

Nightwoods: A Novel Study Guide

Nightwoods: A Novel by Charles Frazier

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Plot Summary

Luce is a beautiful young woman who lives as a caretaker of an abandoned lodge. She has limited contact with other people, including her father who is a deputy in the area. Luce has no contact with her only sibling, Lily, other than letters. Luce's father, Lit, raised Luce and Lily from the time their mother left when they were very young children. When Luce receives word that Lily has been murdered by her husband, Bud, Luce agrees to take in Lily's twins, Dolores and Frank. She soon discovers the children have been traumatized; probably by witnessing their stepfather kill their mother and by his subsequent treatment of them. Bud is charged with murder but with the skillful maneuvering of his lawyer, he is not convicted. His lawyer however warns that the state could file the charges again if new evidence surfaced. Bud immediately begins to seek the money Lily had hidden from him and to worry that the twins, though they are very young and don't talk, may start talking and put an end to his freedom. He winds up in the town near Luce's lodge and sets himself up as a vital part of the community, running illegal liquor.

Luce, meanwhile, tries to settle in with the twins. They are enamored with fire and set fire to anything they can in the initial days. They refuse to talk and either scream or withdraw whenever Luce touches them. There seems to be a breakthrough when Luce and the twins visit one of her only neighbors, a woman named Maddie who is the epitome of a backwoods resident. Maddie has a horse named Sally and the twins repeat the horse's name, then allow Maddie to put them on Sally's back where they happily ride whenever they have the chance.

The owner of the lodge, old Mr. Stubblefield, dies, leaving the lodge and other holdings to his grandson, Stubblefield, who had a crush on Luce when they were teenagers. Stubblefield spends as much time as possible near the lodge to be with Luce and takes on the challenge of reaching the twins. Stubblefield has begun to question Bud's identity. Bud is meanwhile providing liquor and drugs for Lit and he also begins to question Bud's identity. Bud murders Lit and threatens Stubblefield, then goes to the lodge where the twins see him and run away. There's a frantic search for the next two days and Lit's body is found. Luce is the one to find the twins but Bud has already located them. They have found the money among Lily's possessions and have used the bills to start fires. Luce has a razor with her and manages to get close enough to put a serious gash in Bud's wrist, bringing an end to his threats. He manages to get away from Luce but is too weak to try to run away or retaliate.

Luce goes to the twins but knows she still can't push them. They return to the lodge with her where Stubblefield and Maddie are waiting. By the time that there's a Christmas program at the church, Stubblefield and Luce are settled in as parents to the twins though they remain alert on the lookout for Bud, in case he has survived.



Part I, Chapters 1 through 3

Part I, Chapters 1 through 3 Summary

As the story opens, Luce reveals that she's responsible for a set of twins, her niece and nephew, and that the children are "small and beautiful and violent." They kill chickens and set fires. After they set fire to a corner of the lodge where Luce and the twins live, she switches them. Their reaction is of staunch acceptance and Luce immediately pledges not to hit them again.

The Wayah Lodge where Luce lives was owned by Old Mr. Stubblefield who had recently died. Luce was with him several times near the end of his life. She says he'd worried about who would inherit what and had left Luce a pair of silver candlesticks she didn't particularly want. She believes it's sad to have that on one's mind at the end. Luce, prior to the arrival of the twins, has a daybed in the living room of the lodge, which had served as a retreat for rich people in years past. She had carefully examined all the upstairs rooms but remains downstairs, especially after dark. She has a good friend down the road, a woman named Maddie. She can't get to town except to walk the miles around the lake that separates the lodge from the town. She can buy a few essentials at the country store a couple of miles down the road.

It's summer when the twins arrive in the custody of a representative of the State. He says they don't talk and one doctor believes they are "feebleminded" but it could be they've just been traumatized by what they saw and from being taken out of their lives. They were held at the Methodist Home until it was arranged for them to come to Luce. The man notes that there is still the issue of their father's "legal matters." Luce says he isn't their father and asks what will happen to him. The man says he'll be tried and convicted, adding that there will be room for family to watch the execution. Luce says she wants to be there.

Luce sometimes listens to her neighbor and friend, Maddie, sing ballads of love, murder, revenge, and the things that go wrong in relationships. Luce says she'd always taken the songs' messages lightly until her sister, Lily, had encountered Johnny Johnson. One night Luce goes through some of Lily's letters and reads about the burning passion between Lily and Johnny Johnson. She is angry that Lily didn't do more to protect herself against Johnny.

In chapter two, Bud is a handsome man who has been in trouble constantly since he was a teenager. He'd kept a gun in his locker at school to impress the girls and had once arrived at a party with cases of beer in a stolen car. He'd been sent to juvenile prison and could have slipped out at any time. Instead, he learned a lesson - he didn't want to go to adult prison. He holds some part time jobs and it is during this phase of his life that he meets and marries Lily.



As a child, Bud is forced to church where a preacher makes clear the need for shedding blood to atone for sins. He had been surprised when his marriage to Lily turned out to be less than the hot courtship, mainly because the children were "a constant irritation." Bud is working on the railroad and Lily is a beautician. She earns more than he and she owns the house where they live, the result of her first marriage to a grocer who died and left it to her. Bud and some friends come up with the idea of a robbery and Bud comes home drunk but with a great deal of money. When he sobers up, Lily has hidden the money and has a plan to take out just a little to help maintain a slightly better lifestyle here and there. Bud still might not have killed Lily if she hadn't come home unexpectedly one day. With one look at the scene, she begins shouting that she'll kill him but he uses a butcher knife to kill her. The children are in the dining room door when the police - summoned by a neighbor who hears the fight - arrive.

In chapter three, Luce struggles with the concept of being a mother to the twins. She'd never planned to have babies of her own and hasn't had a mother since she was in third grade, so has little in the way of an example to go on. She has personally come to a peace with her life by ignoring the majority of the world and focusing on the landscape. She spends time talking to the twins, named Dolores and Frank, and tells them about the world in which they live. The children have killed several chickens though Luce never finds anything but some feathers and a foot. One morning she sets out to teach them about the chickens and eggs, hoping to help them see that killing the chickens will put an end to the eggs they often have for a meal and the chickens they occasionally kill for a meal. She teaches them about the need to weed the garden or face the problem of overgrown rows where snakes might hide. She tells them she and Lily had broken a kitchen faucet as children and being unable to turn off the flow, had tried to drink it. The twins don't respond but they also aren't trying to set fires while she talks.

The twins seem to get hurt often. One day Frank cuts open his forehead on the corner of a tin roof, though it's much farther off the ground than the top of his head. They don't seem to sleep and are often somewhere besides their bed, another daybed in the living room, when Luce wakes. One day Luce takes Dolores and Frank by Maddie's house. Maddie is frying up a huge batch of "spinal cord" from a hog and Luce isn't surprised to find it tastes very good. She says that just about anything that is battered and fried tastes good.

Part I, Chapters 1 through 3 Analysis

There's a brief conversation between Luce and the representative of the state about the living arrangements for the children. The man asks if Luce has plumbing and electricity and she asks if it's a requirement. The man says it isn't and Luce responds with a sarcastic remark, obviously realizing the man has taken a look at the backwoods area and believes the inhabitants are uneducated, uncivilized people. This stereotype seems to be one of the things the author tries to address. While the characters of the story are obviously "backwoods" people, they are also intelligent, loyal, and kind. These traits are evident when the characters set out to improve their situations. Luce works hard to make life better for the twins. Maddie plays an important role in Luce's life, helping with



the twins and being a loyal friend when Luce needs it most. There are other examples that will come to light as the story progresses.

The children are completely silent when they arrive at Luce's house but there's something deeper wrong than just their lack of speech. In chapter two, it is revealed that the children were standing in the dining room when Bud killed Lily. The details are never fully revealed but there is a passage in chapter two that indicates Lily had come home early, unexpectedly, when Bud was alone in the house with the children. Bud had apparently been in some compromising situation but the details of that are not revealed. The author teases to the situation and it seems likely there was something sexual involved. Lily becomes immediately furious and screams that she'll kill Bud but he kills her instead. It seems likely he would have killed the children then as well but the police arrive before he can bring that about.

There are a few details about Luce and Lily's childhoods revealed early in the book. Luce had been a wanderer, constantly exploring her world. Lily had always been content to remain inside. This changed when the girls were grown. Luce felt there was no need to leave but Lily used the money from her carhop job to leave town, not even letting anyone know where she was for some time. It's noted that she doesn't have a mother to care and their father was pretty uninterested. What's strange here is that Lily and Luce were apparently close enough that they kept in contact by letter but were completely willing to break ties when they were grown. It seems that the two girls, growing up without a mother and with an indifferent father, would have been closer, especially when it's later revealed that Luce took on a great deal of responsibility for Lily from a very early age.



Part I, Chapters 4 through 6

Part I, Chapters 4 through 6 Summary

In chapter four, Johnny Johnson, otherwise known as Bud, winds up with an excellent attorney who realizes he'll be able to get the house owned by Lily and Bud as payment for his fee. The attorney makes Lily out to be a villain with loose morals and the inexperienced prosecutor can't withstand the maneuverings. The jury can't come to agreement on a guilty verdict and Bud walks away a free man though his attorney warns that if new witnesses or evidence comes to light, he could be tried again. Bud's thoughts turn immediately to the money and the twins, the only possible witnesses. He decides he needs to kill the twins and believes their new caretaker, Lily's sister, will have the money.

Bud buys a gun at a pawn shop and sets out. He robs several stores, stealing what he needs to get a car and some cash. Bud arrives in the town where Lily grew up in an old pickup he'd bought with his stolen cash. He is careful not to rouse attention and checks into the Chief Motel.

In chapter five, Luce struggles with her lack of knowledge and understanding about children in general and the twins in particular. She tries to play games with them, tickling their "piggies," but they hate having their feet handled and hate being touched at all. One day Luce tries to undress them to help them bathe and they slip into themselves, crying silently. Luce notes that they howl when they're mad or frustrated, but that this is a totally different kind of hurt. She discovers they'll undress themselves and bathe outside, splashing in the water. She knows that's okay for summer but wonders what will happen when the weather turns cold.

Luce doesn't love Dolores and Frank but pledges to care for them because of her love for Lily. She thinks about her own parents. There had been frequent slaps and her mother had been either furious or indifferent, teaching Luce not to cry in the process. When Luce was old enough to start school, she'd gone willingly on her first day. But she hadn't liked it and announced she wouldn't go back. Her mother, Lola, and father, Lit, had been indifferent, often too drunk to know if she'd gone or not. Then a state official showed up and told Lit and Lola that Luce had to go to school. The man had apparently realized the situation and he took Luce aside. He pointed to her parents and asked Luce if she wants to grow up to be like them. Luce, though very young, already knew the answer to that. The man from the state said her ticket out of that life was her education and Luce dedicated herself to school. When Lily started school, Luce made sure they both got out the door on time and attended regularly. Though she didn't like much of the school work, Luce learned how to read.

Luce spends a great deal of time talking to Dolores and Frank. They walk in the woods and she shows them things about nature. One morning when they wake before daylight, she takes them outside and shows them constellations. She knows they don't fully



understand but she hopes "a word or two" penetrates occasionally. One afternoon the children vanish. Luce is frantic by the time she finds them near the lake, throwing rocks at each other. She tries to hug them but they remain stiff in her embrace and she notes a cloud of smoke coming from the direction of Old Stubblefield's house.

In chapter six, Stubblefield (the grandson of Old Mr. Stubblefield) is wandering through town. He takes in the town where he lives, including the movie house where "The Defiant Ones" is advertised as a coming attraction. He checks his mail at the post office, buys shrimp at the dock, and reads a letter informing him of his inheritance. The only profitable piece of property is the Roadhouse, a late-night gathering place that features live music. The attorney warns that it's a potential liability. Stubblefield is urged to make decisions about what's to be done with the property. Stubblefield goes to his grandfather's home and finds the barn and other buildings are dilapidated. The house has been burned to the ground.

Part I, Chapters 4 through 6 Analysis

There's a humorous notation in which Luce says she doesn't know much of anything about children and wonders if the twins still have their baby teeth. She admits that she's like her father in this regard. She says when her father, Lit, first saw Luce in the hospital, she'd been asleep. Her father had asked a nurse how old Luce would be before she opened her eyes, equating his newborn daughter with a puppy or kitten.

Luce discusses her first teacher. She says the lady was useful and taught Luce some things, such as how to read. However, she had her "faults," such as the way she dealt with Luce over an ice cream sandwich. Luce had never seen ice cream before and decided that she would take her ice cream home to Lily. She hid it but it melted on her books and papers, creating quite a mess and prompting the teacher to spank Luce. It may seem impossible that a modern-day youngster would not know what ice cream is but this is a statement of Luce's difficult home life during her younger years.

Stubblefield is something of a spoiled child. There are only veiled references to other members of his family other than his grandfather. He is living a life with apparently little direction at the time of his grandfather's death. He lives on the beach and has little apparent interest in doing anything with his life. On the day he receives notice of his inheritance, he wanders through town, buys himself some shrimp from the dock, and picks up his mail. He apparently doesn't have a job and when he decides to go check out the property his grandfather left him, he just goes.



Part I, Chapters 7 through 12

Part I, Chapters 7 through 12 Summary

In chapter seven, there's a "social occasion" in a clearing near town. Bud picks a fight with a short man named Lit, not realizing that Lit is a deputy and has been known to beat large men to a pulp. Bud looks back at it later and is upset that he's called attention to himself with the law, but pledges to simply move forward from this point. Bud later goes to visit Old Jones, an older man who is known as the local bootlegger. Bud convinces Jones that he'll take over the bootlegging business, give Jones a healthy percentage of his business, and leaves with a book of standing orders Jones has for weekly deliveries. Days pass. One day Bud stops by Jones' house with a few twenties, a fraudulent percentage of his business. Jones asks Bud if he knows why there is only one bootlegger in town. He says if Bud had stopped by when Jones was twenty years younger, Bud would have "found yourself at the bottom of the lake by midnight." Bud considers buying a souped up car for running liquor but watches "Thunder Road" and realizes that calling attention to himself would not be a good idea. He sticks with his beat-up pickup, buys a tarp and some hay as camouflage, and settles in. His only problem is the thought that the twins might someday talk and bring him back for another trial, this one with witnesses who are beneficial to the prosecution.

In chapter eight, Luce and the twins go walking one day and discover a huge crater that Luce had never seen before. Though the crater is not extremely wide, the drop is steep. When Luce throws a rock, it's a long way to water and she imagines the rock going farther and farther down into the darkness.

As a teenager just out of school, Luce had gone to work for the telephone company. She worked night shift which she didn't mind because it usually left her time for a nap as long as she slept lightly. There were few calls and fewer people who went to the telephone office, housed in an almost-abandoned hotel. One night Luce was working when a teacher, Mr. Stewart, arrived to pay his bill. He raped Luce and left a Saint Christopher's medallion on a chain, apparently as payment. Luce remains on duty until around midnight, then the reality hits her and she leaves. Ordinarily there are no calls after midnight but on this particular night the high school caught on fire and Luce wasn't there to relay the report, prompting anger from the community.

Luce went to Lit a couple of days later. He explained that the previous night shift girl had apparently traded sex for trinkets and that it would be difficult to prove in court. Luce left without pursuing the charge and soon moved to the lodge.

In chapter nine, Bud goes into the hardware store and makes a great show of buying a rod and reel. He is loud and obnoxious, knowing that if anyone asks later, everyone in the store will remember his presence and that he'd been going fishing. Bud is actually headed to the lodge. After the weeks in town, he'd finally heard some gossip about a young woman who'd taken in her sister's children. Bud knocks on the door, intending to



make up some reason for his presence is Luce is home. He knows Luce won't know him, having never seen even a picture of him. If no one is home, he plans to look for the money. There's no answer and he goes inside. He senses the futility of the search because the lodge is such a huge place, but he searches anyway. He finds some personal items, including a cheerleader outfit Luce has carefully packed away with mothballs. Unable to find the money, Bud takes the cheerleader outfit out of the drawer, puts it on the hearth, and sets fire to it, stomping it out before it's completely burned.

In chapter ten, Stubblefield visits his grandfather's lawyer and discovers there are some sixteen hundred acres, the lodge, and the Roadhouse among his inheritance. He also learns there are back taxes due. The lawyer says the county allowed Old Mr. Stubblefield to fall behind because he was liked. He suggests Stubblefield sell the Roadhouse, seeing it as the biggest liability even though it is the only property making a profit. He suggests leasing out some land for agriculture and Stubblefield says he wants time to consider his options. Stubblefield begins driving around the area almost daily in his Hawk.

In chapter eleven, the children go through Lily's possessions, stored in the smokehouse and untouched since their arrival. They rip and shred, tearing up most of her things, in their minds seeking a way to get nearer their lost mother and struggling to remember her. In the stack, they find "large stacks of paper tinder, wrapped in big red bands."

Part I, Chapters 7 through 12 Analysis

Luce feels that the deep hole in the woods is something sacred. She says she's always believed if a person wandered around in the woods long enough, they'd find spiritual places. She's never found a place that disturbed her as much as this one. There's an interesting sign leading to this place. There's a tree with a huge bulge on the side that looks almost like a nose. Luce says in old times people would twist a sapling to grow in that shape to point the way to something. She and the twins follow the bulge on the tree to the huge crater. When they get there, Luce is so unsettled that she believes the bulge on the tree was a warning not to go that direction. Though Luce is an intelligent, educated young woman, she is obviously susceptible to the ideas and superstitions of the backwoods people of this region.

Bud's intentions with burning the cheerleader outfit are clearly to scare Luce. He stomps out the fire before the outfit is completely burned, knowing she'll recognize it for what it is. Bud believes it will scare Luce. What he doesn't realize is that the twins have become such firebugs that Luce believes they did it. She is sad but not particularly upset and she doesn't even wonder if there might be some other explanation.

In chapter ten, Stubblefield begins driving around the countryside daily. One day he sees what he believes to be a beautiful young woman in a window. Over the coming days, Stubblefield returns to the house many times, driving by and always seeing the young woman at the same window. He concocts a complicated fantasy about her, believing she's being held against her will, perhaps in deep depression because no one



cares about her. He imagines himself as her savior, taking her away where she is magically cured of her ills because of him. This elaborate fantasy seems an indication that Stubblefield is longing for a purpose in his life. The story gets interesting when he goes to the sheriff's office and tells Lit about seeing the girl. Lit says there have been complaints but, as a law enforcement official, his hands are tied. He suggests Stubblefield check it out and "report back." Stubblefield goes directly back to the house and discovers it's not a real person but a mannequin. Lit gets a great laugh out of Stubblefield's concern.

The children are struggling to remember their mother. A glimpse of their lives prior to Bud's arrival is seen in chapter eleven. They remember Lily tickling them, chanting that she'll love them "till the day I die." Their destruction of her possessions is not an effort to tear up anything. They are seeking only to find a way to get close to her again. They tear up a suitcase and in the lining discover the "tinder." This is actually the money that has cost the family so much.



Part II, Chapters 1 through 3

Part II, Chapters 1 through 3 Summary

In chapter one, Stubblefield arrives at the lodge. He introduces himself and remembers Luce as a beautiful teenager during a beauty contest at the local swimming pool. Luce is chopping wood and tells him the house is his, and that he's free to look around all he wants. She then says, almost off-handedly, that the twins might have burned down his grandfather's house. As he's driving home, he is mortified to recall their conversation on his return outside. He'd mentioned the beauty pageant, remembered the color of her swimsuit, and that she'd been eating a Mars bar. Luce points out that she hadn't won and suggests it might have had something to do with her cat-eye sun glasses. Stubblefield suggests it was the fact that she was eating a candy bar.

In chapter two, Lit is out patrolling the back roads, letting the farmers see "their tax dollars at work." Lit is an oddity in that he's not corrupt. He will beat up anyone who dares offer him a bribe and knows he would never play the political game necessary to be sheriff. The sheriff is willing to let Lit do what needs to be done with regard to arrests and Lit is willing to let the sheriff do what needs to be done with regard to the politics. Lit is, however, willing to allow the new bootlegger in town the room to run his business. He personally understands the occasional need for something to help raise or lower the mood and he knows that the bootlegger is in demand in this dry county. When Lit next hits pavement, he heads back into town, planning to find Bud.

Lit spends some time with Bud and they are soon talking about drugs. Bud knows where he can get a specific drug Bud craves from his days in the military. Lit stays up for days and realizes he's going to need some downers.

In chapter three, time continues to pass and Luce comes to realize the twins aren't acting out because of meanness. She understands they are scared though she can't fully understand what it is that frightens them. She does realize they feel powerful with a match in their hands, prompting their need to burn things. She hopes living daily in the mountains can become a series of lessons in peace for the children.

One day Luce and the twins go to visit Maddie who is cooking off cane squeezing. She has a pot boiling over an open fire and a horse plodding in a circle, operating the mill that squeezes the cane. The twins would usually have been engrossed in the fire but instead are completely captivated by the horse, Sally. Maddie scoops up Dolores without waiting for permission or an invitation and puts her atop Sally. She then seats Frank behind her sister. When she takes them down, Maddie tells them the horse's name, Dolores repeats it several times and Frank says it once, the first time they've spoken since they arrived.

When Luce is putting the twins to bed that night, she asks them what is their favorite kind of weather and favorite color. She points out that they'd spoken that afternoon, that



there are no wrong answers, and that they should answer. They say they like lightening. Frank says he likes black and Dolores says she likes "fire color." Luce looks around for something to read to the children for bedtime stories. She doesn't know any stories because the only ones from her childhood were those of Lit about bloody battlefields during the war. She settles on a book from a shelf in the lodge and the twins soon grow to love the story, "Three Billy Goats Gruff."

Part II, Chapters 1 through 3 Analysis

There's an interesting moment when Stubblefield and Luce meet for the first time after his grandfather's death. There's no indication that Luce remembers him from their years as a teenager but he remembers her. He recalls the day of the beauty pageant at the pool and the fact that Luce had been out with a group in what seemed a "dismal triple-date" that night. Stubblefield had gone back to his grandfather's home, driving his grandfather's Packard, and had returned to Jackson with his mother the following day. When Stubblefield has finished stumbling his way through these details, some of them aloud to Luce, he turns to leave. She yells after him, apparently with a great degree of sarcasm, asking if the "flame still burns." Stubblefield holds his head up above his head, saying, "Yea high." This is another indication that Stubblefield isn't the careless person he's indicated up to this point. It seems that Luce will refuse to have anything to do with him but that's not the case.

There's another interesting point about the first meeting between Luce and Stubblefield. She doesn't seem at all worried that he'll kick her out of the lodge. She has nowhere else to do, there is no family or close friends to help her, and there's no help from the state with the expenses for the kids. She doesn't seem to have any idea how she would pay rent and support the twins if he kicks her out of the lodge and doesn't seem to even consider it a possibility. Another interesting thing is that she tells him the twins might have burned down his grandfather's house and he doesn't even react. Later, she'll thank him for his reaction but during this first meeting she takes it as a matter of fact.



Part II, Chapters 4 through 6

Part II, Chapters 4 through 6 Summary

In chapter four, Stubblefield continues to drive down the road toward the lodge almost daily though he stops to swim on a beach created for him by his grandfather when Stubblefield had been training in swimming. He admits to himself that he's interested in Luce and, if not for her, he'd sell all his newly-acquired holdings and go live on the beach until his money ran out. Stubblefield ticks off the baggage Luce is carrying. Her sister is a murder victim, her father is a crazy "violent lawman," and her mother ran away years ago. Added to that, her niece and nephew are tiny pyromaniacs who had probably burned his grandfather's house. Stubblefield admits that all these things are reasons to leave but when he learns about the reaction to Sally, he goes to Maddie to buy the horse as a gift for Luce. She refuses to sell.

Stubblefield tells Luce of his effort to buy the horse and she says a horse is a too-large present. One day Luce and Stubblefield go to visit Maddie to let the twins ride Sally. They are seated on the porch and Maddie observes Luce's happiness in the moment. She then observes Stubblefield watching Luce and notes his happiness in her happiness. She whispers that he had better be "careful" with Luce.

One day Stubblefield and Luce leave the twins with Maddie while they go for a ride in his Hawk. She directs him to a house where three sisters live. All three are teachers and all are married to men who don't live in the house with them. Each weekend, they split up and go to their respective homes. None of them have children but all have taught for years. Maddie tells them about the twins and says she's afraid of doing something wrong. They point out they aren't mothers and that all they've ever been able to do as teachers is to do their best and hope the children do theirs. She reveals that the children don't like to touch or be touched and wonders how long they'll carry the scars of whatever happened to them. The teaches say those scars will never go away. On the way home, Luce gives voice to some of her concerns. She says she's afraid to coddle the children too much, afraid they'll never be better than they are now. She ticks off a list of their transgressions, including killing a couple of roosters. She points out that killing a rooster to a child Frank's size would be an enormous feat for an adult. As they ride, Luce takes Stubblefield's hand and is pleased that he doesn't make a big deal of it.

In chapter five, Lit and Bud are out driving one evening. They find a group of kids on the golf course, drinking. Lit ticks off their charges but then says there are "mitigating circumstances" that will allow them to go on with their party. He takes a couple of beers, one for himself and one for Bud, and leaves. At the Roadhouse, a man confronts Lit. He asks if Lit remembers "trying" to arrest the man and Lit says he didn't just try. The man leans into the car, promising to beat Lit, but Lit quickly rolls up the window, trapping the man's head inside before beating him to a bloody pulp and leaving him lying on the parking lot.



In chapter six, Stubblefield sets out to learn about Luce. He knows outright questions will get him nowhere so is subtle, taking opportunities where they arise. When he asks about her cheerleading, beauty contest days, Luce says being pretty brings trouble and that she seldom looks in the mirror and wastes no time on makeup or beauty parlors. She has little use for what money can buy though she has begun to worry about taking care of the twins. Luce admits she gets lonely but says there are things in nature that make up for that. When he asks how things were at home after Lola left, Luce says it was better because her parents had fought so constantly. She says there was speculation that Lit killed Lola. She says she has never missed her mother.

Part II, Chapters 4 through 6 Analysis

The scene in which Lit confronts the kids who are out drinking is important because it indicates Lit's attitude. He is proud of the fact that he's not corrupt and wouldn't accept a bribe but then turns his back on a group of kids who are clearly breaking several laws. As Lit is leaving, he says to the kids that he should point out that it's a school night. He curses as he's leaving, which would have been a major taboo for a law enforcement official during this time period and which would have lessened the natural respect the teens might otherwise have had for Lit. While he might be above taking a bribe, Lit is corrupt in that he chooses which laws to enforce. His increasing drug use may be a contributing factor to this situation.

The scene in which Lit beats the man in the Roadhouse parking lot is important because it gives Bud an upclose view of Lit's raw power. Though he's small, Lit is known for his fighting ability. When Bud later realizes that Lit is looking into his past and could become a threat to his quest for the money and the twins, he knows he won't be able to beat Lit in an open confrontation and so murders Lit. While Bud is cold-blooded, Lit seems even more so. It's noted that when Bud beats the man in the parking lot, his expression barely changes and he never shows the rage one would expect.



Part II Chapters 7 through 10

Part II Chapters 7 through 10 Summary

In chapter seven, Bud and Lit go inside after Lit has beaten the man in the parking lot. Bud notes that everything comes easy to Lit. Lit has a large cash credit on a pinball machine and decides to go for a drink. When he returns, Bud has lost it all and Lit leaves Bud to find his own way back to town. Bud knows the anger will be short-lived.

In chapter eight, Stubblefield invites Luce to go on a trip with him, either to the ocean or to Tennessee to a concert. Luce knows it's not possible to leave the children for that long though part of her wants to throw caution to the wind and do just that. Over the coming days, Stubblefield remains near and Luce begins to wonder what's wrong with him. For his part, Stubblefield sees connecting with the twins as a major way of reaching Luce but they remain elusive. One day when he arrives, Dolores says "Stubblefield." Though it's a flat tone and the twins immediately run away, it seems a sign of progress. Luce tells him thank you for his efforts with the twins.

Stubblefield goes to see the attorney and says he'd like for the lawyer to handle the leasing of the agricultural land. The attorney says he'll draw up the paperwork. Stubblefield says he doubts there were ever any papers between the lawyer and Old Mr. Stubblefield. The lawyer agrees that there wasn't and Stubblefield insists they'll be doing business the same way or not at all. The lawyer shakes Stubblefield's offered hand.

In chapter nine, Lit and Bud are drinking together one night when Lit becomes somewhat sentimental. By this time, Bud knows that Luce is Lily's sister. Lit says that Luce is now "all the relation he's got in the world," and goes on to say they barely speak when they meet each other on the street. Bud is immediately alert. He hadn't until this moment realized Lit is his former father-in-law. Bud runs through his memories and realizes that just a week before, while he was very drunk himself, he said something about having been charged with murder. Bud knows that gossip spreads quickly in small towns like this and that if Lit hadn't already heard this story, he was sure to hear it soon. Bud clears his mind and strengthens his determination to find the money, settle his business, and move on to some distant town.

In chapter ten, it's raining the night Luce and Stubblefield have their first date. They go to the Roadhouse for a drink and when the bartender brings them a drink without being asked, Stubblefield admits that he's the owner. Stubblefield talks with the guitarist from the band and he and Luce dance. Luce excuses herself to go to the restroom. On the way, a man "accidentally" touches her on the rear but she ignores it and keeps walking. As she opens the bathroom door, Bud pushes her inside and asks why Stubblefield is asking about him. Luce immediately realizes he's Lily's husband and says he's a murderer, regardless of what the court said. Stubblefield realizes something is wrong and goes to the door where Bud shoves him inside as well. Stubblefield says he was



following rumors when he began to check into Bud's background. Bud makes a number of threats but doesn't say why he's here. Luce says she'll kill him if he comes near the lodge or the twins. There's a fight and Bud cuts Stubblefield pretty seriously on the hand. He makes additional threats of violence if they go to the police.

Luce wants to take Stubblefield to the hospital but he refuses, knowing Lit will know about it if he does and fearing fallout. He says Lit and Bud have become constant companions and doesn't know what Lit's reaction will be. Luce drives Stubblefield to Maddie's house where Maddie sews up the wound. Maddie insists they leave the twins with her and Luce drives Stubblefield back to his apartment. The next morning, she asks why he hadn't told her about Bud. He says he wasn't certain until Bud confronted them the previous evening.

Part II Chapters 7 through 10 Analysis

Luce's true personality is seen in her reaction when Bud shoves his way into the bathroom where she is. He expects that she'll be terrified and is unprepared when she stands up to him instead. This is important because it signifies that she's matured a great deal since the day she was raped. That day she'd simply been a victim.

An important aspect of the story is loyalty and those are greatly divided among Luce's family. This common knowledge and affects Stubblefield's actions when he's cut so seriously. He refuses to go to the doctor for fear that Lit will find out. Stubblefield knows that Lit and Bud have become good friends and seems to fear that Lit will take some action. It's not clear if Stubblefield is trying to keep Lit from knowing for fear that he'll kill Bud or that he might be helping Bud hide and will retaliate against Stubblefield for interfering.



Part II, Chapters 11 through 13

Part II, Chapters 11 through 13 Summary

In chapter eleven, Stubblefield has located Luce's mother, Lola, living on a beach in Florida. He suggests they go there. Luce is reluctant but finally agrees because she sees it as safer for the twins. Lola doesn't know they're coming. She's in a swimsuit when they arrive and Luce is surprised at how young she looks. She says they can come in if they want but that she has no intentions of being either mother or grandmother, despite knowing the children could be in danger. They leave, headed to Stubblefield's beach house instead. He knows he doesn't have enough money for them to remain at the beach house for long.

In chapter twelve, Bud and Lit are driving around, drinking as usual. Lit is questioning Bud about his past and Bud keeps insisting there's nothing to see. Lit doesn't mention Lily but does mention gossip around town. Bud points out that a court has already acquitted him. Lit drives in silence for awhile but then says that he's not talking about judges, jury, or the law. Bud realizes Lit is certain of his identity and that he can't beat Lit in a fair fight. He stabs Lit in the side, leaning over to take the steering wheel and guide the car to a standstill. He shoves Lit's body to the passenger seat and he dies a short time later. Bud then dumps the body, expecting that wild animals will dispose of the remains. He shoves the car into the lake in a spot he's certain it will sink out of sight. He then walks back to town.

In chapter thirteen, Luce goes to the sheriff. She says Bud killed Lily and has probably killed Lit as well. The sheriff says Lit is missing and there's no way to be sure he hasn't just left. Back at the lodge, Luce finds a straight razor given to her by her father on her sixteenth birthday. He'd told her it would make good protection. She'd thought it was a ridiculous present. She now wishes she'd had it handy when Mr. Stewart attacked her. Stubblefield moves his essentials to the lodge to be near Luce and provide protection. She doesn't object and the twins help him carry his belongings inside. Luce is feeling down because she's become certain Lit is dead. The feeling is difficult to define because there's no body, therefore, no funeral.

Part II, Chapters 11 through 13 Analysis

While they are at the beach house, Luce finally tells Stubblefield about the rape. She wants it out there so there's no question about it later and she realizes it might make a difference to Stubblefield. The reader should remember that rape was seen much differently during this time period. Stubblefield doesn't react negatively but does offer to find Mr. Stewart. Luce asks that he not.

The decision by Luce and Stubblefield to stay out of the hospital may have indirectly contributed to Lit's death at Bud's hands. Lit might have known for certain that Bud was



Lily's murderer and might have confronted Bud in a different situation in which Bud would not have had the upper hand. However, it's more important to note Lit's staggering self-confidence. He has obviously come to believe that Bud is the man who murdered his daughter. He must know at least some of the details so should have been at least on guard. Lit is never afraid of anyone or any situation and can't imagine that he won't have the opportunity to beat Bud or even kill him. Lit should have considered that Bud is a ruthless killer and wouldn't fight fair. It's interesting that he doesn't even consider that possibility.

The straight razor is a symbol of one's ability to protect oneself. Lit gave it to Luce on her sixteenth birthday, obviously seeing that his daughter had become beautiful. What's interesting about this is that Lit apparently sees the need for Luce to be able to protect herself but sees no need to try to protect her. When Luce announces that she's been raped, he seems virtually indifferent.

Part III, Chapters 1 through 5

Part III, Chapters 1 through 5 Summary

In chapter one, Stubblefield is struggling to find a comfortable way to carry his gun and winds up with it in one coat pocket and a book in the other pocket for balance. Luce lets the twins pack a lunch for themselves and they head to Maddie's while Stubblefield goes to retrieve the rest of his belongings. While they're gone, Bud breaks in. He tries to let the money speak to him knowing it's useless to continue searching for it in the huge old lodge. He goes upstairs and falls asleep on a bed. He's still there with Luce, Stubblefield, and the twins return. Bud is on his way out of the lodge when he encounters the twins. As the children stand there, shocked, first Dolores then Frank repeats their mother's final words, that "I'll ... kill you." Bud rushes out and the twins run upstairs. Bud now knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that the twins remember and that they're capable of conveying what they know.

Luce and Stubblefield realize the twins are missing and begin searching but don't realize the twins are in the vast servants' quarters upstairs. Luce's first thought is Maddie's house and she rushes that direction. The twins, meanwhile, are running away and are putting a great deal of thought into what they need to pack. They take matches, a jug of kerosene, the "tinder" from their mother's possessions, and food. They then go get Sally and ride away, headed up the mountain.

Bud, meanwhile, goes to all his regular customers with the story that he'll be taking a vacation. He promises to make a run before he goes and collects a great deal of money toward the liquor he says he'll bring back. He learns that the twins are missing and hopes they'll die but decides to join the search in case he still needs to kill them. Volunteers join the search and Lit's body is found. Luce says there's no time to grieve for her father because there's still hope they'll find the twins.

In chapter two, Bud steals everything he believes he'll need for a couple of days on the mountain and heads out. The sheriff isn't happy about spending a night on the ground but knows voters won't approve if he gives up the search too quickly. He does make time to take another look at Luce and Stubblefield, knowing family members are likely suspects. Bud encounters first a bear that leaves him with virtually none of his supplies, then a group of drunk hunters who feed him and let him stay near their fire before sending him on his way. The weather deteriorates. Stubblefield goes to Bud's house and breaks in, planning to confront him when he returns, but he never does.

In chapter three, the twins have stopped guiding Sally and she begins a lazy curve toward home. Bud considers the possibility of just leaving town, getting a job, and living out his life. He knows he can't do that because he'll always be looking over his shoulder, expecting to be arrested again. He wonders if the twins might have died in the foul weather but then lucks up on the remains of an apple with tiny teeth marks and knows they haven't.



In chapter four, Luce and Stubblefield are sleeping almost none. When Luce wakes, she heads out to search some more, leaving Stubblefield and Maddie asleep. Luce goes to the big crater and sees Bud on one side, the twins on the other, carefully keeping the crater between them. There's the remains of a fire with the edges of burned bills still showing. Luce, armed with the straight razor Lit gave her, slices deeply into Bud's wrist and he begins bleeding profusely. He runs away without clear direction. He holds his arms up and blood pools into his sleeves. He runs until he can't run anymore. He reaches a stream and washes away some of the blood, then tries to staunch the flow with moss. He sits down against a tree to rest.

After Bud is gone, Sally, Dolores, and Frank move around the crater to stand near the remains of the fire where Luce is waiting. She knows she can't make a fuss or run to hug them, knowing that will only make them run away. The twins begin to tell her about their adventure. When they finish, Luce says they should take her with them "next time."

In chapter five, Luce, Stubblefield, Frank, and Dolores are attending the Christmas celebration at the Methodist Church. The twins are completely absorbed in the candles, uncaring about the gifts being distributed. Stubblefield catches them as they're setting paper on fire and tells Luce it's something they'll have to work on. Back at the lodge, the twins go to be in a room of their own, just past the room Maddie uses when she stays with them. Stubblefield is reading downstairs, the gun nearby, as Luce settles in next to him on the couch. As the days pass, they are less concerned about Bud and his memory fades.

Part III, Chapters 1 through 5 Analysis

Bud takes time to consider his options with regard to the twins. There's no indication as to why he didn't just kill them when he encountered them in the lodge but it could have been that he was simply shocked to see them and to hear them repeating Lily's final words. He knows there is a great deal of difference between committing a murder in the heat of the moment and planning it out. He notes that even the state makes the distinction between the two and he seems to realize he won't be lucky enough to get off if he's brought to trial again for any murder - Lily's or the twins.

Bud continues to make the analogy between purity and blood, referring to the preacher of his childhood shouting about the redemptive power of spilled blood.

The final reference to Bud seems to indicate he dies in the woods. It's noted that if he were to relate a moral, it would be to "make it quick." There's then what seems to be a hypothetical situation of a dead creature that remains on the forest floor throughout the winter until a hunter finds a group of buzzards standing around over a "piece of work," each politely waiting for another to finish before taking a share. It seems likely that Bud is that creature that dies but it could also be a hypothetical situation because Bud's life was painful and horrible in his efforts to survive. It could be indicating that Bud would rather have died than to endure whatever his eventual fate was. It's left to the reader to decide.



Characters

Luce

A beautiful young woman who lives alone in an abandoned lodge, she is Lily's sister. When Lily is killed, Luce accepts responsibility for Lily's twins, Dolores and Frank. Luce is a strong woman, mostly because of her traumatic upbringing. Luce's mother abandons the family when the children are very young. Luce's father, Lit, apparently does the best he could to raise the girls but a falling out occurs and by the time of Lit's death, Luce and Lit barely speak to each other when they meet on the street. Luce is leading a fairly normal life as a young adult after high school. She is working and has plenty of free time to do what she pleases. Then she is raped and when she takes the issue to her father, a deputy, he tells her it would be almost impossible to make the charges stick. Luce is devastated and accepts the job as caretaker for the abandoned lodge in order to avoid being around people of the town. Luce is at peace with her life when the children arrive but then realizes she's going to have to make some lifestyle changes in order to meet the basic needs of the twins. She realizes the twins have seen their mother brutally murdered but also knows that the twins were brutalized themselves. She confides in her former teachers that she doesn't know how to help the children. Luce is also at peace with her natural surroundings. She tells the twins things about living with and understanding nature, and their role in that. The fact that she understands these things and tells the children about them is evidence that it's an important concept to Luce.

Stubblefield

The owner of the abandoned lodge where Luce lives after the death of his grandfather, Stubblefield is something of a spoiled child prior to the inheritance. Stubblefield spent most of his childhood summers in the town where Luce lives. His grandfather apparently indulged him, creating a beach at the lake for swimming when Stubblefield was in training and letting Stubblefield use his car as a teenager. When Stubblefield learns the situation with the property he's inherited, his initial reaction is that he'll sell it all and live on the beach until the money runs out. He's urged to visit the properties before making a decision. Stubblefield arrives at the lodge without any clear expectations of what he'll find. When he sees Luce, he's immediately filled with memories of a teenage crush on her. He stumbles through an admission of this on their first meeting but regains his confidence as he begins to check in on Luce and the children over the coming days. Stubblefield seems to mature dramatically after meeting Luce and makes it clear he won't be frightened away by the presence of the children. He makes it his priority to make Luce and the children happy but soon realizes he'll have to allow the relationship to move at Luce's pace if he hopes to win her heart. He is intuitive about this and Luce accepts his love.



Johnny Johnson

Known throughout the story as Bud, he is the man who murders Lily and who hurts the twins, Dolores and Frank. Bud is a cruel man who has no remorse for his actions. Faced with the knowledge that the twins might be able to tell that he killed Lily, he travels to Luce's home with the intention of killing the twins, though they are little more than babies. When he's confronted with the probability that Lit knows who he is, he simply kills Lit though the two are supposedly friends. Bud may die at the end of the story though it's not clear whether this is the case.

Lit

The father of Luce and Lily, he is a deputy with no aspirations of being anything else. He is very small but is a formidable opponent in a fight and has sent many men to the hospital when they resisted arrest or picked a fight with him. Lit is volatile but seems to put that side of his nature aside when his wife leaves him to raise the girls. Lit apparently begins to have suspicions about Bud's true identity. Realizing he can't possibly win in a fair fight, Bud kills Lit.

Maddie

Luce's closest neighbor, she is a true friend. Maddie is a backwoods woman who produces her own syrup from cane, raises a garden, and basically takes care of herself. When she is wakened after dark by a car horn, she meets the guests with a shotgun. Maddie steps in and takes over cooking when the twins go missing, spending hours awake at the kitchen table at the lodge.

Dolores

The girl of the twins, she is often the leader and is the first to begin talking when Maddie sets her on the back of the horse. Dolores is obviously traumatized by the actions of Bud though she doesn't give voice to her fears.

Frank

The boy of the twins, he seems to often follow the lead set by Dolores. Frank is obviously as traumatized as his sister but also doesn't give voice to his fears. When the twins have their first ride on Sally, Frank rides behind his sister, evidence that he is often willing to follow her.



Old Mr. Stubblefield

Stubblefield's grandfather, he is the owner of the lodge where Luce lives until his death. He is apparently a kind man but spends a great deal of time at the end of his life worrying about his possessions. He leaves the property to his grandson but gives Luce a pair of candlesticks. The book refers to both the older Mr. Stubblefield and the grandson as "Stubblefield." For the purposes of clarity in this guide, the grandfather is referred to as "old Mr. Stubblefield."

Lola

Luce and Lily's mother, she hates being a mother and one of the lessons Luce remembers is the admonition not to cry. Lola is living in Florida when Luce and Stubblefield find her while trying to hide from Bud, but she makes it clear she doesn't want them and won't take responsibility for being either a mother or grandmother.

Lily

Mother of the twins, she is a beautician and works hard to support herself and the twins. She has a whirlwind courtship with Bud and marries him before she realizes that he's brutal and cruel. When Bud steals a great deal of money, Lily hides it, planning to dole out a small amount each month to help them live a slightly better lifestyle. Bud eventually snaps and murders Lily in front of the twins but can't find the money.



Objects/Places

Sally

This is Maddie's horse.

Wayah Lodge

This is where Luce lives as caretaker.

The Chief Motel

This is where Bud checks in on his first night in Luce's hometown.

The Phone Company

This is where Luce is working when she's raped.

The lake

Located between the lodge and town, this is about a mile across.

The cheerleader outfit

This is the possession Bud burns in an effort to scare Luce the first time he's at the lodge.

The Hawk

This is the car that Stubblefield drives.

The Roadhouse

This is the business Stubblefield inherits and that is the only money-making enterprise left to him by his grandfather.

The Methodist Home

This is where the twins were taken after Lily's death and prior to be taken in by Luce.

The Three Billy Goats Gruff

This is the story the twins like when they first begin talking to Luce.



Themes

The Effects of Abuse

The twins are a prime example of this theme though perhaps not the most important example in the story. The twins were undoubtedly abused by Bud. Though the abuse is not detailed, it seems likely that it was sexual in nature. Lily arrives home early one day to discover Bud alone with the children and immediately launches into threats to kill him. When the twins are with Luce, she reads their actions when they're frustrated or mad but says those screaming fits are nothing compared to the way the children withdraw when she undresses them for a bath. Luce wants to know if the twins can be "fixed," and poses that question to some teachers. They assure her the twins will never completely overcome the effects of the abuse.

Another important example of this theme is seen in the lives of Luce and Lily. Luce becomes a stronger child. One of the teachers says Luce was never afraid of anything, even when she was very young. Luce became this person because of Lola's harsh treatment. Her slaps and refusal to offer any kindness shaped Luce from a very early age. Ironically, Lily became a different kind of person. Lily sought out passion and love as an adult, traits that Luce hated because she believes they got Lily killed. Lily may have become this person at least partly because of Lola's abuse and Lit's indifference, but Luce's nurturing toward Lily may also have contributed. Another important aspect of this example is seen in Luce's rape. There's little doubt her life is dramatically changed by that act. She moves away from people, seeking solitude and safety. Finally, Bud's childhood may have included abuse on some level. Bud refers repeatedly to the need to cleanse through the shedding of blood - teachings from his childhood in church services. Though Bud's childhood isn't detailed to any great degree, it seems that his parents may have been overly strict with regard to religion to the point that it bordered on abuse. These early teachings shaped Bud so that he embraced the shedding of blood.

Family Dynamics

The family dynamics play an important role in the story because it shapes Lily and Luce into the adults they become and sets the stage for Luce to take custody of her niece and nephew. Lola is not a nurturing mother and her example has a tremendous impact on Luce, mainly because Luce doesn't want to be anything like her. If Lola had been a loving, caring mother and grandmother, she would likely have been the one who gained custody of the children. Even when Lola knows Luce and the twins are in danger, she simply doesn't want to be involved. Lit's relationship with Luce is another aspect of this theme. Lit seems to care about his children to some degree but doesn't know how to be a caring person. Luce fully believes Lit has been killed by Bud but doesn't cry for her father. She notes that's not a turn their relationship would have taken. Another important example of this theme is seen with Lily and Luce. The girls are apparently very close



when they are youngsters. When Lola and Lit are too caught up in each other and themselves to even make sure the girls go to school, Luce takes responsibility for Lily. When Luce has her first taste of ice cream, she tries to save it for Lily. Despite this closeness, the girls later have little to do with each other. When Lily leaves town, they communicate only by letters. However, when Luce is faced with the responsibility of caring for the twins, she accepts it. She says she doesn't love the twins and that they don't love her, but that she'll take care of them and do right by them because she loved Lily.

The Need for Friendship, Companionship, and Love

The need for friendship and love is an important theme of the story because it drives several of the characters. Lily is a prime example of this. She leaves home and marries, then meets Bud and marries again, all because of her need for love. In Lily's case, at least part of the motivation is probably her need to make up for a childhood in which her parents ranged from abusive to indifferent. Luce and Stubblefield are another important example of this theme. Stubblefield sees a mannequin in a window as he's driving on a particular road each day and comes to believe the mannequin is a young woman who desperately needs someone to save her. His creation of this complex story reveals that he's lonely and in need of friendship and the opportunity for love. When he encounters Luce for the first time after his grandfather's death, Stubblefield immediately remembers his teenage crush on Luce and begins concocting reasons to spend time with her. Luce acts as if friendship is optional for her but she seeks out Maddie and Old Mr. Stubblefield even before the younger Stubblefield returns to the county. Luce doesn't make an issue of being lonely before the arrival of the twins but she listens to the radio almost constantly, especially at night. Finally, the twins can be viewed as an example of this theme. They refuse to be touched or held by Luce though they remember their mother hugging them and tickling them. They try to run away from Bud and think nothing of leaving Luce behind in the process, but after Luce sliced Bud's wrists near the crater, the twins return to her rather than running away again.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in the third-person and omniscient perspective, though the reader's view of the actions is somewhat limited in some instances. This is seen clearly when Luce cuts Bud, seriously wounding him so that he experiences a great deal of blood loss. However, Bud is able to get to a stream and wash some of the blood away. He tries to staunch the flow of blood using moss. It seems possible that he might have survived but it also seems possible that he might have died. The omniscient view is limited in this case because the reader is left wondering about Bud's fate. However, in other cases, the thoughts and actions of the characters are clearly outlined. When Bud and Lit are riding around together one night, Lit begins questioning Bud's identity. It seems clear that Lit has come to suspect Bud's identity and Bud isn't certain what Lit's reaction is going to be. The reader is privy to Bud's thoughts, including his realization that he won't be able to beat Lit in a fair fight, then through the actions as Bud stabs Lit, killing him within minutes and dumping the body and the car. The author withholds some information in order to preserve surprises and plot twists in the story. For example, the reader sees the acts of the twins as they tear apart Lily's possessions. The children find "tinder" they use later for starting fires and it turns out this is the money Lily hid from Bud. Perspectives vary at different points in the story, including that of Luce, the twins, and Bud.

Setting

The story is set in the Appalachian Mountains. The overall setting is real though the specific settings - the lodge, the lake, the Roadhouse, and the old hotel where Luce was raped - are figments of the author's imagination. The exact town is never named, which is a fact that is probably on purpose. There are several specific settings within the overall setting. These include the lodge, the mountain side near the lodge, the lake, the Roadhouse, and the old hotel where Luce worked for the telephone company. These are described in adequate detail and some of these details are vital to the storyline. This is seen specifically in the mountain setting where there's a large, deep depression. Luce finds it one day when she's walking with the children and it's where she finds the children after they've run away. The time setting seems to be in the late 1950s, probably 1958. There are two movie references that support this time setting. The first is that Stubblefield walks past a movie theater with a billing for an upcoming showing of "The Defiant Ones," a Tony Curtis film released in 1958. The second is that Bud takes a woman to see "Thunder Road" at a drive-in. There are other hints about the time setting. Lit had served in the war and lamented that the government had been willing to hand out "bucketfuls" of drugs as uppers and downers but then had made much of that illegal. Cars are commonplace and travel easily accomplished. There is electricity available, even as far out of town as the lodge but there isn't a phone at the lodge and



Luce travels down the road to the country store to check for messages while the twins are missing.

Language and Meaning

The story is presented in a very informal style that is fairly easy to read though there are some interesting quirks in the story. The author does not use quotation marks at all. There are statements that seem to be direct quotes but most are referenced by dashes at the beginning of the statement. In some cases, a sentence begins with, "Said" and a statement that seems to indicate a direct quote. Some readers may find the style disconcerting though readers should pick up on the style fairly quickly. The overall tone is one of dread and danger. It's known from the beginning the Bud is a danger to the twins and Luce, and the fact that the reader knows Bud is nearby and actually searching for the twins makes the dangerous undertones more real. However, there is another vein of hope and peace, perpetuated by Luce's personality, that balances the danger. The two strains work well together to create a balance of suspense and hope. Though there are direct quotes, the average reader will find few unfamiliar words and phrases. The author seems to avoid the typical "backwoods" language in an effort to make the story more readable. There are some references to actions and activities that seem in keeping with the people, place, and time. For example, Maddie fries spinal cord from a hog and is squeezing cane for syrup. Luce takes the children for walks, teaching them about the natural world around them.

Structure

The book is divided into three parts. Each begins with a title page that includes a faded pattern of tangled tree limbs, as if seen through a fog. These parts are titled only by Roman Numerals, one through three. Part one includes chapters one through eleven. In these chapters, the main characters are introduced though their relationships are not yet made clear. It's known that Lily and Luce are sisters but the reader isn't yet certain that Lit is their father. The details of Lily's murder and Bud's trial are also detailed during this section. In part two, the chapter numbers begin again and include chapters one through thirteen. In this part, Luce and Stubblefield reunite where he admits that he had a crush on her when they were teenagers and he spent the summers with his grandfather. Luce is initially reluctant to allow a relationship to begin but gives in and the two are soon in love. In the final part, there are only five chapters. In this section, the twins run away and Bud and Luce find them at almost the same time. There's a confrontation between Luce and Bud which ends with Bud being cut seriously. The book comes to a conclusion with Luce and Stubblefield attending Christmas services with the twins who are slowly coming toward a normal outlook on life though the adults continue to keep an eye out for Bud. The chapters are titled by number only, giving no clue of what's included in each. The chapters vary greatly in length. For example, chapter four of part one is only about five pages in length and chapter eleven of part one is less than three full pages. Chapter three is about sixteen pages. Chapter two of part three is more than seventeen pages.



Quotes

"Within two days, the children learned how to make their own fire from tinder and a green stick bowed with a shoelace. Tiny cavemen on Benzedrine couldn't have made fire faster." (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"She explained the economics of chickens, talking to the children as if they had sense and hoping a few words might get through." (Chapter 3, p. 25).

"Being uncommunicative and taking an interest in fire were neither crimes nor sins, just inconvenient." (Chapter 3, p. 32).

"He used to say that when Luce was born, the first time he saw her, she was asleep. He asked the nurse how old they had to be for their eyes to open." (Chapter 5, p. 43).

"He ran the numbers in his head, and found that hauling liquor paid considerably better than lubing boxcar couplings, but even if he worked until he was as old as the former bootlegger, he'd never make back what Lily took from him. And he'd always live like he had the muzzle of a gun to his head, those two idiot kids with their grubby fingers on the trigger." (Chapter 7, p. 66).

"Back at the creek, they lay on the bank, turned their faces to the sun, and remember Lily hugging them tight, both at the same time, until their stomachs tingled and they laughed uncontrollably. Lily saying over and over, Love you, love you, love you, till the day I die." (Chapter 12, p. 95).

"And that's why we do dangerous and embarrassing things, as if simultaneously we're immortal and going to die tomorrow. And that's why we look back on that time so fondly from the dimmer years to come. Remembering the days when we were like Greek gods." (Chapter 1, p. 104).

"I can't tell if they can be fixed. Or if they can, how much." (Chapter 4, p. 150).

"He'd be sweating all over during a fight, but his expression remained mild as Jesus in his sunbeam amid the youngster animals. Drunks and criminals could be trying to head-butt him or shove up close, nose-to-nose, spitting out vile epithets, yet the look in Lit's eye remained as if he were peering into another green and peaceful word entirely." (Chapter 5, p. 137).

"And it wasn't even as if love factored much. Luce didn't love the children, and she sure didn't expect them to love her. That was a lot to ask in either direction." (Chapter 8, p. 152).

"When she finished the story, Luce wasn't even close to getting weepy about her dead daddy. He wasn't that kind of daddy, and she wasn't that kind of daughter." (Chapter 13, p. 200).



"And the long view is, they need to learn to speak for themselves and do the best they can. For now, if they bag their own lunch and it's pickles and prunes and they say the words, all you do is put both thumbs up and say Good job." (Chapter 1, p. 204).

"So if Bud ever writes his story, the moral is Make it quick. No more than switching off the porch light before bed." (Chapter 5, p. 255).



Topics for Discussion

Describe Luce. What is she like? What are her strengths and weaknesses? What are the circumstances that bring her to live in the lodge? What are her connections to family and friends? What do these connections indicate about her as a person?

Who is Stubblefield? What are his strengths and weaknesses? What is he doing when he learns of his inheritance? What does he do after the inheritance? How does he come into contact with Luce? What is his reaction when he does?

Who is Bud? Who is Lily? How do their lives impact the life of Luce? What kind of person was Lily? Briefly compare the strengths and weaknesses of Lily to those of Luce. Do the same for Bud and Stubblefield.

Who is Lit? What kind of person is he? How does he become acquainted with Bud? What does he eventually learn about Bud? What is his fate?

Who is Maddie? Who is Lola? Compare the two. What is their impact on Luce's life? What is Luce's impact on their lives?

What is the most important theme of the story? Why do you consider this important? What are some examples of this theme? Describe the people who are affected most by that theme.

Describe the overall setting of the story, including place and time. Why does this setting work for the story? Why is the setting of time and place important to this story?