

The Last Child Study Guide

The Last Child by John Hart

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Plot Summary

This is a tightly-written multiple murder mystery that involves good and bad cops, physical as well as spiritual monsters and young men who try bravely to find their place in the adult world while avoiding its pains and pretenses. The author creates convincing action stemming from clear character traits and weaves a web of ever-deepening mystery until the last few pages when he performs the kind of authorial magic that produces sudden enlightenment—surely one of the reasons people read this genre of fiction. The descriptions of place and characters are very realistic and compelling, and almost before the reader is aware, the plot has ensnared him or her so they feel almost an actor in the drama unfolding in these pages. It is stimulating and satisfying to encounter an author with such a seemingly easy mastery of his craft.

Johnny Merrimon is a thirteen-year-old adolescent whose twin sister Alyssa has disappeared and is assumed abducted from the small town where they live in the hill country of North Carolina. His beloved father Spencer leaves his mother Katherine two weeks after the disappearance of their daughter. Katherine has become a pain pill popping agoraphobic whose solace is in drugs and alcohol. She takes up with a cocaine-snorting wealthy developer named Ken Holloway, who is physically and verbally abusive to Johnny. The young man has become a school-skipping delinquent who is cynical, distrustful of adults and obsessed with finding out what happened to his sister and, if possible, rescuing her. His partner is another frustrated boy named Jack, the son of Detective Cross and a co-worker of Detective Clyde Hunt. The two boys spend their days away from school tossing rocks through windows and roaming about like dispossessed souls.

Johnny witnesses at close hand a vicious murder in which a man is thrown from a bridge onto the river banks where he walks; the man starts to say he knows where "she" is but dies before he can finish his sentence. Johnny connects the dying man's words with his missing sister and goes on an intensive search.



Chapters 1-7

Chapters 1-7 Summary

Chapter 1:

Because of the abduction of his twin sister Alyssa, abandonment by his father Spencer and his mother Katherine's addictive relationship with the despicable Ken Hololoway, Johnny Merrimon is a hyper-vigilant thirteen-year-old who double-checks locks on the doors, drinks and skips school, and distrusts adults. He is haunted by memories of his family's life together before these losses, determined to find out what has happened to his sister and to collar the responsible person. Whenever old family friend Detective Hunt cruises by the Merrimon's house, which is often, Johnny blows him off with a cover story, telling him, "I'm good...hanging in," despite the horrors of his daily life. Johnny hangs out with his only friend, Jack, who is the delinquent son of a cop.

Chapter 2:

Johnny awakens to discover a collection of Vicodin bottles in the bathroom. He wistfully looks at photos of his father and sister, then pulls out a map to decide where to escape from school. As he leaves the house while his mother sleeps, a van pulls into the driveway with "Uncle" Steve at the wheel. Steve, the first cousin of Johnny's father, asks him to get in so he can take him to school. Johnny tells him he is not his uncle and he isn't going to school. Steve, a security guard, goes inside the house to inform Katherine that her son won't cooperate; when Johnny follows him inside he sees Steve standing near her bed, where she is naked and fully exposed. Johnny yells at Steve, "You're sick. What's wrong with you?" Johnny uses the scene to convince Steve he should tell his mother that he took Johnny to school, then orders Steve out of the house.

Chapter 3:

After another restless night of nightmares about the Alyssa Merrimon case, Detective Hunt shows up for work looking haggard. John Yoakum, his partner, mistakes his condition for a hangover. Hunt gets a call from Louisa Sparrow telling him that Johnny has been at her house visiting, and she's concerned about him. Hunt finds the boy close to the Sparrow residence, sitting on the curb, perusing a map of the county on which he has marked the houses where he's talked to people in his search for leads about his missing sister. Hunt tells Johnny his quest is dangerous and futile and reprimands him for skipping school. Hunt asks him how many bruises he has, then leaves him with his broken down bike and map, hoping that he will ask for help about his home life.

Chapter 4:

Filled with self-confidence and the realization he probably faces more danger from Ken Holloway than from any stranger on whose door he might knock, Johnny goes on with his search. Johnny goes to the river and meets his friend Jack, who he asks again to



repeat the details he remembers of seeing Alyssa pulled into a white van on the day of her disappearance. "White guy, black shirt," Jack says. They drink bourbon, smoke cigarettes and swim. When Jack leaves, Johnny falls asleep on a rock and when he awakens in late afternoon, he hears a loud collision on the nearby bridge. A man's body hurtles across the sky and onto the riverbank near Johnny. Before the badly-mangled man dies, he spits out that he'd found "the girl that was taken." He tells Johnny to run, then dies. Johnny runs and runs until he is exhausted and then is grabbed by a "giant green monster."

Chapter 5:

Levi Freemantle, a 300-pound black man, had seen Johnny running "like a hunted animal," and caught him up in his massive arms because the Lord told Levi to stop Johnny but not hurt him. Johnny bites one of Levi's massive fingers down to the bone, and Freemantle releases him. Levi discovers the body, feels sorry for the dead man, and sits down to await God's instructions.

Chapter 6:

Johnny runs nearly eight miles toward home, eager to tell his mother what he has seen, then realizes that Ken Hollowell has pulled up beside him in his white Cadillac. Ken orders him to get into the car. Johnny, tired, finally relents and gets into the car. When they arrive home, there is a constellation of police cruisers that lights up the sky like a Christmas tree. He confronts his hysterical mother who tells him another girl—Tiffany Shore— has been abducted. "I know Tiffany," Johnny says, shocked.

Chapter 7:

Levi prays for God to take the dead man's soul, then removes the cash from his wallet and a piece of fabric in his hand. He is long gone when the police, led by Johnny, arrive at the scene. The medical examiner determines that the corpse has calluses on his hands consistent with a mountain climber's hands. Officer Cross tells Hunt that his son, Jack, had been at the river previously with Johnny but knows nothing about the crime. The police theorize that David Wilson, the motorcyclist, was killed because he knew something about the child abductions—and that the killer would want to eliminate Johnny as a witness.

Chapters 1-7 Analysis

In these chapters, the reader is introduced to the personal torments of the principal characters and at once plunged into the action with the execution of a murder witnessed by Johnny Merrimon, a thirteen-year-old boy who is obsessed with finding his missing twin sister, or her remains, after she disappeared a year earlier. He feels abandoned by his father who also disappeared shortly after his sister. His sister's disappearance has become Johnny's obsession, as well as the obsession that haunts Detective Clyde Hunt. This obsession has caused Hunt's family to disintegrate and Johnny to become a nearly feral adolescent, afraid of adults and highly self-reliant. His mother, Katherine,



has become a drug addict after the disappearances and is involved in a violent, destructive relationship with another drug addict, Ken Holloway.

Set in a small unnamed town in the hill country of North Carolina, the story has Faulknerian complexity of plot combined with an odd assortment of characters, including the huge black man known as Levi Freemantle who is simple minded and obsessed with God. However, instead of Faulkner's sharecroppers, aristocrats, backwoods lunatics and self-righteous church folks, author John Hart gives us a tale populated largely by middle class people—many of them police. The primary exceptions to this statement are Freemantle and the sociopathic businessman Ken Holloway. Whereas in Faulkner's fiction characters are identified with and often crippled by family and social rank, most of the characters in this book seem connected by violence that arises from deep-seated fear. How these characters handle their own fears and relate to others' fear-induced behavior propels the action as much as the unraveling of the murder mysteries.

It is racial paranoia as much as evidence that makes Levi Freemantle a suspect in the child abductions. However, it emerges over time that the frightening-looking black man has a great respect and love for children—especially his own three-year-old daughter who he must bury after he kills his wife and her lover in a fit of jealous rage.



Chapters 8-16

Chapters 8-16 Summary

Chapter 8:

Hunt gives Johnny and his intoxicated mother a ride home from the crime scene in his patrol car. Inside, there is a standoff between Johnny and Ken over who will escort Katherine to bed. Ken bullies Johnny and prevails, leading her to their room and locking the door. Enraged, Johnny gets in his mother's car, starts the engine and heads out of the driveway. He stops to pick up a huge rock which he places on the seat as he approaches Ken Holloway's house.

Chapter 9:

As Hunt returns to Johnny's house with a new set of questions, he receives a phone call from the police chief telling him he should be at the home of David Wilson and not the Merrimon home. Detective Hunt has an ugly confrontation with Holloway, who receives a cell phone call telling him that a window in his house has been broken. Holloway tells Hunt that Johnny has broken his window—the fifth time it has happened. Hunt waits in his patrol car and exchanges frigid stares with Holloway as he drives off in his Cadillac. Just as he is about to leave, Hunt notices movement on the front porch followed by two loud screams.

Chapter 10:

Johnny stops at his friend Jack's house to see if he wants to go out in the night searching for the child killer; Jack reminds him of the dangers and pleads with him not to go. Detective Hunt drives by the Merrimon house again and sees Katherine Merrimon stumbling around in drugged grief. He gently leads her out of the rainy mud and to her bedroom to rest. He is joined by hard-bitten Officer Laura Taylor, who is to watch Mrs. Merrimon. "You're hanging your ass out on this one, Hunt and you're asking me to bare my fine, sculpted backside, too," she tells him. Johnny approaches his house in the darkness and sees a patrol car parked in the driveway; he also sees through the window his mother bent over an old photo of his father. Johnny runs into the woods and builds a large bonfire near an abandoned barn.

Chapter 11:

Hunt joins his partner Yoakum at the home of David Wilson, victim of the motorcycle crash and a respected member of the biology department at the college. From the multiple photos of Wilson with different women, they conclude he was a bachelor, and from the climbing gear and trail bike oil stains in the garage, they guess that perhaps he was biking in the wilderness before he was run off the road. Hunt orders an immediate, full-scale search of access roads and trailheads in hopes of finding Wilson's parked car.



Because of Wilson's dying statement that he knew where one of the abducted girls was, the police look for clues that might help them find the recently-missing Tiffany Shore.

Chapter 12:

Carrying his ubiquitous package, Levi Freemantle crashes through the woods in the dark listening for God to tell him something about his wife Sofia whom he has caught with another man. Levi cries tears of emotional pain, suddenly loses his footing, falls and feels something jab him deep on his side as he slides down a muddy ravine into the edge of the dark river. His fall sends his package into the water, and Levi wades into that blackness to retrieve it. Finally, exhausted, he pulls himself and his package back to shore and falls asleep, arms curled around the package.

Chapter 13:

Officer Taylor tells Hunt that Holloway had stopped by the Merrimon's house, enraged, looking for Johnny. Just as Hunt tells Taylor that she should lock Holloway up if he returns and threatens her, he sees Holloway's white Cadillac approaching. Holloway gets out of the car with his wimpy lawyer, demanding access to the house he owns and rents to Mrs. Merrimon for \$1 a month. Hunt tells Holloway he must give proper notice before entering the house. Holloway jabs a finger into Hunt's chest as he blusters; Hunt arrests and handcuffs him for assaulting an officer. Then he tells Officer Taylor to take Holloway to headquarters and book him with formal assault charges.

Chapter 14:

Johnny performs his version of an Indian rite of initiation, crushing berries on himself, building a fire and smearing himself with ashes, and putting eagle feathers on his head. Then he throws his bible into the fire, cursing the minister who told him to pray harder when he sought help, and sneaks to the home of an elderly couple where he slips unnoticed into their car and fingers the book in his pocket with the names and addresses of six local sex offenders. He cranks the engine and drives off, "an Indian chief."

Chapter 15:

Exhausted, Hunt goes home for some rest but cannot stop himself from checking with Yoakum on the progress of prints from the eyelids of David Wilson. Yoakum urges Hunt to go to bed and sleep, and to try to talk to his estranged teenage son, Allen. Hunt enters his son's room and turns down the ear-splitting sound of grunge. Allen confronts him with his own anger about Hunt's obsession with the Merrimon case and says he feels left out of his father's life. Just as they are about to connect, Yoakum calls and tells Hunt they have found some breakthrough information on Wilson. Hunt turns to tell Allen he must leave, but the boy already has slammed his door shut and resumed the pounding music.

Chapter 16:



Hunt learns from Yoakum that the fingerprint on the dead man's eyelid is that of Levi Freemantle. Freemantle's rap sheet shows that he'd spent time in jail for minor offenses, and he walked off a county work detail just before the disappearance of Tiffany Shore. Yoakum tells Hunt the police have asked a judge to issue an arrest warrant for Freemantle, and predicts its swift approval because Tiffany Shore is "white and her parents are rich." Hunt reprimands Yoakum for his racist statement. Once the warrant is issued, Hunt, Yoakum and other police surround Freemantle's house. They smash the front door lock with a sledgehammer and enter. They find two bodies in an upstairs bedroom—a woman they assume to be Ronda Jeffries, Freemantle's wife—and an unidentified black man. Both had been pummeled to death with a cinder block.

Chapters 8-16 Analysis

Officer Hunt's need to protect Katherine Merrimon and her son shed light on his motivations, partly sexual, for carrying an obsession about Alyssa. Hunt tells himself he is just being a good cop by working day and night on the case, but it is apparent to his co-workers and police chief that something else is involved. The other police warn him several times about "personal" instincts overcoming his professional demeanor and ability to see the case objectively. Already, Hunt has developed a fine revulsion against businessman Ken Holloway who gives Katherine Merrimon—the woman he once hoped to marry—copious amounts of narcotics to foster her addiction and dependence on him.

Johnny Merrimon, meanwhile, has taken to committing acts of vandalism against Holloway's home in his fear and rage over his presence in the tattered family. Although he can't prove that Johnny is behind all the vandalism at his home, Holloway nevertheless is abusive toward him and tells him he can't wait to get his hands on "the little shit." Hunt's obsession grows in direct proportion to his fears—apprehensions about the safety of Johnny and Katherine, fear about the direction his son's drugged escape from reality will take, fear that he will not be able to solve the Merrimon case, fear that he may be fired for overstepping a line in his handling of the case, fear that more children may disappear before he can find the perpetrator(s).



Chapters 17-36

Chapters 17-36 Summary

Chapter 17:

In the stolen station wagon, Johnny arrives at the residence of Burton Jarvis, one of the sex offenders on his list, known as a recidivist, or "sick motherfucker likely to do it again." Johnny watches Jarvis' house at night for some time, and sees several men who are regular visitors come and go and pass computer disks between themselves. They talk of their Vietnam experiences and a woman called Small Yellow. Johnny becomes suspicious of a shed behind Jarvis' house that has covered windows nailed shut and sealed with a huge lock. He decides to investigate.

Chapter 18:

Hunt oversees the bagging and removal of the bodies and asks neighbors if they know anything about what transpired in the house. The next-door neighbor woman claims to have heard or seen nothing. The medical examiner tells Hunt in an aside that preliminary autopsy results indicate that David Wilson did not die from his fall injuries, but from a powerful force that crushed his windpipe, such as someone standing on his throat. Hunt's son calls him on the cell phone and asks if he will be home for breakfast. When his father hesitates, Allen hangs up. In an attempt to see if the missing girl's body is in the house, the police bring in a trained dog who does not pick up a third scent—no sign of Tiffany Shore. On the wall of a recently-vacated room inside there are traces of a child's drawings and strips of tape angles as if at the corners of a piece of paper. They find a button from a stuffed animal. Once again, Hunt asks the neighbors if anyone knows anything. They are silent. In his rage Hunt spots an old paint can. "With a violence that surprised him, Hunt kicked the can. It arced into the yard, struck dirt and exploded in a belch of gray." Hunt looks up to see the police chief watching him, shaking his head.

Chapter 19:

Jar staggers bleary-eyed and hung over from his shed just as morning is dawning. After thirteen years in prison and with nine arrests, Jarvis only cares about himself and his own needs. As he limps his way toward full consciousness, he notices a flash of chrome from a car parked down the road from his house, close to the two-lane highway. In his underwear, Jar picks up a baseball bat and heads toward the old station wagon, where Johnny Merrimon is stretched out, asleep, in the front seat. Jar has a rational thought: too risky and not worth going back to prison for. But Johnny awakens, sees Jar and screams. Then "Jar went through the window like a rat down a hole."

Chapter 20:



Johnny fights Jar and stabs his arms with his pocket knife, but the enraged man pulls Johnny out of the car by his ankles and starts to stab him with his own knife. Johnny is overwhelmed with fear when suddenly Tiffany Shore appears in handcuffs, bloody and holding a revolver. Johnny pleads with her not to shoot, but she moves past him and shoots Jarvis in the mouth, killing him. Johnny slams Jar's head against the asphalt, repeatedly screaming "Where is she?" When the sound goes "from hard to wet," Johnny relents.

Chapter 21:

Levi Freemantle awakens to what sounds like a gunshot. He becomes aware that a sizable tree branch is lodged in his abdomen; he tries to pull it out and faints. In addition, his ankle is hideously swollen from an injury. A flock of noisy crows in the treetops prompts a voice inside his head that says, "A murder of crows." Convinced it is God speaking directly to him, Levi looks around and asks: "Where are you?" Getting no answer, Levi crawls painfully away from the river.

Chapter 22:

Reporters swarm around the hospital after Johnny Merrimon, haggard in his improvised Indian getup, drives to the emergency room with the handcuffed Tiffany Shore. Johnny is taken into surgery and Detective Hunt has another confrontation with the police chief, who is angered by the presence of the news media. Hunt suggests that Levi Freemantle is a prime suspect, but the chief reminds him that the murdered Burton Jarvis is "a known pedophile" and should also not be ruled out. Hunt is angered by the chief's defense of Ken Holloway, a political supporter, when he tells Hunt to lay off Holloway. Katherine Merrimon runs into Hunt at the hospital; he tells her that the Department of Social Services will likely want to interview her about her son since he was gone the entire night in her car and almost killed by Jarvis. Hunt leads the chief into the shed on Jarvis' property, the prison from which Tiffany Shore escaped. He shows the chief where she dislodged her handcuffs from the wall, and the unsecured front door through which she escaped, probably getting the pistol from inside Jarvis' house.

Chapter 23:

Disgusted with herself, Katherine Merrimon starts to take Vicodin, but puts it back and throws the pills in the toilet. Then, in a frenzied, sweeping motion she guts her medicine chest, pours all her medications into the toilet and flushes. Then she showers and puts on a good dress to visit Johnny in the hospital. Meanwhile, Johnny rises from his delirium in his hospital room and nods as he recognizes Hunt standing beside his bed. He tries to answer Hunt's questions, but becomes obsessed with his revolver and slips back into unconsciousness. As Katherine readies herself, Ken Holloway shows up wearing a tasteless purple necktie and demands that she stay with him. She throws off his iron grip on her arm, brushes past him and gets into the cab waiting outside. She then heads to the hospital.

Chapter 24:



Under questioning by Detective Hunt, Johnny says he does not think the man he saw on the bridge was the same man who picked him up beside the river—Levi Freemantle. Johnny asks if David Wilson was alive when Freemantle reached him; Hunt replies that it's possible. When discussion of the Department of Social Services arises, Johnny asks whether he can go live with his father. Katherine says she lied about knowing her husband's whereabouts and admits she has no clue where his father lives. Katherine asks Johnny to pray with her, but he replies that prayer is useless. He says he prayed for three things every night until he gave up on God—"I prayed for the rest of our family to come home, for you to stop taking pills and for Ken to die...in fear like he's put on us." Katherine tells Hunt that she and Johnny believe a cop worked with Jarvis in his pedophile activities.

Chapter 25:

As Detective Hunt is leaving the hospital, he becomes aware of a shadowy figure following him. The man approaches, hands him papers and says, "You've been served." Ken Holloway is suing the detective. Hunt confronts Levi Freemantle's probation officer and says Levi is a murder suspect; the probation officer tells Hunt there is no way the forty-three-year-old black man could kill anyone. The detective says there are three murder victims, each with a connection to Freemantle. The probation officer tells Hunt that Levi has lived with Ronda Jeffries for a long time and they have a two-year-old daughter.

Chapter 26:

Katherine returns home from the hospital by taxi to find all the lights on; there had been no lights on when she left. Cautiously, she enters expecting the worst. She finds a large bottle of Ocycontin sitting on the kitchen table, obviously a gift of Ken Holloway. Angrily, she opens the lid and hurls the bottle and pills into the yard, secures the doors and windows and goes to sleep. The next day Johnny is released from the hospital and is carried by Uncle Steve to his house under an agreement with social services. On the way, Johnny reaches into the glove box to get Steve a cigarette and finds his .32-caliber pistol. Admiring and wide-eyed, Johnny asks Steve to show him how to shoot. When Steve asks why, Johnny replies, "Just 'cause." .

Chapter 27:

Uncle Steve drives to the shopping mall owned by Ken Holloway, where he is a security guard. On the way, he tells Johnny that Holloway had dated his mother before she married his father, and that Holloway hated to lose. With an encoded plastic security card, Steve ushers his charge into the inner sanctum where he works behind a see-through mirror to monitor the comings and goings of consumers and check for shoplifters. Through the mirror, Johnny sees his friend Jack being harassed by a group of teenagers who spit on his shirt. He races to the scene and runs up to a senior who repeatedly punches Jack's bad arm and smashes his fist into his face. Johnny is enraged because Jack's older brother, Gerald, is nearby but does not defend his brother. They leave the mall, and Jack notices blood on Johnny's shirt—the result of torn



stitches in the brief fistfight. "Johnny looked at his friend and knew that Jack could never understand Johnny's desperate need to believe in something more powerful than his own two hands."

Chapter 28:

Detective Hunt has an angry confrontation with the police chief and county sheriff in the chief's office over his request to look at confidential employee files in search of a possible cop child predator as mentioned in Johnny Merrimon's diary. Access to employee records is impossible, the chief says. The chief and the sheriff attack Johnny's credibility and sanity. Hunt says Tiffany Shore's handcuffs implicate a police connection; they tell him identical cuffs could be bought "at any decent surplus store." Hunt acknowledges there is no serial number on the cuffs traceable to either law enforcement agency. In leaving, Hunt tells the chief the bodies found at Levi Freemantle's house are those of his girlfriend and "a guy she was probably sleeping with," which makes Freemantle the prime suspect in the killings. Hunt tells the chief that Freemantle's daughter is missing; the chief won't accept that claim because no missing person report has been filed. The chief directs Hunt to say nothing about the case because of all the pressure on his department in the wake of the other child abductions.

Chapter 29:

Steve takes Johnny to his apartment and shows him his small, spare room. Johnny unpacks a photo of his parents and puts it on the table. Steve tells him he has a girlfriend he wants to see and will be gone a few hours. If social services comes, he says, Johnny should be quiet and not open the door. Johnny finds the key to Steve's truck and then looks up Levi Freemantle's address in the phone book. Katherine calls to check on her son, and he tells her he is OK. Johnny hears a crash in the background, and his mother quickly hangs up. Johnny looks at the truck key and tells himself no one would know if he drove off.

Chapter 30:

Katherine thrusts her back against the front door as Ken Holloway tries to smash it down. The deadbolt holds fast despite his onslaught. She shouts at him to go away. She threatens to call the police, which quiets him. The kicks and screaming die down. She relaxes a bit. Then Holloway delivers one last fierce kick and leaves the building. She calls Hunt and asks him to come protect her. Katherine then opens the chained door a slit to check that Holloway is really gone. She sees a box on the porch sealed with tape; an envelope addressed to Johnny sits atop the box. Inside is a note telling her son: "You saw nobody. Heard nothing. You keep your damn mouth shut." Katherine tears the box open, and inside is a still-living cat whose back had been broken.

Chapter 31:

Johnny sneaks into Steve's truck, starts the engine, and drives to Levi Freemantle's dark, broken-down house. He sweeps past yellow police tapes and goes inside. When



he sees dried blood on the walls, he flees in terror and drives back. But when he arrives, he sees Steve's van parked and realizes he is too late.

Hunt arrives at Katherine's house and she greets him at the door with a carving knife in her hand. He inspects the box and finds the cat dead. They try to puzzle out who wrote the threatening note to Johnny. She reminds him that Johnny thinks the sixth man who frequented Jarvis' shed was a cop, who is now trying to silence—or kill—Johnny. Hunt disagrees but convinces Katherine they need to find her son. Meanwhile, Johnny sees police cars in front of Steve's apartment, quietly parks the truck and races for cover in a pile of pine needles. There he encounters an inebriated Jack, who follows him as he breaks into Steve's van and takes his pistol and ammunition. Johnny and Jack get in the truck and Johnny drives carefully to his house, breaks a window to enter, packs some clothes and the gun in a knapsack and grabs a book with a map of where the old abandoned tobacco farm stands near Holloway's house. They get back in the truck and head to Freemantle's house.

Chapter 32:

As Katherine Merrimon dithers about her son's safety, Johnny and Jack approach the abandoned tobacco farm in Steve's truck. The farm is adjacent to a swampy area known as Hush Arbor where slaves once worshiped, away from their white masters and without a physical church building to betray their location. Johnny tells Jack this is the ancestral home of the Freemantles and where he expects to find Levi. They build a fire and Johnny unpacks four kinds of branches for good luck and safety, in the Indian tradition. He tells Jack that Levi knows the whereabouts of his sister and that they have to find Levi and find where Alyssa is. Terrified, Jack tells Johnny they are stalking a double murderer; Johnny shows him the gun and tells him not to worry. Once again, Johnny asks Jack to stay with him through the ordeal.

Chapter 33:

Detective Hunt tells Katherine Merrimon he's concerned about her safety and asks her not to stay at her house. They find the broken glass from Johnny's break-in, and a suitcase under his bed filled with photos of earlier times when their young family was intact. Katherine insists on staying alone, and when she hears Hunt's car leaving she goes into the front yard and retrieves the bottle of Oxycontin. She takes four and lies down on Johnny's bed. Hunt parks his car far enough away from Katherine's house not to be seen but close enough to keep watch on the house. He dozes, then gets a cell phone call from Yoakum telling him that the police have found a body at the Burton Jarvis site. When Hunt arrives on the scene, he is informed by the search dog handler that there are actually three bodies—and more may be found.

Chapter 34:

Johnny drives Steve's truck into the woods, alarming Jack, but soon they find a crudely-lettered sign that reads: "Hush Arbor, 1853." They decide to leave the truck and advance on foot.



The Jarvis murder scene is overrun with sheriff's deputies and local police. The local medical examiner, Dr. Moore, tells Hunt the crush of people isn't helping anything and asks him to send them home. Hunt asks the police chief again if he can have access to city employee files and the chief says he'll consider it. "Give me a day," he tells Hunt. The local medical examiner says it looks like Jarvis may have had some help with disposing of the bodies. Officer Cross tells Hunt that David Wilson's truck has been located, dumped in a ravine. The two cops head for the scene.

Chapter 35:

Johnny and Jack press deeper into the woods until they come to a clearing enclosed by a fence. Johnny peers through the gate and sees Levi Freemantle sitting alone in the center, legs splayed apart, a shovel in his hand. As his eyes scan the scene, he realizes they have come upon a cemetery. Freemantle stands and tries to dig with the shovel, but his multiple injuries cause him such pain that he falls. They draw closer, Johnny holding the pistol in his hand. Sobbing, he looks at the spot where a small coffin sits. The boys approach and Johnny brandishes the pistol at Levi who acts confused and asks whether they have come to help him because he doesn't have the strength to dig a grave for his "baby." Johnny lowers his gun.

Chapter 36:

Hunt examines Wilson's trashed truck hanging over a ravine. One of the evidence specialists calls to Hunt that the Toyota seems to have been wiped clean of fingerprints.. Officer Cross asks Hunt whether he still believes there was a cop involved in the slaying of these children. Hunt says he isn't sure any more. Soon the detectives are covered by reporters like a swarm of bees at the hive. They shout questions, which he ignores, until one female reporter asks whether there was evidence of "police involvement with Burton Jarvis." He pulls her aside and tells her he can't comment on an ongoing investigation. She tells him her sources are all protected, and he tells her the sources are dead wrong.

Chapters 17-36 Analysis

Detective Hunt's fear becomes a reality with the disappearance of another child, Tiffany Shore. Johnny Merrimon knows that Burton Jarvis, who owns property in the woods with a secretive shack where men come and go with computer disks, is a registered sex offender. In an effort to find out anything he can about Jarvis, Johnny stakes out his house in a parked truck But Jarvis finds him sleeping in his driveway and a desperate knife fight ensues. Meanwhile, the abducted Tiffany Shore seizes the opportunity to flee from Jarvis' house and grabs one of his pistols in her handcuffed hands and heads to the scene of the struggle. She shoots Jarvis, killing him. Johnny and Tiffany then flee in the truck; Johnny takes her to the hospital and is praised as a hero.

Detective Hunt particularly praises Johnny for his bravery, hoping to be able to break down some of the defense mechanisms the boy has created to keep adults away. In his



zeal to find who in the police department might have been involved with Jarvis' illegal activities, Hunt asks for permission to sift through confidential personnel files. This enrages the police chief, who once again sees Hunt's motive as pleasing Katherine Merrimon. Fearing the publicity that such a move could generate, the chief turns Hunt's request down unequivocally. The nature of the codependent relationship between Katherine and Ken Holloway is revealed by the fact she throws away all her Vicodin in an effort to quit; when she returns home from the hospital where her son is a patient, she finds a large bottle of Oxycontin—another narcotic—sitting on her kitchen table. Later that day, Katherine is assaulted by Ken Holloway banging on her door and screaming. Despite her fears, Holloway isn't able to break in.

Detective Hunt urges Katherine to temporarily leave her house because he is concerned about her safety. Another of Hunt's fears materializes when he gets a call from his partner telling him that several bodies have been unearthed near Burton Jarvis' shed. At this point, fear-induced adrenaline seems to power the actions of Hunt, Katherine Johnny and Ken Holloway. The reader is challenged to keep up with the mercurial pace of the narrative.



Chapter 37-42

Chapter 37-42 Summary

Chapter 37:

Yoakum and Hunt have a contentious head-to-head. Yoakum warns Hunt that his involvement with Katherine and Johnny Merrimon could potentially be explosive in the media, undermine his credibility and cause him to be fired. They ponder why Johnny believes that a cop was involved with Jarvis; Yoakum says the most likely reason is because the man wore a uniform. They recall that "whoever Johnny saw at Jarvis' house used stolen plates on his car." Further investigation revealed that all the stolen plates came from cars that were parked at the mall. "They both had the same thought at the same time. Cuffs. Guns. Uniform—security guard."

Chapter 38:

Johnny helps Levi dig a grave for the small pine coffin containing his daughter's body. They dig deeper than necessary and Johnny jumps out of the hole, anticipating the moment when he can ask the huge black man whether David Wilson told him where he found the girl. Freemantle yells at a crow that lands in a nearby tree; lighting flashes as storm clouds darken. They finish the burial in a pouring rainstorm. Johnny notices that Jack has gone.

Chapter 39:

Hunt and Yoakum go to the mall in search of Steve. As they enter, they run across an older woman carrying an opened can of tuna. She tells them the cat that used to eat the food she left out hadn't come around for a long time. Her description of the cat matches the cat delivered, broken-backed, in a box to Katherine's porch. They push their way into the mall security office and find Steve with two other security guards—none of whom had a gun. They ask to see Meechum, the boss, who had just left his office minutes before. Steve's description of Meechum matches that written by Johnny in his diary, and Steve tells them Meechum usually carries a sidearm. Steve gives them directions to Meechum's house behind the mall; they approach in the rain, pistols drawn. Through a slit in drawn curtains, they see Meechum burning computer disks in the fireplace—evidence. Meechum raises an ax above his head and smashes his computer just before the two detectives rush inside. Hunt yells to Meechum to stop as he draws the ax over his head; as soon as the ax begins to drop Yoakum shoots Meechum in the heart and kills him. Hunt is able to kick some of the discs out of the fire. Hunt calls his son and tells him he's bringing supper home. Hunt stops at Katherine's house on the way home, approaching her door through a gaggle of reporters and a driving rain. Hunt calms her fears and she sits next to him, head on his shoulder.

Chapter 40:



After burying his daughter, Freemantle slumps in his chair through the entire thunderstorm, lightning and all. Johnny sits under a tree limb nearby; Jack leans over the wall and hands him the gun. Freemantle shuffles, exhausted, toward the barn. Johnny and Jack follow him to sit near the blazing stove. Jack asks Freemantle why he carried the little coffin to this remote spot in the woods; Freemantle answers: "I can't drive." He pours veterinarian medicine over his swollen hands and his punctured thorax; Johnny tells him he needs antibiotics. Levi tells the boys that he received a news clipping in jail about the heat-induced death of his daughter while his wife and her boyfriend drank at a nearby bar. He says he walked off his work detail to exhume his daughter and bring her for burial back to the family lands. Levi says God told him to bring his daughter there and "to kill them." Jack notices a name tag in the piece of cloth Freemantle used for a bandage—Alyssa Merrimon.

Chapter 41:

Hunt shares a cold chicken dinner with his surly son, then gets a late night call from Yoakum who demands to know what his partner had told investigators about his killing Meechum. Hunt says he told them "it was a clean shot," provoked by Yoakum's perception that the suspect was about to lower an ax on his partner's head. He asks Hunt whether he has filed obstruction of justice charges against Holloway. Hunt tells him no, but says he will do it. Yoakum reaches for another scotch and water.

Chapter 42:

Johnny demands that Freemantle tell him where his sister is, but Levi says he doesn't know Alyssa and that the damning piece of material was given to him by "broken man" (David Wilson) before he died from the motorcycle crash. Johnny falls into an exhausted sleep; when he awakens briefly, Levi has the pistol in his hands. Jack calmly asks for the gun back, and Freemantle hands it to him. Freemantle says his wife shot him once because she thought he was stupid. "Calling people names is mean," Levi mumbles as he falls asleep.

Chapter 37-42 Analysis

While Johnny Merrimon tries to extract a confession from Levi Freemantle, Hunt and his partner head to Holloway's mall to see if the uniformed person Johnny says he saw at Jarvis' house might be a security guard. They think they have a suspect in Meechum, the head of security, and track him to his house where Hunt sees him disposing of computer disks in the fireplace, then hack his computer with a hatchet. Hunt rushes into the house and salvages some of the disks, but Mechum again raises the hatchet. From a distance it looks to Joakum as if Meechum is about to strike Hunt, so he shoots him in the heart and kills him. Later, Hunt supports Yoakum when he comes under fire for killing Meechum by maintaining it was a "clean shot," or one with a perfectly justifiable cause. The reader is left to wonder, however, if the hard-drinking, hung-over Yoakum might have reacted too quickly to a rush of fear. Johnny is surprised when he and Jack

encounter Freemantle conducting a small burial service for his two-year-old daughter; he is forced to revise his opinion of Freemantle as a homicidal maniac.

Once again, fear drives behavior. Yoakum shoots Meechum out of fear; Johnny Merrimon stalks Freemantle out of fear. In both cases, the characters have sufficient reason to later reflect on their own actions and motives.



Chapter 43-56

Chapter 43-56 Summary

Chapter 43:

When Hunt and Yoakum show up for work the next day, the chief calls them into his office where two stern, suited men stand stiffly. The chief introduces them as state investigators from the Raleigh office. The chief tells the two detectives to put their service revolvers on his desk. With much protest, they do as told. One of the state men asks Yoakum where his personal pistol is, and he answers "That's none of your business." The state man tells Yoakum that a shell with his fingerprints was found inside the wreckage of David Wilson's car. A physical struggle between Yoakum and the two state men results in handcuffs being clamped on his hands. Yoakum is then led through the bullpen to their car for a trip to Raleigh for interrogation.

Chapter 44:

Johnny and Jack awaken in the clearing where they've slept, along with Freemantle. Johnny tells Jack he thinks Levi is dying because of his bodily aroma. Jack tells Johnny they should flee before Freemantle decides to kill them. The huge man suddenly awakens, thrusts the hand with an infected finger toward his throat and squeezes mightily. The infection, now several days old, developed at the spot where Johnny bit down to the bone when Freemantle surprised and then hoisted him. Levi lowers his hand and acts disoriented, confused. Jack tries to recover his breathing; red finger marks appear on his throat.

Chapter 45:

The police chief gives Hunt his revolver and tells him Yoakum is a prime suspect in the murders because he theorizes there are three men involved—Burton Jarvis, Meechum and Yoakum. He tells Hunt that Yoakum had to kill Meechum when the opportunity arose before he could tell all about their conspiracy. Hunt leaves the station and decides to break into Yoakum's house, if necessary, to look for exculpatory evidence. But when he arrives, he sees a blue truck with the letters SBI parked in the driveway, people coming and going in and out of the house. It is obvious that the state investigators have a search warrant, which he does not.

Chapter 46:

Johnny Merrimon tells Jack that Freemantle is very feverish because he is very sick. In and out of consciousness, Levi mumbles about his house and his momma being on fire. Johnny starts the stolen truck, sending a plume of blue smoke into the air. He hands the pistol to Jack and tells him to watch Freemantle. They decide that since they aren't strong enough to lift Levi into the truck, they must patiently wait.



Chapter 47:

Hunt stops at Katherine Merrimon's house to check on her. She tells him that Holloway, drunk, came to her house at 3 a.m. and banged on her door for a while. She ignored him and he left, Detective Hunt asks permission to enter Johnny's room, where he searches for his book on Raven County. When he finds none, he goes to the public library and checks out a copy to compare that map of Hush Arbor with the road map in his glove box. Then he heads northwest toward Hush Arbor and Johnny Merrimon.

Chapter 48:

Officer Taylor goes to Ken Holloway's office but the receptionist tells her Holloway is not in. Taylor then goes to Holloway's house and hears a woman crying within. She enters through the open door and sees Holloway's prized piano hacked to bits, an ax lying nearby. She finds the crying woman in a hallway; she is a nineteen-year-old girl dressed in a maid's uniform, with part of it torn. Obviously traumatized, the girl tells Taylor she sometimes had sex with Holloway but when he called her Katherine, she asked who he was talking to. Holloway flew into a rage and smashed the piano, telling her that she would be "next" if she ever asked him again. Taylor sees lines of cocaine on the sofa; the house is generally a mess. The girl finally tells Taylor that Holloway is "a very bad man."

Chapter 49:

Johnny drives the truck into the cemetery and, with Jack's help, manages to get a dazed, sick Freemantle into the back. As they drive off, Jack hears Levi chanting, "no crows."

Chapter 50:

Hunt gets a call from Officer Cross telling him the police team has unearthed its first body—Spencer Merrimon, husband of Katherine and father of Johnny and Alyssa. Hunt speeds to the site, shaking his head and trying to make sense of everything

Chapter 51:

Jack and Johnny haul Levi back to the old barn and drag him out of the truck. Delirious with infection and fever, Freemantle utters repetitive nonsense words. Johnny tells Jack he has to watch over Freemantle while he goes for help. Soon Johnny disappears into the woods, leaving Jack to guard Levi with the pistol in his hand.

Chapter 52:

Among the effects found on Spencer Merrimon's remains is his wallet with identification. From his pockets they find a folded drawing by Alyssa when she was six. On the back, Merrimon had written down nine addresses. Hunt recognizes them as the addresses of registered sex offenders.



Chapter 53:

Johnny treks through the woods toward the house that his mother rents from Ken Holloway, while Jack keeps an eye—and his pistol—focused on the awakening Levi Freemantle. Hunt receives a call from Officer Taylor telling him that she has been unable to reach Katherine Merrimon on the phone. Once again, Hunt drives toward Katherine's house. Johnny emerges from the woods near the house and sees Ken Holloway's SUV smashed and parked in the yard, near the door, which is open. As he approaches, he hears a muffled scream from upstairs. Johnny finds the room where the scream originated, turns the door knob, and is suddenly swept inside by Ken Holloway. He sees his mother on the floor, hands tied behind her back with wire. Holloway slams Johnny down on the floor and puts his foot on his throat; he wields a length of lead pipe that Johnny had kept under his bed. Suddenly, Freemantle appears in the doorway, covered with dirt, blood, and leaves. "The little ones are gifts," Freemantle says, and as Ken lunges for him with the pipe, Freemantle grabs it with his massive hand and swings it back toward Holloway, smashing it into his throat. Holloway, falls to the floor gasping for breath, then dies.

Chapter 54:

Hunt rushes into the house, sees the ferocious Freemantle with the lead pipe in his hand, and jumps to the conclusion that he is the killer. A single shot to the shoulder intended just to bring Levi down does not seem to affect him, for he stands, smiles briefly and says, "Sofia," before dropping dead to the floor.

Chapter 55:

Hunt and Katherine lead the injured Johnny to a quiet place in the back yard, away from the reporters, police, medical examiners and paramedics. Katherine takes Johnny's hand in hers and Hunt tells him they'd found his father's remains in the ground behind Jarvis' house; he confirms that police believe Jarvis killed his father while he was looking for Alyssa. "He didn't leave us," she tells Johnny. Ken emerges, dazed, from the woods and says, "I know where she [Alyssa] is."

Chapter 56:

Jack tells Hunt that Freemantle said Alyssa is in the North Crozet Shaft, an abandoned gold mine with tunnels that drop down hundreds of feet. Once a recreational area open to the public, the mine had long been closed. Hunt takes Johnny and Katherine to the mine, where a twelve-foot gaping hole in the earth empties into darkness. They find a small sign that reads: "No. Croz."

Chapter 43-56 Analysis

Now set in motion, the various plot lines intersect, converge, and then diverge with alarming alacrity as each character does what he or she thinks will solve the problem of the child abductions and perhaps their own personal problems as well. The information



and clues that emerge from the exhumation of the bodies provide help from the past for today's fast-paced murder investigation. An old drawing by Alyssa found in Spencer Merrimon's pocket bears on its reverse side a list of registered sex offenders in the area—suggesting that he may have been killed for getting too close to the perpetrators of the abductions. Holloway becomes suspect because of his call to Meechum informing him that the police are looking for him and telling him to destroy any and all computer records. Holloway's sexist, abusive actions toward women, including Katherine Merrimon and a young female cleaning lady, are signs of his hostile attitude towards women and a likely reason why he might be involved in crimes such as child exploitation along with the other suspects. Freemantle somehow knows that Holloway is not only a brutal man but possibly the architect of the child abductions, and deals with him summarily by striking him in the throat with a large lead pipe.

If this book were a movie, this would be a point where the audience would probably let up a cheer that one of the bad guys has finally gotten justice. The eccentric nature of that justice is all too obvious when Hunt shoots Freemantle, killing him and thus preventing any kind of punishment. This, it seems, is a "clean shot" of an altogether different character than the shot by Yoakum that brings down Meechum. If one of the themes of this mystery is powerlessness, then random acts of violence or of kindness assume a very large role in the narrative. The seemingly random gentleness of Freemantle as opposed to the shocking bestiality of Holloway—supposedly a successful businessman and pillar of the community—unmask the reality that powerlessness can take many forms.



Chapter 57-62

Chapter 57-62 Summary

Chapter 57:

Detective Hunt calls firefighter friends who can ascend—and descend—ropes at great lengths. They hook their ropes to the back of the police car. The divers find what looks like an unidentifiable body and an old bicycle that Johnny recognizes as Jack's—the bike "stolen" from him years ago. The body surfaces in a black vinyl bag.

Chapter 58:

The firefighters tell Hunt the bike went into the shaft first, lodged in the tunnel, then the body came afterwards and rested on the bike. The body, they say, is a female of the approximate age as Alyssa when she disappeared. Hunt recalls that claims to have seen Alyssa pulled into a van just before she disappeared, and as such is the only witness to the abduction. He speculates: "Maybe it was not an abduction. Maybe Jack lied." Hunt drives the badly shaken Katherine and Johnny to a motel, tells them they can't be in their house because it's a crime scene, and promises to return the next day. Hunt tells Katherine he's gotten her car released from impound; it is parked near the front of the motel and her keys are at the desk.

Chapter 59:

Yoakum returns to work after the assault charges are dropped; Hunt tells him of his suspicion Officer Cross actually killed the mountain climber David Wilson because he stumbled on Alyssa's body while exploring at the North Crozet Shaft. Hunt theorizes that Cross picked up one of Yoakum's shell casings at the police firing range and placed it inside Wilson's wrecked car. Cross was the one, according to Hunt, who ran David Wilson over the bridge.

To gather more information, Hunt and Yoakum drive to a small shack near the gold mine where an older couple live. Johnny drives to the spot on the river where he and Jack used to meet, and he finds a drunken Jack sitting on a rock. Jack says he loaned Alyssa his bicycle so she could ride to the mines for a school project in geology; that his brother Gerald had a new truck and wanted to scare Alyssa. The bright headlights and noise caused her to steer into the deep shaft and fall to her death. Officer Cross, father of Jack and Gerald, demands that no one speak about the incident for fear of ruining Gerald's baseball career.

Chapter 60:

Hunt and Yoakum obtain an arrest warrant for Detective Cross on suspicion of murder at 2 a.m. from the district attorney. When they arrive at the Cross residence, they see Gerald's white truck smashed against the side of the house, Cross yelling, and his wife



on her knees in the yard, holding a bible and praying. Jack appears with the pistol and points it at his father. Cross moves toward his son and tries to talk him into handing over the gun. "It's your fault," Jack tells his father. When he gets closer, Cross raises his hands and Jack fires the pistol but there is nothing in the cartridge. After the second dry firing, Hunt tackles Jack and tells Cross to stay away from the gun. Hunt asks Cross to come with him to the police station for booking. Cross demands a lawyer, Hunt then arrests him "for the murder of David Wilson." Cross says Hunt's son, Allen, was in the truck with Gerald when Alyssa was forced into the mining tunnel. When he returns home, Hunt goes into his sleeping son's room; when Allen awakens, Hunt asks him if he has anything on his mind he wants to talk about. Allen says no, and Hunt goes to bed.

Chapter 61:

Hunt shows an autopsy photo of Meechum to Johnny and asks if he is the man the boy saw with Jarvis; Johnny nods in affirmation. Johnny said he thought the man was a cop because he carried a gun and handcuffs. Hunt gets a call from Dr. Trenton Moore, the coroner, asking him to come and see some evidence. He shows Hunt an X-ray of Freemantle's torso showing the stick lodged in his intestines. Hunt says he didn't mean to kill Freemantle; Moore says he didn't. "This is massive trauma," the coroner says. "He should have been dead days before you shot him."

Chapter 62:

Johnny is taken by social services from his home and mother and put in a foster home for one month. During that time, Hunt helps her find another place to live and checks it out for her. Katherine reminds Hunt that her son returns tomorrow, and asks if he would like to come for dinner in a month after they have had time to become reacquainted. Hunt says he'd be delighted and calls her new home "perfect."

Chapter 57-62 Analysis

In a blaze of technical brilliance, the author tightens the skeins of his story and leads the reader on a fast ride to its conclusion. After innumerable dead-ends and blind alleys, the resolution becomes clear when Detective Hunt fits the pieces of the puzzle together to implicate Detective Cross as the real villain in the disappearance and murder of Alyssa Merrimon. The motive for his actions is not pedophilia, but pride and an obsessive need to protect his athlete son, Gerald, as well as the family honor. By this point in the narrative the real pedophile, Burton Jarvis, has been killed by one of his victims; the good but unfortunate Levi Freemantle also has died; and the truly pernicious Ken Holloway has died a painful and violent death at the hands of Freemantle. As the strands of the story are tied together and the layers of mystery cleared up, the horizon is at last clear for Hunt and Katherine to come together and possibly form a new family in which Johnny can grow into a stable manhood.



Characters

Johnny Merrimon

Johnny is the undisputed hero of this tale. Basically a good young man who faces a tough life, Johnny grows through these pages into a man of whom his missing father could be proud. Johnny has become his mother's 'de facto' caretaker as she slides deeper into her addiction. Johnny painfully misses his father and deeply resents and fears Ken Holloway, the man who sleeps with his mother, provides her drugs and abuses her. These conflicting feelings drive Johnny's antisocial behavior, such as skipping school. He also is obsessed with finding out the fate of his missing sister, Alyssa.

Clyde Lafayette Hunt

Clyde Lafayette Hunt, otherwise known as Detective Hunt, is a kindhearted cop who tries to act as a surrogate father for Johnny, and who has a romantic interest in his mother, Katherine. The appropriately-named Hunt is also the spearhead of the local police department's investigation into the multiple child abductions. Since the disappearance of Alyssa Merrimon, Hunt has become fixated on trying to solve her case to the point that his wife has left him.

Ken Holloway

Ken Holloway is the violent drug abuser who moves in with Johnny's mother; he supplies her with drugs and they use them together. His frequent presence in the Merrimon house—which he leases to Katherine—is one reason Johnny is usually not at school and not at home. It is not uncommon for him to beat Katherine until she is bloody and bruised. "The man was a predator, pure and simple," is how the narrator describes him. In the demimonde of demons in this book, Holloway is probably second to the child murderer in terms of pure evil.

Levi Freemantle

Levi Freemantle is a 300-pound black man, former prison inmate, and slow-witted misfit who talks and listens to God continuously. Perhaps because of his race and his rather shocking physical demeanor, he is believed at one point in the narrative to be the killer responsible for the deaths of the abducted children. Freemantle displays no actual violence, in fact his police "rap sheet" consists of relatively minor offenses.



Uncle Steve

"Uncle" Steve is a friend of the Merrimons and a security guard who has a romantic attraction to Katherine. Steve is a first cousin of Spencer—Johnny's dad—but the boy resents his intrusion into the life of what remains of his family.

David Wilson

Wilson is a professorial-looking man who is a college professor and recreational motorcyclist killed in a collision with a car on a bridge, where the impact causes him to be thrown off the bridge and onto the river bank below.

Officer Laura Taylor

Taylor is a no-nonsense cop who exhibits a hard edge on the job. Although she once was infatuated with Officer Hunt, Officer Taylor gives no inkling of any lingering attraction when they are both assigned to work on the child abduction cases.

Officer John Yoakum

John Yoakum is a veteran police detective who is Detective Hunt's regular beat partner. He is described as "63 years old with thinning brown hair and a goatee shot with gray...thin but very fit, dangerously smart, cynical to a fault." He is taciturn, worldly and self-regarding—the polar opposite to Hunt's personality.

Burton Jarvis

Burton Jarvis is a paroled violent sex offender whose nickname is Jar. He makes a living stuffing shot deer and hauling garbage in his truck. Jarvis has a tightly-sealed and locked shed in his back yard that makes Johnny suspicious of him as the possible child killer.

Calvin Tremont

Calvin Tremont is Levi Freemantle's parole officer.



Objects/Places

Vicodin

The prescription opiate pain killer is ubiquitous in this novel as, indeed, it is in current society. Katherine Merrimon is addicted to it, as is her lover, Ken Holloway. Oxycontin is another prescription pain killer that they both use. His mother's medicine chest also includes the tranquilizer Xanax and the antidepressant Prozac.

Police station

The police station is one of the axis of this story. This is where Detective Hunt, his partner Yoakum, the police chief and all the other officers spend the majority of their time. It is not unusual to see Detective Hunt burning the midnight oil in his determined search for the killer of the missing children and, in particular, Alyssa Merrimon.

Motorcycle

The motorcycle on which David Wilson is riding when he collides with another vehicle on a bridge follows him over the side in its downward plunge to the riverbank where Johnny Merrimon is walking in the opening chapters.

North Carolina sand hills

The North Carolina sand hills form a geological transition from the sandy seashore to the inland Piedmont with its fertile soil and farmlands. It is in a small town in this region where the central action of the story occurs.

Alligator River Raptor Preserve

The Alligator River Raptor Preserve is where Johnny Merrimon goes in search of an eagle's feather, an important talisman to give him strength since the departure of his father and abduction of his sister, Alyssa.

Department of Social Services

DSS is the state agency charged with child welfare, and there is a very real possibility Johnny could be taken from his mother and placed in a foster home. Johnny instinctively knows that such an action would spell catastrophe for him, and goes out of his way to avoid DSS agents whenever they visit his house.



Guns

Guns, specifically pistols, play an important part in the story. Detective Hunt has a powerful 45-caliber police service revolver, which Johnny admires greatly. Johnny gets his hands on an illicit 38-caliber pistol which he uses to hold Levi Freemantle hostage in his search for the abductor of his sister.

Raleigh

Raleigh, as the capitol of North Carolina, is the seat of state government—including the state police. Detective Hunt tries to prevent state police, or any other outside agency, from intruding into his investigation of the Alyssa Merrimon disappearance.

Raven County

Raven County, North Carolina is the locale for all the action in the book. One of its earliest settlers was John Pendleton Merrimon, "surgeon and abolitionist," who is Johnny Merrimon's ancestor from the 1800s.

North Crozet Shaft

The North Crozet Shaft is a deep tunnel in an abandoned mining camp where police discover the body of Alyssa Merrimon.



Themes

Powerlessness

Powerlessness over people and events permeates this story. Johnny Merrimon is powerless over his sister's disappearance and his father's abandonment of the family. He is also powerless over his mother's pill-popping addiction as well as her relationship with the smarmy Ken Holloway. Detective Hunt is powerless to unravel the mystery of Alyssa's disappearance, and the local police are powerless to find other abducted children. Hunt is powerless over his obsession with Katherine Merrimon, who is powerless over her addiction. Because Johnny Merrimon knows he is powerless over actions of the adults in his life, he skips school and is frequently gone from home to avoid encounters with Holloway. Ken Holloway is powerless over his own addiction, as well as his anger, which eventually lead to his downfall.

Beyond the plot centered on the inevitable mystery of who did what to whom, when, why and how, powerlessness emerges as a deeper theme presenting the stark reality that everyone is powerless over life and death—especially innocent children. That vulnerability can lead directly into fear which, in this story, affects all of the central characters profoundly. Each deals with this fear in his or her own way. Johnny deals with his fear by focusing his life on a search for his sister's abductor/killer. Katherine Merrimon and Ken Holloway deal with their own individual fears by using drugs; Levi Freemantle handles his fears by praying; Detective Hunt tries to control his fears by obsessing about the disappearance of Alyssa Merrimon; Yoakum reacts to his fears by placing a cynical shell between himself and the world. Death, fear and powerlessness seem to be the only constants in the lives of these characters.

Violence

Violence—whether explicit or implicit—is a constant theme in the book, from beginning to end. The violence involved in the disappearance and murder of several young girls raises suspicions that the killer may be a sex offender. Both Johnny Merrimon and his mother, Katherine, are victims of the violence of Ken Holloway—a drug-addicted, callous man. The death of David Wilson, who was thrown off his motorcycle in what appears to be a deliberate collision, is another instance of extreme violence. And the discovery of the bodies of Levi Freemantle and Ronda Jeffries, both evidently pummeled to death by a cinder block, adds further to the violent toll while also providing a clue for Detective Hunt. There is also implicit violence in the fact Johnny Merrimon carries a revolver, as does Detective Hunt and all the other police officers. Johnny's burning of his bible seems another act of violence inasmuch as it represents his violent rejection of an important part of his childhood.

Violence to humans runs parallel to the gun-carrying, animal-hunting mentality of these southerners. This small town may not be the wild west, but there still exists a sense that



guns are needed not only for protection and hunting, but also for administration of vigilante-style justice. Violence is, in fact, the common thread that holds the narrative together and connects the characters in their individual sufferings. The book is suffused with violence, and the action is quick—both attributes of a screenplay. The elements of violence, mystery and an exotic location are made to order for a suspense-horror film; in fact the reader may wonder whether this novel, despite its literary attributes, may have been written primarily with the movie screen in mind. It is not inconceivable that this best-seller could become an Academy Award nominated film.

Obsession

Johnny Merrimon is obsessed with finding and punishing his sister's abductor/murderer. Detective Hunt shares the same obsession with Johnny. Katherine Merrimon is self-obsessed in terms of her drug addiction. Ken Holloway is obsessed with Katherine. The police chief is obsessed with the public relations and political posture of his department. Levi Freemantle is obsessed with his relationship to God. And Officer Laura Taylor seems obsessed with her career. All of these people represent different points on the spectrum of obsession from the merely neurotic to the truly pathological. Thus the author works a didactic teaching about how innocuous personality quirks, as in the case of Officer Taylor, can become distorted into madness and criminality, as in the case of the child murderer.

Style

Point of View

The general point of view is that of the knowing narrator. That voice manages to make sense of the characters and to reveal their motives, while providing a narrative framework. But within that overall point of view, there are multiple points of view of various characters. Johnny Merrimon has the point of view of an anxious, afraid adolescent boy trying to find some stability in his life; Katherine Robinson's point of view is based on low self-esteem and chronic drug use; Detective Hunt's point of view is that of an obsessive, proud cop and southerner who can not accept defeat—especially in the area of finding Alyssa Merrimon. Ken Holloway's point of view is that other humans, especially Katherine Merrimon, exist only for his pleasure and amusement; he seems unable to summon empathy or even kindness from his soul. The author's point of view toward his characters is largely one of compassion and warmth. Even the freakish and frightening Levi Freemantle is shown to have a tender soul. However the perpetrator of the crimes is depicted as bloodless, cold, insect-like.

Whenever the point of view shifts to that of Johnny Merrimon, the world is black-and-white without shades of gray—not unusual for a traumatized youth of thirteen. His quest for his sister is a crusade, Holloway is evil incarnate, Hunt is an opportunist and an interloper in Johnny's worldview. Detective Hunt tends to see himself idealistically as the knight on the white charger, determined to "rescue" Johnny and his mother whether they want to be rescued or not. John Yoakum, Hunt's partner, is a world-weary cynic who is suspicious of everyone's motives and the polar opposite to Hunt. Levi Freemantle's point of view is very simplistic; he sees himself as merely a servant of God and listens for God's injunctions in various voices and scenarios that play out in his head. His character is suggestive of the idiot Lenny in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, a huge adult male with the mentality and innocence of a small child. Thus there is a full spectrum of points of view in the characters, from the abnormally simplistic view of Levi to the cynical Yoakum, as well as different levels of awareness of the world in Johnny Merrimon, Ken Holloway and Detective Hunt. To a large extent, the characters' view of the world and themselves determines their behavior in this story. The juxtaposition of these points of view and motivations adds another level of meaning to the story and helps to advance the plot.

Setting

The setting for this novel is rural North Carolina—specifically the "hill country" situated between the coast and such well-known locations as Kitty Hawk and the agricultural piedmont, or flatlands of the interior. Sociologically, this region is portrayed as isolated and a magnet for marginal characters who do not fit into the other clearly-defined regions. Along with the solid local folks, it seems to attract deviant opportunists such as Ken Holloway, dreamers like David Wilson and misfits like ex-con Burton Jarvis. This



somewhat unpredictable human setting only adds to the tension in the novel as it works its way toward resolution of the child murders and motivations of characters such as Detective Hunt, who ends up in a relationship with Katherine Merrimon after a long period of trying to pry her away from her exploitive boyfriend Ken Holloway.

Language and Meaning

Although regional accents are quite pronounced in this part of the country, they do not make it to the printed page. The author has seen fit not to make dialect and local speech patterns an important part of the narrative. Except for a few apocopated southernisms in the inchoate mumblings of Levi Freemantle, the characters speak a kind of contemporary American that would be just as appropriate if the novel were set in the Midwest or, for example, California. This choice is itself interesting because the author has not attempted to capture the convoluted thought patterns and eccentric speech of southerners in a dramatic fashion such as William Faulkner employs in his fiction. Whereas regional dialect plays a major role in conveying meaning and motivation in Faulkner, it is unremarkable in Hart's work. But there is a palpable presence of "cop talk," or the professional lingo of police, especially in the conversations of Hunt, Yoakum and Laura Taylor. By casting speech in standard American, the author removes a potential barrier between his story and his readers but also loses some amount of credibility which he has carefully nurtured in his detailed descriptions and realistic interactions among characters.

Structure

The structure of the novel is masterful. It generally follows the problem-conflict-resolution-release of tension common to this genre of suspense fiction. But the author paints a broad landscape of characters and possible outcomes once the problem (disappearance of Alyssa Merrimon) is established, which leads the reader seemingly down multiple blind alleys as the police and Alyssa's brother search for her abductor. The usual suspects turn out to be, in the end, just oddballs and social misfits incapable of multiple murders. The actual perpetrator is a shock because he is the kind of man who seems most unlikely in the role of killer. This is a clear contest between although it is anything but clear who is the actual evil. Having thrown his readers off-center, the author prosecutes his plot with a manic persistence, dropping faint clues here and there but never enough for the reader—or even those in the story—to be certain who the killer is.

The author plays with two lines of the plot at the same time, in a sort of suspense fugue. One of these lines is the determined search for his sister and her killer carried out by her brother, Johnny. Johnny is bold and intrepid in his search, filled with a sense of mission. Detective Hunt, on the other hand, spearheads the police department's investigation into the killings and is as frustrated as the reader by the foot-dragging pace at which his department works. Johnny and Hunt pursue different groups of suspects with equal futility. Johnny knows all too well where evil manifests itself in his life—in the



person of Ken Hallowell, a slimy and violent man who keeps his mother in a kind of drug-induced servitude, abusing her whenever he likes. A large part of Johnny's time and energy is consumed by his frantic efforts to avoid Holloway, who has become a tyrant in their home. Hunt places himself in jeopardy with the police chief, who wants him to go easy on the case, because of his obsessive quest to find Alyssa Merrimon. And Hunt's wife leaves him for the same reason.

Toward the end of the book, the tension and reader interest peak as the author tightens the structural noose, flashing from Detective Hunt to Johnny, back and forth, so the narrative becomes a race to see which theory and approach will work (Johnny's) to unravel the complex mystery. By this time, the reader is hopelessly ensnared and captivated until the very last word. The structure, thus, is very effective in providing lots of narrative drive as well as a cast of compelling characters. All these threads of the story are woven into a seamless piece of tapestry that is a delight to experience.



Quotes

"What had been concrete one day proved sand the next; strength was illusion; faith meant shit. So what? So his once-bright world had devolved to cold, wet fog. That was life, the new order. Johnny had nothing to trust but himself, so that's the way he rolled —his path, his choices, and no looking back."

Chap. 2, p. 25

"Looking at the boy [Johnny] and at his desperate conviction, Hunt felt a great sadness. He was the department's lead on Alyssa's disappearance. He'd spent months, lost touch with his own family until his wife, in despair and quiet rage, had finally left him. And for what? Alyssa was gone, so gone they'd be lucky to find her remains."

Chap. 3, p. 37

"Johnny saw a shower of sparks, the top of a car and a motorcycle that cartwheeled once before the body came over the rail. One of the legs bent impossibly, the arms churned and Johnny knew it was a mistake, a pinwheel that screamed with a man's voice. It landed at Johnny's feet with a wet thump and the double snap of breaking bones. His eyes were open and they were the most amazing blue."

Chap. 4, p. 50

"Ken followed her to the end of the hall, looked back once, and shut the door. Johnny did not hear the lock drop, but he knew that it had. He wanted to punch the wall; instead he looked at his Uncle Steve, who gathered cans in silence."

Chap. 8, p. 74

"Hunt had admired Johnny's mother since they'd first met. Small but full of life, she'd shown courage and faith under unbearable circumstances. She'd stayed strong until the day she fell apart, at which point the collapse was total. Maybe it was grief, maybe it was guilt, but she was tragic and lost, adrift in the kind of horror that few parents could imagine."

Chap. 9, p. 83

"Levi moved carefully on the mud and slick rocks. The river tossed bits of light that reminded him of something from when he was a boy. It went truly dark and that's when he saw the faces. He saw his wife laughing at him and then suddenly not, her face gone reddish black and wet, almost by itself. He saw the man who was with her, and how his face went wrong, too, all red and crooked and flat on one side."

Chap. 12, p.103

"I'm so sick of hearing about Alyssa and Johnny and what a terrible tragedy it all is. I'm sick of seeing you with that file, looking at her picture, going through through it all night after night. I'm sick of the way your eyes cloud up and you never hear me talking. I'm sick of hearing you up at 3 in the morning, pacing and muttering. Mom left because of



your obsession...with Johnny's mother."
Chap. 15, p. 124

"It took Johnny two trips to become suspicious about the shed behind Jar's house. It sat at the end of a narrow footpath through dense trees, hidden from the road and from the house. The walls were cinder block, the windows nailed shut and packed tight with pink insulation and black plastic. Johnny could not see in. Light never came out. The lock was half the size of Johnny's head. That's where he first went."
Chap. 17, p. 139

"Tiffany sat down on the road and stared into space. She placed the gun beside her as Jar's blood pooled against her leg. Johnny ran to the old man's side and dropped to his knees. He grabbed Jar's shattered head as if he could hold in all of the things that leaked out, but the eyes were dull and empty, the silver turned to lead. For a second, Johnny saw black, then he screamed. 'Where is she?' He screamed the question, kept screaming it, and then he was beating Jar's head against the road, slamming it until the sound went from hard to wet. Eventually Johnny stopped. It was too late."
Chap. 20, p.154

"Jack swallowed, took a desperate look at the scrub beyond the fire; then he said it. 'She's fucking dead, man.' Johnny swung with all he had. The blow struck the side of Jack's face and he went down in the dirt. Johnny stood over him, his breath like glass in his throat, the gun a dead weight in his hand. For that instant, his oldest friend was not his friend, but his enemy."
Chap. 32, p. 241

"They fell into silence, each man alone with his thoughts. Hunt pictured grieving parents in museum bedrooms, surrounded by pink animals, dress-up clothes and framed photographs, carefully dusted. He hoped to bring them closure, some small measure peace. He wanted to deliver the remains of their children home to them, tell them that the monster responsible was dead, sent out of this world not by time, disease or the police but by one of his victims, by a small girl with the strength to pull the trigger. Hunt found poetry in that. Maybe they would too."
Chap. 34, p. 259

"Johnny's hand found the knob and it twisted as the door was yanked open from the inside. The force was unexpected and immense. It pulled Johnny across the threshold and into the room. He saw his mother on the floor, hands pinned behind her back with twists of wire. She called his name, then Holloway caught him by the throat. He had a big hand, thick fingers. Johnny couldn't breathe. He couldn't speak."
Chap. 53, p. 365



Topics for Discussion

What is the single most defining trait of Johnny Merrimon's character? What is his primary motivation?

What is the relationship of Detective Hunt to Johnny? To Katherine Merrimon? To Joakum?

What does Jack do, or not do, that infuriates Johnny and ruins their friendship?

What is Detective Hunt's obsession, and how does it affect his life?

What is the relationship of Ken Holloway to Katherine Merriman? Why doesn't she leave him?

Besides skipping school, what other types of antisocial—or illegal—behavior does Johnny display? To what extent are these behaviors motivated by fear?

What criminal offenses has Levi Freemantle committed, and how does his status as an ex-con affect the murder investigation?

Does Johnny's eventual surrender to Social Services seem like a good thing for him?

How might things have turned out differently for the Merrimon family if the father had remained at home?

What are the three things Johnny tells Detective Hunt that he prays for? Does he get them?