

The Girl Next Door Study Guide

The Girl Next Door by Jack Ketchum

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Plot Summary

The Girl Next Door by Jack Ketchum is a harrowing tale about the power of adult suggestion over children, the power of group dynamics, and the horrifying result of childhood fantasies given life. Young David and his friends are at an age where sexual fantasies and ideas are beginning to foster. Meg and her sister, Susan, come to live with neighborhood's favorite mom, Ruth, when their parents are killed in a car accident. As David begins to find himself with a crush on Meg, the others in the neighborhood begin to notice changes in Ruth. Ruth becomes more and more obsessed with Meg as a young woman, and uses her to teach her sons and their friends about the evils of women. When the boys begin to become sexually frustrated with mental images of Meg, Ruth begins to beat and torment Meg and disabled Susan. As the beatings and torment increase, and as Meg is held captive in a dark, cold basement, usually nude, young David finds himself questioning the situation and his own role in it. Torn between his desires and the knowledge that Ruth has given permission for the young children to torment Meg and the clear downward spiral of the situation, David eventually decides to help Meg escape after the children, under direction of Ruth, begin to rape Meg. After Ruth's sons cut Meg and Ruth cauterizes it with a cigarette, David helps Meg to escape. When she returns to free her sister, however, Meg is again captured. As punishment, Ruth orders the boys to burn out her clitoris with a heated tire iron. When David, pushed to the limit, tries to run, he and Susan are held captive as well. Following an attempt at escape, Meg uses the last of her energy to help David and Susan. Her heroic efforts lead to her death, but also to a rescue by police. As David and the others are led up the stairs, David, in a burst of anger, shoves Ruth down the stairs, killing her.

"The Girl Next Door", while certainly horrifying in content, particularly in light of it's base in a true story, is none the less a lesson in the amazing power of group mentality. The book's shift from the innocence of childhood to the buddings of sexual ideas to the dangers of a lack of parental structure to the total chaos of a complete breakdown of morality is a journey that leaves the reader sickened, but unable to put down the story. From beginning to end, "The Girl Next Door" delivers a powerful story that faint of heart readers should avoid, but one that deserves to be read.



Chapter One through Chapter Three

Chapter One through Chapter Three Summary

In chapter one, the narrator, David, asks the reader if he or she knows pain. He mentions his second wife was attacked by cats, and thinks she knows pain. His first wife was in a car accident where her lover was skinned alive. He thinks she is closer to understanding pain. He admits he and "the others" were just kids when they met Meg and Susan Loughlin, and reminds himself it was the fifties, when everything was secretive. He is now forty-one, with two failed marriages and no children. He is well-off, but admits he has not been right since the summer of 1958.

In chapter two, David Moran is at the Rock along the stream, catching crayfish when beautiful sixteen-year-old Meg arrives. She helps him catch crayfish and explains she is from New York. The two get along well, and Meg amazes David with her skills at things she has never done. David notices a large scar on her arm, and she mentions a car accident, but says little more about it. She seems nervous about staying with the Chandlers, but David is happy, as they are now neighbors. David admits now, as an adult, that he looks back on that day and hates Ruth, because on that day, he innocently became enamored with Meg, and over the next few months, Ruth would ruin that and everything else. He has researched Ruth, or Mrs. Chandler, and cannot see the woman she claimed she was before she was married. He tells her to cash his revenge check in hell.

In chapter three, David as a boy admits that the Chandler house was always the place to be, since Ruth was a permissive parent who let the kids do as they pleased. He explains the neighborhood was a dead end, and everyone knew one another. He goes to the Chandlers and finds ten-year-old Ralphie, or Woofie, feeding worms to ants. Donny, David's best friend, is inside on the couch. The house is neat and tidy. The two talk good naturedly of Willie, Donny's twin brother, and of Meg, and head to Eddie Crocker's house. David admits Eddie is crazy and often cruel, but interesting because of his daring behaviors. The two talk of Meg as they walk, and both admit she is pretty. Donny notes Susan was severely disabled in the accident, and has to walk with braces. Donny informs David that Meg's parents both died in the accident and that Ruth says Meg got off easy. David sees Meg as heroic, and as an adult, repeatedly plays that moment in his mind.

Chapter One through Chapter Three Analysis

In the opening chapters, readers meet three of the primary characters in the novel. The entire first chapter foreshadows the events in the book as it becomes clear David, as an adult, went through something terrible at the hands of Ruth in 1958. It is also clear he and his young friends did something to Meg Loughlin, although at this point in the novel,



it is unclear what they have done. His comments of pain and suffering, though, clearly show he is haunted, and his unsuccessful relationships also lend to this idea.

In chapter two, David the child is introduced, and is clearly a good kid, with a genuine childlike innocence that is endearing. He is automatically likable as he meets Meg, a lovely young woman who awakens in David a new sense of adolescence as he finds himself attracted to Meg. As they catch crayfish together, it is clear these characters have a lot in common and have a genuine liking for one another. However, Meg's reaction to David's questions of the scars foreshadows the knowledge that her parents died in the same crash. Also, her reaction to mentions of Ruth indicate there is a problem already brewing within the situation. Additionally, David's comments about Ruth indicate he now has a deep hatred for her, again foreshadowing the events in later chapters.

Donny is introduced in chapter three, as is Eddie, in part. Donny is much like David, and the two have a close, almost brotherly relationship. The Chandler house is shown to be clean and tidy. This small fact is used later in the novel as Ruth's insanity begins to take over, and the house becomes a mess. Willie is introduced at this point only as a twin brother to Donny and as having bad teeth. This small difference is symbolic, as the two characters are shown to be drastically different in personality, as well. Woofer is also introduced, and again, his behaviors are indicative of a highly disturbed personality, which is revealed more later in the novel. Eddie, an insane friend, is also introduced, and his erratic, cruel behavior is mentioned, foreshadowing his involvement later in the novel. David's opinion of Meg as a heroine is fitting, and shows again his admiration for the young woman. The knowledge that David is still haunted by the concept that Ruth noted Meg got off easy again foreshadows the horrible treatment of Meg in Ruth's hands.



Chapter Four through Chapter Seven

Chapter Four through Chapter Seven Summary

In chapter four, David is away from Meg for a few weeks, but returns in time for the Carnival, run by the Kiwanis. David watches as the carnies put up the rides, and finds Cheryl and Denise, two local girls, watching as well. Cheryl is a gangly young woman and well behaved, whereas Denise, Eddie's sister, is reckless and daring. David likes Cheryl, but is often annoyed with Denise. The three talk of the Carnival and the upcoming rain, and Denise mentions The Game. David recalls last summer, when The Game, or Commando, started in the woods. One child is it, and the other children make a base camp in the woods. The one who is it tries to hit as many kids as possible in camp with apples. The one who is it never wins, and the camp kids then get to do whatever they want to the Commando. When Denise began playing, the boys often stripped her. Denise asks again about the game, but the sky opens up and rain begins to fall. David runs home.

In chapter five, David explains that his mother and Ruth dislike one another, and he is rarely allowed to sleep over. He remembers staying on Carnival nights, however, and listening as the older kids rode the rides the younger ones were too small to ride. Now, David finds himself alone at the Carnival, wondering what to do. He sees Meg, and goes to her to find she is fascinated by the Ferris Wheel. He offers to ride with her and she accepts. David is shy, but enjoys being with Meg. He notices a ring on her finger, and the two talk of the death of her parents as she explains the ring is her mother's wedding band. Meg admits Ruth is funny sometimes and that Woofers is weird, but she believes Ruth means well. She admits she doesn't like the basement or the shelter at the Chandlers.

In chapter six, David explains that within the Chandler basement is a shelter, built by Ruth's ex husband. It is an eight by ten by six foot concrete room with a heavy metal bolted door, no lights, and only a barred, wired window. The shelter has not been used, and is dirty and unkempt. David finds it scary.

Chapter seven finds Ruth talking to the boys about "hoochie-koochie" girls in Carnivals she saw as a young girl. She explains these were young girls who danced with little clothing. She also discusses seeing the freak show. When finished with her beer, she tells Meg to stay behind while Ruth and the boys go to the Carnival. She reminds her to stay out of the icebox so she doesn't get fat, and tells David to go meet Susan. He does, and finds her shy, but friendly. She is frail and weak, and clearly damaged from the car accident, but she smiles.



Chapter Four through Chapter Seven Analysis

In chapter four, David begins to admit he finds himself drawn to Meg and being curious about her, foreshadowing his involvement in Meg's life in the rest of the book. The Game is also introduced in this chapter, which is important since the Game is the launching point for Meg's torture later in the book. It is clear that the point of the Game is not to win, but instead to allow others to push you to new limits. It is the masochistic component that makes the Game enjoyable, and when combined with sex, the Game becomes a dangerous one for preteens and teenagers with already raging hormones. The description of Denise given in this chapter, and the comparisons to Eddie, foreshadow Denise's involvement in Meg's torture.

The interplay between Meg and David in chapter five lays the foundation for the budding relationship between these characters and lends a depth to the storyline. The obvious crush David has on Meg is innocent, sweet, and heartbreakingly tender in light of later components of the novel, and it is this scene that will torment readers as David begins to be a voyeur on Meg's torture later. The ring, clearly treasured by Meg, is brought to the forefront in the chapter as well, and Meg's comments about Ruth's dislike for it foreshadow her stealing of it later. Additionally, it is clear in this chapter that Meg has misgivings about Ruth, and that their relationship is off to a rocky start. Finally, the comments of Meg about the cellar and David's description of it in chapter six not only set the scene for Meg's torture chamber later in the novel, but also foreshadows the move to the basement by Ruth and the others.

Ruth's comments in chapter seven begin to reveal her true nature. Ruth's descriptions of the dancing girls of her youth is clearly meant to arouse the young boys, and shows her perception of them as men instead of small children. This perception is part of the problem later in the novel. Her treatment of Meg in this chapter, although mild, also shows the beginnings of Ruth's torment of the young girl. Finally, David's meeting of Susan and his descriptions of her frailty serve to help the reader understand the situation that plagues Meg later in the novel, when she is forced to choose between abuse and the abuse of her already broken sister.



Chapter Eight through Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Eight through Chapter Fifteen Summary

In chapter eight, David, Donnie, Willie, Tony Morino, Kennie Robertson, and Eddie spend the night in a tent in David's yard. Woofer is absent, as he is being punished for putting his toy soldiers in the incinerator. The boys drink soda, eat junk food, smoke, and tell jokes until the talk turns to Playboy and sex. Eddie claims he reads his father's copy, and the boys discuss the breasts of the models. After good natured talk, the boys begin to discuss whether any have seen real breasts. Tony admits he has seen his mother's, and the boys surmise Meg's are likely nice. The boys sneak over the yards to the back yard of the Chandler home, in an attempt to see Meg undress for bed. They take turns, and when Donnie and Willie return without seeing anything, they are frustrated and seem to be angry with Meg directly, as though it were her fault. David wonders about their anger, but feels similarly after his turn. None of the boys see anything, and they are left with the dull ache of unsatisfied lust. David is torn, however, in that he also feels guilty about spying on Meg. Back at the tent, Willie suggests they might be able to get Meg into the Game.

In chapter nine, David hears Ruth yelling at someone, and sneaks over to peek. He finds Ruth yelling at Susan for dropping the laundry, although it is clearly difficult for her to carry it with her crutches and leg braces. Susan is sobbing, and Ruth finally seems to relax her anger and pats Susan on the shoulder. David notes her tired looking face, and he could swear now she was crying. He wonders for whom.

In chapter ten, Ruth recruits the children to help her rid the trees of tent worms. She shows them how to light a torch and burns the nests. The children watch as the worms are burned alive, hundreds of them baking in the fire. Meg is sickened, and asks to do something else. Ruth accuses her of trying to make her look bad, in that she feels Meg is being ladylike, which insinuates that Ruth is not a lady. Meg is baffled at her anger, as are the other children. Ruth sends her away to do laundry, noting that "her boys can handle it".

In chapter eleven, the boys finish the nests and David returns home to shower. David hears his mother in the living room and thinks of his father's affairs with the many women at his bar. He goes outside and is beckoned over by Meg, who tells him she doesn't understand why Ruth hates her. She tells David Ruth is mean to her and Susan and that she can't please anyone in the family. She feels the boys look at her in a way that isn't right, and don't see her the rest of the time. She tells David she used to paint, but can't anymore because she is so unhappy and because she thinks Ruth would make fun of her. David tries to get her to make one for Ruth, but when she refuses, he convinces her to paint a picture for him. She agrees. The following day, in chapter twelve, Meg comes to David's with a container of milk for his mother and a watercolor for him. The painting is very good, showing a boy lying on his stomach on rocks by a stream.



In chapter thirteen, David takes the painting to a framing shop. After dinner, David takes the painting to Ruth, and tells her Meg painted it for her, believing he is doing a good thing. Meg stands in the background, silently mouthing for him not to do so. Ruth is at first seemingly pleased, but soon realizes Meg must have painted the picture for David, due to the content. Ruth becomes bitter, and explains to the boys that all they have to do is be nice to a woman and she will give him things. Ruth asks if all David got was a painting, and David is offended. Ruth notes he is young, but not too young. She says girls are easy, and reminds them her ex-husband thought she was easy and left her with three small children. She asks Meg if the painting is all she gave David, and reminds her that she has what men want between her legs, and it isn't her artwork. Meg is upset, but Ruth continues, telling her that to give a man what he wants makes her a slut. She explains that a slut is a woman who spreads her legs for a man. She threatens that any slutting around will result in a beating. She comments that the painting is a pale thing anyway, and grabs a beer.

In chapter fourteen, David returns home partially inebriated, thanks to Ruth's beer. He feels weird about the evening, and about what Ruth said. He recalls Denise tied to a tree, and wonders if she qualifies as a slut. He thinks about how easy it is to hurt people, and realizes he could hurt people too, as his parents hurt one another. He hears voices drifting from the Chandlers, hears Ruth, Donnie, Willie, and Woofer yelling and sees Meg backing up. Ruth is yelling at her and slaps her, hard. Meg crumbles, crying, and stumbles. Willie begins to advance on Meg, but is stopped by Ruth. They pick up the room, and go to bed, as David watches. In chapter fifteen, while bowling with Willie and Donnie, David learns the boys have involved Meg in a Game of their own.

Chapter Eight through Chapter Fifteen Analysis

The boys in chapter eight show themselves as the hormone-filled young men they are. As they experience sexual excitement while looking through the windows at Meg, they also experience sexual frustration. This anger, misinterpreted as anger at Meg herself, plays a large part in the novel in the torture of Meg, as the boys take out their sexual frustrations and anger on Meg as a member of the female sex. It is not Meg they are angry at, nor is she to blame, but their young age combined with their hormones confuses them. David's own feelings, including both his sense of guilt and his need to see Meg, shows his dueling wants and desires, which is a major cause of his voyeuristic behavior throughout the novel, as well. The suggestion of getting Meg into the Game, knowing the sexual nature involved when Denise plays, foreshadows the sexual abuse of Meg later in the novel.

In chapter nine, Ruth's anger at Meg begins to boil over and to rear up even in front of others. Ruth reacts to Meg's squeamishness by assuming it is directed at her and somehow meant to lessen her in the eyes of the young men. Again, Ruth's statements, along with her fear of what the young boys think, show her perception of them as men instead of children. This perception means Ruth sees Meg's comments as intending to degrade her in front of the opposite sex. Such concepts clearly have a hand in the eventual abuse Ruth heaps onto Meg. This concept is shown again in chapter eleven,



when Meg explains to David that Ruth hates her. It is clear by this point, and by Meg's fear, that Ruth is cruel to her and Susan, and that the boys are sexually attracted to her. These concepts foreshadow again the sexual treatment of Meg and the abuse at the hands of the Chandler family. David's convincing of Meg to make him a drawing foreshadows his attempts in the next chapter to help her. The innocence and sweetness of the painting in chapter twelve reminds readers of Meg's liking of David, of her childlike nature, and of her inner light, despite her situation.

The cruelty of Ruth in chapter thirteen is a turning point in the novel. David's attempts to help Meg backfire, and Ruth's anger and bitterness come out in full force. It is clear, due to her statements to the boys about their father, about women being sluts and men taking advantage, that Ruth is beginning to see herself in Meg, and is beginning to take out her own anger and frustration at her departing youth on Meg. She accuses Meg of several completely irrational acts, and causes David to be uncomfortable. Her statements also show again that she treats the boys as men, and not children.

At this point, Ruth's stability begins to waver, and David and the other begin to see her violent nature. This turn in Ruth is further shown in her physical abuse of Meg in chapter fourteen. David's thoughts in this chapter also foreshadow his own involvement in the torture of Meg, as he contemplates the abuse of others. At this point, Ruth still stops Willie from harming Meg, but this foreshadows her eventual permission to the others to participate in Meg's torture. The discovery during chapter fifteen that the boys have involved Meg in a form of the Game is a harrowing statement, foreshadowing events in the next chapters as the abuse of Meg increases.



Chapter Sixteen through Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Sixteen through Chapter Twenty-Four Summary

In chapter sixteen, David mentions he and Donny often spoke late into the evening about their dreams, hopes, and other topics, and he often was the last one to speak, long after Donny was asleep. He still has problems talking about his issues. He also admits he never had children because he and the other children will never be right after what they did, and didn't do. In chapter seventeen, David walks into the Chandler house to find Donny, Willie, and Woofier tickling Meg. When Woofier pinches her breast, however, Meg hits him. She storms from the house, and the boys tell Ruth. Ruth returns to the bedroom and asks Susan to tell the story. She does, and Ruth accuses her of helping Meg by not trying to stop her. She spansks Susan twenty times, both for Meg's hitting of Woofier and Susan's own lack of action. She makes David and the others watch. David realizes Ruth is playing the Game with Susan, in that Susan is unable to move due to her braces, and he suddenly feels less awkward and less guilty about the game. David returns home, but sees Meg outside and wonders if she knows. Later, he finds Meg and Susan outside, where Meg is soothingly brushing Susan's hair, and singing to her gently. He envies their closeness.

In chapter eighteen, Meg asks David to loan her money, so she can buy a sandwich. When asked why, she explains that Ruth has forbidden her from eating anything or making anything in the kitchen, because she says she is fat. David laughs, but realizes she is not kidding, and that she has not eaten in a day. In chapter nineteen, Meg brings David's change, and the children decide to go to the brook. They stop at the Chandler house, where Donny asks Meg to make Koolaid. Ruth arrives, and accuses Meg of eating, since she is in the kitchen. When asked to open her mouth for Ruth to smell, she refuses in such a dignified way, the others are astonished. But when Ruth threatens to get Susan, Meg crumbles, and touches Ruth, begging her not to. Ruth hits her, twice, and then has Donny and Willie hold her down while she tries to pry her mouth open. She bites Ruth, and Ruth in turn hits her in the stomach. David turns to leave, and is told by Ruth not to say anything, as this is a domestic dispute. David leaves and thinks of Meg, crying and hurt, and feels nothing.

In chapter twenty, David goes to the brook and hears Meg scream as he nears. He arrives to find Woofier and Willie throwing cans and glass jars at her. To avoid being severely injured, she dives into the water, slipping along the rocks. She escapes into the brush as the boys laugh. David thinks to himself that they can't wade anymore due to the glass, and walks home. In chapter twenty-one, David and Donny sit with parents and their friends while the town gathers for the Fourth of July. Donny and David go for ice cream, and see Meg talking with a police officer. They listen, and hear Meg speaking



of Ruth's abusive behavior. Jennings sees the boys, and leads Meg away, still talking. Donny thinks Jennings won't believe her.

The following night, in chapter twenty-two, Jennings arrives at the house. David is home with his babysitter, who often agrees to let him do anything as long as he doesn't tell his parents she has her boyfriends over. David goes to the Chandlers after the police leave, and everyone is staring at Meg. They confront her, and Donny accuses her of bringing the police to pick up his mother. She apologizes, but Donny slaps her. Ruth tells him to stop, and asks Meg what she was thinking. She speaks to Meg about not being afraid of anyone, and wonders aloud what to do. She sends Meg and Susan to their room, and sends David home, claiming she has hard thinking to do. She gives him a beer to take home, and he drinks it in his room, thinking of Meg of contemplating helping her. He wonders if she needs help, or if Ruth's treatment of her is normal.

In chapter twenty-three, Ruth decides Meg can no longer leave the house. David feels almost relieved, as he no longer feels responsible for helping her. He spends time away from the family. Everyone in the neighborhood knows what is happening at the Chandlers. The children begin to feel contempt for Meg, in light of her conversation with police. The children believe they are property, and as such, have no right to complain of their treatment. Even David begins to resent her. As a result, he notes in chapter twenty-four, the situation moves to the basement.

Chapter Sixteen through Chapter Twenty-Four Analysis

David's admitting of his emotional distance in chapter sixteen not only shows the permanent damage his actions did to him, but also foreshadow the events in the chapters ahead as he talks about what he did and did not do at the time. The situation in chapter seventeen is yet another turn in the story, as Ruth goes from mildly abusive to Meg to complete abuse of Susan. This chapter also shows a subtle shift in the boys, as their tickling of Meg takes on a sexual undertone. David's realizations at this point that Ruth is essentially playing the Game with Susan symbolizes the depth of the situation. An adult is abusing a helpless child, just as they do during their play. This realization allows David and the others to feel less guilt, in that their own actions are mimicked by someone in authority, making them acceptable. Susan and Meg's clear sisterly emotions shock David, however, and make him realize there is a deep connection, foreshadowing the closeness of the girls throughout the book.

By chapter eighteen, the situation has clearly gotten worse, as Meg is no longer allowed to eat. Her refusal to steal, however, again shows Meg as a heroic character who is unwilling to do wrong even in the face of hunger or abuse. David's agreement to loan her money shows him as a caring character once again, as well. In chapter nineteen, however, the abuse of Meg takes on an even more serious note, when the children of Ruth are asked to openly participate. Donny is an unwilling helper, but Willie clearly enjoys his part. The abuse occurs in front of others, as well, showing Ruth's decline in her ability to maintain her emotions. David is clearly upset by Meg's abuse, but he and



the others have no choice but to admire her. Meg's dignity in this chapter serve to further show her character as heroic and strong. Her only weakness is shown when Ruth threatens to get Susan. This weakness is a factor that is used by Ruth throughout the novel. David is able to turn of his emotions in this chapter, but only because he can compare himself to her. He is still under the impression that while the abuse of Meg is severe, it is not yet out of the ordinary.

In chapter twenty, the involvement of the children becomes more apparent. Willie and Woofer now actively torment Meg. Having been given permission to hurt her, the boys now find opportunities to do so. While David is angry, he is only angry that the boys have polluted their swimming area. He is still not able to see the severe damage the abuse is doing to Meg. However, when Meg tells the police, the boys know the situation has turned serious. The police, in a complete lack of involvement, visit the home, but do nothing to help Meg or Susan. Donny, previously an unwilling participant in her abuse, now hits Meg, clearly upset. Whereas he was unwilling to harm Meg without reason, he now has reason, and seems willing enough. Ruth, on the other hand, appears coldly uninvolved, which is frightening. This cold, calm persona foreshadows the mental unraveling of Ruth, and the situations to come. Her treatment of David, in giving him beer, again shows her lack of parental responsibility, foreshadowing her ability to hurt Meg without remorse. While David thinks of helping her, he is also unsure if the situation is normal. As has been mentioned throughout the story, the children of the neighborhood are often beat by their parents. while this is not normal, it is considered acceptable, and until now, Ruth has done nothing severely outside of the acceptable realm of abuse. By chapter twenty-three, this leads to a feeling of contempt for Meg. This children of the neighborhood accept their roles as children, in that they feel as though they are simply belongings of their parents. They have no rights outside of those given to them by others, and they are unable to participate in anything without permission. His resentment allows him to distance himself from her, emotionally, making it easier to witness her abuse later in the book. The statement in chapter twenty-four leads readers to the knowledge that the abuse is taking another step, and is escalating to a point of no return.



Chapter Twenty-Five through Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Five through Chapter Twenty-Eight Summary

In chapter twenty-five, David goes to the Chandler's to hear commotion downstairs. He arrives to find the boys and Ruth using Meg as a tackling dummy. David feels a surge of power as he realizes he could join them. He believes, for a moment, that she is separate from them, and that this separation is perhaps justified. He realizes now the situation was personal, and that it touched a deep part of him he is shameful of now, that he wanted something bad to happen to Meg. He realizes how he learned to hate and fear from that moment, in the basement, with Ruth and the others.

They continue to tackle her, trying to make her cry. She refuses, but does crumble to the floor when she hits her head. They leave, locking her in the shelter. They eat a snack, and Ruth flips through a magazine, noting that Meg is much prettier than the model in an ad. In chapter twenty-six, Donny tells David to spend the night, as they have something to talk about. When he asks his parents, in chapter twenty-seven, however, his mother refuses, noting there are girls over there now. His father, however, lets him, to the anger of his mother. In chapter twenty-eight, Donny tells David they told Ruth about the Game. David is angry, knowing that Ruth knows they tie young girls to trees naked, but Donny reassures him. In fact, he notes, they are playing it in the basement with Meg.

David goes down to find Meg tied to the rafters, arms and legs spread, gagged and blindfolded. Ruth and the others are gathered around. She is standing on a pile of books, and they are slowly pulling them out one by one, straining her arms and legs tighter against the ropes. They explain that she must tell a secret before they let her go. They take all the books and Meg is breathing hard, sweating. David finds her beautiful. Donny suggests they strip her, and Willie and Woofers agree.

Meg begins struggling again, jumping against them and the ropes. Willie strikes her in the head with a book, and David finds his voice, suggesting it is not a good idea. Woofers turns on him, snarling that they have permission. Ruth agrees to the plan, and Donny goes to her with a switchblade. He undoes her blouse, and cuts it away from her. He pulls down her shorts, and Ruth asks if she is ready to confess. The boys, however, claim she is not, and want to remove her bra and panties. Woofers mentions he wants to see her do the hoochy-koo. Donny cuts away her bra, and David finds himself impressed by her breasts. Her panties are removed, and David wonders how she would feel to the touch. Meg is sobbing, and David is highly aroused. Ruth begins playing with her own breasts.



Meg silently agrees to confess, and they remove her gag. They ask her to admit to masturbation, sexual disease, and to cry. She asks if David is there, and he realizes she doesn't want him there, doesn't want him to see this. He is ashamed, but knows he cannot leave, both out of fear and out of desire. She also asks if her sister is present, and when she finds out she is, she moans. They tell her to confess, and she strongly refuses, noting there is no confession. She wearily asks them to leave her alone. David realizes when she is allowed to speak, she is Meg again, and not a helpless victim. They are left with unsatisfied sexual urges, and are angry. Donny reaches out to touch her breast, but Ruth tells him no. She says she is unclean, and warns that no one is to touch her sexually. Ruth turns to leave, but reminds Meg that it could be her sister hanging there. She also tells her she will hear her confess, eventually. She is gagged again, and they leave the basement, leaving her naked in the dark.

Chapter Twenty-Five through Chapter Twenty-Eight Analysis

Chapter twenty-five reveals David's true guilt and his shame. David is not immune to human emotion, but somehow convinces himself temporarily that Meg deserves the treatment she is getting. The sense of power he feels when he is watching them torture Meg overpowers his own sense of reality and his sense of right and wrong. He knows now he was waiting for things to escalate, to entice that hidden dark part of him Ruth helped to find. As the boys abuse Meg physically, it is clear the situation has worsened. Ruth's own lack of feeling on the topic, clear by her comparison of Meg to a model, shows her decline in mental ability, and her spiral into insanity. Chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven simply foreshadow the events in the next chapter, as David realizes something important has happened, and as his parents again fight.

Chapter twenty-eight shows the beginning of the end for Meg. It is clear by the end of this chapter that the situation in the Chandler household cannot end well. Things move from physical abuse to sexual abuse rapidly in this chapter. Woofer's comments about hoochy-koo and his comments about having permission show clearly that Ruth is to blame for this spiral. Without her permission and her involvement, the events unfolding would never have occurred. It is Ruth who allows the boys to beat Meg, and Ruth who allows them to strip her. As she massages her own breasts, Ruth is clearly aroused by the situation, showing her extreme mental breakdown. The boys are aroused, but it is Ruth who prevents them from touching Meg.

Ruth knows that to deny them the right to touch will only make matters worse, but she seems not to care. Instead, she only allows the Game to go so far, and then ends it, leaving everyone angry, with only Meg as a victim. The fact that she forces Susan to watch is equally nauseating, and shows the level of her sickness. David finds himself so attracted he is unable to turn away. However, this turns to guilt as Meg asks only if he is there. David knows Meg doesn't want him to be participating, in that it is him she trusts, and him she thinks of as her only ally. That he feels guilt at this knowledge shows he is not immune to her suffering, but choosing to ignore it in favor of his own needs and desires. Yet again, however, Meg surprises everyone by taking the wind out of their

game, as she refuses their desires, knowing that by doing so she removes the fun for them. She is again heroic, and again strong in the face of their weakness. Although she is left alone in the dark, naked, bruised, and beaten, she does not give in.



Chapter Twenty-Nine through Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Nine through Chapter Thirty-Three Summary

In chapter twenty-nine, David admits they are tormented at thoughts of Meg that night, and that they must go see her again. They quietly go downstairs, and David admits that watching her was like standing in front of a shrine, or watching an animal in the zoo. He admits now that had Meg not been strong and pretty, the situation likely would not have happened, as he thinks now their torture of her was a statement against that beauty. They agree to give her water, and take off the gag. She thanks them, and asks if they can slacken the ropes. David realizes he is so physically attracted to her, it is difficult to think beyond her nakedness. They agree to untie her, if she doesn't fight when they touch her. Meg refuses, and they gag her again, pointing out that they still have a deal. They gave her water, and she is not to tell Ruth they were there. Meg agrees. David loudly suggests they give her slack by moving the table closer, then quietly points out she might be grateful later. They agree, and give her a little slack. David believes Meg will remember this, and let him touch her someday.

In chapter thirty, Ruth has untied Meg and allowed her to drink tea and eat dry toast. She has difficulty swallowing, Ruth tells her to eat, and Meg says it is hard for her, but she will drink the tea, and eat the toast later. Ruth explodes, knocking the tea from her hand, and crushing the toast with her loafer. She screams about Meg wasting food, and tells her Susan will be forced to clean up the tea. Meg begs, but Susan is brought down. Willie and Donny hold Meg while Ruth beats Susan's bare behind with a belt. Susan is sobbing, and Meg struggles to be free. When it is over, Susan and Meg look at each other, and David notices again a shared moment. Then Meg looks at Ruth, and David sees rage and savagery in her eyes. Ruth tells the boys to clear out anything that could be used as a weapon, and while they are hanging nails to put them on outside the shelter, David looks at Meg. He reminds her she could run away with his help, and Meg asks angrily what he would want in return. She nods to Susan, and reminds David that Susan is unable to run. Susan begins sobbing, and tells Meg they will do something to get away.

In chapter thirty-one, David stays away, and only sees Donny a few times. He tells him Meg is not allowed water, nor allowed upstairs at all any more, and that he has to empty her bedpan every day. David is tormented by thoughts of Meg before the abuse, and during, and her sexuality. David tries talking to his father, but during the discussion he realizes that his father has hit his mother in the past, and that he believes people deserve their abuse. David realizes he should talk to his mother.

By chapter thirty-two, David's fantasies about Meg are out of control, and he feels he has to see her again. He arrives to find Ruth lecturing a bound Meg in the basement



about God and her vagina being a Curse that will cause her the same pain Ruth herself has faced in life. Ruth tells her she will burn it out of her, and begins throwing lit matches at her while verbally abusing her. Meg's dress lights on fire, and just as David is about to put it out, Ruth does so, laughing. In her eyes, David sees no kindness, no compassion, and no laughter. He thinks of them as feral eyes. They go upstairs to play cards, while Meg is left downstairs.

In chapter twenty-three, the boys come home, and mention they should wash Meg. Ruth agrees, and the boys go downstairs and get her. Ruth seems distant and unresponsive, and David notes there is something wrong with her. He also notices the house is filthy, with dirty dishes laying all over, and dust and grime covering everything. Ruth asks why no one bought beer, and they remind her they are too young. She barely registers that fact. She has scotch instead.

They strip Meg, tie her hands behind her back, and turn on only the hot water. Meg realizes what is about to happen, and begins to fight them, but Ruth threatens to get Susan instead. David watches as they drag Meg in, and begin burning her with the water while she screams in agony. He runs.

Chapter Twenty-Nine through Chapter Thirty-Three Analysis

David's actions in chapter twenty-nine show again that he is torn between his physical and sexual desires for Meg and his guilt about her confinement. He wants to see her naked, and even goes so far as to convince the others to loosen her ropes in the hopes that he has impressed Meg enough for her to allow him to touch her later. It is clear that all the boys desire her, and want her. Meg is still in control, as is shown by her sense of dignity in this chapter, and her unwillingness to help them rape her. David's comments about being in front of a shrine and watching an animal at the zoo symbolize his own torn feelings between idolization of Meg and seeing her only as a prisoner.

By chapter thirty, it is clear Ruth is beginning to unravel. Her outburst toward Meg, and Meg's clear fear symbolize the increase in violence and anger in Ruth, and foreshadow her unraveling. Following the beating of Susan, Meg's eyes clearly show her rage, and again show Meg to be a powerful character, even when beaten down. The conversation between David and Meg shows again he is still unable to completely help Meg without expectation, and shows that Meg is beginning to understand this. She still has a tenderness toward David however. Also, her clear unwillingness to leave Susan behind foreshadows her inability to flee later in the novel without her sister.

By chapter thirty-one, David is beginning to feel more guilt about his involvement in the torture of Meg, and can no longer stand to be around the situation daily. When David tries to go to his father for help, he realizes that his father too is guilty of abuse, and he becomes more aware of how fragile people are. He realizes he needs to talk to his mother, which foreshadows the scene later in the novel where he tries to do so. It is also



clear, through Donny's conversations in this chapter, that Meg is in serious trouble as she is now a permanent captive in the basement.

David's overwhelming need to see Meg in chapter thirty-two has as much to do with his own guilt and curiosity as it does his need to help Meg. However, what he finds is that Ruth has gone insane and has come to become somewhat heartless. Ruth is no longer mindful of consequences, but instead seems obsessed with the sexuality of Meg, and in ending that sexuality. This scene foreshadows the horrendous "burning out" scene later in the novel, as this chapter reveals Ruth's own belief that a woman's vagina is the root of problems. By chapter thirty-three, even David has come to realize that Ruth, and the entire situation, is spiraling out of control. He notices the home is in disarray, notices Ruth's illness and seemingly dazed state, and notices the filth of the home. It is clear, by this stage, that Ruth is losing her grip on reality, and that the boys are losing it, as well. When Meg is seared in the shower, again showing the theme of burning the womanliness from her, it becomes clear that death is imminent for her. It is no longer possible for the reader to imagine that Ruth or the others will voluntarily allow Meg freedom, but David's escape at the end of the chapter does give the reader hope that he will come to his senses and will help save the girls.



Chapter Thirty-Four through Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Four through Chapter Thirty-Seven Summary

David admits in chapter thirty-four he never ran again. He admits he feels as though he is outside of the torture and pain, but is addicted to seeing how far it will go. For several days after the shower, the Chandlers keep Meg clothed and untied, feeding her soup and sandwiches, allowing her blisters to heal. When David arrives one day, however, Eddie is there, and Meg is again tied up, stomach down on the table. Eddie is beating Meg across the butt with his shoe, while Willie hits her with a belt. David goes upstairs, as Eddie is too into it. Susan is upstairs, doing a puzzle. David asks if the sounds of the torture below bother her, and she notes they do. David tells her he can't stop them, and she replies that she knows. Together, they put together the puzzle, while Ruth lays in her room with a headache. The boys come in, and Eddie asks if they plan to kill her. David knows this is all too possible, and wonders what other outcomes could be possible. He thinks Ruth would not allow Meg's death, but realizes the boys are often left with Meg, alone. Eddie comes nearly each day, sometimes with his sister, in chapter thirty-five. Denise and Eddie force feed Meg crackers and beat her with a curtain rod when she can't eat. They use her again as a tackle dummy.

Ruth is often gone, as her illness progresses. Sores appear all over her body, she loses weight, and cold sores appear. Denise makes Meg cry by pinching her breasts, Willie spansks her violently, and Woofers places insects on her body. Donny often caresses her breasts and vagina lovingly, instead of violently abusing her. He kisses her, but one day, Eddie forces Meg to eat dog feces, and he doesn't kiss her following that event. On another day, David notices nearly all the kids in the neighborhood are in the basement, along with Ruth, and they are again using her as a dummy. Meg seems resigned, and doesn't fight them often. She does as she is told, and takes the abuse without a sound. Often, David notes, they play cards near her, often forgetting she is even there other than to toss insults at her or use her in new ways occasionally.

David realizes Ruth is preoccupied with her illness, and as a result, the kids are less intense in their torment. In a month, school will start, and the Game will have to end. Eddie lets Meg down one day and urinates in her face. Donny realizes Ruth will be angry, and advises they clean up the basement. Donny fills a tub with water and Tide, and they clean her head. Eddie then runs a tub of pure hot water, and shoves Meg's face in it. Ruth is furious, and for several days, they care for Meg as they fear she is blind. Her eyes leak pus, and her face is swollen.

Eddie stays away a few days, but returns on the third day. He and the others tie Meg spread eagle, and Eddie shoves a coke bottle into her vagina. David is not there, but hears that Ruth went ballistic. Eddie and Denise flee, but Ruth screams at her children



about how she is getting old, never leaves the house, and is stuck with her kids. She is breaking everything in the cellar, and then begins verbally abusing Meg, finally kicking her violently in the groin, creating horrible bruising.

David has a nightmare about Meg, and wakes, crying. He goes to his parents' room, and desperately wants to wake his mother to confess. He nearly does, but realizes he too is to blame for Meg's suffering. He leaves, crying harder, and sobs alone in the hallway, aware of his crimes. In chapter thirty-six, he admits he now knows he has to help. However, Donny tells him Ruth is not allowing anyone over. One of the neighborhood kids told his mother, and Ruth now fears intervention. David knows he will have to play their game until he can help Meg escape.

In chapter thirty-seven, Donny convinces Ruth to allow David entry. When he returns to the house, he finds Ruth severely ill, unclean, and mentally unhinged. Woofer is poking Meg with his knife, and Ruth is watching. David notices a mark on her leg, and Donny explains Ruth threw a hot iron at her. Woofer cuts Meg, and Ruth cauterizes it with her cigarette as Meg screams in pain. Ruth touches her own breasts and vagina through her clothing as she burns Meg. She stops only because someone is at the door. Ruth tells her children to answer it carefully, but David convinces her she should go upstairs, in case it is the police. Ruth tells David that if either of them make a sound, she will kill them. When she is gone, David promises Meg he will help her escape that evening. Donny and Willie come back down, and accuses David of calling the police, since Officer Jennings was at the door. David assures them he only said that to Ruth to get her moving, as she was clearly losing her mind. The boys agree, and David goes home, noting the back door of the Chandler home has no latch.

Chapter Thirty-Four through Chapter Thirty-Seven Analysis

By the end of chapter thirty-four, it is clear the abuse of Meg has gone to a new level. With Ruth absent, David knows the only controlling factor, however small it was, is gone, and that the children are left to their own devices. This is a frightening prospect, considering the personalities of the people involved, and these fears are verified when Eddie discusses killing Meg. Even Susan seems to know her sister is in severe danger, but feels helpless. David becomes aware that such an ending is likely.

By chapter thirty-five, it is clear the death of Meg is nearly inevitable. The violence against her is more severe, the humiliation more complete, and the absence of Ruth is more pronounced. When Ruth is present, it is clear she is completely insane by now. Donny still appears to believe his attentions to Meg are loving, but his sexual torture of her is just as humiliating. Meg too seems resigned to her fate.

David almost believes they have become bored with her, and will soon let her go. However, when Eddie nearly blinds Meg, it is clear there is severe danger. Eddie has taken the abuse of Meg to a new, horrifying level, and as such, the other children become more violently involved, as well. His sexual abuse of Meg, including the bottle,



seems to force Ruth over the edge, and her breakdown is complete as Meg becomes the focus of all that is wrong in Ruth's life.

David's own guilt is complete in this chapter, as well, as he finally realizes the extent of his own crime. The scene in his parent's bedroom shows his complete realization that he too is as much to blame as the others. This realization lends home to the reader, in that David now knows he must help Meg.

The intervention of someone seems likely by chapter thirty-six, when individuals begin to tell their parents. By chapter thirty-seven, however, the question becomes one of time in that Ruth is severely mentally insane. Her appearance, her lack of compassion, her masturbation during the burning of Meg, and her threats of death to both David and Meg confirm that she is either insane, or very sick. However, David's assurances to Meg that he will help her again lend hope. His parting thoughts that the door is broken show he plans to help Meg escape, and foreshadow events in the upcoming chapters.



Chapter Thirty-Eight through Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Eight through Chapter Forty-Three Summary

In chapter thirty-eight, David notes that the time frame was one where everyone trusted one another. The Chandler's house has a door without a latch, and David sneaks in to free Meg that night. He sneaks downstairs, and opens the metal door to the shelter. He tells her he will leave the bolt and the screen door undone. He hands her his money, but she notes that if they catch her, they will know someone helped. Instead, he is to leave it at the brook. She is covered in cuts and bruises. She kisses him, with her torn, chapped, bruised lips and David believes they are the softest things on the planet. He begins to cry, apologizing, but she reminds him that it is what a person does last that counts. He hands her a tire iron, and leaves. He goes to the brook, leaves the money, and returns home.

In chapter thirty-nine, David sleeps late and runs to the brook to find the money still there. He knows Meg has been caught. He ponders what to do, but is afraid to go to the police because of his involvement. Instead, he goes to the Chandler's. In chapter forty, Willie leads David downstairs, where Ruth, Woofers, Eddie, Denise, Willie, and Susan watch as Donny rapes Meg. He orgasms, and cannot look David in the eye when finished. Ruth tells Meg that is what she is good for, and warns that Donny likely has a disease now. Susan begins crying for her mother, and they knock her from the chair. Ruth asks if anyone else wants a turn, but refuses Willie, since his brother just had her. Eddie says he wants to cut her, and he and Woofers agree Ruth had told them they could brand her. Woofers is sent for a needle, which is then heated. David tries to convince Ruth they can't possibly brand her like this, but she barely notices him. David realizes she is furious, insane, and a threat to all their lives. She tells her sons to castrate David if he tries to leave. The group decides to carve/burn "I fuck, Fuck Me" into Meg's skin as a brand. Everyone is allowed to do two letters. David asks to leave, but is refused. He mentions there is a lot of screaming.

In chapter forty-one, when they are done, David walks over to Meg. She is beaten badly, bruised, swollen, and burned. Additionally, the letters now stand two inches high across her stomach, half burned and half carved into her skin. Ruth tells Meg she can never marry, because those words are now there forever. David realizes she is right, and that Meg is forever changed. Donny notes Meg isn't as attractive after her branding. They haul her back up to a tied, hanging position, and David notes she seems less exciting, less sexually attractive. Ruth suggests that although men no longer want her, she may want men. She has the boys roll up newspapers, and place them in the sink to light on fire. She explains that women only want a man in one place, between their legs. She suggests they burn that place out of Meg.



David suddenly realizes he is among savages, and that he is now surrounded by evil. He runs for the stairs and makes it outside, but is caught by Donny and Eddie. Back inside, Ruth has him tied up with Meg. Ruth has Woofer light the fire, and Eddie take the tire iron to the fire to heat it thoroughly. When done, they go back inside the shelter. In chapter forty-two, David tells readers he will not tell them of the burning of Meg. He explains that there are some things a person will die without saying. He notes that he watched and he saw. In chapter forty-three, David, Meg, and Susan are alone in the shelter in the dark. Meg is unconscious, and Susan and David are untied. David knows his parents will begin to hunt for him soon. Susan asks if David hates her, and explains that Meg was caught because she came back for Susan. She explains that Ruth has been sexually molesting her, and that Meg couldn't leave without her, so she feels at fault. David reassures her, and Susan gives him a candle and matches she stole from Ruth. However, in the light, Meg is horribly injured. Her cuts glisten, she is horribly bruised, and her burns are oozing. In her unconsciousness, she is tearing at the scar on her arm, ripping it open, attempting to hurt herself. David rips his shirt and covers the scar. Meg awakens in horrible pain, and tells David she can't do it any more. David and Susan work out a plan to try and escape. Using shoelaces, David forms a trip wire inside the opening of the shelter. He explains that he is going to light a fire, and when they come running down stairs, he will use Susan's leg brace to try to beat them enough to escape. David uses the sheet covering Meg for fire fuel, and notices the gaping wound. Meg unconsciously begins working at her scar again as David lights the fire.

Chapter Thirty-Eight through Chapter Forty-Three Analysis

David's decision to help Meg escape foreshadows the events at the end of the novel, but it also shows a turning point in the novel. David has found his own guilt and has chosen to respond to it by helping Meg and betraying his friends. He risks being caught himself to free her, showing his true character. Meg's comments about the last thing you do being the most important not only foreshadow her own actions at the end of the novel, but also again show her as a forgiving, kind, and hopeful person, despite all she has been through. David's reactions to her kiss show his love for her, and the resulting guilt and anguish show he is still a caring, kind human being.

The realization in chapter thirty-nine that Meg has been caught weighs on the reader. David's decision not to go to the police is an anguishing one, in that it is again a selfish decision, and an unintelligent one, as is shown by the results. However, the decision again shows him to be just a child, whose decisions are often selfish and childish in nature. The rape and branding of Meg is one of the most horrific scenes in the novel in chapter forty. The fact that Donny is the rapist is not a surprise, since this has been foreshadowed by his actions throughout the novel, but the fact that Ruth now allows physical contact is a symbol that Meg has ceased to be real to Ruth. The fact that Ruth is allowing her to be raped and branded shows Ruth has no intention of ever allowing Meg to be free. Her death at this point is imminent. Their increasingly horrific treatment



of Susan also shows her to be in serious danger as well. In addition, Ruth's increasingly violent treatment of David shows she is willing to hurt anyone at this point.

By the time David sees Meg in the beginning of chapter forty-one, she is badly hurt. Ruth has altered Meg forever, and firmly believes this is good for her, showing again her insanity. David knows Meg will have to live with this for the rest of her life, although even he knows at this point that the rest of her life will not be long in the basement of the Chandler's. David and Donny both mention the lack of attractiveness of Meg. Ruth has accomplished her goal, in that the boys, her boys, no longer find Meg attractive. After weeks of battery, abuse, violence, anger, and humiliation, Ruth has finally achieved her goal, and Meg has resigned to her fate. This realization symbolizes the beginning of the end for Meg. Throughout the novel she has been a fighter and a dignified person, regardless of their treatment of her. Now, however, she appears beaten.

Ruth's solution to Meg wanting a man is horrific. The novel is thankfully limited on the detail of the procedure done to Meg in chapter forty-two, but it is clear that Ruth has Eddie burn Meg's clitoris and vaginal area with a heated tire iron. David watches this done, and is sickened by it, choosing not to tell anyone of what he saw. Throughout the novel, David has explained the abuse of Meg, but this one specific incident is even unbearable for him, symbolizing the severity of the pain and suffering. David's realization that he has been surrounded by inhumane, evil individuals, and has actually been a part of them, shows his separation from them as a group and his isolation with Meg and Susan, foreshadowing his own captivity.

By chapter forty-three, it is clear David and the others must escape, or they will be killed. His plan, while risky, shows he is determined to beat the Chandlers and to escape. Meg is near death, and David knows that without his help, they will all die. Susan's confession that Meg was caught to save her from sexual abuse only furthers the reader's desire to see Ruth punished for her crimes. Meg's continuous tearing at her scar shows her own desire for death, and her own body's final act to stop the pain and suffering poor Meg has endured. Her body is finally revolting, and David knows he must act.



Chapter Forty-Four through Chapter Forty-Seven

Chapter Forty-Four through Chapter Forty-Seven Summary

In chapter forty-four, David lights the fire, and they begin to cough. The Chandlers come downstairs, and David is able to hit Donny and Ruth. Ruth slams Susan against the wall, knocking her partially unconscious. After much fighting, David is knocked to the ground and is kicked senseless by Donny, Willie, and Ruth. David rolls under the table, only to look out and see another pair of legs. Meg, in her bruised, battered, and broken state, has risen up, and come to his rescue. She has little strength, but manages one step forward to make Ruth's attention focus on her. David notices her eyes are clear and sharp. Ruth rushes her, grabs her head, and smashes it against the wall. Meg slumps to the floor. Ruth stares and asks meekly if she is still breathing. Donny notes she is, but barely. The boys clean up the basement, and go upstairs. David tells Donny he has to tell the police, or Meg will die. Donny leaves them a light, and water. He then locks them in again.

In chapter forty-five, the night wears on, with no interruptions from police. Susan and David care for Meg as best as possible, but she is bleeding from the head and feverish. She wakes once, and is confused as to why David and Susan are there. David tells her what happened again, and Meg tells him she often fantasied about him coming to her rescue. She begins to tell him she begged Ruth to stop, and how she cannot believe Ruth allowed her to be burned. She asks David to get her mother's ring back from Ruth, and he promises he will. They falls asleep, but David wakes to Meg scratching at the floor, hunched over, trying to dig her way out in her semi-conscious state. Her hands are bleeding. David takes her gently, and washes and wraps her fingers. Meg wakes one final time, and states that she believes she will be all right. Then, she dies.

In chapter forty-six, a knock at the door upstairs brings the police and David's father to the cellar. David's father pulls him close and holds him tight, while the police begin firing questions. David admits he saw all of the abuse, but tried to help, and Susan agrees. Ruth asks for a lawyer. She then explodes, calling Meg a slut and a whore, and trying to justify her actions. Jennings tells her to shut up, and begins leading them all upstairs. David sees the ring around Ruth's neck, and finds the strength in himself to fight. Reaching back, he shoves her down the stairs. She breaks her neck on the fall, and dies. Jennings says David stumbled and fell, calling it a tragic accident. Willie and Woofers are frantic, but when David asks to give the ring to Susan, Donny agrees it is her ring. David takes the ring, and takes it upstairs to Susan. They cry together.

In chapter forty-seven, Donny, Willie, Eddie, Denise, Woofers, and David go to juvenile court, where David and Susan testify against the rest. Eddie and the others are sent to reform school, and David is returned to his parents. Susan is sent to foster care. David's



parents divorce, and he rarely sees his father. He graduates, goes to college, marries several times, and is a success on Wall Street. When his mother dies, he comes home and finds newspaper clippings of the obituaries of Ruth and Meg. He also finds clippings of events that happened to the other boys over time. Woofers was arrested for the rape and burning deaths of two young women. His mother had written "I wonder how Donny and Willie are doing?" in the margin, and David, now on his third marriage and constantly afraid of failing someone, wonders how they, and himself, are doing.

In the Author's Note, Ketchum explains that he wrote the book based on a true story, because the woman in the story made him furious, and that he did it to pay tribute to the thousands abused every day. He set it in a time frame he knew, in his own home neighborhood, to make it convincing and real for the reader. He used first person to again add reality, and he hopes that Meg and Susan and David come out heroic, as he believes they are.

In the short story "Do You Love Your Wife", a man struggles to overcome feelings for an ex-girlfriend who ended things with him because she knew things wouldn't work out. He meets with her new husband, and allows himself to be free of her memory. He burns a scar over his heart as a token, and moves on.

In "Returns", a man dies, and finds his spirit back in his old apartment, with a woman who is his girlfriend. She is drunk, and calls animal control to come take his cat. He realizes he was not sent back to save the woman, but instead, to soothe his cat. He does so, and fades. In "We Have Permission", Ketchum and the screenwriters of the movie version discuss their adaptations of the book for the movie.

Chapter Forty-Four through Chapter Forty-Seven Analysis

In chapter forty-four, David's attempts to free them leave Meg nearly dead, but also show her as the heroic character she truly is. Meg mentioned previously to David that it is the final act of a person that shows their true character. In her final act, Meg uses the last of her strength to protect her sister and friend, knowing full well that to do so will likely mean the end of her life. She rises above all possible odds to fight her enemy, and although that enemy wins the battle, the war is won by Meg as those final acts result in her death, which result in the eventual persecution of the boys who tormented her, and end in the death of Ruth. It is clear she knows her actions will result in her own demise, but as David notes, her eyes are clear and she does this act willingly. Ruth, after her outburst, is clearly in shock, and knows her crimes will soon come to haunt her. Donny too is in shock, and with prompting from David, clearly feels remorse and calls police. Meg's request that David retrieve her ring in chapter forty-five, foreshadows the burst of anger David uses to retrieve the ring at the end of the novel. That ring is clearly important to Meg, and since she asks in her dying state, readers know he will kill for that ring. Meg's final show of heroism and defiance, done semi-conscious, shows her inner strength and her inability to simply give in. She is digging at the concrete and dirt in a final effort to escape, caring little about her own pain or suffering. Left alone, Meg likely



would have dug until her fingers were bone. David, seeing her and knowing she is near the end, retrieves her and makes her as comfortable as possible, again showing his caring nature.

Meg's death comes not as a shock, but almost as a relief. Her body has been pushed beyond that of normal human endurance, and she has acted bravely until her death. Her final statement, that she is going to make it, is not as simple as it appears. Instead, Meg seems to know she is dying, and intends her statement to mean she has finally won, and finally made it to freedom in the only way still possible. A continued life for Meg would have been unbearable. Her death is a blessing, and a heroic end to a sad life.

When they are finally rescued, in chapter forty-six, David's murder of Ruth is not surprising. Again, Meg's lesson that what someone does last is the most important is driven home. David takes the ring Meg so desperately wanted and gives it to her sister. Again, this act is David's own final act of defiance against Ruth. In chapter forty-seven, punishments are handed out, and these seem too light in consideration of what the children did. However, this does show that the court systems see the children as excusable for their crimes, despite their severity. Woofers' eventual killing is not surprising, nor is David's own failed life. In the end, Meg is almost lucky to have perished, as those who survived are forever plagued.

In the last few sections, the author gives readers insight into his reasons for writing the book, his ideas for a film version, and a few sample stories. His reasons for writing the book are simple, in that he found the original true case fascinating and horrifying, and wanted to pay tribute to the little girl who was tortured at the hands of an older woman and her children. Ketchum was sickened by the treatment of the girl, and at the adult responsible for the mess, and wanted to make his own version where the children are proud and dignified and most of all, where they win against the evil. In the book version, unlike the true version, Ruth dies at the hands of the tormented, and Ketchum believes that is a more fitting end. The short stories he gives serve to show another side to the writing of Ketchum in that they are not filled with horror and graphic violence, but show a side hinted at in "Girl Next Door". The characters in the short stories are much like David in that they are compassionate, but also somewhat need self-destruction. The final section, which discusses the movie version, is an interesting look at how the novel was adapted for film.



Characters

David Moran

David Moran is the narrator of the story, and the eye witness to the events that lead to the death of Meg Loughlin. David is only twelve years old when he meets Meg. He clearly finds Meg attractive, and seems to develop a crush on her fairly rapidly. David is a decent young man with an unstable home life, due to his parent's failing marriage. He is kind, caring, and seems to genuinely care for others. However, he is also prone to follow his friends, despite his own knowledge that their actions may be wrong.

Throughout the story, David is torn between his loyalty to his friends, his belief that adults are always right, and a gnawing sense within himself that the abuse and torture of Meg at the hands of Ruth Chandler and her sons is horribly wrong. He is often forced to choose between watching the horrific abuse, participating, or simply leaving, and he often chooses to leave or turn away. However, there are times he is forced to watch, and he does find himself abstractedly interested in the events. His sexual fantasies and his age lend to this interest, but he also knows the torment of Meg is very wrong.

In the end, David chooses to stand up in the only way he can, and he attempts to help Meg escape. When he is caught trying to run after Meg is caught, however, he is faced with the same captivity as Meg. While he does succeed in saving himself and Susan, his actions help to end the life of Meg, as she uses the last of her strength to help protect him. Finally realizing his own guilt, he also realizes that Ruth is responsible for the death. His final act is to kill Ruth in revenge of both Meg and Susan and for himself and his friends, as well.

Meg Loughlin

Meg Loughlin is a fourteen-year-old young woman who is sent to live with her aunt following the death of her parents. She and her sister are bright, pretty, and happy young women at the beginning of the story, although it is clear early on that Meg has reservations about her aunt Ruth. Over a short time, she and David Moran begin a friendship, but Meg is consistently berated by her cousins and their mother. Told she is fat, Meg is neither allowed to eat nor enter the kitchen. When she disobeys, she is hit, or her sister is hit instead. When Meg finally attempts to tell authorities of the abuse, she is not believed and is severely beaten.

Over the next several weeks, Meg is sexually abused by her aunt and her cousins, is beaten severely, burned, kicked, cut, mutilated, and raped. When she is helped to escape by David, she finds herself unable to leave her sister and returns for her, only to be caught. She and Susan are then both held captive, along with David. In the end, Meg dies trying to save David.



Throughout the novel, Meg is not only the victim but also the strongest character. Even while tied up, even while being physically abused, Meg's character shows a level of dignity far beyond her age and shows a level of defiance against her abusers that only the extremely courageous could muster. In her darkest hour, this horribly abused young woman rises above her circumstances to defend those she loves, showing the ultimate power of her inner strength.

Ruth Chandler

Ruth Chandler is the mother of three young men. As a single mother, Ruth struggles to maintain her youth. She often treats the boys of the neighborhood as her "men", giving them beer, flirting with them, and allowing them to participate in activities most parents would disagree with. Ruth was wealthy as a child, but married an abuse alcoholic who left her and her three children. She is hard, and an alcoholic herself. Of ill health, Ruth is still a favorite in the neighborhood.

When she received Susan and Meg unexpectedly after their parents' death, Ruth seems to resent their youthful beauty and inner light. She begins to verbally abuse them both and to allow her sons to do the same. Soon, the abuse turns physical, and then highly violent. She sexually molests crippled Susan, and begins regularly beating and violently abusing Meg.

Eventually, the abuse turns horrific as Ruth seems to slowly lose what is left of her sanity. She physically burns Meg with cigarettes, lights her on fire, and places her in scalding hot water. She uses Meg to teach the young men of sex and of the uselessness and danger of women, and seems to take all of her own anger and frustrations about aging on the poor young girl. In the end, she allows the boys to physically rape Meg, and when her actions are discovered, she kills Meg.

Although clearly insane, Ruth has enough mindset left to blame Meg for her own death when authorities come. She is killed by David. Ruth's character serves as the instigator throughout the whole novel, and serves to show that the actions of adults affect children more than one realizes.

Donny Chandler

Donny Chandler is the son of Ruth, and the best friend of David. Donny is a fairly normal twelve-year-old, with a twin brother and a younger brother. His father left early, and he has no father figure in his life. His home is unstable, in that his mother Ruth is physically ill and borders on mental illness much of the time.

Donny is at first enamored by his cousin, who he notes is good at things many boys are good at. He finds her pretty, and seems to place a value on her sexuality, as most twelve year old boys would do. When first ordered to hold Meg for a beating, Donnie is reluctant, showing his hesitation, even at his mother's insistence. As the story unfolds, Donny remains a somewhat reluctant captor, although his need to have Meg sexually



often enrages him, and has a hand in directing his actions. When the boys are given permission to touch Meg, it is Donny who does so tenderly, as though touching a lover. In the end, it is Donny who rapes Meg.

However, when Meg is known to be critically injured, and when the culmination of events comes to a head, it is Donny who leaves a light and water for David, Meg and Susan, and it is Donny who calls the police. Even when his mother is killed by David, it is Donny who allows the police to take Meg's mother's ring from Ruth's dead body and give it to Susan. Donny's character does not seem, throughout the novel, to act out of aggression, but actually out of sexual attraction.

Willie Chandler, Jr.

Willie Chandler, Jr. is the same age as his brother, but a world apart in personality. Willie's attraction to Meg is one of pure anger and sexual rage. Willie is the meaner of the twins, and while he does find Meg attractive, he also enjoys the violence and cruelty the situation displays.

Unlike his twin brother Donny, Willie enjoys participating in the abuse of Meg, and is often the instigator of the physical abuse. It is Willie who first thinks to get Meg into the "Game", and Willie who is first to take a swing at Meg. Willie's character clearly shows that some individuals go along with others not out of fear or responsibility, but enjoyment. While Willie may not have abused Meg without others involved, he clearly has no guilt about his actions.

Ralphie

Ralphie "Woofers" Chandler is the younger brother of Donny and Willie. Ralphie is only ten years old at the time Meg and Susan come to the house. Ralphie enjoys cruelty even before Meg arrives, as he passes his time watching red and black ants eat worms. Ralphie is also the first to use a knife on Meg, and although Ruth is clearly aware of the dangers, it is doubtful Ralphie understands the true danger of his actions. When he draws blood, Ruth cauterizes the wound using her cigarette. He also is the first to use fire, and enjoys scalding her with hot water. His mother tells him of dancing girls, and Ralphie finds himself with sexual concepts far before an age where such ideas are understood. Ralphie's character shows the dangers of a young child in the presence of older children and an unstable mother. His problems existed prior to the introduction of Meg, and continue beyond her. In the end, Ralphie is convicted as an adult for burning two women to death after raping them.

Susan Loughlin

Susan Loughlin is the sister of Meg Loughlin. Having been badly hurt in the car accident that killed her parents, Susan walks with braces on her legs and also has braces on her arms. Unable to defend herself, she often relies on Meg to help spare her from the



Chandlers. Susan is forced to watch as the group destroys her sister. Often, Susan is used as a bargaining tool for Ruth, in that Ruth can make Meg do nearly anything by threatening to harm Susan. Ruth also sexually abuses Susan. It is Susan who causes Meg to return to the house following her escape, in that Meg knows Susan will be severely hurt if she is left behind following Meg's escape. Susan is left alive in the end, and thankfully given to a foster family who loves her, but she is forever damaged.

Eddie Crocker

Eddie Crocker is another character who enjoys pain and suffering. Eddie is, as David puts it, insane. He enjoys living on the edge, and has no respect for right and wrong or morality. Abused by his father, Eddie is an angry young man who likes to fight and loves to hurt others. He is the perfect abuser, and his involvement with Meg escalates the situation at nearly every turn. It is Eddie who brands Meg with words carved into her skin, Eddie who nearly blinds Meg by submerging her face in boiling water, and it is Eddie who uses a heated tire iron to burn Meg's clitoris.

Eddie is cruel, malicious, and unlike Ruth, completely sane. Eddie's character is the instigator of many acts, and unlike Willie, Eddie would likely have damaged Meg without anyone else present. Eddie does not participate out of fear, like David, or responsibility, like Willie, or even out of sexual frustration, like Donny. Eddie hurts Meg because he enjoys hurting people. In the end, Eddie serves only two years for his participation, since he was not present during Meg's actual murder.

Denise Crocker

Denise Crocker is the only female who regularly participates in the abuse of Meg. The same age as the others, Denise is the sister of Eddie, and had many of the same characteristics. She is cruel, and enjoys the attention of others. She plays the Game with the boys, and allows herself to be tied naked to a tree, seemingly even to enjoy her punishments. When brought into the situation with Meg, Denise plays a minor role in her abuse. However, she does not attempt to help in any way, and seems to also enjoy watching Meg suffer.

Officer Jennings

Officer Jennings represents the failure of social institutions to help save Meg Loughlin. Jennings is a local police officer. On the Fourth of July, following several incidents of abuse, Meg tells Jennings of the situation at the Chandler home. Jennings follows up on the situation, but does so in a way that puts Meg in severe danger. Meg is then transferred to the basement, where her torture increases and her death eventually occurs. Jennings does check on the girls again, but does not probe deeply into the situation, as he should. Jennings is one of the officers who finds Meg dead in the end, and he allows David to kill Ruth, seemingly on "accident", even though he knows Ruth's

death was deliberate. Jennings, while not an abuser, is responsible for the death of Meg, in that he did not do his duty to protect a child who came to him for assistance.



Objects/Places

Laurel Avenue

Laurel Avenue is the street on which the novel takes place. It is a dead end street where all the children on the block are close to one another.

Big Rock

The Big Rock is a rock near a small stream where the boys go to catch crayfish. This is where David meets Meg for the first time.

The Shelter

The shelter is in the basement of the Chandler's, and is where Meg is taken to be tortured and eventually killed.

The Woods

The woods are a small wooded area behind the homes situated on Laurel Avenue. The woods are where the children begin to play the Game.

The Game (or Commando)

In the game, one of the children is it. He or she has a safe territory, or the Orchard. The commando, armed with apples, attempts to sneak up on the other children and hit them, thereby knocking them from the game. The commando never wins, but hits as many targets as possible. When captured, the commando is blindfolded, gagged, and tied to a tree. The survivors can do anything to the commando at that point. At times, this becomes dangerous, sexually abusive, or violent.

The Crowd

Throughout the novel, the idea of crowd mentality is used. In the book, the crowd is the group of teenagers who abuses and torments Meg.

Tent Worms

Tent worms are small insects that make nests in the trees and eventually kill them. Ruth and the boys burn the tent worm nests, but Meg refuses.



The Ring

The ring is given to Meg by her mother. Ruth steals the ring, and David takes it from her following her death.

Terrytoon

A Terrytoon is a cigarette Ruth smokes heavily throughout the book.

The Curse

According to Ruth, the Curse of women is their sexual organs.



Themes

Mob Mentality/Bystander Effect

One of the primary themes within the novel is the concept of the mob mentality and the bystander effect. The concept behind the mob mentality phenomenon is that when an individual, such as David or the others, is involved in a group, that group becomes the norm by which standards are judged. In other words, if acting alone, David and the others would not likely have taken part in the abuse of Meg. However when placed as part of a group, the individual consciousness is overrun by the standards set forth by the group. Willy and Donny would likely not have been violent with Meg, and certainly would not have raped her, had it not been for the previous actions of the group. As part of a group, they feel protected, and less guilty of their crimes, even though individually, they never would have completed such acts. Also, David feels he is less responsible when he is in the group, because he is not actively participating, but is instead simply watching. Since no one else in the group is telling the police or anyone else, David therefore does not either. This theme is clear not only with the situation with Meg, but in the Game, as well. There too, the group of children act as a group, instead of as individuals. The individual concepts of right and wrong become immaterial as the group activities go beyond what is generally considered acceptable. The novel shows, in graphic, horrifying detail, the results of allowing such mentality.

Role of Parents in Children Behavior

The role of the parents in the behavior of children is another theme throughout the novel. In the beginning, the boys generally look to Ruth, the neighborhood mother, for indications of right and wrong. When she tells them not to touch Meg, they don't. They don't hit her or harm her until Ruth begins to do so herself. It is when Ruth hits Meg that the children find themselves also hurting her, and only when Ruth gives permission do they begin cutting her. In fact, several times throughout the novel the children of Ruth note that she has given her permission and thereby made the activities acceptable, showing again the strong role parental permission plays on the lives of these children. Ruth allows them to drink beer, smoke cigarettes, and seems to think of them as her men, rather than little boys. This concept taints many of her actions towards the young men, and changes her role from parent to conspirator rapidly.

It is not just Ruth's role that affects the behavior of the young men and women. Eddie, the most violent of the group, takes after his father, who is known to be an abusive drunk. His sister, too, is a dangerous female, in that she seems to enjoy the attention of the young men around her, even when that attention borders on sexual abuse. David questions his own father about hitting females, in an attempt to understand his own guilt about the treatment of Meg. But his own father, he realizes, has hit his mother in the past and informs him that while a man shouldn't hit a woman, he sometimes is driven to



it. Such an idea in the head of a small child is irresponsible, at best, and shows that parents do have a role in the behaviors of their children.

Responsibility

Another theme in the novel is the personal responsibility of the people involved in the eventual death of Meg. Obviously, Ruth has the brunt of responsibility in the situation, as she is the lead adult in the group. Had Ruth been a proper parent and adult role model, Meg would not have been harmed. However, on the other hand, Ruth's responsibility in the situation is countered by her clear decline in health and mental capability. Her increasing insanity could, for some, be argued to result in a diminished capacity for responsible behaviors. In addition, her children had a large responsibility in the situation, in that they could see the decline of Ruth but did not report her activities, nor did they decline to participate. However, their responsibility, in their minds, also is tainted by their relationship to their mother.

It is clear several times in the novel that Ruth's children are torn between their love and honor of their mother and their actions toward Meg. Even when Ruth is horrible to Meg and is physically abusing her, they defend Ruth if Meg attempts to hurt her. When Meg goes to the police, the boys see it as an attack on Ruth, rather than an attempt by Meg to stop a horrible situation.

David, too, has a duality issue with responsibility. On the one hand, he is responsible to his friends and to Ruth, as an adult. On the other hand, he witnesses atrocious acts against a young woman and has a responsibility to her to help. Even though he does not participate, he is still responsible for the problem through his inaction. Even Susan and Meg themselves bear at least some responsibility for the situation. Both girls remain silent after their first attempt to contact police, because their first attempt resulted in severe punishment. However, had Susan told someone, she may have been able to save her sister. Again, however, this responsibility is paired with a fear of retribution, and a fear of harm.

In all cases, then, it is clear that the responsibility of the characters is, at the very least, often paired with a perception by the characters of alternate responsibility that clouds their judgment, leaving the reader to discern who is truly at fault.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in the novel is first person. It is told from the viewpoint of David, a bystander in the torment of Meg. This point of view is reliable, in that the person telling the tale is in the room as the horrific events occur and is friends with many of the perpetrators in the story. His reactions and eyewitness accounts prove him to be knowledgeable, and his torn emotional dialogs show him to be an honest storyteller. This point of view, according to Ketchum himself, is necessary, in that it draws the reader into the room, and makes him or her a co-conspirator to the events.

One of the primary themes in the novel is the emotional torment of the narrator, and this first person viewpoint actually allows the reader to feel this horrific torment. Additionally, it almost makes the reader feel guilty, as the narrator does, for witnessing these events and for continuing to turn the page. This personal level of involvement would not be possible were it not for first person narrative. The descriptive portions of David's narrative also help to convey the childlike innocence of David, and help to remind the reader of the helplessness of being a young child in the presence of adults making bad decisions. The reader, as an adult, would miss some of the associations between sexual fantasy, frustration, and the power of peer pressure and adult intervention without the first person narrative of David serving as their eyes and ears.

Setting

The novel is set in a middle class neighborhood in suburbia during the 1950s. The residents of Laurel Avenue live on a dead end street and seem to know everyone in the neighborhood, as is often the case in small, close-knit areas. The children on the twelve house block are all friends with one another, and most hang out at Ruth's house. Ruth is the mother of Ralphie, Donnie, and Willie. David lives next door. Eddie, Tony, and others live up the block. By the block there is a stretch of dark, open woods the children use to play the Game in. Nearby, there is a ball field, and a playground where the Carnival is held every year. The lawns are large, and people often sit and visit during the warm evenings.

Ruth Chandler's house is large, but much of the action takes place in the cold, dark basement. Within the basement is a makeshift bomb shelter, eight foot by ten foot, and six feet high. There is a heavy, bolted door on the outside of the concrete walls that make up the shelter. Inside, the only window is covered in heavy wire mesh and sandbagged on the outside. It is dirty, filled with unused and rotten supplies. The participants eventually tie Meg to the steel girders in the room, place a dirty mattress inside, and keep her captive. This setting serves to increase not only the helplessness and bleakness of the story, but also to show the story as being frighteningly close to



home. As it occurs in such a normal neighborhood, it becomes easier to imagine such an event nearby.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple and familiar. As much of the novel is told through the eyes of a teenage boy, the manner of writing is easy to follow and without formal structure or stiff language. There is much vulgarity, and the content is, at times, extremely graphic in nature. This language actually serves to add depth and honesty to the novel, in that the reader is allowed a first hand, familiar view that makes the novel even more chilling. In addition, the unrestrained descriptions of the torture of Meg allow the reader a sickeningly close view of the horrors Meg faces, resulting in a deeper reading of the novel.

The dialog between characters often serves not only to show different genders and ages, but also different personalities. David's conversations and descriptions tend to be somewhat naive and brutally honest, as well as endearing toward Meg. Eddie, on the other hand, through his language, is shown to be violent and crass. Ralphie, the youngest, uses language that reminds the reader painfully of his very young age. This helps the reader understand the motivations behind each character's participation in the torture of Meg, and helps tie together the character's behavior with his or her personality. The language also serves to show Ruth's decline into madness as her language in the beginning of the novel becomes drastically different than her distant, almost rambling conversations by the end of the novel.

Structure

The novel is made up of five main parts. The first, introducing the characters, is made up of seven chapters. The second, giving a glimpse of Ruth's hatred of Meg and of the situation beginning to brew at the Chandlers', is eight chapters in length. The third section, which moves the story from the correction of Meg to the torture of Meg, consists of nine chapters. The fourth section, which shows the torment, torture, and severe abuse of Meg, is nine chapters. The final section, which leads the story to the heroic, blessed death of Meg, and the murder of Ruth, is thirteen chapters. There is then an Epilogue, only six pages in length, which ties up the ending, and the lives of the characters over time. There is then a brief interview in which Ketchum explains his reasons for writing the novel, a short story called "Do You Love Your Wife?", another called "Returns", and another interview with the author and the screenwriters of the film version of the novel. In total, the novel is 380 pages in length.

The plot of the novel is simple, with a variety of subplots. The novel's main premise is the destruction of a young girl at the hands of her aunt and her teenage friends, in full view of her younger sister. The subplots include the failure of community structure, the sexual tension of teenagers, the role of women in society, and the consequences of thinking as part of a group instead of individual beliefs. The pace of the novel is quick,



with the treatment of Meg moving quickly from mild punishment to severe torture. The novel is, at times, graphically written to the point of disgust, but such writing does serve a purpose in the novel. These graphic depictions help to completely convey the horrific treatment of Meg and help the reader clearly imagine the situation. Although unbelievably horrific in content, the novel is difficult to put down.



Quotes

"I mean that sometimes what you see is pain. Pain in its cruelest, purest form. Without drugs or sleep or even shock or coma to dull it for you. You see it and you take it in. And then it's you. You're host to a long white worm that gnaws and eats, growing, filling your intestines until finally you cough one morning and up comes the blind pale head of the thing sliding from your mouth like a second tongue."

Chap. 1, p. 5

"I'm going to try to change that now, if I can. I'm going to tell our little story. Straight as I can from here on in, and no interruptions. And I'm writing this for you, Ruth. Because I never got to pay you back, really. So here's my check. Overdue and overdrawn. Cash it in hell."

Chap. 2, p. 16

"The the wheel began turning and she laughed and I thought it was the happiest, nicest sound I'd ever heard and felt proud of myself for asking her, of making her happy and making her laugh the way she did."

Chap. 5, p. 45

"I lay in bed and thought how easy it was to hurt a person. It didn't have to be physical. All you had to do was take a good hard kick at something they cared about. I could too if I wanted. People were vulnerable."

Chap. 14, p. 101

"Because it seems to me now that so much of this was strictly personal, part of the nature of the world as I saw it. I've tried to think that it was all the fault of my parents' warfare, of the cold blank calm I developed in the center of their constant hurricane. But I don't quite believe that anymore."

Chap. 25, p. 157

"In the basement, with Ruth, I began to learn that anger, hate, fear, and loneliness are all one button awaiting the touch of just a single finger to set them blazing toward destruction. And I learned that they can taste like winning."

Chap. 25, p. 157

"It was like Ruth was still in the room, watching...like Ruth was a ghost who haunted us, her sons and me. Who'd haunt us forever if we pushed or disobeyed her. I think I realized then the sharp razor edge she'd honed to her permission. The show was Ruth's and Ruth's only. The Game was nonexistent. And by that reckoning it was not just Meg but all of us stripped and naked, hanging there."

Chap. 28, p. 183

"And I wonder now if anything would have been different had she not been so pretty, had her body not been young and healthy and strong but ugly, fat, flabby...[B]ut it seems to me more likely that it was precisely because she was beautiful and strong, and we



were not, that Ruth and the rest of us had done this to her. To make a sort of judgment on that beauty, on what it meant and didn't mean to us."

Chap. 29, p. 186

"I tell you. A woman's nothing but a slut and an animal. You got to see that, you got to remember. Just used and screwed and punished. Nothing but a stupid loser slut with a hole in her and that's all she'll ever be."

Chap. 32, p. 212

"The Eddie came in laughing one day with a dog turd in a plastic cup and they held her down over the table while Woofer pinched her nostrils until she had to open her mouth to breathe and Eddie slipped it in. And that was the last time anybody kissed her."

Chap. 35, p. 237

"One sound down here and I promise I'll kill the both of you. Not punish you. Kill you. Dead. You got that, Davy? Are we straight about that?"

Chap. 37, p. 257

"I turned again and she was suddenly next to me, reaching up. I saw the tears gleam bright in her eyes just as she closed them and kissed me. Her lips were battered, broken, chapped, and torn. They were the softest, most beautiful things that had ever touched me, that I had ever touched."

Chap. 38, p. 267

"I thought, my God, this was a woman I'd liked once. A woman I'd thought funny, sometimes even pretty. One of the guys. This woman scared the hell out of me. She'll kill you, I thought. She'll kill us all, including her own kids and not even care of thing about it till later. If she feels like it."

Chap. 40, p. 278

"Ruth had changed her. Changed her forever. The burns and bruises would fade but this would stay - legible, however faintly, even thirty years from now. It was something she'd have to think about and explain each and every time she stood naked in front of someone. Whenever she looked in a mirror she'd see it there and remember."

Chap. 41, p. 283

"And I trembled, yes. With reason. With understanding. I was captured by savages. I had lived with them. I'd been one of them. No. Not savages. Not really. Worse than that. More like a pack of dogs or cats...like some other species altogether. Some intelligence that only looked human, but had no access to human feelings. I stood among them swamped by otherness. By evil."

Chap. 41, p. 288

"This parody of a mother. This evil joke of a mother who had stolen not just the ring from her but everything, her life, her future, her body - and all in the name of raising her, while what she was doing was not raising but pushing down, pushing her further and further and loving it, exulting in it, coming for God's sake-down finally into the very earth

itself which was where she'd lie now, unraised, erased, vanished."
Chap. 46, p. 323



Topics for Discussion

In the novel, Ruth plays an important role in the actions of the young boys and girls who torment Meg. What does she do that seems to push the situation further along? Does giving her permission influence the behaviors of the children? Why or why not? What does this permission mean to David and the other boys? Why is her influence so strong over the children?

The concept of group mentality is strong in the novel. Do you think the children would have acted as they did if they were not in a group situation? Why or why not? How do you think the other children influenced the behaviors of David? Do you think the situation would have escalated as far as it did without a group experience? Why or why not?

Sexuality plays an important role in the book. What is Ruth's view of women in general? From where does this belief stem? How does this belief influence her treatment of Meg? Of Susan? How do the young men see girls at this age? Does this influence their behaviors? Why or why not?

In the novel, David is torn between his own draw to the violence and sexuality of Meg as a captive and his strong belief that the actions of the group are morally wrong. How do you feel about David's own participation in the events of the novel? Is he equally responsible for the death of Meg because of his failure to do anything? Why do you think he doesn't tell the police earlier in the novel? Do you think this puts him at least partially to blame? Why or why not? What are your general feelings towards David in the novel? About your feelings of his murder of Ruth? Should he be held accountable for this death? Why or why not?

Ruth clearly becomes both physically and mentally ill by the end of the novel. There are suggestions throughout the book that Ruth is not stable and that she too is a product of her past bad experiences. Do you believe Ruth is insane by the end of the novel? Why or why not? What examples in the book lead to your beliefs? Do these beliefs change the level of responsibility of Ruth in the novel? Do they change your opinion of her behavior? Why or why not? What are your feelings on her death at the end?

Meg is portrayed not only as a victim in the novel but also as a hero, and a very brave young woman. How does the author succeed in portraying Meg this way? What situations can you recall where Meg is shown not only as a victim, but as a strong-willed, fighting character? How does this make you feel about her as a character? Do you think this makes the ending of the novel softer, emotionally, or more brutal? Why? Do you think this was intentional by the author? Why or why not?

In the book, there are many separate failures of the community that help cause the death of Meg. What are some of these failures? How do other parents contribute? The police? The other children? Social services? What do these failures say about the cause of Meg's death? Is it the cause of a single person, or a group, or of the entire

community? What was the author trying to say about the responsibility of a society in terms of child welfare? Do you agree? Why or why not?