one another. The description is poetic and so lightly sketched that one can only take away that it is tragic.

Kostas and Daphne Mitsialis are introduced, largely in order for the adults to talk current politics and to describe life in Athens before and after the Germans drive out the British and Australian. The latter are clearly viewed by the locals as occupiers, but of a far more benign type. A Greek black-marketeer who substitutes a dead dog for a lamb is particularly striking. Americans bringing emergency food and the communists stealing it, and stringing up former friends in arms also provides striking imagery. Kostas wants young Jakob to understand the workings of the world while Daphne dotes on him, helping him come out of his shell. She reminds him of his mother and Bella. Kostas tells Jakob confidentially that Athos is prone to depression and will need Jakob's help at times. The menfolk discuss political acronyms and labels too obscure for most readers to comprehend. The point is that tragedy follows tragedy and Athos and Jakob are again to escape it. Note how Jakob picks up bits of details that remind him of life at home before war tears it apart.

Athos performs secularized, personalized rituals of leaving Zakynthos that are modified from the memorial services of the Orthodox church. The theme of not forgetting the past, the departed, is reinforced. Victims of the sea are offered fresh water to refresh them. There is a rather confusing aside on the use of popular, modern Greek rather than the formal literary language that most readers will want to gloss over. It picks up the theme of bravery and brings Jakob to realize the power of poetry, which becomes his professional field.

Chapter three explains how Athos comes to emigrate to Canada and teach at the University of Toronto. The key names are tied to Scott's Antarctic expedition, which Athos has already described at length to young Jakob. It also introduces the island of Idhra, to which the novel returns in Book II. The rich description of how animal behavior alerts humans to the coming of a catastrophic earthquake allows Athos to talk about the need to heed warnings. He flees Poland only because Jakob flees his house, for instance. There is a foreboding of life in exile, close to what is described in the Psalms.



Book I, The Way Station

Book I, The Way Station Summary

Toronto is an active, albeit derelict, port, full of nostalgic migrants. Athos and Jakob head north Union Station to the Heathside Gardens apartments, which seem luxurious after Zakyntos. Disoriented by everything, Jakob finds it hard to sleep and despairs. Athos sleeps little as he prepares lectures by night. Jakob attends English and Greek classes and does the shopping; Athos cooks for relaxation. Athos helps Jakob with the subtleties of English and wishes he could relieve him of his nightmares. How Nazis could have done what they did with straight faces is beyond Jakob. He tries to bury the images, but family and friends emerge from his mind at night. Later, he will study the details of the Holocaust. Athos teaches Jakob to cook Greek dishes. Jakob does not stray far when food shopping. One day he misunderstands a grocer's thick accent and never returns, despite Athos's explanation. Jakob ponders how it takes years to straighten out sounds and gain vocabulary.

Athos and Jakob gather fellow strays, none of whom work in their former professions, and from them Jakob learns many useful things. Athos and Jakob take little part in the Greek community but frequent Constantine's restaurants. Athos writes his book, sensing that he is running out of time, and Jakob studies the city rather than making friends. On Sunday walks through Toronto's ravines, Athos points out 150 million years of prehistory. In the first thunderstorm of spring, Jakob sees boys blowing on grass to produce loud squawks. Athos and Jakob make up characters and stories to help Jakob with his English. Jakob is proud of terrible puns and sees differences between Old and New World objects. He later finds that writing about his childhood in English protects him. Toronto's Greek and Jewish neighborhoods lie side-by-side, which comforts Jakob. Hearing the old tongue brings fear and love; he wonders how survivors of the camps feel, surrounded by so much food.

Jakob learns how glaciers transform Toronto's rivers and forests and reads about Canadian history. They both correspond with Kostas and Daphne, Jakob reporting on school and food, Athos writing about Greek politics. Athos often falls depressed while working on Bearing False Witness, a tribute to comrades lost at Biskupin, documenting the Nazi abuse of archeology. Biskupin and other historical events inflame Athos's temper and Jakob chokes on the smoke from his images. Jakob dreams about the Nazis invading his home and wonders what they think about Bella's magnificent hair as they cut it. Athos stops eating as he labors late nights.

On one of their last walks together, Athos and Jakob discuss religion. Jakob maintains that the Truth does not care what one thinks of it. Athos's father had not known if there is a God, because God constantly disappears. Beautiful Government House in Chorley Park, which Athos and Jacob often visit, disappears. Tiring, Athos waves off Jakob's concerns and refuses to slow. Jakob enrolls in the university, studying literature, history, and geography, and begins translating banned Greek poets. It is a task filled with



mystery. Walking one summer evening, Jakob hears overhead melodies that his mother always sang while brushing Bella's hair and he joins in, a foreign song that surprises porch-sitters. Jakob's spirit-shape grows familiar.

Unable to sleep, Jakob imagines kissing a skinny girl from the library, but she wonders why he keeps to himself, collects articles about the war, and studies faces in photographs. Jakob and Athos both suffer from having spent the war in ignorance on Zakynthos. Only silence can store Jakob's life. Feeling Bella inch away, Jakob thinks that writing poetry slightly askew might restore order. He writes about Biskupin and Zakynthos but achieves only shrieking. Through Athos, Jakob makes one lasting friend at the university, Maurice Salman. The three go to movies and argue about which actress to adore, until Athos dies. He returns home from lecturing on conserving Egyptian wood, sits at his table, and is dead in the morning. Jakob knows the outlines and many details of Athos's life but wonders about whom and how he had loved. Athos's last breath obscures the the view of his life.

Weighted down by self-pity, Jakob sits in Athos's chaotic study, looking at mementos and reading with embarrassment a packet of letters from Athos to Helen while both were studying in Vienna. From the letters, he understands why Athos has continued searching for Bella. For Athos, hope and expectation are separate and love is always good. To Kostas and Daphne, Jakob promises to bring Athos' ashes home to where he will be remembered. Jakob dips at random into Athos's diverse interests in nature, particularly peat and salt, and appreciates how Athos views social forces in terms of geology.

Having planned to help Athos organize his files on Nazi archeology, Jakob spends three years searching for the "why." He feels Athos' presence in the flat as he works alone. Jakob also translates part-time and occasionally has dinner with Maurice and his bride Irene. They talk about the book, which Jakob dedicates to Athos's dead colleagues. Jakob performs the rite of pouring fresh water into the sea for the dead to drink and recalls how Eskimo hunters offer fresh water to the seals that they hunt. He realizes that to honor Athos and Bella he must resolve a perpetual thirst.

Book I, The Way Station Analysis

The fourth chapter depicts the brief time that Athos and Jakob spend together in Toronto. Much space is given to description of the city, as it is after World War II and as it had been in historical, pre-historical, and geologic time. The pair spend Sundays hiking, and the ravines of Toronto offer Athos many teaching opportunities. Jakob is disoriented by the busy, crowded city and particularly by the sensual nature of advertising. He recalls several incidents that become funny in hindsight but are frightening at the time to a boy whose English is weak. Athos shuns the large organized Greek community to spend time writing. Jakob offers some telling recollections about displaced fellow immigrants, including Greeks and Jews, whose neighborhoods lie next to one another. Hearing Yiddish and Hebrew brings mixed feelings because of Jakob's

unresolved survivor's guilt. Jakob's earliest efforts to write autobiographical poetry are a failure.

Jakob talks about mastering English with Athos's help and gradually beginning to translate for a living. Jacob develops a taste for puns and malapropisms (twists on words) and reproduces a number of humorous examples. He discusses Hayim Nahman Bialik's views on the impossibility of adequately translating poetry and applies them especially to Greek, which he has already shown operates on two literary levels in the mid-twentieth century. Jakob continues to suffer nightmares about the Nazi evil, and in a rather lyrical passage, he considers how they could have done what they did with straight faces. He later comes to understand the psychology that allows them to function, but at this point he is puzzled, rather childishly expecting people's faces to reveal their true inner nature.

Jakob makes one lasting friend at the university, Maurice Salman, who soon marries. His wife becomes for Jakob a symbol of womanhood. He also falls for a skinny girl that he meets in the university library who finds him odd with his preference for collecting articles about the war over learning how to dance. Jakob's love life will come into focus later in the novel and be shown initially to falter.

Athos dies before he can finish *Bearing False Witness*, so Jakob completes it for him, working late nights and alone, as Athos had. Jakob recognizes in himself self-pity as he sifts through mementos, which he describes in abundance, helping to characterize his late mentor. He is embarrassed to read Athos's fifty-year-old letters to Helen and look at her lone photograph. Finishing the book takes three years, which telescope to a single sentence. The chapter ends with Jakob performing the rite of pouring fresh water into the sea for the dead to drink, which Athos had taught him in Zakynthos, and he couples this, in Athos's fashion, with Eskimo hunting rituals. Athos has taught him syncretism. The image shifts to Jakob realizing that to honor Athos - and Bella, whose memory has inched away a bit but continues to haunt him - he must resolve a perpetual thirst.



Book I, Phosphorus

Book I, Phosphorus Summary

In 1968, Jakob and Bella enter a soundless, colorful dream. A river flows to the music of Brahms. When Bella disappears, the dream turns nightmarish and Jakob feels wrong about being married to Alex and living in a foreign land. He feels as though he has disappeared and Bella is searching for him. He recalls Bella's practicing and playing with adult passions.

Jakob meets Alex at a fine music library in the park where he listens to composers systematically by alphabet. She is an energetic woman who is adept at punning. Raised by her physician father on stories of the British military and word wit, she develops a passion for listening to music. Acting sophisticated, Alex is awkwardly innocent and seems to promise Jakob freedom. It takes five years for their attraction to end, but the signs show early. Jakob feels insecure around her Marxist friends and she has trouble dealing with his shyness. She is restless when they visit the Salmans but seems to enjoy the security of marriage, especially not having to cook. Two years into the marriage, Jakob's nightmares return, spoiling their sex life.

Jakob muses about how the fourteenth-century Catalan Atlas is honest about designating unknown regions. History is less frank, forcing one to remember what it covers up as if it were a watermark leaking through. He recalls Bella practicing her fingering and telling stories about Brahms. Jakob and their mother memorize the fragments that she practices, but when she plays the whole piece through, Jakob gets lost.

Returning to history and memory, Jakob contrasts history as the Totenbuch of the concentration camps and memory as the Memorbucher of the synagogue. The former is amoral and the latter moral. History and memory share time and space and every moment is really two moments. Examples are how the Nazis and the Lublin scholars view the destruction of holy books, how Nazis and mothers in Łódź react to the soldiers "catching" infants on their bayonets, and how a woman in Birkenau carries a photograph of her husband and daughter under her tongue in order not to be separated from them.

Jakob cannot resist reading the horrors of history because he needs to know where Bella actually dies. He had hoped that marrying Alex would bring light to his life, but it pushes him down into the mud. He is obsessed not with the details of where Holocaust victims come from, what they do or is done to them, but whether they are silent or speak, keep their eyes open or closed at the precise moment of death. He wonders how this relates to the gradual instant of geology. Jakob sees in Alex's belongings and behaviors parallels to memories of Bella, whose remembered music helps him recover better than the touch of Alex's body. Nothing releases the dreamer.



In the gradual erosion of the cliffs on which his friends, the Truppers, have built their house, Alex also perceives that every moment is two moments, just as in 1942, Jews hide in the painted caves of Lascaux and listen to Mozart, while at Auschwitz a prison orchestra accompanies the doomed. Caves are temples. The ground speaks - through Oracles at Delphi and holy mass graves. Germans turn humans into objects just as physicists are turning matter into energy. When Alex turns on lights, Jakob's memories and stories slip away. He feels that she is brainwashing and wants him to begin anew. When she leaves him, everyone thinks that she is at fault, but Jakob knows it is his fault. He has lost desire. He hears Bella tapping their secret goodnight code through the wall and recalls Bella telling him a terrible story about Brahms falling in love with Clara Schumann, wife of the composer whom Brahms adores. Brahms never marries and is so distraught when she dies that he barely makes it to the end of her burial. Jakob cannot imagine the trauma of Jews whose lives are cut off, left unfinished.

In July, Alex respects Jakob enough to declare that she can stand no more. He assumes that she has met someone else. She notes that she will remove all trace of herself, everything that means nothing to him already, because he is ungrateful. Mama and Papa leave thirty-two tins of food and promise to return before he has eaten the last one. He has four books, which he repeatedly reads. He is not to step outside the door. He obeys, even when the food runs out and he gets lightheaded. He hears music outside and considers floating up through a crack. Jakob cannot move a muscle throughout July.

Book I, Phosphorus Analysis

The fifth chapter introduces and dispatches Jakob's first wife, Alex. The action has jumped forward to 1968. They are radically different personalities and each approaches the one thing that unites them, the love of music, differently. Alex is carefree, frivolous, and attracted to Marxism. Jakob, who has seen ideologies go bad in practice, is uncomfortable. Music makes him draw comparisons to lost Bella, his nightmares return, and they drift apart. He appreciates Alex's honesty in calling it quits. He blames her for nothing and does not withhold from the reader how badly he treats her as his depression deepens. At the end of the chapter, he is totally dysfunctional, leaving the reader to wonder - indeed, worry - about his future.

Bella's musical focus earlier is Beethoven and in particular his Moonlight Sonata. He is mentioned again, in connection with mysterious love letters to an "Immortal Beloved", whose identity is debated in musicological literature. The phrase here is used merely to heighten the poetic atmosphere. Bella is shown also to have concentrated much of her practice time, which is described in detail on Johannes Brahms' Intermezzo No. 2. Much attention is given to Bella's care over orchestration notes. Bella also tells the sad story of Brahms' unrequited love for his friend's wife.

Jakob has earlier stated several times how he exists during World War II outside the experience of his people. He has several times shown how the Jews are forced to hide in ways that resemble benign activities, and here cites several more, almost in passing.



Jakob's obsession with the Holocaust continues to grow, particularly because he does not know his sister Bella's precise fate. He fixates on the precise moment of death and what the victims do. Athos's teachings about geology provide a parallel, as the painfully slow processes whereby wood becomes stone, peat becomes coal, and limestone becomes marble eventually come to a culmination. He calls it a "gradual instant", like death.

Jakob draws parallels involving archeology and music. Jews are shown hiding in the famed caves of Lascaux in southern France, listening to Mozart. The caves contain Paleolithic paintings of animal hunts. Parallel with this, at Auschwitz, a prison orchestra accompanies the doomed to the gas chambers and ovens. The selection process at the primary death camp is described in more detail later. Jakob draws a parallel between the Oracles at Delphi speaking from a grotto - a hole in the ground - and the bodily voices calling out from the mass graves. He has already described how these holes in the ground are sanctified and sanctifying. Jakob mentions how the Nazis turn humans into objects to justify their treatment of the Jews, but does not develop the theme until later. Instead, he parallels this with physicists turning matter into energy in this same period. A brick's worth of uranium releasing its power in nuclear fission would destroy whole cities. He then masterfully notes that the Nazis thrown regular bricks during Kristallnacht, the staged demonstration that initiates the terror against the Jews. These concatenated passages are quite powerful.



Book I, Terra Nullius

Book I, Terra Nullius Summary

Jakob returns to Greece, missing Alex, and disoriented by tourists and traffic. Everything has changed in Athens, Zakynthos, where the old house is fittingly in ruins, and Idhra, where in the Roussos family home he writes this account. As Jakob looks through Athos's library, he recalls the broad education that he has received. He selects a small volume of Psalms to read himself to sleep and opens at random to a section about a worn-out, suffering man, torn hand and foot, but ultimately exalted by God.

Idhra opens Jakob's memory and he spends long nights writing and dealing with questions that have no answers. He notes that Jews live in an eternal present, always identifying with those who leave Egypt. They are responsible for time and must make moral decisions that have effect beyond this life. Jakob offers the parable of a famed rabbi who travels incognito in shabby clothing and is ridiculed by passengers. When they find out who he is, they beg forgiveness, but he refuses, even on the Day of Awe, because they have wronged the man on the train, not himself. The moral: nothing erases an immoral act. When the victim is dead, only silence remains. Recorded history can be resurrected. Destruction turns presence into absence. That rabbi will forever know humiliation but not be humiliated, as the painted clock at Treblinka station always reads 3 o'clock. Einstein talks of simultaneous events: a train arrives at a certain time because it coincides with the clock and someone notices this. The Holocaust has witnesses, and neither evil nor good acts can be erased. Being moral in those days consists of the tiniest acts but elevates the doers higher than the angels. Evil can be a single occurrence, but goodness requires repetition.

On Idhra Jakob finally feels comfortable writing English poetry. He feels at home in Greece, but also forever a stranger. He finishes writing Groundwork. Jakob thinks about the Nazis' efforts to dehumanize the Jews to make it easier psychologically for the troops to exterminate them. When they realize, however, that they are not dealing with "figurens" as propaganda holds, but with humans who refuse to be degraded and can only be killed, this triggers brutality and they choose to live by the lie and do their job. The few heroes who rescue others also have no choice: they do as truth requires. New Adam must rise from the place of greatest degradation.

Jakob imagines Bella in a crowded camp barracks, practicing her keyboard fingering silently. Her skins is degrading painfully. When the gas chamber door is opened there is always a tangled pyramid of bodies clambering for the last air. There are babies half-born. Screams are heard through the thick walls. Despair, however, transforms mercilessly into faith. Jakob knows that he must embrace faith, which will never be as perfect again. Like caged birds drawn to the magnetic pole when it is time to migrate, humans are moved by instinct, which seems to disappear with the body. Jakob's body cannot forget his loved ones, but he realizes that Bella, like all of the dead, wants to get close enough to push him back into the world.



Book I, Terra Nullius Analysis

The sixth chapter is entitled "No Man's Land" in Latin, but shows Jakob finally coming to grips with himself. Having separated from Alex, but clearly hoping to reform to the point that she can take him back, he goes to Greece alone. He gives rapid impressions of the country that has just been restored to a constitutional democracy, which suggests that the events take part during 1970. He alludes to prominent artists who suffer under the military junta for being communists: the composer Mikis Theodorakis, best known in the West for *Zorba the Greek*, and the poet Giannis Ritsos. Everything in Greece has changed and seems odd to Jakob, who settles into Athos's ancestral home on Idhra Island and indicates that he writes this account of his life in Athos's study. The homecoming observations are rapid and impressionistic.

There are several oddly positive references to Christianity in the chapter. First, when Jakob takes a book of psalms to read himself to sleep, he turns at random to Ps. 22, which in the Christian reading is a prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion. He also describes how Idhra has watched over and blessed everywhere weathered old icons. He refers to the face of "their Redeemer" without sarcasm. He states clearly that he feels out of place in Greece and in particular with the new bustle and commercialism, which had bothered him also in Toronto. He reiterates Athos's contention, several times already mentioned, that the Hebrew and Greek scripts form a harmony and the two cultures share a unique historic destiny. Note that Jakob finds the prayer shawl (*tallit*) that Athos gives him but he never uses. He is struck by the intense blue color of its stripes. He describes the requirement that one forgive others and seek forgiveness on the Day of Atonement, which he calls by the generic term Day of Awe, meaning the High Holy Days. Characters in a story are scandalized that a renowned rabbi refuses to absolve them for mistakenly scorning him. The rabbi, however, does not identify with the one scorned and insists they seek forgiveness from him.

This is a fine example of the parable, a story illustrating a moral, and a literary form much identified with Jesus. Jakob is able to surmount prejudice. Much of the chapter deals with good and evil, using this extended parable and a series of aphorisms, interwoven with snippets of Bella's concern for orchestration as she memorizes musical scores. This underscores how firmly she remains in her brother's mind. In the end, he decides that her spirit stays close not in order to draw him to her but to be in a position to push him back into the world.

Idhra gets Jakob writing again, including the poetry for which he is soon to become well known. To date, his attempts have sounded like ghost stories even to friends. He writes feverishly all night, as had Athos. The first example he gives, set in italics, is parabolic: Zdena and Bettina growing to resemble one another.

Many more details of life during the Holocaust emerge: the never-changing painted clock face at Treblinka station, the coming together of victims, perpetrators, and witnesses, the virtue of the few who help save lives. Jakob emphasizes that evil needs only occur once, but goodness requires repetition. Jews in all generations identify with



the generation of the Exodus and take part mystically in that trek. There is collective unity also in the Holocaust. Having approached the subject several times, Jakob analyzes how the Nazis manage to kill so many people without conscience or remorse. He finds the key in photographs of the officers, laughing. Propaganda has convinced them that Jews are sub-human, so there is no crime in eliminating them - it is, in fact, a necessity, like sanitation. The problem comes when the killers discover that the Jews are, in fact, human, and the shock triggers brutality. They choose to live by the comfortable lie and do their job.

Jakob pictures life in crowded camp barracks and death in the gas chambers. In horrible detail he portrays opening the doors onto carnage, but finds that the piles of twisted corpses struggling to survive on the last pockets of air provide an "obscene testament of grace". The phrase, rather tinged by the Christian outlook, leads him to perceive how despair transforms into faith, which he finally embraces.



Book I, The Gradual Instant

Book I, The Gradual Instant Summary

Jakob's Greek-English translations support him nicely. He prepares Athos's writings for publication, translates Bearing False Witness into Greek, and sometimes lectures on Athos's work. When in Toronto, he stays with the Salmans and they stay with him when in Greece. Jakob loves the Salmans' sons, Yoshi and Tomas, as he would have loved Bella's children. The Salmans play matchmaker for Jakob, and one day in their kitchen he meets young Michaela, a voluptuous museum administrator. He tells her the story of Tomas's premature birth and miraculous survival and she talks enthusiastically of her Russian/Spanish heritage. Jakob feels old and unattractive beside her but cannot resist. She lets his hands wander over her. There is nothing of death in her. Hearing about Bella, Michaela weeps for her and Jakob is filled with joy. He sleeps for the first time in his life. He is filled with peace. Their coming together is as unlikely as old Salonika, where once Jews, Christians, and Muslims live in harmony.

At the same party, Jakob meets a Polish painter who asks how one can hate all that one has come from and yet not hate oneself. He cannot paint in yellow. When Jakob first awakens in bed with Michaela he first experiences yellow. Happiness is wild but not sudden. Early in their relationship, they take drives through lakeside towns, then return to her flat. They venture farther north in spring and Michaela opens up with stories about growing up. Seeing how she loves the land of her youth, Jakob resolves to show her the Aegean. Her parents had loved taking car trips, she says. Visiting a pioneer museum once, Michaela is afraid of how small people had been centuries ago and of a legend about the Manitoulines burning down their island to exorcise a spirit. Children see the link between the sacred and fear. She is happy then, reading, rowing, and learning about clouds. As an adult driving to the North Channel she always feels like someone very old or very young is in the car with her. Jakob is afraid of losing Michaela as they tour the empty off-season towns. They camp out in a birch forest during an electric storm, and for the first time, Jakob feels safe above ground.

Jakob and Michaela go to Idhra that spring. When she concentrates, Michaela charmingly forgets her body. It returns when she speaks. When she reads to him, Jakob thinks about how young Bella had understood love without experiencing it. In the summer of 1992 Jakob finishes writing his life's story. Michaela tells him plots for novels, histories, and stories. She looks well-loved. Making a pie, Michaela tells how her mother does it and Jakob recalls his mother teaching baking secrets to Bella. Michaela tells constant stories about her relatives. Memory dies unless given a use. Darkness becomes frightening to Jakob. Objects become relics to him. Being beside Michaela awakens him with joy. Light brings stillness. Silence is composed of both fullness and emptiness. The whole world never sleeps or it would vanish.

What people admire defines them. Jakob longs for a child, whom he will name Bela or Bella. Mentally he tells him or her to think of his parents sometimes when he or she is



sixty, but not to look for them. He hopes that the grown child will realize how much his or her parents love one another. The name that he intends to give the baby had saved him in the forest long ago.

Book I, The Gradual Instant Analysis

Book I ends with Jakob meeting and marrying his true soul mate, Michaela, a museum administrator. In her he sees all that Bella never lives to experience and Michaela appropriately weeps over Bella's loss. Jakob reveals that he finishes writing Book I on Idhra in the summer of 1992. Recall from the preface that he and Michaela die in 1993, childless. Jakob's one great hope is to bear a son or daughter named after his sister, who will grow old recalling his or her parents' love for one another. Because this is so heartfelt - Jakob confessing that he has survived since the forest horrors by clinging to Bella's name - Book I ends with a sense of the melancholy.

Jakob includes in his story of how he and Michaela come together a poem by the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, a reference to Beatrice de Luna, a Portuguese Jew forced to convert to Christianity who nevertheless does not forsake her faith and helps victims of the Inquisition, and the memory of generations of devoted Jewish women in Kiev. Michaela's Russian/Spanish background is difficult to picture, as is a reference to prewar Salonika, Greece, where Jews, Christians, and Muslims live in harmony. Jakob declares their coming together just as unlikely. Jakob's narrative turns poetically sensual and he finds that he can sleep for the first time in his life and appreciate the joyful color yellow. He feels the age difference but cannot hold himself back. Michaela seems not to notice. In one of the novel's better aphorisms, Jakob notes that happiness is wild but not sudden. Formerly a lover of darkness, he now finds it frightening and finds stillness in light. He is transformed by love.



Book II, The Drowned City

Book II, The Drowned City Summary

Naomi takes a cold shower to escape the heat and humidity and lies atop husband Ben, a devoted fan of the poetry of the late Jakob Beer. Ben's late parents had been liberated from a concentration camp four years before his birth. For them there is nothing ordinary in the world. Before age five, Ben is visited by an angel to point out beauty and to silence his nightmares about doors axed down. Reading Jakob's poetry helps him understand. Ben first meets Jakob and Michaela at Irena's birthday party. Ben recalls Jakob touching Michaela, sensually, as he listens to normally shy Naomi pour out both of their family histories. Jakob makes them feel clean. Ben and Naomi have been fighting over her care for his parents' grave; when Jakob defends this, she is love-smitten and physically transformed.

Jakob's *Groundwork*, in which the earth speaks through the mass graves, shows Athos's influence, and lonely Maurice reminisces long hours to Ben about Jakob's life and work, emphasizing his affinity for dilemmas. Maurice suggests that Ben's thesis correlate weather and biography. Naomi comes along to nourish his research as he turns the thesis into a book. He analyzes great storms incorporated in literature and the lives of writers. Ben recalls his parents' obsession with food and his father's rapt love of classical recordings. Music had kept him alive during forced marches. His father forces Ben to view pictures of the Holocaust to teach him that thousands younger than he have suffered. Ben dreads piano lessons with Father, a perfectionist. When Ben is eleven, to purge him of fear, Father forces him to walk in total darkness from a vacation cabin to the road. It is a terrifying and fruitless experiment. When Ben discovers bog people in *National Geographic* and realizes how different they look from Holocaust victims, he resolves to give their lives names and stories. Biography is about guesswork and probabilities. The quest to recover someone's psyche is a function of love. Beneath the facts, one must learn the assumptions that guide the subject's life.

Ben learns all that he knows about the family's life before Canada from his mother, when his father is at work. Father forbids mentioning relatives. Ben's mother loves the world because of past losses and passes this to him. Father is drained by greater losses. As a boy, Ben is fascinated by how tornadoes are arbitrary in their destruction and sees the tornado of Nazism as being more capricious and unmerciful. To mother, they recall the camp, Kristallnacht, and the SS. Learning that those with a trade fared better in camp, Ben as a boy studies electricity and Father buys equipment for a home laboratory. Ben lacks instincts for science, however. When a neighbor gives Ben a duplicate copy of an illustrated version of the classics, it sets him to reading and collecting.

When he is fourteen, Mother lets Ben attend the Canadian National Exhibition with school friends and he is thoroughly exhilarated. He brings home free gifts and literature, which Mother insists must be stolen. Ben hides it from Father and throws it away in the



morning. Ben widens his boundaries and learns about the city. Abandoned facilities fascinate him. Mother fears that he and Father may never return whenever they leave home. Ben is too ashamed to bring school friends home. Mother is sensual beyond anything that calm Jakob could imagine. Jakob does not even acknowledge Ben at Irena's party, but Naomi opens like a flower.

Mother refuses to believe that Ben will move out to live on his own during university, but grimly presents him food as he leaves. She gives him a parcel every time he visits. His defection creates a new intimacy between his parents, while detaching him from his mother. His father remains impatient and immobile. Ben keeps to himself as an undergraduate, has one failed love affair, and makes no friends. Leaving home has exhausted him. When it comes time for Father to retire, Ben makes arrangements, but the official who examines his birth certificate rejects it, saying that he had been stationed in that town in 1941/42. Father flees and hides for days.

When Naomi enters Ben's grief-filled home, she knows how to deal with them lovingly. This creates jealousy in Ben. Naomi puts down her considerable natural beauty and the penetrating power of her mind. When Ben's teaching job at the university becomes permanent, he begins researching a second book, *No Mortal Foe*, about how weather influences war. Naomi's tiny apartment is carefully organized. She loves lame jokes and 1950s science fiction movies, siding with the aliens. She loves all forms of music and collects and sings for Ben specialty lullabies. After eight years together, she no longer sings to him and he misses it. Naomi is a master of trivia and non-sequiturs. Writing a series on municipal affairs, she fills Ben in while in bed on everything to be known about public figures and works in details about governance. It is not gossip. Ben tells Naomi about odd weather events. Naomi matches songs to people. She assigns to his parents "Night" by Liuba Levitska, whom they hear in the camp, and "Moorsoldaten" (Peat Bog Soldiers), the first song written in a camp, to Jakob. Naomi insists that singing to the dead is all that one can do for them. She gets angry over Ben's self-pity over a childhood not happy like hers. She knows that history eventually consumes everything and one slips away, forsaken by all.

Unlike most immigrants at the time, Ben's parents do not settle in a compact district, with his father fearing that they would be too easily rounded up. He takes the family to still-rural Weston and buys a large house on the Humber River. They keep to themselves. Mother discourages young Ben's exploring the river. One fall evening after an all-day rain, a neighbor pounds on the door to warn that the river is rising dangerously. Father slams the door in his face and rages. Only when water reaches the second floor does he abandon the house, just before it is swept downstream. Many neighbors are not rescued from Hurricane Hazel, but some parts of the city are affected little or not at all. Ben's parents lose less than the neighbors because they have little to start with. Father does not use government restitution, lest Ben someday be in debt. They take a tiny apartment, where all doors look alike.

Ben is jealous of his mother and Naomi's closeness. The women often talk in private in the kitchen while Ben and his father sit mutely in the living room. Naomi's love and generosity Ben reads as manipulation, because he does not consider his parents



outwardly lovable. They appreciate that she respects their privacy. Ben dreams silently about his parents' physical decline. His mother ages suddenly and Naomi's caring for her injures Ben. His father slips away soon after his mother dies, his mind filling with ghosts. He sits alone in the garden, missing his wife. On his father's last night, Ben phones Naomi to come to the hospital. Ben realizes that his father had not been waiting for death his whole life. Two months later, clearing out belongings, Ben finds a single photograph from June 1941 of Father as a young man with Mother and two infants. Mother is nursing when she enters the ghetto. Naomi realizes the horror without seeing the picture, because Mother had confided this. Naomi tells Ben that his name is not Benjamin but simply Ben, the Hebrew word for son. His parents had hoped that the angel of death would pass by an unnamed child.

While cleaning out his parents' apartment, Ben scavenges the river for objects unearthed by spring flooding. Naomi's gestures of intimacy fill him with hopelessness. When Jakob dies, soon after Ben's father, Naomi suggests that Ben retrieve Jakob's notebooks from Idhra. Ben makes arrangements and misses Naomi's reaction of fear. He sees afterward that he has squandered their life together. His father had lived with Ben and Naomi briefly and had finally seen a doctor about his insomnia. He takes the whole bottle of sleeping pills.

Book II, The Drowned City Analysis

The eighth chapter begins Book II, in which a new narrator takes over. Ben, no last name ever mentioned, teaches at the University of Toronto, having been mentored by Maurice Salzman, Athos's old colleague. Maurice encourages the young man to coordinate his interests in weather and biography, a combination of which Athos and Jakob would approve. Ben finds that Jakob's poetry helps him understand his own parents, whose names are never mentioned. They are deeply-scarred survivors of the Holocaust. Much of the chapter, addressed personally to the late Jakob Beer, describes Ben's growing up, failed marriage, and snippets of his career as a scholar.

The psychological effects of surviving the Holocaust are laid out in Ben's parents. Mother opens up to the sensual joys of life, while Father closes down. He refuses to live in an ethnic neighborhood for fear that the authorities will round them up. He is spooked while signing up for Canadian Social Security when what appears to be an ex-camp official challenges his birth certificate and when a neighbor pounds on his door to warn him to flee the path of Hurricane Hazel. The family barely escapes with their lives. Father moves them into a small apartment, where all doors look alike. Recall Jakob's life-long trauma caused by the kicking in of his family's door when the Nazis come for them. Father forbids talk about murdered relatives, but Mother fills Ben in on those who have been lost. The secret bonds them. Ben has a hard time as an adolescent in asserting his independence and through college remains a loner. He confesses that he never understands his father until his father commits suicide. The revelation of this act at the close of the chapter is unexpected, given Ben's description of dealing with his parents' physical decline in old age. For a while, Ben nearly avoids seeming churlish.



Music remains a major theme, as Ben's father is a former conductor demoted after the war to piano teacher. He dissects scores as he listens to recordings and only while listening to music does he open up to his son. Ben recalls lying on his father's lap listening to music. His eyes fall on the pale camp tattoo on his father's arm. During forced marches between camps, Father plays Beethoven in his head to keep his sanity. Ben's wife, Naomi is also devoted to music of all kinds. Naomi tells Jakob about the Jewish opera singer Liuba Levitska, who dies in the camps when she will not abandon her mother. Levitska has all of the inmates singing "Tsvey Taybelech" (Two Little Doves; pg. 240). Another inmate defies the Nazis by composing a song that fills the camps. Recall that a major goal of the Nazis is to de-humanize their victims, so composing music is a major act of defiance.

While Athos has broad interests in literature and poetry, which he imparts to his war, Ben devotes his professional career to combining meteorology throughout history with literature, biography, and history. For his thesis he pictures accompanying Dostoevsky into the square where he is subjected to a mock execution before being marched to exile in Siberia. Many details of this incident, which transforms the great Russian writer's life, are included. Ben writes two books and the summary takes rapid note of a plethora of writers, musicians, and historical figures and events that weather has influenced. Ben observes that even the most reticent figures in history (e.g., Henry James, who burns his correspondence) can have their stories reconstructed, but the successful biographer penetrates the assumptions by which the subject lives. Ben has difficulty figuring out the assumptions of his own parents and wife. Between descriptions of Ben's research and his wife's eclectic interests and penchant for trivia and non-sequiturs, the chapter abounds in seemingly random but fascinating anecdotes.

Besides the historical hurricane and flood, which occasions the chapter title, tornadoes are described as arbitrary. Many examples of survival side-by-side with utter destruction and bits of whimsy - lakes having their water sucked up and dropped again, people, animals, and objects being transported vast distances but then set down intact, etc., are quoted. Mother, hearing them, thinks instinctively about the evil winds of Nazism that are planned out and arbitrary. Her three focal points are the camps, Kristallnacht (mentioned in Book I in conjunction with the invention of nuclear fission), and the SS.

Ben's beautiful, intelligent wife Naomi is introduced and, like Jakob's first wife, Alex, is rather swiftly dispatched. Naomi bonds with his parents in ways that he cannot understand. She gives them the space that they need and Mother opens up to her, telling her about the two children that perish in the camps. Ben's parents had apparently agreed not to tell him. Naomi reveals that they call him Ben, not a proper name but the Hebrew word for "son," hoping that he will be spared if he is not named. There is a veiled reference to the Exodus 12. Recall earlier mentions of how Jews throughout history identify morally with the founding event in their history. It is always a "now" event, undertaken by them as well as their ancestors.

Jakob takes an obvious interest in Naomi when they first meet at a party and she, uncharacteristically, tells him all about her and Ben's family. Ben finds himself jealous, but fights it because Jakob is his hero and develops into the true specialty of his

academic career, as seen in the concluding chapters. Ben is less tolerant of Naomi's good relations with his parents and, when she suggests that he go to Idhra to collect Jakob's papers, he follows through. This destroys their already shaky marriage. Passages describing the beginning of their relationship are unusually lyrical and erotic. There is another passage that evokes the Christian sacrament of penance, as Jakob listens to Naomi's stories not like a priest, but as a sinner seeking redemption, and his words makes them afterwards feel clean. Ben notices a physical transformation in Naomi, brought about by love.

Ben's adolescent interest in bog people and how they differ from pictures of Holocaust victims reaches back to the early chapters of Book I, detailing Athos' research. This helps link the two parts, as do the two narrators' marital troubles. Neither disguises his responsibility for the failures. The long chapter establishes the intellectual debt that Ben owes to Jakob, and thus to Athos. As the chapter ends, Ben is bound, like Jakob before him, for Greece.



Book II, Vertical Time

Book II, Vertical Time Summary

Ben arrives on Idhra at a time of refreshing winds. Like seafarers have for centuries, he gasps at the sight of the harbor. Having received Jakob's papers, Maurice worries that his journals are lost in the huge library. He is too weak to come himself. Ben searches for weeks, amazed at the collection's scope and constantly distracted by fascinating items. Ben pictures where Jakob might have buried the journals, like Jews across Eastern Europe and considers digging up the garden but, one bright morning, studying a dry-docked ship with a disorienting figurehead, he enters an upper floor and sees Jakob's private study tucked into the roof. It is filled with covered furniture, books, paintings, a collection of buttons, and nautical artifacts. He finds a forgotten kitchen. A jumble of sandals reminds Ben of his parents' shoes and mended clothing. The house reminds him of interrupted lives at Vesuvius. He pictures Jakob and Michaela's daily lives and is envious. He sees how the place gives Jakob the confidence to write *Groundwork* and feels his spirit everywhere. Michaela lets him see a future. She undresses his spirit and brings his life to belief, as Jakob writes. Ben continues his search for weeks, feeling that Jakob and Michaela might appear. He believes that they are hiding, seeking to be alone.

Book II, Vertical Time Analysis

The ninth chapter is brief and impressionistic. It opens with Ben describing the mechanics and effects, physical and psychological, of the meltemi wind on Idhra. It reminds the reader of Ben's specialization, weather, and helps picture the Greek Islands far better than Jakob has in his quick passages here and there. He quickly gets lost in the treasures of the huge, eclectic library, but cannot find the journals. He pictures Jakob burying them, as Jakob himself earlier describes Jews doing with their treasures, including writings. He then comes upon parts of the house that have long been closed off and forgotten. Note the chest in which Jakob as a boy had hidden from the Nazis. He likens the picture of interrupted life that he experiences with the excavations at Vesuvius. He pictures Jakob and Michaela's daily lives and, notably, is envious. This mirrors his attitude towards Naomi's relationship with his mother. He contemplates how Michaela undresses his spirit and brings his life to belief. The phrase is gradually developed in italics, suggesting that it is a line from Jakob's poetry that helps Ben interpret what he is seeing and feeling. He is struck by how powerfully he feels Jakob and Michaela present, seeking to be alone, even though he knows the circumstances and certainty of their deaths. Recall the mystical passages in Book I from the Zohar, stating that, "All visible things will be born again invisible" and Jakob's frequent meditations on unfinished lives.



Book II, Phosphorus

Book II, Phosphorus Summary

Until the eighteenth century, people not knowing the danger of lightning search to discover its nature from its appearance rather than in a collision of hot and cold. One hundred million volts channeled between earth and cloud in a fraction of a second can make objects hum and sizzle. It can bake potatoes in the ground and fry a goose in flight. It can expand clothing so it falls off. It can magnetize and restore sight and hair loss. Ball lightning can circle a room without harming it and exit again.

Petra sits alone in Karouzos' courtyard, tosses her hair, and Ben desires her. It is like the imprint made by lightning of scenes on the skin of humans or animals. Ben imagines her imprinted as a child. For three months, he studies the lines, scents, and sounds of her body closely. He can identify her in darkness. By late September, Idhra is empty. They follow Jakob Beer's footsteps over the island and Ben tells stories that he has learned about Jakob and Michaela's life together. Making love with Petra helps Ben shake free of many lives. At Jakob's museum-like house, Petra strips naked, reminding Ben of abandoned Naomi, and leads him to Jakob's bedroom. There, pulling back the cover, they discover Michaela's never-discovered note naming the child that she is carrying: Bela or Bella. Ben and Petra make violent love on the floor.

Ben recalls how Father begins conducting in his home town, then he and Mother move to Warsaw. They picnic in a peaceful forest. In 1941, the Nazis raze the forest to become a killing ground. Years later, prisoners are forced to dig up the mass graves so that eighty thousand corpses can be burned. Jakob has described the gory but spiritual work. Secretly, the work teams with a spoon dig a tunnel and Father is one of eleven who escape and join partisans. Ben and Naomi have disagreed on whether a child inherits fear from its parents. Ben imagines a number appearing on Naomi's child's forehead because he is watching it. He wonders what difference his older siblings would have made on the household, had they lived. He thinks about Naomi holding Mother's hand and receiving the secret photograph. Ben recalls Jakob, at their first meeting, saying that grief is the weight of a sleeping child.

Ben awakens to find Petra, naked, rummaging through Jakob's possessions. She yells, dresses, stalks off, and catches the boat to the mainland. Jakob recalls someone at university saying that after sex he recalls childhood memories. Ben had envied him for the women and now for the solace. As a heavy storm batters Idhra, Ben longs for Jakob and Michaela. He sings Liuba Levitsky's song to lure them. While cleaning up the mess that Petra leaves behind, Ben finds two journals, from June and November 1992. He sits and reads aphorisms at random. That night, he drapes the furniture to leave and finds a scarf identical to Naomi's. He recalls how Jakob had stolen her heart. Ben cannot recall her physical appearance but knows everything else about her from living eight years together. He has wasted love. Before leaving Idhra, Ben returns Michaela's



note, not knowing whether it is for Jakob's sake or to spare Maurice, who so misses Jakob.

Book II, Phosphorus Analysis

The tenth chapter opens with a study of lightning from the scientific and anecdotal points of view. Both narrators have piled up interesting stories on various subjects in this way. They lead this time, however, to Petra, Ben's four-month lover on Idhra. It is filled with his enthusiasm of early enchantment, which he and Jakob have both earlier described and moves through their sharing of Jakob's passion for communing with Jakob's spirit. He also thinks about losing Naomi. Petra is responsible to two discoveries: a note from Michaela to Jakob announcing that she is pregnant, and Jakob's lost journals. The former, a surprise, turns up under the bed cover, awaiting the Roussoses' return from Athens. The latter turns up while Ben is cleaning up the mess that Petra makes of Jakob's library. He finds a forgotten wing of the house and wanders through interrupted lives, feeling that Jakob and Michaela are present and want to be alone.

The chapter fills in the final details on Ben's parents' life before the camp and describes how Father escapes to join the partisans. It is a rather heroic posture for the man who has been shown to be frightened of his shadow. Ben recalls stories of digging up mass graves to hide Nazi atrocities, relying on Jakob's published words. Ben contemplates whether fear can be passed down to children, worrying about his own progeny, should he have any. He sees a number tattooed on a baby's head. Recall him lying next to Father's camp tattoo while listening to music. Petra, who is introduced and quickly dispatched in the familiar fashion, he imagines being tattooed by lightning.

A storm not unlike Hazel strikes Idhra on the night that Ben finds Petra tearing apart Jakob's library. Rebuked, she storms away. As he restores order, Ben sings Liuba Levitsky's song to lure Jakob and Michaela back. He finds the lost journals and a scarf identical to Naomi's. It seems likely that in the final chapter he will try to reconcile with Naomi.



Book II, The Way Station

Book II, The Way Station Summary

In rainy Athens, Ben contemplates why rain is different everywhere, while snow is identical. Naomi claims that foreign dusks are different. Watching people eat makes Ben think about literary characters who help others. He sees Petra toss her hair and leave the café on some man's arm. When the storm passes, Ben climbs into the mountains. Litter gradually gives way to wildflowers. In the darkness, Ben senses the presence of lovers, no longer young. The man laughs and Ben thinks of Petra. He recalls hearing on the boat from Idhra a witticism about how no firstborn is conceived in the fields, but its siblings are. Ben recalls Naomi saying at the time of their marriage that they must climb out of deep places together and he must look back if she cannot keep up. He is sorrowful, his last night in Greece.

Flying home, Ben pictures Naomi getting home groceries and a book. He pictures the cab ride being like Sunday rides in the back seat of his parents' car. He worries that Naomi will not be home. He wonders if Naomi still has her scarf and plans to talk about waterspouts in bed. He imagines Naomi sitting silently in the kitchen and fearing the way that she looks. He will not tell her about Petra. He remembers Naomi's favorite childhood bowl. He recalls the first time that he sees Father cry while eating food, but this gives way to an image of Mother stroking Father's hair as he eats. They empower one another. Ben sees that he must give what he most needs.

Book II, The Way Station Analysis

The final chapter takes place in Athens and aboard a homebound plane. Ben sees Petra already taking up with another man. He encounters lovers on the mountainside and realizes that he must try to come back to his wife. On the flight, he imagines possible scenarios for the meeting and scenes of his parents - as he recalls them and as they should have and probably had been, outside his sight: completing a circuit of strength. Ben sees that he must give what he most needs.



Characters

Jakob Beer

The narrator and protagonist of Part 1, Jakob tells of being a seven-year-old Jewish boy in Poland during World War II. Hiding behind the wallpaper in the family house, he avoids being killed or captured like the rest of his family and neighbors. He hides in the terrifying river and forest until he approaches and is rescued by a Greek scientist/scholar, Athanasios (Athos) Roussos. Athos adopts him and spirits him off to Nazi-occupied Zakynthos in Greece, where they hide until liberation. His childhood is filled with privation and fear, but is not, he learns later, anywhere near as horrible as the fate of his people in Europe. Memories of hiding in Poland haunt him for most of his life, and he is particularly upset not to know his beautiful and talented sister Bella's fate. He vividly imagines her suffering and being gassed in a camp. From her he had learned much about classical music. He also mourns the shortened life of his boyhood friend, Mones.

After the war, Athos takes a teaching job at the University of Toronto, partly to escape the Greek civil war. The Greek and Jewish neighborhood lie next to one another, which Jakob finds comforting. The Hebrew language continues to cause frightening memories. Jakob studies English and Greek and struggles to fit into the new culture, many of whose aspects frighten and/or embarrass him. He completes school and enrolls in the university. He begins translating technical materials and literature banned in Greece to the point that he earns a decent living. He dabbles in writing poetry, but his early efforts are said to resemble nightmares.

Jakob marries twice. His first wife, Alex, within a few years cannot abide his obsession with Bella and the Holocaust and leaves him. By contrast, Michaela understands his pain and helps him work through it. Eventually they return to Greece and her love helps him write true poetry. They move regularly between Greece and Toronto over the years. In Toronto, he meets a budding scholar Ben and Ben's second wife Naomi, and his poetry helps Ben deal with his own Holocaust-damaged family life.

A one-page preface to the novel explains that Jakob is struck by a car in Athens in 1993 and killed. Michaela dies two days later. Jakob had just begun to write his memoirs. In addition to preparing Athos' *Bearing False Witness* for publication, Jakob pens at least three volumes: *Groundwork*, *Dilemma Poems*, and *Hotel Poems*. Visiting Greece to retrieve Jakob's lost journals, Ben feels Jakob's and Michaela's spirits in Athos's ancestral home and sense that they want to be alone. Under the bedspread, Ben finds a note from Michaela to Jakob, saying that she is pregnant and wants to name the baby after Bella. Jakob dies without learning that his fondest wish had been about to be realized.



Ben

The narrator of Book II, Ben (no last name ever given) is an admirer of Holocaust poet Jakob Beer and addresses Book II by talking to him posthumously, telling how Jakob and his work have helped him understand his own dysfunctional life. Late in life, Ben learns that his name is not short for Benjamin, but is the generic word for "son" in Hebrew. His mother gives him this for fear of losing another child to the angel of death. Two siblings perish in the camps during World War II, while his parents, deeply scarred emotionally, survive.

Ben is born after the war and grows up in Weston, Ontario, in Canada, away from the ethnic neighborhoods of Toronto where his father fears the government could too easily round up Jews. He doubts that he could be lucky enough to survive again. His father is a former symphony conductor reduced in emigration to teaching piano. He is too demanding for Ben to endure lessons. When listening to classical recordings, his father allows Ben to lie on his lap and scratches his head. His camp tattoo discomfits Ben. His father also insists that Ben study ghastly pictures of Holocaust victims to realize that children younger than he have suffered. While his father refuses to discuss dead relatives, his mother, whom privation has made savor life, shares the family history in secret. She is loath to let her husband or son leave home for fear that they will never return. Ben is ashamed to bring school friends home and has a hard time leaving the nest when he enters college.

Ben specializes in weather, showing anecdotally weather's use in literature and effects on history. His wife, Naomi, forms an instant rapport with his difficult parents and Ben irrationally resents it. The relationship declines after his parents' and Jakob Beer's deaths. Ben has taken a keen interest in the poet's work. Naomi suggests that he go to Greece to find Jakob's journal and is saddened when he agrees. There, Ben has a brief affair, but it helps him yearn to return to Naomi. In the last chapter, he ponders on the flight home how the homecoming might work out.

In addition to editing Jakob's works and lecturing about him, Ben publishes a version of his thesis, *A Line of Weather*, about weather in history and literature, and a second book, *No Mortal Foe*, about how weather influences war.

Athanasios (Athos) Roussos

A geologist born in Odessa, Ukraine, into a commercial Greek family, Athos is trained in geology at Cambridge University and specializes in peat, limestone, and archaeological wood. He travels extensively before World War II, working in England, France, Austria, Yugoslavia, and finally Poland, where he works at a dig in Biskupin, Poland. There he is approached by a terrified seven-year-old, Jakob Beer, freshly orphaned and in hiding from the Nazis. The fifty-year-old adopts the boy and spirits him off to Zakynthos Island in Greece. There they live in hiding, high in the mountains, enduring great deprivations until liberation. During the Greek civil war that follows World War II, Athos accepts a teaching job in Toronto, Canada.



Athos descends from seafarers back to the 1700s and knows in detail about seawater, navigation, and shipbuilding around the world. He shares this knowledge with young Jakob. Athos is handsome, heavy-set, and graying. His study is crammed with books, samples, and pictures. After the war, Athos takes Jakob to Athens to look for information about his beloved sister Bella's fate and to meet his friend of forty years, Dr. Kostas Mitsialis and his wife Daphne. Kostas tells Jakob that Athos is married to a woman named Helen, who had died during World War I, but he leaves it to Athos to provide details. Athos never does, beyond the fact that being newly-married had prevented him from applying for Scott's expedition to Antarctica. Athos retains a life-long interest in that continent, which he bequeaths to Jakob.

After the war, Athos finds Greece so changed that he needs to get away permanently. Kostas warns Jakob that Athos is prone to depression and will need his help at times; he is, however, as everlasting as his beloved limestone. At the University of Toronto, Athos teaches *The History of Geographical Thought* and helps Jakob find his own academic niche in poetry and translation. Athos is careful to encourage Jakob to retain his Jewish heritage while assimilating Greek and Canadian culture. After Athos' death, Jakob edits his major work, *Bearing False Witness*.

Mones Alperstein

Jakob Beer's childhood friend in Biskupin, Poland, Mones is particularly skilled at skipping flat rocks across the water. Together the boys collect cards of famous places packaged with candy, tear them in half, and each preserves one half, to rejoin them someday when they go into business together, marry, travel, and have children in the same year. Mones' mother makes wigs and the lotion that she applies to her hands makes the milk that she gives the boys taste sweet. For life, Jakob is haunted by Mones' life, abbreviated by the Holocaust.

Bella Beer

Jakob Beer's older sister, Bella is at an early age a serious and accomplished pianist, enamored by the life, career, and works of Ludwig van Beethoven. She dresses, eats, and drinks like the composer (except for beer) but when she plays, she turns serious and precise. Her favorite piece is "The Moonlight." She often plays silently to perfect her style. She adopts Brahms' motto: "Fix order nix" ("up to the mark, or nothing"; p. 137). Jakob sees his parents' bodies after he emerges from hiding when the Nazis invade their house, but has to imagine throughout his whole life what befalls his beautiful fifteen-year-old sister. He recalls particularly her luxurious dark hair. Jakob intends, if he ever has a child, to name him or her Bela or Bella, but he and his second wife die childless. He never sees Michaela's note about the pregnancy and her intention to keep the vow about the baby's name.



Alexandra Gillian Dodson (Alex née McClean) Beer

Jakob Beer's first wife, Alex, is a devotee of classical music and a master of word play. They first meet in an excellent music library in a park that Jakob frequents. Waiting for a record, he does not know what to say when Alex, an energetic, blue-eyed woman comes up and spouts a series of puns. Soon after, they marry. Alex's physician father steeps her in stories of the British military and intelligence tradition in the Middle East, where he had been stationed. Jakob is shy around her Marxist friends and she resents his selfishness and isolation. Their marriage ends in divorce when Jakob cannot meet Alex's expectations of a sociable life. He broods constantly about his late sister, Bella.

Michaela Beer

Jakob Beer's second wife, Michaela, at age twenty-five, is much younger than Jakob. She is proud of her Russian and Spanish Jewish heritage and is a "voluptuous scholar", whose master's thesis commiserates with the tragedy of a young Greenland Inuit, Minik, marooned in New York City. The style is not particularly academic, but the story is moving. Michaela and Jakob meet in Maurice and Irene Salman's kitchen and Jakob, a divorcé, falls instantly in love. She is a museum administrator with a grasp of and passion for history. She lives above a bank in a small flat filled with magazines, books of all sorts, and general clutter.

Michaela helps Jakob get over his sister Bella's death, which had been the stumbling block in his first marriage. The couple moves to Greece and settles into the Roussos ancestral home at Idhra, where Jakob writes his life's story comprising (Book I) and finally writes true poetry. They die in a tragic accident in Athens. She has written and hidden a note to her husband, saying that she will name the child that she is bearing after his sister.

Old Martin

A merchant on Zakynthos Island who supplies Athanasios (Athos) Roussos and his ward, Jakob Beer with essentials during World War II, Old Martin had known Athos's late father. One night Old Martin shows up with his son Ioannis, Ioannis's Jewish wife Allegra, and their young son Avramakis (Match). They carry all of their belongings as they flee the Nazi occupation. Athos briefly hides them until they join fellow Jews scattering across the island. Ioannis's family moves to Corfu, and all perish when the Nazis sink their boat. Old Martin does his best during the occupation to provide food to the Jews, becoming the "Patron Saint of Groceries". After the war he is gray and arthritic. He is dead by the time Jakob returns to Zakynthos, around 1970. Everyone turns out for his funeral.



Kostas and Daphne Mitsialis

Kostas is a professor in Athens who before World War II shares an office with Athanasios (Athos) Roussos. After the war, Kostas and wife Daphne host Athos and his young ward Jakob Beer during a visit from Zakynthos, taking them to a café where Vito the cook's singing earlier inspires Kostas to propose marriage. Jakob, at thirteen years of age, is self-conscious and shy, but the Mitsialis provide used clothes, get him his first haircut, and feed him. A victim of the Holocaust, he is amazed by their kindness. Tall, thin Daphne seems like an elderly girl, dressed in bird prints with her graying hair done up. She paints cubist cityscapes. Starved for conversation, the adults talk about contemporary political matters that Jakob does not understand, but he can picture Kostas's vivid, bitter descriptions of the Nazi occupation. After Athos and Jakob emigrate to Canada, Kostas keeps Jakob informed about events in Greece through 1970, at about which time he dies.

Naomi

The wife of Ben, who narrates Book II, Naomi enters his parents' grief-filled home and knows instantly how to lovingly deal with these paranoid Holocaust survivors. Oddly, this creates jealousy in Ben. Naomi puts down her considerable natural beauty and the penetrating power of her mind. Her tiny apartment is carefully organized. She loves lame jokes and 1950s science fiction movies, siding with the aliens. She loves all forms of music and collects and sings for Ben specialty lullabies. After eight years together, she no longer sings to him and he misses it. Naomi is a master of trivia and non-sequiturs. Naomi insists that singing to the dead is all that one can do for them. She gets angry over Ben's self-pity over a childhood not happy like hers. She knows that history eventually consumes everything and one slips away, forsaken by all. When Ben's hero, Jakob Beer, the narrator of Book I, dies, Naomi suggests that he go to Greece to collect his journals. Ben goes, knowing that he is dooming his marriage. He recalls Naomi fondly while having an affair, and wonders about his reception when he returns home after four months. He knows that he needs Naomi's love.

Petra

A blue-eyed, well-tanned, twenty-two-year-old woman with whom Ben, the narrator of Book II, falls instantly in love on Idhra Island in Greece, Petra cannot decide what she wants to do with her life, but knows that she does not want to go home. She has been traveling with friends. During three months, she swims daily and talks about her past. Ben studies the lines, scents, and sounds of her body until he can identify her in darkness. He listens to her idly. They follow Jakob Beer's footsteps over the island and Ben tells stories that he has learned about Jakob and his wife Michaela's life together. He wants to tell her all about literature and storms. Making love with Petra helps Ben shake free of many lives, but she reminds him of his abandoned wife, Naomi. Petra leads Ben upstairs to Jakob's bedroom and, while pulling back the cover, discovers a note from wife to husband, never picked up: the names for the child she is carrying.



Petra is also instrumental in finding Jakob's lost journals by tearing up the library before abandoning Jakob. He last sees her on the arm of another man in Athens.

Maurice and Irene Salzman

Jakob Beer's one lasting friend, made while at the University of Toronto, Maurice is a graduate student who has just moved to the city. Jakob's mentor, Athanasios (Athos) Roussos, invites Maurice to dinner and the three sometimes go to movies, developing crushes on various actresses. Maurice marries Irene, whom Jakob views as the perfection of womanhood. Maurice becomes head of meteorology in a museum. When Jakob and his new wife, Alex, visit the Salmans, Alex is uncomfortable, as Jakob is among her Marxist friends. The foursome regularly attend Saturday matinées at the local theater.

When Jakob returns to Greece around 1970, Maurice, Irene, and their son Yosha visit. Jakob declares them his only friends on earth. Maurice chides Jakob about his poetry, which he characterizes as ghost stories. Only by becoming a father does Maurice stop obsessing about death. The Salmans have a second son, Tomas. Jakob stays with the Salmans when in Toronto, and the Salmans stay with him on Idhra Island when Maurice lectures on "Ancient Weather: Predicting the Past" (p. 173).

Ben, the narrator of Book II, describes Maurice as combining acuity and corn, given to the sublime, a caricature of the old movies that he adores. He is precise but appears hyperbolic. Maurice recommends that Ben read Jakob's *Groundwork*, a volume that helps Ben understand his own background. Maurice is too old and infirm to travel to Idhra to collect Jakob's journals after Jakob's death and sends Ben on the mission. Jakob profoundly misses his old friend.

Griffith Taylor

A Cambridge scholar, Taylor and Canadian-born colleague Silas Wright join Captain Robert Scott's doomed Antarctic expedition. Taylor fills his diary with exclamation points over all that he sees. He briefly meets Athanasios (Athos) Roussos in 1938 while lecturing in Greece on "Correlations and Culture" (p. 81) and discovers broadly shared intellectual interests (geopacifism). Taylor invites Athos to teach in Toronto, but this becomes feasible only after World War II. Soon after Athos arrives, Taylor is diagnosed with cancer and returns to his native Australia. During the first winter, however, the Taylors host parties in their Forest Hills mansion. Athos's ward, Jakob Beer, recalls that the Taylors seem very much in love. Mrs. Taylor dubs Athos and Jakob "The Bachelors".

Donald and Margaret Tupper

Professor Athanasios (Athos) Roussos's only colleagues in the geography department at the University of Toronto with whom Athos's ward, Jakob Beer remains in contact



after Athos's death, Donald lives with his wife Margaret dangerously close to the cliffs of Lake Ontario at Scarborough Bluffs. Erosion eventually forces them to move inland.

Edward Wilson

A Canadian scientist and gifted watercolorist, Wilson accompanies Captain Robert Scott on his South Pole expedition and becomes, through Athanasios (Athos) Roussos's stories, a hero to young Jakob Beer. Lying on the roof in Zakynthos, Greece, watching the stars, Jakob imagines what Wilson sees and does and the doomed explorers' final hours, starving and freezing in a tent, eleven miles from abundant food.



Objects/Places

Antarctica

Athanasios (Athos) Roussos's great passion since his student days at Cambridge University, Antarctica is the "azimuth" that sets his and ward Jakob Beer's lives together in Greece and in Canada. Athos most admires scientist Edward Wilson, who accompanies Captain Scott at Cape Evans. Both are watercolorists who capture the beauty. Starving, the explorers hallucinate about food and suffer food nightmares and take turns lecturing about their various specialties. Athos tells young Jakob tales of the expedition at night as they gather around a lantern, as the doomed explorers had gathered. He notes that the five weary, frostbitten men who reach the South Pole discover Amundsen's flag. Wilson collects fossil evidence that Antarctica had once been part of a super continent that fractures and, in part, slowly creates the Himalayas. They perish, trying to carry this information back.

After World War I, Athos returns to Cambridge to see the new Scott Polar Research Institute and brings back a Wilson photograph that reminds Jakob of his memory of the Holocaust's spirit world. Members of Scott's expedition are responsible for recruiting Athos for the University of Toronto.

Athens, Greece

The capital of Greece, Athens is where Athanasios (Athos) Roussos and his friend Kostas Mitsialis teach at the university prior to World War II. Kostas describes the weeping as the swastika flag is unfurled over the Acropolis during the war. He remains and marries Daphne and live in the rubble to which Greece is reduced in the war. When Athos and his ward, Jakob Beer, visit Athens, fruitlessly seeking information about the fate of Jakob's sister Bella and his aunt Ida during the Holocaust, the communists are fighting the British in a brutal civil war.

After 1968, Jakob returns to Athens and can remember things only as he sees them currently. Kostas is dead and his old house, under new ownership, has been spruced up. Kostas had written Jakob about changes under the new constitution, but no one forgets the atrocities of the civil war. Finding the traffic and tourist disorienting, Jakob flies quickly to Zakynthos, which is as disturbing. In the final pages of the novel, Book II's narrator, Ben spends a day and a night in Athens and captures some of the flavor of the historic district before viewing it from the hillsides above.

Biskupin, Poland

An archaeological site in Poland that begins to be excavated in 1934, Biskupin becomes a symbol of prehistoric (Stone and Iron Age) Slavic culture. As a consequence, Biskupin is destroyed after 1939 by the Nazi SS-Ahnenerbe, as posing a threat to Aryan



supremacy. When the Nazis withdraw, Biskupin reverts to a bog formed by the Gasawka River. Providentially, this preserves what survives the cultural purge. Biskupin is called in the novel "the Polish Pompeii". The narrator of Book I, Jakob Beer, lives up until age seven near Biskupin and is found hiding from the Nazis in the woods by Greek scholar Athanasios (Athos) Roussos, who spirits him off to Greece.

Idhra Island, Greece

A bare, blue rock covered by wildflowers, Idhra is the ancestral home of the Roussos family. Mrs. Karouzos runs a small hotel there and watches over the Roussos house during long periods when it stands vacant. There are no cars on Idhra, so after World War II, when Athanasios (Athos) Roussos sends his books there in preparation for relocating to Toronto, Ontario, Canada, the heavy trunks must be carried uphill by donkeys to the airy, hilltop house that resembles the one on Zakynthos Island, where they spend the war. There are many wealthy shipbuilders living around the beautiful Idhra harbor. Athos' and Jakob's visit is short, but around 1970, Jakob returns and begins writing poetry and the contents of Book I of this volume. Jakob's future biographer, Ben, visits Idhra after Jakob's death for four months to collect Jakob's journals and senses Jakob's and his wife Michaela's spirits enjoying the house and wanting to be alone.

Odessa, Ukraine

A major port city on the Black Sea, Odessa sports large Greek and Jewish communities before World War II. Athanasios (Athos) Roussos' maternal ancestors are prominent merchants there, shipping dyes to Austria. As ward Jakob Beer is learning about Athos' family history, some thirty thousand of his fellow Jews in Odessa are being burnt alive by the Nazis. Before the war, Athos's widowed father takes his son to Zakynthos Island.

Salonika, Greece

A major Greek seaport both in ancient in and modern times, Salonika is home to a large Jewish population before World War II. When Jakob Beer as a boy visits with his mentor, Athanasios (Athos) Roussos, he first learns about the magic of salt and wood.

SS-Ahnenerbe

Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler's agency for proving that only Germanic culture is authentic, the Ahnenerbe (meaning: Bureau of Ancestral Inheritance) downplays the archaeological importance of Biskupin as a "Polish Pompeii" because this would suggest that Poland and the Slavs in general develop an advanced early culture. Once a school friend of Athanasios (Athos) Roussos and formerly a fine scholar employed by the Ahnenerbe, he suddenly discovers ancient swastikas everywhere and presents Himmler the "Willendorf Venus." This friend maintains that Greek civilization starts in neolithic



Germany. After the war, having destroyed sites, relics, and documentation, such people are allowed to continue teaching.

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

After World War II, Athanasios (Athos) Roussos accepts a teaching position in the geography department at the University of Toronto, newly formed by Griffith Taylor. Returning veterans fill the university and the teaching staff is short-handed. Taylor's friend and companion in Antarctic exploration, Silas Wright, hails from Toronto. Toronto is shown as an active, albeit derelict port, a city of nostalgic migrants. The northern sections look like an evacuated metropolis, similar to Warsaw in Jakob Beer's father's descriptions. Signs of the wilderness past remain in a city of valleys and bridges, railways and hidden lanes. Particular attention is given to the ravines, whose strata Athos explains to his ward Jakob Beer.

Most immigrants first arrive in Montreal and then take the train to Union Station, where they fan out by taxi. The Greek and Jewish neighborhoods stand side-by-side, which comforts Jakob, a Jew brought up in Greece. Jakob attends Greek and English lessons at the Athena School, while Athos lectures in the McMaster Building on Bloor St. They rent a partially furnished flat in the Heathside Gardens complex on St. Clair Ave., West. It seems luxurious after wartime Zakynthos Island. Across the street is a restaurant that stays open all night. The lights, traffic, and crowding disorient and embarrass Jakob.

Other locations in Toronto mentioned are Department chairman Griffith Taylor and his wife's home in Forest Hills and an unnamed music library where Jakob meets his first wife, Alex. It is located in a park. They honeymoon at the Royal York Hotel and then live in Jakob and Athos's old flat. They hang out with her Marxist friends in fancy clubs. After they divorce, Jakob remarries and takes his wife to Greece, where they die. Jakob's future biographer, the narrator of Book II, known only as Ben, is shown in passing on campus, but he and his family live in Weston, a northwestern suburb.

Weston, Ontario, Canada

A northwestern suburb of Toronto, Weston lies on the Humber River. The family of Part 2's narrator, Ben, loses their house on the river to Hurricane Hazel in October 1954. Years afterward, Ben still finds household objects embedded in the mud. Ben's father, a paranoid Holocaust survivor, settles in Weston rather than the ethnic neighborhoods of Toronto in order to make it harder for authorities to sweep him up if there ever is a resurgence of Nazi-like activity against ethnicities. The family moves to a tiny apartment rather than rebuild, Ben's father figuring that all apartment doors look alike.

Zakynthos

One of the Ionian Islands located off the western coast of Greece, Zakynthos is also the name of the island's largest town. Poet Jacob Beer, the narrator of Book I, likens it to a



bone jutting "from the skin of the sea". His mentor, Athanasios (Athos) Roussos, lives high on mountainous island before World War II and returns there with young Jakob in 1942, having been working in Poland as an archaeologist. Athos' widowed father brings him to Zakynthos from Odessa. When Athos grows up, he paves the town square and erects a fountain in his late brother Nikos's memory. The true story of the island under Nazi occupation is embedded in the novel, including the courageous and successful efforts of Mayor Karrer and Bp. Chrysostomos to withhold the names of local Jews who face deportation to concentration camps. The Jews are instead hidden in small villages around the island. The novel also describes Zakynthos's destruction by earthquake in 1953, which destroys almost all personal property, including the Nikos fountain and Athos's house, neither of which he rebuilds. Around 1970, Jakob returns to Greece, stopping in Athens and only briefly in Zakynthos. He finds it fitting that Athos's house is in ruins, since Athos himself is long dead.



Themes

Good and Evil

Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels deals primarily with the Holocaust, Nazi Germany's systematic attempt during World War II to eradicate European Jews. The novel is filled with vivid imagery of brutality: doors kicked down, people killed outright in their homes or dragged off to camps where they are worked to death, starve, or are gassed and cremated. To prepare the executioners for their task and to lighten their psychological load, Nazi propaganda and legislation for years dehumanizes the Jews, so that their removal will be no more morally troublesome than street cleaning. Many victims go quietly to their fate, playing the prescribed role as well as the tormentors play theirs, but a few at the last moment open their eyes and mouths and show that they are human. This infuriates the tormentors and the brutality mounts.

One of the most horrific scenes, often revisited, finds surviving prisoners late in the war being forced to dig up eight thousand bodies, in order that they may be cremated to remove evidence of the atrocities. The Nazis surely realize that the task is not only naturally repulsive, but that according to Judaism, ritually defiles the workers. They, however, are mystically filled with the souls of those cut-off lives and their hands are sanctified. Thereafter, they preserve the lives cut short for as long as they survive.

It is said that all deeds, good and evil, have a permanent effect on the universe. It is also said that an evil deed has only to be done once to be significant, while good deeds must be repeated constantly. Good deeds during the Holocaust can be as minor as looking the other way while someone escapes or failing to report an escape or offering a bit of food to the starving. Those who do good are so rare that their stature is higher than the angels.

The novel dwells on the situation of the Jews on Zakynthos Island in the Greek Aegean Sea. The mayor and Orthodox archbishop are ordered by the Gestapo to submit a list of all Jews, providing names and occupations. They will be deported to the camps. The mayor and archbishop refuse, the Jews disperse around the island for the duration of the war, and none is lost. The mayor on near-by Corfu is a collaborator, and most of that island's population perishes, including relatives of a man on Zakynthos who undertakes to feed the starving until liberation. When he dies, decades later, the whole population turns out to honor him.

Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome

Book I's narrator, Jakob Beer, and the parents of Book II's narrator, Ben, are all survivors of the Holocaust. Predictably, they exhibit clear symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) years after their ordeal. Ben's father suffers the greatest inability ability to cope with life, as he re-experiences the original trauma of being torn



from his normal life teaching music in Warsaw, surviving life in the Ghetto and in a work camp, being forced marched through winter weather, and eventually escaping. He is hyper-vigilant against a repeat of his incarceration. Being uncommunicative except about music, he does not mention flashbacks or nightmares, but avoids crowded conditions and confrontations with authority figures. A loud knock at the door to warn him of flooding causes flashbacks of the Gestapo breaking down his door, paralyzes him until the last moment to escape, and then leaves him withdrawn for days. Later in life he suffers insomnia and eventually commits suicide by a massive dose of sleeping pills. Ben's mother reacts to restored life by enhanced appreciation of tastes and smells, but she worries every time husband or son leave the house lest they not return, and always carries her passport with her on the street.

Jakob suffers constant flashbacks to the kicked-in door, his dead parents lying in a pool of blood, and himself spending days and nights up to his ears in the river and in the deep forest, hiding from the Gestapo. He makes no friends during school or college until he marries, and then his obsession with what had befallen his beloved older sister destroys his first marriage. He has difficulty falling and staying asleep and is easily angered.

Music

Music flows through Anne Michaels's fictional novel, *Fugitive Pieces*. Both narrators, Jakob Beer in Book I and Ben (no last name given) in Book II are interested in music and are influenced by figures far more adept. Jakob's beloved sister at age fifteen is already an accomplished pianist and thoroughly enamored by the life, career, and works of Ludwig van Beethoven. She dresses, eats, and drinks, amusingly, like the composer, but when she plays, she turns serious and precise. Also fond of Johannes Brahms, Bella adopts his motto: "Fix order nix" ("up to the mark, or nothing"), and often plays silently to perfect her style. For the rest of his life, Jakob wonders what befalls Bella and pictures her practicing silently in a crowded camp barrack.

Jakob's first wife, Alex, is a devotee of classical music. They first meet in an excellent music library, where Jakob systematically listens to recordings and studies scores of composers in alphabetic order. The marriage ends because Jakob cannot break out of brooding over Bella. His second wife, Michaela, is a museum administrator, more attuned to history than music, but she helps him get over Bella and their marriage endures.

Ben finds in Jakob's poetry a way of understanding his dysfunctional family. His father is a budding symphony conductor in Poland before World War II and after surviving the Holocaust is reduced to teaching piano in Canada. As a piano teacher, he is too demanding for Ben to continue lessons. He is withdrawn even from his family except when listening to classical music. As it soothes him, he lets his young son lie on his lap. During the war, Ben's father had listened to music in his head to keep him going during forced marches. It seems to perform the same function in peacetime.



Ben's wife, Naomi, loves all forms of music but specializes in lullabies in various cultures. When, after eight years together she stops singing to him, Ben misses it. She is also a master of trivia and non-sequiturs and is able to match songs to particular people. She assigns to Ben's parents "Night" by Liuba Levitska, whom they hear sing while in a concentration camp, and "Moorsoldaten" (Peat Bog Soldiers), the first song that is written in a camp. Composing music is a bold political move, given that the Nazis insist that Jews are sub-human and thus incapable of creating art. Naomi insists that singing to the dead is all that one can do for them.

Style

Point of View

Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels has two narrators, the poet Jakob Beer, and Ben (no last name given), a devotee of Jakob's poetry and scholar of his life and work. Both speak in the first person, past tense. Long Book I, Jakob's part, appears to be at least the draft of a memoir penned on Idhra Island, Greece, weeks before his and second wife Michaela's untimely death in Athens. A one-page preface by an unspecified hand gives particulars. Book II is addressed to Jakob, posthumously by Ben, telling Jakob how his poetry has helped him deal with his own dysfunctional family. Both narrators are children of Holocaust survivors.

Jakob tells of his life in Biskupin, Poland, crashing in as the Nazis kill his parents and remove his beloved sister Bella to an unknown but surely horrible fate. He hides, terrified, in forest and river, until a Greek archaeologist at the local dig rescues him and spirits him off to Greece. There he receives a rich education from Athanasios (Athos) Roussos, a man of vast learning and deep philosophical views. Much of Book I is a paean to Athos's generous spirit. After World War II, they emigrate to Toronto, Ontario, Canada, where Jakob continues his education and begins a life as a translator. He aspires to be a poet, but achieves this only after his second marriage. His obsession with the Holocaust destroys an earlier union. Michaela's love allows Jakob to write and publish volumes of poetry that deals with dilemmas and images from the Holocaust.

Jakob's writing is detailed, picturesque, and brutal in its honesty. He censors nothing about his own faults. He rambles, switching between scenarios and returning again. He thinks deeply about Athos' theories of life, which are grounded in the methods of geology. Athos appreciates and helps Jakob to understand the mystical teachings of Judaism. Literature and music loom large.

Ben also writes in a rambling, disjointed manner, recalling his growing up in his father's paranoid household and struggling to leave the nest. He tells Jakob how his poetry helps him cope and understand. This mechanism helps the reader assimilate many of the earlier stories and themes, seeing them through another mind.

Setting

Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels spans the period from World War II through approximately 1980. It opens in the boggy forests of Poland as Nazi thugs break down the door of the Beer house, kill the parents, remove the daughter to an unknown but likely ghastly fate, but fail to find the hiding son, narrator Jakob Beer. He hides until rescued by an archaeologist, Athanasios (Athos) Roussos, who spirits him off to Zakynthos Island in Greece. Flashbacks briefly characterize Poland before the war and the labor camps during it. Jakob's devoted follower is born of Holocaust survivors, and



in Book II, he tells Jakob posthumously how his poetry helps him understand the dysfunctional nature of his home in Canada.

Zakynthos is occupied by the Nazis, but Athos and Jakob live high on the mountain. None of the Jews on the island are turned over to the Nazis, thanks to the righteous mayor and archbishop. After the war, Athos and Jakob walk across the war-scarred Peloponnese (southern Greece) to Athens, which they soon afterward abandon for Canada. First-hand accounts of the ensuing civil war are incorporated, thanks to friends' letters.

In Canada, Athos teaches at the University of Toronto. The city's layout and character are painted in broad strokes. Jakob grows up in an ethnic neighborhood (Greek and Jewish) but is not drawn heavily into either. He attends the university and eventually works for it. Ben meets Jakob at a faculty member's house shortly before Jakob and his second wife return to Greece, specifically the Roussos's family home on Idhra Is. There, Jakob writes Book I and finds his muse to write poetry. He and Michaela die tragically in Athens.

Ben's father chooses to live in the northwestern suburb of Weston, Ontario, where he feels safer. Life from Weston north to Sudbury is told in anecdotes. After Jakob dies, Ben goes to Idhra to recover his lost journals. He writes moving passages about the natural beauty of the island and the spiritual beauty of Jakob and Michael's life that he discovers there. He adds a brief description of rebuilt Athens before flying home to Canada.

Language and Meaning

According to the cover flaps of *Fugitive Pieces*, author Anne Michaels is an award-winning Canadian poet and teacher of creative literature. This is her first novel. Not surprisingly, therefore, the novel is extremely rich in figures of speech. The narration is divided between two scholars and lovers of poetry, so the language does not seem out of place coming from their pens and mouths.

Both narrators, Jakob Beer and Ben (no last name given) are children of the Holocaust. Jakob is forever scarred by seeing his parents shot dead in their home and his beloved sister, a budding musician, dragged off to an unknown but likely horrible fate. His obsession with what happens to Bella destroys Jakob's first marriage and retards his progress as a poet. A second wife, Michaela, by love and understanding helps unleash his talent. Jakob receives an extraordinary home-schooling from his Greek mentor, Athanasios (Athos) Roussos, who sees human behavior following the lines of physics and geology. A great deal of science and mysticism are mixed into the narrative. Ben is devoted to Jakob's poetry. They and their various wives jump from image to image, using vivid language and allusions to music, literature, and history. The progression of images can be daunting. The Holocaust materials are, inevitably, raw and gut-twisting, but Athos and Jakob firmly believe with the Zohar, a book of Jewish mysticism, that "All



visible things will be born again invisible". By dealing with the lives of witness to which they have been called, both narrators are giving cut-off lives meaning.

Structure

Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels consists of two sections, Book I and Book II. Each section consists of multiple chapters, unnumbered but titled. The chapters are further broken up typographically (symbols and added spacing between paragraphs). The chapters are of varying lengths. A one-page preface informs the reader that the poet Jakob Beer dies in Athens in the spring of 1993, the victim of a traffic accident. He has just begun working on his memoirs. He had spent his life translating anonymous stories from World War II.

Book I consists of: "The Drowned City," "The Stone-Carriers," "Vertical Time," "The Way Station," "Phosphorus," "Terra Nullius," and "The Gradual Instant." It reviews the life of poet Jakob Beer from the time he escapes death at the hands of the Nazis until he is a sixty-year-old scientist/poet, splitting his time between Toronto, Ontario in Canada and his adoptive home during World War II, Greece. A Greek geologist, Athos Roussos, who happens upon him in the mud of Poland, adopts and educates him in all of the mysteries of the universe. After World War II and during the brutal Greek civil war, they emigrate to Canada, where Jakob marries twice and evolves into a renowned poet. Around 1970, Jakob returns to Greece and begins writing poetry in the Roussos family home on Idhra. He travels back and forth between Idhra and Toronto, returning to Idhra with second wife Michaela to finish his life's story in the summer of 1992.

Book II repeats several of the chapter titles from Book I, but applies them to reflections by a fan of Jakob's poetry, Ben. The titles are: "The Drowned City," "Vertical Time," "Phosphorus," and "The Way Station." They are addressed personally to Jakob, several years after his death, telling him about how his poetry has influenced Ben's life and career. As Ben is the son of Holocaust survivors, the mood of Book II is no more elevated than Book I's, but Jakob's words help Ben understand. Back on Idhra, Ben comes to understand how Jakob is able to write about horrors, for he has the love of a good woman. Ben hopes that he can return to his abandoned and betrayed wife and find the love that he needs.



Quotes

"I wanted to go to my parents, to touch them. But I couldn't, unless I stepped on their blood.

The soul leaves the body instantly, as if it can hardly wait to be free: my mother's face was not her own. My father was twisted with falling. Two shapes in the flesh-heap, his hands."

Book I, The Drowned City, p. 7

"I did not witness the most important events of my life. My deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound. From behind a wall, from underground. From the corner of a small house on a small island that juts like a bone from the skin of sea."

Book I, The Stone-Carriers, p. 17

"How can one man take on the memories of even one other man, let alone five or ten or a thousand or ten thousand; how can they be sanctified each? He stops thinking. He concentrates on the whip, he feels a face in his hand, he grasps hair as if in a passion grasp, its matted thickness between his fingers, pulling, his hands full of holy names. His holy hands move, autonomous."

Book I, The Stone-Carriers, p. 52

"On Zakynthos, there was the statue of Solomos. In Athens, there was Palamas and the graffitos, whose heroism was language. I already knew the power of language to destroy, to omit, to obliterate. But poetry, the power of language to restore: this was what both Athos and Kostas were trying to teach me."

Book I, Vertical Time p. 79

"English was a sonar, a microscope, through which I listened and observed, waiting to capture elusive meanings buried in facts. I wanted a line in a poem to be the hollow ney of the dervish orchestra whose plaintive wail is a call to God. But all I achieved was awkward shrieking. Not even the pure shriek of a reed in the rain."

Book I, The Way Station, p. 112

"When a man dies, his secrets bond lie crystals, like frost on a window. His last breath obscures the glass."

Book I, The Way Station, p. 114

"I couldn't turn my anguish from the precise moment of death. I was focused on that historical split second: the tableau of the haunting trinity - perpetrator, victim, witness. "But at what moment does wood become stone, peat become coal, limestone become marble? The gradual instant."

Book I, Phosphorus, p. 140

"Nazi policy was beyond racism, it was anti-matter, for Jews were not considered human. An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as 'figuren,' 'stücke,' - 'dolls,' 'wood,'



'merchandise,' 'rags.' Humans were not being gassed, only 'figuren,' so ethics weren't being violated. No one could be faulted for burning debris, for burning rags and clutter in the dirty basement of society. In fact, they're a fire hazard!"

Book I, Terra Nullius, p. 165

"We think that change occurs suddenly, but even I have learned better. Happiness is wild and arbitrary, but it's not sudden."

Book I, The Gradual Instant, p. 185

"A few years after my mother's death, during the brief time he lived with Naomi and me, my father seemed to give up sleep entirely. At night we heard him wandering around the house. Finally, I convinced him to see a doctor, who, to my relief, prescribed sleeping pills. But, suddenly able to answer the dilemma of hunger that had plagued him so long, he took them all."

Book II, The Drowned City, p. 256

"The house was a breccia of affections. Everything was wind-worn or sea-worn, old and odd, mostly only of personal value."

Book II, Vertical Time, p. 264

"We found Michaela's note where she'd left it. Planned as a surprise ending to a perfect day. Among the cushions, waiting for your discovery, the night you and Michaela never returned from Athens. Two lines of blue ink.

"If she's a girl: Bella.

"If he's a boy: Bela."

Book II, Vertical Time, pp. 278-79



Topics for Discussion

Why does a neighbor pounding on the door so disorient Ben's father? How does this tie in with Jakob's childhood memories?

Describe how Nazi propaganda prepares for the wholesale slaughter of the Jews. What factors cause the executioners to be so brutal?

What use is made of Jewish mysticism in the novel?

How do the fates of Zakynthos and Corfu islands contrast during the Nazi occupation of Greece?

How does Ben's wife Naomi's crush on Jakob affect her husband's devotion to studying the poet's work and preserving his legacy?

How do both Jakob and Ben's failed first marriages compare and contrast? How do the second wives provide antidotes for what goes wrong?

Weather is a major concern in this novel. How do the nature of tornadoes and lightning accommodate figures of speech about the Holocaust? Do you find these natural or forced?