

Jayber Crow: A Novel Study Guide

Jayber Crow: A Novel by Wendell Berry

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Contents

Jayber Crow: A Novel Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapters 1 and 2.....	5
Chapter 3.....	6
Chapters 4 and 5.....	7
Chapters 6 and 7.....	9
Chapters 8 and 9.....	11
Chapters 10 and 11.....	13
Chapters 12 and 13.....	15
Chapters 14 and 15.....	17
Chapters 16 and 17.....	19
Chapters 18 and 19.....	21
Chapters 20 and 21.....	23
Chapter 22.....	25
Chapter 23.....	26
Chapter 24.....	27
Chapters 25 and 26.....	28
Chapters 27 and 28.....	30
Chapter 29.....	31
Chapters 30 and 31.....	33
Chapter 32.....	35
Characters.....	36
Objects/Places.....	43
Themes.....	48



Style..... 51
Quotes..... 54
Topics for Discussion..... 57



Plot Summary

Having lost both parents at a very young age, Jonas Crow lives with his aunt and uncle for several happy years. However, when they, too, pass away Jonas is sent to an orphanage where his identity becomes just a letter in the alphabet, "J." He will always remember the cold stare of authority at the orphanage. Eventually earning a scholarship to study for the ministry, Jonas develops troubling questions about the Bible and about certain Christian beliefs related to the soul and body. He realizes the ministry may not be for him.

As a young adult in 1937, Jonas makes his way through a horrendous record-breaking flood back to the small settlement in Kentucky called Port William, powerfully drawn to his happiest, early memories of a simpler life. He becomes the town's only barber and is known now by his friends as Jayber. He spends his adulthood as the town barber, a quiet, but integral part of this small Kentucky farming community. His abiding love for a younger woman named Mattie results in an emotional commitment to her for the rest of their adult lives, even though he can never marry her. Mattie is married to an ambitious but perhaps misguided farmer whose love for farming is associated more with his own elevation as a modern businessman than a love for the land. He ultimately loses Mattie's family's land due to bad decisions. Jayber watches his beloved community deteriorate as modern, mechanized farming replaces the older, more earth-friendly methods of farmers who have passed on.

Redefining and continually examining his faith, Jayber tells the story of his quiet life as the Port William barber, the local gravedigger, and a custodian at Port Williams' church. In his old age, Jayber takes up residence in a simple cabin on the river, avoiding ever having to answer to government authorities for the lack of running water in his shop.

Jayber is a witness to wars that take many of the town's citizens, and the juggernaut force of agribusiness that changes the town forever. True to his moral code, Jayber never indulges in luxuries like running water, disturbing the earth that he loves as little as possible. His story is bittersweet, and his introspection so penetrating that it is easy to wonder whether this is Berry's novel or his autobiography.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Port William, so tiny it has no written history, is the site of Jayber Crowe's barbershop for thirty-two years. He started it in a depression year, and he is devoted to his customers, who are thrifty and not wealthy. Jayber keeps his own hours and, when he is not barbering, he is visiting neighbors, walking in in the country or fishing. He tells of Grover Gibbs attaching a plunger to the bald head of a car mechanic while he was under a car, as well other amusing stories of people and activities in the little town. The inward life of the local school fascinates Jayber, as well as the noise when the children are dismissed. He recalls seeing Mattie Keith for the first time as she walked home, and being moved by her eyes.

In chapter two, Jayber, once known as "J" since the age of ten, and now named Jayber by his customers, feels he is a possession of Port William, a place he has always known. He was born in nearby Goforth in 1914. He is related through his mother to the Proudfoots, and his father is a blacksmith. He fondly recalls very early memories of his mother's singing and his father's shop. During a very harsh stormy winter in 1918 during World War I, huge ice formations overtook the landscape and altered the lives of people in his community. Jonas recalls grieving the loss of both of his parents to illness. His Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy take little Jonas home with them to live.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

Jayber Crowe's anecdotes about the citizens of Port William are humorous and reveal his pleasure with living in a small community, and watching it, perhaps, from the sidelines. He is observant of the comedy in the lives of simple, hard-working people, their habits, lifestyles and behaviors. With his first notice of the school-girl, Mattie Keith, he mentions knowing her as a woman, foreshadowing some kind of deeper relationship with her later.

Jayber jumps back and forth to the present as he tells of his past. It is a touching story that, although told objectively, reveals his deepest pain at an early age. As a four-year-old, the world seemed broken to him, as symbolized by the ice formations and the unknowns of a world war.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Jonas is with his aunt and uncle in Squires Landing, where he is loved and nurtured. He recalls events when the ice storm receded, including Emmet Edge's boat being stranded on a hill of ice that turned into a cornfield later. He recalls loving the river and the the boats coming and going on the river delivering goods and passengers. He has lived with the river through the age of white people on boats to diesel and recreational uses, and is still, as an old man, entranced by its flow, ripples and silence. He fondly recalls the simple, industrious farming life of his family and neighbors.

Uncle Othy runs a small store and farms; Cordie helps with everything. Their neighbor, Put, keeps his family working, but spends time at Othy's store not buying anything. Other neighbors are their good friends, the Thripples, and a black family across the river, Ben and Ellie Fewclothes, all of whom Jonas addresses as aunt and uncle.

Jayber used to think that life was all just time, but now as an old man he realizes it was very little time and mostly memories. He recalls fishing with Othy and outings, including helping "Dark Tom," a self-sufficient for a blind man. Jayber remembers seeing Tom's dog eating his pancakes.

Uncle Othy dies, and Jayber and Cordie try to maintain their lives alone, but when Jayber is only ten, Aunt Cordie passes away.

Chapter 3 Analysis

In retrospect, Jayber feels like he passed two lifetimes by the time he turned ten. This narrative is made through a very sharp memory possessed by an aging man, who realizes he is coming to the end of life. He is wistful and nostalgic, but at the same time somewhat astonished at his own life and what he has been through. His wonderful illustrations of the people he remembers make this a rich history and endears the reader to Jayber as a little boy. His early and ongoing fascination with the river is symbolic of his life passing by as he narrates his story.



Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

In chapter four, upon Aunt Cordie's death, Jonas is sent to a church orphanage due to a lack of any relatives to take him in. Brother Whitespade, the principal, names him "J." The man's power and cold stare across his desk makes Jonas uncomfortable. He begins to adjust to this loveless atmosphere. The school's belief is that order comes from the soul, and disorder from the body, and the orphanage represents the soul, keeping a watch on the ever-sinful children. Even now, Crow distrusts people who willingly live an institutional life.

A good student, J does not live up to his potential, being more interested in nature and reading important books, fascinating words and passages. He wanders in his memories of childhood, but the places have all changed since that time. He eventually adjusts to the school, but is always "odd," shy and more of an observer.

In chapter five, the Good Shepherd is a world unto itself, protecting the children from outside influences. Here J learns barbering skills. J's biggest temptation to break rules was his desire to get out into nature. Although he occasionally gets into trouble, J begins to think might be called to preach, even though he has not actually heard the call. Due to his interest in the ministry, he is afforded special privileges and opportunities, but J is aware that most of it is hypocrisy for him and he may be choosing it for the wrong reasons. He would like to have a wife and home, but is aware the hormonal stage he is in may be confusing things.

He receives a college scholarship from Good Shepherd and never forgets the kiss of a girl that he never sees again.

Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

J. wants the reader to know he is only giving us a handful of information in order to explain how he ended up going away and returning to where he is now. His nearly nameless status at the orphanage symbolizes the harsh loss and emptiness of a little boy with no family. Swinging between between "constraint and upheaval" and always involved in some sort of punishment further describes a life devoid of love. J. lives in a dreamy state, his mind moving between his former life and the fascination of learning. J.'s total loss of any control over his life puts him in a state that seems like suspended animation.

Nature is what fills the empty space in young J.'s soul. He now feels perhaps his "call" to the ministry was more likely a call from his hormones. The reader can surmise that the call was part of his deep yearning to be loved. His interest in the Bible is an extension of his fascination with books and stories. Finally, his discussion about his

future need for a wife reveals that J.'s most pressing need is for human love and companionship.



Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

In chapter six, as a pre-ministerial student at Pigeonville College, J. works hard but bumps against his own resistance to authority. Although he is provided for with his scholarship, he is a hard worker and saves his money. Eventually J realizes he cannot get comfortable in the atmosphere of piety, and disagrees that everything bad is attributed to the body and everything good comes from the soul. He begins to doubt the literal truth of the Bible, realizing that it has morphed over time and holds many conflicting messages. A certain unanswered prayer of Jesus' convinces him that if one's will does not coincide with God's there may be nothing more to pray for, since prayer does not change God's mind. His questions are met with advice to strengthen his faith. With help from a Dr. Ardmire, J. confirms what he already knows, that he cannot in good conscience be a preacher.

In chapter seven, Jayber feels a great sense of freedom after choosing to abandon the ministry. He heads for Lexington on foot, thinking he should make something of himself. He gets a ride from the principled, independent Sam Hanks, whom he remembers from childhood. J. does not reveal his true identity to him. Sam gives him a five dollar bill and sends him to the trotting tracks for work.

J. goes for a haircut and strikes a deal with the local barber to share the customers. J. fixes the shop up and does some minor marketing and rents a room of his own, which he values. He continues to keep his money in the lining of his jacket and shoes. He gets a taste of forbidden things and enrolls in literature classes at the university, which he loves. In the fall of 1936, J. becomes overwhelmed with depression and loneliness for family. He feels that without a loved life, he is only a theoretical person. He does not return to school in January, but instead packs his small box, pays his rent and sets out on foot for Louisville, knowing the river waters are rising.

Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

The scholarship is a lucky break for J., but whatever it is he is seeking is not going to be found in church. Further, his quiet, somewhat withdrawn nature is not suitable for a profession that would require him to speak to a group. Leaving Pigeonville is not a rash decision, but one that has been in the works since his arrival, perhaps without being conscious of it. J. is an intelligent boy and has the ability to search his mind and conscience, which leads him away from what he sees as hypocrisy.

It seems that J's first real job and home has only left him with an even stronger desire for people who love him. He is withdrawn and does not form ties with people, so his loneliness is consuming. He finally faces the truth of his sadness, and heads back toward his origins. Again, he is unable to find any completion in school, or any

permanence in his personal life. He makes the best of what he has, but knows inside that there is a gaping emptiness.



Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

In chapter eight, clad in protective rain gear, J. leaves Lexington on foot, carrying his box of belongings, with the intention of getting to Louisville. The Kentucky River is rising rapidly and J. is excited to get there, back to his old life. In Frankfort, J. gets directions to a precarious bridge and tells the officer he must get to his people. After crossing the raging river, he is in unfamiliar territory, but finds shelter at the capitol building with flood refugees. J. realizes he is on his way home and is not exactly a refugee like the others. He eats and sleeps, and wakes with love in his heart for these people, and sets out again. After being lost several times, sleeping and bathing where he can, he spots Burley Coulter, a war veteran he knew as a child, who remembers him well. Burley tells him the Port Williams' barber has quit, and J. decides to take a look at the shop. Although it has changed, he would recognize Squires Landing by the look of the sky.

In chapter nine, Burley Coulter is out gathering fish that day from baskets he had put out with his friend, Loyd Thigpen. Burley leads J. through the woods to his mother's home, where they eat heartily. Burley takes him to the barber shop building, which has living quarters on the second floor. J. wants badly to own the place. The bank is closed, so Burly takes J. to Mr. Feltner, a member of the board, who sells the building to J. for three hundred dollars. J. says, "that day two men who knew who and where I had come from had looked at me face-on, as I had not been looked at since I was a child."

J. spends the night in his new shop, sleeping in the barber's chair. He begins to know his customers and enjoys their talk and arguments. While cutting Sam Hanks' hair, J. brings up the favor that Sam did for him when he picked him up and gave him five dollars and good advice. J. confesses that he lied to Sam about his identity, and tries to pay him the five dollars, but Sam claims to remember nothing about it.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

A treacherous few days in extreme weather conditions illustrates J.'s determination to get back to his roots. The rising river symbolizes the rise in him that is reaching for home. His view of the flood is that it is like the beginning and end of the world and he feels "knowledge crawl all over my skin." He suffers cold, being lost, hungry and sore, but continues on without feeling sorry for himself, but feeling a kinship with those who have lost their homes and possessions. Burely Coulter may symbolize J.'s salvation, appearing at the right time and leading him to his destination, the Port Williams barber shop. J. is clearly a good, humble person who appreciates everything.

Jayber's meeting with Burly seems predestined. In his meeting with Burley and Feltner, J. must get his money from his coat hems and boots, and feels as though he is laying

himself bare before the two men. It is as though all of his hiding and being away from the area for all these years has come to an end, and he is home and naked, like a child.



Chapters 10 and 11

Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

In chapter ten, J. goes to the Grandstand, a private spot in the woods where the menfolk play cards, hunt foxes and drink liquor. The liquor leaving the jug says, "good, good, good." and J. joins the group and becomes part of the community. The men discuss where the fox might be, and J. continues to drink from the jug. Julep Smallwood becomes excessively drunk, the dogs return to the camp, and J. falls to sleep on the ground. In the morning, while card games were still going on, Ray Overhold quickly climbs a tree as his wife, Cecelia, comes up the path to find him. Three others climb the tree and remain under him. J. lies still as Cecelia breaks bottles and throws a tantrum, looking for Roy. Seeing J. watching her, she throws a rock that hits him in the mouth and then she calls him bald. The Overholds' sad marriage brings a pall over the party, but the "worter" party is a topic of discussion for weeks to come, including one man who tells of himself falling off a bridge.

In chapter eleven, with the exception of Cecelia Overhold, the people in Port William love and befriend one another, whether they quarrel or not. Although each knows his or her place, like the black man in town, they are respectful generally to one another and are generally "classless." Now "Jayber" is finding himself at home as the town's bachelor barber, living above his shop. Burley becomes something of a father figure to Jayber, proud of him. Jayber comes to know the townspeople closely and can even suspect when there is a genetic relationship due to his familiarity with their individual features.

The hair of little boys is the hardest to cut, but Jayber enjoys the older men with their hard-working hands, funny idiosyncrasies and stories of local history. Jayber keeps the shop open as long as there are people there, and some nights they bring instruments and play music into the night. The generation that was old and dying were those who remembered the Civil War; now the dying generation is Jayber's, who remember the first world war. In 1937, Jayber grows his first garden, a hobby he continues for life. He finds his passion for gardening, using skills Aunt Cordie had taught him.

Jayber relives his losses from childhood that he had tucked away when he went to the Good Shepherd. Jayber wanders over the places he walked as a child, and imagines his people when they were young. Visiting their graves, he realizes that the world will always be a series of presences and absences.

Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

This is a wild party full of a sense of freedom. Men who carry heavy responsibilities of farming and family are able to escape temporarily, drink, talk freely and spend a

carefree night at the Grandstand. J. finally becomes one of the guys by joining them, and has the scar to prove it.

Finally comfortable in his own life, Jayber allows himself to look back and really feel his losses and re-experience a time that had only been a memory for many years. His friends have become a support system in which Jayber finds comfort and confidence, since they needs his services and use his shop as a place to converse and loaf. Jayber isn't afraid of a party, and one gets the sense through is dialogue that he is well-liked. His passion for gardening perhaps fills his need for family of his own,



Chapters 12 and 13

Chapters 12 and 13 Summary

In chapter twelve, Jayber's pilgrimage through life is shown to have not been linear, but through all the twists and turns he still feels he has been led. First seeing Mattie Keith as a schoolgirl, often walking home with her boyfriend, Troy Chatham, he comes to know her from a distance. Jayber dislikes Troy's sense of entitlement. Mattie's parents own a significant farm; Jayber knows that Athey Keith, Mattie's father, does not approve of Troy. Troy becomes a basketball star in high school.

Athey and Della Keith own and run a large, rich farm. Jayber is certain that they, too, disapprove of Troy and know that beyond his basketball talent, there isn't much there. Jayber witnesses Troy making a "basket" into Mattie's bushel basket, showing off his skills. He clearly dislikes Troy.

In chapter thirteen, Jayber discusses how, in spite of the smallness and insignificance of Port William, the news of Pearl Harbor has affected it just the same. The news forces Ms. Gladdie Finn to relive her grief over the son she lost in the first world war. In spite of her ongoing grief, Gladdie is cheerful, strong and productive.

Jayber has registered for the draft at twenty-eight. He is afraid for the world and envisions the war as a huge monstrous force that tramples towns, sheds blood and causes grief and damage. He cannot reconcile in his mind the cause or reasons for war, and cannot connect little Port William with the idea of a nation, except by way of death and suffering. He contemplates the Bible, and Jesus not telling us to love our enemies. He cannot exempt himself with conscientious objector status because the Port William men who do not, will still be hurt and killed. He feels he must share his fate with Port William.

Jayber finds out he has a heart murmur and is classified as 4-F by the army. He goes home, "disgraced by my failure to be able to do what I did not want to do." Fear and grief infiltrate the town. Men begin to die or be classified as missing in action, like Matt Feltner's son. Burley Coulter's nephew is killed, and the men left in Port William continue to gather in Jayber's shop and talk. Mat shares with Jayber a dream he had about his son. Jayber sits with him in a moment of deep grief.

Chapters 12 and 13 Analysis

Jayber feels his dislike for Troy Chatham while Troy is still quite young. Even though Mattie is only a high school girl, Jayber sees something very special in her and he intuitively knows this match is wrong. He sees Troy's egocentric, false pride and his need to show off, but does not see any redeeming qualities in him. His strange perusal of her school books might have been considered odd by others; he is, in a harmless



way, somewhat obsessed with a very young girl. Jayber has not had much in the way of intimate relationships, but he feels deeply drawn to Mattie and her family, the Keiths.

Jayber experiences the turmoil and angst that war stirs up in everyone, in addition to his own personal conflicts about fighting and killing people he does not know. Some of his divinity training is always with him, and he brings it in when working with hard questions. He objects to the war in every way, but will not single himself out from the other men in Port William because he belongs here. Berry does a good job of making us feel the heavy grief in the town, and the way the people bear up under it and go on. It is not as if they will ever be the same, and the innocence of the town, itself, is darkened by the war.



Chapters 14 and 15

Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

In chapter fourteen, Cecelia Overhold, Roy's wife, is an enemy to Jayber and Port William, feeling she has come from upper class. She disapproved of Port William, its people, their dialect and habits. In every way, Port William is inferior to California where her sister lives. Cecelia attends church, and uses it against the non-religious Roy as one of his many failures. When Cecelia raises the pressure on Roy, he simply escapes. Roy is a quiet man who failed to measure up in his wife's eyes. She took him to California once; his friends discussed how decidedly uncomfortable he may have been in his Sunday suit. Roy died, and Jayber realizes that Cecelia has always seen him as her enemy, since he owns the shop to where Roy escaped whenever he could.

Uncle Stanley Gibbs, who uses inappropriate language and shares inappropriate thinking, is fired as the town's grave digger, as well fired as the church's custodian. Stanley chooses Jayber as his successor. Stanley stays on for a while as Jayber's supervisor and teacher, but Stanley dies and ends up in a grave, dug by Jayber.

He finds grave digging solitary and sad work, and contemplates the state of death, feeling tenderness toward all those whose lives are over. He wants to make his heart as big as heaven to love all of the dead. On Decoration Day, Jayber enjoys the flowers that people bring to the graves. He once overheard Burley Coulter and Hibernia Hopple have a flirtatious interchange on Decoration Day.

Chapter fifteen shows how digging graves makes Jayber strong and healthy. Going to church is entering a woman's world again for Jayber, and he likes how they comment on his good cleaning jobs there. Jayber tenderly comments on the innocent hypocrisy of the townspeople who listen to sermons about the flesh, but go home and indulge heartily. He admits that bad sermons give him time to think of other things and look out the window. He likes the singing the best, and decides that people of the congregation come there mostly for acknowledgment and comfort.

Jayber enjoys working in the empty church, sometimes napping on the floor. He rings the bell on Sunday morning, pulling the bell rope in the vestibule, his favorite duty. Jayber enjoys being with the people and loves the silent intervals that bring unite them. In a sleepy moment, he experiences seeing all the people who have ever attended the church as he had seen them as a child. He saw those in the past and those to come, with all their burdens, songs, children, love, grief and simple clothing. He feels a great love for them in which he, himself, is included. He awakes with tears.

Chapters 14 and 15 Analysis

Cecelia Overhold is a force in Jayber's life, and he actually blames her for his lack of sociability in town. She, like Troy Chatham, feel superior to others, except that perhaps



Cecelia does have some self-doubt. Roy is a pathetic character who never had any intention of being changed by her. He does not resist her pushing, but rather silently endures it.

In an interesting twist, Jayber the barber becomes Jayber the gravedigger and church custodian. The passage about Stanley Gibbs and his lack of boundaries is hilarious, since almost everyone has known someone like Stanley. Jayber's attraction to the church is still complex. He certainly does not believe the doctrines, but believes in the people and their need to be there. He still feels that what God has created is just as good and wonderful as God, although that belief prevents him from buying into the church's doctrines.



Chapters 16 and 17

Chapters 16 and 17 Summary

In chapter sixteen, Jayber goes along with changing times and buys himself a car, which he uses primarily to drive to nearby Hargrave. Five years later he overhauls the engine, always taking meticulous care of it. He goes to Hargrave for Violet Greatlow to cut his hair. Violet, who chews caraway seeds when he's been drinking, has a great tale of being locked in jail after cutting the hair of a prisoner.

Jayber admits he got the car because he is lonely and would like female companionship with women who see him as something other than the town barber. He has a few dates now and then, but finally meets Clydie at the Rosebud Cafe. A courageous and uncomplaining woman, Clydie cares for her elderly mother and aunt. Jayber comes to like and enjoy Clydie's company very much, but they keep an unspoken agreement to remain independent. Jayber spends nights with Clydie in her room in total and utter silence.

In chapter seventeen, Troy Chatham is also deemed 4-F by the army for a dubious basketball injury to his knee. Jayber tries to imagine that there might be more to Troy than only Mattie sees. Mattie and Troy marry and settle into a tenant house on the Keith property. Athey, one of the best farmers in the area, has five hundred acres of well kept crops and livestock. He is conservative, resourceful and efficient in his farming, and always keeps aside extra for the unknowns, intending to improve his land and leave it better than he found it. Athey's tenant farmers have always prospered. Athey leaves 75-80 acres of good timber standing on his property. He logs nearby only for firewood and lumber, and protects the large stand, which he calls his "nest egg" from timber buyers. Athey and Della are always busy and productive, and respected in the community for their large holdings.

Athey and Troy have opposite viewpoints on farming; Troy wants to squeeze everything out of the land, while Athey is conservative and thoughtful. The order and cycles of this established farm clash with Troy's wish to enlarge himself through it. Mechanized farming is on its way and will change things for all of the small farmers, whose long years of toil are laughed off by this younger ambitious generation.

Troy goes into debt on equipment and rejecting Athey's attempts to teach him the old ways, plants more and more corn and buys fertilizer because there is more crop than the farm animals can fertilize. The old established farm gives way to Troy's ambitious greed and speed, which even Jayber can slightly relate to as he notes his own impatience when driving his car. In 1949, Mattie gives birth to a son.



Chapters 16 and 17 Analysis

Although he loves his life in Port William, Jayber is only human and wants to experience himself outside of the roles he plays there. His inclusion of the anecdote about Violet Greatlow almost seems apologetic for his real reason for wanting to go to Hargrave. Because he is unattainable, he meets a woman who is also unattainable. Clydie fills the gap for his loneliness, and presents no pressures or unexpected surprises. He likes her in his presence, but not in the way he loves Mattie from a distance.

It is difficult to say whether Troy Chatham is a careless, immature kid or just a forward thinking farmer like the rest of his generation. Jayber already dislikes him for his showing off and his claim on Mattie, and he especially dislikes him now, as he watches him destroy all the years of hard work Athey and Della have put into the farm. Troy is an opportunist and does not hesitate to go into debt on someone else's collateral. Jayber never lets on to Troy that he dislikes him, but he dislikes himself for accepting Troy's criticism of the slower, more old-fashioned ways of Athey.



Chapters 18 and 19

Chapters 18 and 19 Summary

Perhaps torn between her father and her husband, Mattie takes up the slack doing chores that the increasingly busy Troy does not have time to do. Mattie does not show self-pity, and is an honest, present kind of person. The women of Port William make sure that those who are in need are cared for, and often call upon the men to help. As many of the women grow older, Mattie calls on Jayber to see to things being done, although everyone in town knows all about Jayber and he is somewhat "marginal" to the women of the town. Jayber sees Mattie as she plays with and cares for the children at Bible school, and suddenly is absolutely and totally overcome with love for her. He imagines that marriage is what creates true presence between two people. Mattie has no defenses or devices, but is whole, clear and present, and his love for her takes over his mind and dreams. Jayber keeps the secret of his love to himself and continues with his life as usual. He focuses more on Troy and realizes Troy is lonely, humorless and has a dirty mind. Jayber now finds it pleasurable to hate Troy. He has illogical fantasies of running away with Mattie. In late fall while Mattie and her daughter are picking wildflowers, Liddy is struck and killed by a car. It is not the driver's fault, and Jayber can only imagine the moment.

In chapter nineteen, Mat Feltner directs the cleanup work on the old graves, remembering each of the deceased with an anecdote or memory. He recalls the history of a more lawless Port William. He talks of the Rowanberrys, a family divided over the Civil War. Brother and sister saw one another once after fifty years, and he did not recognize her. Jayber realizes he cannot be extracted from this community, nor it from him. In a state of presence, he has a vision of the "membership" of souls here, and understands that everything changes constantly, it includes failures, successes and everything positive and negative, and it all will be perfected by grace. Walking in the cemetery, he finds Mattie lying on her child's grave in grief.

Chapters 18 and 19 Analysis

The reader now understand what attracts Jayber to Mattie. He has moments of being totally in the present, and he sees the same in her. His consciousness is drawn to hers. This is a poignant part of the story. As a middle-aged man, Jayber is not lusting after her, but feels a deep kinship that he has not known before. In a sense, he feels Mattie is a soul mate he cannot have.

Jayber experiences another of the moments of consciousness with respect to Port William. As he contemplates the "membership" of the town, he slips into a higher vision of the the natural flow of changes, events and people, and sees how it is all tied together with love. With that "presence" still with him, he finds Mattie in her grief.

Ironically, he mentions again his "calling," referring back to his earlier desire to be a minister.



Chapters 20 and 21

Chapters 20 and 21 Summary

Jayber is bothered that Cecelia Overhold has continued to dislike him for years. Remembering the chip in his tooth, Jayber feels Cecelia always has her stinger out and feels that her troubles are someone else's fault. Cecelia pretends Jayber doesn't exist. She only wants what she does not have, and hopes each time a newcomer shows up that she can bond with someone superior to the town such as herself. Cecelia and Troy Chatham are the two loneliest people in town. However, Jayber knows that Cecelia with all her hatefulness is also part of the fabric of Port William.

Athey breaks his leg and finally leaves his farm. He and Della buy a smaller homestead and, although he is now lame, Athey keeps it perfect. Athey becomes a regular visitor at the barber shop. Jayber has always kept a certain set of unspoken social rules in the shop, but when a drunk comes in and makes a racial slur, it is Athey who stares him down and contradicts him.

In chapter twenty, it is shown that Athey Keith was raised by his father and a black woman named Molly, who was the mother of aunt Ellie Fewclothes. Carter Keith was an industrious man who made the young Athey diligent about school and chores. Athey tells of a time in his boyhood when there was to be a hog killing on his father's farm, and his father left him in charge. Put Woolfork shows up hoping to get some free hog meat. Promising the local moonshiner, Jim-Pete, that he will get him some meat, as well, Put brings a keg of whiskey to the event. The men began to drink and get sloppy and slow with their butchering and it soon gets dark.

A group of "Regulators" shows up, dressed in sheets carrying torches and rifles. They lock all the hog-killers up, empty the stables, build a fire and feast on free pork and whiskey. Athey knows who they are, and one is Jim-Pete. When the Regulators fall into drunken sleep, Athey takes and buries their weapons and sets free their horses and mules. The hog killers are freed and they beat up the Regulators, who walk away unhooded with their saddles. Carter Keith arrives home, sees the mess and orders Aunt Molly to make strong coffee. Athey sees the regulators no longer as authority figures, but just men.

Chapters 20 and 21 Analysis

Jayber tries to come to terms with Cecelia Overhold's unabashed hatred of him. He doesn't like it, but he does not like her, either, even though he accepts that she is part of the larger picture of Port William. He acknowledges that both she and Troy Chatham are very lonely people which, perhaps, allows him to forgive them to a degree.

Now that Athey Keith lives closer and has more time on his hands, Jayber is getting to know him better, starting with his bold contradiction of the drunken racist.

Athey Keith becomes an important character because he is Mattie's father, and because his history is such a colorful strand in Port William's tapestry. Jayber obviously has great respect for Athey and his ways. The story of Athey's boyhood experience with the hog killing ends with the fact that Athey almost feels sorry for someone he dislikes, just as Jayber almost feels sympathy for Cecelia and Troy.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Jayber recalls various characters and funny stories in Port Williams. He remembers Athey Keith always being kind, but he now sees a new tenderness in him toward children, animals and everyone.

With help from their attorney, Athey and Della kept their title to the farm when they left, and they have now left everything in their wills to Mattie, excluding Troy. Although Mattie is not disloyal to Troy, she no longer approves of his handling of the farm. Troy, now feeling ousted from ownership and sorry for himself, somehow decides he is free.

Jayber and Clydie attend a Christmas dance at an old roadhouse, where they dance and drink. During a dance, Jayber looks up from Clydie and sees Troy Chatham dancing with a blond woman. Troy gives Jayber a wink and a grin and gestures as though he thinks Jayber might approve. Jayber becomes sick in his heart and repulsed at the possibility that he could ever be like Troy. He climbs out the club's restroom window and writes a note to Clydie, leaving his car to her and thanking her for being a friend when he needed one.

He walks the long walk home in the cold, trying to clarify his thoughts about Mattie. He takes a vow to commit himself to her as the faithful husband that Mattie does not have, without her knowledge, until death.

Chapter 22 Analysis

This chapter starts out lighthearted, with funny stories that live on in Port William about characters and unusual folks. It transitions into the mellowing changes Jayber sees in Athey Keith, as well as the changes in Mattie toward Troy. Naming her third child after her father may be the only outward reflection of that change; otherwise, Jayber is conjecturing that she has lost faith in his plans and promises.

Events turn quite dramatic and earth-shaking when Jayber sees Troy cheating on Mattie. Again, Troy tries to imply that Jayber would ever be complicit with him for any reason, with his gestures and presumptive smile. But Troy has touched a nerve in Jayber that turns him away from his casual relationship with Clydie and makes him clarify and acknowledge his devotion to Mattie. He feels now that he must choose between the two women he loves, even though the one he chooses is the one he can never have.

This is certainly the most poignant chapter in the story, thus far, and Berry skillfully draws the reader in by weaving details that lead up to this moment.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Devoting himself to Mattie keeps love in Jayber's heart, even though he lives a solitary life without her. He feels his marriage to her is validated by Troy's invalidation. Living as a married man in his heart only, Jayber loves Mattie all her life. He questions why hate succeeds and finds its justification and love does not always succeed but forces us out of the limits of time. Jayber feels he has always seen Mattie in her eternity.

Jayber begins to pray again. His old questions are still with him, and he still cannot give up on people, even those who diminish life and take more than they give. But he is now remembering God loves the world, and Port William, with all its faults and flaws. He acknowledges the temptation to reason out that everything must be proven. If we really understood God's love for the world, and loved it ourselves, "what would be next?"

Jayber prays for God's will to be done, but also prays for others and for gratitude. His prayers are always only answered in part, and he questions whether the world continues by chance or by prayer, or cause and effect. He feels he now knows that Jesus' prayer in the garden was not answered because he was limited by the flesh. Jayber prays to know God's love for the world in his own heart, but this is his "step into the abyss."

Jayber's life changes without a car or social life in Hargrave, and he continues his life in Port William as before. He recalls many bits and pieces of stories and conversation in the shop, particularly when Burley Coulter and Big Ellis baked a huge cake.

Port William has changed with progress. The older men gather after the younger ones have quieted down in the town. Jayber continues to be married to Mattie in his heart and soul and struggles with loneliness at night.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Jayber exposes and examines his spiritual life in this chapter, his questions and hopes for the world, and the connection with Mattie, which gives him peace and loneliness. With this commitment so deeply affecting him, he revisits his relationship with God and the world around him and continues to draw comfort from the fact that Port William is his home, and that all of its changes are part of the natural flow of life.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

When he is young, Jimmy Chatham spends a lot of time with his grandfather, Athey, helping with farming and learning natural ways of living. When he grows big enough to help his father, Jimmy is much more interested in helping Athey with his old farming methods, a source of irritation to his father. Jimmy picks up the slack as Athey's health begins to fail.

Mattie asks Jayber to come to the house to shave Athey, who has been having small strokes. Jayber begins to spend time at Athey's house, often with Mattie and her children present. Athey's illness, in that way, brings joy to Jayber, who, to a degree, becomes part of the family. Athey gets progressively weaker, and one day dies as Jayber and Della hold his hands. After that, Jayber does not go to Della's house again, but sees her at the cemetery on Decoration Day. She mentions Athey never knew his mother, and Jayber imagines the cry of freedom when love becomes unbound.

The loss of Athey and the little farm devastates young Jimmy. His relationship with Troy as he works on his father's farm becomes strained. Troy is spread thin and Jimmy feels like a slave. Jimmy is ready to go out into the world, perhaps headed for trouble.

Chapter 24 Analysis

At least in this chapter Jayber gets to spend some time with Mattie, even though the situation is sad and deteriorating. They all love Athey, with the exception, perhaps, of Troy. Athey's illness bonds Jayber even more strongly with Della, Mattie and the family, and gives Jayber the perfect reason to be there with them.

What was once the Keith family is now dissolving. With Athey's death and Della's age, the farm that they love goes, too. Young Jimmy is more like his grandfather and is ready to break his ties with his father. Berry foreshadows trouble for Jimmy by telling the reader how much Jimmy dislikes his current situation, that he can hear the dare of the world. In fact, more than foreshadowing, Berry is warning the reader of trouble for Jimmy, who has reached driving age.



Chapters 25 and 26

Chapters 25 and 26 Summary

In chapter twenty-five, Jayber ruminates how war and the economy are Siamese twins. By the 1960s, Port William is beginning to suffer its own death. The general store is closed and empty, and the world has become "Ceceliafied." People are no longer interested in raising, buying or delivering local products, and the entire economy (and the war) is focused on getting people to purchase what they may not need or expect. Now in 1986, Jayber wonders how many shares people have all purchased in death. Farmers are aging, tired, and the old integrity becomes broken. Jayber knows that all these farmers, men who worry about the economy, will die without being replaced. Troy Chatham despises the fear and worry of the old farmers and feels the answer lies in more technology and debt. The Port William school closes and most everything now takes place in Hargrave. When Mat Feltner dies, Burley Coulter helps Jayber cover his grave.

An interstate highway has pushed its way through the valley, dividing properties and neighbors and bringing constant noise. Businesses are no longer serviced in the small town and most people drive to the city, which is now encroaching the farmland.

In chapter twenty-six, Jayber lends bail money to Mattie to get Jimmy out of jail on a drunken driving charge. All of Jimmy's wild behavior is a manifestation of his battle with his father. When Jimmy goes to Vietnam, Troy's attitude becomes proud and supportive of the war effort and, likewise, hateful toward the protesters.

A government inspector comes to check the barber shop and cites Jayber for having no running water. Jayber considers just accepting donations rather than comply.

Jimmy Chatham's death in Viet Nam shakes Jayber deeply, as does the war itself, which he cannot make sense of. Jayber thinks he understands why Christ does not return and stop the insanity and only shows himself in the miracles of existence. One must see the horrors in order to see him. Jayber decides to leave the shop, live on the river and build a boat. Burley offers his mother's camp house by the river for Jayber to use.

Chapters 25 and 26 Analysis

The world is changing quickly during this period of history, and Jayber has lived long enough to see many cycles of life come and go. He sees an increasing gap between people and their souls, demonstrated by the changing way of life. Jayber cannot justify what is happening in the world and understands how the war and the economy go hand in hand. He sees the flaws in humanity, but counts himself among the flawed. His faith, although shaken, is not broken, as he finds ways to figure out why humanity is not being saved by God.

The combination of Jimmy's death and the government interference in his business shakes Jayber into realizing that he must make a change. He wants nothing to do with the government and would rather give up his shop than become entangled in codes and compliance issues, or trying to get around these things. Always drawn back to the river, this seems to be a natural move for Jayber.



Chapters 27 and 28

Chapters 27 and 28 Summary

In chapter twenty-eight, Jayber gets ready to move and cannot sleep. Out in the quiet, he contemplates how much of the little town of Port William is gone, and how many of its people are gone as well. Much of it is vacant or soon will be, but Jayber knows it will be forever here for him. He takes his old barber chair with him and writes "gone" on the old paper clock. His friends move him to the river cabin. The little two-room cabin was well built with good wood floors and tin roof in 1916, and is the most beautiful house Jayber has ever lived in.

His clients/friends, mostly the older ones, come to him on the river for haircuts, and his shop is reborn. He plants a garden, gets two Border collies, makes improvements to the house and becomes intimate with the nature surrounding him. He builds a footbridge and a boat and learns to fish in the river. The river, its beauty and constancy, is a part of Jayber.

Burley's Coulter's son and heir, Danny Branch, is a thrifty and hard-working farmer with a wife, Lyda, and seven children, all of whom live close by with Burley. Aware that the economy could go down again, Danny is cheap and resourceful, but generous in his heart. Jayber begins to get his hair cut by Lyda, and they all become close neighbors, sharing meals or just visiting. Burley is growing old and his hearing is bad. He still tries to hunt with the hounds, despite his inability to hear the dogs and his confusion about where sounds are coming from.

Burley is Jayber's close friend for forty years, and Jayber feels that his own life in Port William and on the river was a gift from Burley, a vision Burley had seen for him. After Burley's death, Danny is Jayber's landlord, but will still not let Jayber pay rent.

Chapters 27 and 28 Analysis

A true passage for Jayber after thirty-two years, his move to the river seems to be a natural step in his life, again, aided by Burly Coulter. His little dwelling and shop, as it empties, becomes a precious memory to him, and he grieves its loss while looking forward to his new life. It seems that Jayber, now, is one of those parts of Port William that older men will someday sit around and discuss.

The impact from the loss of Burley Coulter from Jayber's life is implied in Jayber's sense of the abiding presence of his absence, as well as the mystery Jayber describes. His grief, otherwise, goes unmentioned. Burley's son and his family provide Jayber with the company that he has lost by leaving the shop.



Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

Jayber quits his gravedigger job, but continues to work for the church every weekend. He is convinced that Christ did not intend to found organized religion, but an unorganized one, instead. He revisits the places he has known. Renting the building in town has brought problems. He has come to belong in his river place as he belonged in Port William. Jayber feels that the events in his life have been a surprise which he has watched from the sidelines. He wonders if we are in an eternal story that happens partly in time.

Jayber enjoys his boat and trotline, and stays busy with his gardening, household chores and barbering. He sometimes goes to the Nest Egg and in winter, and stays cozy in his little cabin. The possibility of flood is always present. When the river rises, if it leaves ice it often will rise again. Jayber struggles some from lack of clean running water, but enjoys his baths in the river. He watches the river and the seasons from his porch, finding peace and beauty. Nights are difficult because he is alone, and aware of incompleteness and imperfection in him and the world. He has dark dreams brought on by knowing that the negatives of the world are meant to be "overcome by love." He knows from the news and his surroundings that trees are being felled, cars are speeding by, people are dying in accidents and wars. When Jayber discusses his avoidance of the man across the desk and his wish to to continue to avoid him, Lyda assures him he will not end up in a nursing home.

Jayber watches people "resting" on the river in speeding boats with loud radios, not slowing down, restless and greedy. He sees the new economy as the raw material of bad dreams.

He describes a dream wherein Athey calls him and asks him to come up and sit for a while with him, Burley, Art and Elton. Knowing they have all passed away, he gets up and dresses and goes to them, sitting on the lowest step beneath them. He sees them all smiling and glad to be together. He finally realizes where he is.

Chapter 29 Analysis

Jayber's age has slowed him down and he is beginning to struggle with ordinary things while, at the same time, having a deep and growing recognition and appreciation for beauty and nature. Still struggling with the conflicts between what is and what should be, he is constantly trying to make peace with himself about how quickly the world is seeming to destruct. His insights about the economy buying peoples' freedom from them are astute, and are horrifying to him. Berry is able to delve into the mind of an aging person and really understand the thinking process of someone whose insights both thrill and depress him. That hate is easy and love is difficult is a riddle that Jayber

toils with for years. Most people observe aging as a series of events involving the mind and body, but aging also brings a certain awareness and appreciation to the soul that are often overlooked.



Chapters 30 and 31

Chapters 30 and 31 Summary

Della Keith died at eighty-four, and the Keith estate passed to Mattie and on to Mattie's one surviving child, Athey Keith. Troy and Mattie's marriage is affected by her ownership of the land versus his huge debt and failure. Jayber learns details of Troy's debt through barbering and through Troy, himself, who is not a private person. Troy is unaware of how much Jayber dislikes him. Troy mortgages Mattie's farm and turns it into a dairy farm and later an indoor pig farm; Jayber suspects he is "just an incurable chucklehead" who continues to dig himself deeper into debt in order to appear large. Jayber goes to the Athey property and finds it ruined, overplowed, grown, unharvested and lifeless, with trees bulldozed, fences gone and a large patch of broken machinery. Mattie personally continues to live in the ways of her parents, raising their food and supporting Troy. Troy's denigrating remarks about her stir Jayber's wrath. Jayber now feels that Mattie really did love Troy and simply accepted his flaws with dignity and good humor. Jayber and Mattie are occasionally together.

The fifty-acre Nest Egg of Athey Keith's timber, a favorite place of Jayber's, is where Jayber and Mattie Keith occasionally meet over a period of ten to fifteen years, and spend time together watching the activities in the nature around them. The meetings stay quiet and platonic, as Mattie keeps her wedding vows. Jayber once dreams he is Mattie, and in the dream, he sees bones that become Mattie's daughter, thus experiencing her grief. Jayber now feels this is a book about Heaven and the small moments that we try to capture. Jayber describes a rainbow that breaks through the shadows.

Mattie does not tell Jayber she is ill, but he knows. Eventually their visits at the Nest Egg are no more, and she dies. An old man now, Jayber realizes that he carries memories from men who are gone that are more than a hundred years old. He thinks of each of the people he has lost, and thinks that as we lose everything in our lives, we finally stand alone, having lost everything, and also found everything. Jayber is ready to go.

Chapters 30 and 31 Analysis

Jayber has an interesting time trying to find compassion for Troy Chatham, who he cannot seem to like at all. The difference between Troy and Mattie is that he seems to keep searching for an identity, and Mattie has always known and been true to hers.

It is comforting that Jayber and Mattie did get to spend some time together, and interesting that they never discussed Jayber's personal vow to her. Their meetings seem sweet and as though they enter a world of enlightenment while they are together. Berry helps the reader feel what it is like to grow old and lose the people you love and

care for. It is fascinating to think of Jayber carrying memories that were spoken by people in the Civil War, memories that will die with him.



Chapter 32

Chapter 32 Summary

Jayber explains he had to tell his story in a linear way, but it didn't happen like that. He still sees this as a book about Heaven, but has wondered if it might turn out the opposite. But the earth informs us of heaven, which we would not know unless we knew of Hell. Jayber's leftovers include wondering what ever happened to Clydie. He has forgiven Cecelia Overhold, who was put in a home by her nephew in California. He has forgiven Troy Chatham, who lost the Keith place and his life's work. He describes himself as a man of love and faith, and provides an analogy of a man falling into a deep dark well. A man of faith believes that the man in the well is not lost.

A summer day, knowing Mattie was in the hospital, Jayber goes about his usual chores of washing his laundry, eating, napping and gardening. He tried to ignore the noises of logging, but finally walks to the Nest Egg and learns that Troy has sold all of the timber there, now that Mattie is no longer able to protect it. Jayber, although he later forgives Troy, is unable to stay and see Troy's "desperate merchandise," and wanders off into the woods where he sleeps amid the noises of progress.

Returning home, he gets in Danny Branch's boat and heads to Hargrave to see Mattie, who is dying in the hospital. Tearfully, Mattie tells Jayber that Troy is cutting the woods, and it is hard to die knowing the world is being ruined. When Jayber cries and asks her about "this other thing," Mattie says yes, and gives him a smile of love.

Chapter 32 Analysis

The elderly Jayber's thinking is still influenced by his developing beliefs about God. He knows he has made mistakes in his lifetime and that he is not perfect, but in a deeper sense feels that no one is lost.

Jayber illustrates his point that life is not linear, as he enjoys the day and barely hears the logging going on in the background. Old and sick in his heart, he desperately needs to sleep away his shock over Troy's logging operation and his recognition of the shifting fulcrum of Troy's "leveraging." Troy is down to his last desperate attempt to hold on, but he is obviously ruined, this loss being his final one. Jayber's nap is uncomfortable due to the noises of what one would call "progress" around him - the freeway, the logging, the planes and the displaced wildlife.

Although Jayber's last encounter with the love of his life perhaps assures him that she loves him, as well, the story is a bittersweet, realistic tale of a regular, common man who has uncommon faith and tenderness toward people and the earth.



Characters

Jayber Crow

Jayber Crow is a man who has grown up with what many would see as disadvantages. His disconnection from love at such a young age keeps him emotionally independent until the day he dies. He is married in his heart to someone he can never have and is willing to live with that reality and that commitment.

Jayber is the mellowest of men, with a deep and abiding faith that excludes violence. He treats everyone with kindness, even when he does not feel it. Jayber has learned to examine his life, as well as others, and draws his conclusions based on his sense of goodness, his sense of humor and his deep love for the earth and humanity.

His early training for the ministry served to show Jayber that nothing man has created, such as organized religion, is a sure truth. He finds truth in nature and in the goodness and fallibility of human beings. Early on he realizes he cannot be a minister because he has too many unanswered questions about dogma and he will not pretend to be something he is not. But Jayber believes in love.

Perhaps his early separation from family explains the simplicity of Jayber's needs. He does not wish to make something of himself in the changing world of humans, but only to be where he feels a sense of home, among simple people whose livelihood primarily depends upon the earth. He needs the company of women, but does not play games. His relationship with Clydie is unquestionably one that is not permanent, and his devotion to Mattie is unwavering.

One of the most endearing aspects of Jayber's personality is his love for the earth. He leads the reader through times of great change, when roads begin to divide farmlands and small towns whither away in favor of big cities. His outrage regarding the ties between war and the economy are clearly expressed, as one who lives on the fringe of it all, but who cares deeply.

Jayber's gratitude and appreciation for life makes this story uplifting in its own way. Although it is a blunt statement about how humans are ruining the earth, the story reminds one that there are people like Jayber Crow whose love cannot be shaken, and who live and die on the earth making a very small, but important footprint.

Burley Coulter

Burley Coulter is a down-to-earth gentle man who, like his name, is strong and large, but a teddy bear underneath. Something of a father figure to Jayber Crow, Burley is the first person to see and remember Jayber when he is trying to make his way back through the great flood to his childhood home. Burly seems to foresee Jayber's role in the community as a barber, escorting him to the banker and the old barber shop, where



Jayber ends up spending more than thirty years. Burley feels strongly that Jayber should live in the same place where he works. Jayber realizes later that Burley is proud of him for being a reader, thus sealing the image of Burley as a somewhat doting father.

Burley is a constant friend who makes the introverted Jayber comfortable in the community of Port William. Burley invites Jayber to the "worter dranking party" at the grandstand, and envelopes him in the group of men who are eating, joking, playing, drinking and hunting. He also breaks ground for Jayber, who ends up being a devoted gardener.

The Coulters own land adjacent to the Keiths' land. Burley never marries the woman in his life, Helen Kate Branch, but is loyal to her and supports her and their son. His love of hunting stays with him, even when he is old and deaf and cannot tell where the dogs' sounds are coming from. Burley is one of the friends hwo Jayber loves. Of Burley, Jayber says, "my life in Port William and here at the river had been his gift."

Mattie Keith Chatham

When Jayber first sees Mattie, she is a school girl. Her face is honest and her consciousness seems to be very much in the present. He recognizes her as someone who stands out among others with her values, general brightness and inner strength. An only child, Mattie is a good girl who is respectful of her parents, who also have a very strong place in Jayber's affections.

Mattie suffers her personal hardships in silence and does not "falsify or misrepresent" herself. She is reserved, very present and a good mother. Mattie does not change over time, except for physiologically. She marries Troy Chatham and is devoted to her children, two of whom she loses. Although she disapproves of Troy's behavior, she never speaks out against him. As a grown woman, Jayber's attraction to her is soulful and goes far beyond the physical, because of her steadfastness and even her loyalty to Troy.

Later in life, Mattie begins meeting Jayber in the Nest Egg forest, where they commune with nature. Mattie never even implies that she would do anything in appropriate, and their meetings remain platonic, albeit poignant for Jayber. Mattie loves the earth and nature, and when she is dying of cancer, feels that she would die more easily if she did not know that the earth's beauty was being destroyed. At the end of her life she finally acknowledges her love for Jayber.

Athey and Della Keith

The parents of Jayber's beloved Mattie, the Keiths are practical, hard-working folks who take nothing for granted. They always have room to provide for the future, and they are prepared for what life might bring. They are prosperous farmers in Port William, but are conservative and not prideful. They have only one child, Mattie, and they run an organized, productive, and highly esteemed farming operation.



As they grow older and Athey suffers with a lame leg, they realize that they must move from their farm. Della and Athey know that their son-in-law is not a practical or effective farmer, and without speaking of their disapproval of Troy, they leave their property to their daughter only. When they move to a smaller piece of property, Athey continues to "piddle," using his mules and old ways of farming, and teaching his grandson what he knows.

Jayber learns of Athey's background through Athey's fractured pieces of stories. Athey was left in charge of a hog slaughter as a child, and the gathering got out of control with liquor and participants with ill-intent. As a child, they worked closely with his father who ran a small store and pig farm located at one of the landings along the river.

Always a very kind and unbiased person, in his old age Athey became more tender and attuned to the small things in life. Over time he becomes a very good friend to Jayber, who cares for him when he becomes ill and helps the family deal with his death. Jayber spends some precious time with Della and Mattie caring for Athey and, for a short time, becomes part of their family.

Troy Chatham

Troy Chatham is a man who is lost in his own delusions and thinks that other people buy his facade, since he, himself believes it. He is overly-ambitious in the sense that he wants to be a star like he was in high school. However, his ambition is not necessarily to be productive, but to become rich and recognized. Thus, he ignores the advice of people who know farming and takes the advice of the kind of people he aspires to be, such as investors and wealthy businessmen. In his desire to make lots of money and to avoid the drudgery that he perceives farming to be, he over-invests, over-cultivates, and finds himself constantly in need of more money, more land and more boosts to his ego than the average person.

When Jayber sees Troy cheating on Mattie, it seals Jayber's commitment to Mattie. Troy is not a grownup and is not necessarily a very good person, but Mattie sticks with him without complaint, even after he devastates and squanders the family farm. Only at the end of her life does Mattie complain about losing the trees that Troy harvests from the one pristine piece of the property, which he does out of desperation and a carelessness about the land, not to mention a lack of respect for Mattie and her family.

Uncle Othy and Aunt Cordie Dagget

Older than most parents, Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy take little Jonas Crow in as their own child when both his parents die. Aunt Cordie was Jayber's grandfather's sister, technically, his great-aunt. Aunt Cordie provided Jayber with the nurturing and care that was so abruptly withdrawn when his parents died within hours of each other. Othy and Cordie's own three children all died as young children. The couple was especially good and loving to little Jonas Crow. Uncle Othy owned a store, and little Jonas spent time



with him as he worked. The two died within a few months of one another, leaving Jayber with no family and nowhere to go but the Good Shepherd orphanage.

Sam Hanks

Sam does not have a large role in the story, but his is an important one. After Jayber has grown and decided to leave Pigeonville College, Sam Hanks picks him up in his hog truck to give him a ride, and advises him on jobs in Lexington. The reader can assume that Sam knows who Jayber is, but he does not let on in this scene. He presses a \$5 bill into Jayber's hand when he drops him off.

Later, when Jayber tries to pay him back and refresh his memory, Sam appears not to know what he is talking about and will not accept the repayment, which implies that he did know who Jayber was at that earlier time. Sam represents the kind, caring type of person who lives in Port William - rough around the edges and somewhat reserved, but with a huge heart and great respect for others.

Jimmy Chatham

The son of Mattie and Troy Chatham, young Jimmy has the same kind of soul and principles as his grandfather Athey Keith. He learns from Athey and works on Athey's little farm, using the animals and natural conservationist methods that Athey employed. Jimmy did not enjoy working for his father, sitting on a huge tractor and involving himself in agribusiness. When Athey passes away, Jimmy starts to go a little wild, but eventually joins the military and is killed in Vietnam. In his grief, Jayber recalls the feel and shape of Jimmy Chatham's head when he cut his hair as a child.

Mat Feltner

Mat Feltner, as a member of the board of directors of the local bank, funds Jayber's purchase of the barber shop building when he first arrives at Port William. Together, Mat and Burley Coulter gather the things Jayber would need to live and work in Port William and help him get established. Mat is a direct, clear-eyed honest man whose son, Virgil, is lost in World War II. He felt that "what cannot be helped must be endured." He and Jayber become lifelong friends. Mat participates in the marathon rummy game at the barber shop and is referred to by Jayber as one of the community's "rememberers." When Mat dies, Burley Coulter helps Jayber fill in his grave out of respect for Mat.

Cecelia and Roy Overhold

Cecelia Overhold represents many things in Jayber's story but stands out as the one person who clearly does not like him. Cecelia is from Hargraves, and she feels quite superior to the people in Port William. She is disappointed in her husband Roy, whom



she has not been able to mold to her liking, and who has not changed from who he was when she married him. Roy is a beaten, unhappy man, but Cecelia is all he has. The community is aware of their marital problems and sympathizes with Roy. Roy is a simple man who likes to drink and is a down-home, quiet type. Cecelia, who places herself as a pillar of the church, sees herself as a frustrated socialite, and refers often to her sister in California who, apparently, leads a glamorous and much better life.

The reader's first glimpse of Cecelia is at the Worter Dranking Party, when she comes barging into the grandstand, throwing things and making a scene while Roy hides from her high in a tree. She is so angry and mean spirited that when she sees Jayber looking at her, she throws a rock at him and chips his tooth. Cecelia does not acknowledge Jayber from that moment on, since she feels he is beneath her, although she does know that he is educated and has chosen his life as a barber here. Jayber feels her "stinger is always out," and her dislike of him causes him to contemplate what went wrong at that moment.

Jayber acknowledges that Cecelia cannot dislike others so much without some dislike of herself and, toward the end of his life, he totally forgives her for her cruel and undeserved treatment of him. In her old age, Cecelia finally moves to California, but her sister has died and her nephew puts her in an old folks home, taking charge of her money.

Clydie Greatlow

Clydie is a waitress who has a casual affair with Jayber Crow. She and Jayber go to movies and dances together, and he sleeps with her at her home that she shares with her mother and aunt. She has another love interest, but the two do not discuss it, and they enjoy one another's company in Hargraves for quite some time. At the Christmas dance when Jayber sees Troy Chatham cheating on Mattie with another woman, he realizes that he cannot love two women, and that he is deeply committed to Mattie. He ends his relationship with Clydie by leaving her a note on his car, which he gives to her. She is a good friend to him, but he is not in love with her.

Brother Whitespade

Brother Whitespade is the stern authority figure who young Jonas Crow faces across the desk when he arrives at Good Shepherd orphanage. He gives Jonas Crow the name of "J." In Jayber's mind, Whitespade becomes symbolic for authority of any kind that could make a decision that would affect the life of another person. Jayber avoids this kind of figure his entire life and, when faced with it again in the form of the inspection division of the state, Jayber chooses to leave Port William rather than deal with that kind of authority.



Wheeler Catlett

A lawyer who provides free legal advice to Jayber in exchange for haircuts, Wheeler is a frequent customer and friend. His advice to Jayber about compliance with the inspector's requirements is what helps Jayber decide to leave the barbershop and move to the river.

Violet Greatlow

Uncle to Clydie Greatlow, Violet is a large man who lived in an old brick farmhouse on the edge of Hargrave. Jayber goes to him for haircuts. Violet has small children and is something of an inventor. However, he drinks frequently and chews caraway seeds to cover it up.

Violet's stories include inventing a gigantic tank and submitting the idea to the government, from which he received no response. He also talks of a time when he was summoned to jail to cut a prisoner's hair and was locked in for an entire day.

It is not clear whether Violet is the "competition" that instigated the inspection of Jayber's barbershop.

Ab Rowanberry

Ab is a old man who lives with each of his five daughters for a short period of time before moving on to the next. He carried his belongings with him and left before wearing out his welcome.

Fee Berlew

A serious drunk, Fee (Fielding) Berlew gets so intoxicated that he sings in the street. Jayber calls out that a truck almost hit him and, when Fee finally realizes that the truck had stopped short of killing him, he curses the driver and tells him to get the thing out of the road. Fee also is the only man Jayber ever threw out of his shop. Fee banged on the barbershop window, cursing and insulting Jayber, but returned in the morning asking for forgiveness.

Big Ellis

One of the characters in Port William, Big Ellis hangs out in the barbershop and is friends with Burley Coulter. He and Burley make a bet about the weather, and when the local inspector comes in and begins to inventory all the problems in the shop, Big Ellis decides to make a "donation" to Jayber for the haircut he has received, perhaps to throw off the inspector.



Elizabeth Lawler

While at Good Shepherd, Jayber takes notice of a new girl, about seven years old, whose clothes did not fit and who is quiet and resigned. She stood back while others played, and became known as "E," just as others were known only by the first name initials. When the girls invite her into their circle, Jayber realizes that she had been waiting for this. He wrote her name, "Elizabeth Lawler," in the back of his book so that he would remember her. She represents the namelessness that each orphan falls into when they were enrolled at this school. They become just a little less than a number and their only family becomes others who are known by an initial. Jayber does not want to forget that he knew her by her full name.

Barber Horsefield

Actually named Peter Hausfeldt, this barber is the one in Port William who had lost the business because he could not afford to support his large family. Jayber buys his shop, complete with barber chair and living quarters upstairs. The reader does not "meet" Barber, but he is the reason there is an opening for Jayber in Port William.

Uncle Stanley Gibbs

The elderly man who was the Port Williams church janitor, as well as its gravedigger, Uncle Stanley Gibbs is fired from both jobs for being embarrassingly and inappropriately vocal about things that one does not discuss in public. Stanley hopes his wife Pauline would die first so he could be a bachelor and a "tomcat." Stanley converses with Jayber while he works, but finally he dies and Jayber buries him.



Objects/Places

Port William

Port William is a very small town on a river in a rich agricultural area of Kentucky. The town has been through several states of brief and minimal growth over time when Jayber Crow arrives as its new barber. Port William is home to a small general store, a barber shop and a public school, and is populated primarily by farmers tending various sized operations in the area. Jayber Crow spends his adulthood in Port William as its only barber, and a great deal of his story involves the people of the Port William community. Port William is so small it is referred to as a "membership."

Port William Barber Shop

The barber shop that Jayber Crow buys in Port William is a simple two-story building. His living quarters are on the top floor and he carries out his business of barbering on the bottom. The shop is a place where the men in the community tend to gather and spend time together, not always to get haircuts. Jayber inherited with the shop an old leather barber chair, which he, himself spends time in when there are no customers. A large vat with a spigot holds his hot water, since there is no running water in the building. Jayber grows a garden behind the building, and makes this place his home for thirty-two years.

Goforth and Squires Landing

Jayber Crow was born in the tiny rural settlement of Goforth along the same river where Port Williams and Squires Landing are located. His father was a blacksmith with a shop, which he remembers from early childhood. When his parents passed away, Jayber was taken in by Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy, an older couple who lived in Squires Landing. Uncle Othy runs a small grocery store and Jayber helps him there. Their property is right on the river and is the site of the pig killing that Jayber describes in detail. Othy does all of his commercial business by way of the river using barges and boats.

Grandstand

Grandstand is an obscure location in the woods outside of Port William where the men of the town meet to get drunk, hunt, talk freely, play cards and hang out in a way that is not necessarily approved of by the women of the town. Jayber describes his initiation into the group of men at one of these gatherings where he first met Cecelia Overhold, who disliked him from that moment on because of his participation with her husband Roy in this event. Cecelia, who was a snob, threw a rock and hit Jayber, breaking off one of his teeth.



The Good Shepherd

The Good Shepherd is an orphanage in central Kentucky where young Jonas Crow is sent when his guardians pass away. It is a school/orphanage, run with a strict hand and is strongly structured, especially for a little child who has become used to life in the country. The orphanage provides an ordered environment which turns Jayber forever against institutions and organizations. The orphanage is strictly managed by "Brother Whitespade," the principal, who gives Jonas the name of "J," and whose authoritative manner will haunt Jayber all his life. It is here that Jayber realizes he loves learning but prefers not to be an achiever, since that is the one thing he can control.

Piegeonville College

Jayber Crow attended Pigeonville College on a scholarship in order to enter the ministry. He learns here to obey the rules and enjoys reading, working and being a good student. He becomes independent for the first time, earning his own money and not having to share his room. While he attends Pigeonville, Jayber begins to question whether he should be a minister, since he finds so many discrepancies and unanswered questions in the Bible. He realizes that he is expected to take some of the Bible literally, and some of it not. With the blessing of his professor, he withdraws from the college.

Lexington

After leaving Pigeonville College, Jayber goes to Lexington and finds a job at the "trotting tracks." He took a job as a barber in Lexington at Skinners Barbershop, where he did some cleanup and marketing for the shop, as well as barbering. Lexington is where Jayber first learned about all the things that he had been made to believe were "forbidden." He also took some classes at the local university and indulged in his love for reading. In 1936, Jayber became very depressed while in Lexington, and left on a search for the end to his loneliness and sadness. He headed out for Louisville, Frankfort, and eventually ended up in Port William.

Hargrave

Hargrave is a town only a few minutes' drive by car away from Port William. In a sense, Hargrave represents the big city to the folks of Port William, since it actually has bars, a jail, a movie theater and restaurants. Jayber Crow goes to Hargrave to get his own hair cut by Violet Greatlow and to meet women. Jayber meets Clydie in Hargrave, and continues to date her there. Hargrave eventually grows and is connected to Port William with a freeway. The Port William school children are bused to Hargrave when the local school is closed down.



The River

The river is a major feature of this story. As a little boy, Jayber lived on the river at Squires Landing and watched the steamboats and their colorful crews, loading and unloading freight. He contemplates now that the "surface of the river is like a living soul, which is easy to disturb, is often disturbed, but, growing calm, shows what it was, is, and will be."

A major flood of the Kentucky River in 1936 wiped out farms and homes . It was toward this flooded river that Jayber walked, through the pounding rain and sleet, with his box of belongings, crossing dangerous bridges and feeling miserable loneliness. Jayber does not even realize that he is headed home, but the river has drawn him back.

The river is symbolic in this story, representing several ideas. One is the constancy of life's flow over time — people come and go, towns come and go, but the river continues to flow. Another is the flood of emotion that Jayber is caught in as he seeks to ease his depression by going home. In addition, the river is the life blood for the people early in his life, like his uncle and the farmers. Jayber, standing on a bridge, has a revelation about the Spirit of God moving on the waters.

Frankfort

Jayber is cold to the bone, exhausted and hungry when he is shown to the capitol building in Frankfort, Kentucky. There, in a large room, he eats and sleeps with refugees from the flood. He sets out the next morning for the region of his childhood home.

Grave Digging

When the elderly Uncle Stanley Gibbs retired from the jobs of church janitor and grave digger, Jayber Crow picked up the two jobs for him, and stayed with them as long as he possibly could, burying the bodies of wartime soldiers, aging friends and lost children.

Port William Zephyr

A green Dodge sedan that Jayber Crow bought from Milo Settle, the Zephyr is the car that Jayber used to drive into Hargrave seeking social interaction with women. Jayber gave it this name because, aside from being concerned about its well-being, he was impressed with the fact that it carried him smoothly down the road. It was not new, but was an object of fascination for Jayber, who kept it up perfectly and, eventually, gave it to his girlfriend, Clydie.



Keith Farm

Mattie Keith's parents, Athey and Della Keith, own a five-hundred acre farm which was eventually taken over by Troy Chatham, Mattie's husband. The Keiths work the farm responsibly and are always well-off in terms of crops and animals. The Keiths are humble, debt-free people who respect and honor the land, and who do things frugally and thoughtfully. They left one area of the farm uncleared, and called the small patch of timber the Nest Egg, always thinking ahead and being sure that there would always be enough laid aside for the future.

Although the farm was left to their daughter, Mattie, upon their deaths, her husband Troy continued to use the land irresponsibly, expand the plantings using machinery, wearing out the soil and not replenishing it. He eventually destroyed the farm with his careless, greedy ways and logged the Nest Egg for money.

Port William Church

The cleanliness of the small white church in Port William became Jayber Crow's responsibility. Although he did not go into the ministry, Jayber loves the church and loves the people who attend. The church is the only exposure he really gets to the women of Port William, and they compliment him on his work there. Jayber loves most ringing the bell and singing in the choir.

The Nest Egg

A small stand of pristine forest on the Keith land that Athey Keith left untouched for a rainy day, the Nest Egg is a beautiful spot in nature where, in later life, Jayber occasionally meets with Mattie just to spend time. The Nest Egg is important because it represents the last hold on what once was in Port William. Until the end of the story, it had been untouched by progress or technology. When Troy Chatham finally clears the nest egg to cash in on the lumber, Mattie is dying in the hospital and knows that the last of her parents' beautifully cared-for property is being destroyed.

The River

The river is a constant presence in Jayber's story. He was born on the river, which one might assume is the Kentucky River. Throughout the story, he refers to branches of the river, such as "Katy's branch," and different settlements along the river, like Squires Landing. The river represents life to Jayber, who is drawn back to it after becoming a young adult. The flooding river is a matter of concern for the people in this farming area of Kentucky, and it is the means of transportation for goods, services and people in the early days of the story. Jayber crosses the river during a record-breaking flood in his search for home before he finally lands in Port William. Later in life, Jayber lives in a



cabin on the river again, and is witness to speed boats and new technology, polluting the water and the atmosphere.

Decoration Day

In Port William one day a year is devoted to tending to the community graveyard, cleaning, weeding and decorating with flowers, and visiting the graves of those who have passed.

Agribusiness

Jayber Crow watches as the farming region in which he lives gradually gives itself over to technology. It begins with Troy Chatham, who buys large tractors and automated farming equipment, and whose goal is consistently to make more money and plant more crops, regardless of what it does to the land. Jayber watches over his lifetime as farming goes from the use of mules and hard work to large corporate ownership and heavy machinery.

War

Jayber Crow lives through three wars: World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam. One of the themes of his story is the uselessness of war and how it continues as a counterpart to the world economy. Even though Jayber feels compelled to sign up for the draft, he does not believe in war. He is found to be 4-F by the Army due to a heart murmur.

Community

Jayber's story is about the community of people who form a "membership" in Port William. His group of friends is tightly-knit and loveable, even though some are drunks and characters of other sorts. He appreciates the individual traits of each person, but more importantly, values the community that is knitted by geography and lifestyle, and which continues to fluctuate and change with time.



Themes

The Nature of Progress

As the reader follows Jayber through his life, he describes his living conditions and the world around him. His father is a hard-working blacksmith with a small shop, his mother a simple hard-working housewife. His aunt and uncle depend upon the river for their livelihood, and commerce is slow and fairly uncomplicated. His description of the hog-killing illustrates a time when people depended upon farming for food and did not buy their meat from a grocery store.

As Jayber's life continues in Port William, things gradually change. The local school is closed and the children are bussed to another town. A freeway is built through the town, dividing families and neighbors from one another, and the automobile becomes the means of transportation, the freeway replaces the river for moving goods. The big city draws people who begin to buy things they do not need, in stark contrast to Jayber's childhood when people had only what they needed and not much more.

When the government inspector insists Jayber install a water system in his barbershop, he realizes it is time to move on, because Jayber is of the modern world, but loves the way things were when he was young. Even after buying a car and spending some time in Port Townsend, he eventually gives that up, as well.

Having moved onto the river again when he is older, Jayber still is without electricity while the world around him continues to ramp up technologically. He describes the war and the economy as inter-dependent and illustrates a sense of shallowness that overcomes the population, as greed becomes more rampant.

The logging of the Nest Egg is a final and major blow for Jayber, as the last bit of unspoiled land is raped in the name of money. The farmlands have already been ruined, and the character of Troy Chatham, who destroys the Keith farm, is symbolic of progress - shallow and careless, focused on greed.

Nothing about progress is wholesome or thoughtful, in Jayber's view. Progress presents a narrowing of consciousness, as well as a carelessness toward the earth, and he, prophetically, knows what is ahead.

Love and Loss

Berry threads a theme of love and loss throughout Jayber Crow's life. Jayber starts out as a loved, happy child with his young parents, but loses them at a very young age to illness. Bearing this loss, he eventually becomes quite tied to his aunt and uncle, who provide him with love and a wholesome, happy life until he is ten years old. However, Jayber loses them both, as well, and is sent to an orphanage where there is a severe dearth of love and affection.



Jayber has tender feelings for two girls during his time as a student, but both are lost to him as they continue on their separate ways, and except for one kiss, any exchange of affection is lost.

At the orphanage, without anyone to care for him, Jayber turns inward and considers the ministry for a short period of time. However, he cannot rationalize the dichotomies in the Bible and knows he cannot represent something he, himself, is unsure of. He believes in love, and feels that the Bible contradicts itself on this issue.

Jayber's dates with Clydie fulfill his needs for companionship and intimacy, but there is an unspoken distance between them because his love for Mattie is the only true one. He loses Clydie by choice. His sense of fairness allows him to let her go in order to be true to himself.

As a young and middle-aged man, Jayber finds a certain quality of love by spending time with the men in the town at his shop. He loves them in a somewhat abstract way, and they represent the family he has been without for so long. His love for Mattie Keith is one he can never act upon, but which stays with him for life. In a sense, he never lost Mattie because he never had her, but his commitment of love to her was the one love he was able to hold on to.

Jayber loses Mattie to cancer and, one by one, his dear friends begin to pass away. Jayber takes life as it is, but is convince that love is at the core of all life and, although we lose people, we do not lose the love in our souls.

Coming of Age

Jayber Crow is a socially awkward boy, having lost his family and grown up in an orphanage. The love inside of him is full, but his ability to express himself is limited due to his withdrawn nature. He is aware of his adolescence and puberty and notes that it may have been behind some of his actions, but as a teenager he does not date girls and has only kissed one.

Jayber's college years studying the ministry helped form his values and opinions, and perhaps contributed to the principled person he became. His ability to be honest with himself takes him from the ministry and back to a place where he knows there is no family and unknown prospects. He begins to know himself well enough to realize that the big things that other people plan to do with their lives are not as important to him as finding a sense of home.

As a young barber, Jayber returned to Goforth where he lived as a baby, and then to Katy's Branch, where his Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othie lived, retracing his steps and re-experiencing the feelings of his childhood. His perspective on life, that even the old folks had once been youngsters, has not escaped him, and although he still grieves his past, he comes to understand the completeness of their lives and the fact that everything and everyone, comes and goes.



Jayber's maturity, or at least the social aspect of it, may have been delayed by his stint in the orphanage, but he grows into a subdued, appreciative man who can participate in the community of grown men, as well as be a friend to the church and women of the community.

Community

Jayber's entire adulthood is enmeshed in the community in which he has chosen to live and work. He admits that not everything about Port William is perfect, but that it is a community that is always trying to better itself, and one in which everyone is loved, at least, by someone. Although Port William does not ultimately survive as a town, Berry weaves its residents together through common experiences, family ties or just life events. This weaving of encounters among so many of the residents forms what Jayber eventually refers to as a "membership." Jayber views the community of people almost as having a life of its own, with the coming and going of the elderly and newly born. He discusses the Sundays that celebrate the town's deceased and the atmosphere in the cemetery. He also defines the male population that frequents his shop as distinctly different from the female population that is the strength of the church, and the children that attend the local school. They are different groups, yet all related and flowing within their own lives and the lives of each other.

Port William is deeply affected by national events, but not recognized by national leadership due to its minuscule size. However, the community still experiences the the fear and grief of war, and the onslaught of technology, and larger forces over which it has no control. It's not so much that everyone here loves everyone else. Berry's point is more that a true community of people is made up of those with morals and those without, by happy events and sad ones, and by by the cycles of life that connect everything with the thread of love.



Style

Point of View

The character Jayber Crow tells his life story from his own point of view as he remembers it, now that he is an elderly man. Jayber allows us to see into his own thinking by speaking in first person, and provides information about supporting characters through Jayber's descriptions, as well as insightful quotes that reveal their character and their thinking. Berry gives Jayber Crow an omnipotent voice, which allows him to jump back and forth in time, occasionally reminding us that at the time he is writing, he is at the end of his life.

Jayber speaks in first person and intersperses dialogue, which makes the story enjoyable and smooth to read. Although the novel covers many areas of interest - small town life, the choices of a simple man, the environment and the power of love, to name a few — its plot focuses primarily Jayber's life experiences, perceptions and opinions. Much of what Jayber tells us is learned from gossip and idle talk among the men who hang out in his shop. The story is written with such precise detail and description that it is easy to assume that it might be autobiographical in nature, although Berry does not reveal that for certain.

Setting

The larger setting of this story is the state of Kentucky. Jayber is born in a tiny rural region called Goforth, where his father was a blacksmith. When his parents die, Jayber spends about eight years in Squires Landing, a settlement on the Kentucky river, where his uncle Othy runs a small farm and uses boats and barges for transfer of goods and services. When his aunt and uncle pass on, Jayber is placed in The Good Shepherd orphanage in central Kentucky. This institution, where he grows up, is large and stately, his life ordered and regimented and, primarily, loveless. He stares out the window and dreams of his childhood on the river. After attending divinity college in Pigeonville, Kentucky, Jayber spends some time in Lexington working at the horse races and later as a barber.

However, he is drawn to his old childhood home on the river. Making his way through a record-breaking flood and risking his life, Jayber spends a night in the state's capitol building and travels on, by foot, toward Louisville. This is primarily verdant farm country. Jayber finally settles in the small town of Port William and becomes the town's barber. Here he spends most of his adult life in a little country town, his shop on the bottom floor and living quarters on the top floor of an old building. In the earlier days, the town has its own school, but later in his life the school is shut down and children are bussed into the closest larger town of Harwood. Jayber spends some social time in Harwood, driving in to go to restaurants and nightclubs in order to meet women.



As an older man, Jayber gives up his shop and moves to a cabin right on the river, where he lives frugally and simply, and learns to love fishing. Like the simple barber shop building in town, he makes this cabin his home and finds comfort in his simple surroundings. In this later period of his life, he meets Mattie Chatham in an unspoiled part of her property called The Nest Egg, which is a beautiful stand of trees and forest.

Language and Meaning

Wendell Berry's writing style makes reading a pleasure because it flows and winds around different periods of time effortlessly. Although Jayber is quite well-spoken, the reader occasionally remembers that the people in Kentucky farm country speak with a definite local dialect. Jayber lets one see this through bits of dialogue among others, and even reveals that he, himself, uses the word "ain't" and is a true Kentuckian himself in that regard.

Throughout the story, although Jayber Crow has periods of behavior that conflict with his earlier "call" to the ministry, Berry makes it clear that his inner thinking is guided by his faith and by his constant questioning of our purpose here. Berry does not emphasize or focus on Jayber's drinking or periods of sowing his oats, but instead just allows the reader to know that Jayber is human and has normal urges and needs. In this way, Jayber is a more realistic character and not totally saintly. By keeping Jayber a fallible human, his messages about life and the impact we are having on our environment are more credible, and the reader can view him as simply insightful and thoughtful.

Structure

This novel consists of thirty-two chapters divided into three parts, representing Jayber Crow's childhood, adulthood and old age. Wendell Berry has Jayber jump back and forth in time, reminding the reader that the narrator, Jayber, is writing this story from his perspective as an elderly man at the end of his life. The titles of each of the chapters hold great meaning that becomes clear after reading the chapter.

Since this is a narration of someone's life and is done so realistically, it could be mistaken for an autobiography. There is no specific plot, but instead, the story of a life unfolds that covers a period of seventy-two years. The basic story line of Jayber Crow's life is that he is orphaned as a child, gives up an attempt to study for the ministry, returns to his childhood home town and becomes the town's barber where he is inextricably woven into the community. He also becomes the community's gravedigger and church janitor. Although Jayber dates as a young man, he ultimately makes a heartfelt commitment to a woman he cannot have, and loves her all her life. As an elderly man, he moves to a cabin on the river to spend the rest of his days. However, these basic structural ideas are richly connected with Jayber's philosophies of nature, God, love, time, progress and community. The reader sees him, finally, as a compassionate, deep-thinking man of faith and love.

The story is perfectly paced and, with its hindsight, occasional local dialects and beautifully written dialogue, this is a novel that a reader does not want to finish. It is not just a story, but a wonderful assortment of ideas, feelings and history.



Quotes

"They had had three children of their own, and all three had died as children. I suppose Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy had a store of affection laid away that they now brought out and applied to me. Later I would know how blessed I had been."

Chap. 3, p. 15

"As I did not know then but know now, the surface of the river is like a living soul, which is easy to disturb, is often disturbed, but, growing calm, shows what it was, is, and and will be."

Chap. 3, p. 20

"And now, nearing the end, I see that my life is almost entirely memory and very little time."

Chap. 3, p. 24

"And for a while, though I believe I felt the influence of my unthought questions, I continued not to think of them."

Chap. 6, p. 46

"Does prayer change God's mind? If God's mind can be changed by the wants and wishes of us mere humans, as if deferring to our better judgment, what is the point of praying to Him at all? And what are we to think when two good people pray for opposite things - as when two devout mothers of soldiers on opposite sides pray for the safety of their sons, or for victory?"

Chap. 6, p. 51

"They spoke of last year's lamb market and the prospects for this year's. And then they got onto the subject of the flood which had been costly for John T., much of whose farm lay in the river bottoms. The talk went the way I love it, so quiet and unhurried I could hear the dampened fire fluttering in the stove."

Chap. 9, p. 104

"After I got to Port William, I didn't feel any longer that I needed to look around to see if there was someplace I would like better. I quit wondering what I was going to make of myself. A lot of my doubts and questions were settled. You could say, I guess, that I was glad at last to be classified. I was not a preacher or a teacher of a student or a traveler. I was Port Williams' bachelor barber, and a number of satisfactions were available to me as the perquisites of that office."

Chap. 11, p. 123

"A town such as Port William in this age of the world is like a man on an icy slope, working hard to stay in place and yet slowly sliding downhill. It has to contend not just with the local mortality, depravity, ignorance, natural deficiencies and weather but also with what I supposed we might as well call The News."

Chap. 13, p. 139



"In Port William, more than anyplace else I had been, this religion that scorned the beauty and goodness of this world was a puzzle to me. To begin with, I didn't think anybody believed it. I still don't think so."

Chap. 15, p. 161

"I saw the creases crisscrossed on the backs of the men's necks, their work-thickened hands, the Sunday dresses faded with washing. They were just there. They said nothing, and I said nothing. I seemed to love them all with a love that was mine merely because it included me. When I came to myself again, my face was wet with tears."

Chap. 15, p. 165

"It was longing for the society of women that sent me smoking down to Hargrave where I would dance the awkward jig of ineligible and undyingly hopeful bachelorhood."

Chap. 16, p. 171

"Troy brought nothing to the marriage but himself and an automobile in which he had invested most of his earnings from wage-working and the little tobacco crop he raised with his father. He had sunk down in actual achievement from his days on the basketball team, but he continued to present himself in the manner of a star. He was all show, and he had the conviction, as such people do, that show is the same as substance. He didn't think he was fooling other people; he had fooled himself. He thought he saw what he thought we saw. Sometimes after he left my shop, I would discover that my teeth were clenched."

Chap. 17, p. 177

"My vision of the gathered church that had come to me after I became the janitor had been replaced by a vision of the gathered community. What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on. . . . It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill. I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William and of no other place on earth."

Chap. 19, p. 205

"As much as you will let it, Port William will trouble your heart."

Chap. 22, p. 230

"The problem with Troy was that he was a dreamer. He was a dreamer in the most demanding practical circumstances, increasingly taking the advice of people who were not in his circumstances. He was a man who, because of his nature and the nature of his circumstances, always had everything at stake. He had no margins. After he had reached a certain extremity of commitment and debt, he had no room to turn around in, even if he had wanted to turn around."

Chap. 22, p. 233



"Do you, then, in love's mystery and fear, give yourself to this woman to be her faithful husband from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death?"

'I do. Yes! That is my vow.'"

Chap. 22, p. 243

"But love, sooner or later, forces us out of time. It does not accept that limit. Of all that we feel and do, all the virtues and all the sins, love alone crowds us at last over the edge of the world."

Chap. 23, p. 249

"If God loves the world, might that not be proved in my own love for it? I prayed to know in my heart His love for the world, and this was my most prideful, foolish, an dangerous prayer. It was my step into the abyss. As soon as I prayed it, I knew that I would die. I knew the old wrong and the death that lay in the world. Just as a good man would not coerce the love of his wife, God does not coerce the love of His human creatures, not for Himself or for the world for for one another. To allow that love to exist fully and freely, He must allow it not to exist at all. His love is suffering. It is our freedom and His sorrow. To love the world as much even as I could love it would be suffering also, for I would fail. And yet all the good I know is in this, that a man might so love this world that it would break his heart."

Chap. 23, p. 254

"The nation lapsed into peace there for a while, between the Korean War and the one in Vietnam. Or, rather, instead of fighting a war, it was merely getting ready to fight one, and for a while Port William eased along without patriotic deaths."

Chap. 25, p. 257

"This is not an exactly true account of my life. The necessity of telling it has caused me to divide it into strands. Things that happened at the same time, different and even opposite feelings and thoughts that came all at once, have had to be strung out to be told. In fact, many things have always been happening all at the same time. Some of the funniest things have happened on some of the saddest days. Sometimes I have been happy in the midst of sorrow or sorrowful in the midst of happiness. Sometimes too I have been perfectly content, in the amazing state of ignorance, not yet knowing that I was already in the presence of loss."

Chap. 32, p. 354



Topics for Discussion

What is Wendell Berry telling us, if anything, about progress? Is he sensible in his views or radical? Is progress bad or good, or is he neutral? Analyze and discuss his views on progress, including the old and the new slavery.

Why does Jayber Crow describe himself as an "ineligible" bachelor, even before he personally commits his heart to Mattie? What can you gather about Jayber's personality, given this description?

Discuss Cecelia Overhold's role in Jayber's life. What might be some reasons that she targeted him as an enemy? Why do you suppose Berry included her character in the story?

Discuss the nature and origins of Jayber Crow's deep and abiding love for Mattie Keith Chatham. What is it about Mattie that makes him so attracted to her? What did his commitment to her symbolize, if anything?

Was Jayber in love with Clydie? Why did he leave his car for her? Discuss the relationship between the two, its beginning, and its end.

What is your opinion of Troy Chatham? Do you think Jayber's opinion of Troy is a fair one, or is he simply jealous? What is Troy's role in this story? What, if anything, does he symbolize? How do things end up between Troy and Jayber?

The title of each chapter of this story has great meaning, which is only revealed upon reading the chapter. Choose several chapters and analyze the significance of their titles.

There have been many moments in Jayber's life when he has been in a state of despair, loneliness and sadness. Overall, how do you think Jayber views these periods in retrospect? Is he bitter? Is he angry? How does he regard these memories?

Jayber lives through several rough periods in America's history. Discuss how each war affected him personally. Explore Jayber's attitude about war in the U.S. Analyze and discuss his political views.

Is it possible that small towns like Port William still exist, as the town was when Jayber became its barber? What would the conditions need to be for survival of a rural community? What kind of people would be required to keep a small rural "membership" like Port William alive?