

Let Me Be Frank With You Study Guide

Let Me Be Frank With You by Richard Ford

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Plot Summary

Let Me Be Frank With You by Robert Ford is the fourth novel about retired real estate agent Frank Bascombe. The four short stories that comprise the novel each deal with a different facet of life and how Frank deals with other people around him as they all face the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. This is a collection of short stories showing Frank's views on aging and the culture around him as he encounters old friends and meets new ones with stories of their own.

In "I'm Here", Frank comes face to face with the destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy. Former client Arnie Urquhart calls Frank to complain that the house Frank sold him years ago has been totally destroyed by the hurricane. Arnie wants advice on how he should proceed with the property as he has been recently contacted about selling the property. Frank is at first agitated that he has been called as he feels that there is nothing he can do and that it is Arnie's decision, but Arnie wants to meet with Frank anyways. Reluctantly, Frank agrees although he is a bit concerned for his own safety. Frank drives to his former home but is stopped at the beginning of the street by a police officer, who is also a former client of Frank's. After a brief chat, the officer allows Frank to go on down Poincinet Road to his former home. Frank waits for Arnie but Arnie is late, giving Frank time to rethink his decision. Before anything can be done about it, Arnie shows up outside of Frank's car wanting Frank to walk with him. After a lengthy discussion about change and how others have survived the storm, Arnie agrees that this is the best time to sell the house as there is nothing that can be done for it. Frank realizes that the only thing Arnie really wants is someone to talk to and be there for him in making this decision.

Frank encounters a former resident of his home in "Everything Could Be Worse". As Frank is returning home from reading to the blind at the local radio station, he notices a woman standing on his front porch. She introduces herself as Charlotte Pines and informs Frank that she lived in his house many years ago. Charlotte would like to see the inside of the house for nostalgia's sake and Frank lets her in. While Frank is downstairs in the kitchen, Charlotte takes a tour of the upstairs of the home. When she comes back down, she and Frank share a cup of coffee. While they are drinking, Charlotte reveals the real reason she is there. She is seeking closure from a tragic event that occurred in the house, causing her to unexpectedly leave it. Charlotte tells Frank that when she was in high school, her father murdered her mother and her brother before committing suicide. Charlotte is surprised that Frank has had no prior knowledge of this, but Frank is glad that Charlotte has shared her story with him. Once she is finished, the pair find themselves becoming friends as they share the same philosophies on life and happiness.

"The New Normal" follows Frank as he makes a visit to his ex wife, Ann, at a local assisted living facility. Ann has been living at the facility following the death of her second husband and since learning she has Parkinson's disease. Frank has been visiting her regularly since she has moved in. On this visit, Frank is bring her a Christmas present of an orthopedic pillow to help her be comfortable. As it is also his



current wife's birthday, Frank wants to make the visit as quick as possible and to avoid any arguments with Ann. Frank uses a method he calls his "Default Self", a way of acting truthfully yet kindly as it is a way he truly perceives himself. As Frank and Ann chat, the conversation is generally pleasant, except a moment where they discuss death and where they want to be buried. Ann wants to be buried next to their son, Ralph, but Frank is undecided as to what he wants to do. The visit is called to a halt when Ann gently tells Frank that is time to leave as she has begun to have a slight muscle spasm. Frank hugs Ann goodbye, satisfied that they have had such a pleasant visit.

The final story is "The Deaths of Others". Frank is listening to the local radio station talk show when he hears an old familiar voice as one of the callers. It is a man named Eddie Medley who says that he is dying and he gives his views on the importance of Hurricane Sandy. Shortly after, Frank's wife Sally says that there is a message on the answering machine for Frank from an old friend. Frank learns that the message is also from Eddie and Frank reminisces about Eddie. Eddie wants Frank to call him sometime, as he is dying and wants to hear from a familiar person. On Christmas Eve, Frank goes to visit Eddie, foregoing his plans of packing for his Christmas day trip to see his son, Paul. Frank is very uneasy about this visit as he is faced with dealing with Eddie's impending death. Frank and Eddie spend a short amount of time talking about the past and making some jokes, although the conversations end quietly. After a brief period of awkward silence, Eddie informs Frank that he has a confession to make. Eddie confesses that he had an affair with Ann towards the end of Frank's marriage to Ann. Frank is too shocked to have a reaction to this as Eddie continues to tell Frank that he was in love with Ann at one time and wanted to marry her, but Ann said that she was still in love with Frank. Frank is ready to leave at this point and he gets his opportunity to exit Eddie's house quietly as the phone rings. Once Frank leaves the home, he shares a brief word with the gas meter reader, causing Frank to feel better and gives him the ability to move on with his day.



Story 1: I'm Here

Summary

Frank Bascombe is putting gas in his car on the way to meet former client Arnie Urquhart. As he is doing so, he listens to a morning sports radio show where they are reviewing a local coach's expletive filled tirade. This gets Frank to thinking about the use of words and how he does not like the modern trends of catchphrases and other words. He does not mind expletives, Frank actually prefers them. He finds them more useful than the current slang that he feels will confuse others who do not use them on a regular basis.

Frank is awakened the previous morning by a phone call from Arnie Urquhart. Arnie's home has been blown away by Hurricane Sandy and Italian property flippers want to buy the property. Arnie wants Frank to come see the remnants of the house as it was at one time Frank's house. Arnie goes on a tirade about the house's condition and the fact that Italian property flippers want to buy the property. Arnie wants Frank to come to the old house to give him advice as to what he should do next. Frank first worries about this, but soon relents and agrees to join Arnie.

Shortly after Frank and Arnie's conversation, Frank is eating breakfast when his wife Sally joins him. She wants to discuss the current book she is reading about the Dakota Indian Uprising of 1862. Sally is intrigued by this story as she has never heard of it before, but Frank has. Sally goes on to tell him of how the Dakota Indians were arrested and sentenced to death for the murders of hundreds of settlers in the area. Sally is emotional as she tells Frank that their last words were "I'm here", but she senses that she has somehow ruined Frank's breakfast so she apologizes and says "I'm here" to Frank before leaving the room.

The next day, Frank drives to his old home on Ortley Beach. He listens to Copland's "Fanfare" as Copland is one of his favorite composers and the music soothes his nerves. Frank worries that he could be hurt by Arnie as attacks on real estate agents are becoming more common. Before he can make it all the way down his former street, he is stopped by a police officer who is guarding the area from trespassers. The Officer is a former client of Frank's and the two recognize each other almost instantly. After a brief discussion on the damages caused to the area, the officer allows Frank to enter the restricted areas and that lead back to his former home. Frank sits in his car waiting for Arnie, with nothing to read but a latest copy of the veteran's pamphlet "We Salute You" that he usually hands out at the airport to soldiers returning from overseas. As Frank continues to wait for Arnie, he is filled with a sense of regret that he has come and no longer wants to meet with Arnie. Before Frank can do anything about his feeling, Arnie walks up to the window of Frank's car, wanting him to get out and walk with him. Frank gets out of the car and the pair walk along the beach, talking about the hurricane and the outcomes of how some of the neighbors survived the hurricane.



As the pair survey the damage to the house, Arnie comes to the realization that there is nothing left to do with the house as it has been too badly damaged to repair. Arnie decides that he will go ahead and let the property flippers buy the house so that they can rebuild the area. Frank and Arnie begin to head back to their cars, but Frank notices something about Arnie. Arnie is not visually the man he once was. Frank recalls that Arnie used to look much older and more masculine. Due to many plastic surgeries and other things, Arnie looks younger but very strange to Frank. Frank agrees with Arnie's decision to let the house be sold which satisfies Arnie. Frank slips and almost falls trying to get back to his car, but quickly straightens himself out as Arnie suggests that Frank take better care of himself. Frank politely agrees with this, but wants to hurry away from the situation as quickly as possible. Before Frank can make his escape, Arnie envelopes Frank in a giant hug.

Analysis

The first story "I'm Here" introduces the reader to Frank Bascombe, a retired real estate agent. As Frank is filling his car up with gas, he hears a sports talk show on the radio. Although he has recently become bored with it, he still listens as the sportscasters talk about a recent expletive filled rant. This tirade establishes a series of thoughts that Frank has on the subject of language use and the need to simplify words so that conversations are more understandable. Frank does not like or understand how common phrases and sayings have infiltrated daily speech. He has a preference for keeping things simple when it comes to using language, even if it means using expletives. The motivations for this desire for simplicity come from Frank's desire to be understood and to understand what others say. Frank says that this is a result of aging making a certain need to simplify things as much as he can. This is to be considered side information as at this point, the thoughts only make the reader aware of Frank's inner thoughts. This allows the reader to gain a clearer understanding of Frank's motivation.

The story then goes into a flashback of the previous day, setting up the main topic of the story. Frank's wife Sally is briefly introduced as she answers the phone while Frank lies in bed daydreaming about the day's possibilities. There is a side note about his desire to enjoy his retirement and gives the reader an example of how he spends some of his time at the Newark airport handing out "We Salute You", a veteran's pamphlet. This is the first time that this key item is mentioned in the novel. The story goes back to the main topic at hand as Frank takes the phone call, ending his momentary musing. This signals the introduction of the other main character for this story, Arnie Urquhart. Arnie is an opposite of Frank as Arnie has a rough and crude demeanor. There is an admission that Frank does not talk on the phone much anymore, which is a possible explanation for Frank's cool and distant manner while Arnie rants and raves. The purpose of the call is to inform Frank that the house Frank sold Arnie has been destroyed by the recent Hurricane Sandy. Although Frank feels sorry for Arnie, but he is unsure of what he can do to help. It should be noted that the author uses Arnie's way of speech at this point to highlight a significant difference between Frank and Arnie and to point out Arnie's blue collar background. Frank is unsure of what Arnie wants but is trying to calmly diffuse



Arnie's bad temper. It is here that a feeling of apprehension begins as to Arnie's intentions. Arnie declares that he needs Frank's advice as Italian property flippers have inquired about purchasing the property. At first, Frank is very hesitant about going to meet Arnie. Sensing this, Arnie indicates that he has no intention of shooting Frank, which is something Frank has already wondered about. The author adds that Frank has already been shot twice in his past, making an allusion to a part of the content of the three previous Frank Bascombe novels.

The scene shifts to a descriptive narrative of what Frank sees as he is driving to Arnie's house on Poincinet Road. As he drives, he listens to Copland's "Fanfare", one of his favorite pieces of music and a key item. The author also uses this narrative to focus on Frank's changes as he has aged, giving examples like he no longer wears a fancy watch and he is starting to forget things. This also brings up the topic of Frank's health as he ages as he describes his doctor's visits. The description is brief but it touches on another key item, "Rice Krispies". These are sharp pains he feels in his neck and what Frank considers to be the only physical thing that is wrong with him.

Following this, there is another flashback to the previous morning. This is a key flashback as this establishes the importance of Sally's character as it is she who provides the title of the current story. She does this by sharing a story she read about the Dakota Uprising of 1862 where several Sioux Indians were executed for the massacre of white settlers in the area. The significant part of the story is that the men yelled "I'm here" just as they were to die as a show of defiance for their situation. There is a slight confusion at this point as Sally, having realized that Frank is uninterested in the story, gets up to leave but says this same line as she is walking out. This short insight into Sally's role causes a question of whether this is a happy marriage, but it goes unanswered.

Once again, there is a shift back to the main action of the novel as Frank continues to drive. It is in this segment that Frank questions the role he has to play in Arnie's house problems. There is a mix of feelings as Frank questions this but he comes to the conclusion that Arnie just may need someone familiar to talk to, causing Frank to decide that he will be there for Arnie's sake. The next scene showcases the destruction caused by Hurricane Sandy. The author is very descriptive as he writes about the abandoned houses and the signs warning people to stay away from the area. He is momentarily stopped by a police officer, where a conversation occurs. It should be noted that the conversation is friendly and casual, but towards the end, it becomes more awkward and vague. The chatter ends with the officer allowing Frank through a barricade so he can head towards Poincinet Road which is the location of Arnie's house.

Another lengthy description of what Frank sees is given as Frank drives further down the road. This allows the reader to get a full grasp at the destruction of the hurricane. Frank pulls up to the house and the reader is given a full description of the home in its current state. There is a tinge of sorrow coming over Frank as he sees what was once his home. He also notices that the other houses that sat on the same road are gone. As Frank surveys the damage, he begins to worry as he does not see Arnie. Worry sets in the longer that Frank waits. He is annoyed that he did not bring anything to read with



him while he waits. The author makes use of this slight annoyance to describe a key item, the publication "We Salute You". The author details the contents of the magazine and how it helps the veterans it is intended for. The author shifts the focus back to what Frank is seeing as he continues to wait, but instantly, Frank is filled with regret at having come to meet Arnie. This turns into a complex situation as Frank feels that he cannot help Arnie and he also feels helpless for the other people that had houses in the area, although he does not know why. At this point, Frank considers leaving before seeing Arnie.

It is unexplained how Arnie is standing right beside the car when Frank looks up, but Frank is surprised to see him. The author goes into further details about Arnie's background, looks, and his prior association with Frank. Frank does not like Arnie's new look, which is meant to outline the changes that have occurred to Arnie as he has gotten older and richer. Frank is struggling at this point, trying to get out of the car and bracing for the cold air around him. Frank's discomfort at the situation is very clear as they take a brief walk. Finances are discussed during this, with Arnie using expletives as he states his opinion. Frank is influenced by Arnie and begins using the same method of speech as he gives Arnie his advice to sell the house and be done with it. The men agree as they walk back to Frank's car.

The conclusion of the story finds Frank slipping on some loose sand, aggravating his "Rice Krispies". This does not deter Arnie from continuing to talk, although this banter is the falling action of the story. The topics meander as they seamlessly flow from Frank's health to politics to other small items. An unexpected action occurs when Arnie, out of relief that his decision has been made, grabs Frank and gives him a giant hug. This makes Frank very uncomfortable but it is a way of letting the story close on a calm note. The story ends with Arnie whispering that things could be much worse. This is a direct hint and title of the next story "Everything Could Be Worse".

Discussion Question 1

Why does Arnie want Frank to meet him at the destroyed home? Why is Frank worried about this? Why does Frank decide to go anyways?

Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of Sally's story of the Dakota Indians? How is this relevant as Frank is dealing with Arnie?

Discussion Question 3

How does Frank feel about the destruction of his former home?



Vocabulary

ominous, denatured, domicile, mentation, vagrant, unalloyed, benign, disembodied, anemic, oeuvre, subluxation, elated, domiciliary, palpable, discern, spiel, gendarmes, pendulous, rankles, egilitarianism, reconnoitering, pearlescent, filaments, empathetic, garish, depoliticized, gnosis, indomitable, pugnacious, vitreous, indeterminate, fervid



Story 2: Everything Could Be Worse

Summary

In the beginning of this story, Frank recalls reading a story in the "New York Times" about the effects of being in space without air. After he reads it, he thinks about what it would be like to be in that state and what are some of the things that a person could focus on before their deaths. Frank contemplates these final seconds of a person's life and compares it to the recent things he has seen on television, making the comment that a lot of the things seem to be trying to ease the experience of his own impending death.

A few days before Christmas, Frank comes home to find an African American lady on his front steps knocking at the door. At first Frank thinks that the lady is the daughter of his former housekeeper or one of the ladies from the local Baptist church looking for donations, but she is not. Frank asks if the lady is looking for his wife, Sally, adding that she is out of town helping with the hurricane recovery efforts. As Frank gets closer to her, he notices that the lady is impeccably dressed and she replies that she is not looking for Sally. The lady introduces herself as Charlotte Pines and she has come with an odd request. Charlotte reveals that she once lived in Frank's home and she would like to see the inside of it. As this is not the first time Frank has ever received a request like this, Frank agrees and he leads Charlotte into the house.

Once inside, Frank realizes that the television is still on, so he goes to the living room to turn it off. Charlotte continues to stand in the doorway, not wanting to make a mess of the carpet, but she starts to look dizzy. Frank gets Charlotte a glass of orange juice, but she only takes a small sip of it. Frank asks if she had ever visited the home after leaving it before this point and Charlotte answers that the last time she has seen the inside of the home is 1969 when she was in high school. Charlotte is reluctant to move out of the foyer but Frank assures her that she can go anywhere in the house that she pleases. Charlotte then says that she is going to go upstairs for a moment to take a look at her old room while Frank sits in the kitchen working on his article for the veteran's pamphlet, "We Salute You".

When Charlotte comes back downstairs, Frank offers Charlotte coffee. As she is taking off her coat, she reveals that one of her arms is in a cast. Charlotte is a local high school teacher and a victim of Hurricane Sandy. Her home in a neighboring suburb has been destroyed and she suffers from a broken arm. She is staying with friends a short distance away until she figures out what to do next. The pair briefly chat about Charlotte's life before the hurricane, and Frank finds out that she is a local History teacher. As the pair drink coffee, Charlotte asks Frank how much he knows about the house. Although Frank has sold it twice before buying it himself, Frank admits he knows next to nothing about the house. Charlotte struggles with the decision to tell Frank the truth about the home, but with Frank's gentle prodding, Charlotte agrees to tell him.



Charlotte recalls that her father had a respectable career at Bell Laboratories and her mother was an opera singer. As her father grew in prestige at work, her mother grew lonelier and more desperate. Charlotte was her father's favorite because of her high intellect, but her brother Ellis was their mother's favorite because of his voice. For a while, life was normal for the family. After a while, her father became more isolated and kept to himself after work. This upset her mother and she wound up having an affair with the school's music teacher. Charlotte says she does not know the exact details of what went on in the fights between her parents but her father eventually moved into the basement. One afternoon while Charlotte was at debate club, her father killed his wife, then killed Ellis as well. Charlotte's father waited for her to come home as well, but her father gave up on waiting for her and killed himself. Charlotte also reveals that she has not been in the house since then and that her debate teacher helped her with a place to stay and the ability to go to college later on.

After telling her story, Charlotte is ready to leave the home as she has now found the closure she has been wanting for several years. Frank feels that he has found a friend and does not want her to go, but Charlotte gets up and prepares to leave. The pair talk about an article they both read in a magazine about happiness. She asks Frank if he finds that life is hard in this area. Frank answers that he does not as most of the people he knows are gone at this point and that somehow it makes things a bit easier. Charlotte is pleased with this answer and smiles at Frank as she walks out the door.

Analysis

"Everything Could Be Worse" starts out a small anecdote that Frank reads on death in outer space. The small bit of information does not really have any major significance to the current story except to vocalize Frank's feelings towards death. Frank's enthusiasm to reading and watching anything concerning the subject show that he is trying to ease his mind about his own death.

The main focus of the story actually begins shortly after Frank's musings. Frank finds an unknown African American woman on his doorstep. Frank makes an assumption about the identity of the woman while also going into a bit more depth about the African American population in his community. The narrative inexplicably shifts back into Frank's volunteer work of reading for the blind, a short deviation from the main focus of the story, but it gives the reader some insight as to how Frank spends days when he is not at Newark Airport. Another assumption about the woman is made as Frank is curious to know who the woman is and what her intentions are. With this assumption comes a slight glimmer of Frank's past as he thinks it is the former housekeeper's daughter.

The lady is none of what Frank assumes and introduces herself as Charlotte Pines. Frank knows that there is something special about this lady, but he cannot tell just what it is at the moment. Frank makes another assumption that she is looking for his wife, but even that is incorrect, making Frank even more curious about the situation. It should be noted that Frank is not nervous around this lady, but there is a sense that he is rather



speechless around Charlotte and in awe of her. Frank is also happy with this new connection he is making, although Charlotte only reveals at this point that she grew up in Frank's home. This sort of occurrence is not unusual for Frank as he has met others who have lived in houses he has owned over the years. Charlotte's attitude towards Frank is kind, but elusive although she exudes confidence in her mission. It is clear that she is holding back something as there are brief moments of silence as they stand on the front porch together. Eventually she comes to the purpose of her visit and the main catalyst for the rest of the story. She wants to see the inside of her house. Her motives for this inside look are unknown, but her sudden shyness as Frank invites her in make it clear that there is something weighing heavily on Charlotte's mind.

There is a slight description of the inside of Frank's house as he rushes to turn off the television he had left on during the afternoon. Charlotte has a slightly emotional reaction as she finds herself speechless upon entering the foyer. She does not know what to say as she looks around. Frank offers a feeble joke meant to put Charlotte at ease, but the joke comes off as tacky. Sensing Charlotte's unease, Frank continues to make light of the situation, but finds himself speaking and acting awkwardly. It is in this conversation that Charlotte gives the time she departed from the home, but not the full details, leaving a great amount of speculation. Frank does not pry into this, but says tht he will be waiting for her in the kitchen.

As Charlotte tours the upstairs, the reader is given a glimpse at another of Frank's activities. He is a freelance writer for "We Salute You", the publication that was mentioned in Story 1. The author goes on to provide information on what kind of article Frank is working on for the next month's publication. He is not worried about Charlotte's wandering about the house. As Charlotte makes her way down the stairs, Frank is hopeful about his beginning friendship with Charlotte. Once she is in the kitchen, she looks at the door to the cellar. There is an instant hint of foreboding as she looks at the door, but Frank does not notice it. He offers her coffee and out of sheer curiosity, Frank asks how Charlotte came to live in the house. At first, Charlotte is reluctant which adds to the mystery of her character, especially as she initially avoids the question. Charlotte attempts to take off her coat, and it is revealed that she is also a victim of Hurricane Sandy. Her wrist is broken and she informs Frank that her house has also been destroyed. This revelation is a parallel of the first story dealing with the affects of the hurricane.

As this information has been revealed, there is a brief exchange that allows the reader to learn more about Charlotte Pines' life after she moved away from the house. Frank listens intently on Charlotte's story and it is apparent that he wants to know all that there is to know about her. Frank steers the conversation back to Charlotte's past, bringing up her family. This is the lead into narrative that is the catalyst for Charlotte's departure from the home. At first, Charlotte cannot believe that Frank has not heard of her family before. That is a foreshadowing question as Charlotte appears to be uncomfortable at this point. With some gentle prodding, Charlotte tells the story of her family's murder/suicide. She gives interesting background information about each of her family members before going into the details of their deaths. Frank's eagerness to hear more



is apparent with each time Charlotte pauses. This is a bit exasperating for Charlotte, but she is able to conclude her story.

Frank does not seem to have any negative reaction to this, he has been very intrigued by the story. Charlotte is relieved to have told her story as she has found closure with this visit and finally getting her story off her chest to someone. She is also grateful to Frank for listening to her without judgement, but she feels that she has taken up too much of Frank's time. Charlotte prepares to leave, but Frank does not want her to go. He feels that in the course of the conversation that he has connected with an interesting person and wants to hear more about her. Charlotte declines, but a brief moment is shared when they talk about the complexities of life and happiness. It is ironic that they have both read the same articles, something that draws Frank closer to Charlotte. As they make a final comment to each other about the ease of living in Haddam, Frank makes the reader aware of the title of the next story, "The New Normal".

Discussion Question 1

Who does Frank mistake Charlotte for? What is his reaction when he does find out Charlotte's identity?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Charlotte want to visit Frank's home? What happened to Charlotte that caused her to leave the home in 1969? Why does Charlotte feel the need to tell Frank her story?

Discussion Question 3

Does Charlotte's story change the way Frank feels about his house? How does he try to comfort Charlotte? Does this help her to find the closure she is looking for?

Vocabulary

attitudinal, tenebrous, demure, amiable, variegated, liveried, curvaceous, supplication, lustrous, azimuth, primordial, inertia, natter, signatory, insular, diaphanous, phantasm, ambiguity, despondent, phylum

Story 3: The New Normal

Summary

The story opens with a memory of Frank driving to visit some clients during a particularly cold and slippery winter night. As he approaches the house, a dog runs out in front of him, causing Frank to hit it. Frank figures that the dog belongs to the clients, but after Frank and the clients go to it, they realize it is not their dog. The clients agree to bury the stray dog, but they also end up accepting Frank's sale offer. Frank recalls that this incident happened more than twenty years ago.

Although it is early evening, Frank feels that it is the same kind of night as he drives to Carnegie Hill, a local assisted living facility. He is on his way to see his ex-wife, Ann, who is a resident and suffering from Parkinson's disease. As he drives past various places, including the cemetery where his son Ralph is lying, Frank reminisces about more prosperous times in the community and how the economic downturn has affected them. Frank also recalls how Ann's life changed after she moved into Carnegie Hill. She got a boyfriend who is former policeman named Buck. Frank tries to avoid him as much as possible, as Buck likes to talk about how they have a bond because they are both prostate cancer survivors and they both have been intimate with Ann. Frank also does not like Buck because of his political preferences and that he talks too blatantly about his sexual and prostate problems.

Frank also considers how Ann has come to live so close to his home in the first place. After Ann retired from De Tocqueville Academy she began dating one of the faculty members named Teddy Fuchs. Frank's daughter, Clarissa, was convinced that only a platonic relationship existed between the pair, but she was proven wrong, especially after they sent out announcements that they had moved in together. After a happy four year relationship where Ann and Teddy traveled to exotic places together, eventually getting married at one of them, Teddy unexpectedly died of a heart attack on the beach. Ann was left alone once again and she was happy living in the condo she once shared with Teddy. In the meantime, Frank and Sally were living their own happy lives at a house on Poincnet Road. One afternoon Frank was outside watching the ocean when a well dressed man in an expensive car came along. He walked up to Frank and said how much he admired the house, then offered to buy it. Frank asked a ridiculously high number as a way to deter the man, named Arnie Urquhart, but instead Arnie wrote Frank a check for the majority of the cost. Frank and Sally then moved back to his hometown of Haddam and they gave very little thought of Ann.

Sometime later, Ann met Frank for lunch and while they were eating, Ann told him that she had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease after noticing that her body was undergoing small negative changes. Her whole mentality had changed at this point and Frank noticed that her demeanor was more like her bold and sometimes uncouth father. Frank also learned that Ann had lied about her age the entire time they were married. Frank was shocked, but he quickly dismissed this, as Ann was no longer his wife,



therefore he felt he should not be concerned about this. Shortly after this conversation, Ann sold the home she once shared with Teddy and she moved into Carnage Hill. It was actually Clarissa, Frank and Ann's daughter, that told Frank about Ann's move as she suggested that Frank adjust to it as best as he can.

As Frank drives to Carnage Hall remembering these things, his neck is beginning to hurt again. He wants to get this visit over as quickly and quietly as possible. He would like to take his current wife out for dinner for her birthday. Frank continues to contemplate many things, such as the end of their marriage, caused by the death of their son Ralph, Frank's illness, and his infidelities. In order to deal with Ann, Frank decides he must use his "Default Self", a method in which he tries to be as truthful and kind as he can in hopes to avoid any arguments with her.

Frank arrives at Carnage Hall but he wants to avoid as much contact with other visitors and residents as he can. He spots Buck in one of the living rooms and ducks out of the way before he can be seen. As he is trying to walk into the Beth Wessel wing where Ann resides, he is stopped by one of the nurses, named Doris, who does not yet know Frank. After briefly talking to Doris, Frank realizes that Doris is actually transgender. They continue talking for a few moments as Doris says that Ann has mentioned Frank a few times. When the conversation is over, Frank finally arrives at Ann's apartment.

Ann is a decent mood as Frank enters her apartment. He gives her the pillow he has bought for her and she gratefully accepts it. The pair converse about little things like the temperature of the room and more. Parts of it are tedious for Frank, but he uses his "Default Self" to make the conversation more bearable. During a break in the conversation, Ann reveals that she is currently taking a class called "The Deaths of Others" which she finds fascinating. Ann explains a little bit about the class and asks if Frank is still planning to donate his body to science. Frank says he has changed his mind and Ann says that she has changed her mind about her own arrangements as well. She has decided that she wants to be buried beside their son, Ralph, and Frank agrees saying that he would like to be close to Ralph as well.

The topic of their conversation shifts to Frank's current wife and her well being as she has been working hard lately. Frank gets to thinking about their old dog and how Ann had it put to sleep when no other home could be found for it. Ann asks if Frank is truly happy with his life and Frank replies that he is and Ann agrees that she is as well. As another seizure starts and Ann is trying to subtly fight this, she politely tells Frank that it is time to leave. Frank says goodbye to her, but he also hugs her as well, much to Ann's surprise. With that, Frank heads out into the night ready to spend the rest of his evening with Sally.

Analysis

"The New Normal" begins with a slight diversion as Frank remembers a cold and icy night years ago when he was driving to a client's home but winds up hitting a stray dog. This diversion is set to compare the current setting that Frank is driving in as he is



heading to visit his former wife, Ann Dykstra, at Carnage Hill, the assisted care facility that Ann has moved into. Frank reflects on small bits of his life as he drives, particularly about the changes to the community in the last few years. The author goes into a long bit of detail over the state of Haddam's economy and the effects it has had on the community. There is a brief mention of Frank and Ann's first son Ralph during this scene as Frank drives past the local cemetery, but the reason for Ralph's death or any other pertinent information is not given.

The reason for Frank's evening visit is given as Frank briefly describes where Ann is currently living. Frank is delivering an orthopedic pillow to her as she suffers from Parkinson's disease. With this, Frank goes into a brief summary of Ann's life in the facility and the author gives a small glance at her current boyfriend, Buck, whom Frank would like to avoid. The complete backstory of how Ann's life has progressed from the time of her and Frank's divorce to her current living situation is highlighted. This includes a summary of her courtship and marriage to a colleague of hers, Teddy Fuchs. Some time later, Teddy dies on a beach of natural causes, but Ann continues to live in the home she shared with Teddy. Frank admits that he knows more than what he wants to know about Ann's life; for him, divorce should have been the final part of any knowledge of her private life. A small glimpse into the Frank's relationships with his other children is touched upon as well since it is his daughter Clarissa that feeds Frank whatever she knows of Ann's activities. Frank does not ask for this, but Clarissa does it anyways. Their son Paul is also briefly mentioned in this segment as someone who is not close to the family in general, but stays in touch more with Frank than he does Ann.

The story then flashes back to show the reader how Ann noticed that she has Parkinson's. This also develops the casual friendship between Frank and Ann at this point as she tells Frank about her diagnosis and how she realized something was wrong over a lunch date. The author injects another piece of information in regards to Ann in that she has always lied to Frank about her age. It is unknown what pertinence this information has on the main flow of the story, but it does prove that Ann takes a small pleasure in trying to goad Frank into an argument on occasion. There is also a flashback to showcase a bit of Frank's past as well as he informs the reader of how he sold his house on Poincinct Road to a well dressed man who paid a hefty deposit on the spot after driving by the home and admiring it. This is an allusion to the first story, "I'm Here" as the buyer is Annie Urquhart.

The narrative shifts back to further explain Frank and Clarissa's relationship by showcasing a conversation in which Clarissa tells Frank that Ann is moving into Carnage Hill. Their relationship is casual and Clarissa feels at ease speaking to her father. Clarissa tells Frank about the move, which Frank is unhappy about. Clarissa can sense the tension that has been caused by this and is able to quickly diffuse her father's bad temperment by adding a playful insult, further showing that she and her father get on well. Frank is not offended by this and offers an insult of his own.

The story shifts back to the main purpose as Frank enters Carnage Hill. The author describes the property as expensive but very nice. As Frank is heading up the driveway, it is here that the key item, his "Default Self" is introduced. Frank explains that Ann has



a streak of being argumentative frequently. She causes arguments on even the smallest of issues. This "Default Self" is how Frank pictures himself to truly be, kind, honest, thoughtful, and caring. In order to achieve this, he plans to be as nice as possible and to avoid anything that would give Ann a reason to start an argument. The underlying purpose of this act is so that Frank can leave Carnegie Hill quickly as he plans on taking Sally out for a birthday dinner later in the evening.

Once inside the building, Frank makes it clear that he does not want to be disturbed by the other residents and visitors. There are plenty of people inside the main lobby as they celebrate the holidays, but Frank is able to move in and out of the crowd without being noticed too much. Frank is actually known in the area as he is a frequent visitor of Ann's, but since he wants to get through this visit as quickly as possible, he does not stop to talk to anyone. In this way, Frank feels that he can shorten his time in the center and get his visit with Ann done much quicker.

Frank is successful avoiding others as he gets to the Beth Wessel wing, but he encounters a nurse named Doris who stops him at the door. It is apparent that she has not met Frank before as she inquires about who Frank is visiting. As a supporting character, Doris is very pleasant to Frank and is playful, especially when she wants to touch Frank's pillow. As Doris plays with the pillow for a moment, Frank is struck with an epiphany as he notices the woman's hands and takes note of her overly cheerful voice. Doris is a transgender man, which does not bother Frank, but Doris seems pleased that Frank is finally catching on to this knowledge. Doris makes it clear that although Frank does not know her, she has heard of him through Ann. With this knowledge Frank finally makes it to his destination of Ann's apartment.

The climax of this section is brought about by Frank's actual conversation with Ann. She is grateful for the pillow Frank has bought. The author makes note of the smaller details of the living room and of how things are arranged. This gives the reader a better idea of Ann's current living conditions as neat and orderly. As Frank looks around, he is slightly agitated by the small talk that is currently going on. His mind is still fixated on getting out quickly so that he can take Sally out for dinner. The usage of his "Default Self" is in use whereas he tries to deal with some of Ann's smaller comments.

Ann's physical traits are described as Frank is trying to hold onto the conversation, and as he watches her, he notices that Ann is trying to hold off a seizure. The highlight of the conversation occurs when Ann states that she is taking a class called "The Deaths of Others". This is an allusion to the final story of the same name. The theme of death is mixed with the theme of communication in the fact that their conversation becomes heavily engrossed with this topic. The pair discuss their final arrangements with each of the sharing the same desire to be buried near their son. This is not new information for Frank, Ann has simply forgotten that she has told him twice before. There is still no argument or tension much to Frank's satisfaction. He thinks that he can possibly avoid any kind of negativity with this visit but he is wrong. After Ann asks about Sally, she ends up giving Frank a minor insult as she tells him that her other marriages were better than theirs. Frank is able to look past this gracefully as his focus remains squarely on his current wife and dinner later. There is a shift in Ann's behavior and tone as she



politely tells Frank that it is time for him to leave. Her seizure is worsening and it is thought that she does not want Frank to witness it. In a surprise move, Frank ends the visit by hugging her goodbye as he walks out the door.

Discussion Question 1

What kind of relationship does Frank share with his children? Does Pall and Clarissa have a better rapport with their father or their mother?

Discussion Question 2

What is the "Default Self"? Why does Frank feel he needs to use it? Is he successful at using it during this particular visit?

Discussion Question 3

How is the visit with Ann? How is Frank successful in using his "Default Self"?

Vocabulary

manorial, calamitously, verdant, hinterlands, austerity, razing, metier, dissociative, mirthful, turbid, monolith, repertoire, callow, winsome, assay, vestibules, effervescent, perfidy, halcyon, dissonance, epiphany, arras, venal, discordant, firmament, copacetic, libidinous, venereal, curatorial,

Story 4: The Deaths of Others

Summary

Frank sits in his kitchen, eating his breakfast and listening to a talk show on WHAD. During the talk show someone calls in with his own opinions about Hurricane Sandy. The man says he is dying and that the hurricane itself is a manifestation of the need to start weeding out the population. After the caller hangs up, Frank realizes that he knows who the caller was. It is the voice of a man named Eddie Medley, an intelligent inventor Frank met when he and Ann first moved to Haddam many years before. Eddie was also a part of the Divorced Men's group that was founded by Frank, Eddie, and a few other men some time later after they all divorced their own wives. In the last few years, Frank has not heard from Eddie, as life took them in separate paths.

Frank finds out from Sally that there has been a couple of phone calls from Eddie. Before she goes back to her grief counseling work in South Mantoloking, she informs Frank that Eddie has recently called again and that there is a message on the answering machine. As Sally is talking about this, Frank thinks to himself about the worth of friendships and the fact that as he ages, he has been losing friends by his own devices. Frank finds that getting rid of friends is a necessary component to living out old age as simply as he can. As Frank ponders the meanings of friendship and how it affects his life and those around him over the course of the next few days, Sally asks him how he feels about her. Frank nonchalantly says that he loves her, which seems to satisfy her for the moment. Frank makes a slight joke to diffuse the tension, but Frank decides to listen to the voice mail anyways, and it is Eddie asking him to visit his home, as he is dying and wants to see Frank again.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, Frank calls Eddie at his home. Eddie is excited to hear from him, calling Frank "Basset Hound", a nickname that Eddie had given Frank when they hung out together. Frank puts his plans of packing for his Christmas trip to Kansas City on hold to take visit Eddie in the afternoon. Frank is looking more forward to his trip to Kansas City to see his son, Paul, than he is seeing Eddie. As Frank drives towards Eddie's home, he marvels at the changes that have already taken place in the community, including the various neighbors. Frank is unimpressed by the stores and buildings he sees along the way, but it does make him think about his past as he was a beginning realtor.

Once Frank gets to Eddie's house, Frank runs into Fike Birdsong, a preacher who Frank does not like. After a moment's conversation, Frank goes to the door and is met by Eddie's hospice nurse, Finesse. She brings Frank into the house and he notices that everything is still the same from before Eddie became divorced. He is let into Eddie's room, after being given a warning by Finesse to keep Eddie happy and to not depress him, as Eddie is dying but happy about it. Eddie is happy to see Frank and the pair exchange a few jabs at each other before catching up on each other's lives. Once the conversation dies down, Eddie reveals that he has a purpose for Frank's visit. Eddie has



a confession to make and he cannot rest with it hanging over him. Eddie confesses that he once slept with Ann at the end of her marriage to Frank. Eddie wanted Ann to live with him, but she refused due to her feelings for Frank. Frank is speechless and when Eddie presses him to say something or to be mad, Frank finds that he cannot. Instead, Frank feels that time fixes everything and that Eddie is forgiven. Frank is ready to leave shortly after this, and he has a chance to do so when the phone rings and Eddie wants to answer it.

As Frank is walking to his car, he runs into the local gas company's meter reader. The two men exchange what they plan on doing for the upcoming holiday and the meter reader says that he plans to help with the hurricane recovery efforts. This pleases Frank and he is looking forward to his own plans of going to Kansas City. The pair exchange holiday wishes and Frank leaves with high spirits as he feels better and can get on with his Christmas plans.

Analysis

The final story of the novel, "The Deaths of Others", begins with Frank recounting his events from the morning before. The local radio station is broadcasting a regular talk show which is a device used by the author to further illustrate the impact of Hurricane Sandy. At one point in the show, a mysterious caller offers his own unique thoughts on the situation, paralleling the hurricane to his own dying. The man justifies the hurricane as a way to deplete the population, something that even his own death can provide. A sudden thought comes to Frank as he recognizes that the caller is Eddie Medley, a former friend and colleague. He is described extensively with an elaborate backstory of his life and of how he came to be friends with Frank when Frank and Ann first moved to New Jersey. The narrative goes on to further examine Eddie's character as he is a brilliant inventor who made quite a bit of money, but when he decided to no longer work and the money ran out, his wife left him. This creates the Divorced Men's group between Eddie, Frank, and a few other men. These men all had various nicknames, Frank's being "Basset Hound", and Eddie's being "Olive". Frank goes on to say that there is no distinguished point in which they stopped contacting each other.

There is a revelation at this point that Eddie has recently tried to contact Frank by leaving a message on his phone before Frank recognizes him on the radio. Sally is the one who tells Frank about the message before she returns to her grief counseling work. This is one of the few times in the novel that Sally and Frank interact. After Sally informs Frank of this message, there is a long musing about friendships and this section touches on the themes of aging as Frank is trying to simplify his life by his decrease in the number of friendships he has. For Frank, getting rid of friends now is a good way to simplify his life so that he can focus on himself and the things he wants to do. This triggers thoughts on his relationship with Sally as well. In a conversation with her, she wants to know what he thinks of her. As Frank tries to find a good answer, the theme of communication is clear as there seems to be a lack of true communication between the two. He tells her that he loves her, perhaps to try to shut down the conversation. Sally is pleased with this answer, making any further discussion about the topic unnecessary.



The narrative jumps ahead to Christmas Eve. For an unknown reason, Frank feels a sense of urgency in needing to call Eddie, who is happy to hear from him. Eddie pleads with Frank to come over, there is also a sense of urgency about Eddie as he does so. Frank feels trapped into meeting Eddie, but he promises to do so. Frank also realizes this may be the last time he ever sees his friend again, making the visit that much more important. It is important enough to stop Frank's plans of packing for his holiday trip to see his son Paul in Kansas City. This is a strong parallel to the third story as Frank is preoccupied with his own plans but must drop them to come to someone else's aid.

As Frank drives along the streets of Haddam, once again Frank reflects on the changes to the neighborhoods. Frank draws distinct lines between how things were and how they are currently. This brings him to mind of his own past as a realtor and the connections he once had with people. Once he arrives at Eddie's home, there is no change between the years prior and now, which makes the home look decrepit and out of line with the other homes in the well to do neighborhood. Frank is instantly annoyed to see Fike Birdsong, a self named preacher. Frank knows that Fike is only with Eddie to see what he can squeeze out of him, but Fike pretends to be there trying to do good as a spiritual adviser. This notion is refused by Frank and he is quick to end the conversation by using a philosophical thought.

The introduction to supporting character Finesse comes as Frank knocks on the door. She is a formidable woman with a loud voice and an upbeat attitude. The inside of the home is just as untouched as the outside. This shows that Eddie has not wanted to change things since his wife left him many years before. As Finesse shows Frank to Eddie's room, she pauses for a moment to give an update on Eddie's condition. It is serious as he only has a short time left, but he seems happy. She is protective of Eddie and instructs Frank to not depress him in any way. Eddie is elated to see Frank again and the reader is given a glimpse of Eddie's physical condition. The men trade small jokes to each other as if no time has passed between them, but there are brief pauses in between as Eddie coughs or messes with one of the many tubes and wires attached to him. Watching this makes Frank uncomfortable and he wants to leave quickly, but Eddie is at ease although he is having such a difficult time breathing.

The jokes die down and there is a noticeable silence in the room shortly after. The pair briefly talk about the theme of dying, Eddie is resolved to it and has openly welcomed it. The reader learns that only two things bother Eddie about the concept of dying, that he can no longer impress women and the catalyst for this story, that he has a confession to make. Eddie feels that he cannot die with a clear mind if he does not tell Frank this secret. Nervous about what Eddie might say, Frank uses his "Default Self" method from the third story to try to act calm and sympathetic. All at once, Eddie blurts out that he had an affair with Ann, giving the reader the climax of the story. Frank is so shocked that he believes that Eddie did not say that, but Frank learns it is true when Eddie repeats what he said. There is a sudden change to Frank's manner as he tries to process this information. He sounds dejected as he questions Eddie on when and why this event occurred. At this point, Frank is speechless as Eddie goes on to say that he wanted Ann to run away with him but she would not as she still loved Frank. Frank is now ready to leave Eddie as he is so overwhelmed by what has been said. Eddie is deeply



remorseful and actually wants Frank to be angry with him or show some emotion about this, but Frank cannot. Instead, Frank is forgiving and tells Eddie that nothing has changed between them although mentally, Frank is wanting out of the room as soon as possible. He gets his opportunity as the conversation switches to how Eddie is sleeping when the phone rings. Frank uses this chance to make his escape, presumably to never see Eddie again.

On the outside of the house, Eddie's confession seems forgotten as Frank focuses on his Christmas plans. Frank runs into the gas company's meter reader, which is a deviation and falling action to the story. Frank knows this man as he and Frank's son Paul once went to school together. The conversation is light in comparison to Frank's conversation with Eddie. It focuses mainly on the reader's plans for the holiday and there is a brief mention of helping with the survivors of the hurricane. The meter reader is very jovial which lifts Frank's spirits. As the men wish each other a merry Christmas, Frank's day is saved and having put Eddie out of his mind, he feels that he can get on with his own holiday plans, thus concluding the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Eddie feel that the hurricane is a way of cleaning out the population? How does this correspond to his own death?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Frank uninterested in having friends? How does he keep them away?

Discussion Question 3

What is Frank's reaction to Eddie's admission of his affair with Ann? How does this change his friendship with Eddie and his relationship with Ann?

Vocabulary

plausible, asininely, portentous, palaver, jodhpurs, acuity, desultory, irrepressible, emanation, debility, jettison, superfluity, ephemeral, pariah, nonagenarian, cognizance, emulsion, pathos, resonant, phalanxes, emir, oligarch, oubliette, minuscule, marionette, emaciated, odious, brigand, coifed, domicile



Characters

Frank Bascombe

Frank Bascombe is the protagonist of the novel. Frank is a retired real estate agent who does not take aging as something negative. Frank considers his aging as a way of simplifying his life, especially as he is starting to forget small things. He is physically in good shape for his age, except for occasional neck pains he calls "Rice Krispies". Frank is an easy going sort of man, he prefers to avoid confrontation as evidenced by his reluctance to meet Arnie in "I'm Here", his use of his "Default Self" in "The New Normal", and his hesitation over visiting Eddie in "The Deaths of Others". Frank is a kind natured man, even with his hesitation over dealing with others. In "Everything Could Be Worse", Frank finds a new friend in Charlotte Pines, a lady who comes to find closure in her own life and understands Frank's own need for simplicity and happiness.

Frank likes to keep his days full and is always looking for something to improve his life or the lives around him as he is retired. Frank is active in his community as he, along with other veterans, go to Newark airport every week to distribute copies of "We Salute You", an information newsletter for veterans, to soldiers as they come home from deployments. Frank is also an occasional writer for the publication. Frank also reads novels to the blind at a local radio station.

Frank is the former husband of Ann Dykstra and the father of Clarissa and Paul. His other son, Ralph died when he was very young which was one of the causes of Frank and Ann's divorce. Frank loves his wife Sally although in "I'm Here" and "The Deaths of Others", this comes into question when Sally is trying to talk to Frank. Frank seems nonchalant to her as she is trying to tell him about the book she is reading in "I'm Here" and gives a flippant answer as to what he thinks of her in "The Deaths of Others".

Arnie Urquhart

Arnie Urquhart appears in the story "I'm Here". Arnie has recently lost the house he bought from Frank Bascombe due to Hurricane Sandy. Arnie is a middle aged man who also attended the University of Michigan along with Frank. Arnie is a successful fishmonger who sells seafood to celebrity and other high end clients. Having been married several times, Arnie has also gone under many physical changes as well to try to look younger for his current wife. His manner is very abrupt in dealing with others, including Frank, and uses obscene language frequently. In "I'm Here" Arnie calls Frank as his second home has been destroyed.

Charlotte Pines

Charlotte Pines appears in the story "Everything Could Be Worse". She is standing on Frank's doorstep as he is pulling into his driveway shortly before Christmas. She is an



older African American lady whose wrist has been broken during the hurricane as her house was destroyed. She is living with old friends a short distance from Frank's house but wants to visit her childhood home. After taking a brief tour upstairs, she comes downstairs and, over coffee, Charlotte tells Frank of her family and what happened while she was living there. Her father murdered her brother and mother before committing suicide. Charlotte was at her debate club meeting at the time of the murder and was the only survivor. Afterwards, she moved in with one of her teachers before going on to college to become a History teacher. The main purpose for Charlotte's visit is to reconcile with her past and to find closure. After having done this, Charlotte leaves and Frank has found a new friend.

Ann Dykstra

Ann is Frank's first wife who he divorced shortly after the death of their son and is the main focus of "The New Normal". Some time later she meets a co-worker with whom she becomes romantically involved with. Ann later marries this man, but becomes his widow while they are taking a vacation together. For some time she remains in their condo, but soon she finds that her body is changing. After trips to the doctor's office, she is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Finding that she no longer wants to live in her condo, she moves into the Beth Wessel wing of Carnegie Hill so that she can properly care for her condition.

In "The New Normal" Frank is going to visit Ann and to bring her a pillow for Christmas. Ann and Frank have argued in the past but Frank wants to make this visit as non-confrontational as possible. This is successful, but Ann informs Frank that she wishes to be buried next to their deceased son. Frank agrees with her on this and the rest of the visit goes smoothly until Ann begins having a muscle spasm. She is able to control herself long enough to say goodbye to Frank.

In "The Deaths of Others", Eddie Medley admits to having an affair with Ann shortly before the end of her and Frank's marriage.

Eddie Medley

Eddie Medley met Frank when Frank and his first wife Ann came to New Jersey. Eddie is a brilliant inventor who once worked for Bell Laboratories, but gave it up when he thought that there was too much work involved. He married a Swedish woman, but she left shortly after Eddie's finances turned sour.

Eddie and Frank are part of a group of men calling themselves the Divorced Men's Club, where Eddie has the nickname of Olive Medley and Frank is called Basset Hound.

In "The Deaths of Others", Eddie calls into a local radio show. He declares that he is dying and that the hurricane is significant as it was meant to decrease recent overpopulation. Some time later, Frank receives a call from Eddie wanting him to come visit. Frank has not visited with Eddie in many years, but decides to as he knows that he



may never get the chance to again. During the visit, Eddie announces that he has a confession to make. Eddie reveals that towards the end of Frank's marriage to Ann, Eddie had an affair with Ann. Eddie also states that he was in love with Ann but was rejected by her as she loved Frank too much at that time. Eddie hopes that Frank is not too mad about this, and Frank says that he is not but it is clear that Frank no longer is comfortable being in Eddie's company.

Sally Bascombe

Sally Bascombe is Frank's wife. Although she is not seen as a major character within the short stories, Sally is more important in other ways. In "I'm Here", Sally provides the reader with the title of the first short story. As Frank is sitting at the breakfast table after his phone conversation with Arnie Urquhart, Sally comes to Frank to talk about the book she is reading. She has come across a story of the execution of a group of Sioux Indians and wants to share this story with him. The story goes on to say that the Sioux last words were "I'm Here". After noticing Frank's slight annoyance, Sally apologizes for interrupting his breakfast and leaves.

In "Everything Could Be Worse", Sally spends her time as a counselor in a small community close by. She is only mentioned briefly in "The New Normal" as Frank is trying to hurry back to Sally, as he wants to celebrate her birthday by taking her out for a nice dinner. Ann mentions Sally as the two have met before during a visit, she likes Sally but they are not close friends.

In "The Deaths of Others", Sally is curious about Frank's phone call from Eddie and believes that Frank should go visit. Sometime later, she asks Frank if he loves her and he gives a nonchalant answer but it seems to momentarily satisfy Sally.

Hartwick Pines

Hartwick Pines is the father of Charlotte Pines. A brilliant inventor for Bell Laboratories, Hartwick is content only when he is actually working on something and has disdain and distrust for anyone outside of his family. He moves his family into the home that Frank later buys, but he has very little interactions with others outside of it. As time wears on, his wife begins to see someone else. When the affair is discovered, Hartwick moves into the house basement. Some time later, in a fit of rage, Hartwick murders his wife, then his son. He waits for Charlotte to come home to murder her as well, but she is late as she is at her debate club meeting. It is unknown why he decides to take his own life rather than to continue waiting for Charlotte.

Clarissa Bascombe

Clarissa is Frank and Ann's only daughter. She is a veterinarian in Arizona and is only mentioned in "The New Normal". She maintains a good relationship with both of her parents, although many times she has a better and more casual relationship with her



father. It is through her that Frank learns of many of Ann's activities, including Ann's decision to move into a facilitated care facility close to Frank's home.

Paul Bascombe

Paul is Ann and Frank's second son, the first son Ralph having passed away. Paul does not often communicate with his parents and seems to be the odd one of the family. Paul runs a botanical supply store in Kansas City, but he aspires to also run a rent-to-own furniture store. Frank plans to visit Paul in "The Deaths of Others", but his packing is delayed as he has goes to visit Eddie Medley.

Doris

In "The New Normal", Doris is the security guard at the entrance of the Beth Wessel wing of Carnage Hill. Frank encounters her as he is trying to get to Ann's apartment. Frank notices that there is something unusual about Doris then he realizes that Doris is transgender. This is not a negative for Frank and the pair engage in light conversation before wishing each other a pleasant evening as Frank goes on about his way.

Finesse

Finesse is the outspoken home care assistant for Eddie Medley. While protective of Eddie, she is also very authoritative when it comes to Eddie's care. Eddie does not mind that Finesse can be loud and bossy at times, he enjoys her company. Finesse mainly wants Frank to make Eddie happy in the short time of Frank's visit.



Symbols and Symbolism

Hurricane Sandy

Hurricane Sandy happens shortly before the beginning of the novel. It is the significant action that causes the main plot of the first story, "I'm Here", as the hurricane causes a large amount of destruction on the Jersey Shore, including the annihilation of Arnie Urquhart's house. This causes Arnie to set the story in motion by calling Frank to come with him to view the remnants of the house as property flippers have offered to buy it from Arnie.

We Salute You

"We Salute You" is the pamphlet written by a conservative political group in Ohio. Once a week, Frank goes to the airport to distribute these to soldiers returning from overseas as they pass by. Inside the pamphlets is information considered important for soldiers, such as phone numbers and addresses for veterans' aid agencies and mental health hotlines.

Arnie Urquhart's House

The house belong to Arnie Urquhart lies on Ortleigh Beach and has recently been destroyed by Hurricane Sandy. In "I'm Here", Arnie wants Frank to come see the remains of the house, as Arnie has recently been contacted by property flippers wanting to buy the house. Although Frank is hesitant at first, he agrees and goes to see the house. As there is not much left, Frank advises Arnie to sell the home and to move on with his life, especially as this is only a second home for Arnie. After a bit of consideration, Arnie decides that perhaps it actually is time to let the property go as he will be unable to fix it back to how it was.

Pines Family Murders

In 1969, in the house that Frank and Sally currently reside in, a man named Hartwick Pines murdered his wife and son then committed suicide. His daughter, Charlotte is the only survivor of this tragedy. It is Charlotte who is waiting for Frank on his front porch as he returns home in "Everything Could Be Worse". Charlotte is seeking closure from this incident and wants to tour the house once more. After she is finished walking around the house, she tells Frank of these murders and finds the closure that she needs in order to put the past behind her.



Orthopedic Pillow

Frank brings this to his ex-wife Ann at the assisted care facility as a Christmas gift in "The New Normal". The pillow is meant to make Ann more comfortable as she suffers from Parkinson's Disease.

Rice Krispies

Frank suffers from sharp, tingling neck pains frequently which he calls "Rice Krispies". They are first mentioned in "I'm Here" and are the only major physical problem that Frank claims to have.

Copland's "Fanfare"

Copland's "Fanfare" is one of Frank's favorite pieces of music. Frank is listening to this on the way to meet Arnie Urquhart in "I'm Here".

Default Self

Frank's "Default Self" is a method that Frank uses in "The New Normal" as a way to keep arguments from starting between himself and Ann in "The New Normal". In this manner, Frank agrees with everything that Ann says and treats her as kindly as possible. Frank admits that this is a reflection of how he sees himself and how he would like others to see him.

Sally's book

In "I'm Here", Sally comes to the breakfast table on the morning Frank gets his call from Arnie with this history book. There is a particular story in it which Sally finds fascinating enough to share with Frank. The story is about the execution of a group of Sioux warriors who are executed for mass murder. The main part that Sally finds significant about this story is that the men shout "I'm here" just as they are about to be hanged.

Eddie's confession

In "The Deaths of Others", Frank encounters a dying acquaintance named Eddie Medley. Frank calls him shortly before Christmas and is talked into coming to visit Eddie. Once Frank arrives, the conversation is normal at first. After a brief silence, however, Eddie announces that he has a confession to make. Eddie tells Frank that he and Ann had an affair before Frank divorced her and that Eddie was in love with Ann in the past but she did not want to leave Frank for him. This news is shocking to Frank, but he cannot show it as he does not know what to say. After a few moments of thought,

Frank seems to be forgiving, but it is clear that he wants to hurry and leave Eddie's house as he is now uncomfortable being there.



Settings

Haddam, New Jersey

Haddam is the small suburban community where Frank and Sally Bascombe live. The Bascombes moved to this area shortly after the sale of their home near Ortley Beach to Anie Urquhart. The community of Haddam is small, but has its own medical center. Haddam is not an area with a great deal of damage from the hurricane, but is close enough to where most of the damage along the Jersey Shore is.

Poincinet Road

Poincinet Road in the small area of Sea Clift, on the Jersey Shore, is the location of Arnie Urquhart's recently demolished home. Frank sold his home to Arnie Urquhart some years prior, but many of the old neighbors remain. When Hurricane Sandy hits the shore, many of the homes on Poincinet Road are destroyed, including Arnie's, causing him to call Frank to come visit in "I'm Here".

Carnage Hall

Carnage Hall is the elderly care facility where Frank's ex-wife, Ann Dykstra, lives. Ann lives in the section of the hall called the Beth Wessel wing. This wing is for people who do not need much in the way of medical assistance.

WHAD

WHAD is the local radio station where Frank volunteers to read to the blind on a weekly basis. He is coming home from one of these readings in "Everything Could Be Worse" when he meets Charlotte Pines, a former resident of Frank's house. In "Deaths of Others", Eddie Medley calls the station during a talk show to talk about the hurricane and how it has affected the population.

28 Hodge Road

28 Hodge Road is the home of Eddie Medley, and the main setting of "The Deaths of Others". Eddie's home is a large mansion on the west end of Haddam. Eddie bought the home in the 1970's when he was very successful. Currently, the house is in poor condition as Eddie has not done any maintenance on the home. Frank notices that the inside is filled with memorabilia from Eddie's past excesses, as nothing has been removed from the home since Eddie's wife left. Frank finds all of the items in the house over the top as he prefers a much simpler house and decorations.



Themes and Motifs

Aging

Frank has very definitive ideas on aging and how it affects how he handles life. Having left the realty business, Frank is always on the lookout for something to do to pass his time. Frank is not bored with his new lifestyle, he merely wants to find more things that interest him and hopefully make him a better person for the experience. Although Frank wants to simplify his life, life does not necessarily slow down for him. The novel is a collection of events that showcase the fact that Frank has more vitality at this stage of life than many people his age.

With the desire to engage in life any way he can, Frank also finds the desire to simplify his life. He prefers to speak plainly, forgoing the use of modern slang and buzz words that are common in current society. This is particularly noticeable in "I'm Here" as Frank listens to the sports radio show. He is unimpressed by the newscaster's use of "F-bomb" instead of saying the intended word. His necessity to simplify things is not only in his speech but also actions as well as the first story highlights the fact that Frank wears only simple things during his retirement, right down to downgrading to a simple watch instead of the kinds of watches he previously wore at work.

Physically, Frank is very healthy and gets around better than most people his age. In "I'm Here", Frank's only medical condition that can be attributed to his aging is "Rice Krispies". That is the nickname he gives to the sharp pains in his neck that sometimes constricts his movement. These are aggravated in "I'm Here" when Frank momentarily trips on the sand after meeting with Arnie. It is also a bother him again when Arnie gives him a giant hug, thanking Frank for his advice. Any other mention of doctors is scoffed at, especially when the doctor suggests that he takes test to rule out Alzheimer's Disease. Frank says that he does forget little things, like the concept of days of the week, but Frank insists that this is normal behavior for anyone to occasionally lose track of.

Frank also likes to keep busy since he does not have a steady job to do any more. He spends a good deal of time passing out the veteran's guide "We Salute You" to returning soldiers at the Newark Airport. He also writes an article every month for the publication. Frank also reads books for the blind at the local radio station. When he is not doing either of those things, he is an avid reader. He also spends time fixing things around the house, something that he has not been able to do while he was working.

Aging also seems to have an effect on his first wife Ann Dykstra. In "The New Normal", Frank is visiting Ann and bringing her a pillow for Christmas. Ann has Parkinson's disease and has recently moved into an assisted care facility. As Frank has gotten older, he wants to avoid major confrontations. This includes arguing with Ann. In the past, Ann has argued with Frank over many things since their divorce. As Frank currently drives to visit her, Frank decides to use his "Default Self" to somehow avoid arguments with her.



During this visit, Ann does not argue with Frank. It is visible that she is battling her disease in the best way she can and she ends the visit shortly as she is trying to deal with a seizure attack.

"The Deaths of Others" deals more with the thought of oncoming death than it does aging. The theme of aging is touched upon only in Frank's need to "jettison friends" as he gets older. Frank does not want to be tied down into too many relationships as it interrupts his quiet retirement and does not allow him to pursue interests that he wants to engage in. With this departure from friendships, Frank admits that many of his friends are already dead or are in the process of dying. Such is the case with Eddie Medley, who Frank has not talked to in many years. Frank reluctantly visits him but the visit is not without its own problems as Frank is given a socking confession.

Destruction

Hurricane Sandy had a role to play in all four of the short stories and its affects on everyone involved vary. For Frank himself, the hurricane did not affect him that much. His current house only suffered minor damage that is easily fixable. As Frank goes through the community he sees that homes and business have been wiped out. He notices the empty streets and the debris hanging all around. Frank is not involved in any major cleanup or support efforts, although his wife Sally works as a grief counselor and is spending most of her time in another community with their relief efforts. With no direct involvement in the post hurricane events, Frank still has a role to play with others that are dealing with their own hurricane scenarios.

In "I'm Here", the focus of the story rests on the fact that Arnie Urquhart's vacation home has been destroyed by the hurricane. Frank becomes connected to this situation when Arnie calls Frank early one morning. Arnie is upset that his house is now gone and since the house used to be Frank's before he sold it to Arnie, he wants Frank to know about the loss. Frank does not know how he can help Arnie, but it is soon made very clear. Arnie has recently been contacted by Italian property buyers and they would like to make Arnie an offer on the property so that it can be used to re-develop the area. Arnie wants Frank to meet with him so that they can discuss how Arnie should proceed with this offer. Initially, Frank is wary of doing this but he relents and agrees to help Arnie.

Once at the home on Poincinet Road, Frank is able to see firsthand how badly the house has been damaged. It has been blown over on its side, walls are missing, and it is beyond any attempts to try to fix it. Other homes on the street are missing altogether as they have been blown away into the sea. After a brief discussion, Arnie finally asks Frank what would be the best thing for him to do. Frank replies that at this point, the only thing left to do would be to sell to the Italian buyers. In this way, Arnie can regain his financial loss and the hassle of rebuilding can be put on someone else. Arnie agrees to to this and the situation is resolved.

The hurricane has only a slight purpose in "Everything Could Be Worse". Charlotte Pines' home has also been destroyed by the hurricane. She also suffers from a broken



wrist due to trying to get out of the home quickly. Because she has been left homeless, she is staying with some friends who happen to live near Frank. Since she is so close by, she decides that she wants to visit Frank's home as she used to live there many years before. Frank mistakes Charlotte for someone who is looking for Sally, who the reader learns is in another town working with relief efforts.

In "The New Normal" the hurricane is hardly mentioned at all, except for when Ann inquires about Sally. Sally and Ann have met some time previously. In this occasion, Ann asks about how Sally is doing. Frank's answer is that she has been busy with all of the relief efforts lately. Ann likes Sally for her skills at helping others cope with their losses at this time and tells Frank to give Sally her regards.

Discussion of the hurricane during a radio talk show leads to rekindling an old connection in "The Deaths of Others". Frank is listening to this talk show one morning as he is eating breakfast. The main topic is how the hurricane has destroyed so much of the New Jersey shore and how it is affecting people and their thoughts on how they knew that something bad was going to happen before the storm. A man calls in to give his own thoughts of the hurricane. He says he is dying and that his situation and the hurricane are parallel to one another. He goes on to explain that his death and the hurricane are both ways to clear the surplus population and that both are a necessary act. As Frank listens to this, he realizes that he recognizes the voice. It is an old friend of his, Eddie Medley, a man Frank met when he and Ann first moved to New Jersey. Some time after this call, Eddie calls the Bascombe house, wanting Frank to come visit him for the last time. It is during this visit that Eddie makes a confession of having an affair with Ann.

Death

Death is a major part of Frank's thinking, even if he is trying to make the process a lot smoother. As such, Frank knows that death is a complicated event that he wishes to simplify. He does so by paying attention to all of the commercials on television that talk about death so that his own death will not be so harsh. Along the way, Frank is letting go of long term friendships, thinking that if he is successful then he will have less to worry about as time goes by. Frank does not spend too much time worry about the physical decline into death.

Death is not a solid factor in "I'm Here". The only solid contribution to this theme is within the story that Sally is ready that she shares with Frank. It is about the Dakota uprising of 1862, a tragedy where large numbers of white settlers were killed by Sioux warriors. The Sioux were then arrested and executed. Before they were executed, they stood on the gallows and all of them yelled, "I'm here". The deaths of these men and what they said are fascinating to Sally as they proved that they could still be proud and outspoken even upon their own deaths.

Death does come to the forefront of the story in "Everything Could Be Worse". In 1969, Charlotte Pines lived in the house that Frank now occupies. Charlotte lived with her



brother, mother and father. Her father, Hartwick Pines, was a brilliant inventor for Bell Labs, but he became dark and mysterious over time, causing his wife to have an affair. Hartwick found out about this affair and after a short time, he killed his wife. Hartwick then killed his son as well and sat in the house waiting for Charlotte to come home from her debate club meeting so that he could also murder her. Charlotte did not come home at the normal time. When she did come home, she found that the rest of her family are dead. This is what caused her to leave the home and never come back until recently.

For many years, Charlotte has not had the strength to come visit the house. Since Hurricane Sandy annihilated her house, forcing her to move in with friends nearby. She feels that she needs to visit at this point to find the closure that she has been needing for years. Charlotte is successful in this as she tells her story to a sympathetic Frank. As Charlotte leaves, she is filled with a feeling that now she can finally start to be at peace and she has also made a new friend in Frank.

In "The New Normal", death takes on a more supporting role as it provides supporting factors in the actions of the story. After the death of Ann's second husband, Ann learned that she has Parkinson's disease. After living in the condo that she once shared with her late husband and with the onset of her condition, Ann moved into an assisted care facility. Frank comes to visit her to give her a pillow. During the visit, Ann talks about a class she is taking on coping with the deaths of people around her. Ann's revelation causes a conversation about where she would like to be buried. She has chosen her final resting place to be near her and Frank's late son. Upon asking Frank if he still plans to have his body donated to science, Frank says he has declined to do that. Instead, he is opting to be close to their son as well.

The final story "The Deaths of Others" takes the theme of death to the main cause of the story. As Eddie Medley is dying, he reflects on various things. During a local radio talk show, he calls in and offers his opinion on how the hurricane is Nature's way of controlling the over-population. He also calls Frank and asks Frank to visit him, as he is dying. Frank does visit in Eddie, who eventually admits to Frank that he had an affair with Ann at the end of her and Frank's marriage. Eddie said he needed to clear his conscious of this information before he could die.

Closure

The need to find closure is an important factor mainly for the supporting characters, but in some ways Frank is finding it for himself. This can be seen in his need to simplify things as he ages, closing the door on things that are no longer vital in his life. This includes making the list of words and phrases he does not care to use as well as the "jettisoning" of friends. It allows him to move forward with his life and to gain more appreciation for what he has left.

Although Frank finds small bits of closure in his own way, three of the four short stories deal heavily with closure for other characters. In "I'm Here", Frank is going to meet with seafood salesman Arnie Urquhart. The vacation home that Arnie purchased from Frank



many years before has been recently destroyed by Hurricane Sandy. Arnie does not know what to do with the property as Italian property buyers would like to make an offer for the home so that they can rebuild in the area. Arnie is angry over the loss of his home, although he knows that Frank cannot do anything about it. Instead, Arnie asks Frank to meet with Arnie at the house just to see if the potential buyers are genuine.

When Arnie and Frank do meet up, the pair survey the damage to the home. The home has been torn apart and is on its side, making everything irreparable. Arnie rants and raves about this turn of events. Frank patiently listens to Arnie, understanding his frustrations. When Arnie is finished, Frank offers Arnie the advice of getting rid of the house quickly as it is no longer of any use to Arnie and would cost too much to try to repair. Satisfied with Frank's words, Arnie is calm and agrees with Frank. In an emotional outburst showing that Arnie is happy to resolve this issue, Arnie grabs Frank into a tight hug. At this point, Arnie has found his closure as he can go ahead and sell the home to the property flippers.

Charlotte Pines comes to visit Frank in "Everything Could Be Worse". Charlotte's home has also been destroyed by the hurricane and is staying with friends a short distance from Frank's house. When she meets Frank, she explains that she once lived in the home but left when she was still in high school. She has always wanted to visit but has never taken the time to before. Since she is so close by, she figures that it is the right time and asks Frank if she can take a tour of the house. Frank agrees to this and lets Charlotte go about the house by herself. When she is finished, she comes into the kitchen where she and Frank share a cup of coffee.

It is while they are drinking coffee that Charlotte tells Frank her whole story. When she was in high school, her father brutally murdered her brother and her mother over her mother's affair. Her father waited for Charlotte to come home but since Charlotte was late, he ended up committing suicide. Charlotte immediately moved out of the house and has not been back since. Charlotte also says that she has always wanted to visit the house again, but she has never had the courage until now. Charlotte now feels that she can let go of her past and move on with her life now that she has been inside the house again. She has finally found the closure that she has needed for many years.

In the last story "The Deaths of Others", Eddie Medley seeks to find closure with Frank as he is dying. Eddie calls Frank's house sometime before Christmas, but Frank does not call Eddie back until Christmas Eve. Eddie wants Frank to visit, but Frank is more interested in packing for his trip to Kansas City the next day. Frank relents and promises to visit Eddie as this may be the last time that he will ever get to see Eddie. During the visit Eddie reveals that he called Frank because there is something that he needs to confess. Eddie also states that he cannot die without telling Frank this secret as he wants to have a clear conscience before his death. Eddie goes on to confess that he had an affair with Frank's first wife, Ann, shortly before Frank's divorce. Eddie wants Frank to be mad or show some reaction, but Frank finds that he cannot, he is too shocked to fully show any emotion at all. Ultimately, Frank forgives Eddie for his indiscretion, giving Eddie the peace he has been looking for.



Communication

For Frank, language and its meaning is something that is meant to be as simple as possible. Frank does not like the current slang that many people use. He finds it frustrating and confusing that slang terminology exists. Within Frank's preference for keeping language simple, he also accepts the use of expletives as an appropriate form of communicating clearly with others. Frank maintains a mental list of words and phrases that he would prefer never to hear again or to use himself. Some of these include "we're pregnant", "reach out", and "no problem". In Frank's opinion, these things are ridiculous in trying to convey the true meanings of what is trying to be said.

The list of words and phrases that Frank does not want to use or hear from others originates in "I'm Here". Frank is listening to a local sports talk show as he is pumping gas when he hears one of the newscasters say the phrase "F-bomb". The actual intended word ironically does not bother Frank, in fact he would prefer that it would be used, whether it be in the form of a noun, adjective, or a verb. In terms of how Frank communicates in "I'm Here", Frank is very nonchalant as he is trying to calm Arnie Urquhart as his house has been destroyed by the hurricane. Arnie himself is prone to excessive swearing and has a very brusque manner of speaking. Frank speaks with a more dignified air. As the conversation wears on, Frank takes on the same rugged style of talking that Arnie has as Frank gives Arnie the advice to sell the house. This puts Arnie further at ease and he ends up agreeing with Frank.

In "Everything Could Be Worse", a story that is told during a visit to Frank's home provides an older woman with the closure she needs to move on with her life. Charlotte Pines comes to visit Frank just after he comes home from reading to the blind. Charlotte is interested in seeing the inside of the house as she used to live there many years ago. Once she is finished with her small tour, she and Frank share a conversation and Frank gets to learn more about Charlotte. He also gets to learn the true reason of her visit, the reason she left, and more about the house. As Charlotte tells Frank these things, a weight is lifted off of her emotionally. In this form of communication, Charlotte finds a new friend in Frank as he is understanding and sympathetic towards her. At the end of the visit, they have a brief chat about happiness and whether or not they could be truly happy in their lives as it is now. They both agree that life will go on and this shared sentiment draws them closer together.

Communication is at the forefront of "The New Normal". Frank is going to visit his ex-wife Ann at her assisted living facility. Along the way, Frank thinks about how he will deal with Ann quickly so that he can take his current wife out to dinner for her birthday. The reader is informed that Ann frequently causes arguments between herself and Frank, usually over minor things that Frank does not bother to think about. In order to get through this particular visit a bit quicker, Frank intends to use a method he calls his "Default Self". This entails Frank being more agreeable to whatever Ann says and keeping her focused on small topics.



While Frank is visiting the apartment, he is mostly successful at keeping the conversation argument free. Ann is appreciative of the gift Frank has given her. After short comments about other things, Ann moves on to a major part of their conversation. She first tells Frank that she has been taking a class on dealing with death. Frank tries to feign interest in the topic as he is afraid that he does not act interested, then Ann will get offended. Ann goes on to inquire about Frank's final plans before she declares that she wants to be near their deceased son. Frank finds this conversation slightly morbid, but not unpleasant as there has been no arguments. With this, Frank can conclude his visit and leave on a positive note after giving her an unexpected hug goodbye.

The final story, "The Deaths of Others" heavily relies on the theme of communication as well. A phone call to a local radio program is heard by Frank as he is eating breakfast. Frank recognizes the voice on the phone as a former friend, Eddie Medley. Frank has not given Eddie much thought in many years, and he learns through this radio show that Eddie is dying. Coincidentally, a short time later, Eddie calls the Bascombe house, but Frank takes his time in returning the call. Once Frank does, Eddie tells Frank that Frank needs to come visit him as soon as possible as it may be the last time they see each other again.

Frank is met at the door to Eddie's house by a caregiver named Finesse. Her boisterous attitude seems out of place with the somber scene of hospice care, but she conveys to Frank that Eddie needs to have upbeat interaction so that he does not get depressed about his situation. Frank agrees to this as he is walking into Eddie's room, but is mostly speechless upon seeing Eddie. There is light banter and joking about the past and how each of them are doing currently, but there is no major topics being explored at this point. Finesse reminds Frank of his promise, but he is finding it hard to follow through as he does not really know what to talk about.

Once the conversation hits its lowest point, Eddie decides to tell Frank the real reason he asked for this visit. It is something that has been weighing heavily on Eddie's conscience for years and Eddie does not want to die without having given his confession. It is revealed that towards the end of Ann and Frank's marriage, Eddie had an affair with Ann. At one point, Eddie wanted Ann to run away to France with Eddie, but she declined as she was still in love with Frank. This confession is startling to Frank, but he is so shocked he is almost speechless and cannot give a negative reaction. The only thing Frank wants to do at this point is to leave quickly and he gets his chance when a phone call interrupts the visit. Once outside he runs into the gas meter reader. Frank is able to have a pleasant conversation with him, which helps ease Frank's shot and he is able to consider the day saved as he heads home.

Styles

Point of View

All four short stories are written in a first person omniscient point of view. The tone of the narration given by the main character is conversational as Frank describes his actions, thoughts and feelings. This gives the reader a better understanding of Frank's character and how he processes ongoing events. This enables the reader to learn more about various parts of Frank's past that highlight important tidbits of information from his three previous novels. This is especially helpful as this point of view gives insight into how Frank thinks and provides the motivation for some of his actions and conversations.

Language and Meaning

The novel is rather complex in the use of words and their meanings. In the first short story, "I'm Here", Frank sets the tone of how he prefers speech. He does not like the slang used in today's culture and prefers to be straightforward. Expletives have a certain value with Frank as to him they convey a genuine assessment of situations and feelings. Expletives are also heavily used in conversations. The limit of the conversations is that in most cases, the conversations are kept not drawn out nor do they cover anything except what is integral to the story's development. The language of the conversations is casual and not overly complicated, although Arnie Urquhart's language is more of a regional New Jersey style. The descriptive language and that of Frank's thoughts in the novel are of medium difficulty. Due to the difficulty with some of the vocabulary and the explicit language, this novel is suited for advanced high school or adult readers.

Structure

The novel is broken up into four short stories, each dealing with a separate event in Frank's life shortly after Hurricane Sandy. It is interesting to note that each story's title is a part of the conversation of the novel before it. In "I'm Here", Sally provides the title as she relates a story of the 1862 Dakota Indian uprising while Frank eats breakfast. The last words of the Indians is "I'm here", something that Sally wishes to convey to Frank. Frank's main action in this story is to meet with Arnie Urquhart at his recently destroyed home. Although Frank struggles over whether or not he wants to be there with Arnie, Frank indulges him and meets him. Over the course of the conversation, the reader learns that Arnie just wants someone to talk to and be consoled about the loss of his home. In this case, it is Frank that is there for Arnie as he decides to sell the home to Italian property flippers.

Towards the end of the first story, Frank says that "Everything Could Be Worse", which is the title of the next story. In this segment, Frank learns more about his home as he



has an unexpected visitor. A lady named Charlotte Pines comes to the home in hopes of being able to reconnect and find closure with her past. While talking with Frank over a cup of coffee, she tells the story of her family and how her father murdered her mother and brother. Once the visit is over, the pair chat about happiness and how little of it is left in the world. They both agree and Frank tells her that he no longer has the time to worry about the hardships of life, claiming it is "The New Normal".

Frank visits his first wife, Anne, who is suffering from Parkinson's Disease in a nursing home and to bring her a present in "The New Normal". As he is driving to see her, he thinks about his current wife's birthday and how he can get his visit with his first wife done quickly and without any fighting. He decides to rely on his "Default Self", a method he uses with Anne to avoid unnecessary arguments. After Frank maneuvers through the waiting rooms he is careful to avoid people he does not want to see including Anne's new boyfriend. The visit is smooth for the most part with no arguments and the ex-wife is grateful for her present. It is Anne that states the title of the final story, "The Deaths of Others" as she is talking with Frank about her own funeral arrangements.

The final story is "The Deaths of Others", as Frank prepares for a holiday vacation, he receives a call from an old friend. His friend, Eddie, is dying of cancer and wants Frank to grant his last wish by coming to visit him. Frank puts his vacation packing on hold to go visit Eddie, but does not intend to stay very long. The visit makes Eddie happy, but he has one thing he needs to do. Eddie confesses to Frank that he slept with Frank's ex wife Anne before they got their divorce. Rather than be angered by this, Frank is very nonchalant about it. Frank leaves quietly, having fulfilled his friend's last wish of seeing a friendly face.



Quotes

When you grow old, as I am, you pretty much live in the accumulations of life anyway.
-- Frank (Story 1 "I'm Here" paragraph 13)

Importance: This quote sums up how Frank feels about getting older. He is handling his aging as a normal occurrence and nothing too dramatic. Frank also realizes that over the years he has done more things to look back on than things to look forward to. This also shows the nonchalant attitude he has taken towards life in general.

Patent gestures of kindness, commiseration, fellow-feeling, shared sorrow, and empathy - all are weak sisters in the fight against real loss.
-- Frank (Story 1: "I'm Here" paragraph 31)

Importance: The effects of Hurricane Sandy along the New Jersey shore are gigantic as many homes, including Frank's former home, have been destroyed. This quote symbolizes the feeling that Frank has towards the aftermath of this catastrophe. Frank understands the feelings of the people around him as they try to stand together and act as if things can be rebuilt or made into something better. Frank also knows that even though all of these efforts are well meant, there is still such heavy damage to property and personal lives that the process to get on with their lives will be harder than it seems.

I should be able to envision the grains of possibility in what's left of it. But for the moment, I cannot.
-- Frank (Story 1: I'm Here paragraph 83)

Importance: The rebuilding efforts have started on the New Jersey shore, but there is a large amount of debris and destruction, causing the area to look terrible. As Frank is driving to meet Arnie Urquhart, Frank notices all of this. Since he used to be a real estate agent, he should be able to pick out the value, but he finds himself unable to do so because of the mess. He also may be unable to focus on the possibilities because he has retired and therefore does not think about these things on a constant basis.

Even though the fact that things end is often the most interesting thing about them - inasmuch as most things seem not to end nearly fast enough.
-- Frank (Story 2: Everything Could Be Worse paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote is a foreshadowing of the encounter Frank has with Charlotte Pines, a former resident of Frank's home. She comes to visit after several years of not living in the home. Frank allows her to stay for a while, where Charlotte tells Frank the tale of how she left the home after her father murders her mother and her brother.

It's too bad we don't let ourselves in for more unexpected moments. Life would be less flimsy, feel more worth preserving.
-- Frank (Story 2: Everything Could Be Worse paragraph 43)



Importance: This sums up Frank's experience with Charlotte Pines. At first he is wary of Charlotte and her intentions, but he warms up to her and finds her company pleasant. He is so taken with her that sometimes he is unsure of what to say as she reveals the reason for her visit. AT the end of the visit, Frank feels as if he has truly made a new friend.

Its a solid gain to experience significant life events for which no other words or obvious gestures apply. Awkward silence can be perfect."

-- Frank (Story 2: Everything Could Be Worse paragraph 194)

Importance: As Charlotte prepares to leave after telling her story, Frank and Charlotte share a brief silence. In this silence, they seem to understand each other's miseries and feelings better than if they could try to put it to words.

As far as I was concerned, Ann had simply embarked on another new course in life, the main source of interest and primary selling point of which was that it carried her further away from being my wife and near becoming just another person I might never have known, whose obituary my eye might pass over without the slightest pause or twinge. Which is the goal and most perfect paradigm of what we mean when we say divorce.

-- Frank (Story 3: The New Normal paragraph 15)

Importance: This describes the way Frank feels about Ann after her marriage to Teddy Fuchs. Frank does not bear any ill will against Ann, but for him the divorce is final and that the proper thing to do would be to move on with his life as she is clearly getting on with hers. He does not want to be an active part of Ann's life any more, but he is always drawn into it, especially by his children.

Complications and unfathomables in 'dealing with' one or another aging parent seem now to be the norm for modern offspring.

-- Frank (Story 3: The New Normal paragraph 18)

Importance: The relationship between Frank and his children are on display here as the children deal with their parents. Clarissa tells Frank about everything that Ann does, whether he wants the information or not. On the other hand, she has less dealings with her mother. Their son, Paul, has very little to do with either parent, only when it is necessary.

In my view, we have only what we did yesterday, what we do today, and what might still do. Plus, whatever we think about all that.

-- Frank (Story 3: The New Normal paragraph 86)

Importance: While Ann thinks of spirituality and of how a person's demeanor is fate, Frank believes the opposite. This quote is an affirmation of his view that the only the he can believe in is what is tangible and the actions and thoughts that are his own.

To Sally, it would always be good to encounter an old friend. To me, such matters have to dealt with case by case, with the outcome in doubt to the last.



-- Frank (Story 4: "The Deaths of Others" paragraph 23)

Importance: There is a difference over how Sally would view an unexpected call from a friend over how Frank would handle it. Frank is wary of friendships at this point as he has taken to letting go of his friends one by one in order to simplify his life. In this case, this quote shows that Frank is picking and choosing who he actually wants to remain friends with.

Jettisoning friends, along with these small, private acts of corrective thinking, has altogether made death mean a great deal less to me than it used to; but better yet has made life mean a great deal more.

-- Frank (Story 4: "The Deaths of Others" paragraph 29)

Importance: As Frank weeds out his friends, he also ponders his own impending death. This release of old bonds is used in conjunction with a different way of thinking about life and death than Frank's thoughts when he was younger. The combination of the two is satisfying to Frank as the simplification of his life makes him more appreciative of the things and people he has decided to keep in his life.

In the world today, no one should experience a wittering urgency without knowing there's a cause somewhere close by, even if you can't see it.

-- Frank (Story 4: "The Deaths of Others" paragraph 77)

Importance: Frank is in the process of packing for his upcoming trip to Kansas City. This is delayed as he has been asked to visit Eddie at his home. Eddie feels that this may be the last time he ever has the opportunity to see Frank, so this has become an urgent matter for Frank. Although Frank is reluctant to put his own plans on hold, Frank understands that Eddie could die soon, so he decides to fulfill the dying man's wish to see Frank.