

A Land More Kind Than Home Study Guide

A Land More Kind Than Home by Wiley Cash

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Plot Summary

A Land More Kind Than Home is the story of faith and belief gone wrong, a community that follows a false prophet even when his methods lead to the deaths of members of their community. The story is told by Adelaide Lyle, Jess Hall and Sheriff Clem Barefield, as they relay the present events as well as the past events that set up the action. Adelaide opens the novel by recapping the death of Molly Jameson, who had died from a poisonous snake bite during one of Pastor Carson Chambliss' ritual services. Her body was moved to her garden, where it would be found. After this event Adelaide decided to pull the children out of the church, for their own safety, but did not involve the police. After this flashback, it is revealed that a young boy had recently died in another one of Chambliss' services, and Chambliss would like to meet with Adelaide. During this meeting Adelaide is intimidated and physically assaulted by the pastor; she leaves shaken up.

Jess Hall is now the speaker, the son of Ben and Julie Hall and the brother of Christopher "Stump" Hall. He is playing hooky from Sunday school with his friend Joe-Bill. The two boys see the church all boarded up with newspaper and Joe-Bill dares Jess to look inside. Jess remembers that his older brother Stump had been taken inside the church, and that he needs to take advantage of this opportunity, as Stump can't talk and won't be able to relay his experiences. Jess recaps the time that he and his brother saw his mom and Carson Chambliss in Julie's bedroom. Chambliss realizes that Stump had seen him, and the next day Stump is taken into the church. In the morning service the elders attempt a healing on Stump, an aggressive and violent physical healing that Jess sees through the window, causing him to shout out for his mother. This shout is misinterpreted by Julie and the members of the parish as they believe it was Stump. His mother tells him that the church had had a healing, and Stump had called out to her. Jess realizes the truth of that statement, but decides to keep it to himself, for his mother's sake. They return home for dinner, where Ben is waiting in the driveway with a snake that he has recently killed. He asks the boys to bury it, and they do, but not before it seems to come back alive. During the dinner conversation it is revealed the Ben's father will be returning to town soon. Julie, Jess and Stump go to the evening service for a second healing, leaving Jess in the car. After the service a church elder arrives and drives Jess to Adelaide's house, not answering his questions about what had happened.

Clem Barefield is the speaker, and he gives the reader insight into the background of the town as well as Ben Hall. He receives a call from his deputy saying that Christopher Hall had been killed in the Church of Signs Following. On the way there he recounts an event regarding his son Jeff and Ben Hall, that led him to realize that Ben's father might be more dangerous/abusive than he had originally believed. He also reveals that Jimmy Hall had been an alcoholic. He also recounts the story of Farmer Gillum, where Chambliss had exorcised a demon, which had then apparently ran into his tobacco farming barn. Gillum decided to burn the barn to kill the demon, along with his product. Clem uses this incident to describe the sort of religious fanaticism that is common in the county. After this event he researches Carson Chambliss, and finds out that he had



been a petty criminal in Alabama until he blew up a meth lab, killing a runaway sixteen year old and burning the right side of his body. This led him to be imprisoned for two years, where he founded the cult of signs following, consuming poison, fire and other liquids to test his faith.

Jess is the next speaker, as he tries to understand what had taken place during the evening service. Church elders arrive with Stump's body, and lay it on a bed in Adelaide's house. Ben arrives and calls the sheriff, amazed that no one had yet called him. Julie reveals that Chambliss had told her to not. More church elders arrive, saying that they are trying to offer condolences. Ben reacts violently, attacking the men that he believes were sent to intimidate. The sheriff arrives, breaking up the fight but not enacting any legal action on Ben given the circumstances. Jimmy Hall arrives to take Jess home, so that his parents can deal with the funeral setup. On the way home Jimmy attempts to buy alcohol from a liquor store on a Sunday, inciting an aggressive reaction from the liquor store owner. When they arrive at the house, Jess reminisces about catching fireflies with Stump, and how they would put them in Mason Jars to observe them. He recalls the time he made his brother a firefly in art class for a Christmas present, and that Stump had put it in his special box. The two of them discuss death, and how to deal with it, Jess as a young boy and Jimmy as a wiser old man.

Clem returns as the speaker, and gives more details about the character of Jimmy Hall, all bad. He then recounts the death of his son Jeff in an electrical accident with Jimmy Hall's company. He was hurt and enraged by this, assuming that Jimmy had been drinking. He tried to find him, driving up a hill in the blizzard until he couldn't drive any more. He then walked up and found Jimmy in his truck apparently inebriated. He pistol whipped him, and then left him in his truck for the night. The next morning, Jimmy towed Clem's car out from the snow bank, apologizing for the death of Jeff.

Adelaide returns as the narrator, as she recounts her youth with her great aunt on the mountain, and the summer that she had to move to the city to save their lives. She worked as a cleaning girl for some time until she started to use her knowledge of the tobacco market to get a better job. When she returned from the city at the end of that summer she found her great-aunt long dead. She ventured down from the mountain to ask for help from a family with the burial, which they agree to do, somewhat reluctantly. She then had a dream to help her get over the death of her relative, which featured Jesus telling her that he has always been right behind her actions. After this recollection, she recounts the story of how she had traveled through a blizzard to help Julie birth her child, Christopher. Christopher did not cry at all after his birth, foreboding his muteness and mental condition. After this birth, Ben refused to bury the afterbirth, saying that it was unchristian. Adelaide is irritated by this, as she knows that her knowledge of holistic medicine is not well accepted by the community, but it is still not anti-christian. After this story, she retells the origin of Christopher's nickname, Stump. There was a sales agent who visited the Hall residence to purchase some tobacco, when he noticed Christopher in the front yard not saying anything. He made the comment to Ben and Julie that a contemplative boy like him is a marvel, to stand like a stump in the field. Finally, she explains the metaphor of the confederate soldier, who was innocent but still hung by the community for being an outsider.



She then continues to give backstory, this time on the relationship between Julie and Ben and how their difference in faith (Julie's strong christian upbringing, and Ben's abusive childhood) have led them to grow apart. Ben has to keep everything inside for fear of becoming his father, and this drove Julie right into Chambliss' arms. After this, she recounts the time that Julie asked her for help terminating a pregnancy, expressing her anger that the pastor would be helping her abort a child until she realized the implication, that Julie and Carson were lovers. Adelaide returns to the present events of the novel, where Julie arrives at her house after the death of her son Christopher.

Clem takes over as the speaker, interviewing Adelaide to find out exactly what had taken place in the church. He reacts strongly to her sadness at the death of Stump, because she was not a parent and so could not know the meaning of loss in the same way that he did. He finds out that Molly Jameson had also been killed in the church. After this interview he heads to Carson Chambliss' house to question him about the night. When he gets there he is startled by a snake in Chambliss' barn, as the two men have a tense conversation filled with threats. Clem reveals that Stump died of asphyxia, meaning that the men had punctured Stump's lung and he suffocated.

Jess is the next speaker as he is hanging out at Joe Bill's house, discussing the death of Stump and whether or not he can get into heaven without being able to speak his confession. Joe Bill's brother and his friend arrive and start taking pot-shots at the boys with a BB gun. Jess runs away back to his house where he finds his dad with the rain barrel that he had broken the day he and Stump saw Chambliss with Julie. Now Ben knows about Julie and Carson, and Jess hears him drinking, drive off and then return.

Adelaide is the speaker, as she is awoken by Ben banging on the door asking for Julie, saying that he knows what she did. Adelaide lies for Julie, and Ben goes away. Julie hears the whole thing and starts to make plans to run away with Chambliss, calling the sheriff to ask for an escort as they go to the Hall residence to recover her belongings. Chambliss is the speaker, he receives the call from his deputy informing him that Julie needs an escort. He then receives a more urgent call from Adelaide, telling him to go to the Hall residence as there could be trouble between Ben and Carson. Jess is the speaker and he hears Carson and Julie arrive, and later a gunshot. He runs outside, only to see Sheriff Clem shooting his father.

Clem is the speaker, he drives up to the Hall residence to see Chambliss' car in the driveway. Ben comes outside in his boxers holding a shotgun. Chambliss tries to back the car away but is shot and killed instantly. Ben fires a second shot into the windshield. The trunk pops open and the snake crates fall out. Ben aims the shotgun at Julie, and Clem tries to get him to put down the gun. Ben sees Jess at the door, swings towards him with his shotgun when Clem shoots him in the neck and he dies. He then calls Jimmy Hall to ask him to come and pick up Jess. When Jimmy arrives he confesses that he shot his son and the two men share in their ironic pain.

Adelaide takes over to close out the novel. at the funeral of Ben Hall outside of Marshall, their town. She notices Jess and Jimmy standing together, and hopes that their future will be good. She mentions that Clem would soon retire, as the events had

been too much for him. She speaks about the rebirth of the church, how the newspapers were taken down, and how the services have restarted, albeit without a pastor. Jess still attends the services, even though Jimmy Hall does not.



Chapter One: Adelaide

Summary

Adelaide Lyle is the speaker, and she opens the novel by narrating the origin of the Church of Signs following, how the newspaper was put up covering the windows, and how the church was moved from its original location following the death of Pastor Matthews and the name changed from French Broad Church of Christ. She explains the methodology of the Church, how they test the will of God by handling snakes, fire and poison. This leads her to a flashback of when she left the church, and she tells the story of the death of Molly Jameson, who was killed by a rattlesnake during the service. After the Pastor decided to move Molly's body to her garden, where it was later found, Adelaide discussed the matter with Carson and removed both herself and the bible school aged children out of the church. At this point it is clear that something is not right with the church and with Pastor Carson, but Adelaide does not reveal any more details.

The scene shifts back to the present day, as she is consoling Julie Hall, after the funeral of her son. She comments on how it's odd that the Pastor, Carson Chambliss did not come to the funeral. Julie tells her that Carson wants to speak with her, so she goes back to the church, where she hasn't been for ten years. Chambliss wants to make sure that Adelaide doesn't go to the police with the information of that night. They have a heated discussion and it is clear that Chambliss thinks of himself as above her. He then grabs her and forcefully forces her hand into one of his snake crates, she feels the snake slither around her but it doesn't bite her. Having asserted his power, Chambliss leaves her alone in the dark church.

Analysis

This opening sequence sets up Adelaide Lyle as the narrator and possibly the protagonist. This introduction sets the scene and tone of the novel, small town USA with a religious christian population. It immediately takes a turn towards the strange when Adelaide discusses the ministry of Carson Chambliss, one that seems unnecessarily dangerous. The author immediately uses a flashback for the purpose of giving the reader a view into the mindsets of the members of the Church of Signs Following as they allow the cover-up of Molly Jameson's death. This brings up the theocracy theme; although it was Chambliss' initial decision to move the body, none of the members of the church, including Adelaide, acted to stop him. If the members of the church had done something to stop this, it is more than likely that Clem would have shut down the church prior to the events of the novel.

This idea is used by the author often in this novel, the idea of "what if" when setting up the sequence of events that lead to the climactic ending. There are many moments in Adelaide's decision making that would have saved lives, as well as moments in Jess' decision making. Jess more or less gets away with his mistakes due to his age, but



Adelaide's decision to not involve the police on multiple occasions is less forgivable. It also speaks to the strong sense of community that the county and church feel, that they would rather remain silent to protect one of their own than act justly. Adelaide gets herself out of the church, which really only removes her from the responsibility of dealing with what is going on inside, because it is no longer her church. Even after the death of Stump, when Chambliss threatens her, she still doesn't involve the police.

Discussion Question 1

Is Carson Chambliss or the Church of Signs Following responsible for the death of Molly Jameson? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Adelaide never reported the death of Molly Jameson or her assault at the hands of Chambliss to the sheriff or deputy even though she had left the church, physically declaring her lack of association with it?

Discussion Question 3

Why did so many people follow Chambliss' teachings when Adelaide describes many of them who were bitten by snakes, burnt and poisoned on a regular basis? Doesn't that negate Chambliss' idea of faith?

Vocabulary

deacon, copperhead, strychnine, premonition, congregation, linoleum



Chapter Two-Three: Jess Hall

Summary

Jess Hall takes over as the narrator, giving the reader a look into his personal life, his friendship with Joe Bill and the events that lead up to the death of his brother, Christopher. The two boys had left bible study and were playing in the forest when Joe Bill dared him to spy into the church. It's explained that Jess' parents don't want him to eavesdrop or get himself involved in situations that he shouldn't. He only agreed to do this because earlier, Mr. Gene Thompson had taken his brother away from the bible study and into the church for the first time. He had a flashback to the time he and Stump saw Chambliss in their mother's bedroom, setting up a motive for Chambliss' future actions. He and his brother were out searching for salamanders, but couldn't find any and returned to the house earlier than Julie had expected. Stump was standing on the rain barrel to get a look into the window, as the two of them had heard something. The rain barrel breaks, and while Jess was able to hide under the house, Chambliss came out of the house and realized that Stump had seen him in bed with Julie.

Jess returns to the present, and when he looks inside the church he sees a scene of chaos, with guitars and drums blaring, and a group of men seemingly forcing his brother to stay on the ground. His mother is crying and yelling for them to stop, and when Christopher sees this he cries out for his "Mama". When Julie hears this, she stops struggling and allows for the "healing to continue. Jess falls down from the window, and runs away from the church with Joe Bill, as they try to process what they had seen. After the service, everyone seems happy, and Julie explains to Jess that the healing went well, and that she and others in the church had heard Stump yell out for her. Jess explains away his splinter and injuries by saying he was playing baseball with an old board. His mother buys this, and states that she will be taking Stump to a second healing later that evening. Jess is stricken dumb by this, as he knows that it was his voice that his mother heard. He decides not to express this because he feels like his mother needs something to believe in. Jess then thinks about what his father will think, knowing that Ben needs to see a miracle to believe in it.

When they arrive home from the morning service, they see Ben in the driveway with a dead snake, a timber rattler. He tells the boys to bury the snake, warning them that even a dead snake can strike. Julie attempts to get the splinter out, but can't and Ben allows Jess to leave the splinter inside his arm. The boys go to bury the snake, but when they are about to drop it into the hole it begins to move, and continues to crawl around in the hole after being buried. During the dinner, Julie and Ben discuss the return of Ben's abusive father, Jimmy Hall. Ben says that he found the snake in his barn, as if it was waiting for him. After dinner Julie takes Stump and Jess to the evening service where Stump will experience his second "healing". Jess is forced to stay in the truck during the service despite his efforts to exit. He almost tells his mother the truth about the morning service, but is unable to muster the courage. He falls asleep, and is awakened by Mr.



Stuckey, a church Elder, who drives him home. He asks where his mother and brother are but is not given a response.

Analysis

The rule regarding eavesdropping or asking questions that one should not be asking is incredibly important for the events of this novel. Not only does it reinforce the tight-knit community aspect, it shows that the society in general strongly disapproves of individuals that step in to resolve or affect a situation. This logic extends much farther than the church and their secrecy, it extends to the police in general, as the community clearly doesn't trust Clem to assist because he is not only an outsider in their town, but an outsider in their issues. The idea that acting in a place where you should not be has consequences, as there is a clear implication that Chambliss chose Stump to enter the church because Stump had seen him with Julie. Also the "what if" undertone returns, as the only reason that Jess and Stump were able to see Julie with Carson is that they could not find salamanders, for the first time in a while.

The thriller continues, as Jess' next instance of being where he should not leads Julie to believe that Christopher is being healed. This is catastrophic for Stump as well as the Hall family in general, but the reader is not able to get the full effect of this action right away. The reader knows that it is important, as Jess sees a visible shift in his mother. Jess then has the option to give himself up, and tell his mother the truth about his yelling at the church window, but like all of the characters in the novel, decides that she does not need to know. Also, his friend Joe Bill decides to keep the truth from his family, even though he had seen a potentially important event. Jess has the maturity to know that his mother's current unstable state needs something to believe in, and he makes the choice for her by remaining silent.

The next scene has both symbolic and realistic importance, as Ben has found a rattlesnake in his barn and killed it. Symbolically the snake represents evil as well as Carson Chambliss, and Ben having killed it seems to signify that events are about to turn for the better. However, when he tells Jess that even dead snakes can bite, it is clear that this forebodes a tragic ending for Ben and the Hall family, especially when the headless snake actually moves when the boys try to bury it. On a realistic level, this snake was more than likely placed in the barn by Carson, in an attempt to kill Ben Hall. This slight detail places the character of Carson Chambliss firmly in the antagonist role, where before he possibly could have been viewed as a misunderstood religious fanatic. Even during the dinner, Jess' questions about his grandfather are softly rejected, as he is deemed too young to know the full truth. When the family (without Ben) goes back to the church for an evening service, Jess has another, more defining, chance to tell his mother the truth. This time he knows what will happen to his brother, so he has an impetus to act not only for his mother's goodwill but also that of his brother. Of course he once again remains silent, leading to the death of Stump and the rest of the novel.



Discussion Question 1

Why didn't Jess tell his mother the truth about what he had yelled in the church before the evening service?

Discussion Question 2

Did Chambliss intentionally kill Stump because of what Stump saw in the Hall residence?

Discussion Question 3

Do individuals with lower mental capacities need to be "healed" like Christopher? What does modern society say about that idea?

Vocabulary

baptized, cowlick, katydid, quartz, timber rattler



Chapter Four-Six: Clem Barefield

Summary

The perspective shifts to Clem Barefield, sheriff of Madison County for 25 years. He explains that he had a choice between sheriff and apple farmer, and chose sheriff. His predecessor, told him that he would get bored but he explains to the reader that in Madison County, it is impossible to be bored. He's at home with his wife Sheila when he receives a call from his deputy, Rob, alerting him that Stump has been killed at the Church of Signs Following, and his body has been moved to Adelaide Lyle's house. Clem straps on his holster and begins to drive. During this drive he recounts the story of how he once let Ben stay in his house because Ben was afraid on his own father. He gives the reader the background of Ben and Jimmy Hall, Ben's pent up anger and football background and Jimmy's alcoholism and abuse.

He then recounts a second tale, explaining the county's penchant for religious fanaticism. Chambliss performed an exorcism on a girl, after which people believed they saw the "demon" run into Gillum's tobacco barn. Gillum decided to burn down his barn to kill the demon. After witnessing this event Clem called his contacts and discovered many disturbing things regarding Chambliss' past. He finds out that Chambliss cooked meth and was involved in an explosion of the lab that killed a 16-year-old runaway girl. Chambliss only went to jail for two years, during which he founded the Cult of Signs Following based on Mark 16:17-18. He and his followers would test their faith in God by touching fire and drinking cleaning solution, never experiencing bad effects. He was burned badly in the explosion and his right side of his body is burned. Clem arrives at Adelaide's house to see church members bloody on the lawn, Ben Hall and his father Jimmy Hall on the porch, Julie and Jess as well but not Chambliss.

Analysis

Clem's introduction is important in defining him as a outsider to the county and the town, he was not born there. As Adelaide's civil war soldier story will explain later, this area judges people more on their level of belonging than their guilt or personality. This is very important when trying to decipher why no one in the church calls him until it is absolutely necessary, and why Adelaide is so reluctant to give him any information even when she is seemingly on his side. Even more so, it is important to note that Clem has lived in the town for 25 years, but has yet to gain the respect of the county. Carson, on the other hand, seems to have an entire church in the palm of his hand, even though he is the same level of outsider as Clem. It is quite a feat for Carson to gain this level of respect that people are willing to defy the local authorities. In fact, it might be a combination of the two that leads to the autonomy that Carson has; if Clem was born in Madison County it is likely that he would have been given more say and more respect from the community and church. Clem also gives the reader insight into Ben's upbringing, foreboding the pent up rage and hurt that Ben feels and is unable to



express. It is easy to view Ben as a victim in this novel, as although he is a strong individual physically, his abuse received as a child led him to fail out of college and settle for a life in Madison County, where he is consequently cheated on.

The story that Clem tells about Gillum's farm only reinforces the level of influence and charisma that Carson has over individuals. It also brings to the forefront the level of religious fanaticism and desire of these people to believe in something greater, no matter the physical harm it causes to them financially or to their community. There is also a huge reveal as Clem describes Chambliss' criminal background, which is a shock to the readers simply because up to this point Chambliss had described his burns as coming from God himself, something that everyone buys at face value in the community.

The details of what goes on in the church of signs following are expanded upon, as the church resembles the cult that Chambliss had started in his jail. It is also symbolically important that Chambliss was burned on the right side of his body, as in the Christian religion the right side is the good side, where Jesus sits next to the father, while the left side is generally viewed as evil or at least bad. Chambliss has a burned and scarred good side, and so he can only act with his left side. It is also important to note that, regarding the death of the 16-year-old girl, she was also an outsider to the community, a runaway. Therefore, when thinking about Carson's short jail sentence it is possible that if the girl was a member of the community, Chambliss would have received a harsher sentence than involuntary manslaughter.

Discussion Question 1

Does Clem's attitude of "letting be" the Church of Signs Following in keeping with his position as protector of the community?

Discussion Question 2

What does the story of the exorcism/devil and the events that took place after tell us about the mindset of the people in Madison County?

Discussion Question 3

Does the ideal that outsiders are not welcome apply to the girl that died in Chambliss' meth lab explosion?

Vocabulary

development (housing), belief, spectacle, exorcism, controlled substance, methamphetamine, manslaughter, conspirator



Chapter Seven-Ten: Jess Hall

Summary

The perspective shifts back to Jess as he is inside Adelaide's house, while Adelaide is consoling Julie. Two church members enter the house carrying Stump's body, which is placed on a bed in Adelaide's house. Jess stands in the room with Stump's body, then crawls up into the bed. Ben arrives and takes Jess out of the room. Jimmy Hall is also there, silent and smoking. It is revealed that Chambliss told Julie not to call the sheriff, something that Ben has just done himself. Mr. Thompson and other members of the church arrive and Ben responds violently, beating up the two men, only stopping when his father attempts to touch him. The Sheriff then arrives and questions the church members to no avail, receiving the address of Carson Chambliss.

Jimmy Hall takes Jess home in his truck so Ben and Julie can deal with the setup for the funeral. Along the way the two attempt awkward conversation, and Jimmy tries to buy liquor from a corner store on a Sunday, implying that his alcoholism is still a strong influence on his life. They talk about tobacco farming and Jimmy tries to get Jess interested in the business. Jess sees fireflies and reminisces about how he and Stump used to collect fireflies, and that he even made one for his brother as a Christmas present. He talks about Stump's box, where he keeps everything that he likes or is important to him. Jimmy helps Jess remove his splinter, and Jess questions him about the past but Jimmy avoids the questions. Jess places the Stump's quartz in Stump's box. They both agree that Stump will be in heaven, and hope that he will be able to talk there. Jimmy tells Jess that the best way to deal with death is to remember the person.

Analysis

When Stump's body is brought into Adelaide's house, one cannot help but wonder if this healing was entirely necessary in the first place. It is clear that the community and the Hall family do not have full medical knowledge of his condition as they use archaic terms to describe him, such as mute. There seems to be a strong lack of real scientifically based medicine in their community, as the one doctor is generally unavailable. The closest they have is Adelaide, who uses herbs and other holistic medicine techniques, for which she is viewed as un-Christian by Ben Hall. The fact that the church community believed that there was something wrong with Stump, namely that he had a literal demon inside of him that they needed to remove, speaks to their mindset regarding mental illness. This mindset is decidedly backwards, and even though the novel does not take place in the present day, it is not that far in the past for this to be acceptable or normal.

A further reinforcement of this backward or otherwise Christian morally guided town is when Jimmy attempts to buy liquor on a Sunday. Although the author does not explicitly state that he is trying to buy alcohol, the strong negative reaction of the shop owner



makes it clear to any reader with a knowledge of southern practices. This is something that still goes on today, and for that reason makes the events of this novel believable, in that they could happen and might be happening in small towns with religious tendencies. The pair of Jess and Jimmy Hall makes for interesting conversation on the topic of death, as Jimmy is able to give Jess some of his wisdom. It is interesting to see these two individuals joined together by the death of Stump, as Jess has had nothing but positives in his life and Jimmy has had nothing but negatives, mostly self inflicted. Despite Jimmy not having the same level of positivity as Jess, he is able to agree with him that Stump will be in heaven, which is Jess' main concern.

Discussion Question 1

Although it is somewhat reasonable for Julie or the church elders to have called the police, why hasn't Adelaide by the time Ben arrives?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think about Jimmy Hall having a stronger faith than his son Ben, despite his past actions?

Discussion Question 3

Were the men coming to pay condolences to the Halls coming with ulterior motives? Why or why not? Was Ben justified in his violent response to said men?

Vocabulary

quilt, floodlight, burley, tobacco, firefly, mason jar



Chapter Eleven: Clem Barefield

Summary

Sheriff Clem recounts finding his son Jeff dead on the side of the road, he had died in an accident while working on a transformer as a member of Jimmy Hall's electrical crew.

Clem searched for Jimmy after the accident and found him in his truck on top of Gunter Mountain during a snowstorm. Clem's car got stuck in the snow so he walked up to Jimmy's car, noticed that he was drunk and left him there to sober up, not altogether caring if he lived or died. The next morning Jimmy towed Clem's car down from the mountain.

Analysis

This section of the novel is important for its somewhat cover up nature as well as establishing how Clem deals with death. When Clem arrives to the scene he questions the other workers to find out if Jimmy Hall had been drinking or is in anyway responsible. The workers do not give him a straightforward answer, which is indicative of the respect that community pays towards Clem, even when it was his own son that had died. It is never made fully clear whether or not Jimmy was drunk during the accident or if he got drunk following, in his car where Clem finds him. Clem is able to deal with this loss impressively, as he chooses to stay within his duty and the law, again showing his commitment to justice despite a very difficult situation.

Discussion Question 1

Was Clem's decision to leave an inebriated Jimmy Hall on the mountain attempted murder?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Jimmy Hall is responsible for the death of Jeff Barefield simply because he was drunk?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think Clem and Sheila were able to recover so well from the death of their son?

Vocabulary

bleacher, rhododendron, foreman, transformer, CB radio, undercarriage, towline



Chapter Twelve-Fifteen: Adelaide Lyle

Summary

The speaker is Adelaide, as she recounts the story of her childhood with her great aunt on top of Parker Mountain as well as her voyage to the city of Asheville to work. While in the city she worked her way up from washing clothing to working with tobacco, given her history with the product. She returned from her summer in the city to find that her aunt had died, and no one had taken care of her body. She recalls a dream she had of Jesus who showed her her aunt in heaven.

She then recounts the story of her trek through the blizzard to help Julie give birth to Stump. She successfully births Christopher, but he does not cry at all during the process, foreboding his mute future. Ben decides not to bury the afterbirth, stating that it isn't Christian. This irritates Adelaide, as she believes that one can be Christian and still have knowledge of holistic science. She then recounts the story of how Christopher got his nickname of Stump. A travelling salesman commented that he seemed like a stump in a clear field, and the name stuck.

She finally recounts the story of an innocent Confederate soldier who had been hung by a northern town simply because he didn't belong, and she relates this to Christopher in the Church of Signs.

Following, Adelaide talks about the beginning of Julie and Ben's relationship, how beautiful she was and how Ben was in need of something good in his life. She then discusses the divide between Ben and Julie. This divide is characterized by Julie's strong faith and Ben's lack thereof. Julie was afraid of Ben's brooding silence that was slowly overtaking their marriage. However, this isn't a natural development in their marriage; it is directly related to Carson Chambliss. She recalls a time when Julie asked her for help terminating a pregnancy. This was the start of her suspicion of an affair between Julie and Carson. Julie came to Adelaide to discuss her issues with Ben right after the death of Christopher, and how Ben blames himself for the events that had taken place. Julie reveals that it was Chambliss' idea to have the healing in the first place.

Analysis

Adelaide's childhood is very reminiscent of the outsider, a person who lives in the woods alone and cut off from society. Since she lives with her great aunt, two women living alone in the woods, there is the connotation of witches and the occult, especially since they have a strong knowledge of holistic medicine, generally associated with witches. The community knows that they live on the mountain, and yet do not care about them at all, as she finds her long dead aunt after her summer in the city. This is the beginning of her entering the community, when she asks the couple to assist her with the burial. This



is a very important distinction to make, that even Adelaide is somewhat of an outsider. The confederate soldier story only further reinforces what happens to outsiders in their community, while making it even more rare for a man like Chambliss to be able to take over the church so easily. The science/medicine idea comes up again as Ben rejects her traditional method for finishing a birth, saying it is un-christian. This is interesting as Ben's faith is not particularly strong, yet he quotes it as a reason for rejecting Adelaide's methods.

Adelaide acts somewhat on the outskirts of the community, as she is the go-to individual for anyone needing help, even when Julie is in need of an abortion. Julie returns after Stump's death to seek refuge in Adelaide's house, and it is the house where his body is carried to after his death. It is very interesting that Chambliss would choose to move the body of Stump to the person most likely to turn him in, but it speaks to his belief that everything is under his control, as it is revealed that the healing was his idea.

Discussion Question 1

Why didn't Adelaide's aunt ask for help from the community when she was facing death on the mountain?

Discussion Question 2

As a man who does not attend church frequently, Ben's reasoning for not burying the afterbirth irritates Adelaide. What about the relationship between the Christian community and her upbringing causes her reaction?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Chambliss send Julie to Adelaide with her abortion questions?

Vocabulary

bergamot, yokel, testament, frostbite, pelvis, contraction, afterbirth



Chapter Sixteen-Eighteen: Clem Barefield

Summary

The point of view shifts back to Clem as he asks Adelaide about the events that took place in the church. She tells him that it was supposed to be a healing, but it went badly. She expresses her sadness over the death, and Clem thinks to himself that she can't fully understand what had happened because she doesn't have children of her own. She also informs him that Molly Jameson died in the church years ago. Clem leaves to interrogate Chambliss at this farmhouse. It's dark with only one lightbulb that hardly works. Clem thinks that he sees a snake on the rafter, but when the light comes on it isn't there. Chambliss shows him his dead snake skins, calling them symbols of how God can make man anew. Clem informs Chambliss that Christopher died of asphyxia as one of his ribs punctured a lung, trying to understand the sheer amount of force placed on Christopher's body during the healing. It is a tense conversation with Clem more or less threatening Chambliss to reveal the truth before it comes out on its own. He returns home with little information, to which his wife Sheila consoles him and lets him she knows that something will break in the case, foreboding the events to follow.

Analysis

The face-off in the barn is between two outsiders of the community, one who has been accepted and one who has not. Chambliss believes himself to still be in power, as he booby traps his barn to startle Clem and keep him on edge. The lightbulb doesn't work, there are many snakes in the room and Chambliss seems altogether fine with it. He is thrown off of his game by Clem's details regarding his past life, and it is clear that he is still effected by his past actions although he is unwilling to speak about them. This scene further reinforces Chambliss as a borderline evil individual, one who chooses to live in the dark, something that humans are naturally afraid of. He is a man who chooses to handle snakes, another instinctual fear for the average human. He is more than just an outsider to the community, he is an outsider to humanity in general and yet is more accepted by the county and the Church of Signs Following than Sheriff Clem Barefield.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Adelaide so reluctant to express herself to Clem? It is a result of her upbringing or a general dislike for authority figures?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Clem react so strongly, and arguably negatively, to Adelaide saying that she loved Christopher as her own child?

Discussion Question 3

Why has Clem waited so long to confront Chambliss, given his incredibly dangerous past?

Vocabulary

equity, coonhound, implement, asphyxia, petechiae



Chapter Nineteen-Twenty: Jess Hall

Summary

The author returns to Jess as his mouthpiece as he goes to visit his friend Joe Bill. He flashes back to eating dinner with his grandpa and discussing his mother and grandmother. He returns to the present, where he and Joe Bill discuss whether or not Stump will be in heaven because he was unable to give a final confession. They play outside until Joe Bill's brother returns, angry that Joe Bill had shot his gun. Jess runs away back to his house where he finds Ben, who asks him what happened to the rain barrel. Jess tells Ben what happened, revealing that Julie had been having an affair with Chambliss. Ben leaves the house and drives away leaving Jess alone in the house. He returns later that night, not having found Chambliss.

Analysis

This sequence is important mainly for establishing the relationship between Jimmy and Jess, as it sets up the kind of relationship that the two will share after the events of the later chapters. It is a hopeful scene as the two of them eat together and seem to be enjoying each other's company. The second half is Ben's final unraveling, letting loose all of the anger and hurt that he has kept pent up since his childhood. It is important that he does not take out his anger on Jess, as this would have crossed the line and put him in the place of his father, someone who he does not want to emulate. While he is gone Jess attempts to process what had taken place, but is mostly unable to do so.

Discussion Question 1

How responsible is Jess Hall for the deaths of both his brother and mother?

Discussion Question 2

Why might the author have decided to add the characters of Clay and Scooter to this novel?

Discussion Question 3

Does alcohol have a major role in the decisions that Ben makes following his discovery of the affair?

Vocabulary

backboard, guardrail, gully, cove, crawdaddy, rain-barrel, gearshift



Chapter Twenty-One-Twenty-Three: Adelaide Lyle, Clem Barefield, Jess Hall

Summary

Back to Adelaide's perspective, she thinks to herself what she will do after the harrowing encounter with Chambliss. She decides not to call the police and cause more trouble. Ben wakes her up knocking on the door asking for Julie. Adelaide lies and tells him she isn't home, and that she is calling the sheriff. Ben says he will kill Chambliss. Julie has heard the whole exchange and decides to escape with Chambliss. The next morning she calls him to have him pick her up, and he arrives at Adelaide's house.

It is the same morning, at Clem's house. He receives a call that Julie has asked for a police escort. At the same time he gets a call from Adelaide telling him that he has to get over to Ben's house before Julie and Carson arrive to pick up her things.

The perspective shifts to Jess who is awakened by his father to get ready for school. Julie and Chambliss arrive and Ben goes outside telling Jess to stay in his room. Jess hears a gunshot, runs to front door where he sees Sheriff Barefield shoot his father.

Analysis

The final decision of Adelaide Lyle is to not call the police after her attack at the hands of Chambliss, which the reader has seen all the way back in chapter one. This finally places the events of the novel in more or less chronological order, and everything that takes place from the end of chapter 23 on is flashback-free. The tension builds through these three chapters as the reader first finds out that Chambliss and Julie are running away, then that they will be stopping at Ben's house and finally that Ben has fired a gunshot and has been shot himself by the sheriff. The buildup coupled with the change of character perspective is cinematic and effective in creating an intense and heart-racing sequence, while leaving certain details unclear for the moment.

Discussion Question 1

Why doesn't Adelaide inform the sheriff of the situation until the following morning?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think the reason for Chambliss' setting up of the Church of Signs Following if he is so willing to leave with Julie?



Discussion Question 3

What do you think of the near-cinematic thriller element with the quick switch of perspective? Does it add to the thrill of the novel or take away from the continuity?

Vocabulary

musty, ominous, police escort, fender, jockey



Chapter Twenty-Four-Twenty Five: Clem Barefield, Adelaide Lyle

Summary

Clem arrives to the Hall residence to see Ben in his underwear pointing a shotgun at Chambliss inside his car. He flashes his sirens and Chambliss starts to back up when Ben shoots and kills him. The two cars hit each other and Chambliss' trunk opens, spilling snake crates all over the ground. Ben aims the gun at Julie. Jess runs outside and Ben spins with the gun towards Jess. Clem reacts and shoots Ben in the neck. Clem calls Jimmy Hall to pick up Jess. He then notices that Ben's shotgun had been empty when he was aiming it at Julie and Jess, he already fired the two shells to kill Chambliss. Clem tells Jimmy that he shot Ben, his son, and the two share a cathartic moment, each being partially responsible for the death of the other's son. Clem watches Jimmy leave with Jess and hopes that Jimmy will be a better father this time around.

Adelaide Lyle describes Ben's funeral, taking particular interest in Jimmy and Jess. Both of them are dressed up. She notices Jimmy and Clem standing next to each other, two men that had been enemies but are now united in their loss. She states that the sheriff would return soon after the funeral. She describes the church's reformation starting with the windows being opened up and the newspaper taken down. There's no pastor so the parishioners take turns speaking. She closes by stating her belief that God always saves, and that a church is a living thing. Jimmy doesn't attend church, but still brings Jess which is good enough for Adelaide.

Analysis

This scene gives the reader the final "what if" moment of the novel, as it is revealed that Ben's gun was empty when he was a potential danger to Julie and Jess. Clem does not know this, and decides to act for the safety of everyone there, shooting and killing Ben. This is a brutal moment, as yet another individual has died an unnecessary death. In fact, this is yet another innocent death, the same as Jeff Barefield, Christopher Hall, Adelaide's Great Aunt, and Molly Jameson. The only death that is at all justified is that of Carson Chambliss, and this death occurs outside of justice and the law. After Clem realizes that Ben's gun was empty he finally understands how Jimmy Hall felt after the death of Jeff but can do nothing to alleviate the pain. The two men are forever connected by the deaths of their sons but for the same reason are incredibly distant from each other.

Adelaide describes the Sheriff and how he will retire soon after the funeral, having followed his duty to the letter but still was unable to achieve a peaceful end. The events were simply too much for a small town sheriff to handle, especially one with only one deputy. Jess and Jimmy seem to be getting along well, with Jess attending the newly



reborn in a hopeful and uplifting ending. Adelaide gets the first and last word of the novel, as she was the main narrator, and shares with the reader her belief that a church is the community, and not the building. After the death of Carson Chambliss the church snapped out of its dead state and continued anew, without a charismatic and energetic pastor, but with hope in a new future.

Discussion Question 1

Did Clem need to shoot Ben? Do you think he was fully prepared and aware of the situation?

Discussion Question 2

Is it wise for the community to let Jimmy Hall raise Jess?

Discussion Question 3

Are the events that occurred in this novel destined to happen again given the intellectual and spiritual makeup of Madison County?

Vocabulary

sidearm, adultery, hunker, contaminate, gurney, brylcreem, wilderness



Characters

Adelaide Lyle

Adelaide Lyle is one of three protagonists of this story from whose point of view the events unfold. Her point of view is a mix of current events and flashbacks to her clashes with Pastor Chambliss, and her removal of the children from the church. She is a church elder, 81 years old when the book begins. She has been with the parish since its foundation, and when she leaves it is clear that something is very wrong. She was responsible for the blizzard birth of Christopher Hall, risking her life in the process. She takes issue with Chambliss and his risking the lives of the parishioners with the rattlesnakes that he would bring in and drape over them in a way for them to prove their faith. She has the strong will power to stand up to her pastor and pull all of the children (likely children that she delivered) out of the parish after the death of Molly Jameson, sacrificing friendships and leaving her spiritual home of 25 years.

Ten years after she makes this first difficult decision to stand up to Chambliss, she meets him again to discuss the death of Christopher Hall in the church. She is assaulted by Chambliss and this only solidifies her opinion of him. The rest of her story has to do with the Hall family, and Julie Hall in particular. She was approached by Julie for an abortion some time before Christopher's death, and she suspects that Julie might be having an affair with Chambliss. On the night of Christopher's death she takes Julie in and protects her from Chambliss' men looking to make sure none of this information makes it to the sheriff.

Her role in this novel is to provide an inside look into the goings on of the church prior to Chambliss, to provide contrast in atmosphere. Through her flashbacks she helps to piece together various parts of the story, from her relationship to the Hall family to her relationship with Chambliss.

Pastor Carson Chambliss

The primary antagonist of this novel, it is unclear if he truly believes the method of faith that he preaches, or if it is a cult scam. He is a middle aged man originally from Toccoa, Georgia. He has a sordid past filled with petty crime and drug possession. He also cooked meth, and was the "victim" of an explosion which not only burned the right side of his body and arm, but also killed a 16-year-old girl who was working with him in the lab. With the help of his lawyer, he was able to serve only two years in prison during which he created the Signs Following cult. With this group of men he would drink dangerous liquids and touch fire but they never experienced any ill effects. The cult follows the Matthew 16:17-18 which states the numerous things the disciples of Jesus will be able to do, including picking up snakes and drinking poison.



When Chambliss was released from prison he came to Madison County, North Carolina where he took over the French Broad Church of Christ, changing the name to River Road Church of Christ in Signs Following, the same name of his prison cult. This church that he has created is suspicious in design, as they have boarded up the windows with newspaper to avoid onlookers from seeing within. He brings in the snakes in crates and drapes them on his parishioners while he prays over them and singing, music and drums blare inside the church. Of course this riles up the snakes and numerous parishioners suffer from bites, but none deadly until Molly Jameson. After she dies within the church he moves her body to her garden, where it is believed that she suffered the snake bite from a snake in her garden.

Ten years later, Chambliss has the same if not more power in the community. He has started an affair with Julie Hall, an affair that is almost revealed when she becomes pregnant. As a result of his urging, she self-terminates the pregnancy. After Christopher Hall, her mute son, sees the two of them in coitus, Chambliss begins a two part "healing" of Christopher which results in the shattering of his lungs and his death inside of the church. As this death cannot be covered up, Chambliss' world gradually collapses resulting in his death at the hands of Ben Hall.

Chambliss represents what can happen to people who have strong beliefs and desire an outlet to express them. When a charismatic individual such as himself enters a town he can have a deep effect on the mentalities and actions of these people. He is a controversial character, because although he is a clear cult leader who is somewhat worshipped by his parishioners, there seems to be a real belief in what he preaches, beyond the feeling of power and control.

Jess Hall

Jess Hall is the 12-year-old son of Ben and Julie Hall, the second of two children that the couple has. He is the second protagonist/point of view that the reader sees through in this novel. He is an average pre-teen boy, with a friendship with Joe Bill and plenty of time spent with his brother Christopher "Stump". He is an obedient child for the most part, the most prevalent rule that his mother and father have bestowed upon him is to not pry or listen in on something that he shouldn't. This is an ironic rule, as Jess' accidental prying leads to the discovery of a secret as well as possibly assisting in the events leading up to the death of his brother.

When Jess is playing with his friend Joe Bill he decides to go to the church and spy in, because his brother Stump had been taken inside, an event that never had happened before. What he sees when he spies in is a group of the church men applying pressure on a struggling Stump, an event that causes Jess to cry out "Mama!" After the service is finished, his mother tells him that Stump cried out to her during the "healing", and Jess doesn't inform her otherwise. This leads Julie to take Stump to the second service, where he dies.



Jess is the most emotional character of the three that tell the story, because he is caught in the middle of his mother's affair, his grandfather's abusive past and the death of his brother. All of these things are out of his control, but he has to experience it all as a passive observer.

Ben Hall

Ben is the father of Stump and Jess as well as the husband of Julie. He is a good man, strong and tall but with a troubled past and unfulfilled dreams.

His father was abusive to his mother to the point that she left the family. After this, his father became alcoholic and continued his abuse, this time directing it on Ben. Ben was able to persevere through this and become an all state football player, something that got him a scholarship to college. Unfortunately he wasn't focused on his studies and essentially failed out of college, returning to Madison County where he married Julie.

He is not a religious man, and does not accompany his wife to the Signs Following services, which creates a rift in their marriage. After finding out that his wife is having an affair, Ben finally snaps and murders his wife's lover in front of his son Jess before being killed himself by the Sheriff.

Julie Hall

Julie is the wife of Ben Hall and the mother of Stump and Jess. She is a fair skinned blonde woman, somewhat of a rare thing in the farming Madison County. She comes from a strict, religious mother and even though she is not equally strict, she has retained that religious and spiritual center. Her main mantra for her children is for them to keep away from her church and not spy on things they aren't supposed to see.

She is fully invested in Pastor Carson Chambliss' church as a result of a rift in her marriage. When her first son is born mute, the two of them are unable to deal with it together and currently rarely speak to each other about anything besides the daily essential conversations.

To fill this void Julie begins a relationship with Carson Chambliss, an affair that leads her to self-terminate a pregnancy (most likely Carson as the father) and the death of Ben.

Christopher "Stump" Hall

Christopher is the son of Julie and Ben, and the older brother of Jess. He is 14 years old, and was born mute during a ferocious blizzard. He is a boy that loves collecting things, rocks and such, and keeps them all in a box in his room. When he finds something that he especially likes, he takes it and places it in this box where only he can see it.



Unfortunately the fact that he is mute leaves him unable to express his feelings as well as unable to share things that he has seen, such as his mother having an affair with Chambliss. When Chambliss finds out that he knows he begins a "healing" process to bring Stump's voice back, but only ends up crushing his lungs and killing him.

Sheriff Clem Barefield

Clem Barefield is the sheriff of Madison County, following in his father's footsteps, but unlike his father he did not become bored of the job and even though there are rarely large crimes to deal with, he still enjoys his work. He is the third protagonist of this story with his flashbacks giving the reader his personal background as well as the relationship between Ben and his father. He also gives the reader a glimpse into what Chambliss is like outside of the church, with his exorcism at Gillum's farm as well as giving the reader Chambliss' criminal background.

He is a married man who has experienced loss in his life as his son was the victim of one of Jimmy Hall's drunken rages. He was able to remain within the law in his response and he and his wife have a loving and seemingly happy marriage. He is thrust into Chambliss' world when he begins to investigate the death of Christopher Hall. This investigation leads him to kill Ben Hall to protect Julie from Ben's anger.

Shiela Barefield

Shiela is the wife of Clem, the Sheriff of Madison County, North Carolina. She is a supportive and loving wife, staying with Clem through their mutual loss. She understands his need to serve the community, but hopes that he will do his best to remain safe.

Gene Thompson

Gene Thompson is an older member of the Signs Following church, one of the right hand men of Chambliss. He is responsible for bringing Stump to the church for his first "healing" as well as leading a gang of intimidators to Adelaide Lyle's house to make sure no one told Clem about the death of Stump.

Molly Jameson

She is a 79-year-old woman who was killed in the Signs Following church by a rattlesnake during the service. After her death her body was moved from the church to her garden, where it was found. The town believes that she was killed by a snake in her garden. This event leads Adelaide Lyle to leave the church, taking the children with her.



Jeff Barefield

Son of Clem and Sheila, killed when he was only 17 by Jimmy Hall. He serves as a constant reminder to Clem how one can be more protective of the community than his own family.

Jimmy Hall

Father of Ben Hall, he was an alcoholic and abusive father, responsible for his wife's departure and also the death of Jeff Hall. At the time of the events of the book he has returned a changed man, and it appears that he will get a second chance at being a father with Jess.

Joe Bill

Joe Bill is Jess' friend, and he is fiercely loyal to his brother despite his brother's actions. He is somewhat responsible for Jess seeing the first healing, as he egged him on to look through the church windows.

Scooter

Joe Bill's Brother, a vindictive and angry teenager who takes pot shots at the two friends when he believes that they touched his belongings. He is an example of how family can shroud one's true personality.



Symbols and Symbolism

Snake/Serpent

The snake/serpent is a major element to this story on a physical and symbolic level. For the christian faith a serpent is the classic symbol of the devil, the deceiver. In this novel the snake represents sin and danger for the members of the church of Signs Following. They trust their faith enough that risk their lives by placing these physically dangerous creatures and also symbolically represents everything that is evil and anti their religion. Chambliss surrounds himself with these creatures, even in his own barn and house which he keeps cool and dark in order for them to thrive.

Fire

Fire generally symbolizes life as well as rebirth, a classic example being the phoenix. In christianity there is also a strong association between fire and hell, the eternal resting place for sinners. For this novel Fire significantly represents rebirth, but it is up to the reader to decide if it is a true rebirth, as Chambliss claims his meth lab explosion was his fiery rebirth, much like a Phoenix. Jess states that he feels that the heat in the church comes from Chambliss' body, and he views the members of the church as almost smoldering.

Dead Rattlesnake

This snake is different from the ones used in Chambliss' church, Ben Hall found it in his driveway and killed it. Jess and Stump go to bury it, only to find that it is not altogether dead. This snake symbolizes the ability of evil to appear beaten, but still survive. This snake particularly represents Chambliss for Ben, as a precursor to Ben killing Chambliss, he first kills one of his snakes.

Stump's Quartz

Stump's quartz is the last item of Stump's that Jess has after his death. It was given to him when Stump was taken to his first "healing". This quartz represents Stump's childish nature and is the physical representation of Stump for Jess. The quartz makes him remember the firefly he made for him, as well as Stump's secret box of things he likes and has collected throughout his life.

Fireflies

Fireflies symbolize the innocence of Jess and Stump's childhood, as they both loved to see them and collect them together. Jess also made Stump a firefly to remind him of



their time together. Throughout the novel Jess sees fireflies, even when it isn't the correct season. Fireflies are a light in the darkness and represent hope for Jess as well as reminding him of his life with Stump prior to his death.

Jess' Splinter

Jess' splinter is another representative of his loss of innocence, as he gains the splinter when he sees the "healing" of Stump and shouts to his mother. It is also a representation of the relationship he will have with Jimmy Hall, as only Jimmy is able to take it out after both his mother and father failed earlier.

Chambliss' Lightbulb

Chambliss' lightbulb is the one source of light in his barn, a cold and dark place. Of course, the light is not functioning properly and sputters on and off. This lightbulb represents Chambliss' effect on good things, and his ability to drag everything down with him.

Mute/Dumb

Stump's inability to talk, his muteness, is a physical representation of the parishioners of the church of signs following and their inability to speak about what is really going on in their church. It is somewhat of an irony that while all of them are capable of speaking and are viewed as more intelligent than mute people. However they don't have the ability to speak about what is really necessary.

Community

The community of Madison County is a double edged sword. While the church is meant to be a place of refuge and relationships, it has been turned in a place of suspicion and hiding. The community of Madison County is also very exclusive, as exemplified by the death of Adelaide's great aunt and no one coming to check on her as well as the death of the confederate soldier. For Adelaide community is something that represents life in general, how it ebbs and flows, goes up and down.

Carson Chambliss Himself

Carson Chambliss is a representation of a god on earth, a man that can survive flames, poison and dangerous snakes. To his followers he symbolizes Jesus himself, a god on earth. This symbolism proves dangerous for the community as they are unable to see through his charm and charisma to what he is really doing to their community.



Settings

Madison County, North Carolina

Madison County is the county in which the story takes place. It is located in North Carolina, and while having characteristics similar to other counties in the state, has a different type of population. This is elaborated on by Sheriff Clem Barefield who states that the street names in Madison are often strange, often referencing other planets. He also talks about their religious fanaticism, as a people that wants something to believe in. This leads them to be more open to Carson Chambliss and his methods, even though he is an outsider. It's an area that has a history of hostility towards outsiders, as Adelaide references a time when a man was killed more or less for being an outsider. The setting is that of small town middle America, full of farmhouses, farmland and some forests. It is also an area that has experienced little crime and only has one sheriff and one deputy.

Church of Signs Following

This is the church that Carson Chambliss founded in Madison County. It is based on the cult that he formed during his two-year stay in jail, and focuses on Mark 16. Upon his arrival he moved the church from its more secluded but substantially more open location to a smaller one. He also boarded up the windows with newspaper, so as to not allow any passers by to see what goes on. The events are loud, with drums, guitar, piano and singing as the parishioners test their faith by handling dangerous rattlesnakes and the like. It is the location of the deaths of Molly Jameson and Christopher Hall. It is a relatively dark space, with a solitary air conditioner to help its occupants with the Carolina heat.

Carson Chambliss' Barn

This is a dark, cool and otherwise foreboding location in the novel. It is the site of the meeting between Clem and Carson, and the reader can imagine what life must be like for Pastor Chambliss if he spends all of his time in this dark semi-cavernous barn. It is the perfect environment for snakes, the snakes that Carson uses in his services and also the serpent of a man that he is in the novel.

Adelaide Lyle's House

This is the opposite of Chambliss' barn, it is a place of general openness, hospitality and refuge. There are many times during the novel when people come to Adelaide for help, be it Julie with her two pregnancies, Ben when his is looking for Julie, Julie again when she is trying to deal with the death of Christopher etc. It is a place of knowledge, as it is



the first location that Sheriff Clem visits when he's attempting to find out what happened at the church.

The Hall Residence

This setting is at the apex of the thriller, with the final culminating events taking place just outside. It is the location where Stump and Jess share most of their time. It is also the setting where the relationship between Jess and Jimmy Hall begins, an important relationship after the death of Ben Hall. This is the source of the climax of the novel, where Ben shoots Chambliss and is then killed.



Themes and Motifs

Faith

The theme of faith is prominent and underlines not only the primary speaking characters but also the lives of everything in Madison County. Clem Barefield spends most of his opening dialogue speaking about how the people of this county are borderline fanatic and need something to believe in. They are all Christians, but they need something more than traditional faith to believe in for the most part. This leads them to become susceptible to charismatic individuals such as Chambliss. They need something to believe in, something greater than themselves and are willing to go to any length to fulfill that need.

Faith also expresses itself in a personal level as the members of the Hall family, Adelaide and Carson Chambliss all have distinct ways of expressing and viewing their faith in the novel. Carson views his horrific meth lab explosion as a wakeup call from God, one that allows him to test his faith by testing the will of God to keep him safe. He does this by consuming cleaning fluids and lighting himself on fire in jail, but in civilized society he needs to show this in a slightly more acceptable way, which he decides is snakes. When he talks about his faith to Adelaide or Clem it does sound genuine, which makes him even more dangerous as a pastor and character; this isn't a scam for money or simply about the power, he really does believe the twisted faith that he preaches.

For Adelaide, faith represents a certain resiliency following the principle that God is always there for you even if you can't see him. This is a pretty standard viewpoint towards faith, and is the reason why Adelaide can't support the teachings of Carson Chambliss - because they go against her views. She views God as a protector and is totally unable to deal with the amount of risk that Carson places his church under, especially the children.

For the Hall family there are three distinct types of faith visible. The first is Ben Hall, who states that he wants to have a good Christian family, but cannot bring himself to attend a church service due to his upbringing. For Ben, there is a distinct lack of hope in his faith, and he prefers to remain alone, thinking to himself. Julie, partly due to her strong Christian upbringing and partly as a reaction to Ben's stoic apathy towards religion, has thrown herself full force into the Church of Signs Following to the point where she allows them to kill her son while performing a healing. She has also fallen for Carson romantically, as his charisma is able to overpower his burnt body. Jess Hall has the faith of an innocent child, the faith that his brother will be in heaven and that everything will be all right. This faith is somewhat shattered when he sees his dad shot in front of him, and the reader does not get to see how he progresses after the fact.



Innocence/Maturity

This theme shows the contrast between Jess Hall and Adelaide Lyle, each of them representing stark opposites between the pinnacles of experience and the beginning of understanding. Both characters go through experiences that cause them to grow up too early. Jess has these experiences in the present tense, as he deals with the death of his brother and father. Through Adelaide's flashbacks, she has a similar experience as the reader is able to see the moment in which she attained a certain level of maturity. This was when she went to the city to work, in of itself was a moment of maturity, but even more so when she returned to find her aunt dead. This was the moment in which she had to make the transition from innocence to maturity as she came to realization that she would have died if she had stayed on the mountain that summer. Throughout the novel her maturity and reason is displayed in nearly every situation: when Julie needs help delivering Christian; when Julie asks for help terminating the pregnancy; when she takes the children out of the Church of Signs Following, etc. Whenever a character needs help or information Adelaide is the first one to be asked, as she plays the role of wise woman for the community of Madison County.

Jess, on the other hand, is going through his transition from innocence to maturity in front of the reader's eyes. He transitions from an obedient child full of curiosity and questions to someone that knows too much. For Jess, 'ignorance is bliss' is an accurate motto. The readers gets to see his childhood innocence through his trapping fireflies with Stump, not knowing that the glass jar needs air holes. He also has an innocent belief in the things that his mother tells him, except when he witnesses the first "healing" which opens up his mind to certain objective truths. When he sees his mom in bed with Chambliss his brain cannot fully process what he witnessed, except that he knows it is something that his Dad shouldn't know. The resulting couple of days cause Jess to mature quickly, as he deals with the death of his brother and, subsequently, the death of his father and loss of his mother all within a very short period of time. He has his own mentor, however, Jimmy Hall who helps him understand death and move on after the events that had happened.

Domestic Abuse/Cause and Effect

The theme of domestic abuse is a strong and overarching one within the Hall family. It is prevalent in this cause and effect narrative, where little actions or past feelings eventually lead to the climactic final scene of this thriller. It includes both physical and psychological abuse, that both Jimmy and Ben Hall take a part in. Jimmy Hall was an abusive alcoholic, whose abuse drove his wife away from the family, and continued on to his son Ben. This abuse is documented by Clem Barefield for the most part, who tells the story of when Ben told him he fears for his life around his father, even though he was much bigger and stronger than his father. This abuse has had a great effect on Ben's psyche, as he lacks the strong faith and hope that the rest of the community shares. Combined with the birth of his autistic mute son, it causes him to bottle everything inside, which in turn makes him the abuser in the relationship with his wife.



Clem fears that at some point this will overflow and Ben will snap, finally releasing the rage that he has been keeping inside for his entire life. This proves correct as when he discovers that his wife is having an affair he snaps and kills Carson Chambliss.

For Julie, she is the victim of Ben's abuse. Ben's abuse is not physical, as feared by Clem, but emotional and psychological. After the birth of Christopher, Ben completely shuts down communication with his wife, even to the point of not communicating daily tasks. This is brutal for Julie and greatly contributes to her affair with Chambliss, which in turn leads to the death of Christopher. Ben openly blames Julie for the death of Christopher, a blame that only escalates the situation. This psychological abuse impacts Julie's need for community and a strong faith life, as she is unable to find any sense of belonging in her own household. With so many important events and character effected by domestic abuse, it is clear that it is an important motif for this novel.

Theocracy

The theocracy theme comes into play in terms of it's conflict with secular law enforcement. In the Church of Signs Following, Carson Chambliss is essentially God, and so everything goes according to his rules. Of course this causes problems when the events in his church leads to the death of Molly Jameson and Christopher Hall. He was able to get away with the murder of Molly Jameson by moving her body out of the church. This required the silence of all of the members of his church, which he was able to attain. This implies that the members of his church believe in his authority over that of the State, a troubling idea when Chambliss' authority leads to the death of two people. This almost descends into mob style rule when the church elders come over to Adelaide's house in an attempt to intimidate them into not speaking to Sheriff Clem about the events that had occurred during the evening service.

There is also the idea of justice in general in this novel, as there is the choice given to many characters to follow the legal path or to react and take justice into their own hands. As a former criminal and ex-convict, Chambliss clearly prefers to control his own fate and takes actions to make sure that the Church of Signs Following stays alive until it all begins to crumble and he attempts his escape with Julie. For Clem, he has a duty to follow the state form of justice, and he does so even when confronting the man at fault for his son's death. Jimmy Hall does the same when Clem has to kill his son Ben, as the two men share the pain of losing a child. Ben, on the other hand is a rogue individual in the state, not controlled by Chambliss' theocracy but also unstable enough to act alone in his revenge. This leads to the death of Carson Chambliss, and also his own death as he refuses to put down his shotgun, giving Clem no choice.

Death

The theme of death is prevalent in this novel as both in the present time period as well as the flashbacks of the characters there are life changing instances of death. In a way, this novel is about how individuals deal with the death of their loved ones. The first



death to discuss, that helps in defining Carson Chambliss' character, is the death of the 16-year-old girl in his meth lab fire. It is important that she died, but more important that Carson has almost no reaction to her death when questioned by Clem. A man who can watch someone die, someone who was responsible for that death and have no reaction is obviously not a normal human being.

Clem Barefield also has to deal with death, the death of his own son Jeff partly due to Jimmy Hall's negligence. The death of his son had a strong impact on his life, as he describes it as indescribable feeling of loss that no one who hasn't had a child can understand. However, his reaction to this death is respectable as he remains within the law, even though he wanted to deal with it himself. He and his wife have dealt with this death admirably. However, it is a second death that causes Clem to quit the police force entirely, the death of Ben Hall. Clem is unable to overcome his guilt after killing Ben in front of Jess and decides that he has had enough of the police life.

For Adelaide there were two deaths that greatly affected her character: the death of her aunt and the death of Molly Jameson. The first death triggered her transition into adulthood, as she was forced to deal with it almost entirely on her own. This, coupled with things that she had learned helped her to become the symbol of maturity in her community. The second death, that of Molly Jameson in the Church of Signs Following, was the final straw in Adelaide's decision to take the children (the future of the church) away from Carson Chambliss. Death is also prevalent in terms of the church, death and rebirth. Adelaide views the church as a living thing, something that had died long before the arrival of Carson Chambliss, but is reborn after his death.

Death for Jess is an even more defining event, as the death of his brother Stump leads him to question his mother's judgement as well as to ponder the afterlife. He is able to mature and grow through this experience, as it could be viewed as a positive. However, the death of his father, Ben, in front of him, is a decisive negative, which the reader does not get to see his growth from it. There is the hope that he will be able to recover under the guidance of Jimmy Hall, but it is left ambiguous.



Styles

Point of View

The narrative of this novel is written from the point of view of three protagonists: Adelaide Lyle, Jess Hall and Clem Barefield. The narrative is not told in exact chronological order, as the author chooses to stylistically rewind the scene before changing the perspective and character that the reader sees through. There are also a substantial amount of flashbacks used not only for character development, but also to give the reader previously unknown information as the thriller continues. This information is only known by the character having the flashback, and so the reader can see the choices that the character has made or not made with that information. The perspective generally remains equal between the characters, with the character whose perspective moves the thriller forward at that particular moment. The characters often remain the same for two or more chapters until the final five chapters when the perspectives shift more often and the chapters are substantially shorter, again for effect. There is a realistic amount of character development and exposition, but there are many important events that happen throughout the narrative.

As the narrative progresses it becomes clear that Jess' character serves as more of the story driver, as the events that he experiences firsthand are the events that happen in the present tense of the thriller. The other two characters, Adelaide Lye and Clem Barefield, have roles in the action of the novel but for the most part their sections of the narrative are filled with important background information that is told through flashbacks. For example, Clem spends a lot of his time driving to and from scenes of crimes, and his drives often have one or even two long flashbacks. The flashbacks generally serve as sources of information on the character of Carson Chambliss, his past prior to Madison County as well as the events in Madison County (the death of Molly Jameson, his meetings with Adelaide etc.).

This style works very well in terms of setting up a thriller, as each character (primarily Jess) moves the story forward a little bit, while leaving the reader in the dark about the background of Chambliss. As each detail and event is revealed, (his meth lab, the death of Molly Jameson, the affair between Chambliss and Julie) the story becomes clearer and clearer. As the ending quickly approaches it becomes all too obvious what will happen. There are plenty of shocking revelations which tend to focus on the motivations behind Chambliss' actions.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is interesting, because at first glance it is simplistic in nature. The characters are generally simple individuals, there's a young and not particularly intelligent boy, a small town sheriff, and a single religious woman. All of these people are from the same area and have had a similar upbringing, and so their vocabulary and



phrases are similar. What the author decides to do with these simplistic characters is to give them a somewhat unbelievable level of insight both situationally and in terms of depth and profound thought. The level of insight that Jess Hall has when he thinks about his parent's relationship as well as their individual views towards God and faith is almost unbelievable considering his age. He is able to decide that his mother is in need of something to believe in, and his father needs physical proof. The sheriff has the simplicity of a county sheriff, but is also able speak eloquently on the nature of death and how humans deal with it, to the point where he has an inner monologue for a page or more about how someone who has never had their own child can be effected by the death of a child. He is a man that bases his insight on his experiences, but has a level of thought that is deeper than his occupation and upbringing suggests.

Adelaide's language centers on her view of God and her faith, which is another language that the author deals with, the complex issue of personal faith, passion and belief. He has numerous characters that all have some relationship with Christianity, be it the fanatical obsession of Carson Chambliss or the silent brooding ignorance of Ben Hall. Through the perspective of mostly Adelaide, the reader is able to see the religious views of Julie Hall as well as numerous other individuals. There is no exact language in this novel, meaning language that is not open to interpretation except when the sheriff discusses the manner in which Christopher Hall died. That is the single instance of scientific thought, while the rest of the novel is written based on slightly different religious principles.

Structure

In terms of structure, this novel moves in a near chronological order, with the shifts in character often rewinding by hours or at most a day. The way in which these shifts take place play into the thriller aspect of the novel, giving the reader a view into the mind of each character as they individually act in the same event. There are two good examples of this. The first is the shift from Jess to Clem after Ben is shot, which shows both Jess' view as Clem shoots his father and the following chapter shows Clem's point of view, his reason for taking the shot and his following actions. The second is the shift from Adelaide to Clem in the events leading up to this as Adelaide makes efforts to alert Clem about Ben's action, and the reader can see Clem's response and his course of action later. This slight chronological warping adds suspense and anticipation to the novel, as the reader is forced to wait pages to find out exactly what will happen next. This is the second form of suspense that the author uses, and occurs primarily in the second half of the novel after the reader already knows the entire backstory of events. It does take place in the beginning, but only has an effect towards the end of the novel, primarily after Ben has found out that Julie has been cheating on him.

The thrill and suspense that takes place in the first half of the novel is not through chronological altering, as it is in the second half, but through the withholding of information. This is done by immediately utilizing flashbacks before alerting the reader to the events that are in the chronology. The events that happen in real time are Jess seeing the first church meeting, the second church meeting (Stump's death) and the



consequences following. However, the first event discussed by Adelaide is the death of Molly Jameson, something that happened years before. So the reader does not have the knowledge of exactly what happened, or its significance until much later, when certain characters are introduced as significant. For example, it is not until Jess is introduced that the reader knows the significance of Christopher's death (that was mentioned within the first two pages). The flashbacks also give the reader the entire backstory of the antagonist, Carson Chambliss informing the reader of his troubled past through a phone conversation that Clem has. This keeping the reader in the dark adds to the suspense and thrill, as the reader finds out revealing and important information piece by piece until the whole puzzle is revealed leading to the climax. The entire novel is a long buildup to the showdown in the Hall's driveway, which is the only scene in which the reader has all of the information and can solely observe the action.



Quotes

But they reckon a snake must've been hiding in them tomato plants. By the time they found her on Wednesday her right hand had turned black, and she had a black lump under her eye too.

-- Woman (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote is substantially important because it introduces the reader to the circumvention of the law that takes place within the Church of Signs Following. Although the death of Molly Jameson takes place in the church, at the hand of one of Carson's snakes, the community at large believes that she suffered a fatal accident in her garden. And so the church is able to continue with its dangerous methods. This is substantial because if the populace had found out the truth right away, the events of the novel most likely would not have happened, as the church would have been shut down.

A church ain't no place to hide the truth, and a church that does ain't no place for me. Ain't no place for children neither.

-- Adelaide Lyle (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote is important because it defines Adelaide's character as a strong, resilient woman. She decides to remove both herself and all of the children, as in the future generation, from the church. She has to face a truly despicable man, and is able to do so with strength and fortitude. It also labels the church as suspicious and hiding something, an important addition to the plot.

What he did next I can't even picture quite enough to tell just how it happened, but when I felt it on my skin I knew right then what it was; it felt just like the hand of a dead man, just as cold and clammy as it could be.

-- Adelaide Lyle (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote has importance in terms of identifying Carson in the role of snake or reptile, coldblooded and definitively nonhuman. He is described as a man who is not real, one who is dead. The coldness and darkness of his church is representative of his being, and Adelaide cannot even see him as a living human being.

But now Pastor Chambliss held his Bible in that burned-up hand inside the church, and I remembered what Mama'd said about him being on fire for the Holy Spirit, and I thought about his bursting into flames and giving off all kinds of heat, and how the air conditioner might just be pulling it out of the church and blowing it right onto me and Joe Bill.

-- Jess Hall (chapter 2)

Importance: This quote is important because it shows the viewpoint of the church regarding Carson's burns, that it shows his love and passion for God. It also shows the literal nature of their faith, as Jess views him as literally being on fire, as in exuding heat into the atmosphere. It is a significant amount of heat as it blows out of the air



conditioner. Instead of the air conditioner acting to cool down the church, it is literally just cooling down Chambliss.

The heat waves shook in front of me like a flame coming up out of a cigarette lighter, and for a minute it looked like every one of them people in the parking lot was on fire.
-- Jess Hall (chapter 3)

Importance: This quote relates to the symbolism of heat and fire, both being passion for God and one's faith but also representing hell, the eternal damnation for all Christians. He sees the same passion and heat coming off of the parishioners of this church that he perceives in Chambliss, an intense fervor that the reader knows borders on insanity.

I closed my eyes and thought about Daddy having to see a miracle to believe in it, and then I thought about mirages again, about how miracles might be like that sometimes. It was like Mama was lost in the desert and had gotten so thirsty that she was willing to see anything that might make her feel better about being lost.

-- Jess Hall (chapter 3)

Importance: This quote really shows Jess' deep and profound understanding of his parent's faith and what makes them tick as individuals. He knows that his dad does not have a faith that allows him to simply believe, and he knows that his mother is almost too eager to express her faith and believe in something. His mirage metaphor is also perfect for this situation.

I went ahead and lopped it's head off," he said. "It ain't going to hurt them." He looked at me. "But you remember, Jess," he said, "even a dead snake will strike until the sun goes down.

-- Ben Hall (chapter 3)

Importance: This quote is important as the snake is somewhat symbolic of Chambliss and evil in general, no matter how dead it may appear it can always come back. It also forebodes Ben killing Chambliss later in the book.

I wasn't ever afraid of Ben Hall, but I think I might've been a little afraid of what he was capable of doing to other people, including his daddy.

-- Sheriff Clem Barefield (chapter 5)

Importance: This quote is foreboding, as due to Ben's abusive upbringing he is somewhat of a ticking time bomb. Finding out that his wife has been cheating on him with her pastor is the last straw, and Ben fulfills Clem's fear.

And these signs will follow those who believe: In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will place their hands on the sick, and they will get well."

-- Sheriff Clem Barefield (chapter 6)



Importance: This quote is important because it is the founding gospel verse for the church of signs following. It is this verse that fuels the handling of snakes as well as the healing of stump with the placing of hands.

You look just like your daddy,' he said. I sat there with my chin on the table, and I stared at this fuzzy reflection. I thought about how I could tell him the same thing."

-- Jess Hall (9)

Importance: This quote is important as it sets up the reader for the future relationship between Jimmy and Jess Hall, as after the death of Ben Hall Jimmy will take over parental responsibilities for Jess.

Why'd you stop walking?" he asked. "Because," I told him. "I didn't know you were back there." "Yes, you did," he said. "You just forgot. But go on, I'm following you now." I just stood there not knowing what to say, and Jesus waved his hand like he was shooing me away. "Go on," he said. "It's all right. I told you, I'm following you.

-- Adelaide Lyle (chapter 12)

Importance: This quote is important in defining Adelaide's faith, as she believes that Jesus is always behind her in support of her actions, no matter how difficult they may be at the time. It also shows that her faith is not entirely connected to her church, it exists on a personal, extra-communal level as well.

I don't think we're in for that," he said. "We're trying to have us a Christian family, Miss Lyle. I don't think we're in for all that old-timey stuff. It don't seem right."

-- Ben Hall (chapter 13)

Importance: This quote is interesting as Ben claims to be trying to have a Christian family, even though it is well established that his faith is not very strong. It also is important to note that Adelaide potentially believes that Christopher's muteness could come from Ben's refusal to bury the afterbirth according to tradition.

A deep thinker. Any little boy who can stand like a stump in a cleared field is a deep thinker.

-- Agent (chapter 13)

Importance: This quote is important as it gives the reader the origin of Christopher Hall's strange nickname. It is somewhat humorous that the agent was trying to complement Christopher in a way, but ended up creating his nickname.

Because," she said, "he was someplace he shouldn't have been, and sometimes that's enough." And now, when I think about what happened to Christopher inside that church, I think the same thing."

-- Adelaide Lyle (chapter 13)

Importance: This quote is especially important as it speaks about the culture of these



southern towns, where simply being different or an outsider is enough to determine guilt. Stump was in danger because of his mental incapacities, and because it wasn't his church or his community.

If somebody would have wanted to, after Christopher was born, they could've just stood by and watched Julie and Ben grow apart from each other real slow. It was like a tree had sprung up between them, a tree that was just too thick to throw their arms around.
-- Adelaide Lyle (chapter 14)

Importance: This quote is important in explaining the large and deeply rooted divide between Julie and Ben Hall, a divide that is caused by their disabled son, and only grows until Julie starts her affair with Chambliss.

But he was a brooding soul, and I believe the way he carried himself in all that quietness hurt Julie more than an open hand ever could.
-- Adelaide Lyle (chapter 14)

Importance: This quote is essential for defining Ben's character, in that he tends to keep things inside, choosing silence similar to the silence that his son is forced to have.

And I didn't like a grown woman telling her pastor she was pregnant before her own husband knew and then him sending her out to me after showing her how to get rid of it on her own. Then it dawned on me, and I'll never forget the look on Julie's face when I asked. "Is this Ben's baby?"
-- Adelaide Lyle (chapter 14)

Importance: This quote shows the exact moment when Adelaide realized that Julie and Chambliss were having an affair, an affair that almost was revealed through Julie's near pregnancy.

Well, he didn't die just because his ribs broke. The coroner's report says he died because one of those broken ribs punctured a lung. He died of asphyxia. That means he suffocated, Pastor.
-- Sheriff Clem Barefield (chapter 17)

Importance: This quote shows the magnitude and sheer force that the members of the church placed on Stump in order to not only break his ribs but also puncture his lung. Clem is trying to show Chambliss the error of his methodology, but Chambliss will not listen.

The living church is made of people, and it can grow sick and break just like people can, and sometimes churches can die just like people die. My church died, but it didn't die with Carson Chambliss; it was dead long before that. But I can tell you that it came back to life once he was gone. A church can be healed, and it can be saved like people can be saved.
-- Adelaide Lyle (chapter 25)

Importance: This quote is important as it wraps up the novel for Adelaide, showing her viewpoints on church and community, and showing hope for the future of their county.