

The Mountain Between Us Study Guide

The Mountain Between Us by Charles Martin

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Martin, Charles. *The Mountain Between Us*. Broadway Books, 2011.

The Mountain between Us begins in an airport terminal with Ben Payne, the main character, waiting for his flight. He met Ashley Knox, a woman bound for home, waiting on the same plane, preparing to be married when she gets there. Their flight was cancelled, and Ben, wanting to get home hired a charter plane. He offered Ashley a ride on it. She agreed. The pilot had a heart attack mid-air and crashed into the side of the mountain. The pilot did not survive but Ben and Ashley did, along with the pilot's dog. Ashley broke her leg on impact, and Ben broke a few ribs.

Through parts scavenged from the plane, Ben built a makeshift sled and snow shoes and attempted a self-rescue, worried that no one was coming for them, as their flight was not registered with anyone who would know to come looking for them. Over the span of weeks, Ben dragged Ashley through the wilderness towards safety. During this time he also dictated to his personal recorder, leaving messages for his wife Rachel back home. Eventually, they holed up in an abandoned scouts' cabin, near death by this point. The cabin allowed them a short respite, but they had to keep going if they wanted to get rescued. When they spotted the first real sign of civilization, a light and a smoke trail, they attempted to scale a steep drop off. This caused an avalanche. Ashley broke her leg again, and Ben had to abandon her and ran for help. He found it, and they were rescued.

Ashley recuperated in the hospital, and Ben visited the charter pilot's wife to deliver his condolences. Months passed and Ben was invited to Ashley and her fiancé's rehearsal dinner. Ben left a recorder for Ashley as a gift. Roughly a few weeks later, Ashley showed up at Ben's doorstep asking to see his wife Rachel. Ben showed her, revealing that Rachel had been dead the whole time. Ashley revealed her own secret then as well, that she left her now ex-fiance to be with Ben, unable to shake the journey they had taken together.



Prelude-Chapter 3

Summary

The novel begins with a dictation from the still-unnamed protagonist and narrator. He was in a small charter plane that crashed into the side of a mountain. His pilot died on impact and the only other passenger was a woman. She broke her leg and had passed out from shock. The pilot's dog made it out alive too. As he is speaking directly in the text, the protagonist leaves a recorded message for his wife, saying that she had been right all along.

Chapter 1 opens 12 hours before the prelude. Ben Payne, a surgeon, sat in a Utah airport waiting for his flight which had been delayed because of foul winter weather, narrating the story from his point of view but in the past tense. He met a woman named Ashley, a magazine writer, who was engaged to be married. As it turned out, they both ended up on the same flight. This flight was subsequently cancelled because one of the de-icing trucks broke down on the runway. Ashley and Ben separated for the moment, and Ben went to go find a charter plane to Denver. He had surgeries scheduled that he did not want to miss. In an airfield not far from the airport, Ben met a pilot named Grover who agreed to fly a charter plane over the mountains despite the coming storm. Ben returned to the airport to offer Ashley a ride with him. He told her that he did not want her to miss her wedding, and he had a habit of looking at people like stray cats. Ben blamed his wife Rachel's influence on the way he saw people. He also said that this helped him become a better doctor. Despite the strangeness of him asking, Ashley still agreed to go on the plane with him. The two of them took off with the pilot named Grover and his dog, Tank.

Before the eventual plane crash, Grover had a long conversation with his two occupants. He used this time to get to know the both of them, finding out about Ben's history as a doctor and Ashley's desperation to get home and marry her fiancé. Grover revealed a bit himself to them as well. He spoke about his years-long marriage to the woman of his dreams and how they made it work out in the end. At Ashley's behest he offered marriage advice too. His advice offered a more distant perspective, and Grover reiterated this perspective with all of one's life. He pointed out the window and used the land below as an example of gaining a higher perspective on things and not letting the little things matter. During this conversation he started coughing. He told Ben about his past with heart trouble, and Ben urged him seriously to consider seeing his doctor again. Ben feared the worst for Grover. He ended up being more correct than he had hoped for, as not much later Grover had a heart attack and crashed the plane into the side of a mountain.



Analysis

Early on, Martin's novel posits that much of one's problems can be solved with the proper perspective. Grover, the charter pilot, says as much to the Ben and Ashley, the protagonists. He says, "You two walked into my hangar tonight and saw a blue and yellow plane. . . I see an enclosed capsule that lifts you up above the problems of the earth and gives you a perspective you can't get on land" (36). Both Ben and Ashley are engrossed in their own lives. Ben is a surgeon and hires the charter plane in an attempt to get back to his work. Ashley can only think about her upcoming wedding. Grover, and by extension the novel, are saying that high above the Earth, many of the day to day worries seem insignificant. The subsequent crashing of the plane into the wilderness below can be read as the characters being forced into this perspective, against their will. They are forced to confront an absolute reality and drop every problem or worry they had before. Ben cannot worry about surgeries he is missing when he has to worry about survival. The same can be said of Ashley's worries. As the prelude reveals, she broke her leg. Her needs are much more dire. Thus both must adopt Grover's reality to survive, and ironically, Grover is the only one to die in the crash.

Grover's death is not only ironic it is impactful and useful for the protagonists of the novel and the overall structure of the narrative. Despite being a tale of survival, early on it is clear that the novel makes use of the standard hero narrative, and with that in mind the death of Grover fits in as the death of the mentor or master. In a hero's journey narrative, the pupil must part ways with the master and become the master themselves. The standard way narratives accomplish this is through the death of the mentor or master. In the short time he knew Ben and Ashley he established a rapport and offered his wisdom about love, marriage, and life. So by offering both marital and life advice, Grover establishes himself as a mentor figure in the lives of Ben and Ashley. His subsequent death can then be read as something that propels the protagonists towards the ideals that Grover, as the mentor, laid out.

Interestingly enough, the author's choice to begin the novel with full knowledge of the plane crash and then backpedal to the events beforehand accomplishes an effective building of tension. This method of organization also serves to avoid any obfuscation of the plot. The reader knows from the first page what the inciting incident will be. This provides the means for speedy introduction into what is the main crux of the plot. Also, knowing that they eventually crash, the reader knows what may impact the plot later. For example, anything that Ben buys in the airport beforehand could be used to help survive. The backpedal also gives the reader time for a breath. The novel now takes its time to introduce the main characters of the story. Character introductions would be difficult after the crash as the story is wrapped up in the conflict of the plot. Lastly, this backpedal exists in a long literary tradition of beginning in the middle of things, also referred to as "in medias res."



Discussion Question 1

What gives Grover the perspective he has? Why does he choose to share this perspective with Ben and Ashley?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ben offer Ashley, a practical stranger, a ride on the charter plane?

Discussion Question 3

Analyze the marriage advice that Grover gives Ashley but in the full context of knowing that the plane will crash. How does this advice apply across situations? Does it?

Vocabulary

dictating, diagnoses, orthopedics, rhythmic, attaché, columnist, albatross



Chapters 4 - 7

Summary

Chapter 4 finds the protagonist dictating to his recorder again. He speaks to the recorder as if he were speaking to his wife Rachel in the present tense, like actual dialogue. He talks about how they had first met, at high school during a track meet. He says he took a Latin class just to be closer to her. Ben claims that Ashley reminds him a lot of her. Ben also describes her in terms of running, saying that she just floated through the air, but he noticed certain imperfections that he was able to help. In summary, Ben says that Rachel and him were meant for each other from the beginning.

In Chapter 5, Ben set Ashley's broken leg and packed it with snow to reduce the swelling. He dug out a bank in the snow for her to lay flat on, and he attended to her like the doctor he was. Her prognosis did not look good, and Ben worried about any internal injuries that Ashley may have incurred during the crash. Ashley remained unconscious during this time, only coming to as he finished to word a silent "Thank you." Grover's dog, meanwhile, huddled for warmth against Ashley. Ben could not remember its name, so he renames it Napoleon.

In Chapter 6 Ben reiterates to the recorder that he does not think Ashley is doing too well. Then, pretending that he is still talking to his wife, he talks about how his dad always used to make him run in the mornings. He had fixated on Ben's running, forcing him to be better and giving little praise for it. According to Ben, this bordered on abuse, as his father continued to push Ben physically.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Ashley woke up. Being more cognizant, Ben discussed with her about their perilous situation. It was similar to his prognosis of Ashley. Things did not look good, and they did not expect a rescue. Ben continued to monitor Ashley, going as far as examining her urine for blood to affirm or deny his suspicious of internal bleeding. Her urine came back clear, reliving some of the worry. Though her injuries were still bad enough on their own. Ashley taken care of, Ben went and found some wood and made a small fire. Together they ate a bag of trail mix, the only food they had available with them at the crash site. The next day, Ben salvaged the GPS from the plane. With it, Ben attempted to triangulate their position. It appeared as if they were indeed in the middle of nowhere, as nothing recognizable as man-made registered on the device. They continued to try and figure out the best options for their situation.

Analysis

The physical predicament of the two primary characters reflects the interior life of Ben Payne. As the story is from his perspective, the reader is made aware of the tenuous place Ben's psyche is in as he recalls both meeting his wife and his father's abuse. He and Ashley are now lost in the High Uintas Wilderness. They have no idea where they



are. Being forced into a perspective more concerned with immediate survival, they are also at a loss on how to deal with this. They wonder what the best thing to do in their situation is. In this way, their physical misplacement reflects where they are mentally. The intelligent Ben Payne then takes the most obvious route to solve at least this part of the crisis. He does so by using one of the GPS units that remained on the wreckage of the plane. With this he figures out where they are in context to several key landmarks. It does little to help his mental state—in fact it probably hurts it—but it solves one immediate problem and becomes a piece of data to use if and when they try to attempt a self-rescue.

Ben's history as a runner, information included in these chapters, functions as a figurative frame of reference for the mental state he is in at this point in the novel. The information about his running also helps to more fully flesh out his character, as it shows why he is so resilient and driven to survive. But metaphorically, running seems to be the way Ben mentally engages with his surroundings. As he learns of their isolation on the mountain, Ben prepares for a self-rescue, choosing to run from the situation rather than sit it out. His thoughts do not dwell on the negative either, as he chooses to run away from the idea that they may not make it out alive. His physical and mental forward momentum keeps his morale up and helps him stay focused on the now, much like how a runner may only stay focused on the few feet ahead of them rather than think about the entire race. Clearly, Ben's history with running not only physically prepared him for his survival ordeal but mentally prepared him as well. His father's physical and mental abuse during Ben's running training also likely prepared the character for the abuses of the wilderness. In response to his father's abuse, Ben had to grow in fortitude. For him there was no other option. This fortitude may have turned out to have saved his life, paradoxically showing that his father's abuse was advantageous in certain ways.

At this point in the novel, the nature of the conflict is laid out in terms of Man Vs. Nature and Man Vs. Himself. In this way, again, the exterior conflict and circumstances mirror internal ones. Ben, as the protagonist and narrator, is the main focus for both these conflicts. He is the one who must deal with the consequences of the plane crash, namely their isolation and Ashley's broken leg. Ashley attempts to help him figure out their best option, but given her injuries, she lays most of this burden on Ben through her lack of spatial awareness. She cannot go out and explore the surroundings, gather food and firewood, or make any real judgement calls. Ben is also alone in his internal struggles. As he records his inner thoughts and stories he lays his past problems out bare. Specifically, as he reflects on Ashley's injuries, he brings up his own with the emotional injuries that his father left him. Seeds are planted for the idea that, the struggle to best nature is no different than man's struggle best himself, and in fact, these two kinds of conflict are inextricably linked.

Discussion Question 1

Analyze Ben's past history of training as a runner. How did his father's training influence him growing up? How does it come to play in the events of the novel?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Ben not expect a rescue? Is he wrong?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Ben and Ashley's conditions. How are they both doing physically? How are they both doing mentally?

Vocabulary

GPS, ELT, cavalry, bedside manner, catheter, contraption



Chapters 8 - 11

Summary

Ben is dictating to his recorder again at the start of Chapter 8. He lays out his and Ashley's situation with the new information the GPS presented. They are in desperate need of food, and Ashley's injuries continue to worry Ben. Her leg is severely swollen, and her pain is only just kept in check with a few pain pills, of which Ben is running low. With their situation once again laid out, Ben starts talking about his past with his wife Rachel again, speaking directly to her through the recorder. Ben says that Rachel was "the first to put together the pieces of me" (81). Rachel was the first one to tell Ben that he would make a good doctor. Ben says that she saw only the best in him. He claims that while "staring out across this ice-capped landscape. . . I am reminded. I see what is. You see what could be" (81). He tells Rachel that he misses her, and then Ben stops dictating so the narrative returns to normal.

Gathering up supplies, Ben prepared to start his way up the mountain. He needed to get to a vantage point to see more of the landscape. A reference point was needed to make more sense of the vast, icy emptiness he saw on the GPS. Without the hope for a rescue, Ben had started thinking about self-rescue, and for that he needed some landmarks with which to navigate by.

Chapter 9 Ben dictates the state championships of his senior year in high school. There, he had a record breaking run, but held back just enough to cause conflict with his abusive father. This culminated in a physical fight between the two of them where Ben finally stood up to his dad. He left for college soon after, but the time before that was tense between father and son. Ben's father never abused him again after that fight, though. Ben moves on to talk about the scholarships he got for his track career and how he and Rachel naively decided to stick together through college and go wherever the other one went. These are all the good things that came out of his track career, according to Ben.

All of this was recorded while Ben made his trek up the nearby mountain face, as Chapter 10 sees him at the top. He gained a higher vantage point, and he turned on his GPS again. From there he saw that GPS was not lying. As far as he could see was wilderness. There were no man-made objects or buildings to be found. He made a mental note of several key landmarks, including a few distant mountain ranges. He headed back to Ashley, worried that she would become distraught waiting for him. As pain, according to Ben, had a way of isolating people and enhancing their fear.

In Chapter 11 Ben dictates when he asked Rachel to marry him. He says "That was a good day" (96).



Analysis

The struggles of survival in these chapters are juxtaposed with Ben's past, brought to the reader through the character's use of a recording device, serving to highlight both the struggles of survival and wistfulness of his past life. The day he asked Rachel to marry him "was a good day" (96). This is contrasted to what could be argued as an objectively bad day, as Ben continued to find out just how isolated they were. In climbing to a higher vantage point, Ben only sees how far away they are from any nearby aid. Just as Rachel "put together the pieces" of Ben (81), Ben is putting together the pieces of his situation. He continues in discovering more about their situation as he reveals more about his own personal history through the recorder. So this use of dual narratives serves to highlight by contrast and by comparison, using both figurative and literal language to accomplish this. Not only that, it continues the emphasis on the inner conflict of man and his conflict with nature.

At this point in the novel, much of what Ben has to say to Rachel through the recorder is very cryptic, and this raises both the tension and stakes of the novel by introducing a small amount of mystery. There are a few things that make sense, such as Ben claiming that he only "sees what is" in as much as he can only focus on the present to a fault. His mindset is utilitarian, and while useful for their ordeal, Ben still intones some level of regret as he mentions that Rachel saw "what could be" (81). It is not clear yet exactly what is meant by this statement, but given the information present thus far in the novel, Ben may simply be contrasting his utilitarianism with Rachel's inherent kindness and propensity to see the best in any situation. On the other hand, Ben may also be talking about Rachel's ability to see things in the big picture. Often times landscapes reflect the interior lives of characters, and it follows that while Ben looks out across a massive landscape he sees how poorly he interprets the bigger picture of his situation. This reminds him of Rachel. Ashley also reminds him of Rachel, which serves as a key piece of foreshadowing to the later events of the novel.

An undercurrent of isolation has been running through the novel thus far, but in this section it is clear that isolation is used as a theme to incite similar feelings in the reader. First, the reader for the first time gets a glimpse along with the main character of the local surroundings, as Ben climbs to a nearby mountain top. The physical isolation is soul crushing to Ben, as he looks out around him and sees nothing man-made. His fortitude allows him to mentally prepare for an arduous self-rescue by noting several key landmarks and cross referencing those with the GPS. What truly cements isolation as an effective theme, however, is the continued use of the first person perspective, which limits information to the reader. The reader only knows what Ben chooses to tell about his situation and his past. Because of this, the reader is left in their own kind of wilderness, where their isolation is lack of information. This is likely purposeful on the author's part, as Ben is the only point-of-view character.



Discussion Question 1

How does Ben's constant recorder dictating help him? How does it hurt him? Think in terms of morale and mental health.

Discussion Question 2

Analyze why Ben's win at the state championships is juxtaposed with the hopelessness of his climb up to the ridgeline. Why does the author put these two events side by side? How do they influence the reading of each other?

Discussion Question 3

How does isolation function in the novel thus far? Analyze this concept. Think about this in terms of point of view and how much information the readers are allowed to know.

Vocabulary

investigation, snowmobile



Chapters 12 - 17

Summary

Ben returned from the mountain top to Ashley at around midnight. He made note of some large tracks--that were not the dog's--near the entrance of their shelter. He ignored them for a time, choosing to currently focus on the obstacles directly in front of them. He chose to not tell Ashley about the tracks, and instead he simply told her how isolated they were. They both agreed that some form of self-rescue, though difficult, may be their only option. No one would likely find them in the middle of a vast wilderness. After this conversation, Ben continues to dictate to his recorder again.

To the recorder this time he talks about when he and Rachel moved back to Florida after finishing their undergrad and graduate work. They had lived for so long in the Colorado mountains that they needed to go back home to Florida, to some place warm. There Ben started his work as an orthopedic surgeon and doctor. Ben continues to update the recorder on their situation. He relays his worries about something up in the rocks hunting them in the night.

The novel returns to the past-tense narrative as daylight dawned on day six of Ben and Ashley's survival endeavor. Ben left the cave in search of food. He walked for miles before he found anything. Eventually, he found a small school of freshwater trout in a far-away stream. He caught 47 of them and brought them back to the cave. When he returned, he found more tracks and signs of something stalking them near their shelter. He still kept this information to himself, choosing to neither talk about it with Ashley nor think of what the stalking creature may be or do.

Ben keeps the recorder up to date with his constant dictating. He talks about the situation he is in, but mostly he talks about his honeymoon with Rachel and the gift she gave him. Because of his busy life, Ben was often a few minutes late to almost every event or activity he engaged in. So his wife gave him a beautiful, and accurate, watch so he could be more on time. This was the same watch that he now wore.

In Chapter 15, Ben woke up to a growling coming from the shelter entrance. The dog fought off the intruder, a mountain lion, injuring itself in the process. A day later, Ben used the corpse of Grover, the dead pilot, as bait to draw the mountain lion out. With Grover's compound bow, Ben only managed to injure the mountain lion because Ashley crawled out of the shelter and shot a flare at the animal. Ben tracked its blood trail, and found it dead near the peak of a nearby ridge. The mountain lion provided food for Ben and Ashley as they prepared their departure from their current location.

Analysis

In much the same way that the isolated environment serves as a literal embodiment of their figurative condition, the mountain lion encountered in these chapters also serves



both a literal and figurative function. The mountain lion clearly represents encroaching death; it stands a figure of the mountain they are stranded on, an avatar for it. The word 'mountain' even exists in its name. The mountain lion is coming from the mountain itself to finish the two survivors off. It also represents the real tenuousness of Ben and Ashley's situation. Out on the mountain they are not the most powerful beings. Beyond all of that figurative language, the mountain lion is also just another literal obstacle in the way of Ben and Ashley's survival. It is something to be overcome. By defeating it they gain precious food, thus staving off both starvation and fear of death in a single instant. In terms of direct conflict, the mountain lion is reflective of Ben and Ashley. It is in the exact same environment attempting to survive. While Ben is out scouring for food, the mountain lion is doing the same. Ben and Ashley just happen to be the easiest food, much like the fish Ben finds in the stream.

Ben's finding of the fish resonates with popular Christian iconography. Specifically it hearkens to the Bible story of the feeding of the multitudes. When a large, hungry crowd gathered to hear Jesus speak, he fed them by multiplying loaves of bread and fish. Thus, a small amount of food went a long way. The author is perhaps intoning this idea by using small fish to keep the protagonists alive, suggesting that there is divine power behind their survival. Grilled fish was also the first meal given to the resurrected Jesus when he appeared to his disciples, and the fish Ben finds does, after some fashion, resurrect him with more energy, keeping him from the grave. On face value the idea of a divine power saving them is contradictory to the idea of Man Vs. Nature, since the divine power functions as a *deus ex machina*, quite literally. After closer examination, however, it is clear that that to receive something that symbolically resembles a divine gift, Ben had to walk for miles and demonstrate the willingness to find it on his own.

Grover's death is given great weight in the novel, as his death is part of the reason that Ben and Ashley survive. Yes his death provides the means for their predicament, but it also gave them the unfortunate opportunity to find themselves and their true identities. Grover's body itself is also used in a utilitarian function. In that kind of harsh, unforgiving environment, most anything can become a tool. While Grover reminds the characters of the thin line between life and death, his corpse also helps keep them alive. By using his corpse as bait to lure out the lion, Ben is able to successfully kill the creature. It could also be argued that thanks to Grover's dog, they survive the initial mountain lion attack. This then could be the narrative purpose of the dog, as it has thus far been mostly used as scene dressing.

Discussion Question 1

How is death treated in the novel? What function does it serve in the narrative?



Discussion Question 2

How are objects and ideas juxtaposed and dichotomized in Chapters 12-17 of the novel? What does it do to the narrative to set things up in a binary? Think about things like life and death, warm and cold, or man and woman.

Discussion Question 3

Why is the coming of the mountain lion both a blessing and a curse? Is it more of one than another? Explain.

Vocabulary

honeymoon, ER, caped, flare



Chapters 18 - 22

Summary

Ben dictates the time Rachel gave him the compass that he now has with him, and he reminisces about the sea turtles they watched hatch together. They had been running on the beach when they both heard a sound. They crept up a dune and watched a mother sea turtle dig her nest. The two of them come back to that spot every day to check on the eggs and eventually they watched them hatch together. Ben continues, saying that at Rachel's behest they eventually bought the stretch of property where the turtle laid her eggs so that they could protect and watch over them. He says that one of his greatest joys was giving that piece of property to her.

The next day, Ben buried Grover. First he prayed to God to help them. Then he pleaded with Grover to intercede on their behalf to God, to help them reach safety. Only a day after that, they left camp. Out of the wreckage of the plane Ben had built a sled to pull Ashley along with. They walked the entire day, and when Ben stopped to rest Ashley pressed him for information, wanting to find out more about Ben Payne. Ben revealed that he and his wife Rachel had separated and were not living together. She was living with their two children in the house they had built near the sea turtle refuge. He lived alone in their old condo up the beach. He did not see his wife or two kids much anymore. After learning all this, Ashley recorded a message for Rachel on the recorder. She said that Ben was a caring and compassionate man that deserved to be taken back, no matter what he did.

They continued, but because of worsening weather and little shelter, Ben decided to turn back. Ashley had fallen into a fitful sleep, so Ben made the decision alone. He wondered if by making this decision he had just saved their lives or condemned them. By nightfall, they were back at the crash site, worse for wear and having made no progress at all. This was a severe blow to everyone's morale.

Analysis

The burial of Grover and the birth of the sea turtles are chapters dichotomously opposed to each other. Like much of the novel, life and death play side by side with a little grey area put between. The sea turtle infants are fragile, wandering up-shore instead of towards the sea. Life presents itself as a small, weak thing, and death, in the next chapter, is the size of the expansive wilderness in front of Ben on top of the mountain. The line between life and death draws even more thinly every time Ben and Ashley face an obstacle, and burying Grover's corpse is a cold reminder of what they could have been or what they may soon become. While Ben's past is revealed to be something warm and filled with every day hopes. The line between life and death is drawn on a march larger scale to further enhance the tension in Ben's mountain



survival. With life so easily lived in his past, the difficulty of his survival on the mountain is made that much clearer.

The contrast between life and death is enhanced with the settings as well. The scene with the turtles plays out on a beach not far from Ben's home in Jacksonville Florida, contrasting with the bitter cold of the mountains. Life is depicted as warm, fragile and happy. Death is depicted as cold and bitter. Ben's ideas of home circle around the beach at Jacksonville, and now he is practically as far away from that home as he could be in terms of climate and distance. This places his mental state in a place of distance too. The further he is from home the further into his own mind he has to go to find those memories again. It is not coincidence that Ben's home is placed as an opposite to the mountain he is on. In exploring the ideas of home and place, the beach memories make the mountain more alien to the characters and the readers.

Because of the nature of the first person narrative, most of the important, defining character moments are reserved solely for the protagonist Ben Payne, but this section has the first and one of the most important moments for Ashley's character. Ashley's willingness to record a message for Ben's wife Rachel in front of Ben shows a deeper affection than what otherwise did not seem present. Her affection is obvious because he saved her life, but what is important is her honesty in revealing this information. She is not talking to Ben about himself. She is talking to his wife through the recorder, and when Ben claims that he and his wife separated, Ashley asks Rachel, through the recorder, to reconsider. This reveals a blunt honesty of character that foreshadows future events and gives the reader a deeper insight into Ashley, who up to this point has been relegated to just being dragged around by Ben.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ben take the time to bury Grover despite it being a waste of both resources and time?

Discussion Question 2

Based on the information up to this point, why does Ben keep recording messages to his wife if they are separated?

Discussion Question 3

After finishing the novel, why does Ben keep recording messages to Rachel?

Vocabulary

ivory, downhill, Gatorade, disheartening

Chapters 23 - 26

Summary

The day after their retreat, Ashley and Ben tried again to leave the crash site. They were not exactly sure how long they had been out there, as Ben's watch had broken from the fluctuating temperatures. They continued on regardless until Ben stopped at dark, a little over a mile from where they started. Ben set up camp where they stopped. He made a fire-bow kit in preparation for future fire lighting. His jet boil stove was running out of fuel and he had no lighter or matches. This meant that without those items their only means of fire would be friction fire. Ben had never made fire by friction before, but he knew how to do it. He believed that this would be his only option, so despite his skill he made a fire-bow set anyway. They continued on their heading the next day, Ben trudging through the snow and Ashley being dragged on a sled as her leg was still in a non-functional state. They stopped at a small rock outcropping. Ashley and Ben continued to bond as they shared a small space together. They shared each others' body heat, and Ben found himself lost in the smell of her hair in particular.

The pair continued onward. At the end of approximately the 14th day, Ben stopped and built a shelter out of evergreen boughs. He successfully made a fire with the fire-bow kit. Before the day ended completely, Ben climbed the nearby ridge to get his bearings again and see what landmarks were nearby. As he scanned the horizon, Ben's eyes caught something that looked to be a man-made structure far on the horizon. Ben returned to Ashley and they huddled for warmth in their shelter through the night. The next morning, Ben helped Ashley walk up the ridge to get a second opinion on the man-made structure. They agreed that they should go for it, but Ashley said that Ben should just leave her behind. Ben vehemently refused, citing his unwillingness to sacrifice her and see her face on the back of his eyelids every time he went to sleep.

Analysis

Only when Ben's watch breaks, and they lose one of their last connections to the civilized world, are Ben and Ashley able to finally leave the crash site and attempt a self-rescue. Before this, they seemed trapped by the ideals and predilections given to them by society, primarily that someone would or could save them from their torment. It was a very passive view that counted on waiting it out, counting the days so to speak. Their only way to count the actual days was Ben's watch, given to him by his wife Rachel. When his watch breaks, they lose track of the exact time and the exact day. Only by embracing the perspectives of the wilderness are they able to continue on through it. The novel obliquely references the movie *Jeremiah Johnson* several times early on as much of that film was shot in the wilderness the protagonists found themselves in. The major theme of that movie was the same as presented here, that one cannot work against the mountain, only with it. So without any real ties to civilization they venture deeper into the wilderness to try and rescue themselves. As they journey, the last of



their ties to civilization is severed when Ben's stove runs out of fuel. He must resort to starting fire from friction which involves only using approximately three pieces of wood to start a fire. It involves nothing pre-packaged or man-made. Interestingly enough, it is when they are fully immersed in the wilderness, going as far as to shelter themselves in the resources of the mountain, do they spot a man-made structure. This brings everything back full circle from where they set out on their journey from the crash site.

As is often the case with much of modern literature, Ben's watch can also be read as a symbol for time. The wear of time in this particular story seems to relate to time running out or running down, in as much as time is the ultimate killer. Ben and Ashley do not have a lot of time until something on the mountain kills them, whether that is lack of food, injuries, or exposure to the cold. The breaking of Ben's watch must therefore be the culminating symbol of time being completely run out. They are out of time for a rescue. Everything beyond this point, it could be argued, is borrowed time for the protagonists.

Despite his constant recorded messages to Rachel, Ben Payne is falling in love with Ashley. Their ordeal is pushing them closer together. This is most obviously observed when they make camp in a small rock outcropping, just before they set off towards the man-made structure. This is perhaps the first time that they spoon for warmth in the same sleeping bag with their heads close to each other. Ben even admits to himself that he likes the way she smells and that he regrets feeling this way. Still, when Ashley forces his hand and asks him to leave her behind, Ben does not let his regret get in the way of his newfound affection. He refuses to leave her behind. This may be the moment where he leaves off his more utilitarian views, adopting something more akin to how Rachel views the world. In previous chapters, Ben described Rachel as "seeing what could be" and now that is exactly what Ben is doing by refusing to leave Ashley behind. A pragmatic approach would be to leave her behind and find help first, but instead Ben carries onward, Ashley along with him.

Discussion Question 1

Analyze Ben's decision to not leave Ashley behind. Is it made purely through logic or purely through emotion? Why does he so adamantly refuse to even consider it?

Discussion Question 2

How does Ben feel about the growing bond with Ashley? How does it work in the context of his apparent marriage to Rachel? Are there contradictions in his actions?

Discussion Question 3

How does the breaking of Ben's watch affect the morale and mental health of the characters?

Vocabulary

disoriented, hungover, condensation, Neosporin

Chapters 27 - 33

Summary

The pair set out towards what they hoped to be some kind of man-made structure. On the way, Ben fell through the false top of a stream bed, soaking his body from the waist down. In the process of falling, he toppled over Ashley's sled, tearing a hole in it and twisting her bad leg. Ben jury-rigged a system of netting to fix the sled and used water proof stuff-sacks to put between his dry socks and his wet boots. He salvaged what he could out of the situation, but he was now on the verge of hypothermia. Ashley's condition was now worsening as well. The fall agitated her leg, and she was in great pain. The newly jury-rigged sled also worked against Ben as he walked. Still, they continued on but at a significantly slower, and more difficult, pace. Ben passed out in the snow from the exertion. He woke up in the sunlight and Ashley fed him bits of mountain lion meat that she had been hoarding. This upset Ben as she needed the protein to heal, but he had no energy himself to protest. This last bit of food was enough to help Ben propel them towards their destination.

They reached what turned out to be a large A-frame cabin with seven other smaller cabins surrounding. In it they found shelter and the remnants of some food. They built a fire and rested in full for the first time in approximately 17 days. Ben found a map of the area that turned out to be called Ashley National Forest. He bathed, and so did Ashley. In Chapters 29, 31, and 33 Ben dictates to his recorder again. Through the recorder, he talks to his wife about the events surrounding the birth of their first children, who turned out to be twins. He chronicles the buying of the nursery furniture, the ultrasounds, and the stress of preparing for newborn children. Ben explains that he wanted to go back to those times because not soon after those times he and his wife Rachel drifted apart. Though Ben admits that he had already begun to drift away from Rachel, letting himself be consumed with his profession. These present tense recordings occur in between the past tense events of the novel.

Analysis

Death and life come into close contact again in this section of the novel, as Ben nearly dies and later recalls the conception of his children, highlighting again the primary argument of this novel; life is precious, short, and worthy of defending. Much of what is revealed later about Ben Payne's wife and children re-informs the early decision to not leave Ashley behind. This was something he absolutely refused to do. He would not consider an argument about it. This refusal nearly leads to Ben's death as he drives himself to physical and mental exhaustion in pursuit of what may or may not be some form of salvation. He breaks through a false top, risking hypothermia, and had Ashley not been hoarding bits of meat away for later, he would have collapsed. He brushes up with death just as they reach their destination, saving them for now. Ben's thoughts then turn to his children, by way of his discussions with the recorder. Again, the hope of new



life is paired with the renewed hope of the main characters in the face of overwhelming odds.

Up until this point in the novel, Ashley has played a fairly passive role, falling prey to many damsel in distress tropes prevalent in romance literature; nevertheless, she demonstrates at this point that she has some sense of autonomy in her hiding of the mountain lion bits. Ben has been giving Ashley a larger share of the food in an effort to help her body heal. As this moment reveals, she has been eating something more like an equal share. Previous sections have revealed how Ben may be falling in love with Ashley. Her saving of the food could be read as her falling in love with Ben. Although, her choice could be read as simply a more pragmatic one. Yes Ashley needs the protein to heal, but she also needs Ben to drag her to safety. She will not heal in the time needed to save herself. So paradoxically, she has to starve herself to save herself. Her affection for Ben and her will to survive do not have to be mutually exclusive, though. She can both love Ben and desire to get out of this situation alive. In fact this is the most likely scenario.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ashley hide bits of mountain lion for later instead of eating them right away? Analyze her actions and their consequences.

Discussion Question 2

Research the terms "irony" and "coincidence." Is it coincidental that the forest they are lost in is called "Ashley National Forest" or is it ironic? Is it both? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author choose to include Ben's recordings to his wife? How do these recordings inform the actions of the protagonist in this section?

Vocabulary

morbid, swelling, alpine



Chapters 34 - 39

Summary

Ben went outside searching for the dog, as it had not returned. He found it in a puddle of bloody snow. It had killed a rabbit and was eating it raw. Concern for him gone, Ben returned to the A-frame and helped Ashley out of the bath tub. She asked if it had been difficult for him to be around her so much and if he had thought about having sex with her. Ben reaffirmed his faithfulness to his wife, despite the fact that they had separated. He gave her a puzzle to do—one he found in one of the many cabins around the A-frame—while he went out to hunt. He killed two rabbits and brought them back. Ben tried to tell Ashley about the truth about his separation with his wife, but he could not.

In Chapters 35 and 36, continuing the trend of every other chapter, Ben reveals to the reader, through the use of dictating to the recorder, the primary reason behind he and his wife's separation. Rachel, Ben's wife, had complications during her pregnancy with the twins. Her placenta was tearing away from her uterine wall. This threatened her life and she was cautioned to abort the children to save her life. Rachel refused to do so, clinging to the small chance that the children might make it. Ben had thought this was selfish and got into an argument with his wife. This culminated in him saying that he did not even want the children any more. In the recordings, Ben alludes to the fact that the story only got worse. He decides that he will tell Ashley about it, but he still is not sure.

Ben and Ashley spent the next two days recovering in the cabin. Ben continued to hunt, and Ashley continued to heal. Ben worried about whether or not they should leave from their position in search of rescue. On the one hand they were safe and warm, on the other, they could run out of food before help arrived. Ben wanted them to decide together, but Ashley shrugged it off and told Ben to let her know when he made up his mind on what they should do.

Analysis

A jigsaw puzzle that Ben finds after they reach the cabins represents one putting their life back together, piece by piece. This piecing is consistent theme throughout the book, of which much can be said. The puzzle alone, thought, hefts some significant narrative weight. Ben gives the puzzle to Ashley for her to do, and she asks if he wants to help. He refuses, saying it "makes me dizzy just looking at it" (233). Literally speaking, the puzzle makes the characters feel more human. Coming from a cold, bleak wilderness into a cabin playing board games has a way of making them feel more human and help in recuperation. Figuratively, the puzzle can be read as a metaphor for Ben Payne's pieced together life. It does not come with a picture on the cover of the box. They do not know what picture the pieces will make when it is put together, much like the summation of one's life. Without a picture it is difficult for Ben to comprehend where to begin. Ashley says to "Just to take your time. Eventually it'll come together" (233). To this, Ben



responds with a question asking, “What if it doesn’t?” (233), but Ashley reassures him that “It will. Maybe not like you think, but it will” (234). The puzzle does a lot of narrative work to cement the themes of the book and provide metaphorical sub-text to the simple action of putting a puzzle together. It is not really about the puzzle as it is about Ashley’s self-assuredness in the face of Ben’s skepticism and self-doubt.

These chapters also contain the first important clue about Rachel, which informs much of what has happened in the novel thus far. Primarily the reader finds out how Rachel saw “things that could be” and how this contrasted with Ben’s pragmatic view. What Ben had been talking about previously is spelled out explicitly here. Rachel was willing to hope in the face of hopelessness. She was willing to sacrifice herself for some other bigger picture. She was able to see the best out of her situation, which was not dissimilar from the situation Ben now finds himself in. Now Ben’s unwillingness to give up on Ashley is similar to Rachel’s unwillingness to give up on her pregnancy.

The revelations in the Chapters involving Ben dictating to the recorder also reveal to the reader the purpose of the recordings chapters themselves. The author has used these chapters to intricately weave in clues of both Ben and his ex-wife Rachel’s past. These past events are critical in Ben’s development as a character. Without them, the reader would be unaware of how and why Ben is changing and developing. A constant motif of any survival story is Man Vs. Nature and Man Vs. Himself. These Chapters help underscore Ben’s internal struggles.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ben not reveal all the truth about his separation to Ashley at this point?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ashley force Ben to make the decision on his own? Analyze her decision to opt out of this in the context of her physical lameness.

Discussion Question 3

What is the puzzle of symbol of? Why did the author choose to insert this symbol here?

Vocabulary

skewered, monopoly, triumphant, snare



Chapters 40 - 45

Summary

Ben tried again to hunt something to carry them the rest of their journey. He set himself up beneath an evergreen tree, using the foliage as a blind. Over the period of a few days he hunted that same area. Eventually he came across a mother moose and her calf. Ben chose to shoot the calf. This way the mother could go on to produce more calves and he would hurt the environment less, but Ben's shot went wide and he only injured it. By nightfall the wounded calf attracted wolves and an angry mother attacked both them and Ben. He survived, and ended up with less meat than he had hoped by the end of it. The situation with the moose reminded him of Rachel, and it caused him a great deal of mental and spiritual suffering. But with enough food for a journey, he decided to leave the A-frame with Ashley, following the map he found towards a logging road. The going was much easier than before thanks in part to the use of actual snowshoes and a plastic sled, all scavenged from the cabins near the A-frame. Dragging Ashley along in the sled much like before, Ben covered quite a bit of ground over the course of a couple of days.

At about 32 miles away from their starting position, Ben spotted a light in the distance and a thin trail of smoke. He showed Ashley and it lifted their spirits. They continued on, eventually coming to a steep drop off. Ben elected to scale the steep slope to avoid nearly 10 miles of walking around. Unfortunately, the snow on the slope was not secure and halfway down it they caused an avalanche. It buried Ben. Ashley dug him out, but the avalanche did not leave her unharmed. Though she skated across the snow's surface thanks to the sled, she had careened into a boulder and re-broken her leg. Her femur now stuck up out of the skin. Ben could not move her. He left her there and ran the rest of the way towards the light and smoke trail by himself. During his run he had visions of the past, of his father's ruthless training, and of his wife Rachel. He nearly killed himself during the run, but he made it to what turned out to be a cabin. What seemed like seconds later to him they were flying through the drifts on snowmobiles. A LifeFlight helicopter was called. They were rescued.

Analysis

Ben's decision to only kill the calf moose and not the mother is directly related to the rift between him and Rachel. Here he chose again the utilitarian option, thinking what would yield the best results for everyone. As it turned out, it was the wrong decision. It was wrong in the sense that it prompted the attack of the wolves and the mother moose's attack on him. It could be read as a contradictory moment because Ben had to take one of them, he could not preserve life inevitably there if he too wanted to live. To be alive, he finds, one must consume life. Ben thinks, however, that by killing the calf he saves the mother to produce more offspring. The novel may be positing that taking life is as equal and as harsh on any creature or person. The mother moose does not know



that this situation is objectively best, she only knows that her calf is dead. Her anguish mirrors Ben's own anguish in making that choice and in the circumstances that caused him and his wife to separate. The similarity between the moose and Rachel is not lost on Ben either. After gaining what little meat he could from the calf he had a sort of a mental breakdown.

The small light they see after days of travel is both a literal and figurative light at the end of the tunnel, though it is also the cause of further obstacles. The excitement of seeing this light nearly killed both Ben and Ashley. As they came towards it they encountered a steep drop off and because hope shined so bright for them, they decided not to go around the drop off. The avalanche they caused was nearly the final nail in the coffin for both of them. What likely saved them, ironically enough, was Ashley's injury. Because of her broken leg, Ben had to drag her on a sled. Because of the sled, Ashley skated above the surface of the snow as it broke away while it dragged Ben under. Though Ashley re-broke her leg on a boulder, she was still able to dig Ben out. Had she not broken her leg in the first place, they both would have been covered in heavy snow, unable to move. This would have killed them. Her injury helped them survive, and it helped Ben escape the snow to run himself nearly to death to save them both.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ben choose to shoot the calf and not the mother? Was his logical decision making correct or clouded?

Discussion Question 2

What events mirror the situation with the moose and her calf? How do these metaphors and reflections serve or enhance the narrative?

Discussion Question 3

What keeps Ben going during his final run? Is it just trying to save Ashley, or is there something else there? Explain your answers with evidence from the text.

Vocabulary

waltzing, calf, aspen, descended, avalanche



Chapters 46 - 51

Summary

The LifeFlight had taken Ashley to Salt Lake City where they performed emergency surgery on her leg. Ben was there for the last hour. He was recovering in the same hospital. During their recovery the media went crazy for their survival story. Ben focused only on Ashley and did not talk to the media. He got her a cheeseburger some time after her surgery, fulfilling a promise he had made, and he called her fiancé Vince. Then Ben left the hospital and visited Grover's wife. He brought Grover's dog and the last few of his possessions back to her. He told her that he buried Grover on a beautiful mountain top. After coming back to the hospital and meeting Vince, Ben returned home to Jacksonville Florida to see Rachel. He shared with her all the recordings he had made in the mountains. In doing so he found a secret recording that Ashley had made right after the avalanche. It asked Rachel to forgive Ben as he was a great, almost indescribable man.

Three months later Ben and Rachel were invited to Ashley and Vince's rehearsal dinner. Ben came by himself and left a gift of a recorder without talking to Ashley. On the recorder he told Ashley that his wife had not taken him back, and that he was alone. He expressed a sense of gratitude and sorrow for everything he and Ashley had been through.

Weeks later, Ben was running on the beach by his condo when Ashley met him again. She had been looking for him after she found his gift to her. She asked to see Rachel. Ben took her. As it turned out, Ben took her to the grave of Rachel and his two children Michael and Hannah. He told Ashley the story about how Rachel had what was called a partial abruption, where the placenta was tearing away from the uterine wall. Rachel had refused to abort the children saying that she was "not living the rest of my life looking at Michael and Hannah on the back of my eyelids" (320). This caused their separation, but soon after Rachel died from internal bleeding. Ben had never been able to apologize. Ashley helped him apologize in that moment. Then, she revealed that she had left Vince, and the two of them ran off together down the beach, towards the sunset.

Analysis

The novel has consistently used dichotomous pairs to highlight key themes, motifs, and ideas, and none are as clear or important as the pair of Ben and Ashley; the final sections reveal all the work that has been done throughout the novel to make this clear. Ashley is the one who, according to Ben himself, pieced him back together after being broken by the death of his wife and unborn children. The dichotomy exists as Ben is the one helped piece Ashley together physically after the crash. She actually broke a part of herself, in this case her femur, and multiple times in fact. Ben was there to do the physical attending of healing another person. Ashley, immobile and basically reliant on



Ben for everything while they were trapped in the wild, took the figurative bits of a broken man and put them back together again with her caring and honest demeanor. The novel posits that both are necessary and they complement each other.

The revelation at the end of the book, casts the book in a completely new light, and Ben Payne's heroism is only seen as even greater. The novel only alludes to Ben's brokenness in the early parts of the story, but at the end, it is revealed that his wife and children have been dead for years. The recordings he left suddenly become akin to letters to a dead loved one, and they were only for Ben and never for Rachel. The revelation shows why Ben was so persistent to protect Ashley's life at all costs. He refused to leave her much in the same way that Rachel refused to receive a medically necessary abortion. Both Rachel and Ben took a risk to protect life. IT could be argued that Ben would have had a higher chance of survival had he left Ashley behind or given up on her. This is much like Rachel's situation where no one would blame her for aborting the children to save her own life. This risk Rachel took influenced Ben's decision making on the mountain. Without Rachel's initial sacrifice, Ben would not have been as driven as he was to save Ashley's life. So in a way, while Rachel failed in giving life to her children, she saved Ashley by proxy.

Discussion Question 1

What is the true fate of Ben's wife Rachel? Why was the true information kept from the readers? What happens to the novel after this information is revealed?

Discussion Question 2

Analyze Ben's decision to withhold this information. Why did he not tell Ashley until the very last moment?

Discussion Question 3

Analyze Ashley's decision to leave her fiancé. Did she do so only because of Ben's present to her? Would she have done it anyway?

Vocabulary

cappuccino, IV, melting



Characters

Ben Payne

Ben is the protagonist of *The Mountain Between Us*. He is a surgeon from Jacksonville Florida away at a conference in Colorado, which sets off the events of this book. He is the subject of the novel's primary characterization, and the story is told exclusively from his perspective. He is a self-proclaimed broken man that has suffered the death of a wife and two unborn children. This is all before he is cast out into the mountainous wilderness to survive with a woman he barely knows. Ultimately, he comes to know himself as complete only after going through these trials and tribulations.

It is thanks to Ben's experience as a doctor and an athlete that allows him to survive and, by proxy, keep Ashley alive. Much of Ben's development as a character is tied to his past with his abusive father. As a runner growing up, Ben's father made him get up early in the mornings to train. The training bordered on physical abuse, and without praise or help, his father also psychologically abused Ben. The abuse partially accounts for Ben's brokenness, but it also gave him the mental fortitude required to survive such an ordeal as being lost in a mountainous wilderness. Ben can in part thank his history in track and cross country and his father's abuse for saving his life. Ben's history as a doctor adds convenience to a plot where both of the main characters incur severe injuries.

Ashley Knox

Ashley is the other main character of the novel, though almost no time is spent delving into her past or her characterizations. This is simply because the story is not told from her perspective, but still spends a lot of time with her. She is a writer for a magazine and a well-versed martial artist. She ends up at the same airport as Ben Payne on her way to her wedding. Ultimately she leaves her fiancé to be with Ben after all they went through together in the mountains.

At various points in the novel Ashley falls prey to the damsel in distress character archetype. Her autonomy is put into question when she breaks her leg and the male lead must then drag her to safety on a sled. She has several autonomous moments, and it is thanks to her sled that both Ben and her survive an Avalanche near the end of the novel. Her injured condition presents a difficult obstacle for Ben that serves as a device to prompt his character growth. Though, arguably, Ashley encounters no growth herself, she is pivotal in Ben's development.

Grover

Grover is the charter plane pilot that crashes the two main characters in the mountains after suffering a heart attack in the air.



Tank; Napoleon

Tank is Grover's dog that always flies with him. He survives the crash and comes to be known as Napoleon by Ben and Ashley.

Rachel Payne

Rachel is Ben's deceased wife. She died by refusing a medically necessary abortion. Her death haunts Ben's character.

Michael and Hannah

Michael and Hannah were the unborn children of Ben and Rachel. They died only seconds from the womb in an emergency C-section.

Ben Payne's father

Ben Payne's father is the man who forced Ben to get into competitive running. He trained him ruthlessly.

Vince

Vince is Ashley's fiancé. Not much is said about him in the novel.

Grover's wife

Grover's wife only comes to learn of Grover's death through Ben after he is rescued. Tank is returned to her. She was the subject of Grover's great affection, and he made it known during his flight with Ben and Ashley.

The Mountain

The environment itself takes the form as an antagonist character in the novel, ever present and ruthlessly driven to kill both Ben and Ashley. A mountain lion acts first as its avatar in this way, and then later an avalanche achieves this purpose. Its general apathy towards human life is its primary characteristic.



Symbols and Symbolism

The unfinished puzzle

The unfinished puzzle represents the broken pieces of Ben's life, and since the puzzle has no reference picture, Ben thinks it is impossible to piece together, in the same way he thinks his life is permanently broken. Ashley disagrees and proves him wrong on both counts.

The finished puzzle

The finished puzzle is a symbol of the personal perspective involved when introspecting one's life. It also symbolizes Ashley being the one who is able to piece Ben back together. Even when the puzzle is finished Ben still is not sure what to make of it. It is a picture of a sun near the horizon of the mountains. He asks if it is a sunset or a sunrise.

The crashed and broken plane

The broken plane is the culminating symbol, representing Ben's broken life. This physical reality forces him to confront the reality of his wife's death back home in civilization.

The compass

The compass is a symbol of direction, or finding one's way. It is made even more significant by the fact that Ben's dead wife gave it to him. Ben has lost his way, both in the mountains and at home. The compass helps him find it by pointing north and by reminding him of his wife.

The mountain

The mountain represents all the death, despair, apathy that surrounds the characters. It is through this despair that they ultimately come to right themselves interestingly enough.

Ashley's broken leg

Ashley's broken leg is another symbol of brokenness that reflects Ben's interiority. His intent to mend this broken thing ultimately leads to his own spiritual mending.



The mother moose and her calf

The mother moose and her calf is a symbol for the choice between life and death. It is significant because it also serves as an allegory or metaphor for Ben's decision to split with his wife. Both the situation with his wife and the moose calf symbolize the choice between saving life and taking it.

The beach

The beach symbolizes the dichotomous opposite to the mountain. Where the mountain is death and apathy, the beach symbolizes the warm and loving qualities of life.

The recording device

The recording device symbolizes, and physically embodies, prayer and hope. Ben records messages to his dead wife through this device, giving it to her at the end of the novel. The act of doing this brings hope to the protagonist where none can be found.

Ben's watch

Ben's watch symbolizes civilization's obsession with measuring time. It only serves to make their time in the wilderness worse. Only when it breaks are they able to break free from the crash site and rescue themselves. It also symbolizes how they are running out of time.



Settings

The sky above the mountains

Not much time is spent here, but this setting presents the perspectives that remain throughout the whole novel. As Grover points out, seeing life below them so tiny puts their own lives into a more honest and humble perspective. Their personal trials and tribulations and stressors are nothing when viewed from the window of a plane. By extension these problems that persist in civilized society disappear when that plane crashes into the wilderness below.

The Crash Site

Much of the novel is spent here as both Ben and Ashley recover from their wounds. Basic survival rules state, according to Ben, that it is best to stay with the crashed object. So the two of them do so. Ashley breaks her leg on impact, and that is addressed here as well. Primarily their injuries keep them there, but also it is their last tie to civilization in a vast wilderness. Having to leave it means only further isolation. Their first attempt to leave ends in failure also, and they are drawn back to it one final time before they can depart.

The Airport

This is the fateful setting where Ben Payne meets Ashley Knox. They meet in the terminal and ultimately end up on the same flight that gets cancelled. They share pleasantries and tell the other about themselves. After his flight is cancelled, Ben hires a charter to take him across the mountains. He offers Ashley a ride in it too, hoping to help her get to her wedding. This is what places them in the situation that makes up the majority of the novel.

The A-Frame

The A-Frame is the first sign of civilization Ben and Ashley find while trapped in the wild. Only after nearly three weeks do they find it. It is some kind of scout's cabin, large enough for group meetings and likely only in use in the summer. Other, smaller cabins surround it. Here they rest and recuperate for the final leg of their journey.

Jacksonville, Florida

This is where both Ben and his wife Rachel are from originally. After college they move back there and try to start a family. After the events of the novel Ben lives there alone

for a time. The beach is set up as the opposite to the mountains and represents all that is good and warm in Ben's life.



Themes and Motifs

The Value of Life

By using nature and the extreme circumstance of being lost in an unforgiving wasteland, the novel claims early on that life is something to be treasured and defended at all costs. This is most clearly displayed in Ben's undying devotion to protect Ashley Knox. She becomes quintessential life when she breaks her leg in the crash. She only exists and cannot help Ben in any way other than morale. Ben does not protect her life because it necessarily benefits him but, rather, because it is something that is always worth saving. Several times, especially towards the end of the book as their situation worsens, Ashley tells Ben to leave her behind. Ben consistently refuses. He does not want to have to think about her every day afterward if she did survive. With this, the novel argues that a life lost does not necessarily equal a life gained but just another life lost. Unlike in nature where everything exists on equivalent exchange, one life, as the novel seems to say, is not equal to another.

The reveal at the end of the novel further solidifies this theme and recasts it in terms of Ben's wife and children's lives. The scene with the mother moose and her calf takes on a metaphorical resonance. Ben thought in terms of equivalent exchange, thinking that taking the calf's life was more useful than the mother's. The subsequent violence that ensues is a direct result of his actions. The mother moose losing her calf mirrors the situation that Rachel was put in. Ben choosing to kill the calf and save the mother exactly mirrored his wish for Rachel to abort the children and save herself. The utilitarian mindset degrades the inherent value of life, as per Martin's novel.

The true value of life is only, and can only, be revealed by the protagonist's journey into the wilderness. The novel posits that civilized society often undervalues life and only when that life is threatened can one be in a position to respect it. On life Ben says, "I take it for granted. I wake up each day thinking I'll wake up tomorrow too" (118). Grover offers succinct words of wisdom about perspective, saying about his plane that "I see an enclosed capsule that lifts you up above the problems of the earth and gives you a perspective you can't get on land. Where you can see clearly" (36). He claims that being a pilot has given him a wider perspective of the world, intoning that he values what is important and forgets what is not important. It is fitting then that his plane, by crashing in the mountains, is also the literal vehicle of Ben and Ashley's new perspective on life.

Piecing together

Ben claims that he is a broken man, and the novel does a lot of work to break this down thematically with ideas of breaking apart and reforming. The most obvious and literal instance of this is Ashley's broken leg at the start of the story. She literally breaks a part of herself, and since she is a martial artist, it is an important part. Ben spends the better part of the novel trying to mend Ashley. Of course he can only help it along. All the



mending is done by Ashley's body. This is consistent with the theme, as one can only mend one's self, according to the novel, but others can help it along and speed up the process. Ben's occupation is also in line with the theme. He pieces people together in surgery on a regular basis. This is only surface level, however, and the story attempts to drive deeper into the meaning of what it is to be broken and mended.

Ashley is arguably the one who does most of the piecing together in the novel. According to Ben himself, she was the only one capable of putting him back together again after his wife Rachel passed. She consistently boosted his morale during their ordeal while at the same time maintaining a level of honesty that others did not seem willing to give him. She was willing to leave her fiancé to continue the journey they started in the mountains. At one point she was willing to forego eating to save food for Ben to eat while he dragged her to safety. While Ben pieced her back physically, Ashley pieced Ben back mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Other examples of this piecing include the use of the picture-less puzzle, the plane that had broken into two, the breaking placenta in Rachel, and the mountain range that splits and breaks the landscape apart. Some of the clearest evidence of this motif comes from Ben himself. He claims that "[o]nce a heart breaks . . . it doesn't just grow back. It's not a lizard's tail. It's more like a huge stained glass that shattered into a million pieces, and it's not going back together. Least not the way it was" (136). He claims that his broken person can never be pieced back together the way it was. He is right in as much as he does come back together again, different but complete. When dealing with the broken puzzle, a clear symbol for Ben, Ashley tells him to "Just take your time. Eventually, it'll come together" (233). She is really telling him to be patient with himself and his own piecing together.

Running

Part of Ben Payne's back story involves competitive running and it is used as a backdrop for the primary mover of the narrative. First, Ben has to walk and run them to safety. His past in running influences the way he carries his physical body through the landscape. Running is also how he and his wife Rachel met. The two of them continued to run long after high school, impacting Ben's fitness and giving him the mental and physical fortitude to survive his ordeal. Ben likely ended up being such a successful runner because of his father's abusive training regime. He says that "Dad used pain to rid me of pain. Leaving me empty and hurting" (53), but thanks to that painful training he met Rachel who "filled" Ben up. After meeting Rachel Ben says that "for the first time I felt no pain" (53).

In the climactic scene of the novel, when Ashley has re-broken her leg in the avalanche and Ben must leave her to get help, he runs. During this run he even has flashbacks of all the times he had run before, the times with Rachel and the times with his abusive father. Ben pushes his body to its actual limit and runs for both his life and Ashley's. The important distinction between this scene and the others dealing with running is that now Ben is running towards something instead of from something. This is a moment of re-



orientation for Ben Payne. He is not running for his own survival but for someone else. It is here that his running is ultimately turned from a selfish act into a selfless one.

As with many of the themes in this novel, the physical landscape of the characters and their settings often reflects a figurative interiority. Such is the case with Ben's running. By learning of his wife's death at the end of the book, the readers are made aware of how Ben has been figuratively running away from certain aspects of his life. He had not, up until the events of the novel, been able to fully confront his shame after separating with his wife with no reconciliation. After their fight over the fate of their unborn children, Ben runs off down the beach. By the time he returns, his wife is dead. Only after his time in the mountains with Ashley is he able to stop running and face the full breadth of his sorrow. The novel also ends with Ben and Ashley running down that very same beach together, into the sunset. Out of running comes conflict and resolution. It is a through-line through the entire novel.

The Dichotomy of Nature

Many themes, symbols, ideas, and narrative elements are separated into binary systems in this novel, in an effort to capitalize on the primary theme of life versus death. The settings are the first example of this. The book has two primary settings: the mountainous wilderness of Utah, and the beach in Jacksonville Florida. These two places are set as polar opposites to one another. The idea of civilization is dichotomized with a savage wilderness. Humanity, in the form of the main characters, plays opposite to the many beasts in the mountains. A mountain lion, the very avatar of the mountain itself, is set opposed to them, with man ultimately being the victor in this instance. The lives of two unborn babies mirror the lives of two people dying in the wild. Grover's death helps continue Ben's life in a way. There are numerous examples, as most of the novel participates in this dichotomization.

The novel, by its structure and binary design, argues that the world, and even the universe, exists in two parts. Each object or person used in this novel has a dichotomous opposite. Nature, portrayed by the mountains, has civilization, portrayed by condos on the beach. Ben, a man, has Ashley to thematically oppose him during the events of the novel and Rachel to oppose him in the events leading up to the novel. Doing this allows opportunity for reflection and development. It follows in the long literary tradition of using foils to further explore characters and ideas. By having things opposing to one another, their attributes are more obvious and seem more important to the overall plot.

The narrative itself is split into two equally idealistic, though unequal in length, parts. On the one hand there is the survival story, told in the first person past tense. This is where the main events of the novel happen, as like in any other book. On the other hand, many of the chapters are italicized as present tense dialogue, where Ben narrates to his recorder. Nothing new ever happens here, as the protagonist does not narrate the events on the novel in the present, but rather he takes the time to reflect on his current situation and reminisce on the past with Rachel. Typically, the recordings happen at



night, and the events of the novel occur during the day. There is grey area, but the majority follows this black and white pattern.

Isolation

Isolation is another motif in the novel that helps highlight the deep and thorough characterization going on with the protagonist. By physically isolating them in the wilderness, the reader can spend all their time concerned with only getting to know the primary characters. The novel never leaves the wilderness until the characters do. Ben's reminiscing of the past is only sporadic and never completely devoid of the veil of the mountain surrounding him. This isolation also includes a mental isolation as Ben walls himself off from Ashley, only opening up to her when really pressed with specific questions. Even then, Ben never reveals the truth about his wife's death until he is back in civilization, and again, he only shows Ashley Rachel's grave when she asks to see her.

The isolation also gives the characters time to reflect about themselves. While the reader is never aware of what Ashley's reflections are until she says them, they are more than aware of Ben's. His thoughts center around his ex-wife Rachel. An important moment comes early on as Ben, in his isolation, says that "Staring out across this ice-capped landscape with nothing but the impossible staring back at me, I am reminded. I see what is. You see what could be" (81), realizing and coming to terms with what he lost when lost Rachel. These character moments could not be entirely achieved without the isolation the mountain wilderness presents.

It could be argued that the readers themselves are placed in a similar position of isolation as the protagonists. The novel is told in the first person, from only Ben's perspective. The readers are isolated inside Ben's perspective, being put in the exact same place as him mentally. The reader, like Ben never knows Ashley's thoughts unless she says them. The readers are not aware of any rescue attempts or what anyone in civilization is doing. This serves to heighten the despair, and ultimately the triumph, of the main characters. The reader is forced to experience what the main characters experience. Nevertheless, the readers are still not entirely aware of the whole situation until the very end of the story. They are isolated in the amount of information Ben provides early on. This isolation is purposeful on the part of the author to keep certain pieces of information hidden. These hidden pieces re-color the story in a different light and allow for multiple readings.



Styles

Point of View

The story is told entirely from the first person perspective from the main character Ben Payne. The reader is always in Ben's head. This primarily serves as a focusing device on Ben's character. As the readers never leave him, they are made witness to every detail of his personal journey. It also helps to highlight the oral nature of the story. Given that it is a story of survival, it is fitting that it should be told in the fashion of a story around a campfire. The point of view also heightens the sense of isolation present throughout the novel. The readers know nothing beyond what Ben knows, and they do not even know everything that Ben knows until the end. This makes them isolated like the characters.

Language and Meaning

A key piece of information is left out in the novel and only revealed close to the end, casting the story in an entirely different light. In this way, the author manipulates language to derive two meanings from the text. It is much like the puzzle that Ashley completes during their stay at the A-frame cabin; it can be both sunset and sun rise. The reveal, or plot twist, is that Ben's wife was dead the whole time. He acts as if she was alive, and Ashley acts in this same fashion, totally unaware. The readers are along for this same ride, believing Ben at his word. After the reveal, his actions present new meanings on top of those already present. His recordings take on a cathartic role. His desperate attempt to save Ashley can be read as a reconciliation for what happened to his wife. Even his desperate attempt to get back to work (inciting the whole incident of the novel) all circle around the reveal at the end of the novel. Language and meaning function twice in Martin's work.

Structure

The novel is structured into two different kinds of parts, the chapters concerning the current events of the novel and the chapters where the protagonist records his thoughts, which function as flashbacks. The current events of the novel, a survival story set in the mountains is in the first person past tense. Approximately two thirds of the novel is made up of these first person past tense chapters. Every few chapters, however, will be italicized and written as though the protagonist were speaking himself and not just narrating. These chapters are in the present tense first person and spend time going over the events of the previous chapter or some kind of flashback in the protagonist's life. These chapters are actually the protagonist's Ben Payne's recordings to his wife Rachel. These chapters literally exist in the narrative as recordings. So not only does Ben try to keep Rachel up to date about what is happening to him, he also reminisces about his past with her. He chronicles most of his life story through the recorder as a



form of catharsis, but as is revealed later in the novel, this action may have been more for personal forgiveness and a coming to terms. The novel often sets these two different kinds of chapters up in pairs, each part enhancing and adding to the other parts, much like the characters themselves. Nevertheless, there are fewer recording chapters than there are standard chapters. So not every chapter is paired off with a recording.



Quotes

I never noticed they were there until she pointed them out. Started feeding them. Opened my eyes. Now I see them most everywhere. It's sort of spread into the way I look at people. Which is good, 'cause us doctors tend to get a bit jaded after a while.
-- Ben Payne (chapter 2)

Importance: This quote is spoken by Ben, and the "they" he references is stray cats. His wife took in stray cats, and now, according to Ben, he takes them in too. This is the primary motivation he gives to Ashley as to why he offers her, a complete stranger, a ride on the charter plane.

I know you're worried. Don't be. In three months, this'll all be forgotten. You'll see. I'll wait up.
-- Rachel (chapter 3)

Importance: This quote is significant given the reveal at the end of the novel. Rachel, Ben's wife, has consistently loved him despite their argument before her death. This a major motivation for Ben's actions that follow in the novel.

I see an enclosed capsule that lifts you up above the problems of the earth and gives you a perspective you can't get on land. Where you can see clearly.
-- Grover (chapter 3)

Importance: This quote is significant because Grover's perspective outlines several of the claims of the novel. His ideas about the proper perspective heighten the uselessness of both Ben and Ashley's preoccupation with their lives in civilization. The view from above the wilderness is very much the same as the view from within it.

But Dad used pain to rid me of pain. Leaving me empty and hurting. You poured in you and filled me up. For the first time, I felt no pain.
-- Ben Payne (chapter 6)

Importance: Ben speaks this quote in the chapter to his recorder, but he addresses his words to his wife. This is significant again given the revelation later, but also it is significant because of the literal pain that Ben is going through in the crash, and his only respite is remembering that his wife was the only one who could take his pain away.

Once Rachel and I were on our own, we gravitated to the mountains. I had, have, good lungs and pretty good legs . . . we started buying up gear and we spent the weekends in the mountains. Maybe I learned a thing or two.
-- Ben Payne (chapter 7)

Importance: This quote is significant because it offers up the reason why Ben is able to pull Ashley to safety later in the book. His past history of running, and his time in the mountains with his wife, give him the tools and fortitude necessary to rescue them both.



Staring out across this ice-capped landscape with nothing but the impossible staring back at me, I am reminded. I see what is. You see what could be."

-- Ben Payne (chapter 8)

Importance: Here Ben is dictating to his recorder again, addressing Rachel. It is significant because it shows how fully realized Ben's past mistakes are. The revelation at the end of the novel further reveals why Ben is so concerned with their own lives and protecting life at all costs.

I take it for granted. I wake up each day thinking I'll wake up tomorrow too.

-- Ben Payne (chapter 16)

Importance: Here Ben is talking about the value of life. This quote is significant as it is consistent with the main theme of the book: the inherent value of life.

Once a heart breaks . . . it doesn't just grow back. It's not a lizard's tail. It's more like a huge stained glass that shattered into a million pieces, and it's not going back together. Least not the way it was.

-- Ben Payne (chapter 19)

Importance: Here Ben is speaking to the buried corpse of the charter pilot Grover, in an attempt at a memorial service. It is significant as it initializes the idea that Ben Payne is a broken man and needs repairing. This idea of piecing together comes up again throughout the novel and is the emotional climax at the end as well.

The good news was that there was no real change. And the bad news was that there was no real change.

-- The narrator (chapter 24)

Importance: This quote is made by Ben acting as the narrator, discussing the state of Ashley's broken leg. It is significant because it acts as a metaphor for the broken nature of Ben's own life and how it had stagnated.

Just take your time. Eventually, it'll come together.

-- Ashley Knox (chapter 34)

Importance: These words, spoken by Ashley, resonate with the theme of piecing. She is talking directly about putting a puzzle together, but her words are also about how Ben may piece his own life back together. She is telling him to be patient with himself. Ben continues to question her and himself about it, though.

Is it a sunrise or sunset?' She lay back, closed her eyes. 'I think that depends on the viewer.

-- Ashley Knox and Ben Payne (chapter 42)

Importance: This quote is significant because while it is literally about a puzzle, it figuratively shows that even if Ben can piece himself back together he may not know or

like what he sees. Much of it depends on how what his perspective is, as Ashley points out here.

Those twenty-eight days in the mountains with you reminded me that love is worth doing. No matter how much it hurts.

-- Ben Payne (chapter 49)

Importance: This quote from Ben, speaking to a recovering Ashley, is significant because it reflects the message that Rachel tried to impart to Ben before she died. It is also consistent with the theme about the inherent value of life and that it must be defended at all costs.