

# **Mr. Splitfoot Study Guide**

**Mr. Splitfoot by Samantha Hunt**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Hunt, Samantha. *Mr. Splitfoot*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Samantha Hunt's modern Gothic novel is a tale of mystery, intrigue, and conspiracy weaved between two braided narratives. Both narratives are told in chronological order, yet each takes place in a different chunk of time. The earlier story centers around an orphan named Ruth who is forced to live in a foster home with a religious fanatic named Father Arthur. The Father is a self-proclaimed religion expert, and he uses his time with the children to keep them in the dark ages. They are not allowed to leave the crumbling orphanage, they are forced to wear outdated uniforms, they tend to the garden and the chicken coop on a daily basis, and they attend religion courses every day. Father Arthur instructs the children about the dangers of every other religion out there, but is unable to pinpoint his own beliefs as anything but being based on the bible. Ruth finds comfort in two people. Her sister, Eleanor, enters the orphanage with her after they are taken away from their drunk and abusive mother. When El is forced to leave the orphanage at age eighteen, Ruth is only 5 and she is left to tend to herself. This solitary existence does not last long, though. Shortly after, another boy named Nat is abandoned by his mother when she chooses to run away with a man who does not like children. Nat's willingness to display his anger through lighting things on fire leads him to Father Arthur's strict and troubled orphanage, where he meets Ruth and finds a soul mate within the girl whom he shares a room with. Ruth and Nat refer to one another as sisters. They share a room, a bed, and their thoughts with one another. The two of them are inseparable and they depend greatly on the other to get them through their horrid time with Father Arthur.

One of their favorite activities with one another is to communicate with a being named Mr. Splitfoot, who provides a portal between Nat and dead people. Nat charges the other orphans small amounts of money to talk to their dead relatives, and Ruth is proud to know that her friend is able to talk to dead people. Ruth questions why Nat has never tried to speak with her dead mother. The two go down to the basement at Father Arthur's orphanage, better known as Church of Christ!, and Nat attempts to speak with Ruth's mother. While there, a salesman appears in the basement. He is squatting there until he has enough money to move on to the next town. He recognizes Nat as a conman and, after the salesman defines himself as a conman, he invites Nat and Ruth to meet with him in order to discuss a business proposal. The next day, Ruth and Nat venture into the nearest city, Troy, New York, to meet with the mysterious man. He introduces himself as Mr. Bell, a lifelong con artist and a master of his business. He offers to teach Nat how to con people better and asks to be their manager. Ruth is doubtful because she believes Nat to be a genuine talent in talking to dead people, but Nat quickly agrees to the business proposal. The three of them shake hands and develop a close bond based on making money through hosting phony séances.

Ruth tires of all the lies related to her business of hosting séances. She takes a short break and tries to find her sister, El. When Ruth finds Eleanor, she discovers that her sister was abandoned in Troy. El had sex with men in order to find a place to sleep,



which left her pregnant. El was lost. She left Troy and moved in with their mother. Ruth is shocked to learn that her mother was alive when they became state wards. She is even more shocked to discover that it was her own mother who gave her the scar she has on her face. Ruth carries a chemical burn on her face, created when her own mother threw bleach on her face and passed out before she rinsed it off. Eleanor and Ruth became wards of the state after El reported this abuse. However, all of this information is new to Ruth, who returns to Mr. Bell and her life of giving fake séances with an empty feeling she did not feel before knowing this about her early childhood.

Ruth's life changes drastically when she returns with a medical emergency. Her appendix bursts, which lands her in the hospital for a few days. While recovering there, a man named Zeke appears at her bedside and visits with her. Shortly after, Zeke appears at Church of Christ! and offers Father Arthur \$800 for Ruth's hand in marriage. When Ruth realizes that marrying an adult means that she gets freedom from Father Arthur, she proposes marriage to two people: an orphan in the house who is about to turn eighteen and her business partner, Mr. Bell. Ruth marries Mr. Bell and moves out of Father Arthur's home into an apartment in Troy with Nat. The three of them make money off of fake séances until they are caught by Zeke, who is bitter about Ruth's decision not to marry him and rambling about Mr. Bell stealing money from them. The trio goes on the run and winds up at a mansion in the Adirondacks. It is here where Ruth discovers her affection for Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell reveals that Zeke, also known as Mardellion, is his father, and is the person who taught Mr. Bell how to con people. Mardellion is the leader of a cult that follows The Book of Ether. The mansion they find themselves at was the original site for the cult, and Mr. Bell returns to find a box of money that Mardellion and his father collected in all of their previous cons.

The second narrative in this novel takes place roughly fourteen years later. Eleanor's daughter, Cora, is now an adult. She maintains happy memories of meeting her aunt Ruth once before, but she is heavy with regret for her current mundane life. Cora is impregnated by her boyfriend, Lord. Lord is upfront about the fact that he is love with his wife and that he could never fall in love with her. He tries to kill the baby when Cora reveals her pregnancy. Ruth appears at Cora's home in a moment of crisis. Ruth is alone. She appears disheveled, troubled, and is unable to speak. She gestures a departure to Cora, who accepts the proposal due to her personal hatred of her living situation. Cora leaves with Ruth, and the two women venture out on a journey on foot that lasts much longer than Cora ever anticipated. Ruth leads Cora along the Erie Canal. They walk long enough for Cora to carry her baby to full term. Along the way, Cora learns how to like herself. She learns how to be on earth and she develops an understanding of her own priorities. Ruth leads Cora to the same mansion in Adirondacks where Mr. Bell once led them fourteen years ago. Ruth's plan is revealed when she helps Cora find the same box of money Mr. Bell showed them many years ago. But Cora is shocked to find Nat in the mansion all alone, and she learns a lot more about her aunt than she ever anticipated.

# Part 1

## Summary

There are two different narratives within the chapter. The first is a third-person limited narration about Nat and Ruth at the Love of Christ!, which is a church and an orphanage in upstate New York. The other narrative is written in a first-person limited point of view from the perspective of Cora Sykes.

The first half of this section takes place in the past. Readers meet two orphans, Nat and Ruth, who are best friends and entirely dependent on one another. They have been placed into an orphanage with a man referred to as Father Arthur. He leads the children in studies and worship, teaching them about how dangerous every other religion is. The children at Love of Christ! church wear drab, old-fashioned uniforms and they do chores of the past like collecting eggs from the chicken coup and dipping their own candles. They are completely cut off from the outside world and are at the mercy of both Father Arthur and his helper referred to only as Mother.

Nat and Ruth have become quite dependent on one another. Nat remembers his mother, which adds to his anger at being in the foster system in the state of New York. Ruth believes that her mother is dead. She was raised by her sister, Eleanor, while they both lived at Love of Christ! However, El is forced to move out of the home when she turns 18. The two girls are separated instantly and never provided a dialogue about how they will find each other when Ruth is old enough to get out of the orphanage. Nat is El's replacement. He is close to Ruth's age, and the two five year-olds share a room, a bed, and every thought that comes across their minds. Father Arthur hates how close they are and considers their relationship to be sinful, but neither Ruth nor Nat ever give any solid reason why the Father should not trust the purity of their relationship. The children grow up to age 17 and remain united in their lives. They dream of living together when they are forced out of the house at age 18.

The next section in Part I gives readers more insight into what happened to El after she left the home. El left the house, homeless and pregnant, and ended up back at her mother's house. El lived with her mother and her daughter, Cora, until she died. Now Cora lives with El in the groundskeeper apartment at a hospital. Cora remembers meeting her aunt Ruth when she was 11 years-old. At that time, Ruth was 17. She showed up at El's house with Nat, claiming that she was emancipated but that Nat was too young to help her in this endeavor. Ruth seems overjoyed yet nervous, and she bursts out that Nat talks to ghosts. During their dinner reunion, the young Cora was amazed at the life and strength of Ruth and Nat. She was mesmerized by them. El informs Ruth that this house was their mother's. Their mother spilled bleach on Ruth's face when she was a baby, which caused the scaring. As a result, her daughters were put into the foster system. This news upset Ruth very much and Nat and Ruth left the next day.



Ruth stays out of Cora's life until the present day, when readers meet Cora as a pregnant woman carrying her married boyfriend's baby. Her boyfriend, Lord, is married to a woman named Janine, and Janine is locked up in a psych ward somewhere because she thinks spies are out to get her. Cora goes camping with Lord, who treats her with condescension and a lack of care. He speaks about his love for his wife and agrees with Cora that he does not love her. Cora informs Lord that she is pregnant and that, just like her mother did, she is happy to raise the child on her own. Lord does not want her to keep the baby. He visits Cora twice after learning she is pregnant and admits that he is trying to give her an abortion against her will. The baby seems to survive this attempted abortion, and Cora is extremely hopeful for the child's survival.

Cora arrives home to find something that resembles a monster hiding in the dark. This monster turns out to be her Aunt Ruth, who is only recognizable because of the scars on her face. Cora has not seen Ruth for close to 12 years, and Ruth is now a thin, sickly looking woman who is missing the zeal for life she seemed to have the last time Cora saw her. Ruth cannot talk. She points around enough for Cora to understand that Ruth wants her to leave with her. Cora agrees. She quickly packs her things and gets into Ruth's car, which breaks down only a few miles away from their home. Ruth gets out and starts the women walking through the woods while Cora questions both the reasoning and the final destination for this journey.

## Analysis

Readers are introduced to the strangely close, yet entirely unsexual, relationship between seventeen year-olds Nat and Ruth. Each is an orphan with dark pasts, yet each pulls the other up through the darkness with unquestioning support and love. It is this constant affection that helps Nat and Ruth deal with the craziness of Father Arthur, the other damaged orphans, and the restricted life at Love of Christ! They bend into one another. It is as if they are two halves of a whole, with dualism being a theme in this novel. Nat and Ruth balance one another out, the center each other, and each of them depends on the other for any chance to thrive. Samantha Hunt supports her idea of Nat and Ruth bleeding into one another when the narrator comments that, "Nat hates/loves Ruth as much as he hates/loves himself" (2). They are equals in every way. Later on, when Ruth's niece, Cora, meets them for the first time, she immediately notices that "they had a secret way inside each other down a path no one else would ever know" (35). She also describes them in yet another dualistic way, noticing that, "Ruth was like being close to thunder. And then Nat. Lightning" (35). It will be curious to see if and how these two damaged orphans remain together when they leave the orphanage. For now, the children fondly remember the other as the life support that helps them breathe under all of the oppression at Church of Christ!

Nat and Ruth do not have sex with one another. They are romantic with each other in the most intimate of ways, but they are not sexual. There is, however, a strange moment when Nat asks Ruth to pretend to be his wife. He appears to behave sexually but without any knowledge or understanding of how to have sex. Nat simply wants to lie on top of Ruth and feel their bodies collide. This is a different intimacy from the way they



sleep together at night. Here, they are on top of one another whereas their nighttime sleep habits describe them as sleeping side by side, like yin and yang. There is a desperation for both of them to be something more than they already are, although they are already quite inseparable. “Alone with Nat,” Ruth thinks, “a perfect place can exist, their own terrarium” (13).

This orphanage is not an easy place to survive. Yes, Father Arthur takes care of the children in the most basic of ways. He provides them food, water, shelter, and clothing. In his own mind, it seems as though Father Arthur even provides them with his own type of affection. But this form of love is misplaced with the children. It is obvious to readers that the information he teaches the orphans is incorrect. He is strongly religious yet cannot place a label on which branch of religion he follows. He states only that he follows the Bible, which as most know, has several different interpretations. Ruth seems impervious to these teachings and often challenges the things being taught. She questions Father Arthur and she observes some of his sins. She is aware of his previous life spent as a drunken musician and Ruth knows about Father Arthur’s nasty habit of getting drunk off of whiskey in his room late at night. All of these things prevent Ruth from being fully engrossed in the attempted brainwashing of Father Arthur. The omniscient narrator in the narrative of Ruth and Nat’s time at Love of Christ! notes that, “At Love of Christ! children feel the Lord, and the Lord is often furious and unpredictable” (3). Religion is a cornerstone of the children’s education. They are forced to live in a slightly more primitive lifestyle, stating that “The old ways survive” (3), and readers are left to consider whether this coincides with Father Arthur’s religious beliefs or if it is due to Father Arthur wanting to keep the children isolated from society. Perhaps he is worried that the children will tattletale on him; that they will tell another adult about the strange things happening. Another possible reason for this isolation is that Father Arthur is desperate to keep the government funding he receives for being a foster home. The idea of money comes up quite a lot with the narrator, and even Ruth is aware that the Father takes in the most damaged orphans possible. “The Love of Christ! children are [described as being] a rainbow of deformities” (6). The narrator goes into further details when she teaches readers that, “The Father requests damaged wards, parents who are dead, retarded, in jail, all of the above. The more desperate the case, the more money the State gives him” (7). The way the reasoning is explained, this is not an action out of pity or concern but for monetary rewards. Much of the conversation related to Church of Christ! is related to money, making readers well aware of the business Father Arthur is running.

However, readers do get a sense that the Father is not entirely cruel. Yes, he is completely focused on religious education and on educating the children about false facts. However, the narrator comments that Father Arthur imagines that, “he’s a savior performing rescues—and, in some rank way, he is” (8). There is a difference placed between how the Father sees his role and how the children see his role. There is a slight sense that the Father believes himself to be helping children, and in some way he is. After all, without Father Arthur’s church and orphanage Ruth and Nat would never have met. Many of these damaged wards might not be in such a stable home, despite the fact that the stability of the home is also a form of brainwashing. Readers want to hate the Father. Readers are led to lose trust in the home and in what it stands for.





While this is a factor that should not be ignored, it is also important to stop and reflect on how this home is beneficial. Father Arthur is far from a hero's position, but he is not exactly a villain either. It is obvious that Ruth dislikes the Father, but she does not seem to fear him. She knows the rules of the house, she knows what bothers him, and she is careful to live her life avoiding these triggers. The abuse in the home seems to come from the improper education, limited food rations, and mentioned punishments that have not occurred in the narrative yet.

Readers do get a strong sense of cruelty when the narrator discusses how Ruth lost her sister, Eleanor. The way Father Arthur handled the situation shows the level of callousness and cold cruelty that has been alluded to but never addressed directly. Not only did he split up sisters, but he launched Eleanor, "El", into the world completely helpless and unaware of the dangers lurking for her. This is an overwhelmingly traumatic event for both girls involved. For El, readers know that she becomes a single mother, indicating that she experienced an unplanned pregnancy. While the details are not shared, readers can infer that her entrance into the real world was a rough one. For Ruth, she was left behind. At the age of five, El was the only mother she remembers, and Father Arthur must have known this. He yanked Ruth's sister away from her anyway, which is a painful act that pushed Ruth even closer to Nat. In fact, Nat is such a replacement for El that Ruth refers to him as her sister although he is a boy who identifies as being male. Nat sleeps in the same room and in the same bed that El used to, which further makes him a suitable replacement for Ruth's sister. This separation done by Father Arthur was, presumably, based on the fact that Eleanor turned 18 and was no longer a ward of the state. As readers already know, the Father only seems to care about getting money from the state, and legal adults will not yield money from the state. Therefore, it is predictable that Father Arthur will get rid of El seeing as she is no longer profitable for him or his cause.

Father Arthur is a peculiarly complex character. It is easier to gloss over him and focus on the main characters, Nat and Ruth, but the Father needs to be examined closely. In particular, there are suspiciously close similarities between Father Arthur and Lord, Cora's married boyfriend. These two men are seemingly in the shadows of the novel, yet they must resemble one another for a reason. Both men seem to be from an earlier time. Father Arthur forces the children away from live television and into chicken coups. He does not seem to watch much or any TV. Likewise, Lord does not watch television, choosing instead to read books. The closest similarity comes from the words the men say. Early in Part I, when Ruth asks Father Arthur to specify which religion he follows, he responds by saying, "I follow the bible. Ever heard of it?" (10). A rather flippant response. Later on in Part I, when Cora asks where Lord learned the lines of poetry he was reciting, Lord responds by saying, "I read books. Ever heard of 'em?" (22). This is a strikingly similar reaction to questions. Both men simply refer to reading books in order to spread their knowledge. This is an indication that readers can find more similarities as the story moves on, and this may indicate that there is a connection between these two men because, after all, Hunt is slowly weaving a mystery that readers are in charge of untangling. This connection just may be one of the threads in the web of knots.





Knowledge is another theme in this book and, in particular, Hunt discusses the dual sides to knowledge: the upsides and the downsides. We see false knowledge being pumped into the children's brains at Church of Christ! It is these misunderstandings, which will make it difficult for any of the children to adapt when they leave the orphanage. However, there are also comments about how teaching a person new information is a form of affection. As stated in the previous paragraph, both Lord and Father Arthur seem to feel that a form of their affection is teaching people things. Additionally, one of the first descriptions readers receive related to the relationship between Nat and Ruth is that, "This is how Nat loves Ruth. He fills her head with his wisdom" (1). In this scene, Nat is a bit rude to Ruth. He is rough with her. However, the narrator observes that this is how he shows his love for her. There is a run of harsh love in this story. Lord is harsh with Cora, Nat is harsh with Ruth, and Father Arthur is harsh with everyone. But, despite the surface level treatment, the receivers of this jagged affection understand that it is coming from a place of care.

Cora allows Lord to treat her quite cruelly, which is surprising because she comes across as such a strong person. She even admits, "I don't believe in real men. I also don't believe in the Lottery or God. They are stories we tell ourselves at night when we're scared. . . . I know no one else is going to take care of me" (21). However, despite these thoughts, Cora continues to return to Lord. She knows he is married, she knows he does not love her, and yet she returns. This is a confusing attribute for Cora. It leaves readers wondering if she has lost her strength although she remembers it. Cora seems to be folded into herself. She is working at a job that she does not like. She does not seem happy about things or excited by her surroundings. She is quite concerned with social media and how many people like the photos she posts. This may be connected to her memory of meeting her Aunt Ruth years ago. When Ruth and Nat visit her home she is quite young. She remembers being mesmerized by the pair, refreshed by their different personalities. Cora remembers thinking, "I liked my mother fine, but Ruth was like being close to thunder. And then Nat. Lightning" (35). Here, we see a difference between the passion Cora describes her aunt with and the mundane description related to her mother, and to her own real life. Ruth seems exciting and daring, she seems like the type of woman Cora desires to be; but readers do not have any indication that Cora is truly the exciting and strong person she wants to think she is.

It is strongly apparent that Lord is a cruel person when he tries to sneak an abortion on Cora. Many readers were able to infer that Lord's sudden interest in cooking Cora dinner was related to poisoning her somehow, most readers did not expect him to insert the second stage of the abortion into her after he goes down on her. It is a terrifying scene for any woman to read, and Cora seems desperate when she begs Lord to tell her what he put inside of her. She trusted him enough to open herself up to him and he crushed any semblance of trust when he shoved a foreign object into her with the intention of killing their baby. This proves to readers just how little Lord thinks of Cora, and it teaches readers of the cruelty Lord is capable of performing.

While readers are disturbed by the abortion scene, there is also a level of confusion related to Cora. How could Cora get herself to the point of trusting such a disgusting and cruel man? She claims to be strong but she crumbles around Lord, convincing



herself that he will accept the pregnancy and file for divorce from the wife he loves so much. Perhaps this is why Cora is so quick to accept the strange offer of adventure Ruth provides her. Ruth needs to do very little convincing in order to get Cora packing a bag and ready to leave the house. Cora does not seem keen on staying in her current living situation anyway, and appears to be thankful for a strange twist in her own life story, for the chance of the adventure she has been waiting for. But this does not shift the focus from the drastic changes in Ruth since the last time we saw her. To begin, Nat is not with her. This is a huge change from the Ruth readers have met in Part I. Perhaps Nat is dead. Maybe he is in trouble. There is a chance that the two of them had a large enough disagreement to split them up. Ruth is not described in a way that gives readers confidence. There is obviously something wrong with Ruth, but there is no way for readers to know what it is at this point.

While mysteries abound in Hunt's novel, there is also a very distinct writing style that emerges early on. Many of the descriptions in Hunt's novel are dripping with haunting imagery. Lord's love for Janine is described with violence. In an effort to set the dark stage in the upcoming story, author Samantha Hunt uses lengthy descriptions that personify the orphanage Nat and Ruth live in. Hunt uses rather descriptive and aggressive words to help readers understand that the church for Love of Christ! is not a happy or inviting place. "Handiwork from days past . . . is being terrorized by state-provided, institutional, indestructible furniture common to dormitories and religious organizations. . . . Each snaggletooth of a homestead constructed during the Civil War pleases Father Arthur" (3). Here, Hunt uses words such as "terrorized" and "snaggletooth" to paint a grim picture of the place Nat and Ruth call home. This property seems bullied and forgotten all at the same time, neglected and abused simultaneously. Hunt's writing is on par with the overall tone of the novel, a modern gothic tale filled with death, ghosts, séances, treacherous journeys, and confusing mysteries.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the similarities in how Father Arthur and Lord are described. In what ways do they help the people around them and in what ways do they harm the people around them?

## Discussion Question 2

How would you describe Cora's opinion of her mother, Eleanor? Use evidence from the novel to explain whether Cora is close with her mother or distant, whether she respects El or does not.

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Cora decide to leave with Ruth?

## Vocabulary

bureaucracy, chondrite, knave, corpus, callosum, ward, docile, vitriolic, placate, profligate, perdition, fallow, iniquity, indemnity, zealot



## Part 2

### Summary

Nat and Ruth charge the children at the orphanage five dollars to speak to the dead. He is successful until he reads for a girl named Raffaella. Nat starts to talk with Raffaella's dead mother until she stops him to announce that her mother is alive and living in Miami. She pays her money and quickly departs, leaving Nat and Ruth only to speak about life's "mysteries" (48).

A salesman named Mr. Bell visits the house, but Father rejects what he is selling on the grounds that Mr. Bell declares his lack of a connection with Jesus. Shortly after, Nat and Ruth run into Mr. Bell while they are walking into the town of Troy, NY. He offers to give them a ride. The two spend the day shoplifting enough food to eat outside while passersby judge their appearance.

Ruth wakes up in a panic one night, wondering why Nat never talks to her mother since her mom is dead. Nat takes Ruth to the basement where he insists that they speak to Mr. Splitfoot. Except, Mr. Splitfoot does not say, or do, much. Ruth experiences a sort of exorcism and Nat is briefly taken over by Ruth's mother, who claims that she wants to rip out her lungs and heart and drag her to hell with her. The tense moment is interrupted when Mr. Bell, the salesman from earlier that day, appears and admits that he is sleeping in their basement. He applauds Nat's performance in the basement and invites the two of them to meet him in a remote location. When Nat and Ruth get there, they are interested in seeing what Mr. Bell has inside of his case. It is empty, and Mr. Bell admits that he is a con artist who wants to manage them in conning people. They quickly agree and make the deal, binding Mr. Bell to Nat and Ruth as their manager.

The second chapter in Part II returns to Cora walking with the thirty year-old Ruth who is mute. The women walk for so long that Cora no longer has any idea how long it has been. She no longer has a smart phone or any other technology because Ruth broke her phone and eliminated her Internet connection. However, Cora begins to notice how centered she feels without those distractions. Ruth never speaks, but Cora always follows. She calls El a few times, and her mother seems intensely worried about the fact that Cora is out with Ruth. On one of their nights, the women stay with a man named Sequoya. Ruth immediately follows him to his bed and has sex with him, presumably in exchange for allowing them to stay at his home for the night, and because Cora wants to rid herself of Lord. Cora understands that they are following the Eerie Canal but she has no idea how much further it will be or where their final destination is. Meanwhile, her belly is growing and Cora tells Ruth about her pregnancy.

Chapter 3 brings us back to Ruth at Love of Christ! She goes to the hospital for a ruptured appendix. A strange man who calls himself Zeke appears by her bedside. He visits with Ruth all day and, just before she is released from the hospital, the man



hovers his hand over her scar, stating that she has the entire cosmos there. He then tells her that, "There's home between you and me" (91).

Upon returning home, Nat informs Ruth that Mr. Bell thinks they need practice conning people, so they choose a boy named Ceph, who they do not seem to like very much. They enter the basement as normal, calling this experience "Mr. Splitfoot". While there, Nat mentions the name Tina. He does not remember saying this and, it turns out, Tina is the name of Ceph's mother. This leaves both Ruth and Nat very confused by the situation. This event is interrupted when Zeke appears at the door and offers a transaction to take Ruth away. Father Arthur quickly agrees and asks for \$800 in exchange for his blessing and approval to marry Ruth. He has paired up girls from the church with members before, making them wives, and he feels that this would be a more profitable solution.

## Analysis

Readers are exposed to much doubt circling around Nat's ability to speak to the dead. He comments that, "You don't have to believe it. It doesn't matter. I don't believe it, but that doesn't stop it from happening" (45). This indicates that Nat truly believes he has a talent. However, he slips with when he works with Raffaella. During Nat's communication with Raffaella, it comes out that her mother is not dead but living in Miami. Ruth and Nat end the night, and they admit to one another that they were faking it. "[Raffaella] pays them not to admit that it's fake" (48). This is the beginning of the readers' choice. Readers are now going to have to choose if Nat is telling the truth about talking to dead people or if he is a con artist who is lying to vulnerable people. It is obvious that Ruth believes it because this portion of the story is from the past, when Ruth and Nat are still living in the orphanage. Readers have already witnessed Ruth defending Nat's gift while attending dinner with El and Cora in Part I. However, Nat's slip up will require readers to doubt the truthfulness in his claims. While cynics may be quick to say that Nat is a fraud, there is also the possibility that Raffaella's mother did, in fact, die. After all, she is living in an orphanage far away from Miami. It is possible that Raffaele either does not have correct information about her mother's whereabouts or that her mother has died since Raffaella arrived. Ruth has lived her entire life not knowing that her mother is alive, so readers can see a pattern with these children believing misinformation.

Mr. Bell immediately claims to see the con Nat is pulling at the orphanage. He notes that Nat's use of gibberish will help him go, "a long, long way" (57) when conning people. Mr. Bell does not believe Nat's talent for one second. He claims that Nat uses, "Empty space [to] lure your customers into a dark and dreary basement" (60). Later on in the chapter, Mr. Bell uses the idea of darkness and empty space to explain how he cons people so easily, noting that, "It gives me a reason to knock on people's doors, ask them questions. You already understand the potential in empty space and curious customers. Empty space made you two agree to meet me, a strange man in an abandoned location. . . . Information enables me to shape my con, to make something from nothing" (59-60). This idea of empty space, of darkness, then shapes into a symbol for people's



gullibility. It is a person's natural curiosity that will lure them into dealings they might not otherwise commit to.

And so, while Mr. Bell is convinced that Nat is lying, Ruth wholeheartedly defends her other half. While Mr. Bell doubts Nat, Ruth continues to claim, "It's not deceit" (62). Ruth brings up a very good question when she asks why Nat has never tried to speak to her dead mother. There are a few possibilities here. First and foremost, if Nat is lying about his talent, he may have wanted to avoid taking advantage of Ruth by pretending to talk to her mother. A second option is that Nat was previously unable to speak with Ruth's mother because she was alive for a large chunk of time when Ruth is in the orphanage. While Ruth believes her mother to be dead, readers know that she was alive and housing Eleanor years earlier. This may mean that Nat was unable to speak to her and so he stopped trying. He may have been aware of Ruth's mother's status as living but wanted to keep it a secret from Ruth to avoid shocking her. Evidence appears in favor of Nat's honesty in the scene down in the basement between Ruth and Nat. Readers must believe that Nat loves Ruth more than anyone else on the planet. Then it is also readers' assumption that Nat would never harm her. Why, then, would Nat pretend to be so violent and cruel if he was faking his communication with Ruth's mother? This leads readers to believe that Nat had contact with Ruth's mother, a vindictive and seemingly evil spirit.

The novel continues to develop the deep and loyal love Nat and Ruth feel for one another. Ruth wakes one morning and views Nat's sleeping body next to hers. She recalls that Father Arthur claims, "Sleep is to ready us for death." She quickly thinks to herself that this is not the case between Nat and herself, further commenting that she feels as if they are, ". . . stewing and melting together" (58) while laying in bed. This undying love for each other is what continues to bring about apprehension within Cora's narrative. In this storyline, Ruth is alone. She is not talking, which means that she has not mentioned Nat at all. Nat is not present, and readers have no indication for his safety or peril. However, it is rather suspicious that Nat and Ruth are inseparable and then Ruth appears—thin, disheveled, and mute—without Nat.

We do not know Ruth's motivation for her long journey with Cora, nor does Cora have any clue where she is going or why. This does not seem to bother Cora, who seems to have very little waiting for her back home. She worries for Eleanor simply because she does not want Eleanor to feel concerned. But Cora loves spending time with her aunt because, "Ruth is walking me away from the world I know into one I don't" (75). For this, Cora seems grateful. Back home, she has a job she hates and a boyfriend who is married to someone else and who is trying to kill her baby. While she respects her mother, El, Cora does not seem overly excited about her love for her mother. Instead, it is as if Cora's main concern is to treat Eleanor with the respect she deserves as a single mother. This journey may be coordinated by Ruth, but it seems to be helping Cora more.



## Discussion Question 1

Mr. Bell focuses on empty spaces as a way to con a person. What exactly does he mean when he talks about empty spaces and why do they allow a person to be conned easier?

## Discussion Question 2

At this point in the novel, what is your opinion about Nat's ability to talk to the dead? Is he faking it or is it a real ability?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways is Cora transforming into a more mature and self-aware person? Use specific evidence that shows the causes of her transformation.

## Vocabulary

periphery, transom, phalanges, pallet, acrid, confluence, pocked, palpates, larceny, kitsch





## Part 3

### Summary

Chapter 1 keeps readers with Cora and Ruth on their long journey. They have stopped in a sad, small town with a huge sinkhole and an abandoned school. Cora thinks she sees a scary looking man with a cane on the edge of the sinkhole but he disappears. Cora discovers a book in Ruth's backpack titled *The Book of Ether*. There are verses inside that read like a religious text. As they are getting ready to depart, the man with the cane reappears outside of the school, hitting the fencing like he knows they are inside. It is at this moment when Cora feels like Ruth is not taking her somewhere but is running away from something dangerous.

Chapter 2 brings readers back to a time when Nat and Ruth are preparing for a meeting with their new manager, Mr. Bell. He has asked to meet him in a random house. When Nat and Ruth get there, no one else is there and the house seems abandoned except for Mr. Bell's duffel bag. Ruth digs through the bag and finds a sketchbook with several dots and lines. Each page has a similar pattern, and Nat notices that the patterns perfectly match the scarring on Ruth's face.

This discovery is interrupted when Mr. Bell enters the home, pretending it is his mother's yet he does not know where anything is. He brings a change of clothes for the children and welcomes six people who want Nat's help talking to the dead. Nat pretends to speak to one couple's dead daughter, which then makes another couple angry customers. A fight ensues, leaving Mr. Bell feeling nervous, until Ruth steps in and pretends to speak to the angry couple's father. This relieves the tension and helps Mr. Bell's approval of Nat and Ruth's abilities as partners.

Meanwhile, Father Arthur announces to Ruth that she will be marrying Zeke soon. The way he announces the proposal gets Ruth thinking of how she can marry anyone who is 18 or older and get both her and Nat out of the house. She asks Mr. Bell to marry her, a proposal he considers until he realizes that he would need a valid birth certificate. Ruth enters her room to find Ceph, another orphan, in her room and staring at some of her money. He wants the cash because he will turn 18 soon, and this fact prompts Ruth to ask him for his hand in marriage. He agrees to consider it, but demands that Ruth pay him money and have sex with him. She quickly agrees and opens her legs for Ceph, who is shocked to discover that she is still a virgin. He quickly leaves her room, passes Nat, and states that Ruth is his.

In Chapter 3, readers are back in a small town with Ruth and Cora. In their attempt to hide from the man with a cane they run to the house of a fat lady they witnessed being bullied the previous day. She immediately recognizes *The Book of Ether* in Cora's hand and begins to tell them about the history of the book. The man who wrote the book, and who started the religion, is named Mardellion. He grew up as a Mormon fundamentalist in Utah but was kicked out the church at age 13 for being too attractive. He struggled



with his life for a while until he decided to start his own religious following. He pieced together The Book of Ether as the religious text for his cult and hunted for followers, with one follower being the fat lady telling the story. She finishes her story and is relieved when Ruth believes her. All along, it was Ruth who desperately encouraged the fat woman to tell the tale of Mardellion.

## Analysis

Part I ended with Cora taking an impromptu and mysterious journey with Ruth. The women spent the whole of Part II wandering as well. All of Cora's narrative is told from her limited point of view, so readers remain unaware of where this trip is headed. Cora begins to transform on this journey. Ruth breaking her phone helps Cora to eliminate herself from the shallow social media platforms she has become dependent on, and Cora begins to see the world in an entirely new light. She is more confident and less self-conscious. She no longer cares when people stare at them as they walking along the highway. She even seems to care slightly less about the length of their walk as well as the destination because it is as if she is enjoying her transformation. Cora relishes in the fact that she is now more observant. She is celebrating her pregnancy and learning how to feel her experiences instead of remaining numb to them. It seems as though Cora is having her own coming-of-age story, her own miniature bildungsroman in the middle of the tale. However, the meaning behind their travels changes drastically when Cora realizes that this trip is about trying to get away from someone not a journey designed to get them somewhere. It begins to make more sense as to why Ruth did not hesitate when her car broke down. She immediately exited the vehicle and began walking. Cora even notes that, "This whole time we've been walking, I thought we were heading somewhere, but just now, seeing [Ruth's] scared face, I know that we're also running away" (105).

This revelation is, of course, brought on by the sight of the strange man with a cane who the women see in the small town they stop in. This man is obviously looking for them but readers do not know why. What readers do learn more about is the religion that seems to be centered in this story. Several characters are religious or have mentioned something related to religion, including Zeke who tells Ruth that he wants to marry her because, "The cosmos are aligning for the righteous" (126). In Part I, we learned that Father Arthur considers himself to be part of the Christian faith but he does not specify which branch. Now Cora finds The Book of Ether in Ruth's bag during the same length of the journey when both the man with the cane and the fat woman who knows about Etherists appear. Readers must assume there is a connection with all of these things. Now readers are left to wonder if Ruth was looking for the fat woman this entire time.

Ruth knows something readers do not. Or, if she does not know something, she knows what questions to ask in order to learn. Ruth seems to be in the middle of many people's religious endeavors. This fat lady with information related to the book Ruth is carrying is not a mistake. Also, Zeke's strange arrival and almost instantaneous marriage proposal seems to be connected to religion as well. The only indication readers have that Father Arthur is not in the same religion as Zeke is because Zeke is



not one of Father Arthur's "brothers", who the Father frequently organizes marriages for. Zeke seems to want Ruth because of the scar on her face. There is something about her that seems to connect to something related to his faith. We see another strange infatuation with Ruth's scar in Mr. Bell's notebook. Nat notices that the illustrations in Mr. Bell's notebook perfectly match Ruth's scars. And it was Mr. Bell who randomly appeared on the doorstep of Church of Christ! Perhaps it was no accident at all. His interest in Ruth's scars may very well have been a large motivation for his return to the basement of the orphanage where he runs into Nat and Ruth. There is a conspiracy starting to build here, and readers are left to ponder Mr. Bell's connection with The Book of Ether, the fat lady, and Mardellion.

To begin, the first hint of a connection readers receive is the fact that Mr. Bell cannot marry Ruth because he does not have a birth certificate. While this fact seems odd and unimportant, the fat lady interrupts her tale to speak about her lost son. This son was born in the church and, as a result, was not given a record, or in this case, was not given a birth certificate. The final connection to the church is the idea of the cosmos being part of the Etherists religion. Mardellion is very concerned with the placement of heaven and hell; he is worried on the placement of the cosmos within the atmosphere. Hunt's descriptions of Ruth's scars seem to be sprawling like the cosmos. Is it possible that Mr. Bell arrives at Church of Christ! because he is looking for Ruth? Perhaps Zeke is from the same cult following, which is why he wants to be with Ruth. In a book such as this, readers must look for the finest of details that might provide clues to the mystery the end of the story is leading to. Right now, it appears as though Mr. Bell is not only conning his clients at séances but is also conning Nat and Ruth.

Ruth is being sought after in the narrative where she is still living in the orphanage with Nat. Zeke's visit in the hospital is anything but random, so it appears as though he went out in search for Ruth. However, it is curious why Zeke waited to find Ruth at the hospital and not at the orphanage. Readers are left to wonder how he knew where to find her. Ruth does not take the idea of marriage seriously. This may be because she does not like the proposal she was offered, but it might also have something to do with her expectations about the future of her relationship with Nat. Nat is jealous that Ruth asks Mr. Bell to marry her, but then he admits that he does not feel sexually attracted to her. He hints at a prior trauma related to his mother, stating, "Nothing's grown back since my mom. I don't feel anything. I love you, but I don't feel anything" (130). While Nat admits that he is not sexually interested in Ruth, it becomes painfully obvious that it is what Ruth wants.

With Nat admitting that he does not want to have a romantic relationship with her, it appears as though Ruth does not feel that it is worth looking elsewhere for romance. Father Arthur makes a big mistake in how he presents Zeke's marriage proposal. He explains the freedom there is in it for her, so she thinks marrying someone will solve all of her problems. She is positive that it will be worth it to have her own home and not to belong to the state anymore. She believes Nat can easily come with her. It is as if she thinks she will only need to be married until she is 18, stating, "I can get divorced in ten months . . ." (126). Readers already know that she somehow succeeds. In Part I, we learn that she was emancipated, which is why she is able to visit Eleanor and Cora



when she is still only seventeen. There are a few different contenders at this point, so the only thing to do is wait to learn who Ruth uses to get married. Not only does she have a marriage proposal from Zeke, who claims that his proposal is solely based off the idea that, “We need you” (126), but she also has Mr. Bell to think about, and now she is working with Ceph to get out. However, it appears as though Ceph will not be generous in his dealings with Ruth. He has already taken her money and virginity but feels the need to show even more cruelty when he marks Ruth as his after he has sex with her. The indication here is that Ruth has made an unwise choice choosing Ceph for her marriage and eventual exit from Church of Christ!

The real mystery here is why Ruth suddenly becomes so desperate to get out of the church. She has been there for many years and now, at the age of seventeen, has less than a year to wait. Why is she so concerned about getting out early? It is possible that her business with Mr. Bell has woken her up to the possibilities of what her life would be like if she were done with Father Arthur. She seems to enjoy making money and she thinks it would be enjoyable to have a private apartment with Nat. For the first time, though, we see a slight problem begin to bubble up between Nat and Ruth. Ruth is convinced that Nat’s ability to speak to the dead is real. She believes he has a legitimate talent. But readers begin to receive several hints that Nat cannot, or at least that his talent is not consistent. This first indication comes when Nat misspeaks about Raffaele’s dead mother. Secondly, Mr. Bell claims to recognize Nat as a con man from the very beginning. But Ruth refuses to believe it. However, readers can remember how differently Nat and Ruth react to Mr. Bell’s proposal to teach them how to con better. Nat seems quite interested. He seems thankful and relieved to learn of an offer that will help his acting. If Nat were using a true and honest talent he would have no need for lessons in conning. Also, if Nat were being honest about his talent then he would want nothing to do with a con man like Mr. Bell. Ruth openly states that she feels Nat lying to the people at the séance feels like stealing, and when she reminds Nat that she is making her bit up and asks Nat if he is also making it up or if he can genuinely speak with the dead, he replies, “I talk to dead people. Yes, yes, yes, I do” (123). It is as if Nat is conning Ruth. Previously, there was no monetary motivation for Nat to lie to Ruth about his talent, which leads readers to believe one of two things: Either Nat lied about his talent and now he does not want to hurt Ruth by admitting the truth or Nat has the true ability to speak to dead people. The scene in which Nat connects with Ruth’s mother seems quite realistic and terrifying, yet Mr. Bell considers it to be a classic con. Thus begins the book-long doubt as to whether Nat is genuine about his gift or not.

Part III mentions Mr. Splitfoot, the title of the book, twice. It is difficult to grasp who or what exactly Mr. Splitfoot is because the name is referenced differently each time. At first, it sounds as though the term “Mr. Splitfoot” is code for talking to the dead. Ruth mentions that they do not call their act “Mr. Splitfoot in front of strangers who might imagine the devil” (114). This indicates that Mr. Splitfoot is referring to an action. However, at other times, it sounds as though Mr. Splitfoot is a being that Nat communicates with while talking to the dead. The narrator comments that, “For her, Mr. Splitfoot is a two that is sometimes a one, mother and their children, Nat and Ruth, life and death” (114). Again, there is a reference to the theme of dualism in the novel, but there is also a description for Mr. Splitfoot as a being. Similarly, Nat speaks as though



he is possessed by something called Mr. Splitfoot when he is connecting with Ruth's mother. His voice is described as being husky, which is a trait not given to Nat's voice. One thing is for certain, the name will reappear late on because it is the very title of the novel.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why is Ruth rushing to find someone to marry her at age 17 if she has less than a year left to wait until she is released from the orphanage?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is it that Ruth and Nat want from one another? Do they desire the same things from their relationship?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Do you think the fat lady's house is where Ruth was leading Cora all along? What indication do we have that this is where Ruth wanted to be?

## **Vocabulary**

bombard, effulgence, cleave, alderman, egalitarianism, unencumbered, cogitate, beneficent



## Part 4

### Summary

Mr. Bell agrees to marry Ruth, leaving her feeling thankful for the marriage and regretful or her efforts with Ceph. On their wedding day, Mr. Bell, whose first name turns out to be Carl, sketches the same suspicious shapes Nat found in his notebook earlier on a place mat at the table. Mr. Bell admits that they are all meteor landings in the state of New York. Nat and Ruth quickly rent an apartment together in Troy. Father Arthur sells Nat to Ruth for \$500 and returns Zeke's check after he learns about the marriage. Nat and Ruth enjoy their new life. They walk around the city and they can buy whatever junk food they find. Ceph appears in town. He is eighteen now and has freedom, but he does not seem to want it. He continues to visit Ruth, who feels somehow responsible for him. Ceph is deeply hurt and angry that Ruth married someone else. He continues to remind her that she promised to be his, and he is very curious to learn who she married. Ruth decides that it is time for her to get out and find her sister, El, after a rough night at work. A woman begged her to speak to the baby she miscarried years ago. This story is too much for Ruth to handle, and she admits that their act is a fake show.

By the time Ruth and Nat return from the trip to El's described earlier in the novel, Nat has set up a meeting with people who he does not know. Mr. Bell waits outside while Nat and Ruth enter to find Zeke and his religious followers in the house. His nose is now missing and he is snorting bathroom cleaner into his open cavity. Zeke knows about Mr. Bell, and he has called the three of them there tonight so he can find money, assuming the Mr. Bell is the person who stole the cash he wants back. While there, Zeke seems hurt that Ruth did not marry him, claiming that his congregation now has no mother to guide them where they are going. The group does so many drugs that they lose touch with reality, making it possible for Nat and Ruth to slowly sneak out of the back door.

The final chapter in Part IV takes readers back on the road with Cora and Ruth. Ruth always seems to be awake and ready and Cora feels as if she is always dragging behind. One morning, Cora wakes before Ruth and decides to listen to the music she has been playing on her Walkman the entire trip. There is no music playing. Instead, it is the metallic sound of a machine at work. Ruth snaps the Walkman away from Cora and is very upset for the invasion of privacy. The two women wind up spending the night in a monastery where something called the Great Silence requires them to utter no sounds. This drives Cora crazy, and she is left alone to overthink everything going on in her brain. She cannot stand the silence and fills it with her worries. She does, however, come to the conclusion that she should return to her mother, El, and allow her to enjoy being a grandmother. Cora is woken in the middle of the night by a nun named Sister Margaret. The nun claims that the Lord told her they would come and that she should leave the convent with them in order to find the daughter she abandoned. The nun walks and talks to Cora the entire time, lamenting about how challenging and troublesome motherhood is. She leaves the women shortly after joining them and gets on a bus to find her daughter.





## Analysis

Mr. Bell has remained a pretty mysterious character throughout this story. Like Ruth and Nat, readers know that there is something special, unique, or just plain “off” about him. However, it is difficult to pinpoint him as a character because he shows a dynamic range of actions that both instill trust and bring about suspicion. To begin, Mr. Bell is a tender, gentle, and loving figure to Ruth. He agrees to marry her and the way he proposes the marriage is kind and sweet. This is an almost innocent moment where two young people are unsure of what to do or how to behave. On their wedding day Mr. Bell is again seen as meek and unsure yet careful of Ruth’s feelings. He does not kiss her aggressively, nor does he try anything close to having sex with her. Carl Bell has always assumed that Ruth and Nat are lovers. He frequently refers to them as lovers or lovebirds, which is probably why he is trying to be so careful not to come across as being attracted to Ruth. However, Mr. Bell’s effort to remain platonic does not change the strange attraction Ruth feels for Mr. Bell. Even Ruth cannot describe her feelings toward him, but she knows she wants to be around him. Despite her confused feelings, she still wishes to remain loyal to Nat, who has already boldly explained that he does not feel any sexual attraction to her. Perhaps this is the beginning of Ruth giving up on Nat as a lifelong partner.

Ruth is not torn between Mr. Bell and Nat. For now, she is safely attached to Nat and enjoys living with him. On their first night of living in the city of Troy, free from Church of Christ! and free from Father Arthur’s wrath, they sleep in a way the narrator describes as, “a truth of twisted love. Fangs, claws, a matted tale” (149). The two are now living together, and, despite their freedom to do as they please, nothing has changed between them. They still sleep together and enjoy a deep closeness and understanding. However, Ruth’s needs are not entirely met because Nat is sexually blocked for some unknown reason.

The trio of Mr. Bell, Nat, and Ruth is growing stranger by the scene. Nat has always been suspicious of Mr. Bell. He has never trusted him and continues to make comments proving his feelings. Thus far, Mr. Bell has proven himself to be a loyal and trustworthy partner. Readers have no evidence that he has done anything to cheat or to harm Nat or Ruth. Instead, he helps them make money, he marries Ruth out of Church of Christ!, and he helps get Nat out as well. He supports their relationship and he provides work for them. He even cares for Ruth in his actions while getting married. Furthermore, Mr. Bell makes another comment of respect directed at Ruth when he says to Ruth, “I respect your intelligence too much to construct a narrative that might convince you of a reality far from the truth” (145). The longer Mr. Bell spends time with the other two, he begins to open up more and more. When they ask Mr. Bell why he is sketching the meteor sites in New York, he answers by telling them that he wants to find out where his mother went (148). Stating later that, “They used to be of interest to her” (148). This seems to be a rather close connection to the fat lady in the small town where Ruth and Cora stop in their narrative. Hunt tells us that the fat lady lost her son years ago. Readers also know that the son did not have a birth certificate because he was born on an Etherist compound. Mr. Bell does not have a birth certificate. Also, readers are aware





that the fat lady lives close to a fallen meteor site, which is the same types of areas that Mr. Bell is obsessed with mapping. There are too many connections to pass them off as coincidences—not in literature. Continuing with this information, readers know that Ruth travels with Cora while carrying *The Book of Ether* with her. Readers can infer that Mr. Bell is most likely an Etherist, which is why Ruth is carrying the religious text with her. This might also indicate that Ruth and Mr. Bell advance their relationship enough that she carries the religious book around with her. All of these tidbits of information are a strong indication that readers will have the pleasure of learning even more about this mysterious character later in the novel.

One character that seems to be the opposite of mysterious is Ceph. It is almost as if he is haunting Ruth. He only appears to Ruth, showing up at her apartment when she is alone. Ceph has become a lost, sad, and pathetic mess since he aged out of the system. He is so unsure of what to do with himself that he even willingly returns to Father Arthur's home to spend time with the only family Ceph knows. Ruth is unable to reject him. She cannot tell him to go away and, although she is scared of him, she allows him into her life. She tries to show him how to find independence and happiness, but Ceph seems unwilling to find those things without Ruth. Ceph tells Ruth that he has no one in the world to go to. She is it. He continues his creepy comments when he tells her, "I'm going to follow you wherever you go" (159). This seems like an incredibly strange feeling for Ceph. In the orphanage, Ceph is described as being unpopular and antisocial. Ruth only approaches him with her deal of sex and money for marriage because she assumes he is her only hope. Ceph has never shown any signs of being interested in Ruth before this yet now she is all he can think about. There is a huge difference in feelings here. On one hand Ruth feels that Ceph is a burden. She even wonders, "Why is he making her feel responsible for him?" (157). On the other hand, Ceph seems obsessed with her and unable to detach himself from Ruth and her new life in Troy.

This desperate feeling for Ruth could come from the fact that Ceph presumed Nat and Ruth were a sexual couple. The entire house at Church of Christ!, even Father Arthur, just assumed that a boy and a girl who are that close would be a couple having sex. When Ceph pulls out of Ruth the second time and sees the blood on the bed he understands that he just took Ruth's virginity. This sparks a keen interest in Ceph, which is what quickly prompts him to declare that Ruth is his. Perhaps he feels that, because he was Ruth's first sexual partner, that he is married to her. Ceph believes he has claim to Ruth's body. Ceph's obsession with Ruth may also stem from his complete and utter sadness at feeling so alone in the world. Like Eleanor, he was thrust into a real world that Father Arthur did not prepare him for. Ruth encourages him to find a job in order to find a home, but he comments that he wants his home to be with her. He further laments that she is the only person he has.

Readers can easily understand that Ceph stays true to his word about following Ruth. In Cora's narrative, a man with a cane and sunglasses is described as finding and then following Ruth. In the narrative where Ruth is talking to Ceph in Troy, he is described as wearing sunglasses and walking with a cane (152). This is a very clear indication that the man who is following Ruth is Ceph. However, unlike the past, the silent Ruth walking



with Cora is now seen actively trying to run from Ceph. This teaches readers that something bad has happened between them that has caused Ruth to fear him as much as she does.

Ruth is wanted by quite a few people in this novel. Of course Ceph seems to want Ruth because he feels that he has claimed her as his. However, Zeke, Nat, and Mr. Bell all want her as well. Nat has wanted Ruth from the beginning, but his desire for her seems to be deeper than anything sex can touch. They depend on one another in a beautiful coexistence. Mr. Bell wants Ruth to be a moneymaker for his cons, but he also seems to enjoy spending time with her. Of course, readers should not forget about the strange connection between Mr. Bell's sketches of meteor landing sites and the design of Ruth's facial scars. This is an odd enough coincidence that readers must wait to see what Hunt does with this revealing yet minute detail. Zeke is quite a special character longing for Ruth. He makes no effort to avoid the topic of why he wants Ruth so badly. He very much needs her for a religious purpose. There is some connection between Zeke's religion and Father Arthur's because, if there were not, then Father Arthur would not approve of the marriage. Zeke feels very strongly that they were made for one another, telling Ruth, ". . . you were meant for me. That you and I, together, were supposed to alter life as we know it on Earth" (182). He refers to Ruth as a mother figure, yet another reference to this novel's theme of motherhood, and he seems very interested in punishing the trio for the lies they are spreading. However, Zeke's knowledge of Carl Bell seems related to the missing money, and the fact that Mr. Bell is a known conman who is also known by Zeke does not bode well for the séance team.

Hunt does not try hiding the fact that there is a special mystery surrounding the elusive Ruth. Cora has been stunned by her beauty and actions since she first met her aunt. She is entranced by Ruth, as many of the men are in this story, and Ruth seems to be circling around strange religious energies. However, as readers advance through the story, there are more and more death-related descriptions about Ruth that make us wonder whether or not she is dead. In Cora's narrative, there are some characters who seem to be unable to see Ruth. They often speak to Cora as if she is alone. When the police pull the women over and question them about their presence on the side of the road, Cora comments that, ". . . he asks me, as if Ruth's become invisible" (169). There is no evidence that anyone else in this situation sees Ruth. This might also be said for the swimming scene from earlier in the book. Here, Ruth strips down to her underwear to go swimming and no one is bothered, but, when Cora strips down, everyone exits the water. Throughout the novel, Hunt graces the pages with very morose yet beautiful imagery. She describes Ruth swimming in the pool with Ceph at the age of seventeen as, "The water scalds and the purple dye leaks from her dress, brightly colored as any suicide" (165). This is such an elusive image for Ruth, who is enjoying a forced swim with Ceph. It is stated several times that Father Arthur never taught the children how to swim, yet this is the second time Ruth has gone into the water and death-related descriptions are used to help readers visualize the event.

It is also apparent that Ruth is becoming something of a guide for Cora. She sees her aunt as a spiritual leader who has saved her life by helping her find herself again. Cora is thankful for her personal changes related to this random journey on foot, saying to



Ruth, “Thanks for coming to get me. Whatever this turns out to be” (172). As Cora progresses away from her life at the insurance company, as she leaves Lord behind and she embraces her pregnancy, she starts to care a lot less about the destination of their road trip. This was Cora’s obsession at first, but she seems to be getting more comfortable with the idea of the unknown. She is learning how to meander and how to be quiet like her aunt. This is shaping into a major theme in the novel, this idea of learning where oneself fits into the world.

Readers should still be hard at work looking for evidence that supports or denies Nat’s ability to speak to the dead. Mr. Bell is convinced he is a fake while Ruth is convinced he is telling the truth. Nat, on the other hand, continues to refuse answering anything directly. Ruth is weighed down by her work with Mr. Bell. She knows she is pretending and she feels terrible taking advantage of people who are hurting. However, Nat does not provide her with the comfort she needs because all he replies with is, “You see, if you make-believe hard enough that something is true, then it’s true for you” (179). This continues to leave Ruth in a gray area where she is uncertain of her own morals. Her time with the grieving mother who wants her to speak to her miscarried baby touches upon the theme of motherhood in this novel. In Hunt’s tale, motherhood is a tumultuous, challenging, and violent thing. It is something that Cora seems to fear at first and a life stage that many outsiders on the road warn her about. The mother that speaks to Ruth is in a different violent stage of motherhood: she is wild with grief. This is too much for Ruth to handle. She cannot con a woman who she pities. This is a somewhat similar idea to Mr. Bell’s comment: “I respect your intelligence too much to construct a narrative that might convince you of a reality far from the truth” (145). In this short yet stressful scene, Ruth is torn between conning a person to make money or lying to a person who is in pain and struck with grief. She is overwhelmed by these emotions and ends up cracking, leaving Mr. Bell for a visit to Eleanor’s. Of course, readers are already aware that Ruth’s visit with El and young Cora ends up providing her the painful information that it was her own mother who gave her the scars on her face. Ruth is experiencing a lot of trauma related to mothering at this stage in her life, and he is expected to be a mother type figure for both Mr. Bell and for Nat.

## Discussion Question 1

What could Zeke have wanted from Ruth? What does he still seem to want from her?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Zeke know about Mr. Bell? Do you think it is possible that Mr. Bell knows about Zeke?

## Discussion Question 3

Review Cora’s chapter (Part 4, Chapter 4). What does the author’s style of writing indicate about Cora’s start of being at this point in the story?

## Vocabulary

furur, expunging, abhor, shod, wimple, nave, breviary, episiotomy



## Part 5

### Summary

Chapter 1 begins with Nat and Ruth launching themselves into Mr. Bell's car in their escape from Zeke and his followers. Ceph appears from the forest surrounding Zeke's home, but they do not stop for him despite the fact that he is chasing the car to get inside. The three of them drive to a town outside of Bethlehem, close to a meteor-landing site. They stay in a motel for the night. The motel is small but clean and has a large neon hula dancer light out front. In the morning at the motel diner, Mr. Bell admits to Ruth that he is not a good person and that he has made many mistakes in his lifetime. Meanwhile, Nat is still in the room showering.

In Chapter 2, readers are back in Cora's mind on a walking journey with Ruth. The two stop for a break when they discover a horrific car crash, leaving one man dead and a young woman unharmed in the mangled car. They walk together to the nearest motel, the same roadside motel with a hula dancer light out front at Mr. Bell takes Nat and Ruth years earlier. Ruth enters the bathroom while Cora is taking a bath. She is afraid of something outside and forces Cora to stay in the bathtub long enough that she freezes from the cold water and falls asleep. She is alone in the room when she wakes up, and Cora is alone in the room when she wakes the next morning. A woman from the front desk knocks on her door to tell her that she has a phone call at reception. A man is on the other end of the line and the only thing he says is, "You're mine" (220). Cora is shaken up by this brief conversation. She stays in the motel lobby and has a strange conversation with the motel worker who explains that only dead people live at the hotel. She tells Cora that she stands up for the rights of the dead and acts as an advocate for the non-living. Cora is sure the worker is on drugs.

The next chapter brings readers back to the narrative with Nat, Ruth, and Mr. Bell. They are still on the run from Troy, and Mr. Bell offers to take them high up in the mountains to a place he knows. A huge snowstorm is starting to blow in so the trio is trying to travel to their shelter quickly. They stop in a small general store to stock up on supplies. The locals inside are rude and unfriendly to the group. Outside, there is a small gang of local teenagers hanging out in the parking lot. Mr. Bell drives off, but the gang of boys follows them and drives them off the road, pinning them between two of their trucks. They are prepared to start a fight with Nat and Mr. Bell in order to get to Ruth. Mr. Bell uses his words to distract the boys away from Nat and Ruth while insulting them. One of the boys recognizes that Mr. Bell is an Etherist because of his pants (234), which prompts the gang to leave them all alone. One of the boys even apologizes for the bother.

The three of them make it to their shelter in the storm. It is a huge mansion near a deep lake. They all sleep well and Mr. Bell makes them breakfast the next morning, which is when he announces that he was an Etherist. He then explains that the cult has a strong connection to meteors, and uses a very purposeful present tense verb to say that Mandellion "isn't" a nice man (242). He explains that he used to con people at rock and



mineral shows. Mandellion used Mr. Bell to con people into paying obscene amounts of money for a rock worth nothing because Mandellion believed that all rocks should be highly valued. When a con went sideways, Mandellion left Mr. Bell behind and Carl Bell was placed into foster care.

## Analysis

Hunt leads readers faster and faster to the ending of this novel. The action is moving faster than ever before and the minute details from previous chapters are starting to matter very much. To begin, there is a direct call back to Cora's ghost story from Part I. In Part V, Chapter 2, Cora and Ruth experience the exact same scary story that Cora told Lord in on their overnight camping trip. The only difference between the story and what Cora witnesses is that the man who picks up the girl dies in a crash before the girl can get to her mother, which appears to be why the girl is so concerned with returning to her mother after Cora gets her out of the car. The hotel receptionist is not surprised to hear about yet another deadly car crash at dead man's curve. It is impossible to ignore the connections between these two sections of the story. This also indicates to readers that Cora and Ruth have entered into an area busy with spirits. Hunt is beginning to draw the two narratives of this novel closer and closer together, with both leading up to something dramatic that will hopefully explain why Ruth no longer speaks and why she is no longer seen with Nat.

For the first time, the two narratives begin to overlap. Hunt's very obvious connection with the setting of the motel is not hard to identify. It should not surprise readers that each narrative winds up close to the Erie in a small town in New York located close to the meteor crash landing site. The novel has been swirling around religion, with Etherists being the primary target. Etherists believe very strongly in the stars and astronomy. Meteors are from the atmosphere and they occasionally fall to Earth. There have already been several indirect hints that Mr. Bell is an Etherist, which explains why Mr. Bell knows about this remote motel. While most readers quickly gather that both narratives are currently taking place in the same motel, only careful readers will notice that the narratives are even in the same room: Room #4. The fact that Hunt places them both in Room 4 is something noteworthy. In Chapter 1, Nat, Ruth, and Mr. Bell stay in room number 4. Likewise, Ruth and Cora receive the same spoon with the number 4 on it. Hunt goes so far as to reference curly pubic hairs in the bathtub, describing Ruth plucking them off when she showers with Mr. Bell in the other room. Similarly, Cora takes a shower and finds curly pubic hairs in the tub as well (217). While these are most likely not the same hairs, there is definitely a strong connection being made that Hunt wants readers to understand just how connected these two narratives are about to become. This may also indicate that something tragic happens in this very room. There may be a specific reason why Ruth returns to the exact same room.

This motel seems to be something more than just a place to sleep for the night. The young woman who works at the hotel makes the comment that "only dead people live here" (222). Cora then continues the conversation, which concludes with the idea that anyone coming back to the hotel at all is ridiculous. This may be a reference to the





original ghost story of the young girl who returns as a ghost repeatedly looking for rides to her mother's home in the rain. This may also be a reference to Ruth, who was here with Nat and Mr. Bell years ago and has now returned. While one can interpret the idea of the motel being for dead people as an expression, Hunt's story seems to be centering back to ghosts and the dead frequently, leaving a pretty obvious concept that the hotel is actually for people who have deceased. The motel worker does not seem to be making a joke or trying to sound clever when she teaches Cora about the state of the motel she is staying at. The woman at the roadside motel speaks of the dead in a very matter-of-fact kind of way. While her casual tone seems to make Cora think she is on drugs, this may be the start of readers being able to clarify some of the questions they have had about the characters. Throughout the novel there has been a mashing together of life and death. Cora admits that she is alive but not truly living until Ruth takes her on the long journey. There are a number of times when people do not seem to see Ruth next to Cora, particularly when the police stop them on the side of the road and they don't seem to comprehend that Ruth is standing beside Cora. There is another reference connected to Ruth in the conversation between Cora and the young motel employee. She speaks of the dead as "a bad pop song . . . that track you couldn't stop listening to over and over and over" (223). This may be a reference to Ruth's habit of listening to the same sounds on her Walkman over and over again while traveling with Cora.

Something else to consider in this conversation are the two references to Mr. Bell. With the number of characters in this novel, readers must consider that some, or all, might be dead when readers encounter them. Mr. Bell is carrying an empty case when Nat and Ruth meet him. In the conversation at the motel, the young girl comments that, "The dead tend to carry around some sort of empty box" (223). Furthermore, the employee mentions that some ghosts stick around in order to find a loved one or if they did not receive enough love while living. Mr. Bell is quite obsessed with finding his mother. He has mapped out all possible locations but is unable to find her. He wants to find her and he seems consumed with her location. This could potentially be due to the fact that he is roaming the earth in the hopes that he will find her so that he can leave his ghost state. Yet another indication that Mr. Bell was either a ghost in the past or is a ghost in Cora's narrative is when the motel worker speaks to another guest, calls him Carl, and asks him to explain that only dead people live at the motel. When Nat and Ruth arrive at Mr. Bell's mansion, he continues to say that the property is "sort of" his (237). This mansion is empty. While it is not out of the ordinary for Mr. Bell to break into vacant homes, this one is described as being different from the rest. This is the first property that Mr. Bell owns, even if he only sort of owns it. Earlier in Cora's narrative of Chapter 1, the motel employee mentions that ghosts carry something empty with them. The worker specifically mentions that the empty item could be a mansion (224).

We know that the Etherist church is in the same area where Mr. Bell takes Nat and Ruth because the gang of young boys recognizes Mr. Bell's pants as being from the religion. Nat and Ruth are, of course, unaware of this religion, which is why they have never noticed anything about his connection to the Church of Ether before. He admits that he has had many fathers and that he was an Etherist (241). This is the first time Mr. Bell has seemed to be direct about his background. What is interesting is his use of the past





tense here. He announces that he “was” and Etherist but not that he “is” an Etherist. This may continue the theory that Mr. Bell is dead, but right now all it tells readers is that the no longer associates with the religion. Of course it also possible that he has chosen to leave the church. However, this continues the question from Part IV of whether the fat lady from the small town, the Etherist who lost her son when she left the cult, is Mr. Bell’s mother.

The character who previously threatened to haunt Ruth by following her wherever she goes makes a cameo in Part V. It is obvious that Ceph calls the motel just to remind Cora of his tagline that Ruth is his. What is strange, however, is that he directed his comment toward Cora. This may be yet another twist in the story coming up, or it may be that Ceph does not realize he is talking to Cora and not Ruth. This further reinforces the idea that the scary man with the cane from the small town where Cora met the overweight Etherist was Ceph, who has been following them the entire time. Ceph was even following Ruth in the earlier narrative when he suddenly appears from the forest outside of the home where the meet Zeke. There is no explanation for why Ceph is there other than the fact that he has stayed true to his word that he will follow Ruth everywhere.

## Discussion Question 1

What are the possible locations where Ruth could have run off? What reasons does she have for leaving Cora? Do you think she will return? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Is Mr. Bell’s reaction to the gang of boys on the mountain surprising or within his character? What indication from earlier in the book do we have to support each opinion?

## Discussion Question 3

Use evidence from the novel to explain how Nat feels about Mr. Bell.

## Vocabulary

transubstantially, semiotics, chiser, berms, machismo, sconces



## Part 6

### Summary

Chapter 1 brings readers on a small adventure with Cora and Sharesa, the motel worker who is obsessed with death. She takes Cora to a unique show on the Erie, a show that Sharesa calls art and Cora calls weird. When Sharesa drops Cora off, two strange things happen to Cora. First, Sharesa relays a message from Ruth that Cora should not leave “him there alone” (252). Second, Cora’s motel room is trashed and something in the room hits her on the head, causing her to black out.

In Chapter 2, readers are back in the snowed-in cabin with Nat, Ruth, and Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell gives more information about Etherism and takes Ruth and Nat to the old temple where he shows them The Book of Mardellion. Nat ventures off in the abandoned mining town. He wants to convert the abandoned worker cabins into homes for the children who age out of the system. Meanwhile, Ruth spends most of her time with Mr. Bell. The two dance and have long conversations about the golden record sent to space in order to communicate with any alien species that finds it. It is obvious that Mr. Bell wants to kiss Ruth that he wants to be romantic with her. The chapter finishes with Mr. Bell kissing Ruth while they listen to the mechanical sounds of golden record.

The final chapter of Part VI yanks readers back into Cora’s mind, which is seemingly delirious from the blow she took to her head. She hallucinates, or dreams, that Ruth is back and is talking with Cark Bell. The two are affectionate with one another and Mr. Bell claims that they will be together again. Cora awakes from something she thinks is a dream. Ruth wakes Cora while it is still dark outside. Her head is aching and she is exhausted. Ruth drags her into a seemingly never-ending forest, but Cora is too tired to continue moving. Ceph appears in the forest. He stands over a frightened Cora and demands to see Ruth. Cora can see that Ceph has a giant hole in his head, which looks like it was caused by a gunshot. The two find Ruth in the forest, who speaks out loud for the first time with Cora. The two continue to move through the forest, and Cora comments that she feels as if Ruth and she are running from death (278).

### Analysis

The third and final chapter of this part is an obvious speed up to the end of the novel. Several relationships seem to come to a crisis point within only this part. In particular, Cora has the most obvious crisis. She begins to deteriorate on her journey with Ruth. Cora has changed from a strong walker who is rediscovering herself on the road to a worn pregnant woman who cannot go any further on her journey. Of course this change most likely has to do with her advanced pregnancy as well as the harsh blow to her head she receives. When Cora wakes up from the attack in her hotel room, she is a completely different person. Her thoughts become fast and frantic, with Hunt sharing Cora’s thoughts using short and choppy sentences. She is confused and work down to



nothing. While walking in the woods with Ruth, Cora seems to come to an awakening. She begins to review her life and judge her past that, “My life so far has made me stupid, helpless, dependent” (275). Readers get to experience Cora giving up both mentally and physically. In the woods with Ruth, Cora curls into the ground and prepares to die. She does not seem upset about this fact, instead she sounds as if she accepts it as part of the cycle of life. It is when Ruth decides to come back for her when Cora feels as if she can make it out of this situation alive.

While there is no concrete evidence to support this, one possible theory for why Cora changes so quickly is that the blow to her head kills her. After being struck, Cora seems to enter into a vivid dream. She hears Ruth talking. She sees Ruth eating pistachios while sitting on Mr. Bell’s lap. There is a background conversation where Mr. Bell states that he did not mean to hit her, which tells us that it was him to struck Cora in the back of the head. The two seem intimately connected. Yet, despite this realistic and normal sight, it reads as though Cora wakes up from being blacked out. She wakes up with Ruth helping her feel better, and Ruth is back to her normal mute state. It seems easy to presume that Cora was dreaming until she steps on the shell of pistachio. This shows that there is an overlapping of realities between Cora’s “dream” and her current reality. However, for readers who are following the idea that Ruth is a ghost, then it is plausible that Cora is now a ghost as well. Further support for Cora entering the realm of the dead comes when Ceph appears in the woods with a hole through his face. When visualizing what this might look like, it seems as though the only explanation is that Ceph is a spirit, a ghost that is still haunting Ruth after all these years. Ceph repeats his same line, “I told you I’d follow you wherever you went” (276) but does so when speaking to Cora. It is strange that he would say this to her since, in theory, Ceph has never met Cora and he has nothing to do with her. However, after he states this to Cora, he then demands to see Ruth. What this turns out to mean will, unfortunately, have to wait until Part VII of the novel.

Sheresa connects Cora with the idea of being dead when she states that Cora has two deaths inside of her right now and that this may be why she is at the motel at this point in her life (252). Theoretically, if Cora dies then her baby dies also, leaving her with two deaths inside of her. However, since Cora has never been to a doctor during her pregnancy, it is also possible that she is carrying twins. In this case, she definitely has two lives, or two deaths, inside of her. Is Cora nearing her death or has Cora already died? Regardless of which theory a reader personally believes, it is obvious that Hunt is twisting the story so that it is tightly knotted around the transient ideas of life and death, with a reference to a quote in Part IV stating, “Life and death are not clean, separate functions” (200). As readers near closer to the ending of this novel, Hunt continues to play on the idea of dualism, only this time she is showing just how intertwined two things can be. Life and death, two things paired together yet considered very different, are depicted as one large gray area in this novel. Hunt makes many references to the idea of life and death coexisting with one another. The idea of Cora’s possible death, Ruth’s possible death, and Ceph’s appearance of haunting Ruth all prove Hunt’s point that life and death are partners without borders, without limitations.



Sheresa is obsessed with the dead. In terms of character placement, she is the sagely figure that teaches the unwise Cora about all the things she does not understand about her situation. She works at a motel she claims is only for dead people and she is quick to speak about her advocacy for the deceased. But beside her personal obsession with the dead, Sheresa is also infatuated with both art and reality. She mentions the idea of walking artists making shapes and memories, but she mentions two very important connections to the two narratives of this story:

When talking about walking artists creating things, she mentions that those steps create a map, which can then map anything out a person wants. One of the options for a map that Sheresa mentions is fallen meteors (251). This of course is a close connection to Mr. Bell's map of meteor crash sites. Another connection Sheresa makes in her comments is about the busy footsteps of too many artists trampling over one another when she says, ". . . if everybody in the world were a walking artist, the land would be so jammed with traces of everyone who ever came before. Haunted, polluted" (251). One can make the argument that the pollution of the walking artists is what is causing this overlap of narratives from different time eras. Readers know that Cora's narrative is overlapping Ruth's narrative. In Part V, Ruth and Cora arrive at the same motel in the same small town and take baths in the same bathtub.

These narratives will come together soon enough, and Ruth cements the idea that Cora will be connecting with Nat soon when she delivers her message to Cora. "Don't leave him there alone" (252), she warns. Later, of course, clarifying that she means not to leave Nat alone. What makes this request even more intriguing is that Ruth adds not to leave Nat alone, "At the end" (252). Readers understand that this will be at the end of the novel, but readers also know that it not what Ruth means. There must be an end to something, which is coming up in Part VII, which is also where readers hope to get many questions answered.

While the state of Cora's pregnancy, and the health of her baby, remains a mystery; it is no secret how much Cora wants this child. She has grown to love the baby growing inside of her, often having entire conversations with her belly. She wants to embrace motherhood despite all of the warnings people on the road have given her. The idea of Cora's deep love for her baby is one of the only consistently positive and hopeful elements of Hunt's novel. But with Gothic literature, readers are wise to read with a tinge of cynicism. The death-obsessed Sheresa mentions that, "Trees poison the ground so that nothing else can grow near them. Not even their own children" (248). This is quite a dark comment to make to a woman who is about to go into labor any day. This metaphor works into the novel's theme of motherhood as a battle. Cora's grandmother threw bleach on Ruth's face, scarring her forever. Cora is from this same bloodline. She has doubted her ability to care for her baby with love and patience. Now that she has happily accepted the upcoming journey into motherhood, she receives this foreboding message from her new friend. We see another character whose own mother appears to be poisonous enough that they are removed: Mr. Bell.

Part VI might be considered the most revealing section of the book for Mr. Bell's character. Readers are finally afforded some direct answers about his background and



who his connections are to this novel—mainly that his father is the founder of Etherism itself, Mardellion. He is direct about his connections to Etherism, even explaining that his mother, “. . . was his actual wife, his legal wife” (262). Finally, readers can rest knowing that the fat lady in the small town where Ruth and Cora learn about *The Book of Ether* really was Mr. Bell’s mother. This information also lays to rest the reasons why Mr. Bell is obsessed with meteor landing sites, although Hunt still needs to provide an explanation for why Ruth’s scars are a map of the landing sites in New York. He is open and honest with Nat and Ruth. Mr. Bell allows them into his world. He answers their questions directly and is no longer worried about conning them related to ridiculous things such as how Mr. Bell finds empty houses for séances. He is confident in this section. This is his old territory, and he refuses to let any of the locals take that away from him. Mr. Bell’s strong ability to handle the gang of teenage boys is quite a stunning scene. He has always been a composed and well-spoken gentleman, but Mr. Bell is seen as being cleverly vindictive here. One might argue that he is even quite chivalrous in how he steers the gang away from Nat by drawing attention onto himself. Mr. Bell is in control of the journey. He is controlling the drive and the trio’s eventual safe arrival. He has become the captain of the trio, albeit to Nat’s dismay.

But readers also witness a shift in Mr. Bell’s relationship with Ruth. He is bolder and more open with his desire for Ruth. Ruth has shifted away from Nat, who is now placed at a distance from the narrative. Nat is physically out of the scene, exploring an unknown world all alone, while Ruth finds comfort and excitement and attention from Mr. Bell back at the mansion. Even in this scene Mr. Bell is an extreme gentleman. He woos Ruth with music and dancing. He entices her with conversation and gentle touches to her midsection. Mr. Bell is in no hurry to savor his time with Ruth, and Ruth seems to enjoy this attention quite a bit. This is a huge change for Ruth, who, at the beginning of the novel, was consumed by the idea of being with Nat. Previously, while staying in the motel room in Part V, Ruth shows the first sign that she is separating from Nat when she crawls into bed with Mr. Bell. While she removes herself from the bed, she does so because she is worried about hurting Nat, not because she dislikes pushing up against Mr. Bell’s bare chest. For even the most cynical of readers, the interaction between Mr. Bell and Ruth is quite romantic. It is a slow boil of interest that leads up to something as simple as a kiss. But for Ruth, this is so much more than a kiss. For Ruth, this is the first time she has ever been kissed, and she receives this affection in a perfect moment from a man who she has grown deep affection for. Mr. Bell has enamored Ruth since she first set eyes on him while he was trying to sell something to Father Arthur. Nat has always felt her interest, and has shown signs of being jealous all the way back to Part I. Even Ruth cannot explain what she is feeling because no one has prepared her for falling in love. The fact that Ruth is willing to forget about Nat and feel love for another man is something she has never even considered before, but now she is experiencing her first bout of romance and it excites her.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to dwell on this beautiful and tender kiss for too long because Hunt strategically places hints that Ruth becomes heartbroken. There are a few objects and conversation topics that connect to Ruth years later in the narrative with Cora. To begin, while sitting with Mr. Bell, young Ruth asks about the story behind the record “Wall of Death”. Mr. Bell explains that the woman lost her voice because of a



broken heart, and he dismisses this change by saying, “It happens” (263). Ruth does not speak in the narrative that takes place after this conversation, further indicating that Ruth suffers from a broken heart. However, why her heart becomes broken is not a clear story as of now. In her travels with Cora, Ruth never stops listening to a tape on a Walkman she has. With Mr. Bell, young Ruth finds a Walkman and some blank tapes in the mansion. This is probably the same device she is listening to on her trip with Cora. The one morning Cora wakes up before Ruth and listens to Ruth’s Walkman, she describes the audio as if it were a machine. This could very well be a recording from Ruth’s night with Mr. Bell, where she finds blank tapes and wants to record music. Another possibility for Ruth’s recording is that she is listening to Ann Druyan’s brainwaves. Ruth is drawn to this sound and, if Ruth is truly heartbroken, it makes sense that she is fixated with listening to the brainwaves of a woman thinking about the person she loves. Throughout her journey with Cora, Ruth has been silent and sullen. A deep heartbreak might explain why she is this way.

There are two logical assumptions about over whom Ruth might be heartbroken. At first, Ruth may be sad about the loss of Mr. Bell, who seems to be a person she has grown to love deeply. But this seems unlikely since Cora witnesses Ruth talking to Mr. Bell. One thing to remember with the idea of whether Mr. Bell and Ruth are separated or together is that, in the same conversation Cora hears, they promise each other that they will be together again soon. On the other hand, the other logical option for Ruth’s heartbreak is Nat, who was missing from Cora’s narrative until recently. Nat is not in the narrative where Ruth is mute, which hints at a forced division between Nat and Ruth.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Sheresa mean when she says that Cora has two deaths in her?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the possible connections between Mr. Bell’s life and Ruth and Cora’s journey?

## Discussion Question 3

What happened to Cora when she was hit in her motel room? Why does she see a fish? Why is Ruth talking to Carl Bell?

## Vocabulary

vertiginous, culled, frigates, shoddiness, artifice, anorthosite, jarts





## Part 7

### Summary

Ruth wakes in the morning to find that Mr. Bell is outside jumping on a diving board that is placed over an empty pool. Ruth sees a lump in the empty pool and retrieves a box labeled, "SCOTTIES" (281) holding half a million dollars in it. Ruth quickly understands that Mr. Bell placed it there. Upon seeing the cash, Nat finally admits that he was faking his ability to talk to the dead, and Mr. Bell explains more about Merdellion's plans. He is going to build his own exploding comet to make the cult of Etherists come to the same end he claimed in *The Book of Etherism*: exploding into outer space by a meteor. Merdellion has been shaving traces of an explosive from the mine on the property in order to make an explosive big enough for his use. Ruth understands that this is how "Zeke" lost his nose, finally confirming that Zeke is an Etherist. They also determine that they must leave the mansion with the cash as soon as they can because Merdellion plans on blowing up the mansion they are currently staying at. Nat seems tired and angry, stating that he does not believe in things he cannot see and that he does not believe in God.

In Chapter 2, readers are back on the road with Cora and Ruth, who are finishing their journey. Ruth takes Cora to the same mansion Mr. Bell took them years ago. They pass the children from Church of Christ! who are now adults and living in the nearby cabins on the lake. She hands Cora the box of money, takes her into the mansion, and disappears. Moments later, Nat appears in the room. Cora announces that Ruth brought her there, but Nat tells her that Ruth is dead.

The next chapter leaves readers in a passionate love nest between Mr. Bell and Ruth. They make love in the mansion while Nat is busy starting to dig their car out. The two of them read *The Book of Ether* together and talk about what happens after a person dies. This is interrupted when Zeke, who is really Merdellion, arrives at the mansion. He chases Mr. Bell and Ruth through the woods and reveals that Carl Bell is the reason why Zeke wanted to marry Ruth. Carl saw Ruth at Church of Christ!, noticed the similarities of her scar and meteor map, and suggested that Merdellion (Zeke) marry Ruth to get more followers. He did not think Merdellion would blow up the mansion if he could expand the Etherist cult. Upset, Ruth runs away from the men in search for Nat. Zeke tries shooting her with the gun he took from Ceph after he killed him earlier. When Ruth does not return, Zeke shoots Mr. Bell. She requests to tend to Mr. Bell's wound, but the two fall into the icy lake when they are crouched together. Ruth cannot swim and Mr. Bell has only one good arm after being shot. The two descend into the deep lake and the snowstorm continues, resealing the hole their bodies fell through. Zeke rushes off and crashes his truck in the rickety bridge as he tries to leave.

The action is interrupted by Chapter 3, where Cora is talking to a very confused Nat. Cora claims that Ruth is not dead, which angers Nat because he has always thought that Mr. Bell and she ran off with their money and left him alone in the mansion. Nat's





story makes Cora unsure whether Ruth is dead or alive. Cora asks to call her mother, but she starts going into labor before she can find a phone with enough reception to make the call. Nat takes her to the lake, where they see Ruth enter the water and disappear in a flash of light. Nat holds Cora's hands as she welcomes her baby into the world.

## Analysis

Readers were provided a modicum of closure at the end of this novel. While some questions are left unanswered, many of the things readers have been wondering about have been answered. The following paragraphs will break down the answers per character:

Ruth is, in fact, a ghost. Some readers have been following the conspiracy that Ruth is dead while other readers feel shocked about this revelation. When reflecting on the hints throughout the entire novel, readers can find portions of the book where Ruth is ignored in a way that indicates other people are unable to see her. Cora often references her travel companion, but the grammar used in those sections indicates that the people Cora is talking to do not see a second person standing next to her. One of the instances when Ruth is ignored is when she goes swimming in her underwear unnoticed (74). Ruth manages to shimmy down to her underwear next to conservative religious families, yet the families panic and exit the water when Cora does the same thing. This hints at the fact that the other swimmers only see Cora wading into the water. Readers are also aware that Father Arthur never teaches the children to swim, so the fact that Ruth ventures out into the water so naturally is suspicious. Furthermore, Ruth is also ignored by both the police officers who question Cora about her journey and sister Margaret who seems confused when Cora references her aunt Ruth on their walk (196). Both parties seem confused by Cora's mentioning of another human because they do not see her.

Besides Ruth being ignored by others, there are also signs that something is different about Ruth in the way that she behaves with Cora. Cora describes her aunt as never sleeping and never making a noise, often appearing the moment Cora thinks about her (78). She does not seem to feel tired and she never wavers in her inability to speak. There is only one morning when Cora wakes up before Ruth. She is tempted to stick her finger under Ruth's nose to check for breath, which should indicate to readers that even her own niece wonders if Ruth is dead. Early on in their journey, Cora tries to snap a photo of her aunt, but notices that, "the sunlight reflecting off the window turns her into a blur of light" (67). This is a reference to the religious idea of people spirits being filled with light. Ruth seems supernatural in this incident.

The final set of hints Hunt drops throughout the narrative is Ruth's recurring obsession with water and death. She dreams of drowning – she thinks of swimming into the deep end—and all of these descriptions close with a hint of morose outcomes. Perhaps the most beautiful description comes when Ruth is described climbing into a bathtub to rid herself of the immoral activities she engages in with Mr. Bell and Nat. Ruth is seen with,



“The water scald[ing] and the purple dye leak[ing] from her dress, brightly colored as any suicide” (165). This may have caused readers to believe that Ruth killed herself, but, regardless of how she died, this strongly shows Ruth’s death as being related to water. Continuing with death and water, Ruth fantasizes that Mr. Bell drowns her while swimming in a pool with Ceph (157), and again she dreams of drowning in the Hudson later in the novel (158). By the time that Nat tells Cora of Ruth’s death later in the novel (294), it is almost more of a confirmation than a shock, for readers who have been picking apart Hunt’s hints have already understood that Ruth died at some point. Cora even realizes that she knew this fact the entire time, commenting that the first day of their journey together feels as if it is from another solar system (289). They have been through so much together, and Cora feels like she has been floating in another dimension walking along roadsides with her aunt.

Ruth’s death, while tragic in and of itself, can be considered even more tragic for Nat. He has never been given closure in Ruth and Mr. Bell’s disappearance. He only assumes she is dead, but even Nat does not know if, how, or when Ruth died. He was abandoned in the mansion. He was left alone with no extra provisions while a snowstorm blundered in. Above everything else, he was left alone at the mansion knowing two things: there is a lot of money out there somewhere that he does not have access to and there is a crazy cult leader who wants to blow up the only shelter he has. This is a terrifying prospect for Nat, who struggles with how much confidence he has in Ruth as his sister. From his perspective, his life-long friend waits until he goes outside to shovel the snow in order to ditch him with her husband and lots of cash. What some readers might fail to see is how resilient and clever this proves Nat to be. He has always been depicted as dependent. He depends greatly on Ruth for comfort and friendship and support. Nat then depends on Mr. Bell for teaching him how to con people. Nat never leaves Ruth and Mr. Bell, always sticking together as a team that needs one another to thrive. But this comfort is yanked away from him. The two people he knows in the world leave him with no explanation, and yet Nat does not fold. He thrives. He conquers his dreams, and he does so by helping children like him who are in need of a supportive place. Nat follows through with what he tells Ruth he wants to do, and he never completely gives up on Ruth’s return. This sliver of hope is proven in the fact that Nat never enters the cabin Ruth requests as her own. He never enters the property and he never gives it away to anyone else. Somewhere deep down inside of him, Nat believes Ruth will return to her sister at the mansion in the Adirondacks.

Nat may have confidence in Ruth but he never developed trust in Mr. Bell. Perhaps this is because they are two conmen who know better than to trust someone who cons people for a living. Ruth’s relationship with Nat begins changing in Part VI, when Nat is no longer in as much of the action as before. It used to be that Ruth and he were inseparable. However, Parts VI and VII show Nat as being removed. Here in part VII, Nat is gone the entire time that Ruth discovers her love for Mr. Bell. She describes her connection to Mr. Bell much in the same way she used to describe her closeness with Nat in the beginning of the novel. Here, Ruth speaks of Mr. Bell saying, “He is hers. He breathes into her damply, through her, as if they could fall into one another” (318). She turns her attention toward Mr. Bell, which is something that has caused Nat to feel paranoid since they first met him and Nat noticed Ruth’s immediate interest in the



conman with the empty bag. Ruth used to want Nat as a sexual partner, but Nat was always quick to admit that he wanted nothing to do with her sexually. This was a letdown for Ruth, which is one of the reasons why she devalued her virginity enough to have sex with Ceph.

Part VI reveals the connection between Ruth and Mr. Bell in the afterlife. Cora is delirious from being hit on the head, but she is able to hear Ruth speaking with Carl from the hotel. They cuddle one another and show a closeness that hints at their long affection for one another being developed over time. Ruth even reminds Mr. Bell that they will be together again soon, which tells Cora that their journey is almost over. The two have made a long relationship from a slow boiling affection. Mr. Bell has always been respectful and careful with Ruth. He has assumed that Ruth and Nat are a couple, which is why he kept a distance from his wife until he fully understands that Ruth and Nat are extremely close, platonic friends.

But there may be a small piece of hope for affection between Nat and another person. Some of the more romantically inclined readers can make the argument for Cora and Nat being destined for one another. Something that has been a mystery throughout the novel, and is never answered fully, is why Ruth chooses to go on her journey with Cora when she does. Ruth has been dead for fourteen years. She once promised Nat that the first person who died would come back and tell the other about the afterlife, so it makes sense that Ruth would one day want to return to Nat. It also makes sense that Ruth would want to ensure that Nat finds the box of money because neither she nor Mr. Bell can use it now that they are dead. What becomes debatable is why Cora is chosen for the journey and why Cora is chosen when she is. One perspective is that Ruth believes Cora is the perfect match for Nat. Cora is lost in her life, she is struggling and she is lost. She hates her life yet she is too apathetic to notice her ambivalence. Ruth may very well have been able to notice Cora's need for a restart. Ruth may very well have waited until Cora would be open for a change, for her to need a change. Some readers may also argue that, beyond simply saving Cora, Ruth may have wanted to wait until Cora was old enough to be paired with Nat. The final lines of the book portray Nat holding Cora's hand in a tangled and twisted manner, much in the same way Ruth and Mr. Bell are described as holding hands as they drown together in lake. Although Hunt does not provide us with a conclusion related to Nat and Cora's potential relationship, there is a certain sort of intimacy and connection the two seem to share the moment they find one another in the mansion.

Cora's ending is the most uncertain of the group. The question of what will happen with Nat and her is something quite ambiguous. However, readers are not afforded with an actual answer regarding the outcome of her labor. Cora has been carrying her baby but has had no medical checks. The attempted abortion did not kill her child, but there is nothing to say that Lord's attempt to kill the child did not cause permanent damage. Beyond these things, Cora is in labor in a remote mansion surrounded that is, presumably, without medical professionals. This form of delivery can result in health problems for both the mother and baby being delivered. Readers are left to wonder what happens to Cora after the final page of novel because Hunt leaves her story



completely open for interpretation; she leaves readers alone in either their optimism or their cynical beliefs related to Cora's future.

Not all characters are left open for interpretation. Readers know that Ceph was killed, leaving an understanding that the man in sunglasses with a cane chasing Cora and Ruth has been Ceph's ghost all along. This further proves Ceph's threat that he will follow Ruth wherever she goes, even the afterlife apparently. Zeke/Mardellion does not appear to follow Ruth in the afterlife. He disappears from the earth in a car crash and never reappears again, leaving Nat safe and sound in the mansion that will not explode from a manufactured meteor. His death is not directly discussed, but it is referenced so closely that there is no doubt of Mardellion's fate after he watches Ruth and his son, Carl, drown in the frozen lake. Cora notices the aftermath of the accident when she approaches the bridge in the forest and notices that it appears, "as if a car making a speedy decent misjudged the curve and launched itself down into the rocks below (290). This bridge was treacherous for Mr. Bell, Nat, and Ruth as they arrived in the snowstorm, but it is obvious that the last person who left the mansion is the person who caused this destruction. Later on in Part VII, Nat comments that Zeke has never visited the mansion and that no one has tried to blow it up, which also proves that Zeke is dead and unable to make his dreams come to fruition.

Ruth's dreams are crushed right before her death, leaving her to die in the arms of a man she recently discovers that she loves but without the closeness with Nat she once had. Ruth has her final answer from Nat regarding his ability to talk to dead people. In Part VII, Nat reveals his dark and hopeless nature. He finally admits to Ruth that he has been faking his ability, stating, "There are dead people, but they don't talk to me" (283). Oddly enough, Ruth does not seem to overreact to this news since she has doubted it for many years now. What is tragic is that Nat believes his news is part of the reason why Ruth leaves him in the mansion alone. He believes he shocked her and damaged their relationship so much that it was enough for her to leave him all alone as a form of punishment. While Nat openly admits to being a phony, it is important to note that he sometimes gets information correct. Nat's prediction that there is a box of money at the bottom of a swimming pool is something he tells Zeke in Part VI. Early on in Part VII, Ruth discovers a box of money at the bottom of the swimming pool at the mansion. This is yet another open-ended debate Hunt leaves readers to discuss. Nat might not think he has any talent in fortune telling or communicating with the dead, but, if he truly has no connection, how does he manage to randomly guess the location of the box? Yet again, Hunt makes readers debate Nat's talent and question his authenticity.

Religion is not at the center of the final part of the novel, but Nat continues the theme of religion being a con when he laments the lack of help from any god while he suffered. He is more broken than any reader realized, and Nat reveals himself to be scared, lost, and angry about both the fate of other orphans and his own tragic back-story. He has never spoken about his anger related to being abandoned by his mother. Nat displays his anger through action by burning down his original foster home, but he has never shared his feelings with words. He questions heaven and he doubts there is any higher power out there. Ruth's return to the mansion helps show Nat what he has doubted the entire time. Nat finally understands where Ruth went all those years ago, and he



believes that she was true to her word. This is a huge feeling of closure for Nat, who has been left to wonder about Ruth's loyalty for so many years. Ruth is shown returning to her place with Mr. Bell, carrying her empty object. The empty box is in her arms as she descends back into the water. The box she died for. The box Mr. Bell took them to the mansion to collect. The money Ruth has never seemed to long for, and the cash none of them every managed to use while living. This is not an indication of greed. For Ruth, this empty box represents her promise to Nat. This is her unfinished business on earth. The box is something she must share with Nat in order to move forward. Nat does not seek the money. Ruth never wanted the money. Even Mr. Bell does not appear to yearn for the money but wants to keep it from Zeke. Mr. Bell wants to prevent Zeke from getting the cash because he knows that his father will use it for evil. Mr. Bell started the chaos with Zeke and Ruth in order to save the members of the cult, and he ended up sacrificing himself and his wife to protect those cult members. In the end, Mr. Bell achieved at least a part of his goal.

## Discussion Question 1

In the novel, every ghost carries an empty object with them. Why is Ruth's the empty box that holds the money. What does this reveal about her motivation as a ghost?

## Discussion Question 2

What do Ruth and Mr. Bell's deaths reveal about Zeke's character?

## Discussion Question 3

Now that readers have all of the evidence for and against Nat's abilities, use evidence from the novel to explain why Nat is a phony or why Nat has a true talent.

## Vocabulary

trysts, assuage, portico, circumnavigates, finite, sputum, cohorts, carapace, cendars



# Characters

## Ruth Sykes

Ruth is a great many thing in this novel. She has a large burn scar on her face. Ruth's sister, Eleanor (El), reports the abuse and the result is that El and Ruth are put into state custody. They are taken to Father Arthur's orphanage called the Church of Christ! where El and Ruth share a room for a few years. Ruth's sister is removed from the house, and subsequently removed from Ruth's life, leaving Ruth alone in the world at the young age of 5. Shortly after her sister leaves, a boy named Nat arrives. He is Ruth's roommate and best friend. Nat and Ruth often host seances with the kids in the orphanage, leading to a meeting with Mr. Carl Bell. Ruth hires Mr. Bell as their manager for hosting seances for the public. Ruth goes to the hospital because her appendix bursts and, while there, a man named Zeke visits her. Shortly after their visit, Zeke arrives at Church of Christ! and asks Arthur if he can marry Ruth. She refuses his proposal. In an effort to get out of the house, Ruth has sex with another orphan who is about to turn eighteen. Ruth considers marrying the boy named Ceph and is quick to lose her virginity to him if it means getting out. Ceph becomes obsessed with Ruth and never stops following her around. She does not marry Ceph, but convinces Mr. Bell to marry her instead, making it possible for her to leave Church of Christ! before aging out. Ruth is married, free from Father Arthur, and moves into an apartment in Troy with Nat while working with Mr. Bell's con business.

The work proves to be difficult for Ruth's morals, so she takes time off in order to find her missing sister, El. Ruth had always thought that they went into the system because their mother died, but El reveals that their mother was alive and abusive, which is why they were taken away from her. This is also the event when Ruth learns that, as a baby, her drunk mother threw bleach on her face and passed out before rinsing it off, leaving a sprawling scar across her face. She returns to Mr. Bell, only to get caught up in a threatening situation with Zeke, who is still bitter that Ruth did not marry him. Ruth runs away with Nat and Mr. Bell. They end up at mansion for the original Etherist cult. It is here that Ruth realizes she is in love with her husband, Mr. Bell. The two of them enjoy a night of romance, dancing, and conversation before making love. Mr. Bell shows her a big box filled with about half a million dollars and asks her to hid the box in a place where no one would ever look. She hides it in a small, abandoned cabin near the Etherist mansion. Zeke arrives at the mansion and causes Ruth to fall into the frozen lake with Mr. Bell. She dies there in the lake.

Ruth appears to Eleanor's daughter, Cora. She can no longer speak. She convinces Cora to go on a journey with her somewhere important. Cora joins Ruth on a very long walk up to the Adirondacks, where the women arrive back at the Etherist cabin. Ruth shows Cora the money and disappears. Cora quickly learns that her entire journey with Ruth has been with Ruth's ghost. The last time she is seen, Ruth walks into the same lake she died in and disappears into a flash of light.





## Nat

Nat remembers growing up with his mother, and he remembers the day his mother left him to live with a boyfriend who did not want children. Nat was so angry about his abandonment that he set fire to his first foster home and was sent to Church of Christ!, a foster home known for taking problematic orphans. Nat shares a room with Ruth and the two of them refer to one another as sisters. They sleep in the same bed and they do everything together. Nat tells everyone that he is able to talk to dead people. He communicates with many of the orphans' dead parents at Church of Christ! One night, Nat and Ruth are in the basement so Nat can speak to Ruth's mother. Mr. Bell is sleeping in the basement and immediately notices that Nat is a conman like himself. Mr. Bell offers to be his manager in fake seances, and Nat quickly agrees to the partnership despite his lack of trust for Mr. Bell. Nat learns a lot about conning people from Mr. Bell. He becomes a master at acting like he can speak to dead people. It is easy for Nat to admit to Mr. Bell that he is a fake, but Ruth cannot believe that Nat has been lying about his talent the whole time. He organizes his own seance without Mr. Bell's help, but it turns out that this meeting is a trap. Zeke wants to trap Nat and Ruth to scare them about money Mr. Bell has stolen. Nat goes on the run with Mr. Bell and Ruth. The three of them wind up staying in a motel in St. Eugene and then driving to a mansion in the Adirondacks where Mr. Bell tells them this was once the hotbed for Etherists. He explores the abandoned area and finds an old mining area complete with small, rundown cabins where the workers used to live. He decides that it's a good idea to fix up the cabins and welcome orphans who have aged out of the system. Nat learns that Mr. Bell drove them to this cabin because he wanted to get a half million dollars he stole from Mardellion. This makes Nat feel very paranoid. He goes outside to shovel their car out of the drive enough for them to leave before any trouble happens. This is when Zeke comes to the mansion and Ruth and Mr. Bell die. However, Nat is unaware of what happens because he is alone shoveling snow. When he returns to the house, he is alone, with no explanation for where Ruth, Mr. Bell, or the money went. He waits and waits for anyone to return, establishing the cabins for aged out orphans in the meantime. He assumes Ruth died until Cora shows up at the mansion fourteen years later. She is holding the box of money and tells him that it was Ruth who brought her here and showed her where to find the box. At the end of the novel, Nat is holding Cora's hand as she goes into labor by the lake.

## Cora

Cora is a young woman who goes through a huge transformation in the story. Her mother is Eleanor and her aunt is Ruth. At the beginning of the novel, Cora works at an insurance company at a job she dislikes. She is very concerned with her social media accounts and she admits that she is addicted to the internet. Cora is having sex with a man named Lord, who is married to another woman he is in love with. Cora gets pregnant, tells Lord, and he tries to give her an abortion without her knowledge. Ruth visits Cora early in her pregnancy. She nonverbally convinces Cora to go on a journey with her, and Cora quickly agrees because she feels as if she has nothing to live for.





Cora's journey with Ruth proves successful in teaching her how to appreciate life. She lives happily without her smartphone, she does not miss being online, and she learns how to be more connected with the living world around her. Cora's baby grows as she walks with Ruth week after week. She learns how to walk day after day, and, eventually, she learns how to embrace her upcoming duty of motherhood.

At the end of the novel, a newly toughened Cora makes it to the Etherist mansion in the Adirondacks. Ruth takes her into a small, run-down cottage and hands her a large box filled with money. Cora takes the box to the mansion only to discover that Ruth has disappeared right as Nat appears in the room. He tells Cora that Ruth has been dead for quite some time, and it is here where Cora realizes she has been traveling with Ruth's ghost. She goes into labor in the mansion, and she realizes how important it is to be with her mother at this moment. The novel ends with Cora in labor near the lake while holding Nat's hand.

## Mr. Carl Bell

Carl was born to a pair of Etherists, specifically the founder of Etherism, Mardellion. Carl's mother is banned from the church, leaving him alone with his father who cons people for a living. Carl then works with his father to con people out of money. They are caught in their con one time and Mardellion runs away, which resulted in Carl going into foster care until he aged out. Mardellion named him Carl, and, owing to his obsession with Carl Sagan, readers can assume that Mr. Bell was named after the scientist.

Carl Bell enters the story simply known as Mr. Bell. He has long hair, tattoos, and wears skull rings. He shows up on the doorstep of Church of Christ! one day, hoping to sell something to the lady of the house; but Father Arthur shuns Mr. Bell when he declares that he does not believe in God. That same night, Nat and Ruth discover Mr. Bell sleeping in their basement. He invites Nat and Ruth to meet him so that they can discuss a partnership conning people. Mr. Bell considers himself to be a masterful conman. He thinks Nat is lying when he claims that he can talk to dead people, and he asks to become their manager in all business dealings of talking to the dead. As their manager, Mr. Bell sets up seances and charges the customers money. He finds empty houses where people are either out of town or are selling their homes and organizes the seances. Ruth asks Mr. Bell to marry her and he agrees, which results in freeing both Ruth and Nat from Church of Christ! They live and work in Troy until Zeke finds them and threatens Mr. Bell about stealing money from him. Mr. Bell drives them to a small motel in St. Eugene located close to the a fallen meteor site. Afterwards, he drives Ruth and Nat to the Etherist mansion in the Adirondacks. He woos Ruth and teaches her much about the cult he grew up in. The two of them make love in the mansion just before Carl's father, Mardellion/Zeke shows up. He wants his money back from when Carl and he used to con people. However, Carl does not know where the box of money is because Ruth hid it somewhere on his behalf. Zeke shoots Carl in the arm, and Ruth tries tending to it over a frozen lake. The ice cannot take their weight, and they fall into the water. Ruth cannot swim and Mr. Bell has only one good arm. The two of them drown together as Zeke speeds away from the scene.



## Mardellion/Zeke

Mardellion grows up as a strict Mormon. He is an active participant in the church, but the leaders of the church begin to reject him as he grows up into a handsome and charming man who distracts the women of the church. Mardellion is rejected by the church and, scorned and alone, he starts his own cult where followers can worship him and make him feel special. He composes a scripture book by taking snippets from Carl Sagan and other books he respects. Mardellion is a con man who only desires growing his cult. He marries a woman and has a child named Carl with her. However, his ego allows him to progress in the cult by taking on many different wives. His wife challenges his actions and his response is to ban her from the church, leaving his son, Carl, without a mother. Mardellion worships meteors, he sees his religion based in them. He used this love in a lengthy con scheme with his son. On the day his son and he are caught, Mardellion runs away, leaving Carl alone, arrested, and eventually put into the system.

Mardellion is still pained at the few members in his cult. He decided the best option is to blow up his mansion in the Adirondacks where the cult worships. He slowly collects old explosives from the nearby mine. This is his way of making his scripture come true, that his cult will be blown off of this earth by a meteor. He changes his name to Zeke and moves close to Troy, New York. Mr. Bell approaches him with the idea to marry Ruth, who can act as the mother of the cult. However, when Ruth refuses his marriage proposal, he turns even crazier. He starts snorting the cleaner Comet and eventually loses his nose as a result. When he threatens Nat and Ruth about the money Mr. Bell stole from him years ago, he sends the trio on the run and Zeke follows them to the old Etherist mansion in the Adirondacks. He uses Ceph's gun to shoot Mr. Bell because Ruth refuses to tell him where the money is hidden, and he watches as his son, Carl, and Ruth fall into the frozen lake and never resurface. He speeds away from the mansion, but he does not take the approach to the rickety bridge slow enough and swerves off the cliff, presumably dying. He never finds his money and he never manages to blow up the Etherist compound he created.

## Eleanor (EI)

Eleanor is Ruth's older sister and Cora's mother. She witnessed her little sister, Ruth, get burned when her mother threw bleach on Ruth's face. EI reports this abuse, which results in the girls being sent to Church of Christ! with Father Arthur. Eleanor stays at the house and takes care of Ruth until she turns eighteen. Father Arthur drives Eleanor into Troy as soon as she ages out of the system. She is left alone in a city she does not know. She is homeless and unemployed. EI has sex with men in exchange for a place to sleep at night. She gets pregnant and has her daughter Cora. They two move in with EI's drunk and abusive mother. She raises Cora as best as she can, and is very concerned for her daughter's departure when Cora leaves with Ruth.



## Ceph

Ceph is an orphan who lives at Church of Christ! with Nat and Ruth. The other children view him as being antisocial and unlikable. He is not talkative and he is the closest thing to a bully at Father Arthur's house. Just before his 18th birthday, Ceph discovers Ruth's money from her work with Mr. Bell. She asks to marry him as a way of getting out of Father Arthur's house. Ceph agrees to marry her if she has sex with him, but, after discovering that he takes her virginity, he declares that Ruth is his and that he will follow her wherever she goes.

Ceph does follow Ruth through Troy. He is outside of the house when Zeke threatens Nat and Ruth and runs after the car. However, Mr. Bell does not stop the car, leaving Ceph to believe that Zeke is Ruth's husband. He returns to Zeke's home with his gun, but Zeke shoots Ceph in the face and kills him. Ceph's ghost continues to haunt Ruth, which then turns into haunting Cora while she is on her journey. Zeke takes Ceph's gun with him when he attacks Ruth and Mr. Bell at his mansion in the Adirondacks.

## Father Arthur

Father Arthur used to be a drunk musician but has found his calling as a money-seeking foster parent. He collects the saddest of orphans as a way to collect the most money from the state possible. He has established his foster home under the name of Church of Christ! and works hard to homeschool the neediest of orphans. Father Arthur punishes the children by either hitting them or taking away their eating privileges. The children know that he uses the money from the government to buy himself whiskey, which he drinks while alone in his room, and they frequently smell luxury food items on his breath despite their own starvation. He is a very religious man. He teaches the children all about how evil every other religion is that is not his. Besides money, Father Arthur's main concern is for what to do with the children once they age out of the system. He expels Eleanor from the house in the middle of the night and drops her off in Troy, helpless and alone. However, Father Arthur marries off many girls from Church of Christ! to local upstanding citizens who follow similar religious codes as he does. When Father Arthur is approached with a marriage proposal for Ruth, he agrees to marry her off if Zeke pays him a lot of money. Arthur is most angered when he learns Ruth has married someone for free, causing Father Arthur to return Zeke's check.

## The Fat Lady

Sadly, the fat lady is never given a name. She lives in a small town on the Erie Canal that is close to a meteor landing site. She is Mardellion's original, legal wife and a former member of the Etherist cult. She has a son named Carl, but he is taken away from her when she challenges Mardellion about his multiple wives. She is banished from the cult and never sees her son again.



## Sheresa

Sheresa is a young woman who loves talking about death, drives a Crown Victoria, and works at a small motel in the small town of St. Eugene. She meets Cora when Cora is a guest at the motel. Sheresa claims that the motel is only for dead people. She seems to know the ghost of Carl Bell, and she is one of the only people who hear Ruth's ghost speak.

Sheresa is part of the Society of Confusing Literature and the Real Lies, which is a group that puts on eccentric boat shows where literary characters pretend to fight to the finish. She invites Cora to one of these events on the Erie Canal but Cora is unimpressed. Sheresa speaks of art and reality, focusing on the rights of the dead, which is a subject she feels is grossly ignored. She passes along a message from Ruth to Cora, stating that Cora should not leave Nat alone in the end.

## Lord

Lord is a selfish man who is married to a woman named Janine yet dating Ruth's niece, Cora. Lord makes no attempt to pretend that he has any other interest in Cora other than for sex. He impregnates Cora. When she tells him that she is pregnant, Lord's immediate reaction is to threaten to take the baby away. He then comes over to Cora's house and cooks her dinner, acting nice to her and seemingly in approval of her keeping the baby. However, the second time he visits Cora, he gives her oral sex followed promptly by a forced abortion process involving injecting an object into Cora's vagina. This tactic does not work, and Cora's baby continues to grow. Cora leaves Lord behind when she leaves on her journey with Ruth, and readers never hear from Lord again. Cora occasionally thinks about him and how stupid she once was for allowing herself to be with him.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Birds

Birds symbolize freedom in this novel. The idea of a bird as an animal elicits the image of something that can fly anywhere it wants. Birds in a cage are limited and prevented from venturing out. Early on in the novel, Ruth watches Mr. Bell walk away from her, and she watches him depart as, "The shadow of a bird crosses his back. He doesn't even see it, doesn't know how lucky he is, free as that bird" (50). Mr. Bell is not tied down to the orphanage. Mr. Bell can go anywhere he pleases. This is very different from Ruth and Nat who are pinned down to Church of Christ! Mr. Bell recognizes this difference when he asks Ruth a question of her freedom, wording it as, "But you already are locked up. Aren't you, dear?" (63). Mr. Bell wants to free Ruth and Nat in order to make money from them, but he is an orphan himself, so he knows the feeling of being locked up.

## The Empty Money Box

Ruth's empty money box symbolizes her loyalty to Nat. While alive, Ruth and Nat promise each other that the first one to die will visit the other to tell them about the afterlife. Ruth dies first, leaving her responsible to live up to her word. Additionally, Ruth dies before she can tell Nat where the money is. For fourteen years, Nat is left alone in the mansion thinking that Ruth and Mr. Bell took the cash and abandoned him. Ruth is loyal to her "sister". She does not want Nat to continue living with the feeling that he was betrayed by his best friend. She carries the empty box with her to remind her of her loyalty and dedication to her friend, Nat.

## Cora's Unborn Baby

The baby Cora is carrying represents hope. As the baby grows, so does Cora's hope for their future. She feels the life of the baby and she begins to believe that her life can improve. She sees this future as an opportunity whereas she used to see her future as a cumbersome requirement. This baby alters Cora's outlook and provides her with a hopeful future. Even Ruth feels this hope growing, which is why she frequently strokes Cora's belly with a smile.

## Mr. Bell's Empty Briefcase

Mr. Bell's empty briefcase symbolizes the power of conning people. He brings about the idea that the emptiness allows him to con people more easily because the emptiness allows him to say and show things to people that they want to hear and see. The idea that all people want something-- that all people need something--and the fact that Mr. Bell's empty case allows him to tailor his cons to the specific person being conned.



Customers are described as being "curious" (59) and Mr. Bell considers himself to be a person who provides people with what they want. He points out that the lack of information is what hooked Ruth and Nat, saying that "Empty space made you two agree to meet me, a strange man in an abandoned location. . . . Information enables me to shape my con, to make something from nothing" (59-60). As Mr. Bell teaches Nat and Ruth how to con people, they focus on the lack of information in order to fill in the gaps. The idea of emptiness being necessary in order to shape a story and to create a con is at the center of Mr. Bell's approach to business.

## **The Book of Ether**

The Book of Ether symbolizes the con of religion. This book is comprised of several texts and song lyrics that have nothing to do with religion. This book is a work of fiction, desperately drafted by a conman who needs followers in order to feel powerful. Mardellion/Zeke collects anything he finds personally interesting and pretends it is legitimate. This book is something the followers read and take to be real, which cons all of the followers into thinking their lives have purpose.

## **The Boat Show on the Erie Canal**

The boat show that Cora attends on the Erie Canal is a symbol for the passionate life Ruth is missing out on. Sheresa is a member of a strange social group. This group accepts each other for their passions. They put on shows. They accept one another. They socialize. They celebrate. They stop and feel joyful in their lives. This is something Cora has been missing out on. For the first time she can remember, Cora has the chance to witness people being happy in their own interests. This is a model for how Cora wants to live, although she is not entirely sure how to. The brief boat show she has a chance to watch is a lesson for how Cora would like to strive her life to be like: total acceptance and an appreciation for the things that bring her joy.

## **Church of Christ!**

Father Arthur's Church of Christ! symbolizes the oppressive feeling that forced religions can have on people who are forced into a congregation that believes things they do not believe. Father Arthur places these wards of the state in his home and he requires them to worship in the way he agrees with. Not all of the children at Church of Christ! agree with the ideas Father Arthur puts forth. This form of rebellion is met with harsh punishments, and it causes the children under Father Arthur's care to fake their beliefs long enough to live comfortably. One can argue that children in religious households may also be forced into a religion they do not agree with but are forced to worship in a way that makes their own caregivers pleased.



## The City of Troy, New York

While Troy may not be a sprawling metropolis, Nat and Ruth see the city as a symbol of freedom. This is the city where they travel to while living in Church of Christ! They find opportunities to travel there and spend time without feeling oppressed by Father Arthur. It is no surprise then that Ruth and Nat choose to live in Troy after they free themselves of Father Arthur. They see the city as a place where they can thrive and grow. They get to experience new things here, making it feel like the city provides freedom.

## Ruth's Walkman

Ruth's Walkman symbolizes her love for Mr. Bell. The one and only night these two get to spend with one another while they are alive is in the mansion. It is here where Mr. Bell shows Ruth many of the objects that allow them to bond and realize their love for one another. Ruth becomes particularly interested in the old Walkman and tries to record the sounds from that night. As a ghost traveling with Cora, Ruth is dependent upon the Walkman. She is separated from Mr. Bell on this long journey. She misses him and wants to be with him. Ruth's way of staying close to her love is by keeping the Walkman close to her.

## Comet

To Mardellion/Zeke, the cleaning substance of Comet symbolizes power. He believes that a person's light, that the Etherists potential light from a fallen meteor, comes from the power of the cosmos. When he is unable to find this powerful light from his own copy of The Book of Ether, he strives to find his own form of power from drugs. What is funny about Hunt's choice for Zeke to snort Comet is that its name connects to the idea of the cosmos. Mardellion/Zeke believes that a meteor will send his cult into a form of heaven, but he also believes that all space rocks have equal value. A comet is simply an icy space rock, which is why Mardellion/Zeke believes that snorting it will bring him close to his own version of heaven.





# Settings

## The Mansion in the Adirondacks

Mardellion set up his cult, who follow The Book of Ether, in an abandoned mine area. The location is incredibly remote, with the nearest town miles away. Travelers must cross a rickety old wood bridge in order to get up to the property. There is a large and beautiful main house built of stone and several small cabins down by a nearby lake. Mardellion built a huge, grand temple for his followers to worship. When Etherists stopped joining, and Mardellion's cult grew smaller, he grew desperate. He collected old mining explosives from the nearby abandoned mines.

While this location is quite old, it does not appear in the book until the end of the novel, when Mr. Bell brings Nat and Ruth there to wit out a horrible snow storm. they arrive to find a grand mansion that has been frozen in time, abandoned, and left to rot without any tenants. They make themselves at home here. Nat explores the area and decides to convert the abandoned cabins into cozy homes for children who age out of the foster system he went through. While Nat is exploring on his own, Ruth and Mr. Bell grow their relationship by talking and tinkering with the items left behind in the mansion. Mr. Bell gives Ruth The Book of Ether while they visit the temple, and Mr. Bell and Ruth make love for their first and only time in one of the many cold rooms in the building.

It is this location where Zeke (Mardellion) stalks Ruth and Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell stole money from Zeke and he wants it back badly enough that he shoots his son, Carl. He watches as Ruth and Mr. Bell fall into the lake and never resurface. Ruth's ghost escorts Cora back to here, where Cora finds the box of money to give to Nat. Cora goes into labor here and discovers that Nat has been waiting there for Ruth for fourteen years.

## The Church of Christ! Facility

A man named Father Arthur establishes an orphanage in New York, close to the city of Troy. The house has a barn, and both buildings are extremely shabby and run down. Father Arthur uses his home to establish an orphanage. He invites the most damaged children he can find because the state pays him more money for dire cases. This money does not go to home repairs. It is this house where Eleanor and Ruth come after they are taken from their mother. This is also the home where Ruth and Nat meet, declare themselves sisters, and share a room.

## Troy, New York

Troy is the closest city to the Church of Christ! facility where Father Arthur houses his orphans. Nat and Ruth walk to the city sometimes when they are hungry. They shoplift a few food items and eat it on the interesting streets while locals judge them for their old



fashioned clothing. Nat and Ruth see Troy as the most freeing and exciting city near them, and they use visits to the city as entertainment.

After Ruth finds freedom from marrying Mr. Bell, she moves into an apartment with Nat. They pay for the apartment with the money they make with Mr. Bell, and they love all of the new things they get to try now that they don't live with Father Arthur.

## **St. Eugene**

St. Eugene is the town where Mr. Bell drives Ruth and Nat after they run away from the scene where noseless Zeke threatens to harm them. This is also the same motel where Ruth takes Cora to spend a few nights before they make their final hike at the end of the novel. Sheresa, the young motel worker who befriends Cora, takes Cora to a local, artistic boat show that Sheresa puts on with her friends.

## **Erie Canal**

Ruth uses the Erie Canal to help navigate her way back to the mansion in the Adirondacks. She knows to follow the water because her final destination feeds into this canal. Throughout Ruth and Cora's journey, Cora often views the beauty of the water and notes that Ruth is using it to help them navigate their way wherever they are going. The Erie is very close to the important hula dancer light motel where all major characters stay.



# Themes and Motifs

## Dualism

Life and death is the ultimate dualistic pair, seemingly separated by a clear line; but, in Hunt's novel, life and death bleed into one another as if they are one blurred being. Both life and death are celebrated and focused on in this story. Cora is the character that hones in the beauty of life, becoming thankful for both her own life and for the upcoming life of her child. Cora learns how to feel things again, she embraces her life like never before, and she even accepts what she assumes to be her death at the end of the novel. When Cora is lying in the forest alone after Ruth leaves her behind, she is calmly convinced that she will die in that moment. She does not fight it, and she accepts her death as part of her life.

A minor character, and one many readers may have brushed off as insignificant, is sister Margaret, who declares to Cora that, "Life and death are not clean, separate functions" (200). This brief character visit sums up Hunt's message about life and death in the simplest of terms, yet speaks the truth. This novel contains characters who are dead yet appear to be living, and it explores the point when a person's body dies versus their ghost. Ruth is Hunt's example for the messiness of the division between life and death. Her character reads as though she is living alongside Cora. She does not speak, but her presence is noticed and Cora is able to follow her aunt to places she does not know exist. Yet, the end of the novel reveals that Ruth has been dead the entire time, meaning that Cora has been traveling with the ghost of her aunt throughout her narrative. While readers can understand that Ruth is dead, her ghost seems very very real. Cora seems to be alive, and yet she is paired with a dead person's ghost in the most familiar of ways.

Hunt plays with the idea of dualism in more ways than just life and death. Both of Ruth's major relationships are described as being two being mashed into one. Ruth is deeply attached to Nat in the beginning of the novel. The two of them complement one another like yin and yang. Gentle Ruth and agitated Nat. The helper and the man who talks to dead people. While lying in bed with Nat, Ruth describes their flat bodies as if they were two beings complimenting one another, fitting into one another perfectly, and "stewing and melting together" (58). The dualistic descriptions continue when Nat and Ruth are awake and moving around. They greet Father Arthur by raising, "opposite arms, a Rorschach blot saying goodbye to Mr. Bell" (128). This image of the popular psychology test is made up of blotted images which mirror one another on a card. They are separate and yet connected as one.

As the novel progresses, Ruth's affections turn away from Nat and toward Mr. Bell. Ruth's closeness to Mr. Bell then changes to be described in a similar dualistic matter as Ruth once described Nat. While making love with Mr. Bell, Ruth feels that, "He is hers. He breathes into her damply, through her, as if they could fall into one another" (318). Their bodies are no longer separate beings, there is no longer a separation



between them. Their two bodies are not separate, clean lines of division but are messy and melded into one.

Even Cora's long journey is a form of dualism, making it have no beginning and no end either. It is a continuous collection of starts and finishes, and yet she continues to walk along without knowing her the final destination. She talks about her journey with Ruth saying that her time in the forest with Ruth is, "The end. Or else a new start" (289). To her, there is no true division of things. Everything is separate and everything is together. Mr. Splitfoot, an elusive being in the novel, is described as being "sometimes a one, mothers and their children, Nat and Ruth, life and death" (114). This being holds both life and death, both Nat and Ruth, both mothers and children. He is a being that changes forms and multiplies without notice. In Hunt's novel, everything is cyclical and changeable. Things alter and bleed into each other, joining forces when necessary and splitting off like cells as they divide.

## Feeling Lost

While Cora feels socially lost in her unstable and uninteresting life, she learns how to establish affection for the physical feeling of being lost out in the world. When readers first meet Cora she is not aware of how lost she truly is. She dislikes her boyfriend, her job, and her life in general. She feels no passion for anything. Ruth yanks her from her life. She breaks her phone and forces Cora to learn how to listen to the things that matter. Cora does not fight this transition and instead almost appears to welcome it. Cora gives up trying to ask Ruth where they are going. She stops wondering how close they are to the end of their journey. She discontinues her daydreams about Lord having anything to do with their baby, and she quiets herself in general. She learns to listen to the noise of the cities they pass through, and Cora is eventually able to smell the pollution from largely populated areas before they even arrive. She comes to the realization that her life needed a change and Ruth is the one providing that change for her in the form of this long journey. She even refers to herself, saying, "I'm more lost from the world than anyone has ever been" (275). But this feeling does not last, and Cora eventually feels a part of the world Ruth takes her to. In Cora's moment of crisis she is described as laying in the forest floor unable to travel any further. She believes she is going to die alone right there. She mentions the previous generations of people who traveled by foot like Ruth and her have done. "They were lost," she comments, "but lost didn't matter back then, since there was no found" (275).

Ceph is another character who displays deep confusion in his feelings of being lost. He ages out of the system and is thrust into the city of Troy all alone. Ruth finds him meandering the streets, lamenting the feeling that he is lost and alone in the world. He clutches to Ruth as something that is familiar to him. He tells Ruth that she is the only person in the world he knows which then causes Ruth to feel responsible for him. He never finds a place in Troy. He never seems to fit in and he does not appear to know how to do it even if he tried. Ceph lacks any other purpose other than trying to claim Ruth.



Ruth and Nat are also plagued by the idea of feeling lost. They are thrown into foster care with the careless Father Arthur, who does not help them find a place in the world. Both Nat and Ruth depend on one another to feel found in the world. Together they can accomplish their goals and dreams, separate they are unsure of how to be members of society. Eleanor was once in a similar situation. She did not have another orphan as a partner and she winds up pregnant and alone. Hunt's theme of being lost is not always a bad thing, but she explores the idea that being lost can be either a blessing or a curse.

## Belief

This novel is riddled with self-proclaimed conmen who find the act of conning to be as simple as playing with the beliefs people have and the desperation those people have for making those beliefs from to fruition. Humanity is depicted as being a gullible race, with everyone ready to jump at any hint that their loss or hope or belief will prove to be true. Mr. Bell makes conning look easy. He is a natural, life-long conman who has no problem exploiting the weak points of his damaged customers.

Mr. Bell quickly recognizes Nat's talent for conning people. Nat cons the children at Church of Christ! and he successfully cons Ruth for several years. But the popular saying of you can't con a con man rings true in this story, making it impossible for Nat to con Mr. Bell. Even the seances are pictured as being quite easy. The customers who show up help the con take place by quickly feeding information that was not directly requested. Once again, humans are conned because they are blinded by their own desperation and do not take logic into consideration. The conmen of the story see no harm in conning people who seem to want to be fooled. The idea that everyone has dead people bleeds into the thought that all people want to be comforted with the thought that they are speaking to their dead loved one. In a way, Mr. Bell and Nat believe they are performing a great service for people. Mr. Bell even tries to teach Ruth about their charitable acts of performing fake seances when he asks her, "What's the harm in believing?" (282). Of course, readers come to find out that Ruth herself has been believing the wrong thing about Nat for years. She becomes morally confused and is unsure of how she feels knowing that they were truly lying the entire time. But, as Mr. Bell points out, he sees the idea of people believing in something as taking, "steady convincing" (266).

Religion is portrayed as a con, and religious people in this novel are shown to be gullible and unquestioning in the word of their religion. Cora's brief and strange stopover in Sequoia's trailer might have seemed like an odd transaction, but what is noteworthy is the grandfather's actions in this instance. He is described as listening to a religious radio show in the morning. The radio show is making outlandish claims, but Cora remarks that he, "believes it because people will believe just about anything" (84). Mardellion's character believes himself to be a saintly religious leader when he is really brainwashing people in his cult. Father Arthur strongly believes in his own religion, and he spreads his personal beliefs to the foster children, forcing them to at least say that they believe what Father Arthur believes. Religion, which is such a large topic it is a



separate theme down below, is imagined as a multifaceted con which many people have fallen for.

Conmen pop up everywhere in this novel. Even the tiniest details reference people who have lived off of fooling others. The small town motel where both narratives sleep is located in a town named St. Eugene. The "St." stands for the word saint, which is a term used for decent people who have been recognized by the Catholic Church for their good deeds while living. But readers come to find out that St. Eugene was named for a conman named Gene Bonifce and, "Gene was a master con man" (221). This random fact about a plain, small town is connected to a man who used to con, "back when it was easier to work a con, back when nobody knew anything. Information was polite" (221). Now, Mr. Bell, Nat, Ruth, and Mardellion are all conning people in a newer time when information is easy to get and, as implied, less polite. Even Mr. Bell has been conning Ruth the entire time because he met them under false pretenses. His main objective upon meeting them was to sacrifice Ruth and her scar in order to protect the followers of the Etherist cult. However, as noble as this may sound, it does not change the fact that Mr. Bell has been conning Ruth and Nat from the very moment they met one another. This further proves to readers that it is easy to be conned.

## Motherhood

Many of the key characters in this novel struggle with the ugly and challenging side of motherhood, leaving them with conflicted feelings about both their own mothers and their journey into being one themselves. Cora discovers she is pregnant at the beginning of the novel. She debates how much she wants to keep the baby and comments that it is the offspring of a less than ideal relationship between herself and Lord. As her belly grows, Cora begins to interact with her baby. Outsiders tell her of the horrors related to motherhood. They warn her about the challenge and the commitment. These embolden Cora to love her baby even more, and she begins to embrace the challenge saying, "this baby, even though it's barely here—some half-dead, half-living thing—I feel it, and it's something big. To me at least, in all my smallness, this baby is really something very big" (29). By the end of the novel, Cora feels the deepest affection for her baby she has felt. This helps her develop a new understanding for her own mother, Eleanor, who was a single mother lost in the city of Troy. Cora develops a bond with her mother although her mother is not physically present. She idolizes the idea of being a mother and, in some ways, creates a martyr in her own mother. While traveling with Ruth, Cora notices that, "Every tree we see reminds me of El. There's sacrifice, antagonism, rebellion, obsession, and adoration, but no properly complex word for what's between a mother and a daughter, roots so twisted, a relationship so deep, people suffocated in its kitsch and comfort words to pretend it's easy" (86).

There is another part of the book where Hunt criticizes the ideal image of mother hood that many women paint. "Motherhood," the book teaches, "despite being immensely common, remains the greatest mystery, and all the language people use to describe it, kitschy words like 'comfort' and 'loving arms' and 'nursing,' is to convince women to stay put" (199). This idea that there are two visions of being a mother. Some people embrace





it with open arms, they love the challenging aspect of raising a child. Others, like Ruth's mother, crumble under the pressure. They do more harm than good.

Cora seems to be the only person who learns to embrace motherhood. Notice that she is also the only character with a non-dysfunctional and fully in-tact relationship with her own mother, El. The fact that Cora was raised by a mother who loves her is the reason why she is able to create such a positive outlook about motherhood. Eleanor is a single mother and Cora is a single mother. She has an example of being a successful single mother because El was so successful with her. However, it is not until Cora comes close to being a mother herself that she is capable of understanding just how much her own mother did for her. The first thing Cora wants when she goes into labor is her mother. She wants the support of Eleanor that she has always taken for granted.

While Cora never appreciated the mother near her, several of the characters in the novel do not appreciate mothers because of their negative experiences with their own moms. It is not shocking that Nat, who is not an orphan but is abandoned, feels that mothers are worthless. He loses his belief in the unseen and sees mothers as a burden. Ruth has never known her mother, but feels let down when she discovers that it was her mother who gave her the large scar on her face. Mr. Bell remembers his mother but the quality of his life goes down significantly after she is forced out of his life. Without a mother, Mr. Bell works as a conman with his father and is caught quickly thereafter. His lack of a mother contributes to his possible downfall. He is left to fantasize about his mother and chases the dream of his mother because he remembers being loved by her.

Motherhood is not always a joyous thing in Hunt's novel. Many maternal descriptions in the novel are riddled with violence and warning, with references to poison and failure and harm. Hunt refers to the act of giving birth as a type of death in the following quote: "An unknown that gets bigger every day. An unknown I feel stirring, growing, making me do things my body doesn't normally do. A program set to play. One day it will talk to me. It will die. How's that possible?" (99). There is always the presence of death surrounding the often horrible experience of motherhood. Strangers on the street make comments to Cora that motherhood is a struggle, that it is a defeating challenge. It ruins lives and takes over happiness. And some mothers do cave under the pressure. Nat's mother abandons him. Ruth's mother throws bleach on her. Not every woman accepts the brutality of motherhood as Hunt describes it in this book. Carrying a child into the world is described as an unwilling sacrifice.

## Religion as the Ultimate Con

Religion is portrayed as the ultimate con, duping people from all across the novel into believing things that are not true and following people who are not honest. Mardellion is a dishonest boy who grows into a religious leader for rejects, drug dealers, and convicts. He preys on the weak because he knows they will be looking for the most answers. Mardellion does not go in search of people who truly believe in his cause. He is not concerned with saving people who need saving. His main objective is to collect pained people and provide them with a false path. This harmful form of religion is





described as a cult, which separates it from some of the religious comments made about other religions throughout the novel. However, despite its cult status, Mardellion reappears as Zeke who has morphed into a egotistical and desperate demi-god in his own following. This religion is no religion at all. It is a con. It is designed to take in people with no purpose and to provide them with a false one.

Mr. Bell was raised in Mardellion's cult. He grew up and realized that he wanted nothing to do with such a false life. Nat and Ruth are also people who grow up in a religious setting yet reject religion when they are no longer forced to recite scripture. Father Arthur is a character with no purpose. He uses religion to con the children into thinking they are receiving an education. He oppresses them and limits their development because he is so focused on spreading his beliefs. And Father Arthur's personal religious beliefs stop him from accepting outsiders, which was shown when he rejects Mr. Bell on his doorstep simply because Mr. Bell declares his lack of faith in God. Father Arthur also rejects other religions and creates entire lessons for the children about how evil other religious followers are.

The religions used in this story are not the typical, mainstream religions people often know about. Etherism is a strange cult and Father Arthur's religion is never completely divulged. However, readers can infer that his religion is not that of a well-known one, making it possible to be in the category of a cult. It seems very much as though Father Arthur has made up his religion out of nothing. When Ruth asks him what religion he is, his answer is rude and vague. Mardellion also creates an entire religion on his own, further following the theme of religion being something that is fabricated to con people. Nat's lack of belief in God comes out very strongly at the end of the novel when he notes that, "Humans are so good at imagining things, they invent gods who feel so real, they then betray us by not existing" (285). Here again, religion is described as a con, as something designed to trick people into following something that is false.

But these gullible followers are also discouraged from asking any questions and challenging the religion. Children at Church of Christ! are punished for challenging Father Arthur. Sequoya's grandfather is portrayed as a religious man listening to a fanatic radio show and believing everything he hears, "because people will believe just about anything" (84). But not everyone believes everything they hear. In today's culture, Mardellion/Zeke has problems finding more followers. He wants to find more people to up the numbers of his cult and to give him the attention he thinks he deserves. He himself refers to his own religion as being the opposite of illness when he says, "Some call it illness; I call it faith" (301). As a character, Zeke is portrayed as quite crazy. He is fixated on meteors crashing into his cult's facilities and he cannot forget about marrying Ruth and her unique scar. However, he wholeheartedly rejects the idea that he is ill because he truly believes in his own cult following. He does not consider his addiction to snorting the cleaner Comet to be strange or sinful. He does not think it is wrong to shoot Mr. Bell over his missing money. Most importantly, Mardellion sees no problem in drafting his own religious text from pop songs and Carl Sagan's theoretical works. This book of fiction is perhaps the biggest poke Hunt takes against religion. It comments that religious texts are fanciful and drafted for entertainment by people who want followers more than genuinely formed from religious miracles.



# Styles

## Point of View

The two narratives within this story are divided by both action and point of view. In the narrative where a younger Ruth is the central focus, a third person limited narrator tells the story. The sentences are short, direct, and most choppy. In the second narrative, readers follow pregnant Cora and Ruth as they walk a very long journey to an unannounced location. This narrative remains in Cora's head, allowing readers to follow the story with a first person limited point of view. Because each narrative is told from a limited perspective, readers are constantly left to wonder about the many mysteries in the tale. Even the end of the story leaves a mystery in place for readers, and participants are left wondering what happens after the story ends.

## Language and Meaning

The author of the novel, Samantha Hunt, maintains a dark tone that is the expected style of Gothic literature. Simple descriptions in the novel are expanded into thick descriptions with eerie tones. There is a scene where Eleanor is yanked away from her sister. Here, Hunt describes the scene by telling readers that Ruth looked out of the window like, "a surgery in some anatomy theater removing the only familiar thing she'd ever known" (4). Another location where Hunt allows her dark imagination soar is when she describes something as simple as a thought being presented. She writes, "The rock falls back to Earth as a good idea pushes up through the soil, not unlike the hand of a zombie reaching up to grab some brains" (259). Even love is described using a velvety rich tone of darkness, stating that Lord's complicated relationship with his wife was established in, "bloody way, thorns and hooks" (26). Hunt combines ideas people think of as being beautiful while providing words that elicit violence, death, and discomfort. This establishes a creepy tone where all readers remain unstable in their comfort of happy events the characters manage to experience.

## Structure

There is a quote printed at the beginning of this book. It is not a dedication but refers to subjects in the novel. As readers progress in the story, they will come to learn about a cult with a few people who call themselves Etherists. Their book of scripture is pieced together by Carl Sagan's work and some popular oldies pop music. This opening poem, or Etherist scripture, contains ideas of death but also includes the song lyrics from the popular stadium song "We Will Rock You" by the music group Queen.

This novel has two very clearly separated narratives within one book. One narrative focuses on a young character named Ruth, who is a ward of the state. Ruth lives with her best friend, Nat, and works with a man named Mr. Bell who manages their fake seances. The second narrative takes place in a different time. Ruth is older and neither



Nat or Mr. Bell are present. This second narrative only includes Ruth and her pregnant niece, Cora. While the two stories close in and run parallel in the end, they never combine. Each narrative takes place at a different moment in time and those moments never cross over.

Each chapter bounces back and forth between each narrative, but the novel does not have any labels, subtitles, or numbers. Each chapter is divided by a black page that contains one white spot in the shape of a water drop. This is the only marker readers have to indicate that they are switching from one story to the next. While the black divider pages do not have page numbers on them, they are counted in the page numbers, which makes it seem as though the book skips two pages between text.



## Quotes

This baby, even though it's barely here—some half-dead, half-living thing—I feel it, and it's something big. To me at least, in all my smallness, this baby is really something very big.”

-- Cora (Part I)

**Importance:** Cora learns how to like being a mother. She accepts the baby when she learns she is pregnant, but she is not sure that she is up to the task of raising a child. Her physical journey with Ruth is also an emotional one. Cora watches her baby grow inside of her belly and she develops a love for the child. She realizes how magical it is for her to grow a human inside of her, and Cora's relationship to motherhood is a sharp contrast from some of the failed mothers mentioned in this story.

Nothing stranger than pregnancy could happen to a body. Not drugs, not sex. An unknown that gets bigger every day. An unknown I feel stirring, growing, making me do things my body doesn't normally do. A program set to play. One day it will talk to me. It will die. How's that possible?

-- Cora (Part III)

**Importance:** The idea of growing a baby is often described as a strange, almost alien, event. At times, Cora feels as though it is an unnatural occurrence. At other times, Cora sees her baby's growth as a beautiful thing. She focuses on the functions of her body changing as her body adapts to a life of walking on the road with Ruth. Here, Cora refers to her pregnancy as an automatic program, and she refers to giving birth as being a death. The death in this quote is when the baby is released from the mother's natural program. Here is a fine example of where Hunt takes a typically pleasant idea and smashes it with dark phrases like, "It will die".

It's not magic. It's just attention and observation.

-- Cora (Part III)

**Importance:** While this quote initially sounds like something Mr. Bell would say about conning people, here Cora is referring to her ability to connect to the earth. Before her journey, Cora was disconnected from everything and everyone. She was not tuned into her own life or to the world around her. However, she adapts to her time on the road unplugged from the internet. She is now able to smell out cities and to sense things she never noticed before. This is the first time she has learned how to be careful enough to notice these things, and she recognizes that it is something everyone could do if they also unplugged themselves and traveled like her.

Why do the living assume the dead know better than we do? Like they gained some knowledge by dying, but why wouldn't they just be the same confused people they were before they died?

-- Ruth (Part III)



**Importance:** Readers come across this quote before it is revealed that Ruth's ghost is with Cora on her journey to the Adirondacks. However, looking back, this quote closely refers to Ruth and to the gullible clients who pay a lot of money for Nat's seances. Ruth's ghost may be what is leading Cora on her journey, but her ghost is not an all-knowing being. Ruth maintains her imperfections just as she had imperfections while living. This quote also relates to Nat's seance customers. They crave communication with their dead loved ones so much. Many people ask for enlightenment or clarification, but the idea that a person's ghost is somehow an improved version of themselves is preposterous in Hunt's dark world.

The heart wants someone to take away the fear. The heart wants answers even if they're made up."  
-- The Fat Lady (Part III)

**Importance:** Many of the customers, clients, and cult members in this story are looking for an answer. They want to feel like they belong somewhere and they want to think they are getting their questions answered. Mr. Bell sees a need for Nat and Ruth's seance sessions. He knows he is conning people but he also feels that he is performing a service. In a way, Mr. Bell is providing closure for people who are hurting. Here, again, there is a call back to the theme of conning. It does not matter if the closure is made up. What matters is that a person feels as if they get closure. This personal belief is what truly matters.

Heaven is a dream of Disneyland for those unable to act here on earth.  
-- Mr. Bell (Part II)

**Importance:** This quote touches on the theme of religion as being the biggest con of all. Mr. Bell grew up in a cult and removed himself when he was forced to leave the cult after being arrested. His departure from the Etherists allowed him to see the world differently. He no longer sees heaven or hell or God or the devil. To Mr. Bell, the world is not a mysterious or spiritual place. This reference to heaven being Disneyland plays into the idea that it is merely a fantasy; it is a dream people can play out. This provides people with a false hope while they are living.

To set the mind on flesh is death."  
-- Cora (Part IV)

**Importance:** On the surface, this quote seems to be a religious warning against sexual fantasies. The fact that Cora finds it while staying at a seminary also supports this idea. However, readers can interpret this as word play because it also touches upon the idea of a person living in the flesh and a person's soul living in memory. Cora is unaware that she is traveling with her aunt's ghost. This ghost is a spirit, and Ruth is no longer of the flesh. Cora has been traveling with death the entire time and has been fine.

The world needs stillness.  
-- Margaret (Part IV)



**Importance:** Cora enters her narrative as a lost and uninterested young woman. Her mind constantly runs and she is concerned by many separate thoughts all at the same time. She does not care about anything and yet overthinks everything in her mind. As Cora spends time on the road, she learns to appreciate the stillness. She allows her mind to calm down. She becomes less concerned with how many people click like on her social media posts. She learns to be still and quiet and comfortable in her existence. Part of Cora's education is because of Ruth's silence. She sees her aunt travel in stillness and solitude. She observes Ruth's behavior and she strives to be more like her.

Life and death are not clean, separate functions."  
-- Margaret (Part IV)

**Importance:** This quote touches on the theme of duality that Hunt presents throughout the story. Here, a runaway nun comments on the fact that living is not as clear cut as most people think it is. In a way, Cora has been dead in her past life. She is functionally living-- she breathes and her heart beats-- but she is not truly living. Here, sister Margaret points out the fact that there is a difference between being alive and living by enjoying one's life.

I'm more lost from the world than anyone has ever been."  
-- Cora (Part VI)

**Importance:** When readers first meet her, they meet a Cora who has been lost in her life for quite some time. She is obsessed with the Internet and with her social media accounts. She has been living on autopilot for so long that she does not even recognize her own hatred for her life. Ruth's forced journey is where Cora learns just how lost she was. She realizes that she was living without zeal. She understands that she has been floating through her life without any interests. She feels unwelcome and uncomfortable in the environment she calls home. What is ironic is that she does not find herself until she gets lost on the road with Ruth.

They rest. They return to their fever. They rest and are troughed together in the sinkhole of the bed, swarmed by blankets, warmed by skin and how many long years it was before they knew each other, before it didn't have to hurt.  
-- Narrator (Part VII)

**Importance:** Finally, Ruth is loved by a man who loves her in return! Finally, Ruth has the opportunity to experience making love with a person. She spent so long pining after Nat, who admitted that he wanted nothing to do with Ruth sexually. She takes a long time to get over Nat and to focus on Mr. Bell, who adores her from the very beginning. This is the one and only time they have sex. Ruth relishes the moment. She recognizes the magic she feels being with her husband; she wishes it did not take her so long to realize her affection for him.

The tiny bombs that parents bury under their child's skin take years to explode."  
-- Narrator (Part VII)



**Importance:** Mothers are not idolized in this story. They are often referred to as harmful, hurtful, and dangerous beings in their children's lives. In Hunt's novel, parents destroy their children's lives. They abuse them, in Ruth's case. They abandon them, in Nat's case. Mr. Bell's father bans his mother from Carl's life. Mardellion abandons his son, Carl, when he is busted in their partner con. Parents are obstacles for the characters in this story. They are bad memories that characters need to overcome. Cora, who is the only character with a stable parent, wrestles with her confidence in providing for her baby. She is not sure that she can be as supportive and loyal of a parent as El is for her. Parenting is not a joy in Hunt's novel, it is a tragedy and a gamble.