

History of Wolves Study Guide

History of Wolves by Emily Fridlund

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Plot Summary

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Linda Furston was a teenager when a four-year-old named Paul moved into their neighborhood. She soon met his mother, Patra, who barely seemed to be an adult. Paul's father, Leo, was in Hawaii where he worked. Patra asked Linda to keep Paul away from their lake house for a few hours each afternoon while she worked at editing Leo's writing. Linda quit her job at a local diner and began to watch Paul. Their relationship was complicated and she sometimes did not like him very much. Paul felt the same about Linda, often lashing out at her when he was tired or angry.

Linda initially felt that Paul's health, including a breathlessness, was just part of his makeup. She noticed small details, such as discolorations of his skin and a sweetish odor of his breath, that she later learned were signs of the edema that took his life. She discovered that Patra had begun putting him in a diaper, especially at night, and later learned that incontinence was another symptom. Leo arrived at the lake house for an extended visit and asked Linda to accompany them on an overnight trip to Duluth. During the trip, Leo began to question Linda's core beliefs, apparently in an effort to sway her to his train of thought. By the time that trip was over, Linda was worried about Paul. At one point, she offered to go to town to get some Tylenol, as if that might help Paul. Patra agreed and Linda wandered around town for awhile, but never found a way to ask anyone else for help. Paul died that night.

A trial ensued and Linda was called to testify because she was one of the few people who had interacted with Paul during those months. Leo and Patra cited their Christian Science ideology as the reason they did not seek medical treatment for Paul, and they were acquitted of any responsibility for his death. What Linda never said during the trial was that Patra seemed to be trying to tell her something, and Linda felt she was either thanking Linda for going to get Tylenol or asking her to get help.

That same year, a teacher at Linda's school died and Mr. Grierson arrived to take his place. Linda kissed him one day, but he did not respond. Soon, rumor circulated that he had impregnated another girl in her class, Lily Holburn. Linda had always been interested in Lily's life, but she wanted to intervene on Mr. Grierson's behalf. She wrote a letter to give to Lily, but when Lily returned to school after the summer break, she was obviously pregnant and Linda did not give her the letter. Linda tracked Mr. Grierson down through a website that keeps track of sex offenders. She contacted him by letter and he wrote back. Their communication did not absolve Linda of her desire for answers about Mr. Grierson or his relationship with Lily.

After high school, Linda briefly attended a community college, then got a job. She had a roommate but never got close to the woman. She was in a sexual relationship with a mechanic, but never allowed that to progress to a permanent or formal arrangement. She continued to drift in this way until her father died and her mother needed someone

to care for her. Linda returned home, at age 37, and sold off some of the family property to pay debts.



Chapters 1 - 2

Summary

In Chapter One, Linda speaks from some two decades after the year Paul died. She says she thinks about him sometimes. He was only the second person she knew who died. Her eighth grade history teacher, Mr. Adler, collapsed and died at school. Linda grew up in Loose river, a small town in Minnesota. Adam Grierson was hired to replace Mr. Adler. Linda could tell he wanted the students to like him but most were indifferent to his efforts. Linda answered a question one day and Mr. Grierson seemed grateful. She felt that was her gift – to “give people what they wanted without knowing it came from me” (Location 98). The day after she answered the question, Mr. Grierson asked her to stay after class and he asked what they were studying before his arrival, hoping to get some help with his own lesson plans. He apologizes for the rocky start. On another day, Mr. Grierson asked Linda to represent the school in the History Odyssey. She was to make a poster and give a presentation. Linda immediately decided she would focus on the history of wolves. He approved.

Mr. Grierson never considered that Linda had to walk home if she remained after the buses left. She walked home after their meeting about the project to find her mother was upset that the drain was clogged. Linda knew her parents had arrived in Loose River “in a stolen van” as part of a commune (Location 149). Other members eventually left, leaving only the three of them. Her mother asked Linda to return to town for something to tackle the clog, but then apologized for asking.

Mr. Grierson continued to be awkward. Linda could see how he looked at Lily Holburn, a girl who had already developed breasts. Linda won the originality prize at the History Odyssey, then asked Mr. Grierson for a ride home. She kissed him and he seemed shaken, making small talk and not commenting on the kiss. The following fall, she learned that he had a sexual relationship with Lily. Linda says that years later, she discovered the ability to track sex offenders through an online database. She found Grierson in southern Florida where he ran a shop and where people know he was a sex offender.

In Chapter 2, Linda arrived home from school one day to find a couple at a recently-constructed lake house despite the fact that it was still very cold. She watched them over the coming days as they went about their lives, including time spent looking through a telescope on the deck.

On day, Linda confronted Lily about the stories about her relationship with Mr. Grierson. She suggested that Lily made it up, and Lily seemed to agree. Linda briefly considered that she and Lily were close, but accepted that Lily simply had no friends in whom she could confide. Linda says that Lily had always tried to please people but the stories had made her a pariah. Linda assured Lily that the stories would eventually die down.



Analysis

There is a great deal of foreshadowing in the opening pages of the novel. In the first scene, Linda talks about the fact that she sometimes remembers Paul, though not all the details, and that he was the second person she knew who died. Since Paul was only a child when Linda knew him, it is clear that he dies at a young age. Some readers may expect that the author is giving away the ending of the novel, but the manner of Paul's death and its aftermath is literally more important to the story than the mere fact of his death.

The author uses some interesting terms and phrases, often in an effort to make the reader further identify with various characters. One of the first examples of this technique is seen when Linda is remembering Paul. She says he is only the second person she ever knew “who'd gone from living to dead” (Location 61). The author could easily have said that he died, rather than expressing it as moving from the state of being alive to the state of being dead. The phrase is from Linda's perspective, which should make the reader understand that she has an unusual way of looking at things, including death.

Linda's mother has a chaotic attitude toward religion. Linda remembers a day when she was very young, when her mother put her in a tub of water in what seems to be a makeshift baptism. Her mother said, “I wish I believed in this shit,” referring to the event she had created (Location 241). At another point, Linda says her mother did believe in God, but “grudgingly, like a grounded daughter” (Location 149). Her mother attended church faithfully, felt tied to interdenominational beliefs, but still struggled to find her way. Faith is one of the novel's themes, and Linda's mother is one of the examples of this theme.

Metaphors and similes are seen throughout the novel. An example of this literary device is seen in Chapter 2. Linda was watching Paul and Patra at their lake house. Paul was wearing a hat with a pom-pom on top, and that pom-pom “bounced like a bobber” (Location 318). The “bobber” is referring to a piece of fishing tackle. The use of that specific metaphor is indicative of the kind of life Linda lived as a resident in that rural area with the lake literally at her doorstep.

Linda's relationships will be one of the novel's themes. Her relationship with her mother is complex and seems even more complicated than most mother-daughter relationships. For example, Linda's mother asked Linda to go back to town to get something to unclog the drain, but she then began to apologize repeatedly. Linda did not immediately exonerate her mother for the unreasonable request, but waited a few seconds before saying it was alright. This indicates that Linda had the upper hand in the relationship. That is borne out by the statement that her mother wanted assurance that Linda had not been hurt by her nontraditional upbringing.

Linda watched the new family as they went about their lives during their early days at the lake house. One detail Linda reveals is that they had a telescope set up on their deck, and they sometimes watched the skies at night. The interest in the stars was



spurred by Leo's profession as an astronomer. The irony of that is that they were watching the skies while Linda was watching the family.

There is a historical connection between Linda and Lily, but not a friendship. Linda says she has felt “vaguely protective and vaguely resentful of Lily” (Location 380). Linda's comment seems to be a contradiction, but she was a teenager when she was acquainted with Lily, which is the definition of confused emotions. Linda's sense of protection likely comes from a lack of a protective influence in her own life. Her sense of resentment probably stems from the fact that Lily deliberately set out to please people, which is something Linda did not do, or from the fact that Lily was considered pretty while Linda did not think that about herself.

Discussion Question 1

List what you know about Linda up to this point. What kind of character is she? Keep the list and add attributes as they become available.

Discussion Question 2

Who is Mr. Grierson? What is his role in Linda's life? Why do you believe she kissed him?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Linda's home life, including her mother. Does their relationship seem complex?

Vocabulary

hysterical, repulsed, etiquette, poplar, cleaves, tyrannies, mutually, sacred, proportion, insignificant, nostalgia, ambiguous, farce



Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

One day, Linda discovered that the telescope was pointed directly at her cabin. Her first thought was of the tarp that covered their doorway. She set their dogs free of their chains and heard the ice crackling under their weight, indicating the lake would soon thaw.

When she was walking home from the bus stop one day, Linda encountered the mother and son on the road. The mother, Patra, was working on her bicycle chain while Paul was collecting leaves and putting them in his backpack. Patra began to talk, saying that she was a terrible driver and that her husband, Leo, did not “trust me with the car” (Location 404). Linda remembers being asked during “the trial” (Location 431) when she became aware that there was something wrong with Paul. From the first meeting, she noticed he had a “breathy” way of talking and had to sit down when he became excited. But later, she came to believe this was just a part of Paul. He was “fussy and fragile” one minute and “whooping and manic” the next (Location 432). His hands seemed large with a reddish tint. Patra wound up turning the bike over without fixing the chain, and pushing Paul home. She invited Linda to join them and Linda accepted.

When they reached the lake house, Patra invited Linda to take off her boots. She was embarrassed about what her feet would look like, and declined. Paul grabbed Linda's hand and urged her repeatedly to remove her shoes. Eventually, she “hissed” at him to let her hand go and stop (Location 473). Paul was obviously confused by her reaction. A short time later, they all sat down to a dinner of noodles with butter and a salad. Patra said her husband, Leo, was working in Hawaii. He had warned her to watch out for bears and “old hippies” he predicted were living in the area (Location 482).

Patra suggested Linda should call her mother to let her know where she was. It was not necessary, but Linda pretended to make the call. In this imaginary conversation, Linda pretended her mother was worried and that she reassured her, saying Patra and Paul need someone to teach them about the woods” (Location 519).

In Chapter 4, Patra offered Linda \$10 a day to watch Paul for a few hours each afternoon while Patra worked on editing Leo's manuscripts. Linda quit her job at a local diner and began to babysit. Patra gave them snacks and other items, such as books, to take along. Linda was surprised she did not have to do anything to gain Paul's trust and that the afternoons were not boring. Paul collected items from the woods for a “city” he was building (Location 540). One day, he gathered rabbit poop, which he said would serve as cannonballs, but washed them so that they disappeared. Linda taught him to mark his trail to find his way home and began to name the plants and animals.

Paul began to depend on Linda, expecting her to help him if he could not get down from a rock. One day, they found a nest of Mallard ducklings. Linda was unaccountably upset



when he was respectful of the babies. Part of her wanted him to do something typically childish so she could remind him to be nice. Another time, they saw a small herd of deer and Linda reminded Paul not to be afraid.

At home, they ate a light supper together. Linda worked a puzzle while Patra bathed Paul and put him to bed. They talked briefly about Leo's work, and Linda felt Patra was not entirely devoted to the work, though she was serving as Leo's editor. Patra revealed she had a degree, and Linda correctly guessed it was an English degree. As they continued to talk and interact, Linda realized that Patra was lonely.

Analysis

The use of the word “girl” to describe Patra is significant because it makes it clear that Linda's first impression was that she was very young (Location 397). At 26, Patra was more than a decade older than Linda, but was petite. Patra never really seemed to be a mature, responsible adult. For example, she was overly-dependent on Paul.

Another of the literary devices is seen in Chapter 3 when Patra and Linda formally introduced themselves for the first time. Patra said she had “forgotten what it is to talk to people,” which is clearly an exaggeration (Location 414). That kind of exaggeration is seen in several other places in the novel. An example of foreshadowing is seen later in the chapter, when Linda referred to the trial.

Another aspect of the relationship between Linda and her mother is seen in this segment, when Patra suggested that Linda should call her mother to let her know where she was. Linda knew that her mother would not be concerned about her absence, especially not this soon. Linda tried to make it appear that she and her mother had a traditional relationship with traditional concerns. Her side of the conversation made it seem that she was worried for Linda's safety. The fact that Linda went to such lengths to try to make Patra think she was having that talk with her mother is an indication that Linda secretly wants that normal kind of life that she believes most mothers and daughters have.

In the scene involving the Mallard ducklings, Linda is surprised when Paul does not set out to grab at the babies or do something typically childish. She thinks it is “strange” when she has an instinct to throw something at the ducks herself (Location 565). She says she felt the need to “show Paul something” that would “make him scared of the right things” (Location 566). She does not say what things he was afraid of, or what those “right things” would be. Considering that the reader knows Paul died at some point after this scene and that Linda is writing from that future knowledge, it seems reasonable that she wants him to be afraid of dying. Threatening the lives of the baby ducks might be a comparison to Paul's life expectancy. But Linda did not consciously know at the time of this scene that Paul was going to die, and her reaction surprised her.



The author uses comparisons freely throughout the novel, and this literary device is sometimes very clear but can also be somewhat vague. One of the more obvious examples is seen in a scene one evening when Linda was about to leave the lake house. Patra gave her the \$10 for watching Paul and Linda rolled it up like a telescope, acting surprised when she saw Patra. Patra's response was to laugh only halfheartedly and Linda immediately felt embarrassed. The comparison here is between Linda's action and that of Mr. Grierson when he pretended to use the telephone to reach out to students. Linda said Mr. Grierson was trying hard to be liked, and she seemed to be trying too hard at this moment herself.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Patra. What is revealed about her life and her family up to this point?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Linda pretend to call her mother on the first evening she spent at Patra's house?

Discussion Question 3

Who is Paul? Begin to explore the relationship between Paul and Linda, including what she seems to like about him and what she does not.

Vocabulary

patriarch, enthusiastic, preoccupied, conspiratorial, sequentially, despot, affronted, differentiated, prey



Chapters 5 - 6

Summary

Linda says she often has dreams about that time, but the dreams tend to center around the dogs. She arrived home late that night, so her father took care of the dogs, which was usually her job. But in the dream, the dogs do not appear normal and she struggles to do what is required. Linda then refers to Mr. Grierson. She read a newspaper article about the police dog that found cocaine in the possession of a student who had sublet Mr. Grierson's apartment. The dog also found Grierson's stash of child pornography photos in an envelop bearing Mr. Grierson's name.

Linda kept watching Lily that spring and knew a lot about her. Her mother died in a car wreck. Lily and her father lived in a trailer that bordered the Indian reservation and there were theories that an ancestor was a member of the tribe. The rumors about Lily mentioned only that Mr. Grierson had kissed her, "as if she couldn't bring herself to name anything more explicit" (Location 670). One day, Linda watched Lily's father drop her at school. Lily went to the lost and found bin and tried on a pair of boots but did not keep them. She did take a pair of mittens.

In May, Paul was bored with their time in the woods and Linda took him to a park. There was a young mother there with her infant baby and little sister. Linda saw them as typical of young girls who became pregnant, except that the girl mentioned a boyfriend who had remained in her life.

Paul convinced the little girl to push him on the swing. Linda had a foreshadowing of what kind of teenager he would become. She predicted he would be loved by a girl, the star of the high school play, moderately athletic, and other students would call him by his last name, Gardner. When she looked back at the playground, the little girl was on the ground and Paul was kneeling over her. Linda immediately sensed aggression in his body language. Linda and the young mother went toward the children and discover that Paul was yelling, "There is no spot where God is not" (Location 759). Linda's first reaction was become defensive, but she then became angry, ready to defend her right – and Paul's – to be different from everyone else in this town.

After the girl and the young mother were gone, Linda told Paul he hurt the little girl. He insisted that she fell, and said he had healed her. Linda dismissed the claim, knowing that youngsters believe things that are not true.

In Chapter 6, Linda says she and Paul did not always "get along," but they always found ways around it (Location 782). For example, she would take him for pie at the diner and he would agree to a ride in the canoe. Sometimes, Linda remained at the lake house for dinner and Paul always became possessive toward Patra during those times. One night, Patra told Linda that she and Paul had come to the lake house to have some quiet time but she added that it was to serve as a "hideout" while Leo was working in Hawaii



(Location 836). She seemed uncertain, saying it might be a good idea to return to the city where Paul could go back to preschool. She seemed to ask Linda's advice and Linda responded that it seemed to be a good plan.

Sometimes, Leo called while Linda, Patra, and Paul were eating and Linda would put him to bed. Linda and Paul often argued during that time. At one point, Paul said Linda was "supposed to be nice, but Linda responded Paul was "supposed to be sweet and cute ... and loveable," but that he did not always reach that (Location 874). One evening, Paul raced around, still naked from his bath, and became frantic, scratching Linda's cheek during the argument. Seemingly from nowhere, he said, "I'm a perfect child of God," which made Linda asks who he was at all (Location 888). Paul then noticed the scratch and Linda pointed out that he had wet his bed. Paul begged for Patra but Linda convinced him to let her help change the sheets first. Linda said that they each felt guilty and needed comfort, but neither could provide it to the other. She realized that he wanted time with Patra at bedtime and the only way he could get that sometimes was by throwing a fit. Patra entered the room and announced that Leo was coming to the lake house for a long weekend.

Analysis

A pair of literary devices are seen when Linda was taking Paul to the park. The author makes sorrow into a tangible thing, and Linda says it "shoved around in my chest, like a stick in wet sand" (Location 703). The metaphor hints at the possibility of time slowing down, like being stuck in wet sand. The imagery continues in that passage, as Linda talks about Paul swinging. She compares the back and forth movement as the epitome of hopelessness. She says the forward swing was hopeful, but then the child was snatched back again, and began all over, maybe with the hope that there would be no backward motion the next time. This seems like a fatalistic view of the situation, which could be explained by Linda's own life. She lived in a place of high poverty with few people ever leaving. The fact that her parents arrived there by choice but never left is an example of that. Linda herself may feel trapped, and she will eventually be pulled back, just as a child swinging is pulled backward after each forward swing.

Linda saw the young mother in the park as typical of the girls in the area. She was unwed, caring for a child, probably with little to look forward to in her future. Linda referred to girls in her class who could wind up the same way as "the Karens" (Location 732). This reference to "the Karens" is meant to indicate the social girls in Linda's grade. She also references other groups, including the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, and the athletes. In Linda's childhood, each group had a niche at their school and something they were known for. This classification of people into groups continues throughout the novel, and is a means of identifying some specific traits – such as the likelihood of an early, unwed pregnancy.

The role of ideology and theology is seen throughout the novel and is one of the major themes. Linda never claims to have any religious tendencies, despite her mother's apparent turn to Christianity, but she does mention being superstitious at the fact that



there was 11 years between each of their ages the summer Paul died. Paul was 4, Linda was 15, Patra was 26, and Leo was 37. Linda defined this as creepy and said there should be a meaning attached to it. She dismissed the possibility that it was mere happenstance.

There is a look at the perspective in this section of the novel as Linda identifies herself as being 37 as she is telling the story. That perspective means that the details of her childhood and the summer of Paul's death are all memories. The perspective is important and explains why she is able and willing to avoid chronological order, opting instead for presenting memories as they occur to her and presenting related memories together. The reader may struggle to find the correlation between some things, such as Mr. Grierson's arrival and Paul's death, until much later in the novel.

Linda has already imagined Paul as a teenager in school, and she later says that she "gave Paul time" to be an adult at the age of 26 (Location 935). The only way Paul would ever reach 26 is in the imaginations of those who knew him. The fact that Linda used the word "gave" to describe this may be an indication that she feels some guilt over his death.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the night Paul and Linda argue, including the fight that ends with a scratch on Linda's cheek. What does this say about each character and about their relationship?

Discussion Question 2

What does Linda know about Lily?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the scene at the park. What does Linda think about Paul at this point? Why do you think he came up with the statement he yelled at the little girl?

Vocabulary

perverse, explicit, mediocre, rancor, ecstasy, tormenting, lingered, distraction, feigned, anomaly, furrowed, atheist, disconsolate



Chapters 7 - 8

Summary

In Chapter 7, many arrived for fishing season. One day, Lily gave a teacher a note and left class. She did not return for the final week of school. Linda finished her final exam at school. At the lake house, she found Paul working on a city he had been building on the deck. It had been a medieval city, but he announced that he was changing it to a capital city on Europa, which is one of Jupiter's moons. Paul said it was the "Most likely place except Mars to have life" (Location 973). When Patra returned from running errands, she stepped on the city, prompting Paul to fall backwards to show how upset he was. Patra said he was excited because of Leo's pending arrival. She was obviously excited as well, and had had her hair done and bought groceries for the occasion. When Linda teased Paul into sitting up, she saw that he was sweaty, unsteady, and his pupils were dilated.

Patra took Paul inside, reciting from the "CS," or Christian Science ideology. One of the family cats ran out. Linda rudely encouraged it to run away. From the future, she says she should have gone home. Instead, she climbed a tree and watched Patra in Paul's room. She read to him until he fell asleep and then undressed him, putting on a diaper before his pajamas. Linda was surprised to see the diaper, having never seen it before, and she left.

The next morning, Patra arrived at Linda's house. She said Paul was "sleeping in," and wanted Linda to watch him while Patra drove to Duluth to pick up Leo (Location 1034). Linda went inside to tell her mother, who insisted she take four dollars and said Linda should have some fun. As Patra and Linda drove back to the lake house, Linda asked her real name. She said it was Cleopatra, but that she abandoned her nickname of Cleo once she married Leo. When they arrived at the lake house, Paul was awake. His coloring was off, the only sign of the illness from the previous day. They spent the day pretending to learn how to crawl on ice and survive in the wilderness. That evening, Linda gave him a meal and a bath, throwing away the diaper. They made a tent and went to sleep in it.

Patra arrived home late, and said Leo's flight was first delayed, then canceled. She said she was tired and should take Paul to bed, then began to cry without saying why. Later, Linda woke and found Patra and Paul still in the tent. Linda felt happiness but did not explain. Early the next morning, Leo arrived.

Linda reverts to the story of Mr. Grierson and Lily. She says Mr. Grierson had reportedly taken Lily out in a canoe on Gone Lake, the largest of four in the area. Linda knows that Lily had the upper hand. She was familiar with canoes and the lake, and she could have gotten away. He took pictures and made it clear that he knew Lily had the advantage. He said he "wanted her to know she had a choice," and he did so "before he unzipped his pants" (Location 1172).



In Chapter 8, Leo made pancakes. After breakfast, Patra tried to give Linda \$40 for the previous day. Linda tried to refuse and Patra put the folded bills under a rock, saying they were designated for Linda.

Later, Linda went out in a canoe, crossing multiple lakes to Lake Winesaga where she left the canoe and walked into the community to find Lily's trailer. Lily was not at home and her father, out back, was obviously drunk. Linda went to the front door and left the pair of boots she had seen Linda try on from the lost and found bin at school. She had meant to give them to Lily as a means of making it clear that she understood Lily. When she looked back at the trailer and saw the boots, they looked like “an implacable person standing watch over the door,” accusing someone of something (Location 1290).

Linda reverts then to memories from her early childhood. When she was four, another little girl lived at the commune. Her name was Tameka and they were constantly together. One day they went walking down the road until one of the older boys from the commune came and took them home. He was angry at them for laughing at him, but he managed to parrot the commune mantra that involved a “positive experience” (Location 1340).

The novel then reverts to the days following Linda's father's funeral. She was living in Duluth but totaled her car when she was leaving her mother's house. She traded the car for a motorcycle and went to the Twin Cities instead. She shared an apartment with a young woman named Ann and began a sexual relationship with a mechanic.

When she was 37, Linda looked up Patra online. She spent some time and found a woman who might have been Patra. She looked up Tameka and found her immediately. Though Linda and Tameka had been close as children, Linda knew they were worlds apart by the time she looked her up.

The story reverts to the Tuesday after Leo's arrival. Linda arrives at the lake house but Patra says that they will not need her for a few days because Patra and Leo are both available to care for Paul. Linda asks if Paul is “feeling better,” which seems to make Patra panic (Location 1407). Patra also mentioned that their cat was missing, but Linda denies having seen him.

Analysis

The author uses a capital “C” in the word Cities at the opening of Chapter 7, which seems to indicate that it is either a specific place or to impress the importance of the urban areas as opposed to the rural area where Linda lives. It seems likely that she is talking about Minneapolis and St. Paul, which are sometimes referred to as the Twin Cities.

There is an interesting piece of imagery in this section that foreshadows danger or dread. Linda was on the deck right after Patra and Paul had gone inside. She was listening to bits of conversation and knew that the day was almost gone. She then says that, “the whole day seemed to bare its open jaws at me” (Location 1005). The



personification of the day is a literary device, but the imagery is arguably more important at this point. Linda had already said that it was about six o'clock when this scene was taking place. The day is almost over, so it could be that she is referring to the earlier events of the day but it could also be a sense of dread that she felt at that moment. Paul was obviously ill when he raised himself up from the deck, but Patra insisted it was just excitement because he was looking forward to his father's visit. Linda never followed up on any of the signs of his illness, which increase over the coming weekend. It could be argued that she should not have needed to say anything to Paul's mother, who should have been able to see the signs, but that may not have completely eliminated her guilt.

The author uses a metaphor in Chapter 7 to make it clear that Paul is still not entirely alright. Linda and Paul went to bed in the tent in the living room. Paul arranged himself, "and then, like a stone tossed in water, sank straight into sleep" (Location 1114). That image seems to indicate that Paul was exhausted and the use of the word "sank" seems ominous, especially considering that the reader knows Paul was going to die soon.

There is an example of the literary device diacope during the scene in which Patra went to sleep in the tent with Linda and Paul. Linda says she was happy, repeating the word twice for emphasis. The passage reads, "Happy. I was happy" (Location 1147). The emphasis is used because Linda had not been accustomed to feeling this emotion and she had to examine it closely to fully identify it.

There is no obvious reason for the novel to revert to Linda's childhood unless the reader carefully evaluates the characters and events. There are series of comparisons that tie the stories together. For example, Linda's mother worried that her nontraditional childhood damaged her. Patra will have to face those same questions about Paul, except that Patra's decisions cost Paul his very life. Another comparison is the relationship between Linda and Tameka to the relationship between Linda and Patra. Linda and Tameka were very close as children, and Tameka even believed they could hear each other's thoughts. By the time she was 37, they were worlds apart. Linda and Patra should never have been close but Linda instinctively knew things about Patra's thoughts that Patra did not willingly reveal. Circumstance put Linda with both Patra and Tameka, and circumstance tore their friendships apart.

The fact that Patra seemed to panic when Linda asks if Paul is well probably seems more significant because of the foreshadowing that makes it clear Paul was about to die. That foreshadowing continues to be an integral part of the novel and moves some aspects of the story to heightened drama.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author insert the information about Tameka? Does it seem effective?

Discussion Question 2

Who was Tameka? What was her relationship with Linda?



Discussion Question 3

What did Linda say to Patra that made her panic? What does this seem to indicate about Patra's knowledge of Paul's illness?

Vocabulary

ritualized, hospitality, durable, dissociative, exasperated, loftier, syncopation, shunt, fermented, tasseled, frolic, harangued, aspirational, aggrieved



Chapters 9 - 10

Summary

School dismissed for summer. Linda was not summoned back to Patra's house to babysit. She sometimes thought of Lily and Mr. Grierson, and imagined Mr. Grierson begging Lily not to reveal their secret. One day, Linda was in the woods looking for berries when her father arrived on an ATV. They rode, leaving crushed plants in their wake, whenever the ATV would run.

Linda spent time with their dogs, Jasper, Doctor, Abe, and Quiet. She brushed their coats and sometimes removed their chains to let them run, amazed that they were so easy to please. While walking in the woods, they sometimes roamed far afield of Linda and one day came running back together, "as if they'd organized at last into a real wolf pack," and Linda saw they were chasing Patra's cat (Location 486). The cat was on a tree limb and Linda caught it, taking it back to the Gardner house. When she arrived, she admitted to herself that she wanted Patra to see her in control of the situation. When Patra opened the door, Linda walked inside with the cat in her arms.

In Chapter 10, Leo was holding Paul, who was wrapped in a blanket. Linda asked if Paul was still sick, and Leo was instantly and obviously upset by the question. Leo said Paul had a demonstration, which in the Christian Science theology, is an important step toward healing. Linda noticed a strange smell in the room that is not unpleasant, but distinctive. She could not identify it. Paul announced that the family was going to Duluth to an event that featured antique ships. Leo asked Linda questions about herself and her family. She glossed over details. Later, at the trial, lawyers asked if she asked Leo anything in return, but she did not. At the end of their conversation, Leo asked if she would accompany them to Duluth so that he and Patra might have dinner out together. She agreed.

When she got home, the dogs were already there and on their chains, and her mother berated her for letting them run loose, saying they could have been killed on the nearby highway. They argued briefly. When Linda announced she was going to Duluth with the Gardners, her mother said only that she should tell her father. He pointed out they had plans for the following day, but did not object to her going.

Paul was asleep in his car seat when they picked Linda up the next morning. He was listless when he woke. They stopped at a Denny's for lunch. Leo ate, then began to ask Linda questions, including her favorite subject in school. They talked about science and biology. Leo said the most important aspect of being a scientist was to consider facts "you think you know" (Location 1656). Linda knew the 20 acres her parents owned on the lake.

They got hotel rooms in Duluth. Linda and Paul went for a walk, but he was soon trembling and his skin took on a gray tinge. He slept most of the way to Duluth and Leo



carried him around when he was out of the car, but he was still ready to go inside as soon as Linda mentioned it. She noticed a strange smell on his breath when he talked. Leo and Patra went downstairs for dinner. Patra seemed to hesitate but Linda encouraged her to go. Patra mouthed the words, “thank-you” as she left (Location 1698). Later, when Patra and Leo returned, Linda sneaked to the door of their room and watched Patra perform oral sex on Leo.

Linda says she heard about Lily's trip to Minneapolis for Mr. Grierson's trial. On the stand, she said she had never been alone with him outside of class and had not had sex with him. Mr. Grierson said he did not have sex with Lily, but admitted he thought about it.

The next morning, Linda woke in the hotel. Leo was reading Science and Health, and he asked Linda if she believed in God. She said she was unsure but he pressed. He pointed out that she assumed her life began 15 years earlier, and that it would someday end. He asked her to then evaluate that assumption, adding the fact that God exists, and that He is “all good ... and all powerful” (Location 1758). She interrupted, asking where Patra and Paul had gone. Leo tried to steer the conversation back to God, but gave up and promised they would talk again later. They prepared to leave with plans to meet Patra and Paul. He tried to pick up the conversation again. Linda lied, saying that Patra had said Leo barely existed at all in her life because of his prolonged absences. She then repeated the phrase she had heard Patra use during sex the previous night, which prompted Leo to stop talking and prepare to leave. Linda had become anxious about Paul and Patra, but was reassured when they met up at the harbor.

Analysis

The author includes a description of the pending darkness in a unique way during this segment, using literary devices that include imagery and sentence fragments. Linda was outdoors in the evenings and some overcast nights, the “twilight finally halved, and then halved again, sliding the sky through epochs of orange, then epochs of blue and purple, ” adding that days seemed to “never get done” (Location 1438). The description will make most readers imagine lengthening days from their personal knowledge when the sky became different colors but seemed to take a long time to reach full darkness.

In the Christian Science theology, a “demonstration” is a time when a person pays special attention toward a specific goal, usually the hope of a cure of a disease or an end of an ailment. Leo used the word to describe something Paul had, and Linda did not really know what it meant, but she could tell that it was important to Patra and Leo, and that it did not really change how ill Paul looked. The person who believes in the Christian Science theology may “demonstrate” his faith through this heightened attention. The person who does not believe in this theology will dismiss the idea as ridiculous, as if a person can simply wish away an illness. Because Leo is so young, Patra and Leo literally believe they have to have enough faith to enact his recovery.



The relationship between Linda and her mother comes up again in this section of the novel. Linda arrived home after Leo asked her to go to Duluth to find that the dogs had returned on their own, and her mother had chained them to keep them from roaming to the highway. Her mother berated Linda for letting the dogs run without supervision, which was typical of how her mother talked to her. Linda revealed that her mother often made fun of her, such as calling her a CEO when Linda spent time counting things. The comment was not meant to be gentle teasing, but was deliberately unkind. Linda typically accepted her mother's words without comment or even paying much attention, but this time she snapped back. She said that this was the “boring” part of their relationship, where mother and daughter have “the same predictable dialogue” (Location 1571). Her comment stopped the conversation at the moment, but the two did not seem to be upset or angry later when they resumed their typical talk with her mother showing no sympathy or concern.

When Leo told Linda the first job of a scientist was to think about what she knew as fact, her mind immediately turned to the 20 acres her parents owned on the lake. She knew that land intimately. She knew the biggest cottonwood on the property and the patches of sumac, and the family's ragged shack where Linda slept in the attic. The author describes that 20 acres in detail, because this had been Linda's life up to this point. She had seldom been anywhere else and this was literally her entire world. Her mother wanted to be sure that her nontraditional upbringing did not harm Linda, but she had nothing to compare it to, so she did not know how to act any differently than she had learned while living in this rural life. Her limited experiences made her seem socially awkward at some points in the novel, and that persisted into adulthood. Her limited experiences also made her into the adult she becomes.

Paul gave Linda some very limited information about the ideology of the Christian Scientists, and his purpose is never revealed. It seems that he was likely trying to sway her to his way of thinking. He may have been trying to make her consider the Christian Science ideology for herself, beginning with a very basic indoctrination.

Discussion Question 1

What pieces of foreshadowing are seen up to this point that indicate Paul is going to die?

Discussion Question 2

What happened when Lily went to trial to testify against Mr. Grierson? What was Mr. Grierson's response?

Discussion Question 3

What happened when the dogs returned home without Linda? What was her mother's reaction? What does this say about the relationship between Linda and her mother?

Vocabulary

confiscated, dithered, pincers, epochs, predictable, minuscule, yearn, trammel, deity, mimicry, exceptionally, excruciatingly, premise



Chapters 11 - 12

Summary

In Chapter 11, they sat at the harbor and watched the parade of ships. Leo talked to Paul about the type and number of ships, and Linda “felt the need ... to defend Paul from Leo's good intentions” (Location 1808). Paul talked some and Patra picked up on the conversation to say that Paul missed their home in Oak Park, Illinois. A woman interrupted, trying to hand them some napkins and the three adults saw that Paul was throwing up “a bubbly white mass” (Location 1838). They went home then, this time with Patra seated in the back with Paul. The next day, Paul died. The cause of death was a cerebral edema. Later, Linda learned about the symptoms, including a headache, incontinence, and diabetic ketoacidosis. His brain had been swelling for weeks, and the symptoms had been there all along. At the trial, lawyers asked Linda what she thought about his symptoms.

Linda said she remembered the trip home from Duluth, this time without a stop for a meal at Denny's. While Leo was checking out of the hotel, Patra told about meeting Leo, who was her college professor when they began their relationship. Leo was “a third-generation Christian Scientist,” and she liked that he was so serious (Location 1927). They dropped Linda off at her house. She went inside as the Gardners drove away.

In Chapter 12, Linda remembered her early childhood. Her mother had made fun of her for counting everything, derisively calling her a CEO. Her father was more tolerant. She notes that privation has become fashionable, and that people think it makes a person better. Linda disagrees. As an adult, she dated a mechanic in Saint Paul. He wanted to talk about her past, but she ignored the attempts. When he tried to talk to her, she would change the subject, such as talking about what she knew about wolves.

As a child, Linda chopped wood and cleaned fish, but soon created other tasks to fill her time. Her mother turned to religion but could never decide whether her good works were more important than God's grace. She believed that her own private school education and mass media had “corrupted her mind” and countered that by pointing out that Linda had much more freedom (Location 2072). Later, her mother stopped calling Linda the CEO and referred to her as the Teenager and did not understand with her fascination with stories, such as a magazine article about Princess Diana.

Linda remembers a day in the restroom at school when a skater named Sarah was fixing Lily's hair for a skating competition. Sarah was believed to have talent and she recruited Lily, standing up for her after Lily's mother died. On that day, Sarah told Lily not to look at Linda, who she called “freak” (Location 2139). Linda met Lily's eyes in the mirror, and Linda “had the sensation I was looking at myself” (Location 2143).

One day, Linda's mother baptized her in a tub of water. Her mother called Linda renewed, but admitted that she did not really believe in it. Her mother explained that she



was trying to “get God on our side” as they set out on this new chapter of their lives without the other members of the commune (Location 2166). The night after the trip to Duluth, Linda went to bed but could hear her mother in the room below. Her mother wanted Linda to talk to her about the trip and about the Gardners, but Linda did not.

The mechanic Linda dated was named Rom. He sometimes used tarot cards and they talked about the meanings of the cards, including the Fool. Rom cited Jung, who said the Fool was like a child who never grew up. Linda grew heated, saying Rom was supposed to be using the cards to look at her past, but he said her past and future were the same.

Analysis

Linda said there were two stories that explained the situation leading up to Paul's death. The first was described by the prosecutors. They told about the medical issues, including headaches and other symptoms, culminating with a coma. Linda remembered the sequence of events differently. She said those events were the trip to Duluth, the drive home, a song Paul and his mother sang together, then bedtime for Paul. This is one of many comparisons seen in the novel. This time, the comparisons are dramatic in their differences, though both scenarios end with Paul's death. This is an example of the importance of perspective. From the prosecutor's perspective, the medical issues are all that matter. From Linda's perspective, the human quality of Paul's life was more important.

Chapter 11 is the end of the first section of the novel, which is titled Science, and Chapter 12 picks up in the second part, which is titled Health. This is yet another example of the literary use of comparison. The subject matter does not change dramatically between the two, though more details about Paul's death are revealed in the second section. This division may seem arbitrary to the casual reader.

There is a possible explanation for some aspects of the story that is first introduced in Chapter 12 when Linda encountered Lily and Sarah in the restroom at school. Linda's eyes met Lily's in the mirror, and Linda “had the sensation I was looking at myself” (Location 2143). That could be a way of Linda saying that she and Lily are two halves of the same person, or that they are literally the same person. Lily could be Linda's alter ego. Some points to support this idea are seen in the comparisons between Lily and Linda. Linda had always taken an interest in Lily, but without any real explanation. Linda wanted a relationship with Mr. Grierson, but Lily is the one who has that relationship. Linda and her mother are constantly at odds but Linda's mother is dead, eliminating that stress in her life. Lily has some friends while Linda has none, and Lily briefly and vaguely stands up for Linda when Sarah makes fun of her. There will be other scenes that seem to support this idea, and it will be explored later in the novel.

There is a simile in Chapter 12 that explains how Linda felt about herself. She was in bed after the trip to Duluth and heard a sound outside. She wondered what it was and knew that her dad would dismiss the sound without thinking twice about it. Sounds like



that were “nothing,” and Linda compared it to herself, saying, “I was nothing” (Location 2204). She seems to be feeling invisible and unimportant, just as a limb falling in the middle of the night was ultimately unimportant in their world. This feeling may be partly typical teenage angst, but it may also be a case of her sense of doom related to Paul's health.

Rom used the tarot cards to try to learn more about Linda, and those cards became a symbol of the doomed relationship between the two. Linda made it clear that she was not going to enter into a formal, long-term relationship though Rom clearly wanted that.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the new details about Linda's childhood.

Discussion Question 2

What is the comparison Linda makes between what the lawyers say about Paul's final hours and what Linda saw during those final hours?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the scene in the restroom involving Lily, Linda, and a classmate. What does this scene suggest?

Vocabulary

enumerating, pontificating, lull, uproariously, ravenous, indiscriminating, deferential, disheveled, hoisted, privation, excavate, banal, sluice, gregarious



Chapters 13 - 14

Summary

In Chapter 13, Linda paddled the canoe across the lake to the Gardeners' lake house. She was wearing Patra's headband and imagined it pulsing with the word "please" (Location 2217). Linda had not set out to go to the lake house, but found herself there. She realized she was very hungry and went to the door. The police later asked if she was concerned about Paul, but she said hunger drove her there. She planned to go inside and find a snack without waking anyone, but then decided she would eat as much as she wanted, from the refrigerator if she chose, and could take other items, such as the cell phone and Leo's manuscript. She could not decide if it was a plan from long ago, or a plan at all.

Inside the house, Patra was awake and on the couch. She asked if they forgot to pay Linda, or if she forgot something in the car. Patra then said she saw Linda crossing the lake, "and I thought ... she's come to rescue us" (Location 2247). She asked again why Linda was there. She turned on a light, saying none of them are going to get any sleep anyway. Leo emerged from Paul's room and was "dismayed" to see Linda (Location 2261). Patra told Leo he had not paid Linda. He wrote her a check for \$150. She heard Paul cry out but Leo said Paul was hungry. Though it was the middle of the night, he said it was not too early to make pancakes for breakfast. Leo said Linda could leave but Patra invited her to stay for pancakes. Leo continued to say that Paul was fine but that Patra should not bother him. He also continued to encourage Linda to leave.

Leo made pancakes and said Patra should eat. He went to Paul's room, but returned, saying "The little king wants his in bed" (Location 2330). Patra had trouble swallowing, and her actions made Linda more afraid. Linda retrieved a blanket and she and Patra sat on the couch together. They talked briefly about the canoe and Linda said that everyone who spends much time in a canoe eventually tips over. Patra responded that Leo never accepts that the worst thing could happen.

Patra said she was frightened during her pregnancy but Leo was full of encouragement. She had multiple problems and felt her heart stop during the delivery. She thought, at that moment, that "God wouldn't just stop my heart," and Leo later said that thought was "Paul being born" (Location 2373). Referring to her life at the time they were living at the lake house, Patra said she was happy. Linda agreed, and felt that everything was going to be alright.

Linda slept and dreamed about Paul, who was running from a bear. She woke at dawn. Patra was asleep on the other end of the couch and she could hear Leo snoring. She picked up a page from Leo's manuscript. He talked about his love for his four-year-old son, and a conversation about matter, which he defined to his son as "Your stomachache and everything else that lies to you and tries to pretend it is real" (Location 2428). He said Paul had no stomachache the following morning, so the family went on



with their plans for a trip. He ended with his thankfulness for the Christian Science church and the truth of their teachings. Patra added a note at the bottom that he might include more description of Paul and praised the writing.

In Chapter 14, Linda wrote a letter to Mr. Grierson once she learned through the sex offender registry that he was running a small shop called The Treasure Chest in Southern Florida. Linda wrote that she was not certain why he chose her for the History Odyssey, but that his reason did not matter. She said Lily had returned to school the fall after the rumors and it was clear that she was pregnant. She had recanted her testimony in court without saying why. However, she soon moved to Saint Paul where a program of the Catholic Church helped her with the necessities and provided job training. Linda said she believed Lily was merely trying to save herself from being forced into marriage and a life of drudgery in Loose River. She finished the letter by saying she believed he was innocent, and that someone should say it.

The story reverts to the day of Paul's death. Patra did not go to bed with Leo or Paul, and she slept late. Linda took that as a sign that everything was fine in the family but at trial, lawyers said she wanted to feel "less responsible" for Paul's situation (Location 2501). Another suggestion was Leo was in control of the situation, leaving Patra and Linda as the younger girls who were not as responsible. That morning, Patra spent a lot of time assuring Linda that everything was alright.

Patra took a phone call from a practitioner, apparently from the church. Patra repeated that things were fine, that she was feeling better about the situation, and that Paul was a perfect child of God. After the phone call, Patra reiterated that for Leo and he assured her everything was fine. He then asked Linda to go to Paul's room and continue a game of Candy Land while he made a phone call and Patra went about her chores. He asked Linda to call him if Paul woke. Linda began playing the game, moving two pieces around the board, though Paul was still and unresponsive. At one point, Paul opened one eye but did not focus.

Linda left the room and announced that Paul won. Leo said that Paul was bound to be happy about the victory and would soon be up and around, getting ready for kindergarten. When Linda was alone with Patra, she suggested that Paul needed medicine. She suggested Tylenol from the drugstore in town. Patra's only comment was that they could not tell Leo. Patra kept saying that Paul was going to be fine, but she agreed to the Tylenol. She was mouthing words that Linda took to be appreciation as Linda left the house. She stopped and retrieved the \$40 Patra had left under a rock in the drive, then hurried toward town.

Analysis

There is an example of personification in the early part of Chapter 13. Literary devices are used throughout the novel as a means of furthering the action. In this case, Linda was paddling the canoe toward the Gardner's lake house and she imagined the headband she was wearing, which belonged to Patra, as "pulsing" in a "plaintive"



fashion, and it repeated the word “please” in time with Linda's paddling (Location 2217). The headband symbolizes a connection between Linda and Patra, because they are both worried about Paul. The use of that symbol as a means of giving words to Linda's unspoken fear indicates that both women were feeling the same concerns.

Many people find themselves looking for an answer even when they are unable to fully voice the question, and that seems to be the case when Linda was imagining the headband pulsing with the word “please” (Location 2217). The underlying theme of Christian and Christian Science theology is evident in this scene. Linda was asking for a favor but she had never fully voiced the concern she felt for Paul. By this point, she knew something was terribly wrong but she did not do anything about it. The role of various characters is another theme of the novel, and Linda seemed determined to fill her role as the young neighbor who was not the person to ultimately take responsibility for Paul's illness.

The author uses the word “pounce” to describe the feeling of hunger Linda had on the lake (Location 2225). She had eaten very little all day, but when she realized that, the hunger arrived in force. The use of that word makes the feeling seem somewhat primal, which is in keeping with the actions Linda took following this realization. She literally set out to ransack the Gardners' cabinets and refrigerator without permission.

The comparisons continue to be a major theme of the novel, and the fact that Leo seemed to view Linda as a threat on the night of Paul's death is a continuation of that theme. Linda immediately thought back to the first time she and Leo met on the morning he arrived when she and Paul had slept in the tent in the living room. That day, she actually had a hatchet in her hand and Leo did not see her as anything more than the teenaged girl who sometimes looked after Paul. On the night of Paul's death, he obviously viewed her presence as a threat. Leo's Christian Science ideology required him to be positive that Paul would recover, even faced with the overwhelming evidence that something was horribly, medically wrong.

Linda's letter to Mr. Grierson seems out of place in the novel. She is talking about the hours leading up to Paul's death both before and after the letter, and the reader has to stop in the middle of the tragedy of Paul's death for that letter. This is another of several examples of the feeling of chaos because of the lack of chronological or subject order. Linda never follows any thoughts to conclusion before returning to other thoughts and scenes.

Relationships are often complicated, and the relationship between Patra and Leo is no exception. Linda was angry at the change that came over Patra when Leo was present. For example, she seemed to “smooth out” when Leo assured her that Paul was much better, was talking and hungry for pancakes (Location 2286). Leo also said that Paul was sleeping, but Patra did not comment on the contradiction. Her willingness to listen to Leo even when her son's life was at stake makes her a weak character, especially in Linda's eyes.



While Leo was cooking pancakes, Linda noted that the heat caused the windows of the lake house to fog over to the point that she “could no longer see out” (Location 2316). This is one of several examples of symbolism in the novel. In this case, Leo’s cooking was cocooning the group from outside eyes, just as his control over Patra and Paul had kept Patra from seeking medical help for Paul. An important aspect of this scene is that Linda was caught inside Leo’s sheltered home, along with Patra and Paul, which will ultimately make her feel complicit in Paul’s death.

Most parents know when their child is desperately ill, and Leo is bound to know by the morning of Paul’s death that there was something very wrong. He continued to insist on making positive comments, making it seem that Paul was responding to him. However, he made the decision to leave Linda in the bedroom alone with Paul for a time, despite the fact that she would be able to see that he was completely unresponsive. Leo’s motivations were not clear. He did not ask Linda to keep an eye on Paul, only to report if he woke. If he had truly been trying to keep Linda from knowing how sick Paul was, he could easily have kept her out of Paul’s bedroom, as he did Patra. The fact that he allowed Linda in makes it appear that he wanted her to take some action. This would be evidence of Leo’s lack of faith and his complicity in Paul’s death, and he never admitted to any wavering.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Leo’s attitude and actions during the final day of Paul’s life.

Discussion Question 2

Compare Patra’s actions and fears to Leo’s attitudes during Paul’s final hours.

Discussion Question 3

Why did Linda tell Mr. Grierson that he was innocent of wrongdoing with Lily when she had evidence to the contrary?

Vocabulary

clambering, giddy, substantial, mesmerizing, exuberance, swiveled, jargon, ploys, dogmatic, susceptible, formidable, veering

Chapters 15 - 16

Summary

In Chapter 15, Linda talked about her life after leaving Loose River. She attended community college in Grand Rapids for three years, then moved to Duluth where she bought a car and dated the mechanic, Rom. He wanted them to get a dog together, hoping it would move them toward a more stable relationship. That Christmas, she gave him a leash and collar, but had him use them on her for sex games.

Her roommate, Ann, was upset that Linda did not have real Christmas holiday plans. When Mr. Grierson sent her a letter, Linda let Ann believe it was from a relative. Mr. Grierson did not remember Linda. He addressed her statement that she believed in his innocence by saying that some people felt the need to defend others, hoping that someone will be there to defend them when their turn comes around" (Location 2734). He ended by saying that she should visit California if she got the opportunity.

On New Year's Day, Linda and Ann went to the laundry. They walked home by a different route to see the luminaries that were traditionally lit in an upscale neighborhood. On the way, they saw a Christian Science reading room. Ann stopped to look inside. She had known some Christian Scientists during her youth, and felt that made her knowledgeable about the subject. She was surprised to find the reading room, saying the religion was dying out. She said her main argument against the ideology is that they offer "no explanation for the origin of evil" (Location 2758). Linda says she never told Ann about her own experience with Christian Science, including her idea that its existence "offers one of the best accounts of the origin of human evil" (Location 2766).

Linda had sometimes urged Paul to run while they were playing. One day, he wanted to stop playing, indicating that his stomach hurt. He was so earnest that Linda stopped and paid close attention. She then offered to take him on the bicycle to the Nature Center where there was a stuffed wolf. Paul had little interest but was fascinated with a puzzle exactly like one he had at home. When Linda sat near him, he climbed onto her lap without an invitation until she told him they had to leave.

In Chapter 16, Linda talks about the trial. Patra had grown up in Milwaukee, her mother was a professor, her father died of cancer, and she met Leo at the University of Chicago. She had taken Paul to Montessori classes before they moved to the lake house and, when a teacher was concerned about Paul's health, sought out advice from her mother's friend, a pediatric endocrinologist. But Patra kept that a secret from Leo and never went for a follow up. She decided she was being an overanxious mother.

When Linda returned from town that day with Tylenol, Leo was carrying Paul and Patra was "white and taunt" as the trio left the house (Location 2835). They did not say where they were going but Leo asked Linda to lock the door. She went inside first. The



pancakes and milk were untouched in Paul's room and she took them to the kitchen. She then moved elements of Paul's city of Europa from the deck to his bedroom and lay down on the bed. When it was dark, her father came to get her. She went home with him.

Linda says her father died about 10 years later after suffering a series of strokes. While he was ill, he sat in front of a window, watching birds at a feeder. Her mother talked about their early lives together. In 1982, Linda's father was uncertain what to do but her mother took charge of their lives, setting out to begin the commune. She talked about the group of people who lived together for six years. While Linda had heard the stories before, her mother now spoke with a "mix of bitterness and nostalgia" that was new (Location 2903). Her mother said the group set out to do something important for the world. When everyone left, her mother and father "started over with just you" (Location 2911).

Analysis

A person's guilt or innocence is something that only that person knows, even if the accused person makes an admission. It seems clear that Mr. Grierson did have sex with Lily, and that Lily ultimately lied in order to avoid an even more terrible situation than an unwed pregnancy. Linda never explains why she believed Mr. Grierson might have been innocent of having sex with a student. She also never explains why she felt the need to contact him again, years after the act. However, this is another case in which it seems possible that Linda and Lily are the same person. If that were the case, Linda might feel compelled to contact Mr. Grierson because she has his child. If that is not the case, it could be that Linda simply feels a connection with Lily and Mr. Grierson, and that she had few of those during her youth so that each was precious.

A person's age affects the way they see things and what they assume to be available and appropriate. Paul, at four, was certain that the adults in his life were available and that it was appropriate for him to make demands on them. When he and Linda were at the Nature Center, he pushed his way onto her lap. She was squatted beside him and he kept rearranging himself until she had no choice but to sit down and accept him onto her lap. Paul's assumption came naturally to him, as a four-year-old child. Linda was angry at his assumption without evaluating it, which is evidence of her inherent attitudes at age 15. However, Linda was on the verge of adulthood, which meant she was beginning to see things from a different perspective. She began to see Paul's presence for the precious thing it was.

The nature of most parents is to be involved in their children's lives, but Linda's parents had never fit that traditional role. Her relationship with her mother was complex and, compared to that, her relationship with her father was utterly simplistic. He did not offer an explanation for going to the Gardner house to get her. It may be that he had seen no lights were on, and that worried him. It may also have been a sense of foreboding that prompted him to go get her. Regardless of the reason, he asked only one vague question and accepted Linda's response without pushing farther. At that moment, Linda



understood that her father had made their relationship this way as a gift to Linda. He wanted their relationship to be like this, probably as a way of making up for the complexity of Linda's relationship with her mother. The fact that Linda was able to see that is a sign of her emerging maturity, which is one of the underlying themes of the novel.

Many people want to change the world by leaving their mark or making a positive difference. Linda's parents were among a group who set out to do that by creating the commune where Linda grew up. The significance is that everyone left except Linda's parents. Her mother said that once everyone else was gone, they "started over" with only the three of them (Location 2911). That wording seems ambiguous. It may indicate that they still hoped to make a difference in the world, this time as a family of three instead of the group that formed the commune. The wording may also mean that they were starting over with a different plan and new focus.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the conversation Linda and Ann had about Christian Science. What is revealed about each character in this conversation?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the scene that took place with Linda and Paul at the Nature Center. What is the significance of Paul climbing onto Linda's lap?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the comments made by Linda's mother on the day Linda was helping prepare the cabin for winter. What did they imply?

Vocabulary

jittery, luminaries, placidly, lavished, disenchanting, impress, accumulated, infuriated, fluctuations, viscous, seeping, dangled, elaborate, overtly



Chapters 17 - 20

Summary

Chapter 17 is the post script from a letter from Mr. Grierson. He wrote about the apparent permanence of the redwoods and sequoias in California, and a time he spent in that area. He never went back because he did not want new memories to destroy those old memories.

In Chapter 18, Linda was taken to the police station to answer questions about Paul, and she wondered if Lily had been questioned in the same room. The prosecutor gave Linda advice about how to avoid being nervous when it was her turn to testify, but she was not nervous. The courtroom was hot during the trial. Linda wore a dress from a thrift store. Her mother accompanied her. Her father did not. Linda planned to place all the blame on Leo if Patra gave her any sign of acknowledgment, but Patra did not. The prosecutor said Paul could have been saved right up to two hours before he went into cardiac arrest, simply by getting fluids and insulin. He asked Patra why she did not follow up with a doctor and she repeatedly said that Paul was “fine” (Location 2996).

Linda remembered the day Leo and Patra left with Paul. Leo assured Linda that Paul was going to be fine. He hugged Linda and told her that she was “good” and “shouldn't feel guilty about any of this” (Location 3008).

Outside the courthouse, Linda and Patra encountered each other by chance. Linda tried to talk to Patra, saying that he should have gone for help sooner. Patra grew furious and said that Linda was the one who saw Paul as “a sick little boy,” and that Paul could not get well with Linda's negative thoughts (Location 3035). Linda had planned to say all the things she saw Patra do that made her a good mother. After the confrontation in the parking lot, Linda said that Patra did nothing to save Paul.

In Chapter 19, Linda and her mother drove from the courthouse in a borrowed truck. Linda remembered finding a cradle once, and wishing she remembered her mother taking care of her as a child. She remembered no adults in particular from her childhood, including her mother. She had never gotten reassurance or kindness from her mother, but on the way home after the trial, she turned to her mother for assurance by asking, “Did I do okay?” (Location 3119). Her mother immediately understood that Linda was not talking about her testimony, and she said that Linda could probably not have done anything to change Paul's death. Linda imagined that her mother made that comment “because I'm not your kid” (Location 3123).

Linda wishes she had asked Patra about the difference between what Patra wanted to believe and what she actually believed, and that she had asked Mr. Grierson about the difference in what he wanted to do and what he actually did. Though Lily did not testify against him, Mr. Grierson spent time in prison, based on the photos and the courtroom confession that he had thoughts about young girls though he never acted on them.



Patra and Leo were acquitted of the manslaughter charge because they were following their religious convictions.

Analysis

Formatting is an important part of any novel, and this one includes letters between Linda and Mr. Grierson. The entire Chapter 17 is the post script from one of Mr. Grierson's letters. It opens with the initials "P.S." (Location 2914), and readers will likely identify it as part of Mr. Grierson's letter, even before he signs it at the end. The font does not differ from the other parts of the book, which might have done more to set it off. Typically, the author uses a series of spaces before and after the letters in order to make them stand out. There are no special formats in this chapter other than the fact that the signature at the end of the letter is centered on the line.

Alter egos may sometimes seem to have nothing in common in order to keep their two identities separate. There is another scene that offers the possibility that Lily might be Linda's alter ego when Linda is at the police station. Linda was there to answer questions about Paul's death. She gave details about the setting and events, such as spilling a drink on the table. She then wondered if Lily was in the same room on another day to give police information about her relationship with Mr. Grierson. The event suggests that Linda might have spilled her drink, just as Lily did. Linda says she never knew for certain if this was the same room, which may indicate that there are several rooms that look similar and that she cannot remember if it is the same room. This could also be an indication that the two are not two halves of the same person, and that Linda simply did not know where Lily was taken for questioning.

Though Christian Scientists do not believe in medical intervention, it seems impossible that a parent could let a child die without taking some step to change that. It is clear that both Leo and Patra knew something was very wrong with Paul, but they did nothing other than what their ideology prescribed, which was to focus on the positive and trust that Paul would recover. An interesting aspect of this situation is seen as Leo told Linda she should never feel guilty, which indicated that he might have expected Paul would die and that Linda might look back and think she should have done something. By the time of the trial, Linda expected that Patra would feel guilty as well, and she was not prepared for Patra's anger. The problem is that Patra had the time between Paul's death and the trial to think about the situation and to listen to Leo's theories. By that time, Leo would certainly have tried to absolve Patra of guilt, insisting that Linda's negative thoughts were responsible. The author has crafted the characters and relationships to make the reader blame Leo for keeping Patra under his control, but most adult readers will not feel sympathy toward Patra, especially when she stands by her decisions during the trial.

Repetition is used to make a point, and the author in this novel uses that literary device, in varying forms and degrees, throughout the novel. One example is seen in Chapter 19 when Linda was evaluating the situations that evolved the summer when she was 15. The author uses repetition as a means of having Linda question Linda's actions,



comparing those to Mr. Grierson's. One one section, Linda wished she had asked Patra, "What's the difference between what you want to believe and what you do?" (Location 3126). Several paragraphs later, Linda posed the same question again, but to Mr. Grierson and specific to his situation, saying "And what's the difference between what you think and what you end up doing?" (Location 3135).

Many children imagine they might be adopted or may actually be someone else's child, but Linda had more reason than most to consider that as an option. She was born while her parents were part of a group of people living a nontraditional lifestyle. All the details of that life are not revealed, but it seems possible that sexual freedom could have been part of it. One detail that is revealed is that the group voted on Linda's name. Linda's mother said her father wanted Madeline, but she never said if she had a preference. Linda had reason to wonder if her strained relationship with her mother was caused by the fact that they were not biologically related. That possibility is never examined, other than the one thought on the way home from the courthouse, and it is left to the reader to decide if it is a real possibility.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the scene that happened between Linda and Patra outside the courthouse. What effect does that conversation have on Linda's testimony?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the new details about the relationship between Linda and her mother. Do you see any credibility in the idea that Linda was not her mother's biological daughter?

Discussion Question 3

What was the question Linda wished she has asked Patra? Compare that to the question she wished she had asked Mr. Grierson.

Vocabulary

convulsing, deciduous, oppressive, assessing, condescension, blitheness, debased, precision, .chugging, loathing, levitating, conscientious, undulates, amalgamate, dawdle



Chapters 20 - 22

Summary

In Chapter 20, Linda had a job at a barge company in Minneapolis. Though she was technically a temporary employee, she had her own office and was the one person who could calm the anxious wives of the barge deckhands. One day she got a call from a woman from Loose River who said Linda's mother was living in deplorable conditions in a dilapidated shed because the cabin roof had blown away.

Linda attended a Christian Science church service one Wednesday night after fortifying herself with liquor. She left with the idea that "Heaven and hell are ways of thinking," and that "Death is the false belief that anything could ever end" (Location 3186). After a sermon, a woman claimed that she had a toothache that went away after she gave a pot of tulips to a woman who had been rude to her. Another woman said she now realized that her husband, who had died, had never been more than a reflection of life, and that he is actually fine. She said her husband had not gone anywhere, and that it was merely a matter of perspective.

Linda went to see Rom before she left town to go to her mother's house. She climbed into bed with him and they argued, ending with her becoming angry and announcing that she was leaving. Rom said she deserved happiness. He then mentioned "that little kid," which startled Linda until he made it clear that he was talking about her as a child (Location 3599). He asked who took care of Linda then. She said that no one did, but that she was "fine" (Location 3601). At the bus stop, Linda hesitated before boarding, but felt calm during the ride. She realized that Mr. Grierson had left the pictures in a place to be found so that he could be certain he would be caught.

Chapter 21 reverts to the trial. Linda said she did not think to dial 911 or to go to her parents or flag someone down on the road for help. What she did not say on the stand was that Patra had been forming words without sound as Linda left for Tylenol that day. Linda was not certain whether Patra was thanking her or begging for help.

Linda then reveals her actions on the day she went to get Tylenol. At the drugstore, she encountered the girl in her grade named Sarah, who acted frightened that Linda might have something contagious when she asked for something for a fever. Linda tried to pay with the money she had taken from under the rock in Patra's drive, but Sarah insisted on paying herself to keep from touching the bill. Linda then wandered around town. She repeatedly walked past city hall, hoping someone would question her. She hoped to find her father at the hardware store, but he was not there. She hoped to find her former boss at the diner, but the woman was on vacation. She went into the church, but no one was there. She took time to pray, but did not acknowledge that Paul was ill. She hoped that Patra would be happy that she had done only the one thing – purchased Tylenol.



On the walk back home, a car stopped and a woman offered Linda a ride. She accepted and directed the woman to the lake house. They were visitors to the area and asked Linda for information about interesting places. Linda wanted to ask the woman for help, and she knew the woman would take action, but she did not because she felt Patra would not approve.

In Chapter 22, Linda woke early on the first day of 10th grade and left for school well ahead of time. She had written a letter, pretending to be Mr. Grierson. The letter was sealed in an envelop and Linda planned to give it to Lily, as if she was delivering it for Mr. Grierson. She planned to take Lily out in a canoe to have her read the letter. But when Lily got out of her father's truck, it was clear she was pregnant and Linda did not stop her to talk.

Linda had written as if Mr. Grierson was innocent, but had come to believe the sexual encounter with Lily only because she said so and he could imagine what it would have been like. Though Linda never actually confronted Lily with the letter, she sometimes imagined that she did over the coming years. But in the imagined scene, "I become Lily" (Location 3555), Linda explains that the imagined scene begins with the two of them in the canoe, then Linda takes the paddle, which would leave Lily stranded except that Linda becomes Lily.

Analysis

Another literary device that can be used for emphasis is repetition that changes tone. An example of that is seen in Chapter 20 when Linda told Rom that she was going to take care of her mother. Rom asked why she was leaving, and why she felt that she did not deserve to be happy. He knew this only instinctively, because she had not told him about Paul. Linda repeated the word "happy" several times, but made it sound sarcastic, as if she did not believe in it (Location 3262). Then Rom said the word "happy," but made it sound pure and honest (Location 3263).

Nontraditional spelling, capitalization, and punctuation are sometimes used as a means of bringing focus to a phrase, and the author uses that in Chapter 21 when Linda was talking about the final moment before she left to go buy Tylenol. She says that Patra was mouthing some words, and that she was either saying "THANKYOU" or "HELPUSPLEASE" (Location 3309). The use of all capital letters without spaces are meant to make the words have a greater impact.

Some people have an inherent need to understand other people, while some people never show the inclination toward understanding. Linda's decision to go into the Christian Science church for a worship service is an important part of her character. She had the need to further understand what Patra and Leo believed, and took at least this small step toward that understanding. What she learned there was confusing to her and is probably the reason the Christian Science community often comes under fire for their attitudes regarding medical care. The core beliefs are not important to understanding the novel, other than their beliefs about healing.



The idea of an alter ego is not unique to this novel, and the final scene of the novel seems to be one more indication that Lily and Linda are the same. In that chapter, Linda planned to give Lily a letter in which Mr. Grierson proclaimed his innocence. However, when Lily arrived at school for the first day after the summer break, she was obviously pregnant. If Linda and Lily are the same person, Linda may have been able to avoid thinking about her pregnancy over the summer, but was no longer afforded that luxury once her classmates knew the truth. This scene could also be interpreted to mean that Linda had a strong feeling of empathy for Lily, especially once the pregnancy had been confirmed.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the final scene in the novel, including interpretations of possible meanings.

Discussion Question 2

What indicates that Linda felt the need to do something to save Paul? Why did she fail to take the actions she considered?

Discussion Question 3

List the strengths and weaknesses of any three characters of the novel. Which are more likeable? Which are more believable?

Vocabulary

contorting, irrevocable, skulk, wistful, flux, proprietary, mantra, chastised, commiseration, benediction



Characters

Linda Furston

Linda is the narrator of the novel, whose real name is Madeline. For the sake of clarity in this guide, she is referred to as Linda throughout, except in direct quotes. Linda is a 37-year-old woman as she is writing the novel.

Linda's parents were the only two who remained when their commune disbanded. Her early childhood was filled with people, including a girl named Tameka, as the adults worked on their dreams of a peace-filled society. Linda's mother worried in later years that the nontraditional upbringing had damaged Linda, and she constantly sought assurance that Linda was alright. That made a complicated relationship between Linda and her mother, and Linda sometimes went out of her way to keep from handing out the assurances her mother sought. By the same token, Linda did not seem to be angry or upset when her mother berated or made fun of her.

Linda was a teenager the year Paul's family built a lake house nearby, and she wound up being his babysitter while Paul's mother worked as editor for her husband's writing. She had a complex relationship with Paul, noting that she sometimes did not like him very much. She knew that something was wrong with Paul, but never felt she had the authority to take any action in his illness.

Linda was extremely invested in Lily Holburn, a girl in her grade who became pregnant by one of their teachers. Her interest is never fully explained, but she wanted to intervene with Lily on the teacher's behalf. She followed Mr. Grierson through an online site for sex offenders, and communicated with him years after the pregnancy.

Patra Gardner

Patra, whose real name was Cleopatra, was Paul's mother and Leo's wife. She moved to the lake house with Paul when Paul was four and Linda was 15. Patra had met Leo when she was a college student and he was a professor. She fell in love with him, partly because he was so serious, and knew that he was a Christian Scientist from early in their relationship. Linda noted that Patra seemed to be under Leo's control and Linda hated that Patra did everything Leo demanded without seeming to question it.

Patra was alone with Paul for weeks before school let out for the summer, and she seemed to welcome Linda's companionship. Patra was excited when Leo was due to return, and Linda hated the change in Patra's focus and attitude.

As it became clear to Linda that Paul was in distress, Patra withdrew. The night before Paul's death, she did not go into his bedroom nor did she make any effort to override Leo's determination to live by the Christian Science ideology not to seek medical help. When Linda suggested she could go for Tylenol, Patra agreed, though she asked Linda



not to tell Leo. When Linda was leaving, Patra was mouthing words that might have been a plea for help, indicating that she wanted someone to step in to save Paul. At the courthouse on the day of the trial, Patra went in the opposite direction, blaming Linda for being the only person in Paul's life who could not believe that he would recover.

Paul Gardner

Paul was a four-year-old boy the summer he moved into Linda's neighborhood. He was not typical of a boy his age and Linda noted symptoms that something was wrong, though she initially put it down to his makeup. Paul died on the day after a family trip to Duluth to watch boat races.

Lily Holburn

Lily was a teenage girl in Linda's grade. She was not a popular girl but was more popular than Linda. Rumors began to circulate about a relationship between Lily and a teacher, Mr. Grierson. While Lily recanted her statement that Mr. Grierson had sex with her, she was obviously pregnant when she arrived for the first day of 10th grade. Lily left town and attended a church-based program that provided assistance, including job training. There is a possibility that Lily is really Linda's alter ego.

Leo Gardner

Leo was Paul's father and Patra's husband. He was a scientist working in Hawaii at the time Patra and Paul moved into the lake house. He was a professor when he and Patra met and was a practicing Christian Scientist. Leo was adamant that Paul was fine, repeating that even when Paul was virtually comatose and unable to respond at all. Leo was charged with manslaughter for Paul's death, but was acquitted based on the premise that he had a right to practice his faith.

Adam Grierson

Mr. Grierson was hired as a teacher at Linda's school after the previous history teacher died. Linda saw Mr. Grierson's interest in Lily and she kissed him, but he did not respond to the overture. He was arrested after police found a package of child pornography photos in the apartment he had sublet to a man who had drugs. He spent some time in jail and Linda found him years later through an online sex registry. He did not remember Linda but did respond to her letters.

Linda's Mother

Linda's mother was a harsh woman who was not often kind or understanding. She had been a driving force in creating the commune that existed for six years around the time



of Linda's birth. Linda's mother was living in the shed on their property when Linda went home to help her, indicating that she was determined to take care of herself and not to ask for help.

Linda's mother believed in God, but she was a reluctant and angry Christian. At one point, she held a makeshift baptism, telling Linda she hoped that it would make God look at them more favorably.

Linda's Father

Linda's father was a quiet man who gave Linda the gift of not intruding on her life. He may have deliberately set out to be the exact opposite of Linda's mother. In a rare moment of veering from that policy, he went to get Linda from the Gardner house on the night Paul died, though he never explained why he did so. He suffered a series of strokes and died several years before Linda returned to Loose Lake to care for her mother.

Rom

Rom was a mechanic who had a sexual relationship with Linda but wanted a more formal, permanent arrangement. He knew little about her, but correctly assumed that she felt she did not deserve happiness.

Ann

Ann was Linda's roommate up until the time Linda moved back home to take care of her mother. Ann knew some things about Linda's past, but was concerned when Linda did not live in a way Ann considered traditional, such as her lack of plans for the Christmas holiday.



Symbols and Symbolism

Governess

Patra suggested the title "Goerness" to describe Linda's role in their lives, symbolizing that Linda had a larger role to play than merely a teenage girl looking after Paul to give Patra time to edit Leo's writing.

The Pornographic Photos

The child pornography photos, located in a very easy to find place, belonged to Mr. Grierson and they symbolize his desire for someone to help him stop actions that he knew to be wrong. Linda believes Mr. Grierson placed the anonymous phone call that sent police to his apartment where police found the photos.

The Trial

The trial is a symbol of an effort as justice as officials tried to make Patra and Leo face responsibility for allowing Paul to die without seeking medical attention.

Tylenol

Linda was going to town, ostensibly to get Tylenol for Paul, but the Tylenol was really a symbol for the help, or intervention, that Patra and Linda felt they needed for Paul.

Christian Science

Leo follows the ideology of the Christian Scientists, which is symbolic of man's effort to control everything by reaching a higher level of faith. The fact that Leo let Paul die when the child was obviously in distress is the result of this ideology, which ultimately makes the Christian Science belief a symbol of Paul's death.

Europa

Euorpa is one of Jupiter's moons, and it symbolizes hope. Paul explained to Linda that it was the "most likely place ... to have life," other than Mars (Location 973). Using things found in nature, Paul built a city on his deck that he decided was the capital of Europa. Considering that Paul had only days to live by this point, his imaginary city also represented the hope that he might survive to accomplish things and make discoveries of his own.



Patra's Headband

Patra's headband symbolizes a connection between Linda and Patra, who were both worried about Paul on the night before his death. Linda was wearing the headband and she imagined it pulsing with the word "please," repeatedly (Location 2217).

The Fogged Windows in the Lake House

The fogged windows in the lake house symbolize Leo's ability to keep the family separate from the rest of the world, but on the night before Paul's death, Linda was kept inside with Leo's family. Leo wanted to live his life in the way of the Christian Science church with no one evaluating his decisions.

The Commune

The commune is symbolic of Linda's early childhood, of their nontraditional lives, and of her parents' attempt to effect positive change on the world. The commune dissolved after six years, leaving only Linda and her parents on the property.

Lily's Pregnancy

Lily's pregnancy is a symbol of Mr. Grierson's guilt, which Linda never seems to accept.



Settings

Linda's Home

Linda and her parents lived in a small house on 20 acres of lake property that was the former home of the commune. Linda knew the property intimately, down to the location of the largest tree. The property included the family cabin and a shed, places where the dogs were tied, and lake access.

The Gardners' Lake House

The Gardners built a lake house near the property owned by Linda's family, on the lake front. The house was typical for the time and place, and included a deck where they used a telescope and where Paul sometimes played. The descriptions of the house were incidental to the story line, such as the existence of a kitchen, living room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom.

Loose River

Loose River is the small town in Minnesota where Linda grew up. There was a school, diner, drug store, hardware store, city hall, and church. The town seems typical of the time and place with people who were usually close to each other. For example, one woman goes to great lengths to track Linda down after her mother was forced to live in the shed, indicating a level of concern that would not usually exist in large cities.

Duluth

Duluth is where the Gardner family and Linda went to see the ships shortly before Paul's death. They stayed in a hotel there and spent some time at the harbor, watching a parade of antique ships pass by.

The Courthouse

The Courthouse is where the trial against Patra and Leo took place. Linda described the courthouse only in general terms except for a mural on a wall. Outside the courthouse was where Patra and Linda met for a few minutes, and where Patra made it clear that she blamed Linda's negative thinking for Paul's death.



Themes and Motifs

Paul's Illness and Death

Paul's death becomes a life-changing event for Linda, as it is pinpointed in the novel as the primary impetus for Linda's inability to properly, or fully, connect with others. Linda second guesses herself for the rest of her life, wondering if she could or should have done more to try and save Paul's life. She ultimately convinces herself that she does not deserve to be happy.

From the first time she met Paul, Linda noted that he was often breathless and his skin was sometimes discolored. She soon put it down to an inherent part of his life, and did not realize until later that there was something seriously wrong with him. Patra, however, had known for awhile that there was something wrong with Paul. At one point, she took him to a pediatrician who was a friend of Patra's mother, but she did not follow up. At trial, she said that she had come to believe that she was overreacting to what was certainly the normal changes in a child of Paul's age.

Leo also knew that something was wrong with Paul and he went to great lengths to cover up the illness in the hours leading up to Paul's death. Leo was in Paul's bedroom when Linda arrived at the lake house. Leo emerged, saying that Paul was awake and hungry, when that was clearly a lie. Leo made pancakes and went back into Paul's room, then returned with the news that Paul wanted to have his breakfast in bed. Several hours later, Leo began a game of Candy Land, even though Paul was not responsive. He later dressed Paul and took him somewhere in the car.

In the hours leading up to Paul's death, Linda also knew that he was seriously ill, but she did not have the courage to go against Leo and Patra in order to seek help for the youngster. With Patra's approval, she went to town to buy Tylenol. Linda walked around for awhile, hoping someone would talk to her so she could ask for help, but she never took the initiative to seek out someone. When a woman offered her a ride home, Linda accepted and she thought about asking that woman for help, but she passed up the opportunity. Through it all, Linda tried to decide whether she should do what was best for Paul or simply do what she believed Patra wanted her to do, which was nothing.

The impact of Paul's death could be seen into Linda's adulthood. She had a relationship with a man named Rom, but she never told him about Paul. He instinctively knew that she felt she did not have a right to be happy, and her response to that accusation indicated he was correct. Despite the fact that Leo told her that none of the situation was her fault and the court system did not accuse her of wrongdoing, Linda sought reassurance from her mother, who also said Linda could not likely have changed the outcome. As an adult, she was clearly haunted by Paul's death and felt at least partly responsible.



Another effect of Paul's death is seen in the fact that Leo and Patra were charged with manslaughter and forced to endure a trial. Patra testified during the trial, forcing her to defend her decision to do nothing while her son died. They were eventually acquitted, based on their right to practice their religion freely.

Taking Responsibility

The author sends a clear message through the novel that people must ultimately take responsibility for themselves, including their decisions and actions. Several characters in this novel are faced with serious consequences for their actions – or inaction – though some pay a higher price than others.

Mr. Grierson is one of the main examples of this theme. Adam Grierson became a teacher at Linda's school after the previous history teacher died. Mr. Grierson was anxious to be liked and was sometimes socially awkward in that effort. From his arrival, Linda could see that Mr. Grierson looked at Lily in a specific way that made it clear he was attracted to her. While he did not respond to an overture from Linda, he did have sex with Lily. Later, Mr. Grierson denied that they had actually had sex, but admitted that he thought about it. Based on his initial confession and the child pornography photos police found in his apartment, Grierson was sentenced to a prison term. He was also forced to register as a sex offender, which is how Linda found him years later. Grierson paid a price for having sex with Lily, and he continued to pay that price for the rest of his life.

Lily is another example of this theme. Lily became the subject of rumors and an unwed mother as a 10th grader. She initially told police that she did have sex with Mr. Grierson, but she later denied it, probably in an effort to lessen the long-term impact of having this child. Instead of being subjected to a forced marriage and living out her life in Loose River, Lily was able to leave town where a church-based program provided help, including job training. Lily left her home and friends behind, and probably raised a child when she was little more than a child herself. She paid a price, though it was not as high as it could have been.

Patra is another example of this theme. Patra tried to balance her faith with her fears over Paul's illness. She subscribed to Leo's faith, which followed the teachings of the Christian Scientists, but she could not completely allay her fears for Paul. Ultimately, she did nothing to help her son and Paul died a tragic death. Patra was tried for manslaughter, along with Leo, but was acquitted. She managed to escape jail time for her role in Paul's death, but she lived the rest of her life without her son, which many readers will see as an extremely high price.

Linda is the final example of this theme. Linda was nothing more than a casual acquaintance of Paul's family and the teenaged babysitter who cared for Paul in the afternoons. In that role, she really did not have any formal responsibility toward Paul or toward the family, but she took on a level of responsibility once she admitted to herself that Paul was in distress and that Leo and Patra were not going to do anything about it.



At that point, Linda accepted responsibility, though she ultimately decided to do what she believed Patra wanted from her – nothing. Linda was not charged in Paul's death, but she did feel a level of guilt that prevented her from finding happiness as an adult.

Coming of Age

Although some may categorize this novel as a coming of age story, it can be argued that it is quite the opposite, since the main character, Linda, does not grow positively and mature from her experiences in her teenage summer that the book focuses on. The characters in this novel are not typical, especially Linda who matures in small stages along the way but never really comes to terms with the events of the summer she was 15. Along with these small steps, Linda shows negative signs of maturing. The stages of maturity and immaturity are marked by Linda's relationships with others, but she ultimately still struggles with most, without reaching real milestones of maturity.

Linda was raised in a very nontraditional home. Her parents were former commune members and her mother wanted Linda to have a nontraditional life, though she worried about the effect it would have. The result was a stressful relationship between Linda and her mother, and that never changed. Her father seemed to try to be completely different from Linda's mother, perhaps as a way of making up for the strain of the mother-daughter relationship. The night of Paul's death, Linda was at the Gardners' lake house, and her father came to get her. He did not question her, but his concern was evident. At that moment, Linda realized that her father was deliberately trying to be a good parent. Her understanding is one of several small steps toward her own maturity.

Another example of this theme is seen when Linda evaluated the relationship between Patra and Leo. After she had been spending some time with Patra and Paul, Linda realized that Patra was lonely. The ability to recognize that and to have empathy for Patra is a sign that Linda was maturing. However, Linda hated the way Patra changed when she talked to Leo on the telephone and the fact that she bowed to Leo's leadership in their marriage. Linda basically seems jealous, which is a sign of her immaturity.

Linda's adult relationships with her roommate, Ann, and her boyfriend, Rom, are evidence of her immaturity. She refused to make any sort of commitment to Rom, despite the fact that he clearly wanted a closer, stable relationship. When he suggested that they should get a dog to make their relationship more stable, Linda refused, but then bought a dog collar that she used to instigate sexual role play. With Ann, Linda was only slightly more open but she outright lied when she let Ann believe that the letter from Mr. Grierson was from a relative as a means of making Ann believe that she had familial relationships in her life.

Linda's relationship with her mother was slightly more mature when Linda was an adult. When a neighbor reported that Linda's mother was living in a shed in deplorable conditions, Linda prepared to move home to help care for her mother. That was a



mature, responsible action, especially considering that they had not maintained regular contact in previous years.

Faith and Belief

Though some of the beliefs are in direct contrast to each other, several characters in this novel turn to their specific beliefs as a cornerstone in their daily lives; these beliefs sustain the characters through difficulties and are used as a moral compass in that character's everyday life.

Patra and Leo are at the heart of this theme. Leo was a Christian Scientist when he and Patra met, and he was upfront about his beliefs from the beginning. Patra apparently adopted his belief system as her own only after she met Leo, and she did not have the same strength of conviction. While Leo insisted that Paul was fine, Patra secretly consulted a pediatrician and agreed that Linda could go to town to get some Tylenol for Paul. Patra's actions, along with a telephone call from a practitioner from their church, demonstrate that her faith was not as strong as Leo's. In a dramatic turn, Patra blamed Linda after Paul's death, saying that Linda was the only one who felt that Paul was sick, and that her lack of faith had been the reason for Paul's death.

Linda did not fully understand what Leo believed, other than the fact that he did not believe in using medicine to intervene in God's will. She attended a worship service at a Christian Science church, mainly in an effort to better understand the ideology. During that service, a woman told about a toothache that went away after she left a pot of tulips as a gift to a rude woman. Another woman talked about the death of her husband. The woman said she knew that her husband was fine, and that his passing was merely a matter of perspective. These stories are at the heart of the Christian Science ideology, and Linda felt that the religion was wrong at its very core.

Linda's mother is another example of this theme. Linda's mother had been a leader in a commune community, which seemed to have no formal religious base. After the commune disbanded, Linda's mother began attending church, though she struggled to decide whether God's grace was more important than works. At one point, she even held a makeshift baptism for Linda, hoping that the deed would garner God's favor. Linda never felt the level of devotion her mother felt for her mother's religious leanings, but she also never adopted the Christian Science belief system.

Similarities and Contrasts Between Characters

Throughout *History of Wolves*, the author uses Linda's observations about the similarities and differences of characters to herself in order to help readers better understand Linda's character, as she uses her observations of others to try and better understand herself.

Linda and Lily attended the same school, but had little in common other than that. Linda believed that Lily was pretty and Lily had more friends than Linda. They did not interact,



either in school or outside, but Linda felt a bond that she was never able to explain. Linda quickly noticed that Mr. Grierson was paying attention to Lily. She correctly assumed there was a sexual level to his interest and she kissed him when they were alone together one evening. He did not respond to the kiss. Though he had dismissed Linda's overture, it was later evident that he had sex with Lily.

Linda identified with Lily on other levels. One day, she felt a strong connection when she and Lily looked at each other in a mirror at school. Linda had planned to give Lily a letter that Linda pretended Mr. Grierson wrote, but she did not. However, in the following years, she imagined the scene as if she did give Lily the letter. In those scenes, Linda imagined Lily in a canoe, but then Linda became Lily. That indicates another level of connection between Linda and Lily, though Linda never explores the reason for it. One explanation is that Lily is actually Linda's alter ego, and does not exist except in Linda's mind.

Another set of similarities exists between Mr. Grierson and Patra. Linda has questions she wishes she had asked both. To Patra, Linda wishes she had asked what was the difference between what Patra said she believed, and what she really did believe. To Mr. Grierson, Linda wishes she had asked what was the difference between what he wanted to do and what he actually did. Patra's belief, or her effort to believe, resulted in the death of her son. Mr. Grierson's action, or the action he wanted to take, resulted in Lily's pregnancy. Both Mr. Grierson and Patra were prosecuted, but only Mr. Grierson was found guilty.

Linda's parents are an example of contrasting characters. Linda's parents were both part of a commune and they remained after the commune formally disbanded. Linda's mother became angry and shrill in the following years, perhaps partly because the commune had failed. Linda's mother's attitudes resulted in a strained mother-daughter relationship. They were never close and Linda's mother never seemed to make an effort to understand or even accept Linda. Her father was a completely different character. When Linda was a teenager, she realized that her father worked to make their relationship simple and without emotional demands, probably because he wanted Linda to have a stress-free relationship to counter her relationship with her mother.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is presented in first person from the limited view of Linda, whose real name is Madeline. She is a teenaged student as the novel opens, but she writes from the vantage point of some two decades in the future, when she is a 37-year-old adult, still struggling to understand the events of that year in her life. She writes little of her current situation at age 37, meaning the novel is written in past tense.

The limited perspective means the reader knows only what Linda knows. However, the fact that she writes from a future has an impact on that perspective. By the time she is writing, she knows the details of those months of her life. She knows that Paul died, that Lily became pregnant and left town, and that Mr. Grierson was arrested for child pornography. She does not keep any of these big-picture items secret from the reader. For example, she reveals Paul's death literally in the opening paragraphs of the novel. However, she does keep back specific details and the reader will typically expect some twists. The limited perspective does mean that the reader knows only what Linda knows. For example, she is not certain whether Patra was asking for help when Paul's illness became serious. She says Patra mouthed something, but that it could have been appreciation for what she was doing or it could have been a plea for help. Because Linda does not know for certain, the reader never knows for certain.

Linda seems like a reliable perspective. She does not put herself in a favorable light, even when she remembers that she sometimes did not like Paul and was not always honorable or kind.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in modern-day English. Overall, the author uses traditional language, spelling, punctuation, and formatting. The reader with an average vocabulary will be able to understand the majority of the novel without a problem. There are a few words and phrases that may be difficult for some, their meaning not readily difficult. One example of that is seen when Leo said that Paul experienced a “demonstration.” No one explained that to Linda, so readers may have to do some research to find out the meaning as it related to the Christian Science ideology. There are not many cases like this, and the reader will not lose any basic understanding if he does not know exactly what this “demonstration” means.

The novel is divided between dialogue and narrative. Each is presented in the traditional way, with quote marks showing dialogue and normal dialogue tags to indicate who is speaking. In a few instances, Linda's thoughts are presented in italics, which is also an acceptable means of communicating the fact that these are thoughts rather than spoken words. The dialogue seems reasonable and believable for the time and place.



Linda serves as the narrator of the novel, which means her voice dominates the narrative sections. A few of her quirks appear, such as referring to the social girls in her school as “the Karens” (Location 732). These are typically explained fully and the reader will come to expect them as a matter of course.

The author uses a number of literary devices, such as repetition, comparison, metaphors, and similes. Many are meant to convey deeper meaning based on the setting, such as the use of nature in comparisons and metaphors.

Structure

The novel is divided into two parts with a total of 22 chapters. The first part is titled Science and the second part is titled Health. Science has the first 11 chapters and the final 11 chapters are in the second part. The chapters are titled by number only. The novel opens with an epigraph that contains two quotes. One is from “Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures,” and mentions that life is “purely spiritual” (Location 27). The titles of the two parts and this quote gives a hint that the ideology of Christian Science will be involved in the novel.

The novel is not presented in chronological order. Linda is remembering as the novel opens and she skips from there to a time when she was in high school, a memory from her childhood, and more information from later in high school. The second part is more chaotic with regard to time. Linda mixes memories of her adult life with memories of her childhood and memories of the year of Paul's death. She clearly identifies the time setting by naming people and places, so the reader will not have trouble keeping track. However, some readers may become disenchanted with the stories because there are so many events presented out of order. To complicate this, all the events are connected by Linda's presence, but some have no other real purpose and some seem to have no connection with the immediate story of Paul's death.



Quotes

I knew from stories how my parents had ridden in a stolen van to Loose River in the early eighties, how my father had stockpiled rifles and pot, and how, when the commune fell apart, my mother had traded whatever hippie fanaticism she had left for Christianity.”
-- Linda (chapter 1 paragraph 32)

Importance: This is the first look at Linda's home life and her family's lifestyle choices. She is under few illusions about her parents, but she does come to realize that they have depths she does not understand.

That's the word I kept hearing in the halls, 'kiss,' and there was something all the more perverse in this, as if she couldn't bring herself to name anything more explicit.”
-- Linda (chapter 5 paragraph 7)

Importance: Linda is talking about Lily, the girl at the center of rumors at school related to a relationship between Lily and Mr. Grierson. This relationship soon captured Linda's attention and it remained with her throughout the novel, even when other events should have taken up more of her attention.

There is no spot where God is not.”
-- Paul (chapter 5 paragraph 39)

Importance: Paul was talking to a little girl on the playground, and he had attracted the attention of Linda and of the little girl's older sister. Linda says Paul looked “predatory” while he was chanting this to the little girl, and he was obviously mimicking what he had heard from others. This is a basic part of Christian belief – that God is omnipresent – but Paul's attitude and actions make it sound sinister.

Though half the time that summer that ATV didn't work at all, half the time it did, and for ten minutes that afternoon, I sat behind him on the hard leather seat as we rumbled along the overgrown trail destroying everything we touched – smashing ferns and goldenrod and baby white pine and sumac fronds – and it was wretched, and it was so delicious, too.”
-- Linda (chapter 9 paragraph 14)

Importance: Linda is talking about riding an ATV with her father. The point she makes is that few things in life are clear cut. Most things have elements of both good and bad, such as in this case when she was having fun with her father but felt bad because of the destruction the ATV wreaked on nature.

I learned in that moment that this was not a question I was allowed to ask. From his chair, Leo frowned up at me, as if I'd said something rude or inept.”
-- Linda (chapter 10 paragraph 8)

Importance: Linda had just asked if Paul is still ill. Leo believed that Paul could not be ill



unless someone believed he was. Much later, Patra accused Linda of being the only person who did not have enough faith to get Paul over his illness.

That, while this last part was happening, he was left uncared for in his bed at the summer house – that instead of taking him to the hospital, instead of giving him the insulin and liquids he needed to survive, Leo had made pancakes and read him books, and Patra had tidied the house and emptied the litter box, and I had moved pieces around a Candy Land board.”

-- Linda (chapter 11 paragraph 31)

Importance: Linda described the series of events that led up to Paul's death, including the inability to control his bladder and bowels, a headache, and diabetic ketoacidosis. She makes the contrast of what Paul was suffering while his caregivers were going about their business.

She wanted very badly for me to cavort and pretend, to prove I was unharmed, happy.

-- Linda (chapter 12 paragraph 41)

Importance: Linda is talking about her mother, saying that her mom wanted to believe she had not harmed Linda with the unconventional upbringing. Linda's life has been difficult in many ways, but she was basically happy and healthy, despite the fact that she was not the kind of child her mother wanted her to be.

Now he was acting as though I might be dangerous to him, and maybe I was – I wanted to be – but not in the way he thought.”

-- Linda (chapter 13 paragraph 26)

Importance: Linda is talking about Leo. She was standing in Leo and Patra's kitchen on the night of Paul's death, and had come to believe that there is something wrong with the situation, though she could not identify exactly what was wrong. She had never liked Leo, but now she found she also did not trust him. She ultimately did not take any action, though she had an opportunity to do so.

Patra also confirmed, when the DA pressed her, that when Paul's teacher had expressed concern one day in February about his health, she'd taken him secretly to see her mother's friend, who was a pediatric endocrinologist.”

-- Linda (chapter 16 paragraph 2)

Importance: This is evidence that Patra was concerned about Paul, and that she believed he needed medical attention. She argued that she had come to believe he was better and that she was simply an overanxious mother.

Of course, things always seem more impressive when you're a little kid. That's one of the reasons I don't really want to go back. I mean, who wants to ruin one of the things you like thinking about most?”

-- Mr. Grierson (chapter 17 paragraph 1)



Importance: This is part of a message in a letter from Mr. Grierson to Linda years after he was her teacher. He is referring to her statement that she might travel to California, and he is telling her his memories of the giant sequoia trees she could see there. He could also be referring to his own memories of sex with one of Linda's classmates, Lily.

What I didn't say on the stand was that when I looked back at her from the doorway, Patra had been mouthing something. It had been strange to see, like she was yelling without sound."

-- Linda (chapter 21 paragraph 2)

Importance: Linda is talking about her testimony during the trial against Patra and Leo. She goes on to say that Patra might have been saying "thank you" or she might have been saying "help us." It seems that would have been an important piece of evidence against the parents, or at least against Patra.

But by the time the shore is a huge ring of horizon around us, by the time I've taken her paddle, and seen the look of recognition on her face, I find I'm the one stranded in the boat, I'm the one shivering with cold, I feel everything and I'm the one wanted more than anyone else."

-- Linda (chapter 22 paragraph 11)

Importance: This is the final sentence of the novel, and it creates questions on several levels. Linda is describing a scene that only happened in her imagination, in which she confronts Lily about the story Lily has told about Mr. Grierson. The fact that Linda changes places with Lily in this scene creates questions about the truth of other aspects of the novel, including Lily's true identity.