

The Ghost Road Study Guide

The Ghost Road by Pat Barker

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Plot Summary

The Ghost Road is a story of war and struggle, both internally and externally. Set against the backdrop of World War I, readers follow the lives of Billy Prior and Dr. Charles Rivers. While Billy may be the first character introduced, it is Dr. Rivers who is truly the protagonist.

Billy Prior meets Dr. Rivers when he is a mental patient at Craiglockhart War Hospital, following his third tour of duty in the Royal Army. Their friendship continues after he's discharged through ongoing outpatient treatment. This treatment is more for Billy to salve his emotional wounds rather than any specific mental problem he's experiencing.

It's unclear why Billy wants to return to the Front for a fourth time, other than the fact that he doesn't know what else to do with his life. Fighting is all he knows. His inner struggle comes from his inability to determine who he is as a man. He continually cheats on his fiancée with both men and women. It is his fourth trip to war that causes his ultimate demise, as he is finally killed in battle.

Dr. Rivers' struggles daily with his own demons. His most significant problem is a perceived lack of effectiveness. Readers learn who he is through flashbacks of his mission trip to Eddystone, a Melanesian island. There, he compiles research on the villagers and plans to write a significant treatise, but his own ghost haunts him: the treatise is never completed or published.

The title of the book speaks to the ghosts, both seen and unseen, in all of us.



Part 1 Chapter 1

Part 1 Chapter 1 Summary

Billy Prior waits for the rest of his life to start. He walks along a seawall in Bradford, watching all of the women and children play in the sand and surf. Munitions workers, with their yellow skin, pass by him on the boardwalk. Billy Prior kills time, waiting for his next medical exam to see if he can be sent back to France to fight for England's war effort. Although he's offered the opportunity, he doesn't want to stay in England or be a munitions worker. He wants to fight, for lack of anything better to do.

As Billy arrives to wait for his medical exam, he runs into a man named Owen with whom he spent some time in the mental ward of a war hospital called Craiglockhart. When finally examined by Dr. Mather, Billy plays down his asthma, so that he will be assured of going back.

Once in front of the military board, an officer named Mitchell questions Billy about his motives and whether he has problems with asthma. In fact, Mitchell never questions him about shellshock, the very thing that got him sent back to England from France. Instead, the doctor focuses on Billy's asthma and the two attacks he suffered at Craiglockhart.

Part 1 Chapter 1 Analysis

In the first chapter of *The Ghost Road*, readers meet Billy Prior, as he is awaiting his military medical exam. If he passes, he'll be sent back to France to fight in World War I. While only a brief sketch of Billy Prior is seen in this first chapter, readers feel the tension of someone badly wanting to return to fight, but without an obvious reason. Tension is also introduced in the form of an intense internal struggle within Billy. First, his sexuality is discussed. Next, Billy's war-induced mental illness is brought to light. This second conflict involving mental illness may make readers feel uneasy, as the very subject is something quite difficult to understand or accept.



Part 1 Chapter 2

Part 1 Chapter 2 Summary

William Rivers is a doctor who practices at a veteran's hospital. He helps treat broken men who have come back from the war. Dr. Rivers' current patient is a man named Ian Moffett, who suffers from hysterical paralysis. While Dr. Rivers has not discovered the cause of the paralysis, he has found a way to treat it.

Dr. Rivers often reminisces about his childhood, which is, in part, how readers will get to learn who he really is. His memory of specific events lay against a backdrop of an unhappy childhood embedded in the throes of wealth and comfort.

Pulling himself out of his reverie, Dr. Rivers goes back to the stack of files upon his desk. He looks at a new patient's file, Geoffrey Wansbeck. Geoffrey's problem is that, after killing a German soldier at the front in France, he continually smells the decay of rotting flesh. Wansbeck knows the smell isn't real, but he can't seem to get the stench out of his nose. Dr. Rivers, prepared to dislike Wansbeck, ends up finding him a likable young man.

Part 1 Chapter 2 Analysis

Readers meet Dr. William Rivers in Chapter 2 and begin a ride that doesn't stop until the end of the novel. Dr. Rivers and Billy Prior are well acquainted with each other, as Dr. Rivers treated Billy when he was a patient at Craiglockhart war hospital. Tension is heightened when readers get a glimpse into Dr. Rivers' life, both past and present. This tension is lessened only slightly when attention is focused not on Dr. Rivers', but on the lives of two patients, Moffett and Wansbeck. Dr. Rivers is at war with himself and his patients. Who will win?



Part 1 Chapter 3

Part 1 Chapter 3 Summary

Billy Prior gets his wish, as he's sent back to France. As he walks along the seawall in the darkness of Bradford, he encounters Elinor, a lady of the evening.

She's drunk and has a hard time walking in her red high heels. At first, Billy isn't interested in her, but then decides to partake of her services. They return to Elinor's room in the local boardinghouse. First, he explores Elinor. Then, he's repulsed by her. Billy's repulsion stems from a look on her face that he's seen before. It's the face of Father McKenzie, his first sex partner.

After his brief evening with Elinor, Billy returns to the barracks, where he awaits going back to France. His tent mate, Hallet, away on a bombing course, has now returned and surprises Billy. Hallet will be shipped out with Billy.

As Billy lay in his sleeping bag thinking about how young Hallet is, he realizes that if Hallet had been conceived just two years later, he wouldn't even be going off to war. Billy knows that there are ghosts of comrades everywhere and that even the living are ghosts in the making.

Part 1 Chapter 3 Analysis

Billy Prior gets his wish to be sent back to France, but it isn't because he has a great desire to fight. It appears that Billy doesn't really know what else to do with himself. He'd rather go fight in France than deal with his own life. Perhaps, some readers may establish a connection with Billy as his individual struggle is something that people still encounter today. The first foreshadowing of the novel appears at the end of the chapter when Billy opines that the living are ghosts in the making.



Part 1 Chapter 4

Part 1 Chapter 4 Summary

Dr. Rivers continues to treat Moffett's hysterical paralysis by drawing circles around his legs. Each day the circles get lower and lower toward his feet. The theory is that each day more and more of the leg above the drawn circle will have feeling restored.

While thinking about the treatment for Moffett, Dr. Rivers remembers a time in his life when he spent time with a witch doctor. Dr. Rivers accompanies Njiru on his rounds and watches as he treats a local villager for constipation. The treatment includes massage of the lower abdomen and a great casting out of something Dr. Rivers can't see. Njiru explains that, in their culture, an octopus taking up residence in the villager's lower intestine causes the constipation. Njiru's "medicine" has cast it out. Not long after this treatment, the villager is relieved of her pain and discomfort.

This recollection, as it relates to Moffett's treatment, concerns Dr. Rivers. He knows what he's doing for Moffett isn't attacking the root cause of the paralysis, but just its physical manifestation. Dr. Rivers believes that Njiru could've done just as good a job.

Days later, Moffett begins to come around and can feel the pinpricks Dr. Rivers is sticking in his legs. He's even able to walk a few steps with Dr. Rivers' help. This achievement only depresses Moffett, causing him to attempt to take his own life. Moffett is found in the bathroom after slicing his wrists. He had succeeded in deeply cutting his left wrist, which requires stitches.

After helping Moffett back to his bed, Dr. Rivers hears a clicking sound. This sound takes Rivers back to the jungle and his friend, Njiru. He recollects an area of skull houses. In this memory, the wind rattles the skulls, causing them to click together.

Part 1 Chapter 4 Analysis

People and occurrences get stranger, therefore increasing the tension in the story. Moffett's attempted suicide and the remembrance of the skull houses heighten concern over what could possibly happen next. A war of a different kind is alluded to in the flashback sequences through viewing a foreign culture and its customs. A house where skulls are kept and displayed is something readers may be unfamiliar with and this increases the presence of the war theme.



Part 1 Chapter 5

Part 1 Chapter 5 Summary

Billy Prior visits his fiancée, Sarah Lumb, before he ships out to France. This visit is fraught with tension, because Billy and Sarah would like nothing better than to spend time alone together. But Sarah's mother, Ada, is seeing that doesn't occur.

Ada appeared in town 18 years before with her two daughters, Sarah and Cynthia, who still live at home with her. On the surface, Ada is a penitent Christian, entertaining the local vicar on Sundays after church. On Saturday nights, however, she spends the evening at séances, the antithesis of Christianity.

Billy isn't entirely convinced that he'll marry Sarah. Their wedding is still a year away and he feels he has a lot of life to live. Currently, she's available and wants him. They try to be alone together after everyone has gone to bed, as well as feigning headaches before going out the next evening. Neither attempt is successful because of Sarah's mother's intuition.

Finally, when they all go to one of Ada's séances, Billy and Sarah sneak out. They get home in time to engage in sexual activity, but barely finish by the time Ada and Cynthia return. Cynthia catches on when Billy sneakily shows her Sarah's underwear, tucked down the front of his shirt.

The next day, Sarah walks Billy to the train to see him off to France. As Billy looks into her face, tinted yellow from working in the munitions factory, he hears his mother's voice in his head. She tells him that he can marry much better than a munitions factory girl.

Part 1 Chapter 5 Analysis

Billy is a philanderer and this chapter introduces the third theme of infidelity. Sex is a commodity to him. His fiancée, Sarah, would undoubtedly be shocked to learn that he's still sexually active with both men and women during their engagement. However, Billy's unfaithfulness runs deeper than sex; he's also unfaithful to himself, as readers will see as the story progresses. Billy may believe that it's kill or be killed, but his reality is quite different.



Part 1 Chapter 6

Part 1 Chapter 6 Summary

Dr. Rivers goes to visit his sisters at Ramsgate. Ethel, Catherine's caregiver, has been given some much-needed time off. Catherine and Dr. Rivers reminisce about their childhood and he expresses concern that he remembers her childhood better than his own.

Catherine and Dr. Rivers talk about their recollection of Charles Dodgson. Dodgson stammered, as well as Dr. Rivers, who was called "Will" in his youth. Will noticed that Dodgson stammered less when he was reading from a book, than when he was talking with someone.

Dr. Rivers' stammer began when he was chastised for not being a grown-up boy during a haircut. He became frightened of the scissors and thought that parts of him were being cut off. This outburst caused Dr. Rivers' father to show him a painting of the man he was named after: Uncle William Rivers. Uncle William had had to have a leg amputated and suffered through it silently, without complaint. Dr. Rivers began to stammer after being shown a painting of this amputation.

Billy Prior visits Dr. Rivers just before being shipped out. Dr. Rivers believes that Billy Prior should stay in England. Just two months ago, Billy had suffered from bad memory lapses. Billy can't seem to convince Dr. Rivers that going back to fight in France is a good thing for him. Dr. Rivers looks upon Billy like a son and sadly watches him leave from a nearby window, recalling his relationship with his own father.

Part 1 Chapter 6 Analysis

Another layer of the war theme is disclosed: Dr. Rivers has been at war with his family since he was a child. He was taught early on that he is not equal to other family members, particularly the uncle for whom he was named. The conflicts created by Billy's impending trip to France are replaced by the tension of the doctor's childhood experiences. Throughout most of Part One, the atmosphere and weather are gray and dark, which is symbolic of England's insertion into World War I. The story exists in a third person, limited and omniscient point of view, which creates some distance for readers, allowing them a safety zone.



Part 2 Chapter 7

Part 2 Chapter 7 Summary

This chapter begins with Billy's personal impressions of going back to France in diary form. It's late August 1918 and he describes his last night in London. After meeting up with his friend Charles Manning, they go out for a night on the town.

The following day, Billy collects some clothes for the trip and returns to the train station. It's a long trip from London to the embarkation point for France and Billy is exhausted by the time he gets there. He sees his old tent mate, Hallett and Hallett's family before leaving. He comments on how sad the little family unit looks.

While on board the ship heading for France, Billy spends most of his time on deck in order to avoid seasickness. He watches the cliffs of England disappear in the distance and is then joined by Hallett.

By the time Billy and his troops arrive in France, it's the beginning of September. The men are stowed in dormitories that remind Billy of Craiglockhart. For now, there's a fair amount of free time before they are moved up to the Front. By the second week in September, the troops are posted to the Second Manchester Division to join the other men fighting on the line.

Part 2 Chapter 7 Analysis

Tension remains high in Chapter 7 for two reasons: Readers await Billy's deployment to France and Pat Barker has shifted the point of view from third person to a first person, diary format. While this shift may be a bit unsettling, it gives readers an excellent opportunity to look into Billy's heart and soul, as he prepares to go back to the Front line for the fourth time. As he watches the cliffs of his home country fade in the distance, Billy believes he knows what to expect when he arrives in France, but isn't exactly sure what he'll find. This keeps the tension running high without any release. Billy is at war with himself, knowing that he must go back. However he still wonders why he should. Internal battle is a sub-theme of both war and struggle and it's one that Billy can't resolve easily. Billy Prior simply can't get out of his own way.



Part 2 Chapter 8

Part 2 Chapter 8 Summary

Dr. Rivers becomes ill with the flu. Although he tries to fight it, he ultimately has to give in and go to bed in order to get better. His high fever causes him to have strange dreams, including playing croquet at his childhood home and being on the ship that took him to Eddystone in the South Pacific for mission duty.

In the dream about Eddystone, Dr. Rivers recalls when he arrived on the island and whom he met there. He and his fellow traveler, Hocart, were to spend time studying the natives on Eddystone from a psychological and sociological perspective. While en route, the ship picked up a group of natives from a different island and Dr. Rivers spent time getting to know their customs and habits.

At one point in their travels, Dr. Rivers and Hocart have to change boats to a tramp steamer. On this steamer, they meet two men who make an impression on them: A man named Brennan and another named Father Michael. Dr. Rivers and Hocart share a cabin with these two men. Over cards one evening, Brennan shows Rivers a picture of his children. They are the result of his relationship with a native from New Hebrides. Brennan tells a story of being able to buy white women in Sydney, Australia for 40 pounds. He wants to shock Hocart, but it doesn't work.

It wasn't until Rivers is seated at a makeshift table outside the tent, repairing an oil lamp, that Njiru appears. There had been no welcoming committee when they arrived on Eddystone. Njiru is a deformed man, suffering from severe curvature of the spine. Yet, Njiru still carries himself with poise and dignity. Njiru is a powerful man, who controls the spirits on Eddystone.

It is from Njiru that Dr. Rivers learns many things about the island, including local customs and traditions. During his time there, one of the oldest chiefs dies. Dr. Rivers must respect tradition and leave his widow alone, in a crouched position, until a conch shell is blown. This is perhaps the most difficult time for him, as Dr. Rivers desires to be a nurturing soul.

Part 2 Chapter 8 Analysis

Readers learn a lot about Dr. Rivers' past through his feverish hallucinations. Barker describes the island as rich and lush, but never tells readers what colors to visualize. The author sets up a comparison of life and atmosphere by volleying back and forth between World War I France and Melanesia. War exists on two very different planes: In France, it's Billy and his troops against the Germans, On Eddystone, the villagers battle tradition and a steeply declining population.



Part 2 Chapter 9

Part 2 Chapter 9 Summary

The train takes Billy, Hallett and the others to a French town three hours away from where they first landed. Billy settles his men in the hall of a church and then goes to find a place where officers will stay. An abandoned house is found, where two other officers have already bunked down for the night.

Because the morning view out his window is so beautiful, Billy forgets he's near the Front. The back garden looks like a jungle and there is even a small pond. At this point in the war, there's absolutely nothing Billy and his soldiers can do but kill time.

The men take their time and explore the town, finding that much of it has been left in ruins by the war. Over dinner, Billy, Owen, Potts and Hallett argue about the reasons for war and why England is still in the fray. The war that is in their backyard is also so far away, that these soldiers can enjoy a bottle of wine on the back terrace of the war-torn house they inhabit.

In the middle of the chapter, the focus turns from third person to first-person diary. Once again, Billy Prior is telling readers what he sees. He tries to rationalize his fear mixed with his desire to be back in the war. By mid-September, the four men who were once so carefree in the abandoned house, are sent to the battalion at the Front. As he was in his last tour of duty, Billy Prior is named Gas Officer, responsible for all soldiers donning heavy gas masks during attacks.

Part 2 Chapter 9 Analysis

There is a certain otherworldliness to the fact that the soldiers are back fighting the war in France, yet experiencing such a tranquil period before they have to go back on the line. This feeling, coupled with the fact that Pat Parker switches point of view in the middle of the chapter, may leave readers feeling unbalanced and unfulfilled. Readers may feel their own struggle, as Barker at first gives them distance in the third person point of view, but then whips them back into the line of duty in the form of Billy's first person diary entries. The lightness of being, experienced by Prior and the other officers before joining the battalion on the front line, foreshadows future events.



Part 2 Chapter 10

Part 2 Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter 10 takes us back to Dr. Rivers' fever dream and the people of Eddystone. Ngea, the most powerful chief after Rembo, is near death. Everyone waits patiently for him to die. Rivers checks on him and then returns to his tent. After supper and work, Rivers lies in the tent and listens to one of the young girls meet with three young boys for sex. While this may be cause for concern in England, it's quite normal on Eddystone.

Toward dawn, Rivers is awakened by sounds of women crying, signaling Ngea's death. His widow, Emele, must now spend an unknown period in a small enclosure. She assumes the same crouched position of her late husband and waits for the blowing of a conch shell to release her. Ngea is propped up in a chair, according to the death ceremony and escorted to a deserted beach where he's left until the funeral boat takes him out to sea.

Dr. Rivers visits a famous cave at Pa Na Keru. Njiru escorts him there and, together, they go into the dark recesses at the back of the initial large cave opening. This smaller cave is filled with life. Thousands of bats hang from the walls and ceiling and swoop down on the two men before exiting.

Sunlight shines in Dr. Rivers' eyes and brings him out of his dream state, back to the present. After being served tea by his landlady, Miss Irving, he begins to drift off again. The sunlight of England becomes the sunlight of Eddystone. Njiru tells Rivers that the conch shell will only be blown when the headhunting is done. The blowing of the conch signifies a successful raid and the chief's widow can only be freed when a head is taken.

Part 2 Chapter 10 Analysis

Readers learn more about Dr. Rivers' time on Eddystone and the traditions of its people. Pat Barker's volleying between island life on Eddystone and Billy Prior's meager existence in World War I France continues to vault the tension even higher. In addition, while there may be small bits of release throughout the story, these chapters are leading, slowly and steadily, to the climax. The dark cave and bats symbolize Dr. Rivers' existence. No matter how hard he flails away at life, he has no clear vision of his future. In fact, childhood memories peck away at him like the bats in the cave.



Part 2 Chapter 11

Part 2 Chapter 11 Summary

Billy writes in his journal about living in a facility that he describes as a cross between a cowshed and an outdoor toilet. He also writes about working in a foxhole at the Front. After a day of cleaning up, the enlisted men are rewarded with game playing in the afternoon.

Sundays are spent trying to sleep in. The one joy to the day seems to be the special breakfast of bacon and eggs. The smells remind Billy of home. An informal church service is set up outside and he can hear strains of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

A week later, the men are bussed to the Front. Along the way, they pass villages in ruins. Billy continues the gas drills several times a day. He is charged with ensuring that the men don their gas masks and protective gear quickly enough. His nickname, the Canary, has been revived from the last time he was in battle. The day ends with the constant drone of airplanes flying overhead and the knowledge that Billy and his troops are to move forward again the next day.

Part 2 Chapter 11 Analysis

Billy knows that the relaxation must come to an end. Readers may feel the anticipation of waiting for the other shoe to drop, with the active insertion of Billy and his battalion into the conflict. The story's diary format puts the reader right into Billy Prior's shoes on the Western Front in France. It's one thing to read about the happenings of the war; it's quite another to be experiencing them first-hand. The desolation of World War I symbolizes Billy's desolate outlook on life. He has no clue what else he would do with his life. Could his repeated efforts at going back to war be the manifestation of his subconscious desire to die in battle to avoid living a useless life afterward?



Part 2 Chapter 12

Part 2 Chapter 12 Summary

Dr. Rivers continues his odd series of fever induced dreams and he's back in the missionary existence he lived on Eddystone. However, in this dream sequence, he is approaching the hut of Ngea's widow, Emele. When he enters, he sees a woman crouched over in the mourning position. When he looks at her, he sees the face of his sister, Kathleen. This awakens him and he realizes that it was just a dream.

Back on Eddystone in his dreams, Dr. Rivers worries about the fate of Emele. He consistently worries about what will happen to her if headhunting is not immediately commenced. She has been in the crouched mourning position for so long, that he frets about her health and well-being. However, he knows that he can't interfere.

On the island, he is awakened one morning to the new and different sound of a blaring conch shell. In a matter of moments, Dr. Rivers is out of his tent and running down to the beach. At the water's edge, he sees Njiru, draped in a white cloth and in a canoe. In the canoe with him is a small, four-year-old boy. This is the headhunting prize. Once in the village, Dr. Rivers sees that Emele has emerged from her mourning hut, bent over and crippled, but still alive.

Part 2 Chapter 12 Analysis

Readers continue to learn more and more about Dr. Rivers and his time in Melanesia. This dream sequence has a resolution to it and this resolution creates a release of tension for the reader. Readers learn that the "headhunting" isn't the bringing back of a disembodied head, but the emergence of young child. Similarly, Emele is released from her prison and Dr. Rivers can now relax. Dr. Rivers' deep concern over his sister Kathleen's life, which is confined to the jail of her ill health, is manifested in his vision of her in the same crouched position as Emele. He struggles, daily, with the realization that he cannot heal her.

Part 2 Chapter 13

Part 2 Chapter 13 Summary

Chapter 13 takes us back to the Western front in France. Billy Prior continues to write in his journal. It's now October of 1918 and Billy and his troops have been fighting the enemy while being confined to abandoned foxholes. There are two tragedies during this period: Billy's aide de camp, Longstaffe, is killed; and his friend, Hallett, is seriously wounded.

Although fatalities are a product of war, Billy writes that the reason the war is ending is partly due to his infantry's effort at breaking through the line and holding their position. Because of this, this division is pulled back from the Front and another division is put in their place.

Mail comes for the troops and Billy receives a letter from his fiancée, Sarah, telling him that she did not get pregnant during their time together. He's relieved. He goes through the mail, finds letters for the men who have died in battle and must deal with them. He remarks in his diary that his men seem to have steady nerves, even in the midst of something as frightening as war.

Part 2 Chapter 13 Analysis

This chapter, continuing in diary form, really doesn't tell the reader a whole lot more than he or she already knows. This, in itself, provides some release from the tension of war and allows some breathing room. If there's any tension at all, it is wondering when the war will end and if Billy Prior will live to see it. A different kind of battle ensues when Billy must put his worries aside to deal with processing letters for dead soldiers.



Part 3 Chapter 14

Part 3 Chapter 14 Summary

Dr. Rivers, recovering from his bout with the flu, reads an article in the morning paper about how the war effort is going for the English over in France. Although he tries to force some breakfast down, he soon grows sleepy and ends up back on Eddystone in his dreams.

A huge party is thrown when Ngea's skull is placed in the skull house. Pigs are cooked over two large fires. The ceremony begins at noon, with Njiru officiating. However, this is not the last the villagers will hear of and from Ngea.

Dr. Rivers is proud that, during the ceremony, he follows most of the prayer without needing an interpreter. Food is offered to the gods and a great prayer for successful headhunting is offered. Dr. Rivers believes the population on this island is perishing from an absence of war. In fact, there are 50% fewer people alive on the island today as there had been a generation ago. That statistic makes Rivers nervous.

Shortly after the celebration, a séance is held where Kundaite interpretes for the spirits. Villagers sit in a circle around the fire, waiting to get a message from their loved ones. It isn't until the spirit of recently departed Ngea enters the space that Dr. Rivers becomes spooked. Although the villagers hear Ngea blow the conch shell signaling his departure for the world of the dead, neither Rivers nor Hocart hear it. This failure leaves Rivers feeling cheated and deflated.

As Rivers gets into bed after returning from the day's festivities, he cracks his head on an axe that has been laid on his pillow. Rivers recognizes the axe as Ngea's and knows that it was placed there by Njiru as a warning for asking too many probing questions.

Part 3 Chapter 14 Analysis

It becomes clearer as the novel continues, that Dr. Rivers' compares much of his present-day life and thoughts to his time in Melanesia. Just as he struggled there to understand the local people, he struggles to understand the mental illnesses of his patients. The confusion that Dr. Rivers felt in understanding a foreign people symbolizes his confusion in understanding his patients' needs. While this book may have begun by following the life of Billy Prior, he's really just an ally to the main character of Dr. Rivers. The feast and séance held on Eddystone correspond with similar events in Western culture, featuring celebration with large gatherings of people and attempts to reach and communicate with the dead. In fact, it's in the sharing of séances that Barker bridges the gap between this primitive culture and present day Britain.



Part 3 Chapter 15

Part 3 Chapter 15 Summary

Billy Prior continues to write in his journal. The men are back to living in dry quarters. Prior thinks of what Dr. Rivers would be doing right at that moment and he recalls Rivers' attempts at trying to make his patients feel safe so that they can talk about their experiences and fears. This remembrance is spurred by the fact that Prior is in a company of many of the men he shared time with at Craiglockhart.

There are times during the conflict that talks of peace filter down to the men and the officers are ordered to stop them from that hopefulness. For now, the Company of the Second Manchesters is at rest and away from the fighting. Prior is kept busy dealing with continuous gas drills and making sure that his men don their gas masks in time.

New troops are added to the rank-and-file, as well as a Lieutenant Colonel called "Marshall-of-the-Ten-Wounds." It's Prior's responsibility, along with the other officers, to integrate these new enlisted men with their battalion. One night, the rumor that the Germans have agreed to peace talks leads to a great party in anticipation of the end of the war. The next day, the Second Manchester battalion is sent back to the Front.

Part 3 Chapter 15 Analysis

Readers continue to experience the First World War through the eyes of Billy Prior. Moods are lifted by the possibility of peace, but then are dashed when the troops are sent back to the Front. This creates a tension and release situation that is never fulfilled. While the tension is never at its peak, the release is never complete either. What drives the reader forward at this point is to learn whether or not Billy Prior will come back from his fourth tour of duty. Billy struggles in a strange position: He knows there will be men from the new troops that won't make it home. Does this knowledge create a new layer of infidelity?



Part 3 Chapter 16

Part 3 Chapter 16 Summary

At the same time Billy Prior is getting ready to go back to the Front, Dr. Rivers has recovered from his bout of flu and is back to work. Just about the only good thing he could say about the flu is that he can't get it again from people who have become newly sick with it. As Dr. Rivers listens to Wansbeck's rendition of how he speaks to the ghost of the man he killed, his mind continually compares his story to memories of Melanesia.

Another patient also has apparitions that gather around his hospital bed. Sassoon continues to see ghosts and tells Dr. Rivers that he is asked why he is not back in France fighting in the war. In addition, still another patient, Harrington, is fighting the feeling of inadequacy in trying to help a dying friend in the war. Both Sassoon and Harrington succeed in fighting their inner demons and are soon in better shape. Dr. Rivers can't seem to help Wansbeck.

Next on Dr. Rivers' plate is Hallett, the comrade of Billy Prior's, who had taken a bullet in the face and skull. As he looks at Hallett's records, Dr. Rivers can hear a chill fall rain in the background, which sends him back to his memories of rainstorms on Eddystone.

After a memorable downpour, Njiru fetches Rivers to accompany him to the rebuilding of one of the oldest skull houses on the island. Readers should recall the scene where Rivers remembers the clicking noise of skulls being blown against each other in the breeze. It is also during this trip that Dr. Rivers' mind is laid to rest when he learns that the child taken from a neighboring island in the headhunting exercise will become the apprentice to the skull house keeper.

At the close of this chapter, Dr. Rivers returns to Hallett's medical file and finds that he had been assigned to Billy Prior's battalion.

Part 3 Chapter 16 Analysis

Ghosts, both real and imagined, are all over this chapter. The continual volleying back-and-forth from Dr. Rivers' present day, to his memories of life on Eddystone, will slowly blend into one experience. The place changes, but the emotions do not. Ghosts are a thread that runs through all three prominent themes: Ghosts of men killed in the war and those who killed them; the daily struggle with personal ghosts in the forms of memories and reactions; and the ghosts created by infidelity to oneself and others.



Part 3 Chapter 17

Part 3 Chapter 17 Summary

Billy Prior's battalion continues to march through the devastation of dead bodies and stagnant water. Billy's fear of abandonment is rising up and overtaking him. Then, some normalcy creeps in.

At the end of one day's march, the battalion comes upon a town with green fields and seemingly normal lives. The men stop to rest in the kitchen of an old farmhouse and are entertained by the family who reside there. Prior wonders if this area had been in German hands not long before they had arrived.

During their stay, Prior runs into a local young man whom he befriends. In the small amount of time that he gets to know him, Prior realizes that the lad is German. The two men share a sexual experience together before Prior and his battalion are shipped off once again.

Prior and his battalion are now face-to-face with the Germans. Because the land in between the two armies is so swampy and wet, the decision is made by Marshall-of-the-Ten-Wounds to build some kind of bridge across. It is assumed that this attempt will be met with gunfire, yet the Lieutenant Colonel is confident that the men must continue to fight on anyway. With the possibility of his life ending, Billy Prior writes a note to Dr. Rivers asking him to be the one to break the news to his mother in case he doesn't come back from the war.

Part 3 Chapter 17 Analysis

The tension rises again with the possibility that Prior and his battalion could be wiped out at this stand. Pat Barker manages to paint the men into such a corner, literally and figuratively, that readers will be able to feel the stiff joints and stench of fear. The cramped quarters and foul stench of the nearby swamp are metaphors for life's last stand. Even though the Second Manchesters are a company of men and in the company of men, each of them came into this world alone. Now, they will die alone. There is nothing that can calm one's internal struggle for acceptance and understanding. Billy blindly continues his life of infidelity as though there were no other choice for him. This could be seen by readers as the foreshadowing of his death.



Part 3 Chapter 18

Part 3 Chapter 18 Summary

Dr. Rivers reads of hopeful news in the paper that the war will soon end. So many people have talked of peace that he would hardly notice if the war ended. Simultaneously, Prior is crouching in a ditch, waiting for the return of his wristwatch, which is being synchronized with others'. They await the start of battle.

Dr. Rivers, on night duty, can also do nothing but wait; wait for the next emergency. Only Dr. Rivers and Sister Roberts remain on the ward because of the flu. The Hallett family; including his fiancée, Susan, who remains by his bedside, waits for him to die.

Reminded of the tent he shared with Hocart on Eddystone, Rivers allows his mind to go back to that time, his last night on the island. He wants Njiru to tell him about Ave, a powerful spirit. Up to this time, no one had talked to him about this, but Njiru breaks his silence on Rivers' last night.

Dr. Rivers checks Hallett's pulse while looking at his wristwatch. At the same time, Billy Prior glances at his watch and waits for the fighting to begin. At a pre-arranged moment, the men rush forward into battle. Live shells whistle overhead as they try to build the bridge over the swamp. As Billy Prior is about to start across the water, he's hit. From his position on the ground, he can see his men all around him, dying just as he is. Then, the ultimate insult comes. Poisonous gas fills the air and he cannot reach his own gas mask. Billy Prior is killed in battle.

Not long after Billy dies, Hallett ends his struggle for life. As the dawn breaks over the hospital, Dr. Rivers pronounces him dead and watches as the family begins to mourn. Fighting sleep that he has staved off, Rivers sees a vision of Njiru walking down the hospital corridor toward him. As Njiru nears, his image disappears.

Part 3 Chapter 18 Analysis

The memories of Dr. Rivers' life on Eddystone are coming faster now. It's as though all three themes are converging on a collision course, but the exact point in time of the crash is still unknown. Barker ends all three stories at the end point of Dr. Rivers'. Hallett, a comrade of Billy Prior's who is injured in the last battle, finally dies; Billy Prior himself is shot and killed at the Front; and the memories of Rivers' time on Eddystone pass away. Nothing and no one is forever and even memories and ghosts have a way of dying. The question readers may be left with is what will happen to Rivers now? Will he go on or die away like the others?



Characters

William "Billy" Prior

Billy is the first character readers meet. He is a man who has already experienced three tours of duty on the French Front in World War I and is awaiting his physical exam and clearance to return for a fourth time. Although he's engaged to be married, his infidelity is one of the first things readers experience, which sets the tone and tenor of his character.

The only thing that Billy knows how to do well is fight in war. It's this transient ability that has him reaching for the meaning of his existence through Dr. Charles Rivers, a psychiatrist who befriends him in Craiglockhart War Hospital.

Billy's unfaithfulness to his fiancée is merely the tip of the iceberg. Billy's unfaithfulness to himself eventually gets him killed. He doesn't have to return to France to fight; he pushes for the assignment because he doesn't believe that he's worth anything more than a body destined to be killed.

It's ironic that he's named the chief gas officer. In the end, it's a combination of a bullet and gas that kills him.

Dr. William Rivers

In addition to being Billy Prior's confidant and psychiatrist, Dr. Rivers is the main character in this novel. It's through his eyes that readers meet other members of the hospital staff and wounded men in Billy's old unit.

Dr. Rivers is an enigma. More time is spent learning who this character is through flashbacks of his mission trip to Eddystone, a Melanesian island and his relationship with the chief medicine man, Njiru, than in his present day life. At times, readers may feel that Njiru and the villagers are more important than his current patients are.

He both admires and abhors Billy Prior. He admires Billy's unselfish gift of himself, many times over, to the war effort. Dr. Rivers' disgust lies in his inability to understand why anyone would voluntarily go back to be killed when it is unnecessary. In Billy's situation, his asthma could have kept him home.

Charles Manning

Charles Manning is a friend of Billy Prior's.



Dr. Mather

Dr. Mather is the doctor who examines Billy Prior to assess whether or not he's fit to return to the front in France.

Mitchell

Mitchell is the officer on the military board, who will determine whether or not Billy Prior returns to France.

Sister Roberts

Sister Roberts is a Nurse at the veteran's hospital where Dr. Rivers works.

Ian Moffett

Ian Moffett is a patient at the veteran's hospital where Dr. Rivers works.

Katharine Rivers

Katharine Rivers is the sister of Ethel and Dr. William Rivers.

Ethel Rivers

Ethel Rivers is the sister of Katharine and William Rivers.

Charles Dodgson

Charles Dodgson is a friend of the Rivers family.

Geoffrey Wansbeck

Geoffrey Wansbeck is a patient in the veteran's hospital where Dr. Rivers works.

Ada Lumb

Ada Lumb is the mother of Sarah Lumb, Billy Prior's fiancée of.



Sarah Lumb

Sarah Lumb is Billy Prior's fiancée.

Cynthia Lumb

Cynthia Lumb is Sarah Lumb's sister and Ada Lumb's daughter.

Lizzie McDowell

Lizzie McDowell is the mother of Billy Prior's childhood best friend: Billy Prior's first sexual conquest.

Elinor

Elinor is Billy Prior's sex partner just before being shipped back to the Front.

Hallett

Hallett is the tent mate of Billy Prior before they ship back to France.

Njiru

NJiru is an acquaintance of Dr. River's from Melanesia.

Namboko Taru

Namboko Taru is a patient treated by Njiru.

Major Telford

Major Telford is a patient at the veteran's hospital where Dr. Rivers works.

Reverend Lindsey

Reverend Lindsey is the Vicar of the church where Ada Lumb goes.



Father McKenzie

Father McKenzie is the priest in the church where Billy Prior was raised. He also introduced Billy to homosexual sex.

Mrs. Irving

Mrs. Irving is the owner of the apartment building where Dr. Rivers lives.

Hocart

Hocart is a fellow missionary of Dr. Rivers, who travels to Eddystone with him.

Brennan

Brennan is the bawdy man on the steamer ship that deposits Dr. Rivers and Hocart on Eddystone.

Father Michael

Father Michael is a priest on the steamer ship to Eddystone.

Rembo

Rembo is the father of Njiru; chief of cults on Eddystone.

Rinambesi

Rinambesi is the oldest man on Eddystone.

Kwini

Kwini is a baby born on Eddystone, just after Rivers' arrival.

Mbuko

Mbuko is a dying, elderly man on Eddystone.



Potts

Potts is an officer in the same division as Billy Prior.

Ngea

Ngea is an elder on Eddystone and the most powerful chief after Rembo.

Emele

Emele is the widow of Ngea.

Mali

Mali is a young girl in the village on Eddystone.

Runi

Runi is a young man in the village on Eddystone.

Marshall-of-the-Ten-Wounds

Marshall-of-the-Ten-Wounds is the Lieutenant Colonel of the Second Manchester battalion.

Oakshott, Moore, Heywood, Buxton, Jenkins, Hoggart and Wyatt

These men are all members of the Second Manchester division.

Sassoon

Sassoon is a patient in Dr. Rivers' care.

Harrington

Harrington is a patient in Dr. Rivers' care.



Objects/Places

Bradford

Bradford is the seaside town where Billy Prior waits to hear whether he'll be sent back to the Front in France.

Craiglockhart War hospital

Craiglockhart War Hospital is the psychiatric hospital where Billy Prior most recently spent time recovering.

Ramsgate

Ramsgate is the home of Dr. Rivers' sisters.

Elinor's room

Elinor's room is the place in the boardinghouse where Billy Prior has sex with Elinor.

Lumb home

The Lumb house is where Ada, Sarah and Cynthia reside.

Westminster

Westminster is the town where Dr. Rivers lives and has a private office.

Knowles Bank

Knowles Bank is Dr. Rivers' boyhood home.

Eddystone

Eddystone is the island in Melanesia where Hocart and Dr. Rivers study a primitive culture.



The Southern Cross

The Southern Cross is the boat that takes Dr. Rivers to the South Pacific island of Eddystone for mission duty.

Skull house

Skull house is the place on Eddystone where chieftains and village officials' skulls are on display.

Cave at Pa Na Keru

The cave at Pa Na Keru is where Dr. Rivers and Njiru experience thousands of bats.

Etaples

Etaples is the town in France where Second Manchesters are first deposited for Billy's fourth tour of duty.

Somme

The Somme River is where Billy Prior dies in battle.

Themes

War

War is a theme that is both overt and hidden. Although the most obvious theme is war between nations, *The Ghost Road* also details war between individuals and war within oneself. The book is written against a background of the end of World War I in 1918, but it is also filled with flashbacks to a pre-World War I time on a South Pacific island. While the Melanesian island of Eddystone isn't caught up in the world's woes, it constantly fights for its own existence.

The war between individuals is seen both in present day and in flashback. Billy Prior is fighting with the military so he can be sent back to the Front in France for a fourth tour of duty. Dr. Rivers battles his patients and his memories. On the world stage, the British are assisting the French to fight the Germans.

Internal wars are presented in both open and covert ways. Billy fights himself daily, questioning his own sanity in returning to war, but also realizing that he'd have been a fool not to go back to the Front. He's also never been truly committed to his fiancée, Sarah, but got engaged because he thought it was expected of him. That expectation is held not only by the world at large, but also by Sarah and Billy himself. Billy's sexuality and sexual confusion is also an internal struggle he is unlikely to win.

Dr. Rivers lives in a world that is truly all his own. While he walks through present day, he's constantly haunted by memories of his time on Eddystone. The culture and mores still influence him. He battles every day against the memory of what should have been but wasn't. He went to Eddystone with a fellow scientist, Hocart, to research the tribal existence of the villagers. Their research was to have been compiled in a treatise, which could have set Rivers up for academic excellence and respect. The book was never written.

Struggle

In *The Ghost Road*, struggle is a subset of war. While some readers may see these terms as equal, struggle denotes something much more cerebral and emotional than the physical manifestation of war. Struggle can be seen in many characters: in Billy, Dr. Rivers, Njiru and the villagers and in the patients under Dr. Rivers' care. Most notably, struggle manifests itself in Hallet's death.

Billy struggles with the meaning of his existence and his sexual confusion. Even though he seems to accept any gender sex partner, his continual dalliances with men goes against the grain of who he thinks he is: an upstanding man engaged to be married and serving his country well.



Dr. Rivers struggles to understand how he fits into his own world. He was raised in a family of some wealth and notoriety. While his parents aren't alive to push him into anything, he still feels the need to prove his worth. On Eddystone, he was revered to a certain degree as a white man with intelligence and compassion. It is unclear whether he preferred his existence on Eddystone or at home in Britain, but he clearly struggles with the memories from that time.

Njiru and the villagers struggle with their own lives and the reality that their numbers are dwindling. Their customs and mores will certainly continue, but only as the people do. It seems that more are buried than are being born.

Dr. Rivers' patients struggle with their own demons every day. Casualties of war, many of these men will never lead a normal life again. They typically fight their subconscious minds but one patient, Hallet, struggles hour by hour to survive from wounds inflicted by the Germans. His mind has given up. His last tortured words are "it's not worth it." However, his body fights to remain and only gives up after nearly a month of existing with severe injuries.

Infidelity

Infidelity is a two-edged sword and is seen most notably in Billy Prior. Billy is unfaithful to his fiancée physically and sexually. He's also unfaithful to himself.

Physically, Billy betrays himself by refusing to listen to doctors, who suggest he shouldn't return to France for a fourth time because of severe asthma attacks combined with memory lapses. He finds it ironic, really, that asthma got him shipped home once before, yet he remains the officer in charge of gas attack drills. Moreover, it is this irony that kills him: in a gas attack, he's unable to get his mask on fast enough.

Sexually, Billy seems to flit from man to woman to man, despite being engaged to Sarah Lumb. It's almost as though Billy doesn't know which gender he prefers, but readers will get the distinct impression that he's happier with men than with women. The book has a couple of graphic scenes that symbolize the graphic nature of war: one side is always reaming the other.

Billy Prior doesn't have a clue as to who he is or wants to be, other than a Field Officer in the Royal Army. It's a blessing that he never comes home from war, because his troubles would then begin in earnest. At least at the Front, he has purpose and direction and knows what he has to do. Civilian life was an enigma to him and was never as fulfilling as being hip deep in a war.



Style

Point of view

The point of view in this novel is a hodge-podge of third and first person. Part One is told in third person limited omniscient and Part Two opens in first person diarist. Of particular interest is the reader's sense of balance between the events of the end of part one and then seeing those events through the eyes of Billy Prior in the beginning of part two.

Throughout Part Three, readers flip back and forth between third person as it pertains to Dr. Rivers, first person through Billy's eyes and again move to third person looking over Billy's shoulder in the war. While this may cause a sense of vertigo at first, readers quickly adapt and will find the switch in point of view to be commonplace by the end of the story.

Readers will come away knowing Dr. Rivers far better through his experiences on Eddystone, than watching him treat patients in present day. Although all of the passages relating to Dr. Rivers are in third person, it's done in a way that gets inside his head as though he were writing a diary. Yet, Billy's diary entries, while done in first person, are remote enough to feel as though they're in third person.

Setting

The main setting for this novel is the end of World War I in the fall of 1918. The fighting in France symbolizes the struggle of humankind all over the world and sets the stage for World War II.

While there are times when setting is also a character in a book, this isn't one of those times. Readers will see the French countryside through sepia colored glasses. There's very little descriptive detail in terms of color and that's undoubtedly done on purpose. It's the conflict readers are focused on not the frills of the countryside. Moreover, the island nation of Eddystone is also more black and white than tropical.

A bigger setting than World War I or Melanesia is the road of life that everyone must tread. The Ghost Road rolls past, present and future into one path and it's how people deal with their past and present ghosts that shapes their future.

Language and Meaning

Language and meaning share several planes: the language of World War I Britain, the language of war and the language of the Melanesian island of Eddystone. Obviously, Eddystone presents the biggest challenge in recognition and understanding.



The way Dr. Rivers learns to communicate with Njiru and the other villagers on Eddystone is through a combination of Pidgin English and their own language. For instance, when Njiru talks about death, he calls it "something he stop long belly" or "die finish."

When Rivers first arrives on the island, he needs Njiru as an interpreter. By the time he leaves, he's able to follow conversations on his own. In Eddystone, language and meaning go beyond the verbal. Language and meaning extends to customs and mores. The dying are propped up in a chair and bound with cloth. This is a custom that shocks Dr. Rivers initially but eventually became commonplace. When Rivers witnesses his first death on the island, he instinctively reaches out to close the dead man's eyes, but the body language of the villagers stopped him.

The language and meaning of World War I and Britain are well known and don't require much explanation. "Jerries" are the British. The only thing on everyone's lips is the war, the war effort and when it will end. There is very little British slang to follow and readers should feel instantly comfortable in a world that existed over 80 years ago.

The language of war is very much the same as it is today. The military develops its own way of speaking, sometimes silently. Readers will find parallels between modern war and World War I, proving that only the names have changed.

Structure

The Ghost Road is presented in three separate parts, each having a number of chapters. There is no time lag to speak of. The entire novel takes place in the summer and fall of 1918, with the exception of the flashbacks to Eddystone. It's never stated when Dr. Rivers took his trip to Melanesia, how long he stayed, or when he returned in relation to present day.

The break between the first and second parts signals a change in point of view. The entirety of Part One is written in third person omniscient voice. It's at the beginning of Part Two that readers get an inside look at the French Front at the end of World War I through Billy's journal entries. Part Three is a mishmash of first and third person.

Part Three also has something unique to it that the other two parts don't share: Readers get to view some newspaper headlines about the very conflict Billy is sitting in and also a letter home from Billy to Dr. Rivers asking him to be the bearer of the bad news to his mother should he be killed in action.



Quotes

"Even the living were only ghosts in the making. You learned to ration your commitment to them." (Chapter 3, page 46)

"He likes being dominated, as people often do who've never had to raise their voice in their lives to get other people running after them." (Chapter 7, page 108)

"He has a lot of strengths but he isn't working from strength." (Chapter 7, page 110-111)

"Poor little bugger's had a station goodbye that's lasted for *days*. (Chapter 7, page 112)

"The mess has scuffed no-colour lino — the colour of misery, if misery has a colour..." (Chapter 7, page 114)

"After marriage complete fidelity was required and one expression of this was that one must never utter the name of an ex-lover." (Chapter 8, page 129)

"The widow of a chief can be freed only by the taking of a head." (Chapter 10, page 170)

"The trouble is my nerves are the same old nerves. I'd be happier with a ton or two of France on top of my head." (Chapter 11, page 172)

"Rivers would say, remember *now* — any suppressed memory stores up trouble for the future. Well, too bad. Refusing to think's the only way I can survive and anyway what future?" (Chapter 13, page 193)

"For the first time it occurs to me that Rivers's job also requires courage." (Chapter 13, page 200)

"Too close to death ourselves to make a fuss. We economize on grief." (Chapter 17, page 241)

"And I look round me at all these faces and all I can think is: What an utter bloody fool I would have been not to come back." (Chapter 17, page 258)



Topics for Discussion

Explain the irony in Billy's death.

Compare the war in France with the war on Eddystone.

Does Dr. Rivers know what he wants in life?

What possesses Billy Prior to go back to France for a fourth time?

Is Billy's engagement to Sarah real?

Is Dr. Rivers more comfortable on Eddystone?

Compare and contrast World War I in France to the Gulf or Iraqi wars.

Why do countries go to war?

Explain the kind of war present on Eddystone.

Who is the protagonist of the story and why?

Describe the sexual undercurrent of the story from Billy's perspective.

Does anyone ever win a war?