

The Great Santini Study Guide

The Great Santini by Pat Conroy

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Plot Summary

"The Great Santini" is a semi-autobiographical novel by Pat Conroy which details the experiences of the Meecham family, particularly Ben Meecham, and his father Bull Meecham, a Marine Corps fighter pilot in 1962.

When the novel begins, Lieutenant Colonel Wilbur "Bull" Meecham heads home to the United States to collect his family (wife Lillian, sons Ben and Matt, and daughters Mary Anne and Karen) to bring them to Ravenel Air Base near Charleston, South Carolina. He's taking command of Squadron 367 there. Bull is determined to keep his family in shape the way he keeps his air squadron in shape. Bull is really a really tough bully who is nearly impossible to please. He butts heads continuously with Ben, his oldest, who looks forward to his freedom when his senior year of high school concludes. Bull's wife, Lillian, is devoted to him despite his hard drinking, hard language, and hard fists. Somehow, love manages to carry on in the family. While Bull may not know how to show love, he is devoted to his family, coming to his son's defense against local ruffians, and making sure Mary Anne has her own dress to the prom.

Ben hates Bull, but he also knows he loves his father. Bull is unexpectedly killed when his plane's engine catches fire and explodes on a routine night flight. The family decides to move back to Atlanta, Georgia, where Lillian is from and where her mother still lives. As he drives his family to Georgia, Ben realizes that, perhaps, he never hated his father at all, but he only loved him.



Chapter 1-7

Summary

Chapter 1 – In Barcelona, near the Cordova Hotel, fourteen Marine Corps fighter pilots from the Forrestal, are holding a going-away party for Colonel Bull Meechem. The party is loud and wild, and commanding officer Ty Mullinax has already passed out. Bull jokes with the maître d' that Mullinax is dead. He says that Mullinax should be left on the table where he has passed out for the next six months. Major Sammy Funderburk points out some attractive and willing girls to Bull, but Bull refuses, saying he is saving himself for his wife. Bull then offers himself a toast, full of praise and bravado.

Captain Ronald Bookout tells Bull that they should keep the noise down, or they are liable to cause trouble, especially with the Naval officers in the room next door. Bull contends it is the job of the Marines to be wild and live up to their Ice Age reputations. But a Navy captain appears with the maître 'd, asking who is in charge. Meecham points to Mullinax, who is passed out. The captain admonishes Meecham to finish up and get out. Meecham agrees. He then asks Sammy and Ace if they have the mushroom soup and the spoons. They reply that they do. Bull uses the mushroom soup as fake vomit, spilling it all over the floor and stage of the next room. Sammy and Ace then begin to eat the soup, fighting each other over it. The Naval party breaks up in an uproar.

The next day, Colonel Luther Windham, commander of the Marines on the Forrestal, calls Bull to a meeting. He is fed up with Bull's antics and considers Bull a headache. Luther will talk to Admiral Bagwell. Bagwell, who likes Bull, outranks Weber, the Navy captain. Luther warns Bull that he is in danger of being kicked out if he can't get his act together. Bull promises that he will become a better officer. Luther tells Bull to say hello to Lillian, Bull's wife for him. Luther wants to tell Bull's kids (Ben, Matt, Mary Anne, and Karen) hello as well. Bull then heads out to take command of a squadron in South Carolina. It is 1962.

Chapter 2 – Ben anxiously awaits his father's plane. It has been a year since he has seen his father. His mother, the beautiful Lillian, is there with him, waiting impatiently. Lillian asks her children to say a prayer for the plane's safe flight, but Mary Anne responds that they have already said five Hail Marys. Karen doesn't want to leave Atlanta. She is unhappy about always making friends and having to leave them behind. Ben and Mary Anne walk along the runway, where Mary Anne teases Ben about his athletic abilities and his acne.

Lillian follows along. She is thirty-seven and stunningly beautiful. While her husband is away, she relaxes a lot of the rules and regulations her children must abide by. But, the return of Bull means the return of strict discipline. Ben has one more year at home before he says he is free. But Lillian tells her children that their father has changed, having missed his children terribly.



Bull's plane comes in. His family runs to greet him, and he is happy to be home. Bull calls himself the Great Santini, a name for which he's known.

Chapter 3 – Bull rises before two in the morning, to both exercise and pray. He wakes up Lillian, because it is moving day. He wakes up his children by turning on their lights. Bull is not happy about being stationed in the South, but he commits to studying a road map. His mother-in-law, Alice Sole, with whom the family had been staying, comes into the kitchen. Alice doesn't understand why her son-in-law insists on driving at night. Bull contends that the kids will sleep and there will be less traffic. Also, it is cooler, and a day won't be wasted. They make sure that their dog named Okra is in the car. As they set out, Meecham pulls a gun out of his jacket, telling his family that they never know who they will meet on the road these days, including a wild black person. The family bristles at this.

As the family begins driving, they sing the Marine Corps hymn, a Meecham family tradition. When Bull begins singing by himself, his voice is so bad that Okra barks at him. Bull calls Okra dumb in response. The family says prayers for a safe trip as they continue the drive. Eventually, everyone begins to fall asleep, and Bull asks which of his family members will be on duty first, to keep him company. Bull puts Ben on duty first. Though Ben is on duty, there is an uncomfortable silence between them, as neither one can find something in common to talk about. So, Ben asks Bull if he is afraid of flying, and Bull says he is always a little afraid, but that is what makes him such a good pilot. He says his greatest fear is hitting a bird in the air. That's because a bird hits a plane like a bowling ball.

Ben and Bull talk about Ben's future plans. He hasn't decided yet whether to enlist in the Marine Corps, the Air Force, or go to college. Bull is determined that his son should enlist, and that, after a four year stint, Ben can make up his mind about what to do. Ben asks what will happen if he is killed, and Bull replies that if Ben is killed, it is because he is a lousy pilot. The only way a pilot should go, Bull reveals, is in combat. Mary Anne then takes over for Ben on duty. As Bull drives, he spots turtles crossing the road. He intentionally runs over them. He also comments about the number of dead dogs he has seen. He then says that he will make some real time. He drives faster. Lillian tells him his love of running over turtles is sick.

Chapter 4 – The Meechams stop at a railroad crossing in the middle of the country at night while a train passes. Each of the males file out to use the bathroom. Lillian tells the girls to stay put. They will not surrender their dignity out in the open. Bull declares it will be the last stop before the Marine Corps air station at Ravenel, South Carolina. As the sun comes up and the Meechams continue on, Bull and his wife talk about their friends and their families, what they have been up to, and where they have gone. As they continue driving, Ben reflects on his father being born in the North and hating the South. Ben feels a strong connection to Georgia, for he was born there. Bull can't stand the Southern accent, and takes great pains to make sure his children do not sound or speak like Southerners.



As the family continues on, Bull asks his children the capitals of states and foreign countries. Bull contends that travel is the best education in the world. Bull explains that, while in Europe, he even went to the Louvre in Paris to see the Mona Lisa. He came to greatly admire and respect it. The children are unhappy that travel means constantly being uprooted, but Bull contends that it is good for their social graces and skills. Matt has to use the bathroom, but Bull refuses to stop. Mary Anne begins crying, saying she already hates their new state. Lillian reminds Mary Anne to keep her composure. A proper lady only expresses sorrow when she is alone. The children can hear the ire in their father's voice, and all of them fall silent.

Chapter 5 – Ravenel is a quiet little town set against a tidal creek and marshland. They drive past an old, beat-up high school, which is denoted as the school for blacks. Bull reveals they will be living off-base. The suburbs of Ravenel are beautiful. Live oaks with Spanish moss line the streets. The house that Bull has rented is a large, old, beautiful home in a quiet neighborhood. Lillian is profoundly impressed. The kids are amazed. Bull brings his kids together for a last-minute pep talk. He tells them that they are Marine kids, and they can hack anything. They should never give up or give in. They should never be afraid to ask God for help either. While Bull heads out to check in at base, the family and the movers, which arrive at 11 that morning, begin to unpack.

By three in the afternoon, everything has been moved in and set to its appropriate place. Unpacking will come next. Lillian gathers her children together to give them a battle plan. The family will concentrate on the downstairs first and the bedrooms in the morning. The house is full of international items, paintings, and other accouterments. Lillian unpacks a box marked "Shrine," which is emblematic of the family's deep Catholic faith. It is full of religious statues, including an F-8 Crusader plastic model. These things are placed in the vestibule under the stairway, to the left of the front door. She also sets up candles, a container for Holy Water, and the rosary beads Bull had given her when she converted to Catholicism. She then gathers the children to pray before the shrine, thanking Mother Mary for a safe trip.

Chapter 6 – Bull Meechem arrives at Ravenel Marine Air Station as an F-8 takes to the skies. He stops at the main gate to give the PFC on duty a lesson in proper saluting. Then, he continues on. Bull goes to see Colonel Virgil Hedgepath, but the sergeant on duty informs Bull that the colonel is in the latrine. Bull goes into the latrines and trips the man whom he assumes to be Hedgepath. But, it is not Hedgepath. It is a skinny corporal named Atchley. Bull tells the corporal to always be prepared for surprise attacks and to forget what happened there that day. Bull then goes back to the sergeant sitting outside Hedgepath's office. Hedgepath is back in, and the two wrestle with each other before saying hello. They have had a twenty year friendship, and Hedgepath is happy to have Meechem

Bull wants to know why Varney, the commander of the group, is willing to have Bull command Squadron 367. Virgil explains that Varney has his eyes on general's stars, and Bull's new squadron has to be whipped into shape. Virgil warns Bull that he's got to get along with Varney. Bull knows that he has to have Varney on his side, so he agrees



to being low-key around him. Virgil and Bull agree to meet for a drink at the 'O'-Club at 1700 after Bull's meeting with Varney.

Next, Bull goes to meet with Colonel Joe Varney. Varney is a no-nonsense guy. He explains that, despite the bad blood between them in the past, the world is a dangerous place. The United States will need crack military forces to handle challenges. Bull is a good pilot and an effective leader. But, Varney is also quick to put Bull in his place, telling Bull that he will be watching him, praying that he makes a mistake somewhere. Varney welcomes Bull aboard. As Varney dismisses him, Bull salutes. While saluting, Bull notices the slight bend in Varney's nose. Bull had broken it years before.

Chapter 7 – The sound of an F-8 in the morning sky wakes Bull up at seven the next morning. He decides it will be a good day to get the house and the yard in order. He understands how important it is that his family will feel at home in their house. They will need to keep busy to get used to their new life. Bull rousts his family from bed as if they are a Marine squadron fighting off a Japanese attack. He orders his kids into defensive positions in the living room to repel an enemy assault. Bull and his kids wrestle and play-fight with one another until Lillian comes downstairs, followed soon after by Mary Anne, who has refused the morning's activities. She announces she is writing a book about Bull, which delights Bull.

Analysis

In the beginning of the novel, the reader learns quickly that Bull is loud, obnoxious, and very pugnacious. He has all the qualities which many Marines consider necessary to be a good Marine. Bull is clearly a military man who has high expectations and works hard. But he parties just as hard. He is tough as nails, something which his family -especially Ben- resents. The children are not looking forward to the return of their father because their father is not only strict, but very, very rough with his kids. He speaks to them as if they were run-of-the-mill Marines needing to be whipped into shape, and his children do not appreciate it. Lillian has to remind her husband frequently that they are a family, not a unit of men.

From the start, the reader can also tell that there is especial tension between Ben and Bull. While Ben considers college, and maybe not joining the Marines, Bull is determined that Ben will at serve at least four years. After that it will be up to Ben to decide what he will do with the rest of his life. Ben isn't thrilled about this. But, despite their father's tough and unruly ways of carrying himself, they discover that he has, at long last, picked out an enjoyable and respectable home for them to live in while he is stationed at Ravenel. Finally, there is some semblance of normalcy for the children, who hate having to move around so much because of their father's work.. Despite Bull's gruff exterior, he does enjoy spending time with his children, as evidenced by his desire to play games with them. Mary Anne, however, isn't thrilled that they are war games.



Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Ben and Bull at this stage in the novel. What words best describe this relationship? Do you believe Ben loves or hates his father, or a mixture of both? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Bull and Lillian. If Bull is the head of the household, what role does Lillian play? Or, is Lillian truly the head of the household? Explain, using evidence from the novel.

Discussion Question 3

What reasons does Bull give for making sure his family has such a nice home in Ravenel? How does his family react? Is it possible that renting such a nice house is a physical way of Bull being able to show his love? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

obstreperously, turbulent, geometrically, virtuosity, dissension, insouciant, vestigial, belligerent, euphoric, imperiously, adroit, peremptory, truculence, indelibly, erudition



Chapter 8-14

Summary

Chapter 8 – Bull is a man incapable of relaxation. He always wants his family to be at the top of their game. Lillian gently chides him that they are a family, not an outfit. Bull, nevertheless, tells his children that on Saturday morning their rooms will be clean, and they will patiently wait outside their rooms for inspection. They will not be dismissed until the rooms are cleaned to his satisfaction. They will also tend to chores and help their mother in any way, shape, or form that is needed.

As the kids file up to their rooms, Lillian tells Bull that she is proud of him and the way that he has controlled his drinking and his temper. Lillian and Bull look out through the window as Bull finishes breakfast. They see sailboats racing down the river. Bull then takes to the newspapers. He cannot understand why his man, President Kennedy, has put McNamara in charge of Defense.

Earline Grantham, an elderly neighbor, comes to visit and pay a social call. She brings along a gift of okra. Despite Bull's gruff nature, Earline takes a quick liking to him. As Lillian enters to chat with Earline, Bull tells Earline she can come by anytime she wants.

Dressed in fatigues, Bull makes the rounds of his children's bedrooms. Bull instructs Ben that his bed needs to be made better, and his clothes arranged better. Also, Bull criticizes Ben's like of novels and his mother's insistence to read them. He tells Ben to focus on the Baltimore Catechism instead, because it has all the answers. After inspections, Mary Anne comes to see Ben. Ben reminds Mary Anne that he wants to get through the year with as little trouble as possible.

As Bull comes downstairs, Earline is leaving. She has helped Lillian find a maid. Bull, meanwhile, is unimpressed that the basketball hoop hasn't been put up yet.

Chapter 9 – On Monday morning, a strong, short, black woman from the low country comes to work at the maid for the Meechams. Her name is Arrabelle Smalls, and she and Bull take turns punching one another in the shoulders. Bull is impressed with her strong shoulder, and he is surprised by how strong she hits, though he hides it. As Bull heads out, Lillian greets and brings Arrabelle into the house. Arrabelle has worked for decades, doing everything from shrimping to picking cotton to raising children. Her husband has been dead for three years. Toomer, her son, sells flowers from a wagon in town. Arrabelle is prepared to start work that very same day.

In the afternoon, Ben sets up the dining room chairs in the driveway and dribbles a basketball in and out of them. Around five, Toomer shows up. He has a slight stutter and is very friendly. He is impressed to see a white boy playing basketball. Lillian and Arrabelle come out of the house, and Arrabelle introduces Toomer to Lillian. Toomer gives Lillian some flowers, which Lillian is grateful for. The flowers are wrapped in



Spanish moss to hold in the moisture. Lillian offers to bake Toomer an apple pie in payment for the flowers. Toomer is off to go fishing, and Lillian asks if Ben can come along. Toomer is happy to have him, He then drives his mother home.

On Saturday afternoon, Ben arrives at River Street, and helps Toomer load up his unsold flowers, herbs, and honey into his wagon. Red Pettus, a white boy with red hair at Fogle's General Store, waves hello to Toomer. He makes fun of Toomer by speaking to him with a stutter. Toomer says that Red doesn't bother with him too much. Toomer drives the wagon out of town and into the fields. He drives into an area with many trees and lots of Spanish moss. There are many dogs and beehives. The house Toomer lives in is an old school bus on cinderblocks with beautiful gardens around it. Ben helps Toomer with his chores for the next hour, and then Toomer offers Ben some raw oysters. Toomer explains he used to work on a shrimp boat, but he caught his foot in in a winch and lost some of his toes. He now has a limp. Toomer then introduces Ben to his dog, The Gray.

That night, Toomer takes Ben out to the beach where they watch a mother turtle come ashore to lay her eggs. Toomer sets up a little fire. He makes coffee, grits, bacon, and fried turtle eggs. Toomer says he will soon show Ben how to get honey from hives, but Ben is concerned about going near bees. Both boys enjoy the cool night air and the stars overhead.

Chapter 10 – By late August, Bull decides to bring Ben and Matthew to the base for haircuts. Bull declares that from now on they will have weekly haircuts. Ben hates Marine Corps barbers, civilians who think they are tough because they cut the hair of men who are tough. Ben is unhappy that his hair gets cut so short.

At five that afternoon, Ben challenges his father to a game of one-on-one basketball. It is a close game, with the entire Meecham family watching. Eventually, the score becomes tied at nine to nine. Incredibly, Ben beats his father. The family cheers. Bull is enraged. He decides Ben has to win by two baskets, but Lillian tells Bull that he will not cheat Ben out of a victory. Bull tells Lillian to get into the house, or he will kick her in there. When Lillian refuses, Bull kicks her in the behind until she runs into the house. The family starts screaming at Bull, who goes face-to-face with Ben. Ben turns to go to the house, and Bull throws the basketball at his son's head, over and over again, trying to get him to cry. In his room, Ben cries, and Bull comes upstairs to tell him that Ben is his favorite daughter. Ben retorts that his favorite girl just beat him. Bull slams the bedroom door shut.

Chapter 11 – At dinner, not a word passes between Bull and his family. After dinner, Bull spends hours outside, practicing basketball. Lillian comes in to see how Ben is doing. Ben asks her how she is doing. She says she is a little sore, but good. Lillian says that if Bull ever does anything like that again, she will leave him. But Ben doesn't believe her, because this isn't the first time she has said it. Ben admits to hating his father and that he can't wait to get out of the house. Ben tries to understand why Bull is so rough on him, when he never acts up or acts out. Ben has the scars and bruises to prove his



father's meanness. Lillian tells Ben that Bull loves him, and Ben retorts that Bull has a funny way of showing it.

Ben further thinks that no one knows who Bull really is, that all he does is act. He acts like he is a Marine fighter pilot, a husband, and a father, not to mention a human being. Ben wonders how his mother can get along when Bull hits her. Lillian insists that Bull has never hit her, despite Ben having seen it happen three times. Ben even hopes there will be a war so Bull will have to go away.

Lillian tells Ben the real reason why Bull is downstairs practicing. It's because he knows the gap between father and son is closing. It is also Bull's way of saying he is sorry.

Chapter 12 – Bull is officially now in charge of squadron 367. He believes that the swearing-in ceremony was perfect, especially because his family had stood up with him on the reviewing stand. He calls Sergeant Latito into his office, to see if all the pilots are prepared for that day's briefing. At 1230 hours, Bull addresses his men. He has been waiting for this day for twelve years, though it all seems like an anticlimax to him after struggling for so long to get the command.

Bull tells them that they have the privilege of serving under the best fighter pilot and squadron commander in the Marine Corps, and if that they aren't the best fighter pilots there are, they will be in six months. Bull also tells them that he wants his men to be obedient and dutiful, but not yes-men. Bull tells them that they are part of Werewolf Squadron 367. If any of them mess up, they will answer to him, but if anyone messes with someone in the Squadron from outside, they will have to answer to Bull. Later, Bull has Captain Johnson report to him later. Johnson is a short, thin man. Johnson is actually the best fighter pilot in the squadron. Bull wants to fly up with Johnson next week to see how good he is.

Chapter 13 – No matter how many times they had done it before, Ben and Mary Anne are not happy about beginning high school in a new town. Each day before they began a new school, Lillian would tell all her children how lucky they are to have the privilege of traveling around. But Ben and Mary Anne are not impressed. They head to John C. Calhoun High School. It is an old, colonial brick building with new wings added on to accommodate Marine children. Ben's homeroom teacher, Mrs. Troutman, sets about naming eligible students for homeroom president. Ben is one of those students because his grades are above a C average. Ben is defeated in a landslide election.

On Thursday during the second week of school, Ben and Mary Anne come across Sammy, who is being picked on by a guy named Red. Others are standing around and laughing. Red is forcing Sammy, a Jew, to say "Heil Hitler." Mary Anne intends to stop it, but Ben doesn't want to get involved. However, Ben has no other choice because Mary Anne will get involved otherwise. Ben tells Red to stop. They exchange words, and Red lets Sammy go to turn on Ben with a knife. Mary Anne yells that a teacher is coming, which causes Red to put his knife away. Ben reacts by smashing Red with a history textbook, and Red leaps into the fight as well. Even Mary Anne scratches at Red's face. Teachers break up the fight, and Ben is brought before the principal.



Mr. John Dacus, the principal, is studying Ben's transcripts. He sees that Ben is an athlete. It turns out that Ben has broken the nose of a kid named Lee Wicks, and Red should be okay, according to the doctor. Dacus says that fighting is not allowed, and that Ben has tangled with upriver boys, the roughest white boys around. Mary Anne says she started the fight to help out Sammy. Sammy appears a moment later to vouch for Mary Anne and Ben. They all attest to Red pulling a knife, and Dacus is ready to kick Red out for the year, but Ben says that he shouldn't do it. Dacus responds that the Pettus family is the meanest around, with the roughest upbringing. Pulling knives is inexcusable. Dacus suspends Ben, Mary Anne, and Sammy for a day, so he can talk to Red's gang of thugs. Dacus's mother was a Pettus, and so he knows how they work. Dacus says he will call Bull and will explain everything.

As Ben and Mary Anne walk home, they are targeted by Red and three of his brothers in front of their house. Mary Anne runs inside to get Bull. Red has been kicked out of school for the year, and he wants revenge. As Ben is battered to the ground, Bull and Virgil show up. They pummel the four Pettus brothers and kick them toward their car. Bull tells them that if they ever mess with his kids again, the Pettus brothers will be found in pieces all over the town. Virgil is Ben's godfather. He asks how he is doing that night. Ben is sore, but alright. Bull is thrilled with the fact that the name "Meecham" will spread like wildfire all over town. Virgil's wife Paige and Lillian also come into the room. As the kids go up to bed, Virgil and Paige tell Bull and Lillian to be proud of their children and to be grateful they have them. Lillian tells Paige that their children look on her and Virgil as second parents.

Chapter 14 – Three weeks into Bull's command of Squadron 367, he has come to know all of his men, including something personal about them. Bull also wants good relations with the civilian population of the town. He seeks out Hobie Rawls, mayor of Ravenel, who also runs a grill called "Hobie's." Bull begins visiting regularly, getting to know Hobie and the locals. Bull takes a liking to the place at once. The regulars, Cleve Goins, Ed Mills, Johnne Voight, and others, talk about excessive nudity in films and needing more family entertainment at the movie theater. The locals become friendly with Bull pretty quickly, and they are happy to talk to him.

A woman named Bertha Grimmitt comes in, and she cuts into the regulars just as easily as they cut into her with friendly, and sometimes less-than-friendly, banter. Bertha asks about Bull's kids, and Hobie says his daughter is a senior at the high school. Bull pays for his breakfast and thanks everyone. As he leaves, Zell Posey, a lawyer, catches up to him. He explains to Bull that had he not lost his leg in a boating accident when he was younger, he would have been a Marine during the Second World War. As Bull and Zell part ways, Zell tells Bull that Bertha was once his wife.

Analysis

After arriving at their new home, Bull proceeds to whip his family into shape, as he sees it. This means everything from weekly haircuts to continual routines of chores and activity. As school begins, the reader learns that Bull's children, especially Ben and Mary



Anne, are truly good children when they intervene on behalf of Sammy Wertzberger, who is about to be beaten up by Red Pettus and his thugs. In a shining example of family loyalty and love, Bull comes to the defense of his children when the Pettuses jump Ben outside the house. Even Virgil gets involved. All four Pettus boys are pummeled, and rightfully so.

Interestingly enough, Bull, who lives his life based on achievements and succeeding in life, feels slightly let down as he takes command of 367. He feels as if the whole experience has been anti-climatic, based on the long and arduous struggle to get there. Bull then wonders how things will proceed, and decides that the 367th will have to be whipped into even better shape. Good relations with the local citizens must be achieved and maintained. He sets out on these new roles with gusto. He becomes even harder on his family as well, wanting them to be in the best shape ever, too. Despite this, his children balk, wanting the more relaxed lifestyle they enjoy when their mother is the one solely taking care of them.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the basketball and Red Pettus fight events, as they pertain to Bull Meecham. Why does Bull handle his family so roughly while playing basketball? Why does Bull unhesitatingly leap to his son's defense when Red Pettus and his brothers attempt to beat up Ben? Is there a consistency in these actions? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Bull give his reasoning for beginning friendships with the locals as good civil-military relations. Do you believe this is true? Or, do you believe that there is more to it -that Bull is seeking some genuine friendships that don't rely on the military as a common ground? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Bull stay out late practicing basketball the night of the family fight? What does Lillian say is happening? Is this an acceptable way of handling the aftermath of the situation? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

eminence, symmetrical, bellicose, derelict, jejune, atrophied, dilapidated, juggernaut, indecipherable, saturnine, denouement, sedulously,



Chapter 15-21

Summary

Chapter 15 – At dinner at home, Lillian insists that Bull eat his food with a fork, rather than his hands, which he reluctantly consents to doing. Bull announces to Ben that Ben has a date with Ansley Matthews, daughter of Lieutenant Colonel Matthews, who is attempting to get his daughter to date someone other than a high school football player. Ben protests, but Bull demands Ben go on the date. Saturday night rolls around, and Ben goes to pick up Ansley. Ansley is stunning, and it is clear to Ben that she wants to go out on this date even less than he does.

Eventually, Ansley opens up about Jim Don, her boyfriend, who says he will beat up anyone she dates. They decide to go to the Shack, a local hangout. She asks him to order food for her while she goes around and says hello to other boys. He notices her point to the car and laugh with her friends. Ben feels humiliated. He is even more humiliated when Jim Don shows up, and Ansley leaves with him, asking Ben not to say anything about it to their parents. Ben leaves, but he is followed by another car. It is Sammy, who offers to bring Ben to a movie and show him the town. He saw what Ansley did, and he hates Ansley.

Chapter 16 – Bull goes to meet with the local Catholic priest, Father Thomas Aquinas Pinckney, who is very thin and very tall. Bull wants a Catholic school in Ravenel, but Father Pinckney says the town is growing, and it isn't big enough for one, yet. Bull signs up his sons to serve in the 11:15 Sunday Masses for the whole year. He also enrolls Ben and Mary Anne in the Wednesday night catechism class. Sister Loretta Marie presides over the class. Sister lectures the class about how to properly receive and consume the Host at Mass. Mary Anne and Ben pass notes, at which Ben laughs. Sister Loretta makes Ben stand at the front of the room with his arms raised like Jesus as punishment.

After class, Mary Anne and Ben head home. Mary Anne talks about her desire to be a novelist. Actually, Mary Anne really believes that she'll be married to a creep and Ben will be a pilot, because it is all written for them already. Ben wonders if he will ever write. Mary Anne tells him he will be a Marine. Ben does not want to be a Marine.

Chapter 17 – On October 11, Bull wakes Ben up early for his birthday. His first gift to Ben on Ben's eighteenth birthday is his first fighter jacket, worn through World War II. Bull tells Ben to wear it at home only. Bull recalls being thrilled to learn eighteen years ago that he had a healthy baby boy. Bull was twenty-three at the time. Bull gets Ben some coffee, and then they head out. Bull brings Ben to B Barracks by 0500 to meet Sergeant Hicks, whom Bull has known since Korea. They are there to see recruits being whipped into shape by Hicks. Hicks goes over his role, and someone in the audience –a plant named Blakeley –coughs. Hicks pretends to shoot him, and Blakeley is prepared with ketchup. Afterward, Hicks and Bull laugh about it.



Bull drops Ben off at home, telling Ben to meet him at the club at 1700. Bull then goes to Hobie's Bar and Grill for his morning coffee. At home, Lillian relates to Ben that she was his age when she married his father. They talk about Major Finch, the father of one of Ben's friends. Finch didn't smoke, drink, curse, or do anything foul, but he was still the best fighter pilot. He could even top Bull. Ben wonders why Bull can't be the same.

Lillian explains that Bull has taken on the mythology of the Marine Corps, entwining it with his own personality. Finch was a confident man who believed in himself. He didn't need the Corps. But, Bull needs it. Ben explains that he himself would like to go to college. He says that Bull thinks all colleges are training grounds for Communists. Before Ben leaves for school, Lillian gives him a letter she has written to him. It encourages him to be a good man, to always trust God, and to always do right.

After school, Ben goes to meet his father at the Officer's Club. Bull and Virgil meet him. Bull intends that Ben should buy a drink, since it is legal to drink in the state of South Carolina at eighteen. Virgil cautions Bull about this, but Ben knows his father is testing him, and he orders a double martini on the rocks with a twist of lemon. Bull rises to his feet to get the entire room to toast his son. Ben gets his martini, and despite the warnings of Virgil to drink it slowly, Ben finds he enjoys it. Ben gets plastered, and Bull brings him home. He has to carry him upstairs past a birthday cake and presents.

Chapter 18 – Bull wakes up, restless, at 0300 hours on October 21. Word is spreading that Squadron 367 is going to Cuba, to Guantanamo Bay. Despite Bull not wanting breakfast, Lillian makes one for him. Bull tells Lillian that he can't give her any more information about what is going on. She asks him if he has any concern for human life, and he says the only human life he is concerned about exists between the Atlantic, the Pacific, north of Mexico, and south of Canada.

Down at base in the Ready Room, the pilots of 367 await Bull and Varney. Varney announces that twenty planes will be departing to Cuba. Bull then addresses the pilots, telling them that their squad was not chosen by accident. The pilots then head for their planes. Lillian watches from home as the squadron takes off. Before the children go to school, Lillian gathers them together to say a prayer for peace.

Chapter 19 – Bull and Lillian prepare for the Marines Corps birthday ball. On this night, Marines all over the world, active, retired, alone, or in groups, would salute, toast, and honor the Corps, while remembering those who had died. Bull realizes, as he dresses in his Dress Blues, that he is getting older and heavier, and no matter what he does, he can't shake some of the weight. Since getting home, Bull has been in a cranky mood because war did not happen with Cuba or the Soviet Union. Bull charges into the living room where his kids are waiting, but Mary Anne refuses to play a war game. Bull chases them around with shot putt, until Karen grabs it and throws it at Bull. The shot putt comes down on his foot. Bull screams, and the children run one way while Lillian runs in the other direction. She finds Bull surveying the damage to his foot. His toenail is turning blue. After finding that Bull is alright, Lillian erupts in laughter. Bull begins laughing as well.



The Marine Corps birthday ball is in full swing. Many of the wives of 367, Lillian included, stand in a group, talking. Lillian enjoys being the commanding officer's wife at such galas. Lillian then seeks out Bull to ask him to dance.

At home, the Meecham children undergo their own Marine Corps birthday ceremony. They shape a piece of dog excrement into a cake-like shape, and light candles. The children dress as wildly as they can. The children then sing about how Marines beat their wives and children, and are not good people.

Chapter 20 – Ben wakes up and packs his bag for basketball practice, to become first string. Mary Anne encourages him greatly. Ben has learned to play basketball when his father was stationed near Washington, D.C., by going to the courts in Alexandria, Virginia. That afternoon, Coach Otis Spinks gets things underway. Jim Don Cooper, linebacker and captain of the football team, shouts “Good luck, rookies” to the boys trying out. Spinks, the football coach, doesn't care much for basketball, but he has read a few books on the subject. Spinks decides to pit the tryouts against varsity. Jim Don becomes Ben's opponent as Mr. Dacus stops in on practice, wanting to guard him.

Chapter 21 – It is now December. Ben prepares for his game, telling his mother he needs a new bag to tote his stuff around in. Lillian explains that she has been saving her money for a permanent house to live in when Bull retires from the Corps. Ben says he has to get to his game, but Lillian has her family pray before the shrine before they go. Bull will be meeting them at the game.

In the locker room before the game, the guys talk about hot girls and about their desire to win the game. Art Bullard has a date with Susie Holtzclaw after the game. Coach Spink disrupts the talk, telling the boys to think of beating West Charleston, not girls. Coach Spink tells his players they will run a man-to-man operation no matter what gets thrown at them. Before the team heads out, they pray. As they head out, Ben discovers that he is Number 13.

Bull arrives at the game, loud and raucous, and jokes around with Principal Dacus, who returns the humor. Jim Don wants to know who the jerk is, and Ben tells Jim Don that it is his father and not to call Bull a jerk. Ben scores eighteen points in the first half. By halftime, Calhoun leads by thirteen points. The team wins, and Ben is mobbed by friends, teammates, girls, and cheerleaders. He has scored thirty points. West Charleston hasn't been beaten in ten years. Even Dacus is thrilled. The guys hit the showers and commence to talking about girls once more. Jim Don says he has sex frequently with Ansley and recounts his first time with her at the beach.

Jim Don asks Ben how many girls he's had sex with, and Ben automatically replies one. The others talk about being with ten or twenty girls, not including the large number of black girls they have been with. Outside, Bull is waiting to take Ben home. He slams Ben's performance, berating him for helping to pick up someone whom Ben knocked over during the game. Bull hates the idea of good sportsmanship. As they pull up at the house, and Ben goes in, Bull tells him that, despite everything, it is the best game he's ever played.



At home, Lillian is thrilled, and Karen is ecstatic that her brother's performance has made her more popular. Bull recounts his own games when he was younger, bragging about his quality and his phenomenal abilities. Before bed, Mary Anne and Ben talk. Mary Anne says she would love the town, the school, the river, the school, the privacy, everything, if she had friends.

Analysis

Bull, despite his very gruff nature, does want his family to be well-tended to and well taken care of. This is exhibited in two very important ways in the preceding chapters. The first is that Bull attempts to set Ben up on a date with Ansley Matthews, a stunningly beautiful girl and daughter of a Marine. The second is that Bull goes to see the local Catholic priest, Father Pinckney, to press him on the idea of a Catholic school for Bull's children to attend. No school is forthcoming, and the date with Ansley doesn't pan out. Bull is unaware of the latter and not exactly disturbed by the former. He enrolls his children in Catechism class, so that they may have a good, moral foundation as human beings, and so that they might know what it means to be good Catholics,

Bull's evolution as a father continues as Ben begins playing basketball. While Bull continually condemns Ben's basketball skills, he does make it to all of Ben's games, and he does manage to throw a few compliments Ben's way. This grudging sort of respect is missed by Ben entirely, who only focuses on the negative aspects of his father. This is easily understood, however, because Bull is such a brash, loud, rude, and bullying character, that his good and finer points are easily overlooked -sometimes willingly (though this is also understandable).

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Bull attempt to be a good father figure to his children? List and describe at least three. Is Bull successful at being a good father through these things? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why are the finer points of Bull's character so easily overlooked, or willingly overlooked, by his children? Are his children justified in doing so? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What are the results of Ben's victory in the basketball game, especially when it comes to his popularity in high school? Does this have a positive or a negative effect on Ben, and on the rest of the family? Explain.

Vocabulary

equanimity, paradox, mirth, diminutive, contiguous, supernumerary, unpretentious, perfunctorily, metatarsal, volubility, prodigal, exuberantly, insouciance, mellifluous, profundo, anthropomorphic, nonchalance, omnivorous, bacchanal, supraorbital, aurignacian,



Chapter 22-28

Summary

Chapter 22 – Ogden Loring, who teaches English, is the best teacher that Ben feels he has ever had. He routinely hides the answers to tests around the rooms, and his students rarely know it. The town thinks he is half-crazy for all his traveling, making seniors read out of literary magazines instead of textbooks, and showing slides of Europe in class. But despite this, he is the most popular teacher at school. At first, Ben doesn't like Loring's teaching methods, but he finally grows to admire and respect them. Even Mr. Loring, in his own way, gives Ben respect.

Chapter 23 – Catechism class eventually comes to the topic of sex. Ben overhears a conversation between Sister Loretta and Father Pinckney, the latter of whom is unsure about teaching about sex. When the time comes, a registered nurse from the naval hospital speaks to the girls, while Sister Loretta handles the boys. Sister Loretta explains that sex is a beautiful thing, and that sex must only be for procreation. She further frowns on masturbation, which she terms self-abuse. The entire population of Heaven, Sister Loretta says, watches such private acts chanting hatred, while the Devil cheers. Ben feels as if he is being singled out and worries about everything. Sister Loretta dismisses the class and wishes them a happy and holy Christmas.

Chapter 24 – On Christmas Eve, the Meecham family prepares for Midnight Mass. The children wonder about the presents under the tree. The family is waiting on Bull, who is in the bathroom. Mary Anne recalls a story where Ben, when younger, had to use the bathroom so bad while waiting for Bull, that Lillian allowed him to go in a milk carton, which Ben then put in the fridge and forgot about. When Bull comes out of the bathroom, he decides he wants cereal. Bull then proceeds to chase Ben all over the yard.

Bull and Lillian are ready for Church. The Church is beautiful and smells wonderful. Ben loves Christmas. He gives himself to the baby Jesus, whom he believes will not throw him into the fire the way that he believes the elder Jesus might. Bull does not sit with his family in Church. He stands to the rear, praying and in thought. He prays for his squadron and his family, the President, the Corps, and so on. The children go straight to bed when they get home.

As the children get into bed, Bull climbs out onto the roof of the house, as he has done for years, pretending to be Santa. He laughs and pretends to come into the house. Lillian tells the children to let their father have his fun. The next morning, the number of gifts around the tree and in the stockings is unbelievable to the children. The four children assault their parents' bed, dragging them up and awake.

Chapter 25 – Sammy comes to pick up Ben the day after Christmas for a surprise. They head out on Charleston Highway. Sammy's mother knows of a woman who has a friend



who has daughters home from college for Christmas that haven't been out on a date, which is where Ben and Sammy come in. They go over strategies for how they may handle the date. They head into Charleston. Sammy, having spoken on the phone to the girls, tells them his name is Rock Troy and that he is bringing along a friend. But at the house, the girls have already gone out with one of their fiancés and his roommate. Ben and Sammy go home, laughing, and hit several bars before getting there.

Chapter 26 – Bull speaks to Lieutenant Colonel Cecil Causey, commander of 234, on the phone on Friday. Bull has served with Causey in the Korean War. Causey's injuries from the war meant that half his face was immobile. Bull and Causey catch up on old times. They agree to get their squadrons together at 1700 hours. Bull tells Latito to call an officers meeting at 1500. Latito also reports to Bull that there is a radar malfunction on his bird, and Bull tells Latito to get things straightened out, because he is going up first thing on Monday. Harter will be working on the radar. He is a tough, pugnacious man, and Bull likes that.

Bull calls Captain Brannon to his office and tells him that a pilot named Beasley from 234 has been bad-mouthing and trash-talking him. Brannon agrees to settle the score. Bull calls home to tell Mary Anne to tell Lillian he will meet them all at the game. In a room adjacent to the Officer's Club, men of the 367th and 234th face each other across the room, drink beer, and taunt one another. Mary Anne calls the bar, pretending to be Lillian, a faux pas which costs Bull \$50 to buy every man in the room a round of drinks. The pilots engage in drinking contests. 367 wins by a single beer. Causey pours a beer over Bull's head, which leads to Bull punching him, which leads to all-out combat between men from each squadron.

Word comes that the MPs are on the way, and the room comes to order. Pilots help each other up, dust each other off, clean up blood, broken glass, and debris. When the MPs arrive, nothing is amiss.

Chapter 27 – Bull has come to enjoy his mornings at Hobie's. He has been accepted as a regular and a friend. It is February. Bull is encouraging everyone to come see his son's game that night. Many of them are already fans of Ben's. The game between Calhoun and Peninsula promises to be a good one. Bull gets home early, and sends Ben to bed to take a nap before the game. He knows that if the game is blown, Ben won't have a chance at a scholarship. Lillian even tells Mary Anne to dress herself up and not to wear baggy, formless clothing. But, Mary Anne thinks she is not pretty. Lillian disagrees. Mary Anne says her mother doesn't love her, or like her, and it makes Lillian cry. Mary Anne believes only her father can understand her, because she is so ugly, and so is he.

Mary Anne goes into the living room where her father is reading the sports section of the newspaper. She says she wants to have a real conversation with him. She wants to ask him some questions. Her father loses interest fast and tells her to leave. Mary Anne continues to taunt him, saying she is pregnant by a black man, but all Bull does is tell her to get lost. As she leaves, Mary Anne tells her father that she can see through his gruff exterior.



Karen comes into Ben's room. She says she is the smartest girl in all of seventh grade. She goes on to say that she has had her period, so she is now a woman. This is according to what her mother has said. Karen says all her friends want Ben's autograph. Karen says she is excited to be a woman, and she leaves Ben's room.

Bull keeps the house as orderly and quiet as possible so Ben can focus on the coming game. Before the game, Bull goes over stats with Ben. Matt announces he can eat a can of peaches, juice and all, in sixty seconds. He does so, and the siblings all applaud him. Ben prays before leaving for the game. He prays that he will do well under the scrutiny of college scouts. Toomer brings by flowers for Lillian before the game. Toomer wishes Ben luck.

The basketball team is very nervous before the game. Philip Turner vomits. Coach Spinks is smoking cigarettes. Bull comes into the locker room, seeking out Ben, who is embarrassed by his presence. Bull, bourbon on his breath, tells Ben that there are four college scouts in the audience that night. Ben can tell Bull is nearly drunk. Bull goes to sit with Lillian, some pilots, and the guys from Hobie's. Ben plays incredibly well, but his efforts are matched by Wyatt Sanders from Peninsula. As the game wears on, the two develop respect for one another, and play harder and harder. One pass from Jim Don goes too far, and Ben nearly topples into the audience, only to be hit behind by Peanut Abbott, which sends Ben into the audience, semi-conscious.

As Ben comes to, and receives two foul shots, Bull screams that Ben had better exact revenge. Ben, dizzy, misses both shots. Bull trails Ben up and down the court, demanding Ben take revenge on Peanut. Ben does so, catching Peanut in midair for a shot, sending him somersaulting onto the floor, where a bone can be heard to break. The teams break into a fight, which is broken up. Ben is ejected from the game, to the approval of his father, who says the scouts will be proud of him. The referees say that Ben will be reported to the high school commission.

Ben, finding out Peanut's arm is broken, feels horrible and sick. Dacus tells Ben he messed up, bad. Dacus tells Ben he should have stood up to his father, and he tells Ben that he will no longer be playing any sports at all ever again. Dacus tells Ben to take off his uniform, That night, Lillian holds Ben's hand in bed.

Chapter 28 – One week later, Sammy comes to pick Ben up. Sammy suggests going to the Shack, but Ben doesn't want to go, because the team will be there, and he feels like Cain around them. Sammy relates that Red has been verbally harassing him. Ben tells Sammy that, at some point, he must stand up to Red. Sammy has brought along a shotgun to shoot off beside the cars of couples making out. Sammy also wants to sleep with a large number of girls at school. Sammy says that rumor has it that Emma Lee Givens likes him.

They come across a lone car, but it is the police car of Junior Palmer, a deputy sheriff. Sammy wants to find out who Junior is with because Junior is married and has two kids. Sammy discovers the woman Junior is with is a black woman, and he wants to put this information to good use. He thinks that it is the Will of God to do so. Sammy wants to



make some money from the news. Ben doesn't like the idea. Sammy decides a note will suffice: fifty dollars in exchange for silence. Ben agrees to be Sammy's partner in crime for twenty-five dollars.

Analysis

As Ben's basketball career in school continues, college scouts become interested in his play. Bull, wants his son to be a Marine. But, he also wants to make sure a scholarship is possible. So, he keeps the house quiet and on lock down while Ben rests up for the coming game. Bull is determined that Ben should be focused on the coming game and that nothing will stop Ben from being prepared. Bull's concern as a father is superseded by his rough-and-tumble nature, as he goads Ben into going after Peanut for his foul. Sportsmanship goes out the window as Ben caves into the demands of his drunken father, and he breaks Peanut's arm. Ben is kicked off the team, and he's forbidden from playing any and all sports for the rest of the year. Ben knows he deserves it. He is not only disgusted by what he has done, but by the fact that he has caved in to his father.

It is ironic that Bull's rage, abrasiveness, and drunkenness have managed to steal away Ben's only opportunity for a shot at a sports scholarship. While Ben can certainly be faulted for caving in to his father, Ben is also the victim of an involuntary action -to an extent. The reader knows what Bull is like, and Ben's fear of Bull catapulted him into the act of aggression against Peanut, not malice. Nevertheless, the event is seminal, and has deleterious consequences for Ben's future academic career.

Discussion Question 1

When Mary Anne tells Bull that she can see through him and that she really knows him, what does she mean? Why does she say it?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe that Bull takes such an active interest in Ben's basketball career, to the point of keeping his entire family at bay for Ben? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Can Ben be faulted for attacking Peanut Abbott? Or, is the fault that of Bull's? Or, can what happened be blamed on both father and son? Why?

Vocabulary

frivolous, ethereal, rubicund, ruminant, arcane, admonition, concupiscent, avaricious, morose, sepulchral, serenity



Chapter 29-34

Summary

Chapter 29 – Sammy and Ben go to the water tower on Saint Catherine’s Island, where they climb to the top for their hush money. As they climb, Sammy says his date the previous evening with Emma Lee went very well. At the top, Red Pettus is there to meet them, while a police car arrives below them. Sammy and Ben are taken to the county jail at Paradise.

Junior is irate. The only three people who know about the particulars of the incident are Ben, Sammy, and himself. Sammy’s father is well-known in town, so Junior lets Sammy go under the condition that he’s silent about everything. Sammy takes all responsibility, but Junior locks Ben up anyways, telling Ben that he’ll think of a reason for locking him up. A short time later, Bull shows up. He punches and backhands Ben through the bars. Junior has told Bull that Ben has been drinking and has hit him. Bull is enraged and leaves. Ben tells Junior that he will be sorry, but Junior says some way or another, Ben will have to accept the story that he was driving while drunk and took a swing at Junior.

Ben protests. Suddenly, Dacus arrives. Dacus knows everything, and Junior knows Sammy has come to him. Dacus tells Junior that he was a pussy football player, and he will break both of his arms. Junior hides behind his badge, telling Dacus not to mess with the law. Dacus rolls his sleeves up, telling Junior he has boxing hands and to let Ben go. He says he will straighten things out with Bull, telling him it was a case of mistaken identity. Dacus tells Junior, as he releases Ben, that if he ever hears Junior talk to one of his students again like he spoke to Ben, he will pummel Junior. Junior tells Dacus never to come back to the jail or to come near him.

Ben thanks Dacus continuously as they walk away from the jailhouse. Dacus says that old coaches exercise tremendous power over their former athletes, even long after the fact. Ben says he plays basketball for a scholarship, but Dacus believes Ben plays because he loves his father. Ben says he hates his father. Dacus says he’s seen hundreds of Marine fathers who live their lives through their children, trying to avert mistakes and being trained not to expect anything substandard. They love their families by waging war on them. Dacus brings Ben home for the night so his wife can tend to Ben. Dacus even goes so far as to hug Ben, and Ben is amazed by the respect. Dacus will straighten everything out in the morning.

Chapter 30 – Spring rolls around, and Ben, Mary Anne, Emma Lee, and Sammy sit outside drinking iced tea with mint leaves. Ben and Mary Anne joke about her being a bad sister. They laugh about her becoming a famous, suicidal writer one day. Sammy and Emma invite them to the movies, but Mary Anne declines, as does Sammy. After the movie, Sammy brings Emma Lee to an isolated spot to make out. A black man comes across them, beats up Sammy, and sends him running. Then, he proceeds to



rape Emma. She is found walking along the beach, half her clothes on, and her face severely beaten and bruised.

Chapter 31 – News of the rape is all over town the next morning. A manhunt is on. Half the regulars at Hobie's blame Sammy for leaving Emma to the mercy of the black man. White men drive all over, staring down black men and looking for the rapist. Sammy is sent away to New York. Ben goes to see Toomer, who believes that catching the black man responsible will be the best thing possible. Toomer later goes to set up shop in front of Fogle's, where Red harasses him. Toomer sells Fogle a bushel of oysters, while Red breaks his jars of honey all over the sidewalk. Red follows Toomer down the street, harassing him. Finally, Toomer has had enough. He turns around and beats up Red. White men come rushing out and actually laugh at Red. Ed Mills tells Red that he makes him sick. Red says he'll see Toomer later that night.

Red, his brother, and two cousins come for Toomer just as the sun is setting. Toomer has brought all his dogs into the bus. Red's brother tells Red that all they're supposed to do is scare Toomer, but Red wants to do more than that. They are drunk and have shotguns. Red is armed with a .38. Toomer upends two beehives, and the bees are on the boys in an instant. Three of them run, but Red jumps into the river. When he comes out, he removes the stingers, picks up his .38, and heads toward Toomer.

Later that night, Arrabelle calls Lillian, hysterical. She is worried the Pettus boys will do something to Toomer, so she asks that Ben go and get Toomer. Ben calls Bull to ask to borrow the car, but Bull says no. Mary Anne says she will go if Ben is too scared, but Ben won't let her go, so he is forced to go instead. Bull calls after Ben leaves in the station wagon, but Mary Anne does her best to cover for Ben, saying he is in the bathroom. Bull knows the truth. He has Virgil come cover for him for an hour, while he drives out to Toomer's.

At Toomer's, Red tells Toomer he humiliated him, and he has to pay for it because Red is a white man. Toomer tells Red to get out, but Red won't. Red goes to shoot Gray, the dog, just as Toomer goes to grab the dog. The bullet hits Toomer in the stomach. Red is horrified by what has happened, and he runs. Toomer lets the dogs out after him. Red is torn to pieces.

Ben arrives, rolls down his window to see what has happened, and Gray lunges for Ben. Ben fights Gray off, but not before his arm is bitten. Ben finds Toomer by his bus, clutching his stomach. Ben struggles to pull Toomer into the car, covers Toomer with his flight jacket, and drives toward the hospital. Bull confronts Ben's car, and backhands Ben for disobeying him. Bull sees Toomer, and both discover that Toomer has passed on. Bull tells Ben to bring Toomer to the hospital, while he goes and calls the sheriff and Arrabelle.

Chapter 32 – Mess Night comes around. It is a formal dinner for the Marines, and is a rigid celebration and genuflection on the Marines. There would be much drinking. Wives are not allowed to attend this particular occasion. Lillian tells Ben that he may have to go and pick his father up from the station if he is unable to drive. The ceremony that



begins the night is refined and orderly, as is dinner. After dinner come toasts, and cigars. Bull then introduces guests of honor. Lieutenant Colonel William Blitcher and Apache Bill. Bull tells the story of how he got his nickname. Bull was on leave in Hawaii when he and another man spotted a bunch of girls on the beach. Bull declared that they would go down there like bulls, real slow, and have sex with all of them. The men cheer.

Bull then finishes formal ceremonies for the evening and asks the Marines to join him at the bar, signaling the beginning of hard drinking. Bull gets home at four in the morning. Lillian is waiting up for him. Bull begins singing, which the children recognize as a prelude to a beating for their mother. One by one, the children run down. Ben flies downstairs last, to find his father pinning his mother against the wall by the throat. Ben charges into his father's stomach, knocking him away from Lillian, and into the fridge. Bull turns on Ben as the family attempts to stop him unsuccessfully. Lillian is backhanded, and her bottom lip is busted open. Mary Anne is smacked and knocked away, and her glasses shatter on the floor. Matt is smacked away and knocked onto the floor. Bull slams Ben's head into the wall three times, and the family is on Bull again. Bull suddenly stops and leaves the house. Mary Anne calls out, asking who is the greatest jerk of all. The family answers, "The Great Santini." They begin laughing in their misery.

As Ben gets back into bed, Lillian tells Ben to go look for Bull, but Ben doesn't want to. But, at Lillian's insistence, Ben gets dressed and heads out to find his father. He finds his father lying in the middle of the Lawn, his uniform bloodied and damp from the swimming pool at the Club. He is nearly passed out, drunk, lying in his own vomit, and with a bottle of Tanqueray nearby. Ben sees that his father is helpless. He wants nothing more than to kick his father's face in. But, he resists. Bull says that he is sick. Ben helps Bull struggle to his feet, and all of the rage he has felt for his father is gone. He actually tells his father he loves him. Bull pulls away and tries to run, but he is too drunk. He falls again and again, ultimately getting sick. Ben continues telling Bull that he loves him. When Bull finishes, Ben helps him back to the house.

Chapter 33 – As April draws to a close, summer is in the air. Lillian explains to her children that they will be in Ravenel for at least one more year. Ben announces that since he and his sister don't have dates to the prom, they should go together. Mary Anne doesn't want to. Lillian offers to teach them to dance, saying she and her father are the best dancers in the entire Corps. Ben says anyone who laughs at them at the prom, he'll take care of. Bull gets home, learns of the plan, and then he and Lillian dance around the back porch. The kids are surprised to see that he dances so well. Bull further contends that Mary Anne will have her own dress, rather than having to borrow one. The next day, he takes her to Sarah Poston's Dress Shop to buy a formal gown.

On the night of the prom, Bull gives Ben his approval on his appearance. While Mary Anne finishes getting ready, Ben and Lillian sit outside and watch the river. Ben wonders if he is Southern. Lillian says that he is. Ben doesn't feel Southern because he has no roots. Lillian explains that is why they stay with their grandmother in Georgia whenever Bull goes away, so Ben and his family can feel connected to some part of the land. They can call that land home. Mary Anne comes down the stairs. She looks beautiful. Even



Bull is impressed. Mary Anne is not wearing her glasses, so she doesn't look ugly. Lillian takes pictures of her children.

Ben and Mary Anne drive at the air station. As they drive, they talk about their parents. Mary Anne would take Bull over Lillian, while Ben would take Lillian over Bull. Ben and Mary Anne get dinner at the Officers' Club. At their table, a dozen red roses from Bull arrive for Mary Anne. Mary Anne is a little taken aback, but plays it off, calling Bull silly. Mary Anne is also unhappy that Ben has taken her to the prom because she gets tired of him always trying to do good. Mary Anne says that, sometimes, being overly-kind can be more painful than their father hitting them. Ben realizes that he has come to be afraid of many things, but suffering is not one of them. Mary Anne is afraid of little, but suffers a lot. At the prom, Mary Anne dances with Philip Turner, as well as Ben. Ben dances with Ansley because Jim Don leaves to go to the parking lot to drink. Mary Anne also dances with Dacus and Loring.

Chapter 34 – Bull does a night flight to satisfy the requirement of four hours night flying each month. He flies at 32,000 feet, from Ravenel to Key West and back, planning to arrive in Ravenel at 0520. Ben and Mary Anne sleep in hammocks in the upper veranda porch that night. Ben gets heavier blankets for himself and Mary Anne, for the May air is surprisingly chilly. Over Brunswick, Georgia, Bull contacts Atlanta, and then Ravenel, which clears him for approach. He learns that the weather is rainy and foggy. As he turns to sea, his plane's fire warning light comes on. The engine shudders and Bull goes onto the emergency frequency. All radar screens will see he is in distress. Bull's engine explodes, and he announces on the radio that he will attempt to level out before bailing. Bull's blip goes off the radar screen, and emergency helicopters are dispatched.

Just before seven in the morning, Joe Varney brings the news of the disaster, along with Chaplain Poindexter. Meanwhile, the town rallies to help the military with the search effort for the downed plane and Bull. Dacus picks up Ben to go looking for Bull. They are given the task of searching Ashley Creek. They come across Ed Mills, who gives them the news that Bull has been found. He is dead.

Lillian spends much of the day calling relatives. She then tells the children that they must behave honorably at the funeral. She tells them that they will honor their father by not crying in public. Relatives, friends, and Marines fly in from all over. Lillian stays up through the night besides Bull's coffin, saying the rosary. Ben joins her. He asks her how they met, and Lillian explains that they met at a dance. She thought he was a barbarian at first. Then, she fell for him because he was charming and persistent. Ben explains that he has hated Bull for most of his life, and he was afraid of him. But, now that his father is dead, Ben doesn't know what to feel. Ben is worried that he has caused his father's death by paying for it, but Lillian said that is not the case. God wanted Bull with Him.

At the funeral, the children do not cry. The town turns out for the funeral. Virgil gives a eulogy for Bull. He says that Bull is lucky to have died in his plane. At the graveyard, planes fly overhead, less one for their formation, in symbolic honor of Bull.



Ben readies his family for the trip to Atlanta at three in the morning, in honor of his father. They have to make good time because Lillian has an interview for a job in Atlanta the following day. Ben drives. Lillian prays the rosary for a safe trip. As they go past the cemetery where Bull is buried, none of them look in that direction. As Ben drives, he thinks about God and what God must be like. He imagines that God would be sweet and bright and alive, but that he would also hate God for his life. Ben knows, as he drives, that he cannot hate God and that he cannot hate his father, Wilbur "Bull" Meacham, the Great Santini.

Analysis

With the arrival of spring, and with the summer upon them, the Meechams go through their darkest and lightest moments as a family. The darkest moments come on the night of the Marine Mess night, when Bull drunkenly attacks his family, stumbles out of the house, and then must rely on his son -whom he has just beaten up -to get him back to the house. The basketball incident now pales in comparison. If Bull has any positive attributes, they are absolutely overshadowed by his drunken abandon. But, in the midst of such hatred and horror, Ben discovers that he loves his father, the confession of which sends Bull over the edge, causing him to throw up. What is interesting is that, perhaps it is not the alcohol that sends Bull into such a state -but the realization of what he has done, and the horror that, despite his brutal nature, his son still loves him. Guilt, perhaps, takes a hold of Bull.

The lightest moments the Meecham family encounters occur shortly before Bull's death. With the prom around the corner, the Meecham children discover that their gruff father knows how to dance -and dance well. When Lillian recommends Mary Anne borrow a dress for the prom, Bull declares that she shall have her own, new dress. For the first time in the novel, Bull says yes to the desires of one of his children, whereas his wife says no. When Ben is dressed for the prom, Bull gives Ben his approval, without any condescending remarks attached. The biggest surprise comes from Bull at the Officers' Club, where he has a dozen red roses delivered to Mary Anne. Though Mary Anne is pleased, she doesn't let it show. It is unclear whether Bull is making up for his past actions or whether he realizes he truly does love his children and needs to show it in a greater way. These are the last real memories the children have of Bull before his death.

Discussion Question 1

What realizations dawn on Ben about the upbringing of both himself and his sister in the Meecham household? Which child is more like which parent? Why does Ben feel sorry for Mary Anne because of this?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the brightest moment of Bull's fatherhood before his death. How does Bull handle his two eldest children attending prom? Why do you believe he acts as he does?



Is it out of love? Remorse? Obligation? Guilt? Or, a combination of two or more of these things? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Bull get sick when Ben tells him he loves him the night of the family fight in the kitchen? Is it guilt and remorse, or simply the alcohol? Explain your response.

Vocabulary

efficacious, abstemiousness, labyrinth, contrapuntal, dissonance, vulgarity, impromptu, cuglion, subphylum, enervating



Characters

Bull Meecham

Wilbur "Bull" Meecham, the Great Santini, is both the protagonist and the main antagonist in the novel "The Great Santini" by Pat Conroy. In his early forties, Bull is a bear of a man and a native of Chicago. Brash and loud, he has a penchant for drinking. He is a crack Marine fighter pilot and colonel. He is relentless, brutish, and a bully. He treats his family as if they were a Marine unit, always holding them up to a higher standard. He is verbally and physically abusive; yet, Lillian, his wife, refuses to leave him because she sees some good in him. Bull's children, Ben, Matt, Mary Anne, and Karen, disagree. They see their father mainly as someone to be hated and feared, or both, depending on the child.

Bull moves his family to South Carolina when he comes there to command Squadron 367 at Ravenel Air Station. Over the course of the year, Bull slips into physical abuse twice and becomes helplessly drunk once. Yet, he does all he can to be a good father, seeking to give his kids a good Catholic education by having them attend Catechism class and by seeing to Ben's basketball talents. Bull's greatest shining moment comes when Ben and Mary Anne attend the prom. He makes sure Mary Anne has a new dress to wear and that she has a dozen red roses as well. He also compliments Ben without condescension. A short while after the prom, Bull is fulfilling routine night hours when his plane's engine catches fire and explodes, killing him in the process.

Ben Meecham

Ben Santini, who turns eighteen in the novel, is the novel's main protagonist. Ben is the oldest child of Bull and Lillian Meecham. Bull has determined that his son's future, whatever it may be, will consist of at least four years in the Marines after high school graduation. Ben thinks that he would prefer college over the Marines, though he is not opposed to joining the Marines, either. Ben is very kindhearted and loves his family deeply, though he hates his father for most of his life. Ben is the older brother of Mary Anne, Matt, and Karen, whom he watches over and protects.

Ben butts heads with his father again and again throughout the novel. Ben can never live up to his father's expectations. Most of his father's compliments, when they do occur, coincide with condescension and patronization. Ben also suffers physical abuse at the hands of Bull, and Ben hits back sometimes, though he always comes up short. He believes his mother should leave Bull, but, eventually, he comes around to the understanding that, despite his father's hideous nature, his father does have some good qualities. He loves his father in the end. Ben even tells his father he loves him the night of the worst physical abuse, which causes a drunken Bull to get sick to his stomach.



When Bull dies on a routine flight, Ben is worried that his hatred of his father, and his prayers that his father would be killed somehow, are to blame, but Lillian tells Ben that this is not the case, that God was ready to call Bull home. With Bull's death, Ben becomes the man of the family, and drives his family back to their grandmother's home in Atlanta, honoring his father by moving the family out at three in the morning.

Lillian Meecham

Lillian Meecham is the wife of Bull Meecham and the mother of Ben, Mary Anne, Matt, and Karen. At thirty-seven, she is still stunningly beautiful and youthful. She is unfailingly patient and kind, very much a Southern lady, having accepted Bulls' hand in marriage after World War II. Lillian wants her daughters to grow up as proper ladies, while her sons grow up as proper gentlemen. For this and other reasons, she butts heads with her husband, doing her best to keep him civil and civilized. She disagrees with Bull that their sons should be rough-and-tumble above all else and that their daughters should only be pieces of tail. Lillian has endured years of physical and emotional abuse from Bull because she loves him. Also, she sees that there is some good in him.

Lillian also serves as the peacemaker in the family, protecting her children from their father's worst ways and preventing her children from hating their father without end. Lillian is truly the glue that holds the Meecham family together. She is a wonderful woman and a wonderful mother, and her children love her very much for this. Lillian is heartbroken by the death of her husband, but she knows that life must continue on. She decides to move the family back to Georgia, where her mother lives.

Mary Anne Meecham

Mary Anne Meecham is the second eldest child of Bull and Lillian Meecham. She is in eleventh grade. She is the sister of Ben, Matt, and Karen. She is pretty, but she doesn't think so because she wears glasses. She dresses shabbily and involves herself with reading, knowledge, and culture, wanting to be everything that her father is not. She suffers tremendous emotional distress and realizes she has more in common with her father than she previously considered. Mary Anne is not popular and has difficulty making friends. She becomes the date of her brother to prom and receives a brand new dress from her father, as well as a dozen red roses from him.

Matt Meecham

Matt Meecham is the son of Bull and Lillian Meecham. He is the brother of Ben, Mary Anne, and Karen. Matt is youthful and kind, and he is unswervingly loyal to his mother and siblings. When Bull goes after Ben, Matt has no fear in leaping to Ben's defense.



Karen Meecham

Karen Meecham is the daughter of Bull and Lillian Meecham. She is sweet, friendly, and kind. She makes friends quickly, and she laments having to always leave them behind. Karen is unfailingly loyal to her mother and siblings. She doesn't hesitate to come to their defense against Bull, despite receiving physical abuse from bull in return.

Arrabelle Smalls

Arrabelle Smalls is a local black woman and widow of Moultrie Smalls. She is the mother of Toomer Smalls. Arrabelle is a sweet, kind, strong, and feisty woman who is hired by the Meechams to help tend house. She becomes good friends with Lillian, after being recommended to Lillian for the job by the neighbor, Earline Grantham.

Toomer Smalls

The son of Moultrie and Arrabelle Smalls, Toomer lives alone in an old school bus with a pack of dogs. He grows and sells flower, honey, and oysters. He is very kind and patient. He befriends Ben quickly. Toomer, having been injured in the crankshaft of a shrimping boat, walks with a limp stutters. When local bully Red Pettus harasses Toomer one time too many, Toomer knocks him over, to the delight of the white people in town, who laugh at Red. Red later shows up at Toomer's intending to scare Toomer, but he accidentally shoots and kills Toomer while trying to kill one of Toomer's dogs.

Sammy Wertzberger

Sammy Wertzberger is a local kid who befriends Ben and Mary Anne after they intervene to save him from being beaten up by Red. Sammy and Ben become fast friends. When Sammy is out on a date one night, he is beaten and assaulted by a black man, while his date is raped by the same man. Sammy then moves to New York, as half the town blames him for not defending the girl from the rapist.

Red Pettus

An upriver boy, Red Pettus comes from the meanest and nastiest family around. He constantly bullies and harasses others, including Sammy and Toomer. Red is put in his place by Ben and by Toomer. Embarrassed by the latter, Red goes out to scare Toomer at Toomer's place. He intends on shooting one of Toomer's dogs. As Toomer attempts to save the dog, Red accidentally shoots Toomer. Toomer sets the dogs on Red. Red is mauled to death by the dogs.



Symbols and Symbolism

F-8 Jet

F-8 Jets are Marine Corps fighter planes that are flown by Bull and members of Squadron 367. They are fast, powerful machines. While Bull loves flying, he also fears it. Bull is killed when his F-8's engine catches fire and explodes.

.38 Handgun

A .38 handgun is what Red Pettus wields when he attempts to scare Toomer after being humiliated by Toomer in town. Unfortunately, Red accidentally mortally wounds Toomer with the .38 instead.

Flight Jacket

Bull's first flight jacket is given to Ben on his eighteenth birthday as a symbol of manhood and as preparation for Ben's career in the Marines. It is one of the proudest days of Bull's life, and he is absolutely thrilled to pass the jacket along to Ben. Ben wears the jacket with pride at home. He also wears it when he drives out to check on Toomer following the incident with Red. Ben ultimately uses it to cover up Toomer as he dies in the car on the way to the hospital.

Prom Dress

A prom dress is what Bull buys for Mary Anne when she consents to going to the prom with her brother. Bull is determined that his daughter be well-dressed and resplendent for the evening.

A Dozen Red Roses

A dozen red roses are given to Mary Anne as a gift by Bull for prom night. He has them delivered to her while she and Ben are at the Officers' Club, with a note telling her to have a good time. Mary Anne is thrilled with this, but she hides her elation from Ben.



Settings

Ravenel, South Carolina

Ravenel, South Carolina, is the main setting of the novel "The Great Santini" by Pat Conroy. Ravenel is one of a cluster of small towns situated on several islands near Ravenel Air Station. It is an area that is mostly working and middle class, and is populated by white and black residents alike. Ravenel is where the Meecham family relocates so Bull can command Squadron 367. The town grows quickly on the Meecham family, and they feel as if they finally have found something of a home for once. Even Mary Anne admits to the fact that, if she had friends, she would love the town.

Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta, Georgia is the hometown of Lillian Meecham. Her mother still lives there. All of Meecham children were born there. When Bull dies, the family decides to put down roots in Atlanta, for good.

Chicago, Illinois

Chicago, Illinois, is the birthplace and hometown of Bull Meecham. No city on earth can compare to it, and Bull hates being stationed in the South after having grown up in the North.

Ravenel Air Station

Ravenel Air Station is a Marine air base, where several squadrons of fighters, including the 367th, are located. It is where Bull is assigned to command 367. Bull works there on a daily basis. Ravenel Air Station is also the location of the Officers' Club.

Officers' Club

Located at Ravenel Air Station, the Officers' Club is where Marines go to have drinks, eat dinner, and bring their dates. Families of officers are also permitted to attend the club. It is where Ben has his first drink and where Bull gets drunk. It is also where Ben and Mary Anne have dinner before prom.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is a dominant and overarching theme in the novel "The Great Santini" by Pat Conroy. Family involves mutual love, unconditional loyalty, emotional and physical support, and compassion between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but behave in the traditional sense and structure of family. Despite the tyranny of Bull Meecham, the Meecham family is still a family. They conform to the thematic elements of family throughout the novel.

In terms of mutual and unconditional love, this is perhaps the most difficult case to make for the Meechams. Love clearly exists between husband and wife and between mother and children, but not so much between father and children. Animosity is strong between them, especially between Bull and Ben. Bull's bullying nature, his physical and emotional abuse, and his anger all hide the idea that he could possibly love his children. But, small bits and pieces of Bull's love for his children, especially Ben, come out here and there. When Ben is born, Bull parades Ben around the fields to show off to his comrades. When Ben turns eighteen, he receives his father's first flight jacket as a gift. This is a tremendous honor. Despite Bull's brutish ways, he supports his son's love of basketball, making all of the games and getting others to attend as well. Ben comes to realize that he does love his father, the night his father savagely beats him. Bull goes against the wishes of his wife to buy Mary Anne a new prom dress and to give her a dozen red roses for the night. Bull does love his children, but his expression of that love is sorely lacking overall.

In terms of emotional support, Lillian and her children have that covered between one another, taking comfort and finding strength in each other against Bull from time to time. Bull's emotional and physical support come to the fore when his family is threatened by the Pettuses, and he rushes to the defense of Ben. This physical support is also manifested when the entire family must defend Ben against Bull. Despite these seeming incongruities, the Meechams are a family, despite the worst of Bull.

The Military Lifestyle

The military lifestyle is a strong and resounding theme throughout Pat Conroy's novel, "The Great Santini". The military lifestyle consists of the lives that dependents, the family of a military service member, must contend with due to that military member's service. In this case, it is the Meecham family as the dependents of Bull Meecham. Bull's service in the Marines takes him around the world and around the country, and the family must constantly pick up and move as this occurs.

The Meechams must continually deal with the fact that their father buys into the Marine Corps mythology of hard drinking, swearing, and brashness. The family is run like a



military unit, much to the chagrin and unhappiness of the children. Bull runs his family with such military authority that his sons are required to have haircuts once a week. Ben, especially, hates this.

Karen has to contend with the fact that constant moves mean constantly making and leaving behind new friends. Ben and Mary Anne hate always having to begin new schools. It seems as soon as they get used to one place or another, they are forced to move again. Ben, especially, feels a sort of listlessness, of not belonging to any place or anywhere in the world. He feels homeless because he is so transient because of his father. The family gets no say in where they go or what they do; everything is up to the Pentagon. The children hate the Marine Corps because of this.

Manhood

Manhood is a major, and underlying theme throughout the course of the novel, "The Great Santini" by Pat Conroy. Manhood consists of acceptable and admirable behavior and conduct as a member of the male species. It touches upon everything from manners to culture to emotion to faith to physical prowess -all in the idea of "what it means to be a man." All subjects are addressed in the novel, especially with respect to Bull and Ben.

Bull and Ben are both Roman Catholic, and both believe in God. They are both faithful. Both of them are physically tough enough to defend loved ones in trouble, as well as to play sports. But here, the definitions of manhood between Bull and Ben splinter and break off. Whereas Bull believes real manhood consists of being brutal, relentless, and gruff, Ben prefers to be quiet and to speak softly while carrying a big stick. Bull believes that true manhood has nothing to do with novels or culture. Ben considers being a writer, and he reads the novels that his mother recommends to him, such as "Anna Karenina." Whereas Ben would prefer to help a turtle cross the road, Bull would prefer to run over them. While Bull has few, if any saving social graces (the ability to dance being one), Ben has multiple saving social graces, which set him in clear contrast to his father. Ben does not raise a hand against a woman, but Bull does.

Both Ben and Bull can claim the mantle of true manhood, that each, and not the other, knows what it means to be a real man. Arguments can be made for both, but it is up to the reader to decide which of the two is more of a man than the other.

Styles

Point of View

Pat Conroy tell his novel "The Great Santini" from the point of view of the third-person omniscient narrator. This is done for two specific reasons. The first is that the story tells about a relationship between a distinctly different duo of father and son, and each character has to have his story told fully. The first-person narrative mode would not allow this. Also, due to the wide range of events in the story, an omniscient voice is needed. Telling the story from third person keeps the reader informed and up to speed on events going on in the town, in the lives of its citizens, and in each of the Meechams.

Language and Meaning

Pat Conroy tell his novel "The Great Santini" in language that is simple and straightforward, but also reflective. The novel is very complex. It involves innumerable events, situations, and emotions. Simple, straightforward language easily progresses the plot of the novel and effectively communicates the feelings and thoughts of the characters involved. The language takes on a reflective tone because the novel is semi-autobiographical. It is based Pat Conroy's upbringing with his own military father.

Structure

Pat Conroy divides his novel "The Great Santini" into thirty-four linear and chronological chapters. This is done for at least two reasons. The first is that the uncomplicated structure of the novel allows the reader to focus on the plot and the characters in the novel. The second is that, because of the wide range of events and the entire year that the novel covers, the linear and chronological structure allows for jumps throughout the year, from one day to the next, or one month to the next. Though time is skipped in some places, the reader does not feel it because of the linear and chronological structure.



Quotes

During the whole flight down, Bull allowed his fantasies to roam the country of his eyes. He needed a war. He need it badly.

-- Narrator (Chapter 18 paragraph p. 230)

Importance: Here, the narrator speaks of the transfer of 367 to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and to the very existence of Bull Meecham. Bull is a fighter pilot, through and through. His life is the military. His life is war. Without such, he couldn't exist. Peacetime military service is barely enough to keep Bull going. He wants a war to help complete his existence, his purpose on earth.

Bull himself was obsessed by a carefully concealed fear that he would die in a plane, and he knew that death in flight could assume many shapes, a light on a control panel, a subtle change in an engine's pitch, a frozen control, a migratory bird.

-- Narrator (Chapter 26 paragraph p. 334)

Importance: In a small window into the inner workings of Bull Meecham, the narrator reveals that Bull has a fear of being killed while up in the air, by malfunction of his bird, or by a migratory bird. A thousand things can go wrong, and despite making himself out to be fearless, Bull can be fearful -and very much human because of it.

I'm leaving, Dad. But I want you to know that I can see through your gruffness... I can see right through it. And I want you to know that I understand. Just me. Just me.

-- Mary Anne Meecham (Chapter 23 paragraph p. 353)

Importance: While getting ready for Ben's game, Mary Anne Meecham pesters her father while he is reading the paper, and he tells her to get lost. But Mary Anne tells her father that she can see through his gruff exterior because she has a lot in common with him. Neither one of them is particularly attractive, and both of them are more combative than peaceful. Additionally, both of them suffer for various reasons. Mary Anne suffers for her upbringing, and Bull suffers for his existence and purpose in life.

Sports show you your limits. Sports teach humility. Sooner or later the athlete becomes humble no matter how good he is. But he plays until he has reached as high as he can.

-- Mr. Dacus (Chapter 29 paragraph p. 387)

Importance: When Mr. Dacus frees Ben from jail, he and Ben discuss the future and sports. While Dacus recounts his own past as a sportsman -a boxer, specifically- his quote is perfectly applied to Bull, who is always searching to be the best, but will one day be humbled for one reason or another. In Bull's case, he will fly until he is killed.

Then they were laughing, the species of laughter that often comes as a bridesmaid of violence. It comes for no reason or from a geography of the spirit that is an untracked and foreign land.

-- Narrator (Chapter 32 paragraph p. 429)



Importance: Here, the narrator recounts the aftermath of one of Bull's physical assaults on his family. His family, bruised and bleeding in Bull's wake, have only each other to find comfort in. They all begin laughing because it is all they have. When one hits rock bottom, there is nowhere else to go, but up.

The Meechams were middle class migrants, and all of them were a part of a profession whose most severe punishment was rootlessness and whose sweetest gift was a freedom granted by highways and a vision of America where nothing was permanent and everything was possible.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph p. 25)

Importance: In this quote, the narrator sums up the existence of the Meecham family as a military family, and what they, and countless other families must endure on a yearly basis. That includes a tough-as-nails father and being moved around from place to place without choosing. However, it also gives them the ability to see much of the country, in ways that many others never will. While the people of Ravenel may never leave their town, the Meechams may never stay in a town. It is a blessing and a curse.

Colonel Meecham chewed gum belligerently, and Ben watched the white lines until he was mesmerized by their repetitiveness. Both of them wanted to speak but could find no common ground to bridge the abyss that separated them as father and son.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph p. 36)

Importance: In this quote the relationship between father and son thus far is summed up. They have little, if anything in common, and they get along only to keep the peace. They do not seem to share a real father and son relationship. The only true thing that seems to unite them besides a desire for peace is a great divide.

A family without ritual and order was a rootless tribe subject to boredom and anarchy, lowered heads, pouting mouths, and sorrowing memories of friends left behind.

-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph p. 83)

Importance: The narrator is explaining Bull Meecham's take on family. A family is like a military unit. It needs order and discipline to excel. It also needs order and discipline to focus on the present and not to dwell on the past. All that matters to Bull is the present.

Why do I get hit when some jerk colonel gets on Dad's back?

-- Ben Meecham (Chapter 11 paragraph p. 136)

Importance: Following the basketball incident, Ben complains to his mother that he is tired of Bull beating both her and him, as well as the other children. Lillian explains that Bull's job is a high-pressure job, and Ben thinks it is unfair that the family must suffer for the father's work.

The command had passed to him. Yet now that the command was his, the fulfillment of an old and troubled dream, he suffered a hollowness of spirit that had the unmistakable



dimension of anticlimax.

-- Narrator (Chapter 12 paragraph p. 142)

Importance: Here, the narrator speaks about the moment that Bull officially becomes commander of Squadron 367, after a long and drawn-out struggle for such a command. Bull, however, feels as if it is without fare or glory, as if the struggle was worth more than the achievement. Bull will have to follow other avenues for new conquests, such as cracking down on his family and befriending the locals.