

Lullaby Study Guide

Lullaby by Chuck Palahniuk

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Plot Summary

Lullaby is a novel by critically acclaimed writer Chuck Palahniuk. In this novel, Carl Streator, a journalist, is doing a story on crib death when he notices a strange connection between not only the deaths of these babies, but of his own wife and infant as well. As Streator continues to investigate a culling song he believes is responsible for all these deaths, he meets Helen Hoover Boyle, a real estate agent, who has also suffered and profited from this same culling song. Lullaby is a novel that questions the conformity of society and the media that appears to have the power to control the world's thoughts and desires.

Carl Streator is assigned a story that will profile the recent deaths of five infants and the impact their deaths have on their families. As part of the research for his articles, Streator rides along with a paramedic team to the scene of these deaths. At each home, Streator notices a book of poems called Poems and Rhymes from Around the World. This book is familiar to Streator because he can remember reading from the same book to his wife and child nearly twenty years before. At each home, Streator also notices that all the books are open to the same page, which is page twenty-seven.

Streator begins researching this poem and learns that it is a culling song or a song often sung to children during a famine or warriors injured on the battlefield. Streator also learns that Helen Hoover Boyle also lost a child twenty years ago from the same thing. Streator introduces himself to Helen and reaches out to her for help. However, Helen is reluctant to discuss this culling song with Streator. At the same time, Streator becomes aware that when he is angry or upset, he thinks of the culling song and the object of his rage suddenly dies right in front of him. Streator becomes afraid of his own thoughts and decides he must rid the world of every copy of the culling song.

Streator learns that Helen tracked down the author of Poems and Rhymes from Around the World years ago and bought up his estate in the hopes of finding the original copy of the culling song. Now Helen agrees to go with Streator to track down every copy of the book and find the original copy. Helen and Streator invite a young couple, Mona and Oyster, to travel with them. All of them have a different idea of what they might do with the original book in which the song appeared, the grimoire. Streator wants to destroy it, Helen wants to bring back her dead infant, and Oyster wants to rid the world of all people.

The foursome finds half the remaining Poems and Rhymes from Around the World, but still have no clue how to find the grimoire when a falling out between Helen and Oyster causes a parting of the ways. A short time later, Mona realizes that the appointment book Helen has carried with her for years is the grimoire, the spells written in various types of invisible writing. Streator and Helen decide to return home to give Helen a chance to translate the spells. This also gives Streator time to deal with a paramedic acquaintance of his who is using the culling spell to commit necrophilia with fashion models.



Helen translates all the spells, including one that allows her to take over other people's bodies. However, while Streater is in jail for the murders of all those he killed with the culling song, including his wife and child, Mona and Oyster steal the grimoire. Helen, fortunately enough, recalls the occupation spell and is able to move her consciousness into a grizzled old cop as her body dies from the suicide Oyster forced her body to commit while he occupied her body. Streater and Helen go off together in search of Mona and Oyster, hoping to stop them before they can do too much damage to the world.



Prologue and Chapters 1-4

Prologue and Chapters 1-4 Summary

Chuck Palahnuik is a critically acclaimed author who has written multiple books that were made into movies. In this latest novel, Chuck Palahnuik tackles the media and the influence it has over consumers.

In the prologue, Helen Hoover Boyle convinces a couple who has just bought a haunted house from her to give her confidential exclusive to resell the house. Helen listens to the police radio and jumps on houses where a death has occurred because she can sell them over and over again, making a profit each time. The moment she is off the phone with this couple, Helen calls another who are anxiously waiting for Helen to find them the perfect house.

In Chapter 1, Streator is thinking about some of the things he learned in journalism school as he sits in a diner with an old grizzled cop called Sarge, waiting for a Flying Madonna to make another appearance.

In Chapter 2, Streator is given an assignment by his editor, Duncan, to write a five part story about crib death. Streator finds himself wondering about the ethics of such a story.

In Chapter 3, Streator is at home where he is overwhelmed by the amount of sound coming through the walls of his apartment from the apartments belonging to his neighbors. As he thinks about the storm of noise all around him, Streator works on a miniature model that includes homes, churches, stores, and other types of municipal buildings. When he finishes placing the final pieces, Streator sets the model on the floor and stomps it with his bare foot.

In Chapter 4, Streator tags along on paramedic calls for five babies. At each home, Streator notices a book called Poems and Rhymes from Around the World and each is open to page twenty-seven. Streator recognizes the poem as one he once read to his own wife and child the night before their deaths.

Prologue and Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The reader meets the narrator and one of the main characters in this section of chapters. The first character introduced is Helen Hoover Boyle, a real estate agent who sells haunted properties so that she can resell them over and over again when the owners become too frightened to live in the home. This suggests to the reader that Helen is not a very compassionate person and that money is very important to her.

The other character introduced in this section of chapters is the narrator, Carl Streator. Streator is a reporter who is working on a story about crib death. Immediately Streator discovers that all five of the babies he is to write about have a copy in their home of a



culling song that he himself read to his own wife and child the night before they died. This suggests to Streater that the culling song has something to do with the deaths. This is the conflict that will propel the plot.

Also of importance in these early chapters is the setting of Chapter 1. This chapter is written in italics and appears to have been written in the present tense while the rest of the chapters have been written in the past tense. In this chapter, Streater is with a seasoned old cop and he is searching for a Flying Madonna, a woman who appeared in a small town and appears to have paranormal abilities. This suggests that Streater has become interested in the paranormal at some point for reasons that are still unclear to the reader.



Chapters 5-9

Chapters 5-9 Summary

In Chapter 5, Streator meets Helen Hoover Boyle at one of her homes where she talks on the phone while she shows him around. Streator tells Helen that he knows her son Patrick died twenty years ago and that her husband died almost a year later of no apparent cause. Helen becomes upset when Streator mentions the poem and asks him to leave.

In Chapter 6, Duncan asks Streator to call the number in a couple of ads for apparent class action lawsuits. At each number the same voice answers and Duncan suggests they might do a story about them. Streator then reads the culling song to Duncan, saying he wants to conduct an experiment.

In Chapter 7, Streator learns the next day that Duncan did not come into work and now he is forced to work with the unpleasant Henderson. Streator becomes irritated and begins thinking about the culling song and how people would become afraid of sound if they learned of the power of the culling song.

In Chapter 8, Streator gets a call from Nash, the paramedic he often went on calls with while doing his story on crib death. Nash calls him and tells him the head of Stuart Western Tech has just been found dead in a hotel room with his wife. Nash talks about how beautiful the woman was and how he would have liked to have sex with her dead body. Then Nash tells Streator that the last phone number on both Stuarts' phones was Helen Hoover Boyle.

In Chapter 9, Streator talks with Helen as she walks through an antique furniture warehouse. Helen tells him that she killed the Stuarts because they planned to have one of her haunted houses knocked down to build another house. Streator then tells her he thinks he killed his editor and wonders how to control the desire to use the culling song.

Chapters 5-9 Analysis

Streator reads the culling song aloud to his editor out of curiosity, to see if the culling song really has the power to kill. The editor does not show up the next day. Not only this, but Streator is made aware of a couple who appear to have been killed with the culling song by Helen Hoover Boyle. Not only does this confirm that Helen knows the song, but it also implies that she is willing to use it as needed. Streator asks her how to keep from using the song whenever the desire strikes, but she has no answers for him at this point.

Two other things of importance happen in these chapters. First is the set of ads that appear to be for class action lawsuits. This ads appear over and over again in the novel



and will become associated with another character who has yet to be introduced. Important at this point are the different phone numbers that all seem to reach the same law office. Second, is Nash. Streater introduces Nash as a slob who has a fascination with beautiful women. Nash mentions that he would like to have sex with the bodies of beautiful dead woman, saying it as though it is a fantasy that will never come true and it is dismissed by Streater. However, this too will come back to haunt Streater as the novel continues to develop.



Chapters 10-14

Chapters 10-14 Summary

In Chapter 10, Streator learns at work that Duncan was found dead in his apartment. Streator also learns a story Helen told him about an Angel of Mercy is true. Then Henderson annoys Streator and he uses the culling song on him.

In Chapter 11, Streator is at home taking a bath when the noise all around him begins to annoy him. Streator says the culling song aloud, believing it will not hurt anyone since they cannot hear him, but he forgot about the air vent that runs through all the apartments.

In Chapter 12, Streator meets with Nash again. Streator asks Nash if anyone died in his apartment building last night. Nash tells him no one he knows of. A cheating husband across the bar annoys Streator, so he thinks the culling song in his direction and watches him drop dead in the bar.

In Chapter 13, Streator goes to work to discover he has yet another new editor. On the way to the office from the bar, Streator killed four people who annoyed him. Then this new editor wants Streator to come up with a nice quote about Duncan. Streator calls Helen Hoover Boyle.

In Chapter 14, Streator is waiting to see Helen and has a conversation with her assistant, Mona Sabbat. Mona is listening to a radio show featuring Dr. Sara, a rude therapist who is yelling at a caller about her unexpected pregnancy. Streator becomes annoyed and thinks the culling spell about Dr. Sara and suddenly the radio host goes silent. Mona tells Streator she is Wiccan and her coven might be able to help him deal with his anger issues.

Chapters 10-14 Analysis

Streator begins killing anyone who annoys him because he cannot control his thoughts. Every time Streator is annoyed, he thinks the culling song and people just drop dead in front of him. This includes two editors, a neighbor, and a group of strangers Streator knows nothing about. Streator is frightened by this and wants to learn how to control it, but the only other person who might understand his situation, Helen Hoover Boyle, will not tell him what to do. Mona Sabbat, Helen's assistant, tells Streator to visit with her Wiccan coven, suggesting they might be able to help because witches deal in spells. This does not seem promising, but it seems that Streator is pretty desperate at this point.

A theme that keeps appearing in this novel, the amount of noise that dominates a civilized world, appears several times in this set of chapters. In fact, it is because of the noise from his neighbor's apartment that Streator says the culling song aloud in his

bathroom and kills his neighbor. This begins to illustrate, as well, the theme of the power of the media since many of these noises come from the radio or the television. This includes the radio show Mona listens to that annoys Streater so much, he kills the host.



Chapters 15-19

Chapters 15-19 Summary

In Chapter 15, Streator meets with Helen again in the antique furniture warehouse and asks her more about the culling song. Helen tells Streator how she learned that the writer of the book, *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World*, had died and she bought up his estate. Helen searched the house for the original copy of the song from which the author took it and put it in his collection, but she never found it. Streator suggests they need to destroy the remaining hundred or so copies of the book loose in the country and Helen suggests they need to find the original copy, the *Book of Shadows* so to speak.

In Chapter 16, Streator meets Nash at the bar. Nash tells Streator he knows how he is killing people and that he might go to the police with the information. Nash threatens to burn down the bar unless Streator tells him, so Streator does.

In Chapter 17, Streator and Helen attend the Wiccan meeting where they discover everyone will attend naked. Among the coven is Oyster, Mona's boyfriend. Oyster is a strong opponent to killing animals for any purpose and he yells at Streator for bringing a salad that has anchovies in one of the ingredients. Streator becomes angry and kills a parrot riding on one of the Wiccan's shoulder.

In Chapter 18, Streator and Sarge are in Oregon looking for someone known as the I-84 Messiah, a man who heals animals that have died beside the road.

In Chapter 19, Streator, Helen, Mona, and Oyster on a road trip traveling through America in search of copies of *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World* in public libraries and book stores. As they drive, Oyster tells them of illnesses and foreign plant species brought into the country to kill a plant or animal that was seen as annoying or troublesome to farmers and ranchers. Mona shows them a book of traditional crafts from which she made a Hopi medicine pouch where Oyster carries his cell phone. On the phone, Oyster orders an ad that sounds like an ad for a class action lawsuit and gives his own number for respondents to call. Oyster says it is his way of destroying existing culture.

Chapters 15-19 Analysis

Helen tells Streator the history of the culling song, suggesting that it came from an ancient book that includes other ancient spells. Helen wants to find this original book so that she might be able to change the world. Streator suggests the book should be destroyed. Then they go on the road to destroy all copies of the culling song and take Mona and her boyfriend with them. Streator imagines these two younger people are like the children he and Helen had that were killed by the culling song, which might suggest

why Streator and Mona put up with them even after Oyster embarrasses them at the Wiccan meeting.

It turns out that the class action lawsuit ads that Streator keeps noticing are placed by Oyster. The reader still does not know why he does this, however, but it becomes clear this is some kind of scam that readers of the paper are falling for, touching again on the theme of media influence.

Another chapter takes place in the future in which Streator is searching now for a man who cures animals that were killed on the highway. This glimpse into the future makes the reader think that perhaps Oyster has gotten hold of the Book of Shadows, or the original book that the culling song appeared in. However, the reader has no idea how this happened or when.



Chapters 20-22

Chapters 20-22 Summary

In Chapter 20, Streator and Helen get access to a home where one of the Poems and Rhymes from *Around the World* was checked out from a library by pretending to be giving free makeovers. The woman of the house is in mourning for the death of her child. As Streator looks for the book and steals the appropriate page, Helen offers some consolation to the woman, including giving her some of her costume jewelry.

In Chapter 21, Helen tells Streator about the death of her son, Patrick, and how she met a woman down lane from her who also lost a child. Helen buys a copy of *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World* at a yard sale after this other child's death and makes the connection between it and a poem she read to her own son the night before his death. Helen then read the poem to her husband, in part out of curiosity, causing him to die that night. Helen then claims that her son is not dead, but he is in the hospital waiting until she can find a spell to bring him back to her.

In Chapter 22, Streator hears people on the radio eulogizing Dr. Sara and he kills them by reciting the culling song in his head because they irritate him. Mona begins talking about strange, traditional methods to cure everyday maladies such as an ear ache, causing Streator even more irritation. In fact, Streator has to count in his head to keep from killing her. Mona also defends Dr. Sara and accuses Streator of killing those eulogizing her. Oyster begins encouraging Streator to kill the person currently talking on the radio to prove his power, but Streator refuses. When the news comes on, Streator hears that drug kingpin Gustave Brennan has died. This is the name of the man Streator saw Helen write in her day planner after taking a call on her cell phone.

Chapters 20-22 Analysis

Helen reveals her compassionate side as she offers some advice to a woman who has recently lost her infant to the culling song. Helen even gives the woman what Streator believes is costume jewelry but later proves to be real jewels. Afterward, Helen confesses to Streator how her son Patrick died, but then insists that Patrick is not dead. This surprises Streator, who looked up the county records and knows that Patrick was declared dead twenty years ago. Helen also confesses to the murder of her husband, a man Streator knows from police records beat his wife after the death of his son. This shows the reader that Helen has suffered in her past and explains in part how she became familiar with the culling song.

Streator continues to find it nearly impossible to control his ability to kill with the culling song. Streator claims to be horrified by his own actions, but continues to kill anyone who annoys him. Streator originally sought out Helen to help him learn to control his new power, but Helen has failed to show him how up to this point. However, the reader has



discovered that Helen continues to kill with the culling song when Streater recognizes the name of a dead man that Helen wrote down in her day planner. This appears to show that Helen is a ruthless killer, but the reader suspects there is more to Helen's actions than is obvious at this point.



Chapters 23-27

Chapters 23-27 Summary

In Chapter 23, Oyster continues to place and answer ads for a fake law firm handling class action suits. At the same time, Oyster tells stories about sailors who left animals on islands to provide themselves with food, but these animals would kill off the indigenous animal life. Streator becomes annoyed and begins counting again.

In Chapter 24, Streator searches through Helen's day planner while Helen and Mona go inside the next library. Streator makes a list of the names he finds in the book and at another library he uses the newspapers to check out each name. They all turn out to be deceased. Helen catches Streator and explains that she kills for diamonds and other jewels as a way to deal with the power of the culling song. Helen and Streator then search for the book and discover it has been checked out. Helen tries to bribe the librarian into telling who checked out the book, but the librarian refuses to give the information, so Helen kills him.

In Chapter 25, Streator's foot has become badly infected from stomping on the model homes and towns he has stomped in the past. Mona examines the foot and begins removing pieces of the models out of infected blisters on his foot. As she works, Mona turns on the television and they see a news report about a fire at a large bookstore downtown. Streator sees Helen and Oyster standing behind the reporter.

In Chapter 26, Streator is upset that Helen and Oyster burned down the bookstore, but Helen explains that the large store was chaotic and they would never have been able to find the books.

In Chapter 27, Streator is in the present Seattle where a plague of ivy has taken over the city. Streator calls in response to an ad for a class action suit and asks the man who answers if he is Oyster. The man hangs up.

Chapters 23-27 Analysis

Oyster is becoming an annoyance to Streator even as he continues to think of him as the son Helen would have if she had never read the culling song. Oyster takes money from people with fake class action ads and has strong opinions against eating animals, as though he cares more for animals than people. Streator struggles not to kill Oyster, but finds the need nearly overwhelming.

Helen reveals to Streator that she kills people with the culling song for diamonds and jewels. This leaves Streator convinced Helen is an evil person, but Helen claims it is a good way to control the need to kill. Streator is finding it difficult to trust anyone, now that he knows how easy it is to kill. Streator is also concerned about the future, afraid if the culling song got out people would be afraid to hear anything and begin burning

books. This fear seems to be increased by Helen and Oyster's actions, but Streater realizes there is nothing he can do about it.

In the future, Streater is in Seattle where Ivy has taken over the city. This suggests to the reader that someone has gotten the Book of Shadows, the original book in which the culling song appeared. However, at this point the reader is unclear if it is Mona and Oyster or Helen and Oyster who have the book and are causing havoc on the world.



Chapters 28-31

Chapters 28-31 Summary

In Chapter 28, Helen and Streator go to the home of a man who checked out Poems and Rhymes from Around the World from the library. This time they pretend to be religious people bringing the man the word of God. This man is angry, however, because he is about to be placed on trial for killing his infant son. Helen finds the book and removes the page, throwing it out a window. Streator, however, does not feel this is good enough and he finds the page. As he hides under the window, Streator hears the man cry inside what was once the nursery. This causes Streator to promise himself if the Book of Shadows, or grimoire, has a spell to wake the dead in it he will not destroy it.

In Chapter 29, Streator recalls the morning his wife and child died. Streator did not know they were dead, even as he made love to his wife and kissed his child goodbye. Only when he arrived home did Streator realize the truth. Streator ran away rather than explain to the authorities his actions that fateful morning.

In Chapter 30, Streator calls a number that has appeared on his pager multiple times and discovers it is a police detective. Streator confesses to all the murders he has committed since learning the culling song, then kills the detective by thinking the song even though he thinks of the police as his saviors. Oyster, as Streator is getting off the phone, assaults Helen and steals a copy of the culling song she has just recovered. Helen hits Oyster in the face with her keys in her hands, leaving long scratches on his face.

In Chapter 31, Helen drives outside of town, then pulls over. Helen insists Oyster get out of the car. Oyster asks Mona to go with him, but she refuses.

Chapters 28-31 Analysis

Streator comes in contact with a father whose infant child was killed by the culling song. When he learns this man is facing charges for the murder, it causes Streator to remember the deaths of his own wife and daughter. Streator read them the culling song, but when he woke the next day he did not know they were dead. Streator even made love to his wife before leaving the house that day. This caused Streator to run away out of fear of being thought a pervert at the least and a murderer at the most. Now the reader knows that Streator is not even the real name of our hero and that he has personal experience with the culling song years before he made the connection between it and the infant deaths he was investigating for his story.

Oyster is determined to learn the culling song, but Streator and Helen have been keeping it from him as much for his protection as for anything else. Oyster tries to steal the song, but Helen has already set it on fire, stopping him from seeing much of it. This

leads to Oyster being thrown out of the foursome, leaving only Mona with Helen and Streator. The reader must wonder where this will lead since Streator does not trust either Helen or Mona any more than he did Oyster.



Chapters 32-35

Chapters 32-35 Summary

In Chapter 32, Streator is in the present again, this time in Nebraska. In this town, a Judas Cow at the local slaughter house began to speak and has convinced the entire town to become vegetarian.

In Chapter 33, Streator, Helen and Mona go to a carnival. While Streator and Helen are riding a ride together, Helen's day planner falls. Mona rescues it and begins to look through it. When Helen and Streator get off the ride, Mona tells them that they have had the Book of Shadows, or grimoire, all along. It is the day planner Helen got from the Poems and Rhymes from Around the World's writer's estate.

In Chapter 34, Mona explains that the book has been written in various forms of invisible ink, which is why Helen thought the book was empty. Mona explains the various methods they can use to make the ink appear so that the spells can be translated. Mona tries to keep the book, but Streator assaults her to get it back.

In Chapter 35, Streator is driving while Helen studies the grimoire. Helen's phone rings repeatedly. The callers are home owners of the haunted houses Helen has sold, afraid of the haunting they are experiencing. Then Oyster calls. Mona tries to tell him about the grimoire, but Streator hangs up before she can.

Chapters 32-35 Analysis

In the present, Streator again talks about an odd occurrence, this one involving a talking animal that makes the reader think of Oyster. It is clear Oyster has the grimoire.

Mona realizes that the day planner Helen uses is the grimoire. The spells have been written in invisible ink. This shocks, but pleases everyone because it is one less thing they will have to search for. In fact, everyone has their own ideas and hopes for the grimoire. Mona wants to take it, but Streator takes it back from her and gives it to Helen. Streator has wanted it destroyed from the beginning, but is beginning to think it might be useful, therefore he gives it to Helen. This suggests that Streator has grown to trust Helen more than was originally apparent.



Chapters 36-39

Chapters 36-39 Summary

In Chapter 36, Streator, Helen, and Mona return to their home city. Streator visits his apartment, but is uncomfortable and afraid he will be arrested, so he goes to Helen's office. Helen is working hard to translate the spells in the grimoire. Helen shows Streator an ad in the newspaper that has his wedding picture and a headline asking if anyone has seen him. As they talk, Mona calls the police and tells them where to find Streator. Streator returns home and calls his parents for the first time in twenty years.

In Chapter 37, Streator meets Helen in the empty mansion where they first meet. Helen casts a flying spell and makes love to Streator as they float near the chandelier.

In Chapter 38, Streator goes to Helen's office and finds the door locked. Streator talks to Mona. Mona tells Streator that Helen cast a love spell over him, forcing him to love Helen.

In Chapter 39, Streator meets Helen in the antique furniture warehouse again. Helen tries to show him the future in a mirror using another spell from the grimoire, but Streator does not see the future Helen sees. Streator tells Helen what Mona said, but Helen insists Mona was lying. Helen insists their love is real.

Chapters 36-39 Analysis

Streator returns home to discover the police are looking for him. From the picture in the paper and the wording of the ad, it is clear to the reader that the police are looking for Streator in connection to his wife's death. After twenty years on the run, Streator finally speaks to his parents again. Streator assures them he did nothing to hurt his wife and child, a fact that is only partially true.

Streator and Helen have a sexual relationship and Streator comes to believe he is in love with Helen, his first sexual relationship in twenty years. However, Mona convinces him that Helen has cast a spell on him. Helen insists this is not true, leaving the reader wondering if Streator can really trust Helen. The reader also wonders if Streator can trust Mona. Mona, after all, has an ulterior motive. Mona wants the grimoire. The reader knows that someone, either Mona or Helen, runs off with Oyster with the grimoire. The only question is which woman is being honest.



Chapters 40-44

Chapters 40-44 Summary

In Chapter 40, Streator goes to a diner to speak with Nash about the rash of model deaths that have taken place recently. When Streator arrives, he finds all the customers and employees of the diner dead. This confirms what Streator has suspected, that Nash has been killing models with the culling spell in order to have sex with them. Nash confirms this. Nash admits that he found the culling song by accessing a copy of the book at the Library of Congress. Nash then attempts to use the culling song on Streator, but he has to read it. Streator is able to recite the culling song in his head before Nash can read it, killing Nash first.

In Chapter 41, Streator is arrested when the police come to the diner. Streator calls Helen and she promises to get Streator out, but he does not want out. Streator is booked and then taken into a room with an old cop to have a body cavity search. During the search, the old cop begins talking to him as though he is Helen. The old cop explains that he is Helen, using the body of the old cop through an occupation spell.

In Chapter 42, Streator is released from jail. Streator goes straight to Helen's office to talk with her. Mona is there and she tells Streator that she and Oyster are leaving town with the grimoire. Mona then tells Streator he can find Helen at a local hospital.

In Chapter 43, Streator arrives at the hospital to find Helen in a room with the frozen body of her infant son, Patrick. Helen is clearly depressed and has drunk drain cleaner. Streator, feeling overwhelmed for Helen, breaks the glass enclosure protecting Patrick and gives her the baby to hold one last time. However, Helen begins to speak and Streator realizes that Oyster has forced her to commit suicide by using the occupation spell. Oyster then leaves Helen's body and she dies. A moment later, the old cop arrives at the hospital with Helen's consciousness inside of him.

In Chapter 44, Streator and Helen, in Sarge's body, travel around the country attempting to find Oyster and Mona. They cannot use the culling spell to kill Oyster and Mona because they have a spell that protects them, but neither can Oyster and Mona use the culling song on them because Helen removed it from the grimoire. However, Oyster and Mona are using all the other spells to wreak havoc on the country.

Chapters 40-44 Analysis

Streator kills Nash for using the culling song to have sex with dead models. This appears to make Streator something of the moral superior. However, Streator then turns himself in to the police, hoping by paying for his crimes he can make up for the overwhelmingly immoral thing he did by making love to his dead wife. Helen loves Streator, however, and cannot allow him to pay for crimes she feels are not really his fault. Helen uses an occupation spell to get Streator out of jail.



All along the reader has known, because of the chapters that take place in the present, which someone, either Helen or Mona, runs off with the grimoire and Oyster. Finally the reader learns it was Mona. In fact, Oyster plots to kill Helen to keep her from coming after them, but under estimates her desire to live. Helen moves her consciousness into the same old cop she used to help Streater out of jail and the same Sarge Streater has been traveling with. This explains some of the odd behavior between Streater and Sarge that the reader has noticed in the chapters that take place in the present rather than the past. In fact, most of the novel makes sense when the reader learns that Mona and Oyster have run off with the grimoire.



Characters

Carl Streator

Carl Streator is the narrator of the book. Streator is a writer for a newspaper who is given an assignment to write five feature articles about five different families who experienced the sudden death of an infant. While working this story, Streator comes to realize that each of these infants were read the same poem before their deaths, a culling song that was originally designed to end the suffering of children during famine and warriors on the battlefield. As Streator investigates this connection between the multiple deaths, he begins to realize that this song will kill anyone the person reading, or reciting, the poem aims it toward.

As the plot continues to develop, the reader learns that Streator himself once had a wife and child who died. Streator read this same poem to both his wife and daughter in the hopes of getting a good night's sleep. In the morning, Streator awoke to find his wife warm and, seemingly, responsive to his romantic overtures. However, upon returning home from work, Streator discovered both his wife and child were dead. Out of fear and revulsion for what he has done, Streator ran away and changes his name, becoming Carl Streator. Therefore, the reader never really learns Streator's real name.

Streator joins with Helen Hoover Boyle, another woman who lost a child due to the culling song, and begins attempting to rid the world of the culling song. Along the way, Streator and Helen find the original copy and use the other spells in the book to do some amazing things. However, the book gets away from them and Streator and Helen must spend the rest of their lives hunting down the people currently in possession of the grimoire or the original book in which the culling song appeared.

Helen Hoover Boyle

Helen Hoover Boyle is a real estate agent who makes money by selling haunted houses to people and then reselling them exclusively when the owners become frightened by the hauntings. Helen Boyle once had a child who died soon after she read him the culling song. A year later, Helen killed her husband with the same culling song. From that time on, Helen became jaded by the power and began using the culling song to commit political assassinations in exchange for rare jewels.

Streator seeks Helen out because he learns from county records that she lost her son and husband the same way he did, around the same time period. Streator hopes that Helen can tell him how to control the desire to kill, but Helen only tells him what she does with the desire and leaves it up to him to use the culling song as he sees fit.

Helen and Streator are wary of one another at first, each considering the idea of killing the other to both protect themselves and to protect the culling song. In the end, however, they fall in love and fight together to save the world from both the culling song



and the other spells in the original grimoire where the culling song first appeared. However, Helen is forced to commit suicide by Oyster, so her consciousness lives inside the body of an old cop known as Sarge.

Mona Sabbat

Mona is Helen's receptionist. Mona believes in unconventional things, such as witchcraft and the power of crystals. Mona is a member of a Wiccan coven, one that includes her boyfriend Oyster. Streator is drawn to Mona because she is roughly the same age his daughter would be if she had not died in infancy. Streator also finds Mona sexually attractive, causing in him a conflict of emotions.

Mona is a strong believer in traditional healing and the Indian arts. Mona wants to use the grimoire to make the world a better place. When Mona looks through Helen's day planner, she recognizes the invisible writing on the pages as spells written in ancient languages. Mona knows this is the grimoire and she wants to translate it herself to steal the spells, but Streator keeps her from it. Later, however, Mona's boyfriend Oyster takes over Helen's body and steals the grimoire, forcing Helen and Streator to chase after him and Mona to keep them from destroying the world.

Oyster

Oyster is Mona's boyfriend. The reader never learns Oyster's real name, but only the name he uses in the Wiccan coven. Oyster is a strong believer in animal rights and believes the world should be destroyed so that one man and one woman can start over, creating a more perfect world. Oyster wants to use the grimoire for this purpose, but the spells he needs are not in it. Instead, Oyster and Mona use the grimoire to wreak havoc on the country.

Nash

Nash is a paramedic Streator works with while gathering information for his sudden infant death stories. Nash confesses to Streator that he would like to have sex with a beautiful woman found dead in a hotel room. From this, Streator comes to the conclusion that a rash of dead fashion models stems from Nash's sick compulsions. Streator confronts Nash and kills him in a quick draw using the culling song.

Gina Dinji and Katrin

Gina is Streator's wife. Gina is a beautiful woman whom Streator loved very much. Gina died after Streator read to her and their daughter, Katrin, the culling song. The following morning, unaware of his wife's death, Streator makes love to her. Later, when Streator learns the truth, he runs away because he is afraid of the humiliation and legal ramifications of his sexual act.



Patrick

Patrick is Helen's infant son. Patrick died twenty years before the opening of the novel from an unknown cause that Streator later learns was the culling song. Unknown to anyone, Helen had Patrick's body frozen in the hope that she could find some way to bring him back to life. It is to revive Patrick that Helen wants to find the grimoire. Helen hopes the grimoire will have a spell that will bring the dead back to life.

Duncan, Henderson, and Oliphant

When Streator first becomes aware that five of the infants he has investigated for his articles were read the culling song, he decides to test his theory that it was the poem that killed them. Streator reads the poem to his editor, Duncan. A few days later, Streator learns Duncan died in his sleep that night. Henderson becomes Streator's new editor. When Henderson irritates Streator with his demands and annoying behavior, Streator thinks the culling song at him and he dies. Oliphant takes over from Henderson and suffers the same fate.

Dr. Sara Lowenstein

Dr. Sara Lowenstein is a radio doctor who counsels people who call into her radio show. Dr. Sara is extremely rude and patronizing to a young pregnant woman while Streator is listening to the show in Helen's waiting room one day. Streator thinks the culling song toward Dr. Sara and the radio suddenly goes silent. Streator is surprised to learn he kill someone who is not even near him. Later, Streator does the same thing to two men who are eulogizing Dr. Sara over the radio.

Waltraud Wagner

Waltraud Wagner is a nurse who began killing when a home-bound patient asked her to do it to give her peace from her pain. Later, Wagner got a job in a hospital working with elderly people. Wagner began killing her patients to relieve their pain and later began killing the ones who annoyed her. Eventually, Wagner got several other nurses in on her scheme and they would often talk about their kills in a local bar. It was during one of these brag sessions that the women were caught when a local doctor overheard their conversation. Helen tells Streator this story to help him understand his own behavior since learning about the culling song.



Objects/Places

Culling Song

A culling song is a poem or song that is spoken to ease the suffering of injured warriors and victims of famine.

Day Planner/Grimoire

Helen has a day planner in which she writes down each name of the people that she assassinates for multiple agencies. Mona later realizes that this day planner is the grimoire, the original Book of Shadows in which the culling song appeared, they have been searching for.

Class Action Lawsuit Advertisements

Oyster places class action type ads in newspapers against innocent business in the hopes of getting those businesses to pay him to remove the ads. This is Oyster's primary source of income.

Models

Streator builds models of buildings, such as houses and churches to help him deal with the grief of losing his wife and child. After he builds them, Streator crushes them under his bare feet.

Haunted Houses

Helen Hoover Boyle sells haunted houses so that she can resell them when the owners become frightened and want out.

Jewelry

Helen Hoover Boyle has a great number of jewels that at first appear to be costume jewelry. However, the reader later learns that these jewels are payment for murders Helen commits with the culling song for various agencies.

Cosmetic Case

Helen Hoover Boyle uses her cosmetic case to get into the home of some people who have taken the book, Poems and Rhymes from Around the World from local libraries.



Judas Cow

A Judas Cow is a cow that lives at a slaughterhouse and is used to coax the other cows to slaughter. Oyster and Mona use the spells in the grimoire to make a Judas Cow speak to the employees of a slaughterhouse, causing these people to stop slaughtering and eating meat.

Poems and Rhymes from Around the World

Poems and Rhymes from Around the World is the book in which the culling song appears. The author made his living from patching together books of this type.

Antique Furniture Warehouse

Streator and Helen often meet in an antique furniture warehouse. The warehouse is so large they often become lost among the furniture.

Book Barn

Book Barn is the name of the mega discount store Helen and Oyster burn down when it becomes clear they will not be able to find the three copies of the book the store has.

Library of Congress

Nash gets a copy of the culling song from the Library of Congress.



Themes

Influence of Media

In this novel, the main character is a reporter for a local newspaper. However, Streator feels as though people are addicted to sound and the media. Streator can constantly hear the sounds of television and radios through the walls of his apartment. This annoys him, leaving him feel as though he is the only person in the world who is not addicted to sound. When Streator learns about the power of the culling song, he begins to think of the implications should something like that become public. Streator imagines that people will burn books and refuse to listen to anything or anyone in order to protect their own lives.

Streator also becomes aware in the course of his experiences that Oyster, the boyfriend of Helen Hoover Boyle's receptionist, places ads in the newspaper suggesting a class action lawsuit is being prepared so that the business targeted might pay him off to remove the ads. In this way, Oyster is essentially using the media to blackmail businesses he has never visited and has no personal connection to.

Streator learns that the man who wrote the book, *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World*, was just collecting various items that have no copyright and putting them together in books to make money. Streator believes the man was greedy and had no clue about the danger he was putting out in the world. Streator makes it his mission to save the world from this man's actions by destroying that page of the book in every book still available to the public. While at the same time concerned about the power of the media over consumers, Streator also wants to avoid fear of books and a massive book burning that he is afraid would result if people became aware of the power of the culling song.

Power of Death

When Streator reads the culling song to his editor, Duncan, he is not sure that the culling song actually kills people. However, in the days after this reading and before he learns that Duncan is truly dead, Streator begins thinking the culling song every time he becomes annoyed with someone. In one afternoon, Streator kills half a dozen people just as he walks to work. In time, Streator becomes frightened by this sudden power, afraid that he will kill whenever he is annoyed or angry and become unable to control that power.

Streator wants to do the right thing. Streator wants to learn to control his power over death. However, as time passes, Streator becomes less determined to control the power as he learns to use it to rid the world of bad and annoying people. Streator feels the same way about the grimoire, the book where the culling song originally appeared. Streator wants it destroyed immediately so that no one can use it for evil. However,



when the book is found, Streator agrees that Helen should translate it. This leads to Oyster and Mona stealing the book, creating chaos throughout the country. Therefore, the reader can see that Streator's ideas regarding the power of death change throughout the novel, making it an important theme.

Morality

Several issues of morality appear in this novel. First, Streator finds himself struggling with the morality in regards to his right to kill people who annoy him. Streator learns about the people he has killed and is filled with guilt over the circumstances of their lives. For this reason, Streator seeks out Helen Hoover Boyle to find help in learning how to control the desire to kill.

Second, Streator learns that Nash has a compulsion to have sex with beautiful dead women. Streator knows this is wrong and he is sickened by the very idea. However, Streator reveals to the reader that he did the same thing to his wife's dead body. The difference in the two cases, however, is that Streator did not know his wife was dead and he meant her no harm. Nash, on the other hand, uses the culling song to kill beautiful women with the intention of having sex with them.

Finally, Oyster brings up many moral dilemmas as he discusses his stand against animal cruelty. Oyster feels that the introduction of animals and plant life in places where these animals and plants are not indigenous is cruel and causes a great deal of harm. Oyster also feels that eating animals is cruel. Oyster wants to rid the world of all its people so that humanity can begin again with a single man and woman. This creates a whole new list of moral dilemmas as the reader struggles to see the humanity in killing all people.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is the first person. The main character, Streater, is the narrator of this novel. Streater tells the story from two different perspectives. The bulk of the novel is told in the past tense as Streater relates to the reader how he came to know about the culling song and how it changed his life. There are also sections of the novel in which Streater tells the story from the present, giving hints to the reader about how the story ends up.

The point of view of this novel is a highly personal point of view. The reader sees and feels everything from the viewpoint of Carl Streater, the main character. This point of view causes the story to be very narrow, to offer only one explanation for the many events that take place in the plot. However, this point of view also presents a highly intimate relationship between narrator and reader, making the reader care deeply what happens to Streater in the course of the plot development.

Setting

The novel begins in an unnamed and large city. The main character works as a reporter in this city and he becomes acquainted with Helen Hoover Boyle, a real estate agent in this same town. As the novel continues to develop, the main character, Streater and Helen go on a road trip throughout rural America to find copies of a culling song they believe is capable of killing anyone it is read to.

The setting of the novel is secondary to the overall plot of the novel. In the beginning, the large city increases the pressure of the media that Streater feels, creating the sense of silence-phobia Streater feels that his neighbors and acquaintances suffer from. However, as Streater begins to travel the country to rid the world of copies of the culling song, he becomes aware that most people are victims of their own lives, of their own futures. The setting does not impact Streater's beliefs, but serves as a means of underscoring the frailty and victim-like reality of most people.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is a simple English. The narrator is an educated man who attended college and journalism classes. This knowledge is reflected in most of the novel as the narrator describes the events that led him to travel the country with Sarge. The novel does not include any foreign phrases even as Helen attempts to translate the ancient language in which the grimoire, the Book of Shadows, is written in.

The language of this novel supports the main character in whose voice the novel is written. The language is simple but comes from a clearly educated man. The language



does not include any words or phrases that might confuse or cause difficulty for a reader, making the novel simple to read. However, the novel is a satire that is written in a format that leaves the important knowledge at the end of the novel so that the reader might often be confused as to why an event has taken place. The language of the novel supports this format with its carefully controlled nature and narrow point of view.

Structure

The novel is divided into forty-four chapters and a prologue. The chapters are often very short and can move around in time quickly, including jumps into the future in some chapters that give the reader hints as to the direction in which the plot is going. The novel is told in a linear format, excluding the future chapters and it is told with both exposition and dialogue. There is a great deal of inner monologue in this novel as the narrator not only tells the story, but comments on events and situations that he has already experienced and therefore has added knowledge the reader might not have.

The novel has one main plot and many subplots. The main plot follows the narrator as he learns about the culling song, uses it, and attempts to find a way to control his desire to use the culling song to kill people who anger or annoy him. One subplot deals with the growing relationship between the narrator, Streater, and Helen Hoover Boyle. Another subplot revolves around Mona and Oyster, a young couple who accompany Helen and Streater on their quest to rid the world of the culling song. The plot and subplots all come to a conclusion at the end of the novel with the exclusion of one subplot that is left unfinished.

Quotes

"This was Helen Hoover Boyle. Our hero. Now dead but not dead" (Prologue, pg. 6.)

"The problem with every story is you tell it after the fact" (Chapter 1, pg. 7.)

"This isn't about quality. It's about volume." Chapter 3, pg. 17.)

"I need to make sure every copy of this book is destroyed" (Chapter 5, pg. 32.)

"When the first paramedic arrived on the scene, the first action he took was to call his stockbroker" (Chapter 8, pg. 45.)

"But, no, I'm never going to use it. That's that. I'm just not. Ever" (Chapter 10, pg. 58.)

"Maybe you go to hell for the things you don't do. The things you don't finish" (Chapter 15, pg. 87.)

"And like everyone else here, we're waiting for a miracle. For a messiah" (Chapter 18, pg. 107.)

"Maybe humans are just the pet alligators that God flushed down the toilet." Chapter 23, pg. 149

"The police report doesn't say how warm my wife, Gina, felt when I woke up that morning" (Chapter 29, pg. 177.)

"After that, I just listen. I wait for him to stop crying so I can say I'm sorry" (Chapter 36, pg. 218.)

"Now this is my life" (Chapter 44, pg. 260.)



Topics for Discussion

Who is Carl Streator? What is his profession? Why is he investigating sudden infant death syndrome? What does he plan to do with this information? Why does this investigation lead to a poem in the book *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World*? What is Carl Streator's personal connection to this poem? How does this personal connection lead to Streator reaching out to Helen Hoover Boyle?

What does Helen Hoover Boyle do for a living? How does she make money off of this job? Is what Helen does ethical? What else does Helen do to make money? Why? Where did Helen learn about the culling song? How does she tell Streator she deals with the power over life and death? Does this information help Streator with his own struggle?

Who is Mona? Why does Streator invite her to join him and Helen on their road trip? What is the purpose of the road trip? What is Streator's relationship with Mona? What does Streator hope will happen during this road trip between him and Mona? How does Mona feel about Streator? How does the reader know this?

Who is Oyster? Why is he called Oyster? How does Streator meet Oyster? What relationship does Streator see between Oyster and Helen? Is Oyster aware of this relationship? Is Helen? How does Helen feel about Oyster? Why does Helen ban him from the road trip? What did Oyster do to win Helen's wrath? How does this impact Oyster's future? Helen's?

What is the culling song? What does it do? For what purpose was it originally written? Is the song evil? Compare the culling song to a gun. What differences are there between the song and a gun? What similarities? Why does the author choose a culling song as his weapon? What is satire? Discuss the use of satire in relation to this novel and the culling song in particular.

What is a grimoire? Why does Helen want to find the grimoire? Where is the grimoire found? What is ironic about the location of the grimoire? What does Helen want to do with the grimoire? What does Streator want to do with the grimoire? What do Mona and Oyster plan to do with the grimoire? What is inside the grimoire? For what purpose is it used?

Discuss Sarge. Who is Sarge? Why is he traveling with Streator in the present tense chapters of the novel? What are Streator and Sarge attempting to do? Why does Sarge keep asking Streator if he loves him? What is strange about this relationship? What is the future of this relationship as implied in the final chapter?