

# **Heroes of the Frontier Study Guide**

## **Heroes of the Frontier by Dave Eggers**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of the book was used to create this guide: Eggers, Dave. *Heroes of the Frontier*. Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC, 2016.

The story begins with Josie having taken her two young children, Paul and Ana, to Alaska without informing their father, Carl. Josie is fed up with her life back in Ohio and with Carl, who is planning to marry his current girlfriend though he had always refused to marry Josie. Josie has also recently lost her dental practice as the result of a lawsuit. Additionally, Josie feels responsible for the death of a young man named Jeremy who had enlisted in the military after Josie encouraged him to do so. He was killed in the line of duty.

Josie, Paul, and Ana are driving around Alaska in a rented Chateau RV. Josie plans to go visit Sam, whom she refers to as her stepsister. In reality, Josie and Sam grew up together in Sunny's house after having emancipated themselves.

On the way to Sam's house, Josie and the children make several stops. One of them leads to them seeing a magic show on a boat after an old fisherman named Charlie invites them. The audience is not impressed by the majority of the magic, so Josie claps more loudly to make up for them. Charlie gets misty-eyed when one act is able to guess where he is from by his postal code.

Josie and the children arrive at Sam's house. At first, Josie thinks Sam really has her life together since she has beautiful children and her house is organized. However, when Sam takes Josie to a bar and Josie discovers that Sam is having an affair with an elderly man that Josie finds deplorable, Josie rethinks her opinion. She leaves the bar and is pushed off the road by a truck as she is walking to Sam's house. She wakes up in the hospital and Sam tells her that the hospital called Carl. The next morning Josie takes the children and leaves.

As they are driving, Paul sees a sign for an archery place and Josie stops. It is closed but she allows the children to play and shoot arrows. Another couple, Kyle and Angie, drives up in a truck carrying a small house in the bed. Their children join Paul and Ana in playing. They all stay the night parked in the field. During the night, Kyle bangs on the door and informs Josie they have to evacuate due to a wildfire.

After driving for a long time, Josie finds a bed and breakfast, but the proprietors are not there. The guest cabin is open, so Josie and the children sleep there for the night. When the proprietor does not return, they stay another night, but are awakened during the night by an angry man who goes to the main house to call the police. Josie and the children run to the Chateau and drive away.

Josie next stops at an RV park owned by a handsome man named Jim. A family is having a wedding there. The father of the groom sees Josie watching and invites her and the children to the dance. The next day, Josie and Jim have dinner together. Josie



ends up having sex with Jim and Paul catches them. She leaves the RV park feeling ashamed.

Josie drives a meandering path with no destination in mind. She ends up on a road just after a road block that had been set up due to the fires is cleared. One of the tires pops and she stops on the side of the road. A group of men all wearing orange offers to help. After they have fixed the tire, another man approaches and she finds out the men in orange are all inmates.

Josie stops at a diner and invites a man sitting alone to join her. She then figures out that he is there to serve her with papers, so she makes a scene and gets away before he can give them to her. She is sure the papers are from Carl.

Josie finds a silver mine and she and the kids go there to explore. When they discover the mine is shut down and the caretaker's cabin is empty, Josie breaks a window and they stay in the cabin for a few days. She and the children are very happy there. One day they go into town for food and Josie meets a group of musicians. She asks one of them, Cooper, to help her write down some of the music that is in her head. While she and the children are at Cooper's house, the town is evacuated. Josie and the children end up at a shelter in a school.

The people at the shelter give Josie the opportunity to make a phone call, so she calls Carl. Carl did not serve her the papers and he is not angry at her. The papers were from a class action lawsuit against a power company that Josie was involved in.

Josie takes the children for a walk and they decide to go see a mountain lake. It begins to storm and the lightning is dangerous. Josie and the children run on toward a shelter by the lake. They finally arrive and find that the shelter there has been set up for a party that never happened. They eat some of the food and let their clothing dry. Josie has the feeling that she is finally right where she belongs.



# Chapters I - V

## Summary

Heroes of the Frontier, by Dave Eggers, is the story of Josie and her two children, Ana and Paul, and their travels through Alaska as Josie tries to make sense of her life and reclaim her identity.

Chapter I begins with Josie and the children stopped at a rest stop in southern Alaska where they are spending the night in the shabby Chateau RV they have rented. Josie has recently left her dental practice and has learned that Carl, the father of her children, has decided to get married even though he had always told her he did not believe in marriage. She has taken the children and left Ohio without informing Carl.

Josie has two children, Paul, who is eight, and Ana, who is five. Paul is quiet and gentle while Ana is full of energy and has a knack for breaking things. So far, the children seem fine with the trip, but Josie is disappointed that Alaska is not full of heroes and does not look much different than Ohio.

Josie became fed up with life in Ohio and all of its drama, so she decided to go to Alaska on the spur of the moment to visit her stepsister, Sam. Sam, a bird watching guide, will not be home for three more days. Josie plans to explore on her way to Homer, where Sam lives.

The family stops at an animal park. Josie thinks the animals look sad and broken. When they finish touring the zoo, a tour guide gives them binoculars to look at some bighorn sheep on a mountainside. As Josie watches, a huge bird swoops down and knocks one of the sheep off the ledge so that it plummets to its death.

The family leaves Anchorage and heads toward Seward. She pulls over and lets the children watch a DVD while she drinks wine. She thinks about Carl who is four years younger than her. His parents are wealthy and Carl has never worked a steady job.

Josie flips through an Old West magazine and thinks about how she knows little about her relatives and that a "true American is truly blank" (15). She then thinks about Evelyn Sandalwood, the woman whose family sued her so that she lost her dental practice.

At 40 years old, Josie is tired of the daily grind of taking her kids to school and then working all day. She recounts the chaos and drudgery of her typical day and thinks about some of her past patients. She liked some of them, especially Jeremy, a teenager who is now dead. She feels like she perhaps was too comfortable in her life and that was the real problem.

In Chapter II, a state trooper wakes Josie to let her know they cannot stay parked where they are. He is kind about it and she feels grateful. As she drives away she thinks about Evelyn. She arrives at an RV park and they stay there for the night. Ana and Paul climb



into bed with her and she recalls that she has not had someone to watch out for her in more than 25 years. Paul reads to Ana and she hears them talking together. Ana asks questions about Alaska and whether they are safe. Paul reassures her.

Chapter III starts the next morning when the family awakens. They go to a diner for breakfast. While they eat, Ana is fidgety while Paul is quiet. Paul is a beautiful boy with a kind face. Ana is constantly in motion. She had been born early and was very ill. Her behavior is frequently reckless. Paul is strangely devoted to her and has been since her birth. Carl had often commented that their genders were switched.

Ana jumps up from the table, yanks on a gumball machine and then runs into the bathroom. They hear a loud crash and Paul goes to get her. She had been standing on the toilet and fell. Paul goes to get a first aid kit and then cares for a cut on Ana's chin. She asks for a mirror, but Josie does not understand her. Paul finally interprets Ana's words for his mother.

They get back on the road and Ana asks if Josie ever lived in Alaska. She had told them stories of her time in the Peace Corps and all the places she has lived. She has not told them that she emancipated herself at the age of 17. It is difficult for them to hear one another talk because the dishes in the cupboards rattle as they drive down the road. Josie stops the RV and they pack everything into the shower with towels to quiet the noise.

Josie is tired of driving and cannot stop thinking about the people in her past: Carl, Evelyn, Evelyn's lawyer and son-in-law, and Sunny. She tries to focus on Sunny's face to find peace.

When they arrive at an RV park in Seward, Josie goes inside to rent a spot. She is careful to write illegibly and pays in cash so that Carl cannot trace her. When she goes back outside a Norwegian man yells at her about being parked in the wrong spot and having left her children alone. She gets in the RV and moves it thinking about how she had once taken Paul with her to a conference in Norway. While she was there, she had thought of creating a musical called "Norway" where everyone would wear white and pretend to be civilized, but they really wanted to destroy all children.

They go to look at the bay and the children watch otters swimming. Another family is on the beach and their children are frightened by some stray dogs, which the parents assume belong to Josie. She thinks these are the kind of people who took over her town in Ohio. She had been expected to be at every school event in spite of the fact that she worked full-time. The other parents treated her like a bad parent because she could not be there for all the events. Only one parent, Deena, had seemed to understand. It was Deena who had joked about moving to Alaska one night and the idea stuck with Josie.

The children come to Josie carrying an otter head. Josie is appalled.

They go to a restaurant for dinner. Josie knows it will cost a lot because the prices in Alaska are very high. She thinks about how tired she had been of constantly spending money at home. Paul is quiet and then asks her where the stray dogs go. She initially



says she does not know, but then realizes it upsets Paul so she makes up a story about how they live in a clubhouse and are fed by the park rangers.

They walk along the boardwalk and Ana strikes up a conversation with an old fisherman about a fish head she sees on the ground. Ana is a tough child, which Josie attributes to her birth. Because Carl was uninvolved, Josie had enlisted Paul's help and he has always taken his responsibility to Ana very seriously.

The old fisherman, Charlie, invites them to see a magic show with him on a boat where a magician from Luxembourg is supposed to be performing. The audience at the show is unenthused, which bothers Josie, so she claps and cheers loudly while drinking several glasses of wine. During the show, a man who has memorized all of the postal codes in the United States performs. As he does, Josie has a moment of panic when she thinks the audience will hate the act. She wonders why she is there and thinks she always makes the wrong choices. The man guesses where Charlie is from based on his postal code and Charlie becomes misty eyed that the man knows where he is from. After the show, Charlie says goodbye and invites Paul to write letters to him.

In Chapter IV Josie wakes thinking about Jeremy and how she feels responsible for his death. Jeremy had been a kind boy who was nice to her children and had sometimes babysat. When he graduated from high school, he had told Josie he planned to go into the military but his parents were reluctant to allow him to enlist. Josie had encouraged him to enlist. His parents respected Josie's opinion, so they allowed him to enlist. He was killed six months later. Josie no longer offers advice and was happy to be rid of her practice.

After eating in the camp cafeteria, Josie and the children go to use the public showers. Two attractive young women are in the shower, but leave when they see Josie watching them. She thinks briefly of her parents teaching her how to dry off and is stunned by how seldom she thinks of them. As Josie and the children shower, she thinks about how comfort should be rationed.

Later, they go down to the beach. A terrible smell leads them to a maxi pad covered in feces placed under a rock. Josie thinks that people are "loathsome creatures" (72). To make up for the experience, Josie buys her children expensive souvenirs. Ana runs ahead and is nearly hit by a truck.

The children stop to watch kids playing at a skate park. A boy invites them to play a game involving zombies and mimes breaking Paul's neck. Josie takes the children and leaves.

Chapter V begins with Josie and the children on their way to Sam's house. Josie catches Paul looking at her in the rearview mirror and thinks he is deciding whether or not his mother knows what she is doing. The radio plays songs from Broadway musicals and Josie recalls her parents bringing Broadway soundtrack albums home to review for playing at the psych ward where they work.



The children smell something as they drive down the road. Josie discovers that Ana has turned the knobs on the gas stove to high and the RV is flooding with gas. She stops and they all get out. Paul tells Ana what she did is bad and she cries. Josie thinks it is good for Ana to “feel remorse for once” (78). As they wait for the gas to clear, Josie wonders what it is about her that always makes her feel like she is in the wrong place.

The family arrives in Homer. Josie parks at an RV park and thinks the owners of the nice RV next to hers will be happy knowing they are better than her. She takes the kids for pizza in a place that seems political and is staffed by women only. Ana breaks a towel rack. Josie has too much wine. She thinks about Jeremy, Carl, and her father joking about sticking his head in the oven.

After they leave the pizza place, Paul asks how Josie knows Sam and if Sam is his godmother and then if she is Josie’s stepsister. Josie agrees that Sam is her stepsister even though it is much more complicated. She then buys expensive Bolivian clothing for her children to prove to the saleswoman that she is competent.

They go back to the RV and the children watch a Tom and Jerry DVD, which is the only one they brought along. Josie remembers Carl commenting on how she had grown up next to a psych ward and that she had been close to a scandal involving the psych hospital, nicknamed Candyland. Carl had grown up wealthy and so never understood the need to work to pay bills. As a result, he often judged Josie for her quirks.

Josie worries that Sam will say something about the Candyland scandal in front of the children. The scandal involved patients being overmedicated and dying or committing suicide at a high rate. After the scandal, her parents who had been nurses at the hospital, began abusing the same drugs the patients had been given. Her parents divorced and Josie was approached by her dentist, Sunny, about emancipation. Sunny and Helen, a lawyer, had helped her emancipate herself and then had moved her into their house where she met Sam. Sam had also been emancipated.

## Analysis

Eggers introduces the protagonist of the novel, Josie, as the novel opens. Josie is 40 years old and has left her life in Ohio behind to travel Alaska with her children, Paul and Ana. Eggers indicates that Josie has essentially kidnapped her children since she has left without telling their father, Carl. However, the events surrounding their leaving are not completely revealed. The reader knows only that Josie was tired of her life, angry at Carl for announcing that he is marrying his current girlfriend, and that she has lost her dental practice. The fact that there are no details provided surrounding Josie leaving Ohio will be important later in the novel when Josie finally makes contact with Carl. However, at this point, the reader is lead to believe that Carl will be looking for Josie to get his children back and that she may be in trouble with the law. To reinforce the idea that Josie may be pursued, the author includes details such as Josie writing illegibly when checking into an RV park to avoid being trailed. This notion that someone may be





after Josie gives the plot an element of suspense since the reader wonders if Josie will be arrested and what might happen then.

Eggers paints Josie as a world-weary woman. She has a restless spirit and believes that she has become complacent in her life. Eggers describes a day in Josie's life that is filled with the drudgery of everyday things like getting children ready for school, going to work, picking children up from school, and then doing it all again the next day. This existence is hard for Josie who was once in the Peace Corps and traveled the world. Josie struggles with the feeling that she is somehow not in the right place no matter where she is.

While describing the drudgery of Josie's life, the author also delves into the chaotic nature of life, which becomes a theme of the novel. Josie seems to feel that her life was monotonous, yet the author describes her daily life at a chaotic pace with her chasing children to put boots on, leading a Muppet's soundtrack sing-along, patients coming and going, the drama of her employees' lives, and finally caring for her children until bedtime. There is no slowing down in Josie's life.

Eggers also implies that Josie suffered a traumatic past. The details of her past are not yet fully revealed. In fact, Eggers never does completely tell the story of Josie's childhood. Small details are revealed later in the novel, but there is still the impression that there is more to the story. In this section, Eggers introduces the Candyland scandal that plagues Josie's past and led to her becoming emancipated from her parents as a teenager. This scandal may be, at least in part, the cause of Josie's feelings of never being in the right place since she was displaced as a teenager and probably had doubts as to whether or not the emancipation was the right decision.

Josie suffers from extremely low self-esteem that causes her to believe that she is at fault for things beyond her control. She blames herself for the death of her patient, Jeremy, who enlisted in the military and died. She believes that her encouragement of him when he talked to her about joining the military is the reason he is dead. Josie also believes she is a bad parent. She compares herself to the other parents in her children's school who have the time to be at all of the school functions. However, Josie is a single mother and runs a business, so she cannot leave her work in the middle of the day. Josie often seeks solace from her feelings in doubts in a glass of wine, so much so that she seems to be on the verge of a drinking problem. Even in Alaska away from the judgement of the other parents, Josie still feels the need to prove that she is a good parent. When she stops at a shop that sells expensive Bolivian clothing, she purchases expensive sweaters that she knows her children will never wear just to prove to the salesperson that she is a good parent capable of buying her children costly things.

In spite of her faults, Eggers also shows that Josie is a mother who loves her children deeply. She worries about what they think of her. She is concerned about Ana's future and that Paul is too attached to his sister. She is also extremely inventive when it comes to solving problems. When the dishes in the Chateau rattle so loudly that she cannot hear her children speaking, Josie pulls over to the side of the road and packs the dishes between towels in the shower to reduce the noise. Later, when Paul asks her where



stray dogs go at night, she makes up an elaborate story about how the rangers take care of the dogs in a little cabin built just for them because she does not want Paul to be sad.

Josie's children, Ana and Paul, are also introduced in this section of the novel as near opposites. Paul is quiet, thoughtful, and ever watchful of his younger sister. Paul prides himself on being the one that understands Ana's still somewhat baby-ish speech the best. When Ana asks for a mirror, Josie thinks she is saying meal. Paul interprets for Ana and Josie thinks he feels somehow superior to her because he understands her child better than she does. Of course, Paul may not feel that way at all since the story is told from Josie's perspective and her view of herself and how others might feel about her is skewed by her low self-esteem. In any case, Paul is clearly happy to be so helpful where his sister is concerned and has placed himself in the role of her caretaker.

Ana, on the other hand, is described in a way that makes her appear to almost be out of control. In fact, at one point Josie worries that her daughter is already headed toward becoming a delinquent. Eggers portrays Ana as a one-dimensional character who has very little going on beneath the surface. She is merely a destructive force as she seeks to break everything within her reach. She is also the source of much of the novel's humor since she often does and says funny things like calling helicopters "hellcopters" and bringing her mother an otter head. The otter head is particularly amusing since it is very unexpected. Josie is enjoying a quiet moment watching her children play on the beach when suddenly Ana approaches with her hands held out and in them is a disgusting otter head. Josie can only think to respond, "Why in hell did you pick this up?" (46).

Eggers tells the story of Josie's travels through Alaska in a series of scenes. Each scene reveals something about Josie or has something to say about a theme of the novel or a lesson that Josie and the readers could learn. One such scene involves Josie and the children going to a magic show at the invitation of an elderly fisherman that they meet on the docks. This scene introduces the idea that life is magical, but shows that people have to be open to the magic to see it. The audience seems unimpressed with much of the magic going on onstage. The magic show becomes a metaphor for people being unable to see the magic around them. Josie, however, empathizes with the magicians who have obviously taken a chance on following their dreams, so she claps and cheers more loudly to show their support. Her identification with the magicians may stem from the fact that she feels she has somehow missed out on chasing her own dreams since she has become disillusioned with her life in Ohio. Josie is open to seeing magic in Alaska. In fact, she came to Alaska expecting it to be full of heroes.

The existence of this magic show allows the author to literally introduce magic into Josie's world, but there is more magic going on beneath the surface. Josie's encounter with Charlie the fisherman is heartwarming. There is something magical in the way that this elderly man has invited a mother and her children to see a show with him even though he does not know them and has no idea if he can get tickets for them. When the show ends and the characters part, there is again a bit of magic in the way that Charlie and Paul have made a connection and Charlie asks Paul to write him letters.



In this section, the author also introduces the idea that the past is important and there is no escaping it. One of the ways in which the author introduces this theme is through the Old West magazine that Josie finds in the Chateau. The magazine contains a section in which readers write letters asking for help in finding people or elements of their past. Throughout much of the book, Josie will read letters from the magazine. While the author never specifically comments on the letters in the form of Josie's thoughts about them, their recurrence indicates that there is something important to be understood from their inclusion. The author seems to be reinforcing the idea that the past, no matter how distant, has an effect on the lives of people. In Josie's case, though she would like to forget her past, she cannot. As she drives, she continuously sees the faces of Jeremy and Evelyn who are both in her past. Yet, she cannot escape the guilt she feels over Jeremy's death and the anger she feels about having been sued by Evelyn. Josie's more distant past, such as the Candyland scandal and her emancipation, also continue to affect her. She worries that her children will learn about Candyland, and she still has some unresolved issues surrounding her emancipation and her relationship with her parents.

The scene with Charlie also supports the theme of the past being important. When an act comes on stage and guesses people's hometowns based on their postal codes, Charlie is deeply affected when his own hometown is guessed. He becomes misty-eyed and says, "That man knows where I come from" (60). Charlie, as old as he is, is touched by the idea that someone could identify something from his past – his hometown.

Another element of the story introduced is the Broadway musical motif. Josie often thinks up ideas for musicals. Josie was exposed to musicals as a child when her parents were put in charge of picking music to play at the mental hospital where they worked. Josie has the idea that musicals are "the only medium that could properly express our true madness and hypocrisy—our collective ability to sit in a theater watching lunatics sing nonsense while the world outside burns" (39). In this section, she thinks up an idea for a musical called Norway based on her experiences in Norway when Paul was a toddler and an encounter she has with an angry Norwegian in an RV park.

This section also contains a metaphor in which Josie is depicted as a sheep clinging to the side of a cliff. Josie and her children stop at an animal park. They look through binoculars at some bighorn sheep walking on the side of a mountain. Their footholds are precarious and it seems impossible that they could hold on, but they do. As Josie watches, an eagle swoops down and knocks one of the sheep off the ledge to its death. The reader cannot help but compare Josie to this poor sheep. She is undoubtedly clinging to a ledge in her life as everything seems to be falling apart around her. Perhaps Josie feels hopeful at seeing the sheep's ability to hold on, but then her hopes are dashed when the eagle kills the sheep.



## Discussion Question 1

How do Paul and Ana differ from one another? What does Josie attribute these differences to?

## Discussion Question 2

What made Josie leave Ohio for Alaska?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Charlie get misty eyed when the performer knows the town he came from by his postal code? What might the author be suggesting by this scene?

## Vocabulary

clarity, lacquered, absurd, vague, descendants, manic, gratitude, predicated, bulbous, periodically, inevitable, convey, cacophony, pristine, somber, preternaturally, formidable, liberated, hygiene, loathsome



# Chapters VI - X

## Summary

In Chapter VI, Josie and the children arrive at Sam's house. They are an hour late and the party Sam has planned for her has already started. There are a number of people there, including Doug, whom Sam is dating despite being married to a man who is away for long periods of time for work. Sam has twin girls, Zoe and Becca, who are 13 and beautiful. Sam acts as though she knows Josie very well even though they have not seen one another for five years.

Chapter VII begins after the barbecue party. The family goes back to Sam's house. Josie thinks that Sam really has her life together. The twins put Paul and Ana to bed. Sam brings out some homemade whiskey and she and Josie drink and talk. Sam knows a lot about the recent events in Josie's life, but does not seem to know the reasons for things like Carl's leaving and Josie leaving her practice. Sam mentions Sunny and Josie is glad she has stopped calling Sunny "mom." Josie thinks that all modern neurosis might be attributable to the fact that everything can change.

Sam comments that Sunny must have been upset when Josie left her practice. Sam had once thought Josie only went into dentistry to impress Sunny. Sunny believed Sam moved to Alaska as a way of conceding to Josie. Sam tells Josie she wants to hear about what happened in Josie's life. She says it will help Josie to talk about it, but Josie thinks talking has never helped; forgetting is the only thing that helps. However, she tells Sam about Evelyn Sandalwood.

Evelyn had been Josie's patient for years and Josie had liked her. Evelyn's dental records were subpoenaed and Josie was sued for not diagnosing Evelyn with a tumor in her mouth that turned out to be cancerous. Josie had talked to her friend Raj, also a dentist, about the lawsuit. He told her that the problem was the "culture of complaint" they lived in (108). In the end, Josie decided to just give the dental practice to Evelyn to avoid a larger settlement.

After she tells Sam the story, Josie asks if Sam feels like she is living right and using her time on earth right. No matter what she has been doing in life, she has always been aware of all the other lives she could be living. When Sam does not respond, Josie reflects that people should be better to one another.

Josie goes to bed, but she cannot sleep. She thinks about the way her employees blamed her when she closed the practice. Her employees were part of a culture that had been trained to always feel aggrieved at any employer.

When she turns her mind away from her ex-employees, Josie thinks of the scarfed woman who tried to get her more involved in the school. Josie knows she has no real



friends because she is not a good friend. Her business kept her from keeping in touch with people. She feels like she always disappoints others.

She then thinks about what a vengeful era she lives in where people become angry over even the smallest things. She contemplates creating a musical called "Disappointed." Evelyn would be the main character.

In Chapter VIII, Josie wakes to hear Sam and her daughters moving around on the floor above her. They finally leave and Josie gets up. Sam's house is immaculate and organized. Ana and Paul come down. Josie forages through Sam's cupboards and refrigerator to feed them. When Josie looks at Paul she can see that he thinks Sam's house makes their life in the Chateau seem irresponsible.

After eating all day, Josie decides to take the children grocery shopping. The store they find has very little in the way of traditional groceries, so they return with an odd assortment of items. When Sam comes home she comments that Josie must have explored her house and that they had eaten a lot of food. Josie shows Sam the food she bought, but Sam is disappointed and goes out to grocery shop. Sam returns from grocery shopping and acts as though nothing happened.

Sam takes Josie to a bar while the twins watch Josie's children. Sam talks to her about feeling like she needs to take her kids out of school because of sexual behaviors that are going around among teenagers. She worries that her girls will get involved. Josie is disgusted to find that Sam has been intimate with an elderly man named Robert. Robert seems to want a threesome with Josie and Sam, so Josie leaves and walks toward Sam's house.

As she walks, Josie realizes her children will be disappointed if she returns too soon and ruins their time with the twins, so she wanders a bit. She thinks Sam is an immoral person. Josie feels like she needs to be more consistent and that interesting people can never have children. She decides that she cannot live in Homer because people like Robert live there, but she cannot go back to Ohio because it has been overrun by women who hurry all the time and people who become angry over minor things. She recalls a bicyclist who nearly beat a man in a pickup truck to death over having been driven too close to. She decides that no one stays anywhere anymore. She thinks maybe Sam could be her anchor. As she has that thought, there is a rushing sound and a bright light.

In Chapter IX, Josie wakes up in the hospital after having been run off the road by a truck. Sam is there and says that Robert is watching the children. Josie is alarmed by this. Sam does not apologize for Josie feeling like she needed to leave the bar. Josie thinks about the way no one is ever sorry anymore.

Sam takes Josie back to her house. Josie goes to bed, but again thinks about Jeremy and Evelyn. She wakes up in pain during the night, but does not want to ask Sam for help because she is with Robert. She lies in bed thinking about how she will leave Sam. She thinks she may be making a choice that is bad for the children.



When Sam comes downstairs in the morning she tells Josie that the hospital called Carl because they caught on to the fact that Josie had kidnapped her children. When Sam and the twins leave for the day, Josie takes her kids and leaves.

Chapter X begins with Josie driving away from Sam's house while Paul looks at the shaved spot on the side of her head where she has stitches. He asks if it hurts and Josie reflects on children first realizing their parents can be hurt. Her friend Raj had had a theory about creating a life budget that would make accepting bad things easier.

Paul tells Josie they should go back to Sam's. Josie refuses. Paul and Ana both say they want to go to school. Josie tells them she had the trip approved with their school. Paul becomes angry and does not believe her. Josie had, in fact, told the principal about Carl and that she planned to take the children to Alaska. Carl had called her one day wanting the children to come to see him and his fiancée Teresa, saying that Teresa's family wanted to spend time with them. However, Josie knows that Carl is only trying to prove to Teresa's family that he is not a deadbeat father.

Ana asks if they will ever go back to their house. Josie thinks about how Carl had decided it was wrong to own a home shortly after having bought the house. He became enthralled with the Occupy movement and resisted working on improving the house. Then he became involved in triathlons and spent his time and money on them. Josie thinks she could make a musical about Carl and his training called "Hero of Zuccotti." Josie realizes she has been a single parent since before Carl left.

Paul and Ana notice a smell in the Chateau. Josie thinks it is coming from outside, so she brushes off their complaints. She thinks about Elias, a lawyer she had developed a crush on when she got involved in a lawsuit concerning a coal-burning plant near her house. Carl had come to her house one day when she was discussing the case with Elias and had reacted poorly, judging Josie for her housekeeping skills and suggesting he interrupted a tryst. Josie thinks Carl is nothing more than a ferret and that she wasted years of her life with him.

Finally, Paul complains of feeling ill, so Josie pulls over and discovers the septic tank heater has been turned on and that is the cause of the smell. She explains this to the children and marvels at the way they so readily accept the explanation.

## Analysis

The author dedicates a great deal of this section to author commentary on today's society in the form of Josie's thoughts on the world and the thoughts of those in her life. For example, in discussing Evelyn's lawsuit with Raj, Raj describes how there is a "culture of complaint" today. The author writes that people have been conditioned to complain about everything. Raj rants about how people cannot accept that others will make mistakes, even doctors and dentists because, as humans, they are fallible. Later, Josie muses about her own employees and the way they blamed her for closing the practice. She also thinks about the people who sought employment with her just to take



advantage of the insurance coverage. The author posits that people today are “brought up to feel aggrieved at any employer, to feel cheated by every paycheck” (111).

Another facet of society that the author discusses is the way that people are always in a hurry. Josie thinks about the ponytailed women in her town who are always rushing about. It does not matter where people are going, they are always in a rush. The author uses irony to illustrate his point about hurrying. In Josie’s town, the ponytailed women even rush to get to yoga, an activity that should slow and calm them. And, the organic grocery store, which one would think would attract people of a more thoughtful and calm nature, has become “the unhappiest place in that miserable town” (127) because of those same hurried people hurrying to the store.

The author also makes a point about how angry people have become today in the search for a better life. Again, Eggers employs irony to make his point. Josie recalls the story of the “Bike Pump Maiming” (127) in which a man riding his bicycle assaults a man in a pickup truck for driving too closely to the bicycle. One might expect the driver of the pickup truck to be the aggressor in this situation, but the author makes the bicyclist the aggressor.

The author also suggests that people should expect bad things to happen and be prepared for them. This idea is presented through Raj when he tells Josie she should have a life budget. This topic comes up after Josie is injured when a truck pushes her off the road while she is walking. At first she worries about how the notion that his mother can be injured will affect Paul, but then she remembers Raj telling her that people “are better when we expect tragedy, calamity, chaos” (137). Raj thinks that if one expects a certain number of bad things to happen in a year, he or she can handle the situation better if they have budgeted for it. By presenting this idea, the author seems to be suggesting that life is chaotic and bad things will happen, so one just has to be prepared to deal with the problems that arise and move on. This idea plays into the author’s theme of life being chaotic.

The author again examines the idea of life being chaotic when Josie reflects that nothing is permanent. People move from place to place and jobs change. She wonders if perhaps the fact that nothing can be relied on to remain the same is the reason for all neurosis.

To drive home the idea of life being chaotic, the author includes a humorous scene in which the children smell something in the RV. When Josie stops to find out what is causing the smell, she discovers that the heater for the septic tank has been turned on and they have been driving around while cooking their feces in the tank. The scene is at once disgusting and humorous since Josie wonders if what they have been doing would be referred to as “broiling” and marvels at the way her children so seriously accept an explanation that involves broiling feces.

The author also explores the idea that there is no such thing as normal. This occurs when Josie arrives at Sam’s house. On the surface, Sam appears to have her life in perfect order. She has two beautiful and healthy children, in contrast to Josie’s often





dirty and unruly children. She also has a nice home that Josie finds exceptionally organized while Josie and her children are living in a rickety RV. When Josie looks at her son, she sees in his eyes that Paul thinks their own life is irresponsible in comparison to Sam's life. Josie, too, cannot help but compare herself to Sam, and at first glance she finds herself lacking. Josie even asks Sam if she thinks she is living her life right. This is a question that often plagues Josie as she cannot seem to figure out just what it is she should be doing. Perhaps this is because she has an idea of what a normal life is supposed to look like, but when she had that life, she was unhappy. As the story goes on Josie realizes that Sam is only normal on the surface. This revelation comes when Sam takes Josie to a bar and Josie learns that Sam has been sleeping with an elderly man by the name of Robert who Josie finds really quite disgusting since he seems to be suggesting a threesome between himself, Sam, and Josie. After this encounter, Josie decides that Sam is actually an immoral monster.

Josie's relationship with Sam is very much like that of sisters even though they are of no blood relation. Josie began living with Sam as a teenager when both were emancipated and lived with Sunny. As teenagers, they vied for Sunny's attention and affection. Sam even accused Josie of going into dentistry just because it was Sunny's profession. When they see each other again for the first time in many years, Josie is irritated by the way that Sam acts like she knows everything about her. However, there is definitely a closeness between the two women. When they sit on Sam's deck talking the author writes, "They sat with their feet touching, their bodies making a V facing the dark trees" (103). The physical contact implies a warmth between them and that there is some affection there. In addition, Sam insists that Josie tell her what has happened in her life because she hopes that talking about it will help Josie.

This discussion of Josie's problems with Evelyn provides the author with an opportunity to continue exploring the theme of the past being important. Sam thinks that talking about the past can help, but Josie has never felt helped by talking about her traumatic past. Instead, she thinks that the best way to deal with the past is to forget about it. Unfortunately, Josie finds it impossible to forget about the past as is evidenced by the fact that Evelyn and Jeremy are never far from her mind. She even thinks about them as she lays recovering after being injured by the truck.

It is in this section of the novel that the author more completely fills out the character of Carl. Eggers does this through Josie's thoughts about Carl, so his description is filtered through Josie's own sour thoughts about her ex. Josie thinks Carl is a deadbeat father. She thinks she has been a single parent since before she and Carl split up. The author uses the metaphor of a ship to describe their relationship. Josie is the captain of the ship and is steering her children's lives while Carl is lying on a beach somewhere. Carl has many interests, but they do not seem to include his children. The author again utilizes the musical motif in Josie's thoughts about Carl. She considers creating a musical called "Hero of Zucotti" about Carl and his many pursuits.

Another use of the musical motif occurs when Josie tells Sam the story of Evelyn and the lawsuit. It is here that the author provides more detail about why Josie was sued and the fact that she willingly gave up her dental practice in the end. Josie considers



creating a musical called “Disappointed” and having the main character be Evelyn. This idea for a musical reveals more about how Josie feels about herself than it does about her feelings toward Evelyn. Josie believes she is a disappointment to everyone. She even claims to be a poor friend because she disappoints everyone in her life.

The author builds upon the suspense established by Josie having taken her children and possibly being pursued by the police when the hospital calls Carl. This causes Josie to leave Sam’s house to avoid being found.

Eggers includes a small detail that seems insignificant in this chapter, but will later be important. Josie is a part of a class-action lawsuit against a power plant. This information will be used in the future to resolve a plot point.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is Sam like? How does Josie feel about Sam’s lifestyle? What is her reaction to Sam’s relationships with her husband and other men?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How do Sam’s children differ from Josie’s children? Why does the author make a point of mentioning these differences?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why did Josie decide to simply give her dental practice away? What does that decision say about her state of mind at the time? Have her feelings changed?

## **Vocabulary**

groggily, surging, flippant, feigned, wretched, conjured, neurosis, resentful, influence, aggrieved, provoked, contemporary, jaunty, commemorate, lucid, indistinguishable, dignity, benevolence, pivotal, rejoiced



# Chapters XI - XV

## Summary

Chapter XI begins with Paul sitting in the passenger seat reading from the Old West magazine about people searching for ancestors or lost friends. Ana watches ATVs drive along the side of the road and comments that she wants one. Paul dismisses her by saying she is only five. Paul then talks to Josie about school and that some of the children there have parents in jail. Josie thinks about parents choosing private schools and homeschooling to avoid such children.

Paul sees a sign for an archery place and asks Josie to stop. He seldom asks for anything, so she does. There is no one there, but Paul finds a bow and some arrows in the field. Josie allows the children to shoot at targets for a while. As she watches the children play, Josie thinks that achieving moments like this might be what parenting is really about. Ana comes over and reveals that she knows that Jeremy was killed.

A truck drives up carrying a small house in its bed. A couple and three children get out. They introduce themselves as Kyle and Angie. All of the children play together. Kyle and Angie explain that they are trying to become stateless to avoid being a part of society. They drink and talk until Josie is too drunk to drive, so they all stay the night parked at the archery range.

In Chapter XII, Josie is awakened by Kyle pounding on the door of the Chateau. They all have to leave because there is a wildfire approaching. When they drive away, Josie is waved in a different direction than the other cars. She ends up on a deserted road driving straight toward the fire. A helicopter turns her around. She is lost, but eventually finds a bed and breakfast where they stay the night in a cabin. There is no one home at the main house. Paul writes a note to leave on the door in case the owners return. As they lay in bed, Josie sees Paul looking at her as if he is saying he can see that she is flawed, but that he loves her anyway.

As Chapter XIII begins, Josie wakes up to a beautiful morning. The bed and breakfast owners did not return during the night. They spend the day enjoying the cabin and the land around it. Josie dozes off while watching the children and wakes to find them in a barn filled with mounted animal heads. Josie feels the need to leave, but Paul makes a rational argument for staying, so they do. They go to bed after enjoying a meal in the cabin's kitchen.

During the night the door to the cabin opens and a man enters. He sees Josie and yells at her that he is calling the police. When he goes back to the main house to make the call, Josie and the children sneak out and run to the Chateau. As she drives away, Josie pictures a bottle shattering against her face. This is a recurring image she has seen since she was 12.



In Chapter XIV, Josie wakes up in an RV park that she drove to during the night. She had woken up the proprietor, Jim, to register. Jim is a handsome older man who treated her kindly and offered her a drink because he could see that she needed it.

The morning is filled with sounds of people laughing and talking. Josie looks out to see that a group of people is preparing for a wedding in the events building. Josie watches the young people arrive and decorate. Then she sees a group of people she assumes to be Mennonites riding bicycles. They look very happy. She wonders if she would have been happier with their simpler life.

The children play by the river with a large group of other children while Josie watches. Jim approaches and offers her a spiked lemonade. Jim chats with her and Josie responds a bit rudely. When Jim gets up and walks away, she sees the bottle breaking against her face again.

That night, the wedding reception gets loud, so Josie and the children sit outside the RV watching the party. Josie remembers feeling set apart from others during the Candyland scandal and that she used to hide in the woods and watch other people's houses. During that time, she realized she was as normal as everyone else. She realizes she is tired of being separated from the rest of the world.

The father of the groom approaches. Josie thinks he is angry at her for watching and she begins to cry. He invites her and the children to come to the party. She and the children go and dance and enjoy themselves.

Chapter XV begins the next day. Josie asks Jim if he would like to have lunch with her. He invites her to have dinner with him instead. They go to Jim's cabin for dinner. He explains the tattoo on his arm to Josie. It is a tattoo commemorating his service in Grenada. This makes Josie think about creating a musical comedy called "Grenada?"

Jim compliments Josie by describing her in a way she has never been described before and she feels as though she is being seduced. After dinner, Jim draws pictures for the children. Josie thinks about the way older men are more settled and that that is appealing. Jim continues to play with the kids and encourages Josie to take some time for herself and go on a bicycle ride.

Josie enjoys her ride and spends time looking at the beauty around her. She has a brief thought that having children keeps a person too busy to appreciate beauty, but then realizes that children are beautiful and she needs to find a way to combine the two. On her way back to the cabin she thinks about how great the night has been and that this is her "best life" (218). She returns to find Jim reading to her children.

## Analysis

This section marks a turning point in Josie's outlook. Josie looks at Paul one day and can see that he knows she is flawed. Instead of this bothering her as it may have in the past, she instead decides that she can see love in his eyes in spite of the fact that she is



flawed. This indicates that Josie may be changing in the way that she sees herself. At the beginning of the book, Josie only saw her flaws and was sure that Paul was judging her when he looked at her, such as when they were at Sam's house and she believed that Paul thought their life was irresponsible. Now, she is able to see that she is worthy of Paul's love even when she makes mistakes.

Josie is also beginning to tire of being apart from the world. She sees an example of what it means to be separate from the world in Kyle and Angie. This couple has made the conscious choice to remove themselves from society. They live out of their truck with their children and travel from place to place. They do not agree with the government and are seeking to avoid paying taxes. While Josie thinks they are beautiful people and they seem happy, Josie seems to think there is something a little crazy about what they are doing. She does not like the way that Kyle is very enthusiastic about shooting at targets with his gun. When they go to bed at night, she has a brief thought about how people are expected to trust that people with guns will not use them to shoot her and her children. This might be seen as another instance of author commentary on the subject of gun control. Though Josie likes Kyle and Angie well enough, she does not seem interested in engaging in their particular lifestyle. Later, when she is at Jim's campground, Josie watches people preparing for a wedding and comes to the realization that she is growing tired of being separated from the world, indicating she is starting to feel ready to return to her regular life.

Josie has felt somewhat separated from the world since she was young. During the time of the Candyland scandal and its aftermath, Josie spent a lot of time alone and watching other families through their lit windows at night. Josie was likely searching for what it meant to be normal and trying to gauge how far off from normal her own family was. However, she now realizes that perhaps there is no such thing as normal since she saw that all of those families that seemed perfect on the surface had their own problems. This realization directly states the author's theme of there being no such thing as normal. This is a lesson that Josie needs to accept in order to move forward with her life and stop wondering if she is doing the right thing all the time.

Unfortunately, Josie's desire to end her separateness leads her to seek a relationship with Jim, which ends badly. Josie, who thought Sam's lover Robert was repulsive in part because he was older, now sees the appeal in an older man. Jim seems settled and confident to her, and she likes that. When Josie has sex with Jim and is caught by Paul, she takes a step backward in her changing outlook. Once again she feels like she has made a grievous error in judgement and worries that Paul is disappointed in her.

Paul is also starting to change. Josie notices that he is distancing himself from Ana a bit and becoming a more independent person. He is able to dismiss Ana's demands for unrealistic things like an ATV. Rather than trying to appease her, he simply tells her she cannot have one because she is too young. He then turns back to his mother and continues to talk to her about his life and his school. Josie is happy to see that Paul feels worthy of dominating a conversation rather than always putting Ana first.



Ana has not yet made any significant changes, but her conversation with Josie about Jeremy is important since it will come up again later when Ana wonders about her father. Josie did not tell her children about Jeremy's death because she wanted to protect them.

The author continues to explore the theme of life being chaotic when Josie and the children are found squatting in an empty bed and breakfast. The scene of the bed and breakfast is ideal and Josie and her children have been enjoying the cozy little cabin and the beautiful land surrounding it. Yet, even in this peaceful setting, there is an element of chaos when Josie discovers her children in a barn filled with mounted animal heads. Josie finds this disturbing and her immediate reaction is to leave. However, Paul asserts his newfound independence and convinces her to stay. Josie relaxes again, but another moment of chaos forces them out of the bed and breakfast. When the man comes into the cabin in the middle of the night the scene immediately turns chaotic when he yells and threatens Josie. Josie fears she will be arrested or that this man will harm her or her children, so she takes the kids and runs away into the night.

Another chaotic element that the author includes in the story is the wildfires that are burning out of control in Alaska while Josie is there. The fires force Josie to leave the archery field when they are evacuated. She has no idea where she is going and nearly drives straight into the fire. The inclusion of the wildfires allows the author to add some action to the plot.

These moments of chaos interrupt several more peaceful moments when Josie is able to see that there is magic in the world. It is interesting to note that there are more moments of peace and magic as the book progresses than there are chaotic moments. This is perhaps because Josie is beginning to be more at peace herself and is now able to see the good around her. For example, Josie takes notice of the joy of the Mennonites riding bicycles and later is awestruck by the beauty around her as she goes for her own bicycle ride. She also enjoys watching the wedding preparations and later the wedding reception that takes place at the campground. In the past, Josie might not have been open to the joy and magic of a wedding since she was struggling with her own feelings about marriage due to her relationship with Carl.

The author adds a new image to the theme of the importance of the past, that of the bottle that Josie imagines breaking against her face in times of stress. This is an image that Josie has seen since she was 12. The fact that she can name the age at which she began seeing this leads the reader to believe that the image is grounded in some traumatic event that occurred when Josie was 12. The image is so clear and specific that there must have been a time when Josie saw it for real. The author first mentions the image when Josie is forced out of the bed and breakfast by the angry man. The man's anger and her own fear at having done something wrong seems to have triggered the image and after that she sees it more often, such as when she knows she has upset Jim by being rude to him.

Jim is the source of another instance of the musical motif. Josie notices a tattoo on his arm and Jim explains that it has to do with his military service in Grenada. Josie finds



this amusing and conceives a musical titled “Grenada?” around the idea of this man being so proud of service in a small and relatively unknown area.

Eggers insert his own commentary on society again in this section. This time he speaks to the subject of schooling. He suggests that private schools were created just so that parents could keep their children away from certain other types of children, such as the children who have a parent in jail that Paul mentions when talking to Josie about his school. Then, Eggers pokes fun at the idea of homeschooling as being a way for parents to reject the whole notion of school altogether.

Later, Eggers also makes an observation about parenting. As Josie sits watching her children play in the archery field she has the thought that achieving such perfect moments may be what parenting is really about. Eggers makes a point of saying that parenting is not about making children perfect or grooming them for getting the right job.

## Discussion Question 1

What makes Josie stay and spend time with Kyle and Angie? What about them draws her to them?

## Discussion Question 2

What realization about parenting does Josie come to while squatting at the bed and breakfast? Do you agree with her?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think the breaking bottle image that Josie often sees means? Why does she see this?

## Vocabulary

shanty, dominating, exhilarating, adept, sedentary, inhabitants, barracks, vague, mesmerized, acrid, exactitude, flawed, immaculate, persecuted, confidant, proprietor, cajoled, intermittent, convey, brutal

# Chapters XVI - XX

## Summary

Chapter XVI begins with Josie driving away from the RV park. She is tired and angry at herself. After sending her children to bed, she had sex with Jim and Paul saw them. She knows her behavior was inappropriate and that Paul understands what they were doing. Afterward, she and Jim and argued about whether or not Jeremy could really have been killed in Afghanistan since the war there is over. As she drives, Josie continually sees the image of the bottle breaking across her face.

In Chapter XVII, Josie thinks the best way to erase from Paul's mind the sight of having seen his mother having sex is to replace it with nicer things. As they drive, she sees a roadside attraction that is a replica of the Batmobile, so she stops and lets the children look at it. As they drive away from the Batmobile, Ana kisses Josie's cheek and says she loves her.

Josie continues to drive, trying to avoid main roads, which makes their path a meandering one. There is evidence of the fires all around them. They come upon a roadblock just as it is being cleared. When Josie drives through she is the only one on the road and the drive is peaceful until she gets a flat tire.

Josie pulls over to the side of the road and a group of men wearing orange and walking in a line approach her. They offer to fix the tire. When Josie cannot find the jack, some of the men offer to look inside the Chateau. Josie lets them look, but has a momentary sense of concern for the bag of money hidden under the sink. The men find the jack and change the tire. As they do, another man approaches and asks what they are doing. He then asks Josie if the men harmed or bothered her. Josie is confused and says they did not, but that they were helpful. He instructs the men to move on and then asks Josie if they identified themselves as inmates. Josie goes in to check that her money is still there and it is. Ana is holding a flower given to her by one of the inmates.

Josie continues driving and finally decides to stop at an all-night diner. She orders and sees a man sitting in the booth facing hers. He is also alone so she invites him to sit with her. He is awkward with her and expresses surprise at having been invited to sit with her. The waitress brings a stack of papers and envelopes to the man and Josie realizes that he is there to serve her with papers. Before he can, she stands up and makes a scene claiming that he propositioned her. She runs to the Chateau and drives quickly away before he can follow.

Later, Josie stops at a gas station and checks under the RV for a tracking device. When the teenager working there sees her, she makes an excuse about needing to empty the septic tank. Afterward, she buys some coffee and food and drives away.





At the beginning of Chapter XVIII, Josie sees a sign for a silver mine and decides to stop there. She vaguely remembers her parents taking her to a mine once and catching them kissing in the tunnels. The mine is closed and there is no one around. They find an empty cabin that appears to have been the caretaker's home. The cabin is furnished, but it is clear that no one has been there for quite some time. Josie sends the children away so that they cannot see her breaking a window. She convinces Ana to climb through the window and open the door. They decide to fix the window and spend the night after Josie leads them to believe that they should make sure their repair will hold. She hides the Chateau in an empty garage so no one will find them. The children find games in the cabin, including Candyland, which Josie vows to burn while the children are not looking.

In Chapter XIX, Josie wakes to find the children outside playing with a small stray dog. Paul initially claims they found the dog scratching on the door, but then admits they went outside looking for sticks and the dog followed them. They have named the dog Follow.

During the night the phone rings. Josie does not answer it. She finds Ana alone on the porch. Ana asks if they are staying at the house and seems disappointed when Josie says they are.

The phone rings again in the morning and Josie ignores it again. She wonders if Follow's owners will come looking for her and worries that they will be found. They go for a walk and Paul asks where languages come from. In her explanation, Josie says that if she were the first person to find a certain kind of rock, she could give it any name she wanted. Ana picks up a rock and declares it "dad." Paul's mood grows dark as he tells Ana she cannot call it that. Then they find a waterfall and Josie allows the children to drink from it.

They stay in the cabin for days and Josie has no regrets. The children seem healthy and happy, which makes Josie think how like animals they are since they thrive in the fresh air and sunshine. Her children have become independent and brave.

When their food runs out, Josie knows she must go into town. Paul finds a map and Josie sees they could pose as hikers. She tells Paul they will have to take Follow with them since she cannot be left alone in the cabin.

That night, Ana tells Josie that she thinks Carl is dead. Josie feels a sense of tenderness for Carl for being the father of her children and decides she must call him and Sunny in the morning.

In Chapter XX, Josie and the children walk into town to buy food. They arrive just as a parade is ending. After the parade people congregate in the park and Josie follows them. The children go to play on an inflatable slide while Josie goes to watch some musicians play. One of them, named Cooper, invites her to sit by him. She is struck by the beauty of the music and a song sung by one of the men. They ask her to request a



song and she chooses “This Land is Your Land” because she knows they will enjoy playing it.

Josie goes back to watch the children on the slide. She is amazed by how brave they have become. As they get ready to leave, Josie sees Cooper and runs over to talk to him. She tells him she has some music in her head and wonders if he and the other musicians would help her to get it out in return for free dental care. He agrees.

Josie and the children go looking for a grocery store. They see a pay phone so Josie calls Sunny and tells her where she is. Sunny says that Carl called, but she did not answer the phone because she did not know what to tell him. Josie says that she will call Carl. As they talk, Josie is reminded that Sunny is getting old and she needs to go see her soon. Sunny tells her that Evelyn died and then says that Josie has not been defeated by Evelyn's family. Josie knows this and thinks that she feels no doubt, only that she is invincible and she wants to continue.

When Josie and the children try to go into the grocery store, they are met at the door by an employee who says that Follow must stay outside. Josie ties her to a pole and they go in. When they come out of the store a woman is with Follow and angrily accuses Josie of stealing her dog. They let the woman take Follow. Josie worries that the woman will call the police and she will be found.

Josie walks back toward the trail they took into town, but realizes she should not go there yet since she does not want to be seen. Instead, they picnic at an RV park. They start walking back to the mine, but it has already grown too dark. Josie stops at a gas station in hopes of finding a flashlight, but is only able to find candles. She allows the children to carry the candles to light the path and they walk back to the cabin. As they walk, Josie thinks about which musical idea she will work on with Cooper. She settles on writing a musical about Alaska and her experiences.

The arrive back at the cabin and find there is no electricity. Josie reads to the children by candlelight from *Prince Caspian*, by C.S. Lewis. She feels as though she and her children have become heroes like those in the book. She now believes that courage is “simply a way of moving forward” (281).

## Analysis

Josie continues to encounter the chaos of life in this section. While driving down a peaceful road, the Chateau gets a flat tire. This moment of chaos also allows the author to incorporate the theme of magic in the world since the flat leads to one of the more surprising and touching moments in the book. A group of men appears and changes the tire for Josie. They are kind and helpful, so Josie is surprised when another man informs her that they are inmates. The magic of the moment is that these men who have been incarcerated would take the time to assist a woman and her children. Not only do they help, but they go into the Chateau where Josie keeps her stash of money and they do not take anything. Finally, one of the men is kind to Ana and leaves her holding a little



yellow flower. This scene might be interpreted as the author commenting that one should not be too quick to judge people who are not like them.

While the moments of chaos do continue to reduce, the author does continue to include the theme of life being chaotic since removing it would negate the idea. Josie is still forced to move from place to place because of the wildfires. Even when she finds a relatively peaceful place to stay in the cabin at the mine, the peace is interrupted by the random ringing of the telephone.

Josie also encounters her past when she stays at the cabin. Her children find some board games and among them is Candyland. The name of the game, of course, reminds Josie of the scandal her parents were involved in. Once again, she cannot escape her past. In her typical fashion of just forgetting the past, Josie vows to burn the game when her children are not looking.

The moments of magic now outweigh the moments of chaos in Josie's life. For the first time ever, Ana tells Josie that she loves her without provocation. This moment is magic to Josie because she has wondered about Ana's future and whether or not she might be a deviant child. Her unprovoked tenderness seems to indicate that there is hope for Ana to develop some sense of compassion and caring for others. Additional moments of magic include the parade Josie and the children happen upon when they go into town to buy food and the music that Josie listens to in the park. Josie is struck by the beautiful music this ragtag group of local musicians is able to come together to create. She knows they do not realize the affect they have on others who do not have their musical talent.

The musicians that Josie meets play into the musical motif since she decides to strike a deal with them to help her develop the music she has in her head. Josie is set on having them help her with music for a musical about her adventures in Alaska.

Josie does find some sense of normalcy in these chapters when she stays in the caretaker's cabin. She sees how happy her children are there and likes being able to eat in a real kitchen and live in a real house. The family even takes in a dog, adding to their sense of living a regular life. However, even as Josie enjoys the comfort of a real house, the reader is aware that her life is still not normal because she has broken into the house and is squatting there. Josie lives with the nagging fear that they might be found.

Josie's fear of being found adds to the suspense of the story. Another moment in which the author develops the suspense is when Josie is in the diner and a man attempts to serve her papers. Josie's ingenuity again shows through when she realizes what is going on and thinks quickly to create a scene so that she can get away without receiving the papers. Later, she stops to check her RV for a tracking device since she cannot imagine how this man found her in Alaska. When she is seen doing so, she again thinks quickly to say that she was checking the septic tank and needs to empty it. The reader has been lead to believe that the papers must be from Carl who is probably



suing her for taking the children to another state. This increases the suspense since it seems that Josie has been found and arrest is imminent.

Josie begins to examine her relationships with those in her life and knows that she cannot stay away forever, not even from Carl. When she makes a phone call to Sunny, she knows that she must go to see Sunny soon because she is getting old. The warmth between the two women and Sunny's role in her life is evident when Sunny informs Josie of Evelyn's death. Sunny encourages Josie by reminding her that although Evelyn has died, the lawsuit did not defeat Josie. In the beginning of the book, Josie probably would have felt defeated and been devastated by this news. However, the author has developed Josie in such a way that she has evolved and now knows that she is not defeated. In fact, she feels invincible and has a sense of wanting to move forward.

At the end of her phone conversation with Sunny, Josie tells Sunny that she will call Carl. This decision indicates that Josie is almost ready to rejoin her life since she knows she will eventually have to deal with Carl and the consequences for taking the children. Josie's decision to contact Carl is solidified when Ana tells Josie that she thinks Carl is dead because he is gone just like Jeremy. Before that, Paul had exhibited his growing sadness at not seeing his father when Ana jokingly says she is going to call a rock "Dad." Paul gets angry and says she cannot because "dad" is already a word, indicating that his father means something to him. Josie realizes that both Paul and Ana miss their father and that they need him.

Another thing that Josie has grown more and more conscious of is the way her children have grown into brave human beings. She entrusts them with candles to light the way back to the cabin through the dark forest and is struck by how well they are able to do this. They show only momentary fear of the darkness, and then the walk becomes an adventure. When they reach the cabin, Josie reads to them by candlelight. They read from C.S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian* and Josie reflects that they have a lot in common with the heroes in the book. This brings the book back around to the first chapter in which Josie had been disappointed by not finding Alaska full of heroic people. Now, she has begun to see the heroism in just living life and doing the best she can. She thinks she is capable of great things, just as the characters in the book are. The author again inserts a bit of commentary when he writes, "Courage was simply a form of moving forward" (281).

## Discussion Question 1

What makes Josie leave Jim's RV park? Is it only that Paul saw them or is there more?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does the author include the scene in which the inmates help Josie? What is Josie's reaction to learning who the men are?



## Discussion Question 3

How has Josie's outlook on life begun to change? What do you think is the reason for the change?

## Vocabulary

relentless, addled, endangered, heraldry, scrum, exhalation, inmates, vulnerable, ampersands, propositioned, extrasensory, benign, habitation, decompose, invariably, misdemeanors, corporeal, prefab, implications, riddled



# Chapters XXI - XXIV

## Summary

In Chapter XXI, Josie takes the children with her to Cooper's house. Ana plays on the porch, but Paul insists on staying with Josie. Josie gives him the job of taking notes. Cooper begins strumming and Josie finds a note on the piano that reminds her of Sunny. They continue to play together and the sound makes Josie think of a bad man walking up the stairs. She abruptly goes to check on Ana.

When she goes back a woman named Cindy has arrived. She is a singer. Josie instructs her to sing any words, but to make them sound urgent. She ends up singing a combination of "now" and "no." Other musicians join in. The song begins to remind her of the sound of a storm and rain hitting a roof. She wonders where she lived once that had a roof like this and a storm. A trumpet player joins and the sound makes her think of adults "who let themselves regret and wallow" (289). The song then evokes a memory of her mother before morphing into a sound that makes her think of the disappointments of her past. Finally, it resolves into a sound like everyday life, with both joy and insanity.

Ana comes in and begins dancing wildly. She coaxes Paul into dancing with her. Many of the musicians begin dancing as they play. The music is interrupted by the sound of sirens.

Chapter XXII begins with everyone being evacuated due to the fires. The musicians leave Cooper's house. Josie gets on a bus with the children to go to the high school where many evacuees are taking shelter. She knows the cabin at the silver mine and the Chateau parked in the garage will be lost to the fire. On the way to the school, Paul asks Josie if she is done with the music. She says she does not know because she has no idea what her future holds right now.

Josie begins to feel free by the idea of all of their possessions and the Chateau being burned. Ana is laying with her head in Josie's lap and Paul has moved to another seat. Paul's distance from Ana is something new.

While they are at the shelter, Josie finds Ana helping a smaller child to drink from a water fountain that is too high. She sees that her daughter has changed. Someone announces that rain is on the way.

Josie is given the opportunity to make a phone call, so she calls Carl. He sounds happy and knows Josie has been in Alaska. He is not upset and it was not him that served her with papers. Carl tells her that Elias has been trying to reach her to tell her that the power company is countersuing.

Josie takes the kids for a walk near the river. She lays down on the grass and the children notice the river stones are warm. They begin putting warm stones on Josie's body. While she lays there, she has a moment of doubt about having brought her kids to



Alaska, but then realizes that they had to leave to become who they are now. She thinks about there being “meaning in motion” (306) and that all parents should know that. She feels love for the people in her life and the people she has met in Alaska, and even for Evelyn and her parents. The children then begin to remove the stones and she feels free. They see a sign depicting a trail to a mountain lake and decide to go see it.

In Chapter XXIII, Josie, Paul, and Ana set out for the lake. Before they go, Josie has Paul draw the map that appears on the sign. They follow the path and have gone quite a long way when it begins to storm. The thunder is extremely loud and lightning strikes a tree near them. Fearing they will be struck by lightning, Josie makes the decision to keep going forward to get to a shelter that appears on the map. They run in short spurts. Ana injures her leg and Josie hurts her back, but they keep going. They climb over rocks that fall in an avalanche and block the path. Josie asks the children to be brave and realizes she has created these wonderful, brave children.

They keep going until they get to a cabin. When they go inside, they see that the cabin has been set up for a party that never happened. They consume the food and drinks that are there and sit in front of a fire. Josie knows she is right where she is supposed to be.

Chapter XXIV consists of just five words, “But then there is tomorrow” (324).

## Analysis

In this final section of the novel, Josie finally reaches a point of acceptance and a joy at being able to move forward. This happens through a series of cathartic moments. The first occurs when Josie goes to Cooper’s house to create some of the music she has in her head. She goes there with the intention of simply making some music about her adventures in Alaska. However, what happens is far greater and allows the author to blend the musical motif with the theme of the importance of the past. The music that Josie and the musicians make ends up being a catharsis of Josie as it helps her to come to terms with her past. Through the music, the author again indicates that Josie’s childhood was far more traumatic than she reveals. There is a section of the music that sounds to Josie like a storm on a roof and a man, who she specifically describes as bad, coming up the stairs. The sound is at once perfect and one she never wants to hear again. This suggests that Josie was the victim of some sort of abuse as a child and one cannot help but wonder if this man was also involved in the broken bottle image that Josie continually sees. The music also incorporates her parents as there is a section that reminds Josie of her mother vamping to some music as she came down the stairs. Finally, though, the music resolves into something joyful, which causes everyone to get up to join Ana in dancing about the room. The music acts as a means for Josie to release whatever has happened in her past and to move forward with more joy.

The next catharsis occurs when Josie realizes that the Chateau and all of her possessions, including her money, are in the path of the fire. Though she initially worries about this, when she knows there is nothing she can do about it, she actually feels free.



In that way, the Chateau can be seen as symbol of Josie's need to keep moving. When the Chateau is gone, she accepts that it may be time to return to her life in Ohio and to Sunny and Carl. In fact, when she is given an opportunity to make a call, Josie calls Carl. This phone call resolves the suspense of the novel in that she learns that Carl is not angry for her and has not been looking for her and the children. The papers that the man in the diner tried to serve her are in relation to the class action suit with the power company, which the author briefly mentioned earlier as a set up for this resolution.

The final cathartic moment occurs when Josie is lying on a bank by a river while her children play with stones that have been warmed by the sun. They begin to place them on her while Josie lies thinking about her life, where she has been, and what it all means. When the children begin to remove the rocks from her, she feels not only physically lighter, but emotionally lighter as well. She lets go of her guilt and anger over the loss of Jeremy and Evelyn's lawsuit. She now knows that she needed to come to Alaska in order to find out how to live her life in the best way possible. The stones, then, are a symbol of those things that have been weighing Josie down.

The author concludes the book by having Josie, Paul, and Ana travel through a dangerous lightning storm to get to safety. The scene is full of action as they dodge bolts of lightning in an effort to get to the shelter by the lake. The storm is a metaphor for Josie's newfound ability to move forward regardless of the chaos that life throws at her. There is a moment when Josie is aware that she could just go back toward town since they know what is back there, but then she makes the decision to go forward into the unknown to get to the shelter. This represents Josie's leaving the past behind to move into the future. Her past is still important as it has shaped her into this person who is capable of braving the storm, but she now knows that moving forward is the best course of action. When they finally make it through the storm, they discover that the shelter has been set up for a party that did not happen, perhaps because of the fires. This party is the author's last inclusion of the theme of the world being full of magic. It seems rather unlikely that Josie would stumble upon a room set for a celebration, yet she does. The party decorations and food enables Josie and the children to celebrate having made it through the storm in a literal sense, but also in the sense of the storm being the difficulties of life that they have survived.

As a final nod to the theme of life being chaotic, the author closes the book by writing a final chapter consisting of just one sentence, "But then there is tomorrow" (324). This sentence serves to remind the reader that even though Josie is at a good place in her life right now, that may not always be the case since one never knows what might come next.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Paul refuse to leave Josie alone with Cooper?





## Discussion Question 2

What does the music that Cooper and the other musicians play for Josie make her think of? How does the music evolve?

## Discussion Question 3

What conclusion does Josie finally come to about life and parenting as she and the children sit by the Yukon River and then travel through the storm to the safety of the cabin?

## Vocabulary

reluctantly, muster, pivotal, disembodied, lyrical, transitions, flourishes, recounting, cherub, amateurs, anew, vigorously, wallow, vamped, jauntier, exaggerate, eviscerate, moorings, revelation, discernible



# Characters

## Josie

Josie is the protagonist of *Heroes of the Frontier*. She is 40 years old and the mother of two young children, Paul and Ana. Josie takes her children and runs away to Alaska where they drive around somewhat aimlessly in an old, rented RV. Josie made the decision to leave Ohio after a series of events left her fed up with her life and worn out. She blames herself for the death of her young patient, Jeremy, who enlisted in the military after she encouraged him to join and he died while serving. She has lost her dental practice because a woman named Evelyn was diagnosed with a mouth tumor that the lawsuit claims she should have seen. And, Carl, the father of her children has announced that he is marrying his current girlfriend.

In the beginning of the novel, Josie is depressed, anxious, angry, and has extremely low self-esteem. She feels responsible for Jeremy's death and she believes she is not a good parent. She also feels like she has made the wrong decision at every turn in her life and as though she is never where she is supposed to be. Throughout the novel, Josie has experiences that change her and help her to regain her sense of self and to understand that life is chaotic, but also beautiful. By the end of the novel, Josie decides that going to Alaska was the right decision and that her children have changed in a positive way, so she may be a good parent after all. She also realizes that there is no such thing as a "normal" life and that she is just as normal as everyone else.

## Paul

Paul is Josie's eight-year-old son. He is a beautiful child who is quiet and intelligent. He starts the novel as his sister's caretaker. When Ana was born, she was ill and Josie had enlisted Paul's help in caring for her. As a result, Paul is very attached to his sister and often puts himself in the role of her guardian. He enjoys being the one Ana runs to when she is hurt and being the one who understands her best. However, as the story progresses, Paul develops a sense of independence. He distances himself from Ana and begins to feel worthy of being the one who is the center of attention. Josie notices him dismissing Ana's requests for outlandish things, like an ATV, and moving away from Ana on the bus to the evacuation shelter. By the end of the novel, Josie has noticed that Paul has become brave.

## Ana

Ana is Josie's five-year-old daughter. She is a ball of energy and seldom sits still. She has a knack for breaking things and even looks for ways she can break nearly everything she encounters. Josie worries about her destructive nature and that she will hurt herself. It also bothers her that Ana is never sorry for anything and shows very little concern for the way others are feeling. As they travel, Ana begins to change. For the



first time ever, she tells Josie that she loves her without being prompted. Later, Josie witnesses Ana trying to help a smaller child drink from a water fountain.

## Carl

Carl is Josie's ex-boyfriend and the father of Paul and Ana. He is younger than Josie and has never held a steady job. His parents were wealthy, so Carl does not understand the need to work. While they were together, Carl insisted he did not believe in marriage. However, one of the things that prompts Josie to leave Ohio is the fact that Carl has announced that he is marrying his current girlfriend. Carl has been rather uninvolved in his children's life as he spends most of his time in pursuit of his latest interest, such as triathlons. So, when Carl wants the children to come and visit him and his fiancé, Josie is certain he is only doing so to prove to his fiancé's parents that he is not a dead-beat father. In the end, Josie decides that Carl is harmless and her feelings toward him change as he is the father of her children and she is grateful to him for that.

## Sam

Sam lived with Josie when they were teenagers. Both Sam and Josie emancipated themselves from their parents with the help of Sunny. They lived together at Sunny's house. Growing up, there was some rivalry between them for Sunny's affection. Sam believed that Josie became a dentist because that was Sunny's profession. Sunny and Josie have speculated that Sam moved to Alaska as a way of conceding to Josie. When Josie visits Sam, she is intrigued by Sam's life. Sam's house is extremely organized and her children are beautiful and well-adjusted. However, Josie comes to realize that Sam and her husband have an open relationship and that one of the men that Sam is sleeping with is an elderly man whom Josie finds disgusting.

## Sunny

Sunny is a mother-figure to Josie. She helped Josie to emancipate herself from her parents when Josie was 17. She then took Josie in to live with her and another girl, Sam, that she had helped. The thought of Sunny brings peace to Josie and it is Sunny who tells Josie that Evelyn has died and that Josie was not defeated by the lawsuit.

## Charlie

Charlie is an old fisherman that Josie and her children meet on the dock. He invites them to see a magic show on a boat with him. During the show, one of the acts is able to guess where audience members are from by their postal codes. Charlie is touched to know that someone knows where he is from when the performer guesses his home town.



## Cooper

Cooper is a musician who tries to help Josie find the music she has inside of her. Josie goes to him to try to make the music she hears in her head in connection with the musicals she thinks about making a reality.

## Kyle and Angie

Josie meets Kyle and Angie when they arrive at an archery field where Josie has stopped to let her children shoot bows. Kyle and Angie and their children live out of a small house that sits in the bed of their truck. They have made the choice to become “stateless” in an effort to break away from society.

## Jim

Jim owns an RV park that Josie stays at. He is slightly older than Josie and she finds him handsome. After having dinner with him and allowing him to watch her children while she has some time alone, Josie has sex with Jim. Paul discovers them in the act and Josie leaves the next day.

## Evelyn

Evelyn never appears in the story, but is mentioned often as she is the woman who filed a lawsuit against Josie. Evelyn was diagnosed with mouth cancer and the lawsuit contends that Josie should have seen that during her regular dental appointments. Josie makes the decision to simply give Evelyn her practice as a settlement. Evelyn dies while Josie is in Alaska.

## Jeremy

Jeremy was once a patient of Josie's. He had been her patient since he was young. When he graduated from high school he wanted to enlist in the military. Josie encouraged him to do so and he was killed six months after enlisting. Josie is haunted by his death and blames herself.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Warm Rocks

Each of the warm rocks Josie's children pile on her near the end of the novel represents a weight of something from Josie's past or her life that she needs to let go of. When the rocks are removed, she feels lighter, both literally and figuratively. She feels as though a burden has been lifted from her and she can now move forward.

## Follow

Follow, the little dog that Paul and Ana find, represents stability. When Follow joins their family while they live in the cabin at the silver mine, Josie begins to feel a sense of normalcy and stability. Her family feels more like other families she has observed in that they are now living in a regular house and even have a dog.

## Old West Magazine

The Old West magazine that Josie finds in the Chateau is a symbol of the way the past can never be left behind. The letters in the magazine are from people who are trying to find some element of their past, such as an ancestor or a person they have lost touch with. Regardless of how far in the past the element is, the person writing the letter has a need to know about it and cannot leave that part of their past behind. Similarly, Josie cannot leave her own past behind but drags the ghosts of Jeremy, Evelyn, and her dental practice with her.

## Evelyn

Evelyn represents Josie's failures. Josie failed to see a tumor in Evelyn's mouth and this led to losing her dental practice. Josie cannot leave the failures of her past behind, so she is constantly thinking about Evelyn.

## Yellow Flower

The yellow flower that Ana receives from an inmate who helps to change a tire on the Chateau is a symbol of good in the world. Josie has often expressed the thought that people are terrible, but the unlikeliest of people, inmates, stop to help her with her flat tire and even treat her daughter with kindness.



## Jeremy

Jeremy, like Evelyn, is a symbol of Josie's failures. Josie believes that she failed to stop Jeremy from going into the military and even encouraged him, so she takes responsibility for his death.

## Stromberg Party

The Stromberg party that was set to take place in the shelter at the mountain lake, but did not, is a symbol of the celebration of Josie finally feeling like she has done the right thing. Josie and the children eat the food that was set up for the party and sit amidst the decorations and Josie is finally content.

## Otter Head

The otter head that Ana carries to Josie represents the chaos of life. Josie is watching her children play and observing the antics of the otters in the water. The scene is peaceful and things seem right for just a moment, but then Ana brings Josie the head of a dead otter with flesh still clinging to it. The head interrupts the peace Josie is feeling and brings the moment to an end in an unexpected way.

## Sunny

For Josie, Sunny is a symbol of peace. When Josie's mind is racing with thoughts of past failures, thinking of Sunny calms her and brings her peace.

## The Chateau

The Chateau is a symbol of Josie's feelings of needing to run from her life. When Josie first rents the Chateau, which is already in bad shape, she quickly notices that her presence and that of her children makes it dirty. Josie continues to feel like she needs to keep moving and that there is somehow something wrong with her. But, when the Chateau burns in the wildfire along with her possessions, Josie feels like losing those things allows her to let go.



# Settings

## Alaska

Josie flees to the state of Alaska with her children when her life in Ohio becomes too difficult for her to bear. She hopes to find a state full of heroic people and beauty. However, when she arrives in Alaska, she decides it does not look much different than Ohio and she wonders where the heroic people are. While she is there, the state is wracked by wildfires. Josie twice finds herself running away from the fires: once while driving the Chateau and once when she is evacuated while at a musician's house.

## The Chateau

The Chateau is an old RV that Josie rents to travel around Alaska. The vehicle is not in good shape. The engine cannot go faster than 48 miles per hour and it is a bit rickety. She and the kids live in the Chateau most of the time that they are in Alaska.

## Sam's House

Sam's house is located in Homer, Alaska. Josie thinks the house is extremely organized, unlike anything she has ever lived in. The house gives the impression that Sam has her life together, but Josie discovers she is sleeping with different men while her husband is away, so the house is only a front for a more tumultuous life. Josie leaves Sam's house after finding out that the hospital she was briefly at contacted Carl.

## Bed and Breakfast

Josie and the children squat at a bed and breakfast they find when they are forced to drive away from the wildfire. The proprietor of the bed and breakfast is not there when they arrive and they find the guest cabin open. It is a cozy little cabin and they enjoy the beauty of living in a real house that is surrounded by land for a few days. However, on their second night there, a man comes and they run while he goes to call the police.

## Peterssen Silver Mine

Josie stops at the Peterssen Silver Mine to explore with her children. When she discovers that the mine is closed and the caretaker's cabin is unoccupied, she breaks a window to get in and they live there for a while. They leave the mine when they are evacuated due to the wildfire while they are in town one day.



# Themes and Motifs

## Life is Chaotic

The idea that life is chaotic is present in the many events that occur in Josie's life that are either random or disruptive, and sometimes both. Josie leaves Ohio in the first place because she feels like her life has fallen into chaos. She has lost her dental practice and the father of her children is marrying someone else. Her daily life, while she sees it as drudgery, is fast paced and full of drama.

Josie tries to escape the chaos of her life by running away to Alaska, but the chaos of life cannot be escaped. Josie's daughter Ana is herself a source of chaos since she is always breaking things or putting herself in dangerous conditions. She does not seem to be afraid of anything, so she does things like standing on sinks in public bathrooms or picking up rotting otter heads. She also turns on the gas burners in the RV, which floods the vehicle with gas fumes, and later turns on the septic tank heater so that it creates a noxious odor.

As they travel, there are many chaotic moments that alter the course of their travels. The wildfires force Josie to leave the archery field, which leads her to the empty bed and breakfast. This brief time of peace is disrupted when the owner of the bed and breakfast finds them there and threatens to call the police. Another moment of peace on an empty road that has just been cleared of a road block is interrupted when the Chateau gets a flat tire. The peace of the empty caretaker's cabin is interrupted by the ringing telephone and then ended all together when Josie and the children are evacuated because of the fires.

One of the final events of the book is the scene in which Josie and the children race through the chaos of a lightning storm to get to safety. Trees are felled by lightning and Josie fears for her life and those of her children. Even after she makes it to the cabin, the author ends the book with the acknowledgement that the chaos is not over because the next day will come.

## There is Magic in the World

The author incorporates the theme of there being magic in the world by including several unlikely and magical moments into the story. One of the first instances is when Josie, Paul, and Ana are invited to attend an actual magic show by a man they have just met. Charlie, an old fisherman, invites them out of the blue after Ana strikes up a conversation with him over a fish head she sees lying on the dock. Charlie has no idea if he can even get tickets for them, but he invites them anyway. His kindness toward this mother and her children is magical itself.

The author uses the magic show to make the point that people will only see the magic in the world if they are open to it. The audience is not impressed by the magic acts on the





stage. They seem bored and barely clap. Josie, however, has come to Alaska hoping to find heroes, and perhaps some magic, too. She claps all the louder to make up for the reaction of the rest of the audience.

Josie happens across several places that she stays at almost as if by magic. She stops at an archery field that is closed, but where her children still find bows and arrows to play with. That stop leads to an encounter with Kyle and Angie, a couple who present an alternative way of life as they seek to be stateless. This encounter teaches Josie that she probably does not want to wander forever and be stateless like them. Then, she finds a bed and breakfast that is also miraculously empty, but with an unlocked cabin where they stay. Later, they stumble across an empty caretaker's cabin by the closed silver mine. Though the mine seems to have been closed for quite some time, the cabin is still fully furnished and has electricity. Their stay in the caretaker's cabin reminds Josie of how good life in a regular house can be and leads her toward wanting to return to her life.

Josie also witnesses several small, but happy events that might be seen as magic as they are chance encounters. She sees otters playing in the water and is charmed by their existence. When they stay at a campground, Josie sees Mennonites riding bicycles and marvels at the joy they get from such a simple thing. When she is given a chance to take a bike ride herself, Josie notices all the beauty of nature around her and the ride has a magical quality. Then, when Josie and the children leave the caretaker's cabin to go into town for groceries they just happen to arrive during a parade and in time for Josie to listen to music being played in the park.

## The Past is Important

At the start of the novel, Josie is intent on forgetting her past, but the author shows throughout the story that the past is important and cannot be escaped. As Josie drives through Alaska she is wracked with guilt over Jeremy's death and angry about the lawsuit that caused her to lose her dental practice. She cannot let these things go and constantly sees Jeremy's and Evelyn's faces while she drives or when she tries to sleep.

Josie is also plagued by childhood traumas that have shaped her as an adult. The Candyland scandal left Josie feeling like she was somehow not a normal person. Though the scandal occurred many years ago, Josie still worries that her children will find about it when they visit Sam. The scandal eventually lead to Josie being emancipated from her parents, which gave her Sam and Sunny as family. Her emancipation has left her feeling some sense of guilt for having left her parents.

In addition to those past events the author reveals, there is also perhaps something even more traumatic in Josie's past that is not revealed. This is evidenced by the image she often sees of a bottle breaking against her face and by the music she creates that includes a section that sounds like a bad man walking up stairs.



The author further illustrates the importance of the past with the Old West magazine that Josie finds in the Chateau. The magazine contains letters from readers who are looking for people from their past. Though some of the people the readers are looking for are long gone, they are still important.

## Musical Motif

The author uses a musical motif as Josie thinks about musicals she would like to create based on events or people in her life. The first mention of this comes when Josie encounters an angry Norwegian man in an RV park. This causes her to remember having gone to Norway when Paul was a toddler. The people there acted like they did not like children and everyone wore white all the time. This makes Josie contemplate creating a musical called “Norway” in which all of the people wear white and are plotting to eliminate all children.

The author explains that Josie thinks musicals are a form of art that truly captures human nature and life. The actors on the stage sing about ludicrous things in crazy situations and the people in the audience sit in the dark and listen while chaos is happening outside the theater. Josie was introduced to musicals as a child when her parents were put in charge of choosing music to be played in the mental hospital where they worked.

Josie considers several musical ideas. She thinks of calling a musical “Disappointed” and making Evelyn the main character and of another called “Hero of Zucotti” about Carl and his many varied pursuits. When she meets Jim, she considers a musical called “Grenada?” about men who were sent to serve in an area of the world they had probably never heard of.

Josie’s love for musicals eventually leads her to a moment of release when she works with Cooper and the other musicians to create the music in her head. She begins the session with the intention of creating a musical about her adventures in Alaska, but what comes out is music that represents her traumatic past. The music eventually turns joyful to represent Josie moving forward with her life.

## There is No Normal

Josie has been comparing herself to others in an effort to find out if she and her life are normal since she was young. After the Candyland scandal, Josie often wandered through the woods of her town and watched people through their lit windows. She did this for a long time, and eventually discovered that no matter how perfect a family might seem on the surface, there is no such thing as normal since they all had something strange about them that was not visible to the outside world, such as a parent who drinks to much or domestic violence or other odd quirks.

At the outset of the story, Josie has forgotten this lesson she learned as a teenager and she constantly compares herself to others. When she sees Sam again for the first time



in years, she is immediately struck by how perfect Sam's life seems to be. Sam has beautiful children and a nice house that is extremely organized. Josie asks Sam if she thinks she is living her life right. This is Josie's attempt to determine whether or not Sam is happy and if her life is normal. Sam does not answer the question. Later, Josie discovers that Sam's life is not perfect, or normal, either. Sam's husband is away for long periods of time, so Sam has affairs with various men, including one who is quite a bit older than her.

By the end of the novel, Josie remembers that there is no such thing as normal. Her method of parenting her children is no less valid than the methods of other parents. Her decision to pick up and go to Alaska was an acceptable decision, too, since it helped her to release herself from her past and find a way to move forward.

# Styles

## Point of View

Heroes of the Frontier is written in the third person limited perspective from Josie's perspective. The author's use of this perspective is appropriate since this is primarily Josie's story. The reader only knows what Josie is thinking. Her thoughts at the outset of the novel are often dark, sarcastic, and self-loathing. However, as her attitude begins to shift, she begins to notice the beauty around her and her confidence begins to grow. Allowing the reader to know what Josie is thinking enables the author to show Josie's growth and change as the novel progresses. The story is told in the past tense.

## Language and Meaning

Eggers uses a slightly elevated vocabulary throughout the novel, making the novel set at a slightly higher level than the average high school reader. The choice of language gives the novel a feeling of being a classic piece of literature. Given that Josie is an educated woman who has a love for old Broadway musicals, the elevated vocabulary and classic feel is appropriate.

## Structure

Heroes of the Frontier is divided into 24 chapters numbered using Roman numerals. The chapters vary in length with the final chapter being only a single sentence long. The novel follows one main plot, that of Josie and her children travelling through Alaska. The subplots are in the form of short vignettes of people and places that Josie encounters, such as meeting Charlie the fisherman or staying in the empty bed and breakfast.



## Quotes

She wanted no more of the useless drama of life.

-- Narrator (I)

**Importance:** This quote explains Josie's need to run away to Alaska. She has grown tired of her life in Ohio and the stress brought on by the drama of her relationship with Carl and the lawsuit filed by Evelyn. She is also tired of the drama of everyday life, such as being judged by other parents for her parenting skills or having to continuously spend money.

She had been comfortable, and comfort is the death of the soul, which is by nature searching, insistent, unsatisfied.

-- Narrator (I)

**Importance:** Josie had once been in the Peace Corps and she sometimes longs for that lifestyle again. She believes that when she began living a comfortable life as a dentist and a mother, she lost a piece of herself. She never feels like she is in the right place and attributes this to her need to wander.

She spent her idle time conceiving of musicals that would never be. It was the only medium that could properly express our true madness and hypocrisy—our collective ability to sit in a theater watching lunatics sing nonsense while the world outside burns.

-- Narrator (III)

**Importance:** This quote explains the author's use of the musicals motif. Josie thinks that musicals truly capture the chaotic and rapid pace of life.

And she wondered about the gene she possessed, some strangling DNA thread that told her, daily, that she was not where she should be.

-- Narrator (V)

**Importance:** This quote explains one of the reasons that Josie fled to Alaska. She has a need to wander and move, yet no matter where she is, she never feels at home. Instead, she constantly feels like she needs to go somewhere else. At the beginning of the novel, small things like mounted animals in a garage make Josie feel like she needs to leave. Later, she begins to feel more settled and stays in one place for longer, such as in the caretaker's cabin at the silver mine.

Do you feel like you're doing what you're supposed to be doing? That you're using your time here properly?

-- Josie (VII)

**Importance:** Josie asks Sam this question as the two of them sit talking on their first night together. Josie's asking of these questions reveals her own state of mind. She



wonders if she is the only person who ever feels like she is in the wrong place or that she should be doing something else.

Josie was sailing the ship of her children's lives, hoisting the sails, turning the winches and bailing water, and Carl was not on that ship, Carl was sunning himself on some faraway unnamed island—wearing his visor!—but he believed he was on the ship.

-- Narrator (X)

**Importance:** This is a metaphor the author uses to explain Josie's life as a parent. She often feels as though she is the only one in charge of raising her children. Carl has repeatedly checked out of his parenting duties by pursuing his latest interest. For example, when Ana was born he took a sudden interest in training for a triathlon. Yet Carl does not acknowledge that it is Josie raising their children.

Raising children was not about perfecting them or preparing them for job placement.

-- Narrator (XI)

**Importance:** This quote reflects a change in Josie's mindset. At the beginning of the book she feels like she is not a good parent and that she may not even know what being a parent is about. This quote occurs as she sits watching her children play in the archery field. She feels as though she has achieved a perfect moment and realizes there is more to being a parent than just pushing children toward a goal.

She got back into the Chateau and drove off, picturing a bottle breaking against her face. This hadn't happened recently, but this vision, a bottle breaking against her face, had been an intermittent part of her life since she was twelve.

-- Narrator (XII)

**Importance:** This is the first time the image of the bottle breaking against Josie's face is mentioned. The author never explains the reason for the image, but it leads the reader to believe that Josie may have had a more traumatic childhood than is fully revealed in the novel. This image recurs throughout the book in times of stress or self-doubt.

And so in those dark woods, in the blue light of these sad homes, she realized she was no less normal than any of these sorry souls.

-- Narrator (XIV)

**Importance:** This quote occurs as the author writes about Josie's solitary youth after her parents were involved in the Candyland scandal. Josie often spent time wandering at night and watching other families through their lit windows at night. She discovered that there is no such thing as a "normal" family or life. She forgot this as she grew up and when the book begins, Josie is trying to find normal. When this quote occurs, Josie is beginning to remember that there is no such thing as normal.

All along she had been looking for courage and purity in the people of Alaska. She had not thought that she could simply—not simply, no, but still—create such people.

-- Narrator (XIX)



**Importance:** At the start of the book, Josie is a bit disappointed that she does not see heroic people in Alaska. As the book goes on and she sees Paul and Ana begin to change and become brave and independent, she realizes that she has helped to create two people of the kind she was looking for.

His interest in them came and went, like his passion for economic equality or triathlons. But he was harmless. This was so crucial and freeing to know.

-- Narrator (XXII)

**Importance:** This quote indicates a turning point for Josie in her feelings toward Carl. She had been angry at him and disgusted by his lack of interest in his children until it served his purpose. However, by the time this quote occurs, Josie realizes that she has warm feelings toward Carl just because he is the father of her children. She also knows that Carl is not a bad person and that he will not intentionally hurt her or the children.

But then there is tomorrow.

-- Narrator (XXIV)

**Importance:** This is the final line of the book. It is the only sentence that appears in the last chapter. The quote is the author's way of reminding the reader that although Josie is at a place in her life that is good, life is chaotic and one never knows what the next day will bring.