

In Country Study Guide

In Country by Bobbie Ann Mason

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Plot Summary

In Country, by Bobbie Ann Mason, is a novel set in Hopewell, Kentucky in the summer of 1984. It is a coming-of-age story about a young girl, Sam Hughes, who has just finished high school and isn't sure if she wants to stay in Hopewell.

Sam lives with her Uncle Emmett who struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder from his time fighting in the Vietnam War. Sam's father was also in the war, but he died a month before Sam was born. Sam becomes increasingly interested in helping her uncle and learning about the war and her father.

Lonnie Malone, Sam's boyfriend, goes away for his brother's bachelor party and Sam goes to the Vietnam Veteran's dance while he is away. Sam is constantly asking Emmett's friends, who are also vets, what Vietnam was really like. She wants to know so that she can help Emmett solve his health issues—namely his adult acne which she fears is due to Agent Orange exposure as are the strange pains he gets in his head. As she gets to know more of the Vets, she develops a crush on Tom Hudson. While Lonnie is away, she goes to the vet's dance and spends the night with Tom.

Sam learns Tom is impotent and is unsure if it is because of a physical injury from the war, but Tom tells her it is all in his mind. She worries Emmett might have a physical injury and that is why he is not married or not currently dating anyone.

Once Lonnie returns from his weekend away, Sam gives him back his ring and breaks up with him. She decides to visit her father's parents to see if they have any pictures, letters or other mementos Sam can keep and help her make sense of who her dad was. Her Mamaw gives her a diary that came home with her father's body. Her grandparents said there is nothing in it, and the handwriting is too difficult to read.

Sam reads it anyway and finds her father's journal entries about what happened while he was in Vietnam. She is disgusted by how her father sounded proud to kill the V.C. and how he talks about the Vietnamese in his writing. She thinks all vets are like this and decides she is going to spend a night in the local swamp to see what it feels like. Emmett comes looking for her. They talk about what it was like for Emmett, and finally, after 14 years of mourning, Emmett breaks down.



Part I: Chapters 1-4

Summary

Chapter 1: The novel begins at the end of summer in 1984. Sam Hughes is taking a road trip in her VW bug with her uncle Emmett and Mamaw to Washington, D.C. Sam doesn't know Mamaw very well and is worried about her judging her uncle Emmett, who is her mother's brother, and has terrible adult acne and suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

They stop at a gas station to get gas and food. When they get back into the car, Emmett tells Sam the car is having transmission problems. Sam dismisses this comment initially—because the boy she likes sold her the car—until she starts driving again and realizes it is true.

Chapter 2: Sam is driving and holding the gear in place. They have not made good time because of the car troubles and decide to stop at a Howard Johnson's and stay the night. Mamaw is worried it is improper to spend the night in a room with Emmett, but they assure her it's fine since getting two rooms would cost twice as much. They settle into the room and Sam goes running in the evening.

Chapter 3: Sam, Emmett and Mamaw eat dinner at the restaurant at Howard Johnson's. Sam wants to order something she has never had before and orders the clams. Mamaw is worried about how expensive the food is and Sam tells her not to worry because they have her mother's credit card if they run out of money.

They begin discussing stories about men who died in the Vietnam War and Mamaw wonders what it would be like if her son, Dwayne, Sam's father, had lived. She postulates Sam would have grown up on the farm with her and would have lots of brothers and sisters. Sam doesn't like this idea and suggests maybe her father would have come home and would have been more than a tobacco farmer.

Chapter 4: Sam, Emmett and Mamaw stop at a Maryland gas station to get the car's transmission fixed. Mamaw is in the gas station bathroom and Emmett is telling Sam Mamaw is driving him crazy—and that she doesn't know how to act. Sam says it is because she has never been anywhere before. Emmett clutches his head in pain and Sam is worried because the pain is getting more frequent.

Sam wants to call Tom, who sold her the car and on whom she has a crush, to help them. Emmett teases her about the feasibility of this.

They decide to stay where they are for the night in a Holiday Inn while the car is being fixed. They expect to get to Washington, D.C. by the next day. Sam again goes running in the evening. When she gets back she and Emmett drink cokes spiked with whiskey together and watch television. Mamaw is homesick.



Sam goes to bed thinking about Tom and how she doesn't want to go to Washington, D.C.

Analysis

Part I establishes that Sam is on a journey, specifically a road trip which is often metaphoric for a coming of age journey. Sam is brazen and bold. This is evident from her wanting to run in unfamiliar territory and her comments about how she feels rebellious and evil. She alludes to something that recently happened that is out-of-character for her at the swamp—this has given her new independence, but the reader doesn't learn what that event was.

As Sam watches the landscape change she is excited by all of the prospects that exist outside of Hopewell, Kentucky, but she is not ready to get to Washington, D.C. to face the reason she is going there—which at this point in time is unknown to the reader. Like the road trip, she feels metaphorically stuck between what is comfortable and familiar, what is exciting, and that which she knows she must face (in Washington, D.C.). Likewise, the characters in the car with her—her uncle whom she lives with and is her mother's brother and her Mamaw, her dead father's mother who she doesn't know very well—mirrors the conflict in her life of whether or not she should stay where she is in Hopewell, or leave and confront her past.

Vocabulary

affectionate, commode, rigs, traipse, reluctant, decides, gaze, lugged, paces, soothingly, patrolling



Part II: Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1: Part II starts at the beginning of the summer of 1984, just after Sam graduates from high school. She is living with her uncle because her mother recently moved to Lexington with her new husband and had a baby. Sam's mother, Irene, let her finish high school in Hopewell and allows her to continue living in the same house with her Uncle Emmett.

Sam loves music and frequently mentions Bruce Springsteen and the Beatles.

This summer Sam begins thinking about the Vietnam War—her father never came home, but her uncle did. Sam's uncle Emmett is her mother's brother and when he came home from the war, Sam's mother Irene took him in. He does not work, owes money to the VA and has really bad acne that Sam thinks is from Agent Orange exposure.

People in Hopewell don't think much of Emmett because when he first came home he was gallivanting around with hippies and pulled pranks like hanging the V.C. flag from the county hall clock tower. Sam loves her uncle and defends him. Though Sam's uncle is in his mid-thirties, he is not an authority figure and lets her do as she wishes.

Lonnie Malone, Sam's boyfriend, comes over after work. He tells Sam he quit his job at Kroger's as a bag boy. Emmett makes them dinner and is wearing a skirt because he thinks it's funny and Lonnie laughs at him.

Chapter 2: A storm breaks. Emmett, Sam, and Lonnie unplug the appliances and watch the storm from inside. Lonnie asks if Sam is disappointed in him for quitting his job. She says she's disappointed, but not in him. Lonnie decides he wants to get drunk and drive to the Bottom. At the Bottom, Emmett, Sam and Lonnie sit in the back of Lonnie's van and smoke a joint. Emmett tells them he is looking for an egret like one he saw in Vietnam. He says that is his only good memory of Vietnam.

Later, Sam and Lonnie sit outside of the van and Sam thinks she dozed off. She wakes up to a Beatles song she has never heard before playing on the van's radio. When they get back in the van with Emmett, he is spooked and tells them to be quiet and not let anybody hear or see them. Lonnie is afraid Emmett is having a flashback to Vietnam.

Analysis

Sam is ambivalent about Hopewell and Lonnie. She knows continuing to date Lonnie will most likely lead to marriage and a lifetime in Hopewell. When he quits his job, Sam is disappointed he is doing so without other prospects lined up. She encourages him to



go to a university but he shrugs her off. She sees no promise in Hopewell, yet feels tied to it because of her relationships.

She is interested in Bruce Springsteen because he is seen as a rebel—and she thinks he is very sexy. Sam viewing Bruce Springsteen as a sexual, rebellious icon informs the reader Sam is not a conventional Hopewell woman. She connects to popular culture like music and TV because it takes her outside of the small world of Hopewell.

It is suggested that Emmett is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He gets spooked at the swamp because he is reminded of his time in the army in the Vietnam jungle. From Sam and Lonnie's reaction, this is not the first time something like this has happened.

Vocabulary

Not available



Part II: Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3: Sam is over at her friend Dawn's house, which she notes is shabbier than hers. Dawn is piercing Sam's ears. They are talking about Sam wanting to marry Lonnie, why Emmett isn't married and what Dawn wants to do with her life. Sam says she wants lots of money and speaks of her ambivalence toward Lonnie stating that "it is just a situation she is in" (43). She also tells Dawn that after her mother Irene got pregnant, she bought Sam's birth control pills.

Chapter 4: Sam comes home from Dawn's to find Emmett digging a ditch alongside the foundation of the house. His intent is to fix the leak in the basement. Sam has never seen Emmett work so hard at anything. He works at it until dusk only stopping for pizza that Lonnie brings by in the evening. In the morning, Granddad Smith comes by and asks Emmett what he is doing with the ditch. He also asks Emmett when he is going to get a job like everybody else. Emmett said there are no jobs worth doing and continues digging.

In the morning, Sam goes with Emmett to McDonald's where he meets his vet buddies every morning for breakfast. She realizes she has known these men for most of her life, but has never really taken an interest in them before. Emmett and Sam run into Granddad Smith's friend who mentions the cookie factory is hiring, but Emmett brushes him off. Sam wonders how other vets come home and are normal and wonders why Emmett is not like that.

Sam meets Pete and Tom, Emmett's friends and she tells them she thinks Emmett might have chloracne from Agent Orange. Sam mentions she wants a car and Tom, who is a mechanic, mentions he has a VW bug that she might be interested in.

Analysis

These chapters demonstrate both Sam's increased interest in the Vietnam War and how it is affecting people 15 years later. Emmett who was in Vietnam returned home over fifteen years earlier and has not had a job and has lived with his sister and niece ever since. He is confronted by his father, Sam and an acquaintance in this chapter about why he chooses not to get a job. Emmett chooses to fixate on other things like digging the ditch which is suggestive of digging a foxhole in the jungle—rather than fixing his life. Digging the hole to fix the foundation in the kitchen also suggests he is trying to live up to some of the expectations of a man in Hopewell, but simultaneously he is evoking disapproval for not getting a job and making money.

Sam wants a car because she thinks that will provide her with the freedom to leave Hopewell. Like the Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, MTV and other TV shows, a car represents the another type of real escapism for Sam.



Ironically, her mother has offered her room and board, help with tuition and a car if she chooses to leave Hopewell and enroll in University of Kentucky, but Sam is reluctant. Her personal relationships with her uncle and her friends and her father's past keep her tethered in time and place to Hopewell.

Vocabulary

plunder, fice, damson, offhandedly, compensation, psychedelic, converged, hearty, poignant, whizzed, grimacing, coincided



Part II: Chapters 5-8

Summary

Chapter 5: Sam comes home to find Emmett making tacos, and they discuss the new release of the Beatles song and Sam thinks it is like hearing voices from the grave. Her mom, Irene, calls but she is reluctant to call her back. Her mom wants to discuss whether or not she is coming to Lexington to live and to attend University of Kentucky.

Sam learns from Emmett that Sam's father, Dwayne, picked her name out. Sam is surprised by this. Sam continues to ask Emmett about Vietnam and what he knows about her father. He says he remembers the smell of fish sauce and human shit and the rice paddies, but is not forthcoming with anything else. This irritates Sam.

After dinner Sam looks at the one photograph she has of her father. She studies his face and notes how young and thin he looks, how childish. When she sees her own reflection in the mirror, chubby and scrubbed, not innocent—she realizes she can see no resemblance between herself and her father.

Chapter 6: Sam wakes up to find Emmett working on the ditch again. A fellow vet named Jim is standing outside talking to Emmett about an upcoming dance for the local vets. Sam comes out of the house and tells Jim she thinks Emmett might have Agent Orange. Jim mentions a fellow vet, Buddy Mangrum, whose little girl has intestinal problems and needs surgery because of Buddy's exposure to Agent Orange during the war.

Chapter 7: Sam visits Anita Stevens, Emmett's ex-girlfriend, who is also a nurse. Sam visits Anita to ask if she thinks that Emmett may have Agent Orange exposure. Sam also invites Anita to the veteran's dance in hopes Anita will come and dance with Emmett. Anita and Sam talk about Lonnie and whether or not Sam wants to marry him. Before Sam leaves, Anita gives her names of doctors for Emmett to see about his acne.

Chapter 8: Emmett is still digging the ditch along the foundation of the house. Sam looks at her dad's picture and thinks about all of the things he has missed since his death like astronauts walking on the moon, Watergate, and Sgt. Pepper's Hearts Club Band playing on the radio.

Analysis

Sam is reluctant to tell her mom about the new Beatles release because she is afraid her mother won't be interested. Like Sam, her mother loves the Beatles, but now Sam questions this connection and interest because her mother has moved away with her new husband and has a new baby. Essentially, her mother has created a new family of which Sam is not a part. If Sam was to tell her mother and, in fact, her mother was disinterested, then one of Sam's largest fears would manifest. Already, with her father



dead and little connection to his family, and her growing isolation in Hopewell, Sam feels like she doesn't belong anywhere—her mother's disinterest in the new Beatles' release would confirm this feeling.

Sam is intrigued that her father, who died in war before she was born, may have named her. After dinner she goes to look at his picture. In the mirror she studies her own face. She cannot find a resemblance between her own face in the mirror and the face in the picture. This is symbolic of how hard Sam is trying to find her place. She wants to see a resemblance, she wants to know her father—or at least about him. This connection to her past helps inform her future, but when she sees no resemblance she loses her footing on how to proceed with her life.

When Jim comes over to invite Emmett to the veteran's dance, he mentions once the foundation shifts in a house, then everything falls apart. This is metaphoric for Emmett's physical and emotional well-being. He can't function as a productive man in society because of the foundational damage that occurred in the war. Emmett's singular focus on trying to fix the house up suggests Emmett is finally ready to get his life together.

Sam visits Anita Stevens who is the only example of a modern woman living in Hopewell. Anita is a nurse and Sam describes her as beautiful, sexy, and smart. She is both an independent woman and a sexy woman. Sam looks up to Anita as someone she would like to emulate.

She invites Anita to the veteran's dance in hopes Anita and Emmett will get back together. Emmett having a girlfriend is a sign that he is a normal guy, and more than anything Sam wants Emmett to be okay so she feels comfortable moving out and leaving him. She also knows Anita has power over Emmett and hopes Anita will convince him to see a doctor.

Vocabulary

unreleased, eerie, mincing, commute, blemish, draped, minor, substance, sappy, vanished, hygiene, dependable, demonstration



Part II: Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9: Sam continues to worry about Emmett and the possibility of Agent Orange exposure. Lonnie and Sam take Emmett to the dermatologist in a nearby town—Paducah—that Anita recommended. The dermatologist gives Emmett acne wash and believes it is just acne or allergies. As Emmett, Sam and Lonnie leave the dermatologist's office, Emmett says the dermatologist said vets blame everything on Agent Orange and the doctor laughed at him.

Chapter 10: Sam goes on a run the next morning. She runs all through town and all the way to Tom Hudson's automotive garage. Tom shows Sam the VW he had told her about at McDonald's. Tom asks Sam about her boyfriend and she dismisses the questions asking, "what boyfriend?" Tom and Sam talk about Dwayne, Sam's dad, and how he died in Vietnam. Tom knows all of this and is familiar with the area where her father died. Tom takes her for a drive in the car.

Analysis

Emmett's trip to the dermatologist reconfirms his believe that the government would not take him seriously even if he could prove chemical poisoning from Agent Orange exposure is causing his acne and other problems. He is embarrassed and ashamed that the doctor laughed at him.

As Sam grows increasingly interested in the Vietnam War and the vets, she becomes more disinterested in Lonnie, referring to him repeatedly as a boy whereas Emmett and his friends who are vets, are men. This is suggestive: does going to war make boys men? She and Lonnie take Emmett to the doctor together (like parents would take a sick child), but while they are waiting for Emmett to come out of his appointment, she tells Lonnie she no longer wants to hear about his brother's wedding, or anything else. She now sees Lonnie and the events in his life as trivial compared to what she is learning from the Vietnam Vets.

A characteristic that demonstrates Sam's independence is her running. She runs in a town where no one else is running. The fact that she can run down main street and all the way through town, reminds the audience what a small community that Hopewell, Kentucky is.

In chapter 10 she runs all through town finally stopping at Tom Hudson's auto garage. When Tom and Sam are talking about her father's death in Vietnam, the audience is reminded of the age difference between the two. He is nearly as old as her father would be had he been alive.



Sam sees the car as a ticket to freedom—having a car will literally help get her out of Hopewell. Tom takes her for a ride and she dismisses the idea of Lonnie as her boyfriend. Her crush on Tom helps Sam distance herself from her relationship with Lonnie even more.

Vocabulary

envision, bitterly, disillusioned, leisurely, unbearable, reckless, immune, meandered, shuddered, federal, bluffing



Part II: Chapters 11-14

Summary

Chapter 11: Sam meets Dawn at the Hopewell shopping center because Dawn thinks she is pregnant with Ken's baby. Sam tells Dawn about riding around with Tom Hudson and that she likes him. At K-Mart, Dawn asks Sam to buy the pregnancy test because she is embarrassed. Sam does it and the cashier needs a price check. A clerk comes back waving the pregnancy test in his hand—Dawn is hiding, mortified, between some racks of clothing, but Sam doesn't care.

Chapter 12: That night, Sam dreams she and Tom have a baby. In the evening, the baby is pureed and in the morning it is whole again. In Sam's dream she was okay with this arrangement, but is disturbed by it when the morning comes.

That evening Sam eats dinner at Lonnie's parents' house. During dinner they talk about Lonnie's brother's wedding and how Martha, Lonnie's mother, was planning a wedding shower where everyone was supposed to bring a spice for the spice rack that she bought them. The conversation switches to Emmett and they ask if he is sick. Sam tells them she thinks he has Agent Orange exposure and Lonnie says that he doesn't believe that. Sam is angry she has to defend Emmett, especially to Lonnie and his parents. Later, Lonnie apologizes for the things he says in front of his parents. Sam goes home to Emmett and finds him playing Space Invaders. She imagines him in the dark jungle in Vietnam.

Chapter 13: It is Flag Days in Hopewell and Sam wants to fly the Vietcong flag just like Emmett did when he first returned from the Vietnam War. Sam runs into Jim and Tom, Emmett's vet friends. She tells Tom she wants to see the clock tower where Emmett flew the Vietcong flag. Tom goes with her. In the tower they talk about Emmett, and Sam asks what it was like in Vietnam. Tom ignores her question but tells her she is cute.

Chapter 14: Sam and Emmett are watching an MTV music video featuring Bruce Springsteen. She thinks about wanting to dance with Tom at the veteran's and wonders if he will look like Gene Wilder in Frankenstein because of his back injury from the war.

Analysis

Sam isn't embarrassed about the scene with the pregnancy test at K-Mart because she feels like people already talk about her, Emmett and her mother. This represents one of the ways in which she feels like she doesn't belong in Hopewell.

When she is at dinner with Lonnie and his parents she gets frustrated and angry that she has to defend Emmett to his parents and she's angry that Lonnie doesn't stand up for him when he acts like he looks up to Emmett. Sam realizes what Lonnie looks up to is Emmett's wartime experience, but not actually who he is as a person. Sam realizes



Lonnie sees Emmett as a man only because of the war. Sam thinks this is comical since Lonnie can't even keep his job as a clerk at the Kroger's grocery store. This is more of an affirmation that Lonnie is a boy instead of being regarded as a man like the other vets. The irony is that Emmett is a vet, yet no one sees him as a "real man". Even he doubts this since he's willing to wear a skirt for laughs.

Sam wanting to see the clock tower and where Emmett flew the flag is proof of her increasing obsession with Emmett, the Vietnam War—and her father. She takes Tom with her, another vet. When they come out of the clock tower, they exit through a passageway that takes them through a tunnel below town hall. There are homeless people down there—some of which are vets. This is symbolic of how vets are seen as and treated like the underbelly of society.

Sam's hesitance to give Lonnie her best panties is another sign she is distancing herself from him. She offers him an earring instead, a remarkably unsexy token.

Vocabulary

receding, warbling, evoked, mellowed, stagnant, inaudibly, glaring, decoupage, rigid, treason, fretfully, napalmed, defoliated, disintegrate, fairing, exuberant, clomped, idly, fragged



Part II: Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15: Sam visits Dawn on her break at the Burger Boy. They are talking about Lonnie and Ken. Ken still doesn't know Dawn is pregnant and Dawn questions the validity of the test. She wants to take another one. While they are standing outside talking, a boy drives up and tells Dawn that Ken's busy and won't be able to pick her up.

Chapter 16: It is the night before the vets' dance and there is a thunderstorm. Emmett is excited because it will test his work on the house's foundation. He wants to see if the basement will leak. He inspects the house and finds dampness but he doesn't think it is a real leak. He wants to cover the windows with plastic to keep the moisture out and Sam says that is what poor people do. She asks him if he is planning on getting a job, ever.

Analysis

Dawn questioning the validity of her pregnancy test and not knowing whether it is too early to test or not illustrates how unprepared she is to be a mother, as does the fact she works at a Burger Boy and is surrounded by teenagers. The job at Burger Boy also represents this is a small dead-end town and if Dawn stays here and has this baby, then she will be committing to a life of poverty.

When the boy at the Burger Boy shouts to Dawn that Ken can't pick her up, this demonstrates Ken may not be the most reliable father since already he is unreliable as a boyfriend. Dawn is about to enter into a lifestyle that Sam is desperately trying to get away from.

Sam begins to realize that with a baby in Dawn's life all of their plans to run away together are foiled. Sam does not want a baby in her life or her friend's. She knows it limits where she can go and what she can do with her life. Like with her mother's relationship, she knows Dawn having a baby will change their friendship.

As Sam learns more and more about the Vietnam War, she is also assuming more responsibility for Emmett— a responsibility she is beginning to resent. She dislikes it that he doesn't have a job, that she has to stick up for him and she also resents his plans for their house make them look like poor people. From every description in the novel so far, it is assumed they already are poor people. But this shows Sam does not think of herself that way and also that there are varying levels of poverty. This is another example of how Sam views herself as an outsider in this town. Even though this is her home and where her friends and relatives live, she does not feel like she belongs there.

Vocabulary

disgraced, precariously, apologetic, drizzled, exaggerated, humidity, conspiracy, wincing, recall, softhearted, tacky, branded



Part II: Chapter 17

Summary

It is the day of the dance. Emmett and Sam go together, but Sam is planning on Emmett leaving with Anita and she hopes Tom will be there. Lonnie is away on the lake trip stag party for his brother. There are not many people who show up to the dance and Jim, the organizer, feels bad about this. There is a cutout of a tank Sam describes as lurking monster in the corner. There is also a table of plastic model weapons. Some of the men are disgusted by this and others find it interesting. Sam notices pictures tacked up on the wall and she notes how there don't seem to be men in the photos, but just young boys.

Sam and Tom dance together; Emmett and Anita dance together. Toward the end of the evening Pete and Earl get in a fight. Pete is proud and nostalgic about his time in the war and Earl feels like that is an inappropriate way to feel about it. Tom is putting whiskey into Sam's cokes and she is getting drunk. By the end of the dance, Jim is crying, Sam goes home with Tom and it is assumed Emmett goes home with Anita.

Analysis

The fact that few people show up to the dance reinforces the characters' feelings that no one cares about the vets, not even the vets themselves. Sam seeing the pictures makes her realize these men have been living with the trauma of the war since they were just boys Lonnie's age. She is also reminded about how trivial Lonnie's life is. While she is at the vets' dance surrounded by men who have been to the Vietnam War and most of them have been wounded or traumatized, Lonnie is at a lake cabin with his friends getting drunk for his brother's bachelor party.

Some of the vets are bothered by the model weapons and some are nostalgic. This is representative of how people are coping in general. Some of Emmett's friends view the war as a defining time and are nostalgic about it, while others—like Emmett—suffer from flashbacks and post-traumatic stress disorder. The former group may struggle with PTSD but they cope with it in a different way.

Sam notes the cardboard tank lurking in the corner like a monster. This is symbolic of how the Vietnam War affects all of these men. Even the men that seem to be getting on with life and coping well will always have the experiences of the Vietnam War lurking like a large monster in their lives. This also foreshadows Tom's problems that happen in the next chapter.



Vocabulary

twanging, hooches, maneuvered, brandishing, shabby, emphatic, maddening, encircle, strafing, decals



Part II: Chapters 18-19

Summary

Chapter 18: Sam goes home with Tom after the dance. His apartment is messy, but he has a quilt on the bed and Sam finds this comforting. They try to have sex, but Tom cannot get an erection. Sam worries it is her lack of attractiveness or a physical injury of his from the war, but he tries to explain it is a mental problem. They kiss and fall asleep together.

Chapter 19: Sam wakes up and Tom is gone. Now, that she is sober she realizes just how dirty his apartment is. She grabs a coke and heads downstairs to the garage. Tom is already down there working. He won't look her in the eye. Sam thinks it is because he is embarrassed about what happened the night before.

When Sam gets home, Emmett is not there and Sam assumes that he went home with Anita. Sam goes to K-Mart to pick out a wedding present for Lonnie's brother and instead buys a ceramic cat. While she is there she runs into Pete. Pete asks if she wants to go to the Bottom with him and she says no, but that he can buy her a coke. They sit in a booth and talk about the dance, Anita and Emmett and Tom.

Analysis

This chapter illustrates another malady that vets suffered: emotional disturbances that manifest themselves as physical problems—like Tom's impotence. Sam worries that she wasn't sexy enough and vows to do better next time. This is the first time the readers get a sense of her desire to be feminine. Most of her other characteristics show her to be brazen, tough and independent, but she also wants to be sexy.

Sam buying the ceramic cat instead of a wedding present for Lonnie's brother confirms Sam's lack of interest in Lonnie. Now, that she has spent a night with Tom she is ready to walk away from Lonnie and their relationship. She feels her relationship with Lonnie is trivial and just a situation she is in. She hasn't broken up with him yet but buying the cat proves her intentions.

When Sam runs into Pete at the K-Mart, she knows Pete is trouble—a married man asking if he can take her down to the Bottom. But she also knows she can use him for a free Coke and be safe if she stays in the K-Mart. She takes the opportunity to discuss the war, the vets and the dance.

Vocabulary

drapery, intimidate, aggravated, imitated, regulation, posture, corruption, bitterly, liable, paraplegic



Part II: Chapters 20-21

Summary

Chapter 20: Emmett is still not home. Sam is hung-over and goes grocery shopping. She spends their grocery allowance on exotic foods she's never tried before, like canned oysters. She gets home and finds a hidden joint of Emmett's. She smokes the joint and starts rooting through her mother's things left behind in her old bedroom. She finds necklaces and takes them into the kitchen where she cuts the beads loose. She then decides to glue them on to the ceramic cat that she just bought. She talks to Dawn on the phone and Dawn still has not told Ken about her pregnancy. Hearing Dawn talk about being pregnant reminds Sam there is nothing for her in Hopewell, except Tom.

Chapter 21: It is Sunday and Sam still has not seen Emmett or his cat, Moon Pie. She calls Anita's house but no one answers. She goes to Grandma and Granddad Hughes's house for dinner. They talk about Emmett and the war, how he had the mumps, and if Irene really loved Sam's father. Sam wants to know why Emmett isn't married and asks her grandmother if she thinks that he might have a problem with impotence. Her grandmother thinks it might be because mumps fell on him—an old wives' tale about mumps causing infertility.

Analysis

Sam buying impractical exotic food at the grocery store shows how desperately she wants out of Hopewell. She's impulsive; she knows it is impractical but the novelty and adventure of trying new things outweighs its impracticality.

Again, when she talks to Dawn, she is reminded of how her best friend is going to be stuck in Hopewell. Sam knows if she is going to leave Hopewell for good, it will be without Dawn, Emmett, or Tom.

She gets high and decorates her ceramic cat with her mother's old necklaces. She is feeling nostalgic for a time when her mother and she were close. She thinks her mother will love the cat and plans to give it to her as a gift, but she is hesitant because she worries her mother will no longer like the same things she used to like. Sam is afraid she has lost her connection with her mother.

Sam goes to her grandparents' house to see what she can learn about Emmett and his wartime experience. She is becoming increasingly obsessed and worried about his health. Since her night with Tom, she wonders if Emmett suffers from the same problem of impotence. And she thinks this is why he is still single.



Vocabulary

mercenary, excursion, bumfuzzled, dabbed, imitation, brooches, admiringly, stirring, subtle, receptacle, immortal, whirring



Part II: Chapters 22-23

Summary

Chapter 22: Emmett is still not home and Sam is worried something horrible has happened to Emmett and Moon Pie. She goes into the basement to see if he was doing work and hurt himself. The basement is dark and dank and scares her. She then inspects the ditch that Emmett has dug outside and worries he may have fallen in the hole under the foundation. When she is inspecting it, Irene pulls up in her new Trans Am with Emmett and her new baby girl, Heather.

Emmett did not go home with Anita the night of the dance. Instead he and Jim drove to Lexington and Jim stayed there to visit his wife, leaving Emmett stranded. Sam is intrigued by the baby, but keeps her distance. Sam and Irene watch MTV together, but Irene is not interested like Sam thought she would be. Irene says she's glad that she got out of this place.

Chapter 23: Irene, Sam and Emmett drive to Paducah where Irene takes them to an expensive barbecue restaurant. Irene pays for dinner. After dinner she takes them to a hill that overlooks the countryside. As a girl and younger woman, Irene loved this place. She said it reminded her of England and as a young girl she used to want to go there.

Analysis

Irene showing up reminds Sam her mother has left Hopewell, but she has not. Her disinterest in MTV confirms Sam's belief the connection between herself and her mother has changed. When Irene looks around the house and proclaims she is so glad she got out of this place, Sam is reminded Irene chose to leave her too.

Ironically, Irene is the only woman with a baby in this book. But, her escape out of Hopewell was because of her pregnancy and new husband. She married a man who could afford to take her out of Hopewell. Despite this, her mother is also a symbol of both motherhood and modernity. Irene is taking courses at college at nearly 40 years old and values her independence.

Sam shows very little interest in her half-sister because she is ambivalent to pregnancy and babies—she fears if she is not careful the same thing will happen to her and she will be stuck in Hopewell like Dawn. She knows this is not what she wants for herself. But her mother is an example of someone who has had babies and still left Hopewell, with a man's help.

Irene showing Emmett and Sam the hillside that reminds her of England demonstrates when she was Sam's age she too had dreams and fantasies of leaving Hopewell. Though Sam struggled to find a resemblance and connection between her father's picture and her own reflection, there is a clear resemblance in characteristics between



Sam and her mother, Irene. When Sam hears her mother talking about fantasizing about escaping to London, Sam realizes the Beatles and the Kinks were to her mother what Bruce Springsteen is to her: a fantasy that there is a world larger than that in Hopewell.

Vocabulary

forsythia, precocious, poised, sullied, accusingly, depressed, intended, oppressive, profession, staggers, rummaged



Part II: Chapter 24

Summary

Sam's mother, Irene, stays the night at the house with them. They have to clean up her old room so there's room for her and the baby. Sam is reminded her mother just left everything when she married her new husband, Lorenzo Jones. Sam is awake in the middle of the night thinking about her mother and she hears baby Heather crying. She goes downstairs to find her mother spoon feeding the baby. Sam and her mother have a conversation about Lonnie and college, and Emmett. Sam also asks about a hippie, Bon, that Irene dated when Sam was three. Irene wants Sam to go to college and leave Hopewell. She wants her to come live in her new house with her husband and Heather. Sam's mother believes women can do anything now and that it would be a waste if Sam stays in Hopewell.

Analysis

Ironically, Sam's mother is the most forward-thinking woman we see in this book. This further confuses Sam, who wants to leave and be independent but also feels tethered to Hopewell and her relationships there. Even though Sam feels like she doesn't fit in in Hopewell, she feels that Dawn and Emmett need her there.

Her mother's things left in her room symbolizes her mother, Irene, left everything and this is how she got out of Hopewell—she couldn't take anything with her and still break free. Sam is not ready to commit to abandoning everything to leave Hopewell. Irene feels Sam needs to leave Emmett and tells her that she is not responsible for him. Irene knows if he is forced to rely on himself he will be alright. This discussion puts Sam in the role as a parent to Emmett: she needs to stop enabling him and allow him to stand on his own.

Vocabulary

abstract, obviously, magnified, pamphlet, fascinated, belching, squalling, partial, gnaw, standoffish



Part II: Chapter 25

Summary

Irene gives Sam \$600 to buy a car. She visits Tom at his garage and buys the car for less than \$400. Tom is businesslike and acts like the night they spent together never happened. This upsets Sam and she drives her new car home crying. She shows her new car to Dawn who is excited because Ken has mentioned their renting an apartment and getting married and she hasn't even told him about the pregnancy.

Sam drives Emmett around and is surprised by how many cars there are in Hopewell. She had never noticed before and now she feels like they are all moving in opposite directions. She comes home and begins looking through her mother's old room for letters from her father, Dwayne. She is looking for letters that Dwayne wrote Irene when he was in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. She finds them and is disappointed by how little they say about what Vietnam was like. But she learns that her father expected a boy and wanted to name him Samuel, or Samantha in the event it was a girl.

Analysis

Sam finally gets a car—what she views as the ultimate symbol of freedom and escape, but instead of being excited and feeling free; she is disappointed and distraught that Tom is not interested in her anymore. When she is driving Emmett around she feels that all of the people on the road are driving in opposite directions just like how she feels everyone is moving in her own life: opposite directions. She worries everyone will solve their own problems and won't need her anymore.

Sam finds her mom's letters and is disappointed by how happy and cheerful her father sounds. Even though she was originally searching the letters for clues about her parents' relationship, but she realizes she really wants details about what it was like to be in the war. She's frustrated no one will tell her what it was like, the details of daily life, and now even her father has disappointed her.

She learns nothing about the war, but she does learn where her name came from. She tries to locate the reference in the Bible that her father makes and realizes this is a false reference. She is disgusted and disappointed by this and judges her father harshly. She believes he wasn't a very intelligent man.

Vocabulary

exhilaration, ridiculous, wrecked, ragged, compound, humiliated, depressed, encounter, burgundy, inched, scenery, way



Part II: Chapters 26-27

Summary

Chapter 26: Lonnie returns from the lake trip and visits Sam. Sam is excited to show Lonnie her new car, but he is unimpressed. She gives him back his school ring and asks for her panties back. She tells him she wants to break up. Lonnie tells her she is just confused and wants to know what is going on with her. She tells him it has nothing to do with him. He gets angry and tells her he is going to throw the ring in the lake and then leaves.

Chapter 27: Sam visits her Pap and Mamaw Hughes, her father, Dwayne's parents. They live outside of Hopewell, in the country. They are chicken and tobacco farmers. Donna, Sam's aunt, lives there with her baby. Sam thinks Donna is a hillbilly and does not like her.

Sam asks Mamaw if there are any letters or photos she can have. Sam looks at pictures of her father and again searches for a resemblance in her father's photograph. Her Mamaw gives her a notebook was her father's and sent back with his body and other belongings. Mamaw says it is just geographical notations and the handwriting is difficult to read. Sam takes it anyway. Mamaw and Pap talk about what a good boy Dwayne was, how he didn't drink and smoke and how much he loved Irene.

Analysis

In chapter 26, Sam starts to think about what Lonnie would be like in Vietnam. She thought of Lonnie tanned and fishing on the lake and was disgusted at how trivial his life and worries are—her panties, his brother's wedding, his job, etc. In her imagination she tries to place Lonnie being brave and fighting, but she cannot. This is part of her disinterest in Lonnie. She is growing up, but she feels he is stuck in his adolescence. Breaking up with Lonnie and having a car are both getting her closer to freedom and independence, and out of Hopewell.

Sam thinks visiting her father's parents' farm will help her to get to know who her father was. Sam walks around the property imagining her dad doing the same things, seeing the same things, smelling the same things. She feels his place holds his memories and experiences. And when she walks around with her Pap she does feel like she is walking in places her father used to walk. This satisfies her. So far, this has been the closest connection she has had to her father.

Hearing her Mamaw say she could have grown up on the farm makes Sam realize how different her life has been since her father didn't survive. She can't imagine her mother stuck out on this farm and is grateful she herself wasn't raised out on the farm. She does not like her father's sister and refers to them in a derogatory way as country people.

Vocabulary

absurd, consolidated, inferior, compensate, meandered, prosperous, disdain, indignantly, touchous, battered



Part II: Chapter 28

Summary

Sam drives to the mall and begins reading through her father's journal. At first it is difficult to read and the entries are dry descriptions and geographical notations, but then a few pages in they turn into journal entries. It describes him fighting and ready to kill the V.C. Her father refers to the Vietnamese people as 'gooks', a racial slur. And is excited to be fighting and killing. He describes a scene where they find a dead V.C. and it smells different than a rotting white person. Other soldiers were taking teeth to keep as tokens and adding a notch in their machetes. Dwayne was disappointed he didn't have any notches yet.

Analysis

Sam is disgusted and disappointed by what she finds in the journal. At first she is excited to be learning so many details about what the war was like, but she finds it disturbing how excited her father was to kill, how racist he was and disconnected from life and death. Ironically, these details are what she has been searching for throughout the entire book—as well as clues to who her father was—and now that she has both she is disgusted and unhappy. She begins to question Emmett's character and wonders if he was excited to kill. Now, she sees all vets through the lens of her father's journal.

Not only is she disgusted with her father, but his whole family and the farm. She wants to distance herself as much as she can from those people and that place. In her father's journal, she notices he has many misspelled words—which combined with his racism leaves her sick to her stomach. She dislikes her father's family even more and this represents another way they are ignorant and unintelligent.

Vocabulary

corridors, heifer, gibberish, perplexing, corpse, penitentiary, humiliated, ignorant, commode, shriveled



Part II: Chapters 29-30 - Part III

Summary

Sam drives home unsure of what she is going to say to Emmett about what she has read in her father's journal. When she gets home Emmett is not there but he has left a flea bomb in the middle of the room. Sam is furious. She thinks he left this flea bomb as a reenactment of war—like leaving a grenade and running. She thinks that Emmett has lost his mind.

In the house she gathers food, a cooler, a space blanket. She drives to Cawood's Pond at the Bottom. She sits in her car and watches the swamp. Before it gets dark she hikes down to the swamp deep in the forest. She can no longer see her car. She finds a smooth spot under an oak tree. She sits and imagines she is in Vietnam. She imagines smelling a rotting corpse and banana leaves, she imagines seeing Emmett as a soldier. She falls asleep pretending to be on watch and listening to the night sounds.

Chapter 30: Sam wakes at the Bottom and hears footsteps. At first she's not worried about it but then she starts to think that it could be a hunter or rapist. She hides under a tree with the top of a can of oysters as a weapon. She continues her fantasy that she is in Vietnam. And then she sees Emmett looking for her. She demands to know what Emmett saw during his experience in the Vietnam War. He says nothing but breaks down and starts crying. He's upset about the war, Anita, and how his life has turned out. Emmett promises to start sharing things, one at a time and then they drive home.

Part III: When Sam gets home, she is in a daze. Emmett takes care of her. Emmett decides he is going to take the job at Burger Boy Sam had lined up for herself, since she is going to go to Lexington for college. They decide before she leaves for school, they should go to Washington and visit the Vietnam War memorial. Sam visits her mom before they leave and brings her the ceramic cat. Her mother loves it.

Emmett and Sam decide to invite Mamaw to visit the memorial so she can see Dwayne's name. When they get there they are surprised by what it looks like. They look up Dwayne's name and find the panel it is on. Mamaw insists on a picture of Sam with the name, but once the photo is taken all they can see is Sam's reflection in the dark stone.

Analysis

Sam thinks Emmett has lost it and set off a flea bomb like it is a grenade. After reading her father's journal she is reading into everything Emmett is doing through the lens of war. She is angry he is trying to kill things—even the cat's fleas. Sam thinks Emmett has lost his mind, but really it is Sam who is breaking down. In her anger she runs away, a very childish thing to do. She wants to prove she can stay the night in the jungle too so she heads to the swamp, which isn't a jungle at all and she knows this and feels stupid.



All night long she pretends she is in Vietnam—reenacting what it may have felt like to sleep outside and keep watch. She tries to relive the memories of war that she read about in her father’s journal and moments and details she’s heard other vets speak of.

When Emmett finds Sam, they both experience a catharsis. She learns about how Emmett is coping, or isn’t, and he breaks down and begins to share what he is experiencing and what he has experienced during his time in Vietnam. She realizes she is being childish and is ready to put the reenactment behind her—she’s experienced a break-through and is ready to move on with her life, which includes leaving Emmett and Dawn behind.

Both Emmett and Sam have changed since the scene at Cawood’s Pond. Emmett is taking responsibility by helping Sam through her tough time understanding the details of war and coming to terms with what her father was like, and by getting a job.

Sam’s change is evident by her being ready to commit to a new life and college in Lexington. She is finally ready to leave Emmett, Dawn, and Hopewell behind. She also understands even though she doesn’t like what her father did, he is still a part of who she is. Sam seeing her reflection in the stone symbolizes this. Her father died in the Vietnam War and this is who he was and this is also part of who she is.

Vocabulary

reconnaissance, disgustedly, fidgeted, jostling, murky, wormed, foxhole, snatched, paranoid, crammed, appalling, scrounge, numerous, immortal, gleaming, ambling, polyurethane, tentatively, faintly, withdrawing, determined, rendering, quadratic, median



Characters

Sam Hughes

Sam is the protagonist. She is an eighteen year-old girl who has just graduated high school. She wants to leave Hopewell, but feels she must sort out who her father was and what is wrong with her uncle Emmett before she can leave. She loves music—namely the Beatles and Bruce Springsteen—and running, and views having a car as her ticket to freedom.

Emmett Smith

Emmett is Sam's uncle and Sam's mother's brother. Emmett lives in his sister's house with his niece, Sam. He has not had a job since he returned from the war 14 years ago. He has really bad acne and suffers from PTSD. Every morning he goes to McDonalds and has breakfast with the other vets in town.

Irene

Irene is Sam's mother and Emmett's sister. She recently has married a wealthy man and moved to Lexington where they have a new baby. Irene is 37. She has gone to college and now as an adult is going back to take psychology classes because they are interesting.

Lonnie Malone

Lonnie is Sam's teenage boyfriend. He was Hopewell High's star basketball player.

Mrs. Biggs

Mrs. Biggs is Sam's and Emmett's elderly neighbor.

Dawn

Dawn is Sam's best friend who works at the Burger Boy and who is pregnant with Ken's baby.

Ken

Ken is Dawn's boyfriend and Lonnie's friend.



Tom

Tom is a Vietnam Vet and a friend of Emmett's. Sam has a crush on Tom and they spend the night together, but Tom is impotent. He is 34.

Anita

Anita is Emmett's ex-girlfriend, but Sam hopes they will get back together. She is near Sam's mother's age. Anita is a nurse.

Jim

Jim is a vet friend of Emmett's. Jim plans the vets' dance and his wife leaves him to go to Lexington to get a job as a computer programmer.

Lorenzo

Lorenzo Jones is Irene's new husband.

Baby Heather

Heather is Irene's new baby and Sam's half-sister.

Pete

Pete is another of Emmett's vet friends. He's proud and nostalgic about the Vietnam War. He fights Earl at the dance.

Grandma and Granddad Smith

Grandma and Granddad Smith are Emmett and Irene's parents, Sam's grandparents.

Mamaw and Pap Hughes

Mamaw and Pap Hughes are Dwayne Hughes's parents and Sam's grandparents.

Dwayne Hughes

Dwayne is Sam's father who died in the war a month before she was born.



Objects/Places

Music

Sam makes many references to music (i.e. Bruce Springsteen and the Beatles).

Egrets

Emmett wants to see an egret—a bird that he has seen only in Vietnam.

Bruce Springsteen

Sam thinks Bruce Springsteen is very sexy and rebellious.

Junk Food

Coke, Doritos and other junk foods are referenced frequently.

Emmett and Sam's House

Sam and Emmett's house is old, full of junk and has a weak foundation. Sam hates her house.

Hopewell, Kentucky

Hopewell is a small town five hours from Lexington. Fifteen years behind in time, as a few characters say. The demographic is of mainly poor white people.

Lexington, Kentucky

To people living in Hopewell, Lexington is the big city. It is where people go to have a more promising future and career.

Vietnam

There are many scenes of Sam imagining the jungle and what it was like to fight there in the Vietnam War.



Fleas

Emmett is obsessed with his cat, Moon Pie, having fleas. They never seem to bother anyone else in the story.

MASH

Sam and Emmett watch MASH religiously. For Sam, it is a way to make war—albeit a different one—real to her.

Moon Pie

Moon Pie is Emmett's beloved cat. Besides Sam, this is the only creature he shows genuine affection for.

VW Bug

The VW bug is Sam's car she buys from Tom. It has a transmission problem.

Burger Boy

The Burger Boy restaurant is where Dawn works and where Sam has a job lined up at the end of summer.



Themes

War

The central theme of this novel is the idea of war and what happens to boys after they come home from war. The book has characters with conflicting viewpoints about life after war, during war and what kinds of benefits the veterans should have once they return home.

The Vietnam vets in this town stick together, meeting every morning for breakfast at McDonalds. The characters readers are introduced to have all been affected severely from the war—either physically or mentally. However, there is mention of other people in the story who are vets and they turned out just fine, but beyond a mention readers don't get a sense this is really the case.

Sam is frustrated so little is being done to help the vets get their lives back together, especially when some of them have financial burdens from medical bills and medical problems in general.

Other characters in the story are unsympathetic to the vets either because they have been in war, albeit a different one, or because they have not been in one. Generally, the consensus among the non-sympathetic characters is that the vets should just get over the war and get their lives together.

Gender Roles

Gender roles are a thematic presence in this book because Sam is trying to figure out what kind of woman she wants to be. Women in Hopewell get married and have babies but she wants to challenge that gender role and do something else—she just isn't sure what that will be.

Sam challenges stereotypical gender roles by being independent through her running and willingness to do things that will make her stand out, by her wanting to leave Hopewell in general, her lusting after Bruce Springsteen and breaking up with Lonnie. She also challenges stereotypical feminine roles by not wanting to have children and showing no interest in her baby half-sister. Sam sees children as a hindrance to her future, while other female characters in the book see babies and children as their future.

Coming of Age

This is a book about a young woman finding out who she is by finding out where she came from, namely her father Dwayne Hughes. Before Sam can make any decisions about leaving Hopewell and going to college, she needs to know about her father, who he was and what happened to him.



By recovering her past, she is able to move on and explore her future. At the beginning of the novel, Sam knows nothing about who her father was. Throughout the story she learns about him through her mother and letters he wrote her, through other vets' experiences in the same war (Vietnam) and through his journal writing.

Another way that Sam is making peace with her personal history is by accepting who her mother is. Throughout the book Sam is holding on to an image of her mother from when she was younger; Sam longs for the relationship that they used to have, but now that her mother has moved away, married and has a new family, Sam feels she has lost her mother. Sam learns to trust her mother and the new relationship they have. This helps her have the confidence to leave Hopewell and create a future for herself.



Style

Point of View

This book is written in third person limited point of view from Sam's perspective. Throughout the book, readers are shown Sam's perspective: what she's thinking and doing, what she notices about the world around her. All actions and conversations are interpreted through her character.

Setting

This book is set in Hopewell, Kentucky an economically depressed area in the mid-80's. Though many characters say that Hopewell is always fifteen years behind the rest of the country, Sam isn't. She listens to Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen, she eats conventional junk food that would have been popular in the mid-eighties and she also demonstrates progressive political beliefs.

Language and Meaning

The language in the book represents the diction and syntax of a lower economic class in the south in the mid-80's. Some of the references to the war and popular culture may be disarming for contemporary readers, but overall sentence structure and language is not complex.

Structure

The book is broken up into three different parts. The first and third parts take place at the end of the summer. They are both short sections with brief chapters. The setting in these sections is on the road trip to Washington with Emmett and Mamaw to see the Vietnam War memorial.

The second—and longest—part of the book takes place just after graduation through to the end of the summer before they leave for Washington. This section contains 30 brief chapters. Occasionally, there are flashbacks but this section of the book follows Sam through the summer chronologically.



Quotes

Where she lives is flat. She has never been this far away from home before. She is nearly eighteen years old and out to see the world. (1, Part I)

She had always taken his death for granted, but the reality of it took hold gradually. (1, Part II)

My mother never told me much about him, what he was like or what his favorite foods were or anything. I don't even know how tall he was or what kind of personality he had. He's just a face in a picture, but now I'm getting real curious. (7, Part II)

Tom's garage was in a section of town that used to be classy, before the doctors and lawyers and merchants began building in the new subdivisions. (10, Part II)

'Here everybody's looking backward—to old-timey days. Antiques and Civil War stuff.' He smiled. (10, Part II)

'Nobody understands the vets,' she said, almost crying. 'They're different. People expect them to behave like everybody else, but they can't. (12, Part II)

But now, listening to 'All You Need is Love,' she realized how naïve the words were. Love didn't even solve things for two people, much less the whole world, she thought. (17, Part II)

Hopewell had sent dozens of boys to the war. (17, Part II)

The red, white and blue were dead colors. (17, Part II)

Dawn was going to have a baby. The news still seemed unreal. Now Dawn would never get to go to Disney World. She would live and die in Hopewell. (20, Part II)

'You have to go to college, Sam. Women can do anything they want to now, just about. (24, Part II)

It was her. She was at the center of all of these impossible dramas, and somehow she was feeling that it was all up to her. But she didn't really know where she was, or who she would be if all those people left town and walked into the sunset to live happily ever after. (25, Part II)

Sam had wanted to care about her father, but she didn't know enough about him. She wasn't even sure how her mother felt about him, if she had really love him. (27, Part II)

Maybe they just took for granted that in war there was killing. That was it. They didn't question it. (29, Part II)

There weren't any people out here, so there was really nothing to be afraid of. (30, Part II)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Why is Sam so fascinated by the Vietnam War? What does finding out this information mean for her? Why is she fascinated by it now and not earlier in her life? What does she learn about the war throughout the book? How does this change her?

Topic 2

What is post-traumatic stress disorder and how does it manifest? Does Emmett or any of his friends have this? What are the signs?

Topic 3

Are Vietnam vets being treated different in Hopewell? How does the community feel about them? Is it supportive of their struggles as vets?

Topic 4

How does Lonnie's version of Hopewell differ from that of the generation of boys before him?

Topic 5

How does Sam rebel against Hopewell and what is expected of a woman in Hopewell? Who are her examples of independent modern women?

Topic 6

Why is it significant for Sam, Emmett and Mamaw to visit the Vietnam Veteran's memorial? How is the experience different for each of them?