

The Neon Bible Study Guide

The Neon Bible by John Kennedy Toole

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Neon Bible Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	6
Chapter 3.....	8
Chapter 4.....	10
Chapter 5.....	12
Chapter 6.....	14
Chapter 7.....	16
Chapter 8.....	17
Chapter 9.....	19
Chapter 10.....	21
Characters.....	22
Objects/Places.....	25
Themes.....	27
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	33
Topics for Discussion.....	35



Plot Summary

The Neon Bible by John Kennedy Toole is a coming of age story about a young man living in a small rural town, who tries to remain sane while dealing with family strife and social awkwardness.

David is raised as an only child, living with his mother, father and his eccentric Aunt Mae. The family resides in town until his father loses his job and they have to relocate to the hills. This move drastically changes their way of life and limits David's ability to socialize with other children. David has no real friends except Aunt Mae. She is a singer who is eccentric and dresses flamboyantly. The entire town talks about her behind her back but she doesn't mind. Any attention is good attention to Aunt Mae.

Father gets a part-time job at a gas station and decides to fill the rest of his time planting crops behind the house. He uses one week's salary to buy seeds and tools. Mother is outraged because it leaves her no money to buy food. During a heated argument, Father hits her and almost does not return to the house. Shortly after this incident, Father is drafted to Italy to fight in the war. It provides relief for the family, because it puts an end to the domestic fighting, but they are all sad to say goodbye.

Aunt Mae starts working at the town war plant and plays a key role in its functioning. A revival comes to town, bringing Bobbie Lee Taylor from Tennessee. The town has not had a revival in a long time and it is much needed by the women missing their loved ones overseas. The war plant has a party and Aunt Mae ends up singing for the crowd. After that night she starts singing all around town with the band. She is never home anymore and Mother spends all day sitting in the crops or reading the letters Father sends from Italy. David is in sixth grade when they receive a telegram stating that Father died and was buried in Italy. They get a picture of white crosses, one of which is presumed to be his.

Mother goes a little crazy and can no longer function in public. Aunt Mae goes out with a much older man from the band named Clyde. David graduates grade school and starts working at the local drugstore. David meets Jo Lynne at the store. She is visiting her sick grandfather and fills his prescriptions. David takes her out one night and they kiss. Soon after that night Jo Lynne leaves town again, prompting David to suggest they marry. She slaps him and leaves the store. Aunt Mae is asked by Clyde to go to Nashville to try and make it in the music industry. She leaves David with Mother and promises to send for them. David returns to the house to find Mother in the hallway bleeding from the mouth. She dies that night. The preacher comes by the house the next day, just as David finishes digging a grave. He tries to take Mother to the state institution, not knowing she is dead. David shoots the preacher in the back of the head with a shot gun. He buries Mother and leaves town on the next train, not looking back.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The novel opens on a train carrying David far away from his small town. The experience on the train brings him back to his childhood, when he receives a toy train for Christmas. Only adults were present on these occasions, and there were hardly any other children living around them, so David stayed inside where it was warm and played with his toy train.

This was when Aunt Mae came to live with them. She was the strongest childhood memory for David, besides the train. Aunt Mae's outlandish ways and revealing dresses were rare in their small town yet despite her differences, Aunt Mae became David's best friend.

Father encourages David to start playing with other little boys, and everyday David is dropped off at Bruce's house. The first thing Bruce ever did was throw David's hat into the stream. He was the type of boy who enjoyed climbing, throwing and fighting. David attempts to fit in but when Bruce and his group of friends find him crying they to beat him up. David throws up all over the boys as they trample and punch him. This stops the fight, but he is not allowed back in Bruce's house again.

David is five years old and ready for school, but he is still small for his age. Aunt Mae suggests he stay home another year and strengthen up. She becomes his playmate, and in addition to their Sunday walks they play outdoor games with toy cars in the mud. It is during their walks that Aunt Mae acquires her first boyfriend in town.

His name is George, whom Father approves of, thinking he will knock some sense into his sister-in-law. She starts coming home early in the morning, having a late breakfast and half-heartedly playing with David before retiring to her room to prepare for another date. She remains with George through the summer, and as time goes on no discussion of marriage ever arises. Aunt Mae did not seem like the type who would be interested in marriage.

They eventually break up and George apparently leaves town. This affects Aunt Mae deeply and her willingness to play with David dwindles.

One day a letter arrives from George and at the very sight of his hand writing, prompts Aunt Mae to tear it up. The truth is, George was arrested by the sheriff on a morals charge by a young girls' mother. He had not left town, he was in prison.

From these thoughts and memories of his childhood David's attention is turned back to the train and his journey into the night, and the great unknown.



Chapter 1 Analysis

This first chapter introduces relationships between the main characters of the novel. The dynamic between David, Mother, Father and Aunt Mae, continually evolves throughout the story, however it is significant to single out Aunt Mae. She plays an essential role in the house and for David, not his parents. She is his best friend, caretaker and confidant, and this relationship quickly becomes the strongest and most consistent in his life.

Father is engrossed in work, and the idea that his son will eventually grow into a strong, assertive, sociable young man. None of these attributes seem to inhabit themselves in David, and he is already seen as somewhat of a disappointment by Father.

It is also evident that David is not the typical young boy climbing trees and playing in dirt. Many references are made to his weak frame or physicality, yet he possesses a genuine interest for the people around him. David is awkward socially, even at five years old, and this behavior is perhaps a foreshadowing of the consistent theme of emotional isolation in David's life.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Father loses his job at the factory and the family is forced to move to a hill overlooking the valley. The new house is huge and consists of numerous rooms upstairs. The furniture from the old house was included in the rent, so the new house is also sparse of decoration.

The yard consists of cinders and weeds, and the back hills are full of snakes, making it difficult for Frank to play in either area. He is mainly confined to playing on the porch or in the house. The porch was the most positive thing about the house, because from there the whole county was visible.

Around the time the family moves to the hills, David enters school at County Elementary. The school is all the way across town, so David takes a long trek there every morning.

His first grade teacher, Mrs. Watkins, is an old neighbor from when they lived in town. She immediately singles David out as troublesome, due to her blatant distaste for Aunt Mae. Her husband is a deacon and has a reputation for preaching segregation. Mrs. Watkins is aware of her husband's reputation, and uses it as a threat to any children that misbehave.

By the end of the year David is able to read, add and write. These attributes are enough to Father, who sees reason for David to return to school the next year. He is growing some crops in the back hills and needs an extra hand plowing through the clay. David is more than happy to go back to school after learning his father's intentions for him. Crops in the hills was improbable because they were primarily a clay foundation.

One night Father returns home from work with a plow, rake, shovel and a little hatchet, bought with his week's salary. The family has no food in the house, except for some hush puppies and fried fish. Father refuses to take the seeds back to town and Mother is furious. Moments later father places his knee in connection with her chin and she goes flying down the stairs, blood running down her mouth.

Father disappears as Aunt Mae rushes in, and David runs to her side. Mother lost a tooth, and they cannot call a doctor because they have no money in the house. She goes to bed with ice packs on her face.

Aunt Mae and David admire the town and the old house from the front porch. That night they slept side by side hoping the next day is better.



Chapter 2 Analysis

The loss of Father's job is the first event in a series of circumstances that will change David's life. The family is uprooted and is forced to move to the hills. The isolation that begins to occur between life in the hills and life in the town is only the beginning of the separation. This theme of isolation yet again appears, and will continue to appear as David matures.

David finds himself confined to a house where he cannot play outside because it is too dangerous, and now his parents are fighting violently. The situation at school makes matters worse, because of Mrs. Watkins. The only person who seems sane and comforting is Aunt Mae.

It appears that this young boy is dealing with aggravations and unfortunate situations on all sides. He is simply trying to be a normal child, yet his circumstances are not allowing that to happen. Specifically when the fight between Mother and Father occur. David loses all admiration and kindness towards Father. He has never seen Mother beaten up before and is unsure how to react.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The next morning Aunt Mae prepares David for school and attempts to prepare breakfast. There are biscuits with the bottoms burnt and still gooey in the center, and fried eggs turned brown. The dish looks extremely unappetizing but David plays along. During breakfast he realizes he hasn't done the homework for Mrs. Watkins class. On the walk to school he sits down and writes his pages. The blades of wet grass were sticking to his pants but he runs down the hill and across town.

David enters the room as other kids are still coming in. He is the last one to take his seat and that is all Mrs. Watkins needs to take a few jabs at him. She hits him with her knee and instructs him to stand. The other kids are engaged in a fit of laughter. David suddenly remembers his pants are wet from the grass he sat on.

Mrs. Watkins turns him around to see the spectacle for herself. David accidentally lets out a huge belch. His throat was burning from the brown fried eggs at breakfast. She slaps him hard across the face and grabs his things, leading him to an empty room. She threatens to call the state authorities and report his behavior. David is left in the room to consider his behavior until Mrs. Watkins decides to come and relieve him.

David tried to blame Aunt Mae and her bad eggs for his uncontrollable belching, but it didn't work. His pants were still wet and uncomfortable. There were two windows in the room, one missing a glass pane. He locks the door from the inside, removes his pants, and places them on a chair to air out. After looking out the window and spotting a woman staring in his direction, David quickly puts his pants back on.

David remembers the lunch Aunt Mae has packed him, wrapped in newspaper. There is a sandwich with a piece of ham on it, and a few of the leftover hush puppies from the night before. She also gave him a little blue flower to accompany the food. David knew this was the only flower she had grown in her attempt at a garden up at the house, and so he took it home with him that night and returned it. She was so grateful upon receiving it again.

The day was almost over and the other students went home by the time Mrs. Watkins came to the room again. She demanded that David unlock the door. He grabs the lock, but she is leaning on the door, making it stick in its place. Her verbal commands turn into threatening yells. Just as she is backing away from the door for a moment in preparation to pummel it, David is able to slip the lock. Mrs. Watkins flies into the room and goes over a chair and onto the floor. She tells him to fetch the doctor immediately. David ran as fast as he possibly could and by the time he returns to the room, Mrs. Watkins is being put on a stretcher. She makes it clear David is not allowed to speak of this incident.



Aunt Mae is sitting on the porch when he arrives home. Father has returned home and sold some of his seeds and the rake so they could buy groceries. His parents do not interact with one another that evening. Aunt Mae remains silent and David wishes he was upstairs playing in the room with the train. The two of them sit on the porch until it begins to rain.

Chapter 3 Analysis

In this chapter Aunt Mae displays her role as the peacemaker. She is not domestic, yet she tries her best to make David feel comfortable and bring a sense of normalcy to his life. There is a sense of sympathy towards her nephew.

The scene at school with Mrs. Watkins displays a stroke of luck in David's favor. He has been badgered and teased by this woman, and yet she has suffered an embarrassing fall, that he is the only witness of. Whatever personal vendetta she has against Aunt Mae has been brushed aside by her concern for her own reputation.

At home, the relationship between Mother and Father is clearly being established by their avoidance for one another. They remain in separate areas of the house, and do not speak about the other's whereabouts to David or Aunt Mae. This reveals that their marriage is clearly unstable and could quite possibly be coming to an end.

David's theme of being in the room with the train appears again. Conflicts have occurred between his parents and at school, and the only place he wants to spend time is in that room.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The war is in full effect when Father is drafted. The family goes with him to the station to say goodbye, and David has never seen a grown man cry like that before. Most of the young men were leaving town for the war as well. The mechanic shops are empty, and signs are hung everywhere stating they are closed for the duration.

A small propeller factory is built down near the river, and many women find employment there, including Aunt Mae. She is even promoted to a supervisor of a section. Everyday she accompanies David on his walk to school. Mother stays home and cares for the crops out back that Father writes home about from his travels.

David is now out of fourth grade and his teacher, Mrs. Moore, is much more congenial than Mrs. Watkins. He passes Mrs. Watkins in the hall often, but the two never make eye contact.

A revival comes to town, bringing about an Evangelist, but not one being sponsored by the preacher as usual. It has been over a year since the town has seen a revival. The preacher is outraged by this, and schedules bible conferences every night at seven thirty for the two weeks the revival is in town. Bobbie Lee Taylor is the Evangelist speaker, and his picture is in the paper and signs hang around town with his name everywhere. People in the town have not seen a revival in over a year

Everyone in town attends the opening day, but it's not until ten days later that the family goes to hear Bobbie Lee Taylor. He speaks about the dedication and representation of Jesus. He warns about the men overseas who are taking up foreign wives, and the men will return home and not remember the importance of religion. He urges the women to write to their soldiers and remind them of this. People are asked to go onto the stage and recommit to their religion.

On the way home a woman stops to talk to Aunt Mae, Mother and David. She wonders why none of them have gone up onto the stage but Aunt Mae simply claims it's because they are still undecided about the whole thing. The woman urges that they go up there while the Evangelists are still in town.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The first person in David's life leaves in this chapter. Father goes overseas to participate in the war. The dynamics up on the hill change once again, and he must adjust to not having an older male figure in the house. This can be viewed as a relief to the three remaining inhabitants, since none of them favored Father after the fight with Mother. However, they all miss him terribly once he is gone.



The revival is something that happens so infrequently in this small town that when it occurs, the utmost attention is given to it. Everyone in town considers the revival a serious and necessary thing to attend. The fact that David and his family live up on the hill and are not seen at church regularly, makes them an easy target for people who think they should recommit to religion.

David is not sure how he feels about religion at this point, so he keeps his mouth shut and simply observes. This is an indication that the town's way of life and its ideals and morals, may not be what David has in mind for himself in the future.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The women at the war plant are having a party and Mother and David decide to attend as well. The factory machines are pushed aside allowing for a dance floor. The women are all wearing light floral dresses with flowers in their hair. A band arrives and soon everyone is dancing. Aunt Mae and another woman begin dancing together. Aunt Mae assumes the man's position, and soon everyone else dancing has retreated, allowing them the entire floor.

Aunt Mae is eventually persuaded to sing for the party. She sings like no one they have ever heard in town before. It was more like the women on the radio and in the movies. Everyone tells Aunt Mae how wonderful it was, and finally after many hours they venture back up the hill to the house. Aunt Mae, with her newfound fame, admits she can be happy here.

After the night of the party Aunt Mae is never around. The band asks her to sing with them regularly and they play gigs everywhere including the county seat and sometimes the capital. They also play at the movie theater every Saturday for ten cents more than the movie and they gain business playing wedding receptions when the war ends.

Meanwhile, the letters Mother receives from Father worry her. He is in Italy where the worst of the fighting is. David is just finishing sixth grade and his class has been allowed to take a field trip with Mrs. Moore to the courthouse and produce a school play.

The day the rehearsals start David makes it home late from school. Mother is crying in the kitchen, and on the table next to her is a telegram. Father has been killed in Italy. David does not know how to feel. He thinks of his father and the plot of land out back he has diligently looked after. He thinks of the beach his father has wanted to take him to after he returned from the war, and he realizes he is crying.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The singing job Aunt Mae accepts changes the dynamic in the household once again. David no longer has her as his continual confidant. To make matters worse, Father has just passed away. This is another example of Aunt Mae continuing to do whatever makes her happy, and putting herself before the greater good of the family.

This chapter reveals the tragedy and rare happiness that comes out of a war. The women of the town band together and find comfort in each other, working and planning parties. The young men return to marry girls and other men return to their wives. The tragedy of the war is displayed in Father's death. He has sent postcards and pictures, all of which Mother cherishes. Sadly, there is no closure to his story; he is gone, and they don't even know what really happened.

The older David becomes the more his personal life unravels. The house up on the hill represents a place of sadness and loneliness rather than a home.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The war is over. Various men bring home the women they married overseas. Eventually these men are ostracized by the preacher and town people alike. The soldiers who died overseas are eventually sent home in boxes and buried in the graveyard. Father never came home. He is buried in Italy, in a large graveyard with a bunch of white crosses. Mother receives a picture of it which she continues to stare at all the time.

Aunt Mae loses her job at the plant, because it closes when the war ends. The little money she makes now is from her singing gigs with the band.

David is almost out of grade school and his teacher, Mr. Farney, is from Atlanta. On graduation night, David wears his father's shirt and a new suit. He is the first man in his family to make it past eighth grade. He and his fellow classmates are now eligible to enter any state high school, although he won't be attending any. Aunt Mae asks her friend Flora to watch after Mother while she attends graduation.

After the ceremony Aunt Mae gives David a watch and tells him to get in Clyde's truck since he is going to drive them back up the hill. Clyde is a member of the band and is trying hard to put the moves on Aunt Mae which is evident in his swerving of the vehicle.

At the bottom of the hill Aunt Mae requests that David wait outside of the truck for a little while. David wonders if girls would even like him or if he could ever do what Clyde and Aunt Mae were doing.

After awhile Aunt Mae exits the truck and they begin walking up the hill. David looks down at the houses, and graduation parties, none of which he is invited to. When they reach the house Mother is in the kitchen talking to herself. Flora left after thirty minutes in her presence, telling her she is crazy. Mother is staring at that picture of the white crosses and David and Aunt Mae looked at each other helplessly.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This is the first time in the novel where David really recognizes himself in comparison to his peers. His lack of money and stability, and distance on the hill from the town, all make his situation less fortunate than the other kids.

He has also managed to accomplish finishing grade school, when no other man in the family has. This is a big deal considering the circumstances and situation in which David has grown up in. Aunt Mae continues to show support and love for her nephew by attending the ceremony and presenting him with a watch. Then she forgets his celebration in favor of hooking up with Clyde in the truck and making David wait outside.

This is another example of how Aunt Mae chooses her own gratification over making him happy.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

David is hired at the local drugstore, delivering medicine to houses and working behind the counter for Mr. Williams, the store owner. Most of the time it is mainly older women that come in, looking at various medicines.

The worst part about the store is the amount of people who ask about Mother. After his graduation Flora apparently helped spread the rumors that she was crazy and unable to function. All the townspeople are either worried she was alright up on the hill or slightly afraid of her.

One day Jo Lynne, a granddaughter of someone in town, began coming to the store. David is instantly attracted to her unique appearance and after about a month of her coming in and filling prescriptions, the two begin talking to one another.

With the insistence from Aunt Mae, David asks Jo Lynne out to a movie and she accepts. The night they plan on meeting up, Aunt Mae willingly stays home with Mother, skipping a rather promising singing gig in favor of helping her nephew's love life.

They go to a movie in town and hold hands during the film. David cannot focus on anything but Jo Lynne. Afterwards they head towards her house but before they arrive Jo Lynne suggests climbing one of the hills to look at some of the new houses being built.

They climb and David is nervous next to her, but he continues to hold onto her, keeping her from falling. In the moonlight, on the hill, amidst frames of new houses, they kiss.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This is David's first encounter with the opposite sex. It is honorable that Aunt Mae waited for David to bring up girls and she never questioned him on the subject. It demonstrates immense understanding between the woman and her nephew. However she acknowledges her selfishness, when keeping David in the house while she was off playing gigs with Clyde. She happily stays at home, not only because she feels like she owes it to David, but because she wants him to have a social life.

David is not incapable of having friends or even a girlfriend, but he has never had the opportunity to fine tune his social skills. For all of the isolation David has experienced in his life, he shows great promise for the future.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Jo Lynne leaves almost as quickly as she had arrived. She comes into the store to briefly say goodbye to David. He wants to write to her and she reacts harshly, accusing him of acting like he has never been out with any girls before. He suggests they get married and she slaps him in the face and storms out of the drugstore. His face is bleeding and he is terribly ashamed of himself.

The other kids from his grade school class were now at state universities, joining fraternities or sororities if they could afford it. David began thinking about his own future, outside of the valley.

He spends most of his time up in the old room where his toy train is. Aunt Mae is home almost every night now, because Clyde has gone to Nashville to see about a radio job. David is happy to have Aunt Mae home now, because Mother is drastically changing. She appears much skinnier and just stares at David every time he is in front of her. Flora and the preacher are trying to take Mother to the state institution and they request that David ask Aunt Mae for permission to do so. David does not want to talk to her and he soon puts it out of his mind.

Aunt Mae receives a letter from Clyde with an offer to do a radio show in Nashville. She is abruptly leaving David and his mother to try and make it big in the music industry. She promises to send them train tickets as soon as the money begins pouring in.

David quits his job at the drugstore, as Aunt Mae requested, in order to stay home with Mother. Mr. Williams feels sorry for him and gives him an envelope with some money it in.

Then Aunt Mae leaves on a bus and does not look back.

Chapter 8 Analysis

David's job at the drugstore is satisfactory, but after hearing about his old classmates he begins thinking about his own aspirations, beyond the valley, which is something he rarely did growing up. His life has never been about living for his own dreams.

David's life and dreams are once again put on hold when Aunt Mae announces she is leaving town. The drugstore is possibly the best place he is capable of working at with only an elementary education. This move on Aunt Mae's part is questionable whether it is selfish or she is thinking of the greater good of the family. She promises to send for them, but it appears she knows that it is not the best decision and she should not leave David alone with Mother.

David should be the one going off into the world pursuing his dreams, yet it is Aunt Mae who is escaping the small town and following her heart. This seems backwards and extremely unfair to the young boy's future life.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

David walks into the house, searching for Mother, but she is nowhere to be found. He climbed the stairs looking for her and felt something thick and runny under his feet. There was something hard beneath him, and David tripped over it in the hallway. It was Mother, sprawled on the floor, with blood coming out of her mouth.

He carried her into the bedroom and attempted to stop the blood from flowing. Mother was dying and David began to cry, even though he reckoned he was too old to cry. That night she passed quietly, and David stayed in the room with the train.

The next morning David went outside with his father's shovel and dug a grave under the pines. When he came into the house again he knew there was a man there. It was the preacher waiting for him.

The preacher demands that taking Mother to the state institution is the most logical thing to do. David pretends not to know where Mother is, suggesting she is out of the house. The preacher is persistent however and David becomes outraged, grabbing the gun from the kitchen as the old man climbs the stairs. David fires one shot and hits the him in the back of the head, causing him fall instantly to the floor.

David runs upstairs to the room where the train was and slams the door. He needs to escape, to find warm air and to breathe. Before he can find relief he has to take care of Mother. He carries her outside and buries her where he dug a hole.

Then with the envelope of money Mr. William's had given him, David walks down the hill and into town. He says hello to people as he passes, and buys a train ticket out of the valley.

Chapter 9 Analysis

When David discovers Mother in the hallway he is detached from the situation. Aunt Mae has just deserted him and there is not enough money or time to call for a doctor. This young boy is now left with his mother's life dangling in front of him. The emotions he feels of losing Mother all stem from the old memories he has of her, not recent events.

This is the only place in the world that David feels safe is the room with the train. They are symbolic of his childhood and happier moments of his life. As time goes on and he continues losing the people he loves, this room becomes more of a necessity for David. It is a place created solely for him.



The most important event in this chapter is the murder of the preacher. David has an instinctual moment where he raises the gun and shoots him. This is significant because David is reacting to feelings of rage and remorse that have been building up for years against the preacher. It was not preemptive, but it is not surprising that he is able to shoot the man and simply leave town as if nothing has happened. David has taken control of his destiny, whether he is aware of it or not.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

David is on the train now, after riding for an entire night. The conductor takes the envelope of money from David and is going to let him off whenever he cannot afford to go any further. The train has gone pretty far from the valley, and there are only flatlands outside the windows now.

David thinks about writing to Aunt Mae, or possibly going to Nashville once he gets a job and figures out where he is. He does not worry about the events on the hill as the train pulls further away from the recent events. He just stares out the window and notices the blue sky is the same as it was in town the day before.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This novel portrays the life of a young man who went from being a social outcast, living up on a hill, to running away from town with no one left to turn to. He is now officially alone in the world.

The train David is on is symbolic for the toy train he has used his whole life as a route of escape. Now the toy train has morphed into a real one, and it is literally taking him away from his problems and the town that has suffocated him from the very beginning. This is a genius writing technique, to take the metaphor of the toy train and turn it into reality for David.



Characters

David

David is the main character of the novel. The story begins with him as a young child and concludes when he is around the age of sixteen. David is an only child who lives with his mother, father and aunt. He is not athletic or social and spends the majority of his time with his Aunt Mae. His favorite place is the room in the house with his toy train, where he has created his own fantasy world, escaping the hardships he faces daily.

David develops into a young man with the potential for a bright future, but no one will ever allow him that opportunity. He only finishes eighth grade, although he aspires to one day finish college. The circumstances in his life including the death of his father, his mother going mentally insane and his aunt leaving town, all mold the person that David becomes. Remarkably he seems undeterred by all of these events until he takes out his rage on the unsuspecting preacher by the end of the novel. David finally breaks free from the confinements of the town, the social barriers and most importantly his own insecurities, once all of the people he lived with have disappeared from his life.

Frank

Frank is David's father, and throughout the novel he is simply referred to as "Father." This man was raised with a small town mentality that he tries to impress upon his only son with no success. Father believes that David should be friends with other boys, and work for a living. School is not necessary past learning to read, add and write. He is stubborn and has little respect for his wife or Aunt Mae. Mostly Father keeps to himself, and works hard everyday. When he goes to fight in the war, it is more voluntary than required, but he is visibly unhappy with his home life. Once he is in Italy, the letters he writes to Mother and David indicate that he is a changed man after his experience in the war. He seems forgiving and regretful he did not appreciate them while he had the chance.

Sarah

Sarah is David's mother and is referred to as "Mother" throughout the novel. She is loyal to her husband and kind enough to allow her sister to come and live with them. She loves David and encourages he develop however he is naturally, and not be forced into playing with boys or quitting school. She appears to have the opposite demeanor of David's father. Mother mostly keeps to herself after Father leaves for the war, and when he is killed she goes a little bit insane. The loss of her husband, no matter how bad the marriage was, is a tragic blow in her life. It is the catalyst for her downfall and ultimate death.



Aunt Mae Gebler

Aunt Mae is David's aunt, who comes to live with the family after many years as a struggling singer. She is a heavy set woman, around sixty years of age, who dresses in bright colors and big hats. Her stage name was Mae Morgan and she has trouble adjusting to the likes of a small town after having big dreams in the music industry. She is the sole confidant and best friend to David. She is also the peacemaker and solid foundation that keeps the family somewhat together. Without the presence of Aunt Mae in the household it is questionable how well David would have survived his adolescent years.

Ultimately Aunt Mae reverts back to her selfish ways of wanting to be on the stage, and leaves David and her senile sister in pursuit of her own happiness.

George

Aunt Mae's first boyfriend in town. He is around seventy years old, with long, gray, greasy hair and shifty eyes. He dated Aunt Mae for a summer, before moving to another town abruptly one morning. Years later David discovered George had not left town, but was arrested by the sheriff because of a report filed by a young girls' mother.

Mrs. Watkins

David's first grade teacher. She dislikes him immediately for his relation to Aunt Mae. Her husband is a deacon and works in the town to promote segregation and stop the infiltration of things like "Gone With the Wind," claiming it to be licentious. Aware of her husband's reputation, she uses his position to threaten the children in her class, and if they are out line will be subject to his fury.

Jo Lynne

A young girl, who comes to town to visit her ailing grandfather. She has black hair and blue-green eyes, and fair skin. She frequently picks up her grandfather's prescription from the drugstore where David works. David experiences his first crush on her. He asks her out and kisses her. She leaves shortly after their date, once her grandfather has recovered.

The Preacher

The preacher is the main leader among the townspeople and they rarely go against his word. He is a promoter of keeping the town clean of "heathens" and any person who does not fit into the proper mold of what the town represents. Therefore he controls an ample amount of what occurs around the valley, including ostracizing these outcasts



and taking old people to the state institution when he sees fit. He reprimands people if they are not constants on his church rolls, even if they cannot afford it.

He is eventually killed by David when he comes up to the house to try and take Mother away to the state institution.

Clyde

Aunt Mae's boyfriend from the band. They meet at the war plant party, and continue a relationship throughout the rest of the novel. Clyde is much older than Aunt Mae, but he pursues her fervently, and eventually finds them both an opportunity in Nashville on a radio program. Aunt Mae ultimately leaves the town to go join Clyde.

Mrs. Moore

David's fifth grade teacher.

Bobbie Lee Taylor

Evangelist from Memphis, Tennessee. He comes to the town for a few weeks for a revival, preaching about becoming a Christian and one with Jesus. He is blond-haired, blue-eyed, skinny and with a firm gaze. His speeches inspire the people of the town and many of them break into tears at the revivals.

Mr Farney

David's final grade school teacher from Atlanta. He walks more like a women, swaying his hips, with smooth skin and a thin frame. He excels at poetry, and took a liking to raising violets. He lives with another man in town who gives music lessons.

Mr. Williams

The drugstore owner.

Flora

A friend of Aunt Mae's who stays at the house with Mother during David's graduation, but only manages thirty minutes there before she declares Mother is a crazy person. She continues to spread rumors about Mother as time passes and eventually plans the idea of taking Mother to the state institution with the preacher.



Objects/Places

The House up on the Hill

The house David and his family move into after his father loses his job at the factory. This house ultimately changes all of the members in David's family, mainly because of its isolation to the rest of the town. It also provides the one room in which David finds comfort and solace.

Main Street

The street in where all of the walks with David and Aunt Mae take place. They walk up and down every Sunday and view the new window displays.

County Elementary

The school David attends. It is a wooden building with four rooms, managing grades 1-8.

The War Plant

Propeller plant, created when the men of the town go off to war. Many of the women, including Aunt Mae, begin working there.

The Roadhouse

A bar where all of the teenagers go to have fun.

County Seat

The area of the county that is outside of the small town. It is where the courthouse presides, and where Aunt Mae travels to play some out of town gigs.

The Room with the Train

This room, upstairs in David's house, is his safe haven. He goes here numerous times whenever anything bad happens and he needs to escape from the hardships and realities of his life.



The Drugstore

David works here instead of attending high school. It is the only place he works while living in the town.

Heathens

Heathens are what the preacher and many townspeople refer when they are speaking about people who were not born and raised in the town. This occurred many times during the war when people were afraid men were going to bring back women from overseas, who were of a different nationality or race.

The Revival

The Revival is when a preacher from out of state comes to the town and speaks on behalf of Jesus and Christianity. The townspeople are emphatic about attending these, and renewing their faith and commitment to religion.



Themes

Life in A Small Town

The undertone of this novel is the constant mention of how life functions in this small town. It is common for people to be born, raised and eventually buried there, without stepping outside of the valley lines. This is the preferred way of life for most, and it is exemplified through many of the characters in the story.

The primary example of pure small town living is the preacher. He does not hide the fact that people from outside of the town, specifically of differing races or ethnicities, are not welcome. If they do happen to reside in town, they will ultimately be forced out, allowing the town to retain its "purity." When young soldiers brought back wives from overseas, this is exactly what happened.

Other promoters of this way of life are Mr. and Mrs. Watkins. She was David's teacher, who held a personal vendetta against Aunt Mae for being loud and different, and he was a town deacon. They both believed in religion heavily and reprimanded anyone who was not on the church rolls consistently. They also promoted the abolishment of movies such as "Gone With The Wind," so that people would have no reference to alternative ways of living.

Many people followed in the wake of the preacher and the Watkins. Perhaps they were afraid of being outcasts themselves, or they truly believed in what these people were promoting.

What truly existed was an unspoken caste society. The people who lived in the hills, such as David's family, were considered not as well-off by any means. There were also sections of the town where the wealthier people lived, and if they decided to rope off the road to their houses they could. Depending on your economic situation and social occupation you were classified in a certain manner.

David was not expected to go to high school, just as the more fortunate children were expected to leave town and finish college. These expectations reserved for certain levels of class or situations, exist all over the town in various forms. Other examples include the people who were sent off to the state institution, even if it was against their will, yet they were considered to old and incapable to stay there. Or the women who suffered a miscarriage or divorce, were simply not discussed and ignored, as if nothing had occurred.

Isolation and the Toy Train

The main theme for the main character is that his life is a series of events of isolation that lead to eventual freedom. David experiences two types of isolation, emotional and



physical. The physical isolation actually becomes emotional isolation, until ultimately David is forced to leave the town whether he wants to or not.

Physically the isolation occurs when Father loses his job and the family moves into the hills. The town is now a world away from David, and any opportunities to make friends there quickly vanishes. He also has no options for playing outside as he once did. The cinders in the front yard and snakes in the back hills, confine him to playing on the porch or in the house. This leads him to creating a world for himself upstairs in a spare room.

He has a toy train that he was given one Christmas. This train becomes his symbol for freedom and happiness. It can magically turn into a real train, traveling over hills and mountains, and far away from the town. His emotional isolation begins here, in this room with the train. He starts imagining a world outside of his own instead of confronting reality.

At school the physical isolation deepens when his teacher makes fun of him for living in the hills, and not being able to afford things like an alarm clock. David is ostracized for simply living out of the valley, even though he is a perfectly normal child. This continues well into grade school, and he makes no friends there. His life is lonely up on the hill, even though he is living with other people.

Events within his family begin to occur that lead to further his emotional distance. One night Mother is hit under the chin and Father leaves the house. David is not capable of handling this situation and retires to the comfort of his room with the train. He is creating isolation from them, from the situation and from his own feelings.

Again when Father leaves for the war and ultimately dies in Italy, David once again finds solace in this room. No matter what age, he remains feeling comfortable in his solitary confinement, within the world he created years ago. He does not discuss his feelings, primarily because he has no one to discuss them with. Aunt Mae is not the sort of confidant he needs. Mother is not comforting to him at all, because she is beginning to go slightly insane after losing her husband.

Finally when Mother dies, he shuts himself in the room with the train and considers what to do. Instead of wanting to be next to her, and remember her, he prefers being alone.

The last and final time David enters that room the circumstances are grave. He has just murdered the preacher, and yet when he is in the room those feelings of panic and rage dissipate. Somehow David has managed to created a world that makes him fearless. His emotional isolation is unknowingly assisting him to escape the binds of the real world he is suffocating in.

When David leaves town and boards a train, the fantasy becomes his reality. He is on the train he created in his mind as a child. He never imagined it would be for the reasons it has become, but the most important thing is that he is on it.



Emotionally David is already a quiet young boy, which is not helped by the fact that Father forces him to play with other young boys who are more experienced socially. When his father loses his job and they move out of town and onto the hills, the physical isolation begins.

Aunt Mae's Abandonment of David

Aunt Mae never really wanted to move in with her sister, and secretly awaited her next big opportunity. She settles for small town life during David's childhood and adolescence and appreciates certain aspects of it. She gains more attention by being the only woman in the valley who is capable of singing like the girls in the movies and she dresses more extravagantly than any of the locals. This is the attention she thirsts for and holds onto, allowing her to survive many years in the town. She also become David's single companion and best friend. She spends hours playing with him and walking down Main Street together. David reveres her as someone he loved spending time with.

The first sign of this abandonment pattern appears when Aunt Mae found her boyfriend George. She stopped being with David, whom she was normally around all the time, and never thought of how it would affect her young nephew. He was quite impressionable, and waited up many nights for Aunt Mae to return home from her dates. By the time she and George broke up, Aunt Mae was a different woman. She no longer wanted to go outside with David in the mud or take walks in town, and David had lost his playmate.

The second instance was when Aunt Mae was offered a job singing in the local band. This was an opportunity to tune her pipes, and perform on stage where she loved the spotlight. The band had numerous gigs out of town, especially once they gained some recognition. Aunt Mae also began dating Clyde, who was a member of the band. At this point Aunt Mae was also working at the war plant, and she accompanied David on his way to school everyday. But when the war ended and the plant closed, she only had her singing gig. He rarely saw her after that.

The final instance of Aunt Mae abandoning David is when she actually leaves the town for good. She is offered an opportunity to join Clyde in Nashville, and without a second thought she bolts, leaving David in the most dire of circumstances with his senile mother. She barely gives him a few days notice and he has no time to prepare physically or mentally for this change.

The confusion lies in the relationship between Aunt Mae and David. She clearly has cared for him more than anyone else in his life, and she has taken care of him every time something with his parents has gone wrong. It is baffling that she would ultimately make a decision that so clearly affects David's life in a negative manner. Every instance of her abandoning David in the past has been worked through and they manage to regain some sort of loving relationship.



But this last action of Aunt Mae's, leaving for Nashville, is the single worst decision she has made since entering David's life. This decision led to the ultimate murder of a man and the rushed burial of her beloved sister. Aunt Mae has no knowledge of the events that directly followed her skipping town, but if she ever hears about them it is sure that she will feel responsible for the choices she has made.



Style

Point of View

The point of view is first person narrative. David is telling the reader his story. This is essential to the author's intention of allowing the reader to fully understand the emotional journey that David takes in order to reach his ultimate outcome. It is necessary to pay close attention to the details in the first chapter, so that the reader remains aware that David is telling the entire story from retrospect until the very end of the novel.

The author probably used this type of perspective so that the reader would focus solely on the experiences and potential feelings of the main character. Although much of the story discusses the people around him, the most important fact is how David felt about those people and situations. There is no other way to allow the reader into David's mind than having him tell his own story.

He goes on such an emotional journey, yet it is completely introverted. He does not discuss his feelings with other characters in the story, because he has no real friends. The possibility of knowing how he feels is not probable from an outsider's point of view. Even from an omniscient perspective, it would not have been as effective.

Setting

The setting for this novel is in a small town in rural America. It is a valley with surrounding hills, and a small population. The capital and the county seat are both right outside of the valley, yet no one ventures there unless it's for important business. David and his family live in the town until his father loses his job and they relocate to the hills. The hills are primarily made up of clay, so it is difficult to plow fields there. The clay also makes the foundation of any house slippery, specifically during torrential rains. David's house actually loses part of the porch in a storm.

This is the only town the story takes place in, although there are references to the outside world. Aunt Mae runs off to Nashville with Clyde, Bobbie Lee Taylor brings a revival from Memphis, Tennessee, and Jo Lynne is visiting from Springfield.

Other places in this setting include the County Elementary where David attended school. It is a wooden building, that holds grades 1-8. The drugstore in town is where David works after he graduates from eighth grade. The propeller plant down by the river is opened when the men go off to war, and many women start working there. Aunt Mae is a supervisor there, and the town even organizes a dance to be held in the plant.

The outdoors discussed in this novel are mainly around the house on the hill. David's family has a lot of land behind the house that is untouched. Pines grow all over the town,



but specifically up behind their house. Father has to make a clearing in the trees to begin his plowing.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is formal and proper, much unlike what you would imagine David actually sounded like. He is speaking as though he is wise and educated beyond his years. This language choice is affective in a positive manner because it allows the reader to concentrate on the events of the story and not the specific type of dialog of the narrator. It may have been detrimental to write the story the way that David really spoke.

A lot of time passes between the chapters. David ages multiple years continually and it is the author's job to streamline the text and keep the reader up to date. This is accomplished with continual reference to what grade he is in at school. Otherwise the reader would have no idea that much time has passed. Aunt Mae is old, but it is never revealed what year in her life she is at. There were a few moments while reading that it is possible to lose track of how old she really is. David reminds the reader at some points by reminding himself that his aunt is pretty old for how you she appears.

There are passages in the novel that are noticeably longer where the author spends an immense amount of detail on certain elements of the story. While they may have to be reread again to obtain the full effects, the details are necessary to understand the main character's point of view and reasons for his actions. Ultimately the language and the meaning behind it contribute to a well written account of the main character's life and experiences.

Structure

The novel consists of ten chapters with no subplots. The chapters are simply labeled by numbers and cohesively flow from one to the next. The first chapter introduces the reader to the David who is on a train traveling away from his hometown. Then he reverts back to a childhood memory, and the story continues from there. It is not until the tenth and final chapter that the author returns to the present day, where David is on the train. Almost the entirety of the book is spent backtracking, explaining David's life up until the present moment.

This technique brings the reader full circle. It is possible to understand, in depth, David's situation, from the way it is written. This kind of writing format is not the easiest to keep the reader interested. A few times in the beginning of the novel it is easy to wonder when the story of David on the train is going to appear again. With persistence and patience, however, the story unravels itself, into a compelling tale of a young man that is definitely worth reading.



Quotes

"On the stage that gown may have been quite successful, but you don't know what it's like to live in a small town like this. If Frank hears about things like that, he won't let you stay here." Chp 1, p. 6

"Frank, you fool, you stupid fool. You have a son to feed. I can take anything you say, go ahead and say it. Call Mae what you want to. I know what you think of her. I just need the money. We have to eat. We can't sit and starve and wait for a few seeds to work where even trees can hardly grow." Chp 2, p. 30

"He's one of the poor folks that lives up in the hills, and don't have the money to buy an alarm clock." Chp 3, p. 43

"Ah the women of America are failing. Every day more soldiers and sailors and marines and colonels and privates and lieutenants are taking up with foreign wives and even marrying them! Do you want your son to return home with a foreign wife, maybe even a heathen?" Chp. 4, p.69

"When he returned he was going to take me to the ocean, because I never went there, so I could see what a beach was like with the waves rolling up in it. In the end he said he missed every one of us more than he ever thought he would." Chp 5, p. 85

"You'd never think in a few more years someone almost left his house over that piece of clay and hit his wife in the jaw and scared his son. But besides me, that was the only thing Poppa did while he was living that you could see now." Chp 5, p. 92

"All the other boys and girls I see down in town have been going out for a long time. You can't sit up here every night with your Mother like you do." Chp. 7p, 123

"She didn't know she was the only thing I ever wanted to have that I thought I'd get."
Chp 8, p.133

"I got mad at myself for feeling that way about my own mother, but then I thought about it, and I told myself she wasn't a real mother anymore. She was just a strange woman who frightened me and didn't seem to know me at all. She didn't even look like my mother." Chp. 8, p. 137

If you were different from anybody in town, you had to get out. That's why everybody was so much alike. The way they talked, what they did, what they liked, what they hated. If somebody got to hate something and he was the right person, everybody had to hate it too, or people began to hate the ones who didn't hate it." Chp. 8, p. 138

"She put on her hat, the same one she wore the day she came to live with us, and she didn't even think about it, but I did." Chp. 8, 146

"The wind just blew cold and strong against the window in the room. It was the only other thing besides me and Mother up there on the hill." Chp 9, p. 154



Topics for Discussion

How has living in the house on the hill affected David's upbringing? How would it differ if his family had remained in town?

Why was Aunt Mae's role in David's life significant? What did her exit from the town do to David emotionally?

How did Father's entry into the war change the lives of his family? Was it beneficial or detrimental that he left?

Why did David act so irrationally with Jo Lynne? What made him consider the idea of marriage?

Do you think Aunt Mae has any intention of sending for David and Mother once she reaches Nashville?

How will the town react to the missing preacher? What will happen when they discover the events in the house on the hill?

Where is David going and how will he survive when he arrives?

Did David do the right thing by leaving town?