

A Language Older Than Words Study Guide

A Language Older Than Words by Derrick Jensen

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

A Language Older Than Words Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Silencing; Coyotes, Kittens and Conversations; and Taking a Life.....	4
Cultural Eyeglasses and Cranes.....	7
The Safety of Metaphor and Claims to Virtue.....	9
Seeking a Third Way.....	11
Breaking Out.....	13
Economics and The Goal is the Process.....	15
Heroes and Metamorphosis.....	17
Insatiability and Violence.....	19
The Parable of the Box and Violence Revisited.....	21
Coercion; Honeybees; and A Turning Over.....	23
A Life of My Own and Interconnection.....	24
The Plants Respond; and Death and Awakening.....	25
A Time of Sleeping; and Out of Mourning, Play.....	26
Trauma and Recovery; and Connection and Cooperation.....	27
Characters.....	30
Objects/Places.....	34
Themes.....	37
Style.....	39
Quotes.....	41
Topics for Discussion.....	43



Plot Summary

In his book, *A Language Older Than Words*, Derrick Jensen attempts to make sense of the atrocities that humans do to each other and to the world in which they live. He speaks of the need for intercommunication between all species; animal, humans, and plants as well as a renewed realization of our interdependence on the entire world and all that is in it. Jensen suggests that in order for positive changes to be made in the world, those that act in ways that are destructive must be made extinct in order to save the world.

In the main premise of Jensen's book, he compares and connects the abuse that he endured in his childhood home to the abuse that takes place in the world as a whole. He discusses what causes abuse as well as some of the reasons why abuse continues to occur. Jensen also talks of the ways that those who are abused protect themselves from their feeling that the world has deceived them.

Jensen goes on to write about the path he has traveled to his own recovery. This path has led him close to a world that has also been abused and continues to be abused. As a result of their similar abuses, Jensen forms a connection with the world and its inhabitants. Jensen traces the thoughts that have caused men to take advantage of the earth and abuse others as they have. Jensen also paints a picture of what might eventually happen to the world if the widespread abuse is not stopped.

Jensen concludes his book by discussing what needs to be done in order to repair the damage that has been done to the earth. He indicates that a way must be found to banish those companies whose activities harm the earth from participation in society. In order to do so, he argues that we as humans must learn to distinguish between real and false hopes. What, for instance, should we expect from those who insist on taking advantage?

Jensen explains that even with a proper mindset, this repair will not be quick or easy. He says that the problems of the world have been intentionally structured so that there will be no easy fix. He finishes his book by indicating that the world is waiting for us to remember our interconnectedness with it and put an end to the isolation that leads to violence and atrocities against it and mankind.



Silencing; Coyotes, Kittens and Conversations; and Taking a Life

Silencing; Coyotes, Kittens and Conversations; and Taking a Life Summary

In his book, *A Language Older Than Words*, Derrick Jensen attempts to make sense of the atrocities that humans do to each other and to the world in which they live. He speaks of the need for intercommunication between all species: animal, humans and plants; as well as a renewed realization of our interdependence on the entire world and all that is in it. Jensen suggests that in order for positive changes to be made in the world, those that act in ways that are destructive must be made extinct in order to save the world.

In the chapter of his book entitled "Silencing," Jensen introduces the idea that people ignore and create lies to cover up facets of humanity that they don't want to believe exist. He also argues that humans believe they are the only ones capable of speaking and understanding because this is the way that humans dominate things, by silencing them. He speaks of his own background in an abusive family where his father denied that any of the abuse had ever happened. Jensen also writes that he and family members made an effort to forget the abuse that they had undergone.

Jensen argues that the world is playing one big game of make believe. Humans pretend that animals can't feel pain, that bad things don't really happen and that people are generally unaffected by the atrocities done to them. He says that humans try to separate ethics from the other aspects of their lives. Jensen states that in the real world, things, other than humans really do speak, if humans will learn to listen. Jensen speaks of hearing positive messages from the stars as an abused child. He argues that it was these messages that made him want to go on living.

Jensen next speaks of Descartes' famous quote, "I think, therefore I am." Jensen sees this quote as representing the intense self-engrossed, self-love that humans have for themselves. Jensen writes of the way that white males have often treated those of other races and sexes such as women, Africans and Indians. Man made up reasons why the voices of these groups should not be listened to.

At the conclusion of this first chapter, Jensen writes about the way humans have blocked out the horror of what actually happened at the Holocaust. He asks the reader if there is a point at which humans can no longer allow themselves to look away while others are hurt. He also wonders why the human race harms one another if they do not enjoy what they are doing to themselves.

Jensen then refers to a practice of cutting the vocal cords of animals used for testing so the researchers didn't have to hear them scream. Jensen says that man is doing the



same thing to the entire planet. He argues that the only way to save our own planet is to return to the old ways of people, such as the Indians, who didn't abuse and mistreat their own homes.

In the chapter "Coyotes, Kittens and Conversations," Jensen writes of the strange feelings that he had that he was going crazy when he realized that he could speak to animals, such as the coyotes that were killing his chickens, and they would actually seem to understand and do as he instructed. In this same chapter, Jensen writes about the things that humans have done in the name of science such as inhumane experiments on dogs and kittens. Jensen also records information shared with him by an Indian friend who describes the differences between the Indian cultures and western civilization. The friend talks to Jensen about the ability to communicate between humans and animals. In the next section, Jensen writes about the way a Cheyenne Indian tribe is massacred by American troops for no good reason except that the people were Indians. Jensen parallels this to the way that his father could always find a reason for abusing Jensen and the rest of the family even though the abuse was really not justified.

In his chapter "Taking a Life," Jensen discusses death. He tells the story of a drake whom he must kill, not only to keep his promise to the coyotes, but also because these drakes are becoming too aggressive with the female ducks. After Jensen chooses the drake doomed for death, he records the interactions between himself and this duck as being somewhat intimate. In the same chapter, he speaks of our culture's confusing combination of the forms of sex and violence.

Silencing; Coyotes, Kittens and Conversations; and Taking a Life Analysis

One of the most striking images that Jensen shares with his readers in this section of the novel is the imagery of the grenade. He uses the imagery of this live grenade rolling across a dance floor to illustrate what he believes is happening in the world. The grenade stands for all of the violence and atrocities being committed in the world while those attending the party are human beings. Although those at the party could grab the grenade and throw it away from themselves, thus saving themselves, they do not do so. Instead, they ignore the grenade and thus the danger that the grenade poses to them. Eventually, the grenade will explode and kill all those at the party. In a similar way, Jensen insinuates that all of the ignored cruelty in the world will eventually cause the demise of the world.

Also in this first section of chapters, Jensen draws a parallel between what is happening to the world as a whole and what happened in his family. He argues that the abuse in his family followed the same pattern as the abuse in the world as a whole. Although there was really no reason for Jensen's father to abuse him and the rest of the family, Jensen writes that his father always had a reason behind his abusive behavior. Similarly, there are "good" reasons why the atrocities that have been done to the world have been done. In the same way that Jensen and his family members learned to



ignore the abuse going on in their family and pretend that it wasn't really happening, so those of us in the world ignore the cruelty going on around them and pretend that it isn't happening.

Also in these chapters, Jensen introduces the idea of the way that the world used to be in the past. He speaks to his Indian friend Jeannette Armstrong, who helps him to understand the way the world worked when indigenous tribes lived on the earth. It is Armstrong who helps Jensen to understand that his belief that he is able to communicate with the coyotes is not a sign that he is crazy.



Cultural Eyeglasses and Cranes

Cultural Eyeglasses and Cranes Summary

Jensen begins the chapter "Cultural Eyeglasses" by talking about the effect of isolation on monkeys then expands this idea to discuss the dangers of the isolation of people from the natural world and from each other. Jensen then talks about what he refers to as cultural eyeglasses. He says these "eyeglasses" are a way of thinking that a society puts on its people to determine or guide their way of thinking. Jensen refers to Christianity as one example of these eyeglasses. He says a form of these glasses were also worn by those working in Nazi death camps.

Jensen next discusses his memories of elementary school where he often challenged his teachers to tell him why when all they wanted to teach him was how. In college Jensen remembers that he and his fellow students were tempted with the idea of moneymaking opportunities to ensure they would finish school.

Jensen closes his chapter by talking about an incident where one of his dogs had been killing the chickens. When Jensen does see the dog killing one of the chickens, he is surprised how calmly the chickens accepted the dog's mauling. Although Jensen chases his dog away from the chickens, coyotes later come and kill the same chickens. Jensen wonders if there is a pattern to the selections of the chickens. Jensen also begins to notice that each day before a chicken is killed, he would dream of chickens. When Jensen speaks to his friend Jeannette again, she tells him that dreams are sent to humans by animals.

In the chapter "Cranes," Jensen writes about his experiences as a high jumper. He speaks of jumping as being a time when he began being able to feel his emotions and express these emotions again. Jensen reasons that this is because the boundaries between himself and others were blurred when a person participated in an activity such as high jumping. He describes this as an activity in which he felt safe expressing his emotions.

Cultural Eyeglasses and Cranes Analysis

One of the things that Jensen does in his book is to include multiple examples that have occurred in real life that back up his beliefs and the way that he sees the world. These examples come from science, such as the experiment by Harlow and Suomi on the effects of isolation on the infant monkeys. In addition, he includes various examples of the cruelty with which the primary culture, usually white men, have treated indigenous cultures and minorities in the past. Many of his examples deal with the way the Indians have been treated. It seems that he uses the examples of Indians and those more in tuned with the world because he hopes to make an impression of how far away from the earth the "primary" culture has moved.



Jensen uses the idea of cultural eyeglasses as a way to explain the strength of the effect that culture and the teachings of modern culture have on society. Just as a pair of eyeglasses can change the way one sees the world, either for better or worse, so can these cultural eyeglasses. Society trains its members early to adapt to a way of seeing things so that they will not later revolt against society.

Jensen continues with the idea of his recovery from his own traumatic childhood as he writes of the freedom that he feels when he is able to participate in high jumping. He indicates that it is at this point that he finally feels able to express his emotions in this area because he considers this area so separated from the rest of his life that it is safe to "feel" while jumping. He notes that these emotions soon begin to spill over into other areas of his life - a change with which he finds it difficult to deal.



The Safety of Metaphor and Claims to Virtue

The Safety of Metaphor and Claims to Virtue Summary

In his chapter, "The Safety of Metaphor," Jensen expands on his belief that animals can communicate with humans and vice versa. He argues that this hypothesis cannot be proven scientifically, however, because there is no way to conduct scientific research on the idea of conversations with animals. Jensen speaks of interviewing with Jim Nollman. Although Jensen does not think that Nollman can help him much, Nollman does concur with Jensen that the idea that there could be a communication between the earth, animals and humans, and that the idea of this communication would be a threat to society. He also indicates society cannot think of the Earth of anything but an inanimate object because if they thought of the Earth as animate and as being able to feel pain, they would find themselves unable to continue to hurt the world in the way that they do.

In the chapter, "Claims to Virtue," Jensen speaks of the horrible things that people do in the name of Christianity. He particularly focuses on society's treatment of women, especially the idea that women are only sexual objects and were created as a temptation to men. Jensen indicates that even though Jesus did not have these views of women, yet His "followers" continue to persecute and kill, believing that it is God's will.

In his chapter, "The Safety of Metaphor," Jensen expands on his belief that animals can communicate with humans and vice versa. He argues that this hypothesis cannot be proven scientifically, however, because there is no way to conduct scientific research on the idea of conversations with animals. Jensen speaks of interviewing with Jim Nollman. Although Jensen does not think that Nollman can help him much, Nollman does concur with Jensen that the idea that there could be a communication between the earth, animals and humans, and that the idea of this communication would be a threat to society. He also indicates society cannot think of the Earth of anything but an inanimate object because if they thought of the Earth as animate and as being able to feel pain, they would find themselves unable to continue to hurt the world in the way that they do.

In the chapter, "Claims to Virtue," Jensen speaks of the horrible things that people do in the name of Christianity. He particularly focuses on society's treatment of women, especially the idea that women are only sexual objects and were created as a temptation to men. Jensen indicates that even though Jesus did not have these views of women, yet His "followers" continue to persecute and kill, believing that it is God's will.

The Safety of Metaphor and Claims to Virtue Analysis

Through these chapters, Jensen focuses on the way that humans try to make themselves feel justified for the cruel things that they do to the world and to each other.



Men, for instance, have turned women into the scapegoats for their crimes by describing ways to determine if these women are witches or not. Those who were determined to be witches were killed.

In these chapters, Jensen singles out religion, Christianity specifically, as an example of a non-violent set of beliefs that people have used throughout the years to punish one another. He makes the point that he believes Jesus would be surprised how many people have come to violent deaths at the hands of people claiming to be following Christ's will. What Jensen does claim is that people have adopted an idea of "if I didn't see it, it didn't happen" belief in regards to violence. The example he uses is the lady who does not approve of the slaughter of cows, but still eats meat because she does not have to witness the slaughter.

Another interesting idea that surfaces in this section of the novel is Jensen's portrayal of his sources. He does not sugarcoat his feelings about the issues that he is dealing with or his opinions about the shape the world is in. In the section of the book in which Jensen writes about having the opportunity to interview Jim Nollman, he presents Nollman as sort of a nut case even though many of Nollman's beliefs echo those of Jensen. The most significant part of the book where Jensen talks about his experience with Nollman is the realization that Jensen is having trouble believing what Nollman is saying, even though the two are in agreement that there is some sort of communication between the species and the earth. It is at the point that one realizes that they are having trouble accepting their own ideas from another person's point of view that they realize they might be fighting a losing battle with people who have been programmed to believe there is not interspecies communication to start with.



Seeking a Third Way

Seeking a Third Way Summary

Jensen begins this chapter with the assertion that people are ultimately good, but act the way they do because they have the underlying fear that their needs for love and socialization won't be met. For this reason, they set up demands from others that they believe will help them to meet these needs. It is because of these demands that Jensen believes violence propagates in the world.

Jensen also addresses the topic of the role of public education in this chapter of his book. He seems to believe it is more than a means through which the educate students in book knowledge, but also a way to teach these students the proper way to act and react to the world. He writes that he believes public education is a way to break the wills of students, have them learn to cater to the opinions of their teachers and not seek to solve problems as a group.

Jensen then addresses a phenomenon seen in the actions of those who are held captive by aboriginal groups. Jensen has noticed that people held prisoners by these groups often don't want to leave and sometime end up joining the group by which they were held captive. He believes this action holds a clue to why European cultures often want to destroy aboriginal cultures so badly because there is a threat that enough Europeans might see the benefits of these aboriginal societies. In this same line of thinking, Jensen speaks of a time when he brought a problem to light during a group meeting Jensen says that he was met with silence and displeasure for breaking the social code of, "Thou shalt pretend there is nothing wrong."

Jensen mentions reading the book *Demonic Males*, a book that claims violence is natural and ignores societies able to live peacefully. He then uses examples of the Semai and the Paliyans, two groups of people who had lived in peace to prove that violence is not necessarily natural. Jensen has prefaced this comment with the story of watching a woman berating her young child for being bad because she slapped a baby. He tells the woman that by treating her child the way she is doing, she is, in essence, doing the same thing the child did.

Jensen closes his chapter by making the point that humans, like other species of animals, can not survive long if they do not learn to cooperate with those around them. He indicates that those who do not learn to protect themselves by being as violent as the world around them will eventually be exterminated. Jensen concludes from this that a third option to the current ways of life is needed.

Seeking a Third Way Analysis

In this chapter, Jensen argues that there are two ways of life currently available to humans. He writes that the first option is for people to accept violence as normal and

fight their way through life. It is these people, he states, who are "winning" at life and are exterminating the non-violent peoples and animals. Jensen concludes that there needs to be a third option between either being a killer or being killed. During this chapter, Jensen also returns to the imagery of the grenade as he describes the dangers associated with the path of destructiveness that the world is currently moving down.

During this section of the novel, Jensen's tone of writing at times turns to one of doubt as he questions his own methods of trying to describe the world. He also criticizes himself for believing that different species can communicate, but not trying to learn the languages of the animals and other living things around him. Although it would have been easy for him not to do so, Jensen recognizes and acknowledges the hypocrisy, even though it is sometimes subtle in his own life.



Breaking Out

Breaking Out Summary

In his chapter entitled "Breaking Out," Jensen goes on to talk about the short fallings of acting only in one's own best interest. He explains that although this way of living may seem the best on the surface, it causes people to accept a severely constricted view of themselves. He believes this gives the idea that humans are at the mercy of their own genes, a viewpoint that Jensen hates. He explains that he sees people as being part of their relationships, part of the world around them. He suggests there is nothing holding people back from escaping from what he refers to as the concentration camp of current civilization

In this chapter, Jensen also writes about how he is still captive to the fear that he learned as a child. He explains there are reasons why people don't break free from this fear when they have the opportunity. Jensen indicates that although they do not like the place where they are being held captive, their fear, they believe that the world around them offers nothing different. Jensen says those who suffer with these types of trauma that lead to fear can either choose to denormalize the trauma or can try to make the trauma feel normal. As an example, he cites a couple who were taken to court on charges of animal abuse. Although the judge charged the couple with some of the crimes, he is most harsh on the people whom he refers to as animal activists who called for justice for the animals the couple had abused.

Also during this chapter, Jensen records an ice storm that caused the coyote tree to break. Jensen finds himself hugging the tree in an attempt to comfort it. Although Jensen thinks at first this might be a strange reaction, he realizes this is the same response one would give to a friend when it is beyond your ability to end or minimize their pain. It is at this point that Jensen realizes that he regards the tree as a friend.

In defense of his idea that humans and animals can coexist and even help each other, Jensen tells the story of a wolf who helped two women and their children survive after they got lost when they ran from the massacre at Sand Creek. This wolf helped the woman and her children get food and offered protection. Jensen also writes of the way that he has tried to convince a scientific friend that animals can speak to humans. Although this woman is not convinced by Jensen's arguments, she is made uncomfortable when Jensen suggests that humans have created the rift between themselves and wildlife as a result of their cruelty.

Breaking Out Analysis

One of the most interesting aspects of this chapter is Jensen's comparison of current society to a concentration camp. Jensen has used the image of a concentration camp before but these references have been made about the people running the camps. In



this reference, Jensen writes that members of current society are like those being held captive in a concentration camp, they are being held in a place where they are being abused and punished on a daily basis and will eventually be killed at the camp. Jensen argues that we, as humans, are free to escape from the concentration camp of current society, but do not do so.

Like the image of the concentration camps, Jensen begins to return to and fill in details of stories he has begun or mentioned in other chapters. One example of this is the massacre at Sand Creek. In one chapter Jensen talks about the cruelty, hate and violence that added to this massacre. In this chapter, Jensen writes about another aspect of this massacre. He tells of the wolves that took care of the two women and their children who survived the massacre but then became lost in the woods. Jensen uses this image to demonstrate the way that animals and human can interconnect and assist one another.



Economics and The Goal is the Process

Economics and The Goal is the Process Summary

In the chapter "Economics," Jensen expands his discussion of economics. He describes economics as a way to turn all things, including lovemaking, into merely a means of money exchange. He makes the point that if one wants to look at every aspect of life in terms of money exchange, very little that is done in one's personal life makes sense. Jensen notes that one of the problems with the current economic system is that it makes money more valuable than anything else. He writes that this type of economy actually encourages people to pull away from each other in a selfish manner. As a result, Jensen says that this economic system actually works to destroy communities.

Instead of providing a clear picture of the true workings of economics, this monetary system promises a life of increasing ease. Jensen indicates that even those who achieve this life of ease will become more and more withdrawn in an effort to avoid the messiness and pain of life. Jensen indicates that it is when these "messy situations" are avoided, that one misses out on the joy and pleasure associated with human interaction.

Jensen concludes that as long as humans value money more than anything else, other living species will be seen as resources, available for use and destruction.

In the chapter, "The Goal is the Process," Jensen begins his chapter by describing a college class in which he allowed students to deviate from typical classroom activities. Jensen next speaks of his upbringing as a fundamental Christian. He fondly remembers the times spent on Sundays communing with nature. Jensen is remembering these Sundays as he takes a couple of chicks who have died to the coyote tree as an offering for the coyotes. At the coyote tree, Jensen sees the stakes and flags of the surveyors who are getting ready to clear land to build houses. Jensen is angered and saddened by the work being done. Although he is not yet brave enough to blow up the dam that is causing the salmon not to be able to reach their spawning ground and therefore die out as a species, he does have the courage to pull up the surveyors' stakes and remove the flags, which will slow the building process.

Economics and The Goal is the Process Analysis

In this chapter, Jensen introduces the idea of the current economics being lethal and destructive. He says this manner of placing a monetary value on everything indicates that everything is for sale. Jensen's argument is that until we lose this idea of looking at other humans and animals based only on their monetary worth, we will never believe that other species and other animals are anything other than things that can be used at will to make our lives easier.



Jensen also describes the class that he taught in college as being non-linear, a term that he also attaches to his book. This idea of the non-linear means that one does not start at the beginning and follow through in a continuum from the start to the ending. In the same way Jensen's book is not linear, he does not follow his ideas from start to finish, but allows his ideas to develop in a manner that may seem disorganized. Like the title of the chapter, however, Jensen makes the point that his intention is not necessarily to come to a concrete conclusion about the ideas that he introduces, but instead to explore the circumstances that have led to the situation that the world is currently in.



Heroes and Metamorphosis

Heroes and Metamorphosis Summary

In the chapter "Heroes" Jensen discusses the way a culture can be defined by their heroes. He writes that his childhood hero was Lawrence of Arabia, a character whom he believed understood Jensen's own perception of reality. Jensen makes the point that a person's heroes say much about who they are and how they perceive the world. Along these same lines, Bruce Stewart, a Maori man tells Jensen that in order for the world to survive, the people must become caretakers of the world. He also indicates people need better heroes, such as the man who died trying to save the birds.

Jensen then gives an example of a person whom many Americans consider a hero. This man is General Norman Schwartzkaf. Jensen points out that although Schwartzkaf is considered a hero, he and his men were found guilty of committing nineteen counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity during the Persian Gulf War. Jensen writes that Schwartzkaf and his men killed unarmed men who were trying to surrender, used napalm, and bombed a baby formula factory as well as many schools and health centers.

In the chapter "Metamorphosis," Jensen writes about what happened when he allowed nature to take over what was once a manicured lawn when he bought his home. During this time, aphids infected a tree near his home. Instead of killing them as he was instructed to do, he left these pests alone to see what would happen to them. At the point that he believes it is almost too late, ladybugs in the larval state come and eat the aphids. During this experience, Jensen wonders what that process of metamorphosis feels like. He wonders what it would be like to turn into a new creature.

Heroes and Metamorphosis Analysis

In this section of his book, Jensen writes about the way that a society can be interpreted by the heroes that society chooses to honor. His argument is that people will cling to a hero who can understand and support their view of reality. One example of the heroes that Jensen says that current society upholds is General Norman Schwartzkaf. Although Schwartzkaf is portrayed as a war hero, he actually used unlawful and cruel techniques to achieve his status.

"Metamorphosis" is a chapter that is interesting because it makes a statement about what might happen to the world if it was left alone to cure itself. Jensen talks about the way his yard, which was once a manicured lawn, was taken over by noxious weeds for several years after he allowed it to grow naturally. During this time, aphids, a type of plant lice, infects one of his trees. Just at the last minute, a natural cure for the aphids comes along in the form of ladybugs that eat the aphids. The idea of metamorphosis

includes the belief that the world could repair itself of the damage that has been done to it.



Insatiability and Violence

Insatiability and Violence Summary

Jensen opens his chapter "Insatiability" by writing of the sound of the bulldozers coming close to his house. He says that he feels like he wants to run away but there is no place for him to go. His feelings of frustration lead him to write about Mount Graham in Arizona. Officials from the University of Arizona wanted to build an astrological observatory on a sacred site of the San Carlos Apaches located on this mountain. Jensen writes about the way the government covered up tests and studies showing the development would hurt the land and its inhabitants. He includes information proving that the Indians were given only a half hearted chance to speak out against the development.

During a discussion with a group of Maori activities, one of the Maori asked Jensen if he worked on these projects and studied interspecies communication so the Indians would like him. As Jensen explores his own motivations, he comes to the conclusion that it was his father's abusive behavior that might have been the catalyst for his work for the benefit of nature. Jensen goes on to tell his readers that his father continued to spy on him throughout his years in high school and college even though they did not live together. Jensen also talks about a track meet at which he competed. Although he had asked his father not to attend the meet, his father does anyway. Later, Jensen is taking part in an activity in which a talking stick was used. Although Jensen resents the way this stick is used out of the context of the Indian ritual, Jensen finds himself using the stick to admit that he wanted to kill his father, in order to protect the innocent.

In the chapter "violence" Jensen first writes about some bullying behavior that he has noticed going on between the geese and one of the hens that he owns. Jensen finally decides to kill the goose, but not until after it has already killed three hens and a rooster. As he is eating with a friend, Jensen realizes that he is responsible for the death of the final hen that was bullied by the goose because he did not kill the goose when he first realized it was killing chickens. Through this experience, Jensen concludes that death and killing is inevitable, but unnecessary killing can be avoided.

Jensen uses various sources to indicate that there are two different kinds of people in the world, those who kill what is in the world and use it selfishly and those who don't. Jensen asks his reader how they think that those who don't use and abuse should react to those who use? Jensen concludes his chapter by telling about a standoff in Peru that ends with Peruvian soldiers killing Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement leaders. Although Jensen is deeply disturbed by the actions of the Peruvians during this time, he indicates that it was a positive experience because for a short while the leaders of this movement held back those who were wishing to destroy the world. Jensen wonders what the world would be like if there were more people like them.



Insatiability and Violence Analysis

In these chapters Jensen writes about the way that the sounds of the machinery make him want to run away like Indians did when white people began taking over their lands. In this way, Jensen can relate to the trials of the Indians. Even though he has these similar experiences, however, one Indian with whom he tries to discuss the troubles facing these indigenous peoples confronts him about his reasons for wanting to help the Indians. The Indian suggests that Jensen is either trying to gain the approval of the Indians or he is trying to pretend he is an Indian. Jensen searches his soul and finally comes to the conclusion that he has developed such a love of protecting nature as a result of his father's abusive behavior.



The Parable of the Box and Violence Revisited

The Parable of the Box and Violence Revisited Summary

In the chapter "The Parable of the Box," Jensen writes that sometimes when he first wakes up in the morning, he believes that none of the harsh realities of current culture are true. He next moves into a discussion of what causes a culture to be bad or good. One of the aspects of culture that he explores is the idea that relationships between people in nonaggressive cultures eliminate the polarity between selfishness and altruism. Jensen also believes that the way that a society handles wealth will also help to determine whether that society is good or bad.

Jensen finishes this chapter by talking about why change is not taking place even though leaders surface occasionally who try to bring change about. Jensen says that each person who could make changes in the world is first killed, and then their story is modified so that it agrees with what those who want to keep control of the culture want others to believe about that person. Instead of the people who are trying to change culture for the better being considered heroes, the real heroes of our culture are those who gain and keep control of others through their use of people.

Jensen goes on to write that entire communities begin to take on the values of the people who hold the majority of the power. He goes on to draw a parallel between the power of politicians and wealthy businessmen over their societies to these same men's power over prostitutes with whom this class of male will sometimes visit. The prostitutes always reported that their clients used them in ways intended to make the prostitute feel dominated and humiliated. Jensen says these men require that they have domination over society in a similar fashion.

Before anything will change, Jensen asserts that each person needs to awaken to their own personal role in the nightmare. He says that we must break free from the delusional hold that people of false power have over us and realize they have no divine right to control the lives of others.

In the chapter "Violence Revisited" Jensen first writes that the difference between his family and culture as a whole is that if his father had been killed, his family's trauma would have ended. In the world as whole, however, killing the people, such as Hitler, would have killed the leader, but not the opinions they represented. This violence, even in killing those who are causing harm also has its drawbacks as those who attempt to make the world a better place by ridding it of a violent person become the very thing they tried to get rid of.



Jensen tells a story of accidentally killing a snake that was neither dead, as he first thought, or injured. Once he did injure the snake, however, he had no choice but to put it out of its misery. Although he might have learned from his mistake, Jensen writes that the finality of violent actions is another problem associated with violence.

Jensen next writes about this culture's obsession with weapons of mass destruction and tries to make sense of our culture's obsession with building this type of weapon. He draws the conclusion that man has an underlying desire to self-destruct. As examples of this desire, Jensen cites the Forest Service's assertions that logging and clear cutting land is good because it keeps healthy trees from becoming sick. These people then inject healthy trees with poison and cause them to die to replace the dead trees taken during the process of clear cutting.

Jensen then writes about the deep-set anger in our culture that is evidenced by the racism in Spokane. Even though Jensen means the black people who use the basketball courts no harm and only wants to be part of their play, he feels unwelcomed and even disliked when he shows up at the basketball court. Jensen finds himself wishing that people could turn their anger toward something productive. This wish leads Jensen to wonder who exactly people should turn their anger upon. Should it be on the trucker driving for the logging company who is just trying to support his family? Even if people flattened all the tires of every logging truck they could find, would this really make a difference?

The Parable of the Box and Violence Revisited Analysis

One of the more forceful statements in this section is Jensen's description of the real lesson of the story of Jesus. Although Jensen claims not to be a Christian, he hits the nail on the head when he speaks of the problems with this religious institution. Jensen does not criticize Jesus or His lessons, but clumps Him into a group of good people who tried to make a difference in the world and were silenced by those in power. Although Jesus spoke of love, and treating others fairly, it is sometimes those who claim to be His closest followers who are killing others for what they wrongly believe is the will of Jesus.

It is also in this section of chapters that Jensen introduces his parable of the box. Using this parable, Jensen tries to make his readers understand that it is their beliefs that are letting the people in control continue to keep control and continue to abuse the power that they have. He indicates that he believes there is no one person who has the divine right to "control" anything provided by nature.



Coercion; Honeybees; and A Turning Over

Coercion; Honeybees; and A Turning Over Summary

Jensen begins his chapter "Coercion" by writing about his reactions to his abuse as a child. He sees even his act of writing about what has happened to him and what continues to happen to society in general as a way of blocking out the reality of it all. He concludes this short chapter by writing that he believes that coercion is central to culture even though it is detrimental. He still believes, though, that there exists in the human race an ability not to live by coercion.

In the chapter "Honeybees," Jensen makes the point that when trying to communicate between the species, cooperation is the key. He writes of working with the bees as being his first real lesson in interspecies cooperation.

In the chapter, "A Turning Over," Jensen starts his chapter by describing a conversation with a friend who is frustrated with his life. Jensen breaks off from this description to discuss why egalitarian societies never last. He suggests that the reason people don't do more to free themselves from the painful positions in which they are stuck is because they get so good at surviving in their pain that they neglect to do anything to break free from it. We don't rebel, he writes, because we have too much to lose.

At the conclusion of this chapter, Jensen introduces the idea that our society values the wrong things. He states that people today value things instead of people and that our way of life will never change until we change our emphasis on things. He indicates those working for wage salaries and "selling" the hours of their lives for things that don't bring them any happiness are the outcomes of this society that values things more than people.

Coercion; Honeybees; and A Turning Over Analysis

In his chapter "Coercion," Jensen provides an interesting self-analysis of his work. He wonders as he writes if the tone of the book is raw enough, if he is getting his point through in the tone of the novel. He also wonders if he is simply writing his book as a way to avoid the feelings associated with his childhood abuse. Even when he is writing about the abuse, he really doesn't have to think about it because he is instead trying to choose the proper words to use to describe his experiences.

From this chapter, Jensen moves on to begin his writing about the bees, a part of his life the reader later learns was very important to his own healing process. Jensen also speaks of the dangers of working for things and not for people and relationships. He accuses those around him of valuing these things more than they even value their own lives.

A Life of My Own and Interconnection

A Life of My Own and Interconnection Summary

In his chapter, "A Life of My Own," Jensen talks about his experiences working with bees. He describes the joy and freedom that he feels working for himself. Jensen describes how he borrowed money from his mother in order to buy bees and hives. Jensen indicates that even though his time with the bees was disastrous, it was also a time of great happiness in his life.

In the chapter "Interconnection," Jensen writes about how difficult it is to withdraw from the modern economy. He uses an example of chicken processing to show the complexity of this interconnection. He also describes the dangers these plants, like Tyson are to the country. He asserts that it is this process and it's emphasis toward production that leads ultimately to murder.

In this chapter, Jensen also describes the way that the lives of bees in a hive are structured. Each bee has its own job to do in the structure of the hive. Jensen, in fact, indicates that the hive itself has its own personality. All of the bees work together to care for the hive and see to its well-being.

Jensen talks about the habits of bees as well as the times that he was "punished" by the bees for treating them rudely. He writes about a time when he was stung badly by bees because he frustrated them in his attempts to cut their hive down from a high branch.

Jensen indicates that in his earlier writing he stated he was "messed" up. At the end of this chapter, he reinstates his feelings. Although he may be "messed" up in many ways, Jensen says that he is not crazy for experiencing ecstasy and intimacy with others.

A Life of My Own and Interconnection Analysis

One of the most interesting aspects of these chapters is Jensen's reference to himself as being fucked up. The reader should note that throughout this novel, this is the only time that Jensen has used any type of off color language in his entire book. He uses this word in reference to himself, a derogatory description giving the reader an idea of his opinion of himself. At the conclusion of these chapters, however, Jensen revokes his image of himself as being messed up. Although he does not disagree with his former opinion of himself, Jensen says that one of the ways in which he is not messed up is in the joy that he finds in his relationships with others.



The Plants Respond; and Death and Awakening

The Plants Respond; and Death and Awakening Summary

In the chapter "The plants respond," Jensen writes about a plant that shows a response on a lie detector test when the experimenter thought about burning one of the plant's leaves. Jensen also talks about an experiment with brine shrimp in which these shrimp also reacted to the stimuli of a human. Jensen writes that these experiments have not gotten far in gaining credibility in the scientific community because scientists do not want to damage their credibility and thus their ability to get grants to assist with their research.

In the chapter "Death and Awakening," Jensen writes about the first time his bees died. He also writes of his struggle with Crohn's Disease and the healing, physical and emotional, that he found during this time in his life.

The Plants Respond; and Death and Awakening Analysis

These chapters, particularly the one entitled "Death and Awakening" could be considered to be the climax of the novel. It is in this chapter that Jensen describes his "death" during his struggle with Crohn's Disease. It is this point in Jensen's life that he realizes what he has done to his own body through his own inability to get past the abuse of his past. Because Jensen has been working with the bees, he considers this the happiest time of his life. However, he writes that it was also the most devastating because his bees died twice during the time that he was working with them. It seems that it is after Jensen's time with Crohn's that he begins writing his own book and telling his own story. It is also while he is in the hospital with Crohn's that Jensen's father calls him for a final time, and Jensen hangs up on him.

The chapter, "The Plants Respond," does much to support Jensen's idea that plants and animals are able to interact with people. In fact, it seems to indicate that these plants and animals, which some people consider to be inanimate, actually attune themselves to the people who take them for granted. Research presented in this chapter indicates that even while the people these plants and animals are attuned to are in different rooms or even buildings these animals and plants still pick up on the emotions and thoughts of their "people."



A Time of Sleeping; and Out of Mourning, Play

A Time of Sleeping; and Out of Mourning, Play Summary

In the chapter, "A Time of Sleeping," Jensen writes about his journey as he learns to live with Crohn's. He writes that he has learned from his disease that he can't attempt to control his emotions or they will kill him. He then uses the story of Briar Rose to describe the way that hopefully society will have the same story of awakening that the princess in the story did.

In his chapter, "Out of Mourning, Play," Jensen includes in his book references to the idea that the animals and plants of the world have sometimes played with him. This is a sort of proof that the world also has a sense of humor and a sign that he also, should play, even in his times of sadness.

A Time of Sleeping; and Out of Mourning, Play Analysis

In this section of his novel, Jensen writes about his continued struggle with his own mental and physical conditions as well as his slow recovery from both of these conditions. He writes about the way that the world around him encourages him to work at his own recovery through what he interprets as their playfulness.



Trauma and Recovery; and Connection and Cooperation

Trauma and Recovery; and Connection and Cooperation Summary

In the chapter "Trauma and Recovery," Jensen writes once again of the lies that are told to the general public to keep the world and its people from seeming so terrible. Jensen poses possibility that these perpetrators really believe the lies they tell and really think the world isn't in as bad shape as it really is. He puts forth the guess that we will never really know what these people think because they aren't interested in being studied. Then by the time they are caught and forced to own up to what they might have done, they only tell people what they want to hear. Jensen points out the statistics that only one percent of offenders are ever actually convicted, so this would be a very minute group to study in order to get a full idea of the thoughts and mindsets of the criminals as a whole.

An anthropologist tries to describe common factors in predatory cultures by talking with Jensen about common risk factors for high rape societies. These include highly militarized and sex-segregated cultures where caring for children, which is done by women, is devalued. These cultures often also generally have a male deity instead of a female deity or male/female couple.

Next, Jensen describes the way that nothing can change what damage has already been done. As an example, Jensen writes about the guilt and grief that he felt when a blind dog that he owned was killed on railroad tracks because Jensen had taken the dog on a walk with him, then not stayed close enough to save him from a coming train. Although he knows the pain of abuse and grief, he also knows that it is time for him to change and stand up to face the world as an adult.

Jensen next addresses this difficulty of recovering from trauma as he writes that walls built as a result of trauma don't fall easily. This is especially so for children raised in trauma. This trauma skews the way these children view life. Jensen writes that there are in order to begin healing from their trauma those traumatized must first have the opportunity to tell their story in a place and a way that they believe is safe. However, there are two problems people encounter when trying to take this step in healing. First, there are some who will tell them their story does not need to be told at all. There are also those who tell the victim that he is better off not talking about what has happened to them. This second problem encountered is that there are those who try to push these victims into talking about their trauma too early.

Near the conclusion of this chapter, Jensen writes that the only true way to transcend an atrocity is to turn it around and make it a gift to others. He writes in warning, however, that it is impossible to recover from any traumatic experience in isolation.



In the final chapter, "Connection and Cooperation," Jensen concludes his book by discussing ways to possibly rehabilitate the world. He suggests there needs to be a "ruthless cooperation" in which those who refuse to participate in this cooperation. Jensen also tells his reader that in order for those in this world to survive, they need to recognize the difference between real and false hopes. He suggests that false hopes need to be eliminated, as these will only block the view of real possibilities.

During this chapter, Jensen writes about the reasons that he can't offer real solutions to the problems that haunt the world. The first reason that he says he can't offer solution is because any solutions he might try to give would trivialize efforts of those who have tried before to heal the world. Another reason that Jensen says that he is unable to give solutions to this problem is because the problem is inherently formed so that it has no solution. Jensen also indicates that if he tries to offer a solution to the problem, he would have to make a supposition that a solution exists.

One suggestion that Jensen makes for those hoping to make a difference is that people must learn to surrender to the land. As he thinks about what the world will be like in the years to come, Jensen wonders if the animals and vegetation are not leaving because they are trying to do their part to shut down what people are doing to the world. He also suggests that these animal and plant species may not be gone, but just gone into hiding until human civilization either collapses or humans are ready to enter into a cooperative relationship with the planet again.

Trauma and Recovery; and Connection and Cooperation Analysis

In this final section of the novel, Jensen returns to the image of the grenade used in the first section of the novel. He uses the image not only to remind readers of the problems facing the world pointed out in the beginning of the book, but also to serve as a warning to readers. The grenade has not gone away. There is still a ticking time bomb waiting to explode and destroy the world, including those who are trying desperately to avoid the dangers facing the world.

In the final chapter, Jensen does not try to lay out a plan to save the world. He explains his reasons for not doing so. In laying out these reasons, Jensen shows respect for those who have attempted in the past to help solve the problems that are in the world. He knows that if he were to propose trite solutions, it would only belittle the people who had come before him. Jensen does write, however, that one thing necessary for the world to even begin to heal is that there must be cooperation between the earth, the animals and the people. He describes this cooperation as "ruthless." The choice of this word indicates that this cooperation will not come easily, but may result in the need to exterminate those entities that will not work for the betterment of the earth.

Finally, during his final chapters, Jensen makes an interesting comment that the animals and plants of the world may have simply gone into hiding, waiting for the damage that the humans have done to result in some sort of apocalypse, after which they can return

and resume life as it was before the humans began to "use" the earth for their own devices.



Characters

My Father

Jensen's father was a socially respected, wealthy, and deeply religious lawyer. However, behind closed doors, he beat and raped both his children and his wife. Jensen's father only raped him and didn't beat him as he did Jensen's brother and sister. When Jensen's parents divorced, his father used his influence and power to take everything possible away from Jensen's mother. Jensen learned that although he left home his father still kept tabs on him through his teachers and later friends. One of the last times that Jensen sees his father is at a track meet that Jensen specifically asked him not to attend. Jensen had the feeling his father only attended the meet because Jensen had asked him not to. Jensen's father later calls Jensen when Jensen is in the hospital with Chron's disease. Jensen hangs up on his father.

Viktor Frankl

Viktor Frankl was a former prisoner at Aushwitz. In his book, Frankl says that the people who found meaning in their lives and their suffering were better suited to survive the concentration camps. Frankl also concluded that there were only two races of people - decent people and indecent people.

Yanomame Indians

This is a tribe of Indians, many of whom were shot when they tried to protect their land against mining prospectors in Venezuela. Newspaper reports at the time gave the impression that these Indians were stupid because they could not count past two and therefore could not give an exact number of those killed.

Jim Nollman

A man who has spent a great deal of his life studying the way animals communicate with each other and with humans. Nollman has written three books on this topic and has founded a nonprofit organization dedicated to this study. Jensen once took the opportunity to interview Nollman for a magazine.

Jeannette Armstrong

Jeannette Armstrong is a traditional Okanagan Indian. She works as an author, teacher and philosopher. She works on indigenous sovereignty and land rights issues as well as helping rebuild damaged indigenous communities damaged by the dominant (i.e. white)



culture. She encourages Jensen to believe that communication with other species is possible.

Jensen

Jensen is the main character and narrator of this book. Based on his experience with his own childhood abuse, Jensen attempts to try to describe what causes the violence, anger, killing, raping and cruelty that goes on in the world. Jensen also tries to determine what might make a difference in the world.

My Mother

Jensen's mother tries to keep her husband from abusing her children by taking the blows herself.

Semai

The Semai are a tribe of people in Mayai who have tried to live peacefully, but are labeled as being weak and timid because of their desire to escape from and avoid strife.

Paliyans

The Paliyans are another tribe of people whose culture has thrived on mutual cooperation and independence of authority. Jensen uses these people as an example that not all cultures celebrate the male as the dominant sex.

Richard Dawkins

A sociobiologist who indicates in his research that natural selection "favors genes which control their survival machines in such a way that they make the best use of their environment."

Julie Mayeda

Julie Mayeda is the friend whom helped Jensen to realize that he inadvertently killed two birds because he did not kill the goose even after he realized which goose was killing the hens.



Cleve Backster

Cleve Backster is a polygraph expert who tests plants with a polygraph trying to get an electrochemical response from these supposedly inanimate objects. Backster gets a response from one of these plants when he threatens its well-being.

Dr. Judith Herman

Dr. Judith Herman is an expert on the effects of psychological trauma whom Jensen has the opportunity to speak to about the connection between atrocities and silence.

Dave

This is a friend of Jensen's who has taken a different path. Dave is trying to succeed in the way that society sees success, but instead is making himself and his family unhappy.

John Kreeble

John Kreeble is a friend of Jensen's who admits that he enjoys studying hate groups such as Aryan Nation because they are honest about their hate and fear of other cultures.

Erich Fromm

Erich Fromm is a psychologist who determined that cultures were either life affirming or destructive.

Ruth Benedict

Ruth Benedict is an anthropologist who tried to discover why some cultures are more or less good while others are not.

General Norman Schwarzkopf

Although Schwarzkopf was considered to be a hero, he actually did and ordered cruel and inhumane things be done to the people whom he was fighting against.

Khoikhoi

This is a tribe of people often criticized for their lack of work.



Arawaks

This is a tribe of people exterminated for the kindness that they showed toward people.

My Mother

Jensen's mother tries to keep her husband from abusing her children by taking the blows herself.

Rob

Jensen remembers his brother, Rob, being chased around the house by his father.



Objects/Places

The Stars

It is the stars that Jensen says helped to keep him alive as a child. He says these stars spoke to him and told him that his abusive circumstances were not normal and that he was a good child and was loved.

A Pink Camaro

This pink Camaro is the car that belonged to Jensen's brother. Jensen remembered his brother running to this car to get away from his father.

A Grenade

It is the imagery of a grenade ignored at a party that Jensen uses to describe the way that humans react to the violence and atrocities of the world. He believes that by ignoring what is happening to the world, humans will eventually destroy themselves, just as they will be destroyed if they continue to ignore the grenade at the party.

Coyotes

The coyotes are a major player in Jensen's writing as he comes to recognize his own connection with the world as a whole. One of the first times that Jensen realizes that animals and humans might be able to communicate with each other is when he asks the coyotes not to kill any more chickens in return for him putting the leftovers from when he butchers a chicken near a tree that he has named the coyote tree.

A White Flag and a United States Flag

The Cheyenne's principal leader waved both of these items at attacking American troops in an attempt to show that the Indians in the village were friendly. Despite the signs, however, the American troops, lead by Chivington, massacre the Indian village.

The Coyote Tree

The coyote tree is a tall, shapely pine near which Jensen places his offerings for the coyotes.



A Pile of Coyote Poop

When Jensen returns to the tree, after he first puts the chicken gizzards next to the tree, he finds a pile of coyote poop. Jensen believes that this is a sign that the coyotes have accepted the agreement he made with them.

Executive Summary of the Third National Incidence Study of C

Jensen receives this summary in the mail and uses the figures quoted in it to emphasize the severity of the child abuse problems.

Lake Coeur d'Alene

Lake Coeur d'Alene is one of the most beautiful, but also one of the most polluted lakes in the world. Hundreds of migrating tundra swans die each year as a result of the toxic levels of lead in the water.

Auschwitz

Auschwitz is a Nazi concentration camp where hundreds of Jews were killed by Hitler's forces.

Malleus Maleficarum

The Malleus Maleficarum is a book that survived 180 years and went through 35 different editions in four languages. This book was a "how-to" guide for identifying witches. Many women who were probably innocent of any crime were killed as a result of information in this book.

Letters from an American Farmer

The writer of this book points out there must be something exemplary about the way the Indians live since there have been many Europeans who have joined the Indian tribes, yet no Indians who have chosen to become Europeans.

Demonic Males

Demonic Males is a book that claims that since rape occurs among orangutans, this is proof the violation is actually a "natural" practice and should be accepted among humans.



Massacre at Sand Creek

Sand Creek was an Indian dwelling place where Europeans opened fire upon the residents for no reason. Two women and their children were able to escape and became lost but were taken care of by wolves.

Mount Graham

Mount Graham is the location of an Apache sacred burial ground and also the place where the University of Arizona forced the Apaches to give up so an observatory could be built.

The Columbus Project

The Columbus Project is the name of the project where the University of Arizona ousted the Apache Indians out of their sacred burial grounds so that an observatory could be built.

The Parable of the Box

The parable of the box is a story that Jensen uses to try to explain why the world is in the condition that it is.

Sixty Days

Sixty days is the amount of time that it takes for people to die of starvation.

Crohn's Disease

It is this disorder of the colon that Jensen says not only almost killed him, but also reintroduced him to the way that he should live his life.



Themes

Religion

Although Jensen claims not to be a Christian, religion is a topic that he breeches often in his writing. In one section of the book, he writes about the way that he was raised as a Christian. Because of his family beliefs, he was not allowed to do any work on Sundays. As a result, Jensen would often spend these Sundays communing with nature and developing a love and appreciation for the outdoors.

As an adult, however, Jensen writes that he separated himself from Christian beliefs. Although he does see Jesus as a good man, he puts Jesus in the same category of people such as Spartacus. As Jensen describes the alterations that humans have made to Christianity, it becomes obvious that he believes these people are generally hypocritical. Although they say they believe in a religion based on love and treating others as they would want to be treated, these so-called Christians have also killed thousands of people in their messed up attempt to be followers of Christ. Jensen includes religion in the list of things that he considers cultural eyeglasses, or ways of thinking that those in power in a society impose on the people in an attempt to influence their ways of thinking.

Interconnection

Interconnection is one of the traits that Jensen indicates has been lost as a result of the current culture's opinion of the earth and its resources as inanimate objects that can be used and abused with no impact on the future. Jensen, instead, argues that the world, the plants, the animals and the humans are all interconnected. He says that when humans destroy the earth and its resources and even other humans, they are creating a ticking time bomb that will eventually come back to destroy them.

Jensen argues in his final chapter that it is only through the re-acknowledgement and re-initiation of this interconnection that the world will be saved. Jensen argues that each species must be able to help each other and must be able to live in harmony with others in order for the world to work as it was designed to work.

Jensen uses his parable of the box to describe the way that society has corrupted this idea of interconnection. Humans, the dominant culture, he argues, have treated the world as a resource available for their use without the humans needing to give anything back to the world. In the parable of the box, Jensen describes one man who keeps all of the salmon in the river in a box away from the other people even though he cannot eat all of these salmon himself. Meanwhile, people are starving because this one man refuses to share the salmon with others.



Recurring Images and Topics

Throughout the novel, Jensen introduces and then returns to certain topics and images that he builds upon throughout his writing. These images and objects include the grenade, the concentration camps, the bees, the coyotes, salmon and his own childhood abuse by his father.

As Jensen develops his ideas, he uses the image of the concentration camp to help his readers understand first, how cruel humans can be to one another. He next uses this same image to describe the way that humans often don't try to extricate themselves from bad situations even though they are causing them harm. Those being held in concentration camps would often do nothing to fight against their captors or warn those around them of the dangers they were facing even when they knew others were slated for death. Jensen again visits the idea of the concentration camp when he describes current culture as holding people captive in their suffering and unhappiness, just as they were held in concentration camps.

The image of a grenade rolling slowly across a dance floor is another image that is used often in Jensen's writing. He uses this image to describe the way that people are ignoring a situation that will eventually cause them grave danger and destruction. If the people in this scenario were to pay attention, however, they would be able to react and possibly save themselves from the situation.

Another situation that Jensen develops throughout the novel is the impact that his relationship with his father had on his entire life. Jensen starts out by sharing with his reader that his father did abuse him as a child. He later expounds upon this information, stating that his father continued to spy on him and try to torment him even as an adult. Jensen compares the abuse that he suffered at the hands of his father to the abuse that the world is suffering at the hands of those who only want to treat the world as a thing instead of a living being.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written from the point of view of Derrick Jensen. From the information included in the book it can be inferred that Jensen is a young to middle-aged man. Although he has dated, he has not married and lives alone. Jensen has attended college and has worked with bees but avoids entering the labor force.

Jensen writes his book, which details the damage that the "dominant" society, i.e. white males, has done to the world, including plants, animals, and indigenous peoples in the name of progress and profit against the background of his own abuse as a child. Jensen uses his own experience with abuse and the process through which he goes to heal from his own abuse to detail what has been done to the world. He uses his story to try to explain what must be done order to help heal the world.

Through the process of writing the book, Jensen seems to help himself more completely understand his own feelings about his childhood abuse as well as his feelings about what is happening to the world. Jensen can relate to what is happening to the world and the pain that he believes that the plants and animals that surround him are going through because of his own childhood abuse and the pain that he felt during this time in his life.

Setting

Jensen includes a variety of settings in his book. The primary setting and one that is mentioned the most, is Jensen's home near Spokane, Washington. Jensen tries to make his home an example of what he would like to see done to the entire world. He raises his own chickens for eggs. He also kills the chickens occasionally for meat. When he kills these chickens, he offers the carcasses to the coyotes. He sees this action as an agreement on his part to keep the coyotes from killing the chickens at will.

Another important place that Jensen mentions often during his novel is the coyote tree. It is at this tree that Jensen leaves his offerings for the coyotes. Jensen sees this tree as a friend. It is a symbol of his relationship and his agreement with the coyotes. During an ice storm this tree is broken. When Jensen finds this tree broken, he tries to comfort it by physical touch, just as he would a human friend.

California is another important setting in this book. It is in this state that Jensen first begins working with honeybees and has many experiences where he learns about cooperation and group work from these insects.

In addition to these two main settings, Jensen branches out his research all over the world. He writes about the concentration camps in Germany and the abuse of



aborigines in Australia. In one section of the book, he writes of sticking a pin in a map to locate the numerous places around the world where atrocities have taken place.

Jensen's setting time wise is in the modern time period. He does, however, travel through time to talk about the way the world worked during different times and during different cultures. He talks about the beginning of time when the aboriginal people worked in cooperation with the world and the plants and animals in it.

Language and Meaning

There are a few places in Jensen's novel where he critiques his own writing. However this critique is often brief and very to the point. The main concern that Jensen expresses in his writing is that his language is not raw enough. He seems to be concerned that he is not expressing through his words the tragedy of the dilemma that the world is in. At another point in his writing, Jensen writes that he feels that even his act of writing about his own abuse is a way to avoid the pain associated with this abuse as his puts his efforts into choosing his words and structuring his sentences carefully. However, as one reads Jensen's work, they can get a feeling of the fervor with which he hopes to present his opinion to his reader. His beliefs are outlined strongly in the book as he uses not only his own opinion and own conclusions from his experiences, but also includes stories of abuse and problems associated with modern society as found around the world.

Although Jensen's words and language can be forceful and often deal with stories and images that are hard to think about, he does not resort to foul language to describe any of the characters, even those who are the malefactors in these circumstances. He has a large vocabulary and uses words that properly fit the circumstances that he attempts to describe. He uses the one curse word mentioned in the book in reference to himself.

Structure

Jensen describes the structure of his book well in the chapter "The Goal is the Process" when he refers to his book as being non-linear. This means that the book is not patterned after any hard and fast time line but instead follows Jensen's own thought process as he works through and tries to make sense of the widespread abuse in the world as well as his own childhood where he was abused by his father.

The book is divided into 28 chapters, each with a worded title but no chapter number. Each of these chapters is prefaced by a quote that sums up or relates to the material covered in the following chapter. The chapter "Death and Awakening" which occurs in the last fourth of the book, almost at the end, could be considered the climax of the novel. From here Jensen concludes his thoughts and provides suggestions as to what must happen in order for the world to return to a better state of living. Prior to this chapter, Jensen develops his argument that the world is slowly killing itself through its processes of greed, power, and politics.



Quotes

"This silencing is central to the workings of our culture. The staunch refusal to hear the voices of those we exploit is crucial to our domination of them." (Silencing, p. 2).

"Throughout my childhood an unarticulated question hung in the air, then settled deep in my bones, not to be defined or spoken until it had worked its way back to the surface many years later: If his violence isn't making him happy, why is he doing it?" (Silencing, p. 11).

"Throw a dart at a map of the world, and no matter the territory it strikes, you will find the story of cruelty and genocide perpetrated by our culture." (Cultural Eyeglasses, p. 43).

"When my teachers told me how, I wanted to know why, and when they gave me abstractions, I asked them to make the lessons real. Not that how isn't important, but I sensed even as a child — in a vague, entirely unarticulated fashion — that to ask how without asking why might be dangerous: only recently have I grown to name my earlier misgivings, and to know that such an imbalance causes nuclear bombs, nerve gas, napalm, and other examples of inexcusable technology." (Cultural Eyeglasses, p. 45).

"I do not wish to merely describe the horrors that characterize our culture; I want to stop them." (Cultural Eyeglasses, p. 50).

"A primary purpose of Judeo-Christianity has not been to move us toward a community where the teachings of someone like Jesus - simple and necessary suggestions for how to get along with each other - are made manifest in all aspects of life, but instead to provide a theological framework for a system of exploitation." (Claims to Virtue, p. 78).

"Are these people evil, or are they stupid? We stumble over ourselves to avoid the truth, to avoid the many grenades that are slowly wobbling across the floor. The answer seems to be that in making ourselves blind we become evil and stupid. We are afraid what it would mean were we to see." (Seeking a Third Way, p. 118).

"The Arawaks were exterminated for their kindness." (Seeking a Third Way, p. 121).

"I am only so beautiful as the character of my relationships, only so rich as I enrich those around me, only so alive as those I greet." (Breaking Out, p. 127).

"No one emerges from a trauma unscarred. Having been severely traumatized, it becomes the work of at least a lifetime to denormalize the trauma - to recognize it for the aberration it is - and to begin to reinhabit your body, your senses, your mind, to reinhabit relationships, to reinhabit a world you perceive as having betrayed you." (Breaking Out, p. 127).

"We still believe we stand alone atop the world. But it has to stop. At some point we finally have to look around and see if anyone is still able, and willing, to lead us home." (Breaking Out, p. 133).



"What this means is that so long as money is valued - and in fact necessary - a great percentage of people will end up spending a great deal of time doing things they don't want to do." (Economics, p. 140).

"I realized I was responsible that day not for one but two deaths, one through the use of a hatchet, the other through inaction." (Violence, p. 197).

"It was the bees who — along with high jumping — provided me my first real somatic understanding of cooperation and compliance: work against bees and they sting; work with them as they work with themselves and they reward you with honey, joy and sore muscles." (Honeybees, p. 252).

"So long as we value production over relationship, and in fact over life, so long shall we follow our current path of ever-increasing immiseration for the ever-increasing majority." (A Turning Over, p. 261).

"There is a language older by far and deeper than words. It is the language of the earth, and it is the language of our bodies. It is the language of dreams, and of action. It is the language of meaning, and of metaphor." (Death and Awakening, p. 311).

"We do not easily give up our acquired ways of being, even when they're killing us." (A Time of Sleeping, p. 326).

"If we wish to stop the atrocities, we need merely step away from the isolation. There is a whole world waiting for us, ready to welcome us home. It has missed us as sorely as we have missed it. And it is time to return." (Connection and Cooperation, p. 375).



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the idea of silence as it is presented in the novel.

Compare and contrast the abuses that Jensen survived in his childhood as compared to the abuses of the world in general.

What does Jensen suggest is the best way for people to help repair the damages that have been done to the world?

Discuss Jensen's opinion of religion.

Explain the significance of both high jumping and keeping bees to Jensen.

What is Jensen's father's role in the novel?

To what language is Jensen referring in the title of his book? Explain your answer.