

The Nix Study Guide

The Nix by Nathan Hill

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Hill, Nathan. *The Nix: a novel*. Alfred A Knopf. 2016 (Ebook ISBN 9781101946626)

The novel begins with a heartbreaking scene of a mother leaving her family slowly. Faye Andreson-Anderson is described as being a mom who never really wanted to be a mom—as a woman who does not feel successful in her role as the head of her household. Instead of continuing this, she slowly packs her bags over the course of weeks, ensuring that neither her husband nor her son will notice her impending departure. Her son, Samuel, is only 11 years old when he watches his mother walk out of the house with only one suitcase in tow. This image, and this feeling of unanswered betrayal, will shape Samuel for the rest of his life.

There are ten parts in this book, and each part details the events of different years from various characters' perspectives. Part One, for example, takes place in 2011. Faye Andreson, as she now refers to herself, has been apart from Samuel for quite some time. She is videotaped throwing rocks at a political figure while he delivers a speech in a park in a Chicago park. This leads to an absolute circus of media coverage in which she is quickly dubbed the, "Packer Attacker." Samuel is an adult now, working as a novelist and English professor in Illinois. He hates his job, has no friends, and plays *World of Elfscape* way more than he knows he should. Within each chapter in Part One, the narrator remains an omniscient third person with lengthy dives into the thought patterns of each damaged character.

Part Two whisks us back to the summer of 1988. We meet Samuel in the time just before Faye leaves him. Samuel is a weak and emotional boy who cries often and frustrates Faye with the high level of waterworks. Samuel meets a very odd and war-obsessed boy named Bishop Fall. The two meet in the forested area between their homes and become instant friends. Bishop's twin sister, Bethany, becomes Samuel's paradigm for female perfection, and Samuel falls head over heels in love with her from the first moment he lays eyes on her. Meanwhile, Samuel is enjoying his friendship with Bishop, although Bishop tends to be a rather naughty bully who brings Samuel into some pretty dangerous antics. Their friendship collapses the day after Samuel helps Bishop poison a man to death. The next morning, Samuel's mother leaves him and Bishop's family removes him from that town forever.

After Hill establishes the time period of crisis when Samuel drastically changes, Part Three exposes us to Samuel's attempt at researching his mother's story in 2011. It turns out that Samuel never actually wrote the novel he was paid an advance for. Because of this, his publisher is threatening to sue him. However, thanks to Faye's recent political activism, Samuel's publisher is willing to give him one more chance if he drafts a novel all about Faye and what a menace to society she is. Samuel agrees to do this, both out of desperation and a quick emotional desire for revenge. He goes in search of answers, leading him to Faye's father in Iowa and to her ex-husband in Illinois. No one seems to know the whole truth about her life or why she made some of the decisions that she did.



Samuel has a lucky break in Iowa when he discovers some of Faye's old papers in storage at his grandfather's nursing home. Samuel quickly learns that Faye spent one month attending college in Chicago but that she quickly left school, returned to Iowa, married Samuel's father, and raised him until she could not bear it and left again. The better question to Samuel becomes why Faye left Chicago so quickly in 1968.

Part Four focuses on Faye's life in 1968. She is an awkward teenager with a boyfriend she does not really like all that much. Faye is horrified by the threatening portrayal of husbands and wives, and she frequently contemplates whether or not she should make her own independent life at college. Faye applied in secret but told everyone when she was accepted. Now the whole town seems to weigh in on whether or not college will be good for her. Faye feels crushed by the social pressures of living in a small town. She wants nothing more than to escape them and become her own woman. She is held down by several individuals in her life. Her mother constantly reminds her of the dangers of living in Chicago. Her father, Frank, does see the purpose of school, and her boyfriend, Henry, threatens to join the fight in Vietnam if she leaves him alone in Iowa. She is faced with many choices, but she is eventually pushed out of Iowa because the town is under the impression that she is pregnant. This brings shame to the Anderson family and Frank tells her to get out and never return.

Hill drags readers back to 2011 in Part Five, where we learn that Bishop Fall has been killed while fighting in Iraq. He drifted apart from Samuel and from Bethany, so the only thing they know is that he is dead but they do not know much about what led up to it. The narrative breaks momentarily to give a detailed account of what Bishop's life was like after he left Illinois. This brings us back to an anti-war protest, where Bethany has invited Samuel march in protest to the Republican National Convention. Samuel is still dealing with his unrequited love for Bethany and he agrees to attend the march because he thinks this will provide an opportunity to rekindle romance with Bethany. She is a mess. Bethany is heartbroken from the loss of her twin brother, but she is also trapped because she is engaged to be married to a man she knows will not make her happy. Bethany tells Samuel that she wants to have sex with him, but Samuel first reads a note from Bishop asking him to leave his sister alone. Samuel leaves the apartment, and spends the rest of his researching in 2011 regretting his decision.

Shortly after his departure from New York City, Samuel is surprised to receive help finding a woman named Alice. Samuel believes that Alice was close with his mother during her brief time in Chicago and he goes in search of answers. Alice is hesitant to talk to Samuel about what happened in Chicago, but she eventually yields. Instead of telling the story from Alice's point of view in 2011, Part Seven delivers us back to 1968. The narrator remains omniscient, but now we are learning of Faye's short time at college from her perspective. She is depicted as an anti-social and unpopular student. She is unhappy at college and much more serious than the other students in her dormitory. Faye becomes friends with her dormitory neighbor, Alice, and the two of them develop a fast and deep bond. Alice introduces Faye to some anti-war feminists at the school, and Faye learns of a planned protest at the upcoming Democratic National Convention. Faye meets an anti-war journalist named Sebastian and she falls instantly in love. What no one knows about Alice is that she has been having late-night sexual



encounters with a conservative police officer named Charlie Brown. Alice meets with Charlie multiple times a week and the two of them try various sexual fetishes in dark alleyways. Charlie falls in love with Alice and wants to leave his wife for her, but Alice breaks things off because she feels deeply attracted to Faye. Charlie seizes this ping of jealousy and rushes to the campus where he arrests Faye, calls her a whore, and throws her in jail for prostitution.

The arrest takes place the night before the march. Faye is kept overnight and is still in her cell when the fighting and violence begins on the streets. Sebastian shows up and releases her from her cell. The two of them venture out into the streets, where it is more dangerous and the air is polluted with tear gas. Faye has an unfortunate run-in with Charlie, who is enjoying the brutality of hitting hippies with his baton. Charlie spots Faye in the crowd and comes rushing at her at the same moment that a huge group of protestors break through a large hotel window. Charlie falls on the broken window, severing his spinal cord and leaving him paralyzed for the rest of his life.

Faye runs away from the scene with Sebastian, who discloses that he has been working alongside the police to incite violent reactions within the anti-war movement. He admits that Sebastian is not his real name and that many of his newspaper stories were fictionalized in order to make people furious enough to strike violence. Faye is not deterred from this information, and she has sex with him in a church while many protestors are receiving first aid. This is the moment Faye considers herself born as her own, independent, and formidable woman. However, this elation is overshadowed with her knowledge that she will leave Chicago the next morning in order to accept Henry's marriage proposal and to save him from fighting overseas.

This highly emotional section is swiped away when Part Eight takes us back to 2011. We see an elderly judge Charles Brown in a wheelchair. He reflects on his sad and tortured life, but relishes the idea that he will soon preside over Faye's case. Charles is still thirsty for revenge, and his life of being in a wheelchair has only fueled his hatred and blame towards Faye. Samuel visits the judge in an effort to save Faye. Alice has told him everything by now, and Samuel understands the dangers this judge has to offer. Charles does not take this visit well. Samuel leaves in fear and the judge immediately calls up his friends in the department to harass Faye even further. Once Samuel and Faye both realize just how dangerous a vengeful judge will be for her, they make the decision to flee the country. They are stopped by airport security, but it is Samuel who is not allowed to fly. Faye leaves Samuel once again and flies to Norway so she can learn more about her father's history there. Faye discovered that Frank left behind a pregnant girlfriend during WWII. Her half-sister does not care much for Frank, but she does not seem angry with him either.

The story concludes with Samuel and Faye trying to establish a healthy relationship with one another while Faye makes daily visits to her father's side. It seems as though the once-shattered family has pieced itself together again. Samuel is living with Bethany, although they do not have a sexual relationship yet; and he feels much more centered now that he has solved his mother's mysteries. Faye's memoir was published. It was written by ghostwriters and Samuel put his name on the cover. None of the characters

seem to be affected by the book release at all because they are all satisfied in their own recently-mended lives.



Prologue

Summary

The Prologue opens with the main character, Samuel, wishing he had known his mother was abandoning his father and him. Samuel laments the fact that he lost his mother saying that he would have tried to be “. . . a child worth sticking around for” (9) had he known his mother was plotting this severe of an exit. The mother’s departure from the family was not sudden. In fact, the Prologue focuses on the fact that his mother had been planning her departure for months. She did this by carefully removing clothing and furniture in slow, small chunks. The result was that both Samuel and his father noticed small changes in the home, such as a missing Crock-Pot and empty walls where family photographs used to be. While these changes were noticed, neither Samuel nor his father suspected anything, which is what the mother seemed to want.

The narrator compares the mother’s departure to that of a certain kind of African turtle that Samuel learned about in a high-school Biology class. This turtle is described as having the instinct to swim hundreds of miles across an ocean just to lay eggs in their original birthplace. The turtles have no idea that this swim used to consist of a short distance across a river because, solely over time, the distance between the two points has widened imperceptibly slow. Just as the land separated glacially slow for the turtles, Samuel’s mother separated herself from a family that did not perceive the slow changes. In the end, his mother left with only one suitcase in her hand.

Analysis

The opening paragraph of the Prologue quickly gives character insight into Samuel, the protagonist of the novel. The young Samuel is shown mourning for the loss of his mother with a great sense of confusion as to how she could leave at all but mostly how she could leave in the cunning way that she did. This horrifyingly empty feeling of abandonment will follow Samuel for the rest of his life and will be a strong theme among most characters in this novel. For Samuel, he will never be able to get over his mother’s departure or the lack of answers to the questions he has about his mother’s desire to abandon him.

The main focus of this Prologue is the mother’s actions related to moving out. Her slow packing is described as the family, “. . . being burglarized at a very slow pace” (10). We are left to wonder how the mother had enough patience to leave her family with so much careful planning, and why it was important to her that they did not know until the very moment she walked out with only one suitcase. This image of the mother leaving her son with only one suitcase in her hand also portrays a desperately sad picture of a woman who has succeeded in her plot to abandon her family without their knowledge and a son who witnesses a sole bag leaving with her. It is clear to this boy then that his



mother does not feel the need to take many physical memories with her. Memories they had created as a happy family.

Samuel's mother tells him a deceitfully simple story about African turtles and their annual swim across an entire ocean. This story is an analogy for herself. Just as the turtles swim farther and farther each and every year without realizing the minor increase in distance, so too does Samuel's mother drift farther and farther away from the place she considers to be home. Now she has allowed herself to drift far enough away that it feels like she must cross an insurmountable obstacle just to get back to where she belongs.

Discussion Question 1

Does the fact that the mother carefully and quietly packed her belongings make this abandonment any more or less painful? Does this show a cold cunning character, an emotional hoarder, a woman afraid of conflict, or something else?

Discussion Question 2

How does the author's analogy of the African turtle that swims across the ocean to lay its eggs help describe what is happening in the Prologue?

Discussion Question 3

What hints, if any, do we see that prove Samuel's mother loves him?

Vocabulary

befuddled, pruned, imperceptibly, whittled



Part One: The Packer Attacker

Summary

Chapter 1 introduces an event that has made the news. However, the focus of the chapter does not lay eyes on the event itself, but rather on the media's ramping up of the story given to the public. At first, the event is categorized as being an attack on a Governor named Sheldon Packer. From there, the media is described as making eye-catching logos about "Terror in Chicago" (13). Shortly thereafter, the news catches hold of a video showing the incident, and the video is described as essentially playing on a loop for everyone to see repeatedly. The video shows a woman, the attacker, shouting, "You pig!" (17) at the Governor and then throwing rocks up at the podium where Packer is delivering his speech. Shortly thereafter, the crowd turns to chaos and quickly leaves the area. The video is less than one minute in its entirety.

After the video is played on every news outlet possible, the name of the attacker is quickly released as well. The woman who threw the rocks is Faye Anderson-Anderson. Just as quickly as her name is released, negative stories about Faye's past are also shared with home audiences. Faye is described as being a radical, and her police record for being arrested under suspicion of prostitution in 1968 is shared as well. Before the end of the day, the woman is depicted as dangerous and her nickname becomes a very catchy, "Packer Attacker" (19).

Chapter 2 opens with a man named Samuel hiding the fact that he is playing the game World of Elfscape while at work. We learn that Samuel plays close to 40 hours per week, and that he is preparing for a difficult raid with his virtual friends and teammates online. The objective tonight is for Samuel and his fellow players to slay a dragon. We are then treated to a detailed, step-by-step look into just what exactly happens in the game. We learn, for example, that Samuel started as a level-one elf but that he has worked his way up to level 90.

In total, there are 20 elves for tonight's raid against the dragon. The narrative is interrupted when we learn about the real life Samuel tries to avoid while playing World of Elfscape. Readers learn that the reason for the segue is that he only plays the game at work due to his work computer having a faster Internet connection. He is an English professor at a small university outside of Chicago. The students Samuel teaches come from spoiled backgrounds, which carry over into Samuels literature classes. We briefly meet a student of Samuel's named Laura Pottsdam. She pops her head into Samuel's class to ask if there are any points that can be earned that day. When Samuel tells her that no points will be earned, she immediately leaves the class saying that there is no point for her to be there if there are no credits to help her grade. Samuel is in the middle of teaching Hamlet to his class, and he decides to give a pop quiz about the reading after his lethargic students admit to not completing the assigned reading.



We are then whipped back into the game where Samuel is torn between enjoying himself and feeling guilty for playing. We learn about someone named Bethany because Samuel thinks he, “. . . always turn[s] to her when he’s doing something he feels guilty about” (27). Samuel feels guilty about enjoying World of Elfscape so much.

We learn that Bethany is a successful violinist who travels the world while Samuel stays in his small university and teaches Hamlet to students who do not care. The chapter ends with Samuel wondering what she is doing and what Bethany would think about him being a grown man who plays video games for hours on end.

Samuel dies in the raid to kill the dragon, but one player manages to stay alive long enough to kill it: Pwnage. We meet Pwnage as he is doing a victory dance in his living room after slaying the dragon. He loves soaking up the messages of congratulations from the other players, but he also feels slightly guilty for playing the game for so long tonight. He intended to start a new diet, a healthier lifestyle, but he was sucked back into World of Elfscape. We learn that Pwnage lives in a home that is not cared for very well. There are images of a dirty home and “TV dinners covered in permafrost” (32). Much of Pwnage’s dilemma tonight circles around money and budgeting. He wants to live a healthier life, starting with eating healthy foods, but he also calculates that this will be a huge expense compared to his current spending. Perhaps his current financial woes are closely related to Lisa, his ex-wife. Although they are officially divorced, Pwnage considers their relationship to be on a temporary hold until she comes back to him. Part of his plan to get Lisa back is to lose some weight and look more attractive to her.

We are taken on a rambling set of excuses as to why Pwnage either cannot or will not change his lifestyle. This list of excuses includes the high amount of daily chores he is responsible for. His most pressing chore: updating his skills on World of Elfscape. In order to access certain special rewards, Pwnage knows that he must log on to play every day and complete online training. This usually takes several hours and, by the time his online skills training is complete, he is simply too tired to do anything else. He falls asleep trying to recreate the amazing feeling he got when his friends celebrated his victory over the dragon hours before. All the while, he tells himself that he will make healthier decisions tomorrow, saying, “He promises. One of these days will be the day that changes everything” (38). Chapter 3 ends with a feeling of pity for Pwnage, which is then connected to the beginning of Chapter 4 when we are thrust into Samuel’s office.

Samuel is accusing a student of plagiarizing an essay and the student proceeds to go through a whopping 16 different logical fallacies in an attempt to talk Samuel out of formally charging her. The student is Laura Pottsdame, who we met as she ditched Samuel’s class earlier. She is not happy at school, nor is she happy being forced to take Samuel’s literature class.

Laura tries every excuse she can to convince Samuel. As it becomes increasingly obvious to Laura that Samuel will not budge, she then turns to tearful pleas. There is an exquisite rant from pages 46-49 where Laura babbles out a stream of her current life problems. Her conclusion is that she will be forced to drop out of school if Samuel goes



through with his plagiarism charge. Unfortunately for Samuel, his cold demeanor is derailed when Laura starts spurring tears, for Samuel is a sympathetic crier. He feels the strong urge to cry along with Laura as her tears swell up. Samuel becomes overwhelmed with the burden of holding back his tears and he responds to Laura with heavy laughter at a very inopportune time. Laura immediately becomes hostile and defensive, accusing Samuel of being in love with her and saying that Samuel does not accommodate her special needs. Samuel becomes infuriated at all of Laura's shallow and weak attempts to argue. He interrupts Laura's arguments to tell her that she is, ". . . just not very smart" (53). This bold and rude statement is not taken well. Immediately, Laura follows with the threat, "I'm going to own you!" (55) and she stomps off down the hall while many students and professors watch.

In Chapter 5, Samuel is still in his office at the university when he receives an unexpected call from a man claiming to be Simon Rogers, a lawyer who works from Rogers and Rogers law firm in Washington D.C. He explains that his firm focuses on high-profile cases, which involve liberal politics and politicians. Simon tells Samuel that he is calling on behalf of his mother and Samuel becomes very confused. Simon then continues to help Samuel clue in by explaining that his mother has been arrested in a high profile case. Throughout the conversation, Simon continuously repeats the fact that he is stunned that Samuel does not know about this incident with his mother. The video has been on every channel and internet news source for the last day, so Simon finds it hard to believe that Samuel knows nothing about it. Readers discover that the woman throwing rocks in the Prologue is Faye Andreson-Anderson, Samuel's estranged mother.

Samuel asks the lawyer many questions about the incident, but Simon does not answer most of them. Instead, he offers a lesson in legal terminology, focusing on words that minimize Faye's actions so she seems harmless. Simon then offers a reunion opportunity if Samuel joins the case as a character witness for Faye. Samuel proclaims that he wants, ". . . no part of this" (60). It seems as though Samuel will continue to receive irritating news.

In Chapter 6, we are sitting in an airport coffee shop with Samuel as he reads a message from his Dean. Apparently, Laura visited the dean and reported how horribly unfair and cruel Samuel was to her. As a result, the Dean says that she is, ". . . shocked at [his] impropriety" (61). Samuel has lost this battle because the Dean allows Laura to re-write the paper for full credit, and says she would like to meet with Samuel immediately.

Shortly after reading the message, Samuel is joined by Guy Periwinkle, his editor and publisher, at the café. He is a very busy publisher who can only meet with Samuel on a quick layover, which is the reason why Samuel is sitting in an airport with no plan to fly anywhere. Unfortunately, Guy wants the meeting to deliver bad news to Samuel. The company Guy works for is cancelling Samuel's contract for a second book. Samuel is way past his deadline, and the publishing company is tired of waiting. The penalty will be that Samuel must pay back the advance he was paid with interest. Guy then informs him that, if Samuel is unable to pay the money back to the company, the company will



sue him. When Samuel offers to write the promised book quickly to avoid any trouble, Guy tells him that they do not want his book anymore. Literature is no longer their focus because there is not a big enough audience for it. Throughout his conversation, Guy informs Samuel that he is working with Molly Miller, who is a famous bubblegum pop star right now. Guy and his team are working on writing a fictitious memoir about Molly's life that will help increase her fan base. Guy has no interest in telling an honest story. Rather, he is interested in telling well-framed stories which will maximize fame, exposure, and saturation into profitable markets.

Their meeting is interrupted with more reports about The Packer Attacker. Guy confides that he would love to get a book about The Packer Attacker because he thinks it would be a best seller. Then in a quick act of desperation, Samuel reveals that The Packer Attacker is his mother. He offers an exclusive book with Guy about Faye Andreson-Anderson.

Guy and Samuel make a quick arrangement regarding the tell-all book about Faye Andreson-Anderson in Chapter 7. In exchange for this book, Samuel will not have to pay back any money to the publisher and he will be able to keep the home he purchased with it. Guy informs Samuel that half of the book has already been completed. "We have those pages finished already, actually. . . . The Packer stuff. Ghostwritten. Done. About a hundred pages" (68). Samuel also learns that Guy has assigned the slant of his mother's story to be that Faye is a villain. Samuel quickly and cold-heartedly agrees that painting his mother as a villain will not be a problem. In fact, Samuel responds by saying, "I will savage her intimately, publicly. That's the deal. I get it" (69).

Samuel decides to begin work on his book by calling his mother's lawyer, Simon, and telling him that he would like to write a letter to the judge attesting to Faye's positive character. However, he would like to have an interview first to learn more about what he can write in the letter. Simon quickly provides his mother's address and organizes a meeting for the following day. Samuel drives a traumatizing journey into Chicago to find a plain building in the place where his mother's home should be. Samuel climbs the three floors up to his mother's blank door, knocks, and freezes. Then, suddenly, he hears Faye's voice say two things: "It's open" and "Don't be scared" (74). This second phrase unnerves Samuel because it is the exact same phrase Faye said to him when she left him in 1988.

Analysis

Samuel, the protagonist, is clearly unhappy in his life. We see Samuel's deep dissatisfaction with his life while he reflects on his job. He feels hatred toward many of his students. His classes are not academically driven, so Samuel feels like he is wasting his time, effort, knowledge, and talent with them. And yet, although he dislikes them, he also yearns for their approval. He wants the students to want to learn from him because it would validate the fact that Samuel is wildly intelligent.



Not only does Samuel seek approval from his students, he is also desperate for the approval to two women who seem extremely important to him: Bethany and his mother, Faye. Samuel repeatedly thinks of these two people and how much he wants them to know him. More specifically, he wants these women to know how happy and talented and successful he is. We do not know who Bethany is to Samuel, but we can infer that she is important enough that Samuel refers to her as one might refer to God in terms of judgment and acceptance of behavior (28). We know she is a respected violinist who travels the world while Samuel sits in an non-extraordinary office just outside of Chicago. Likewise, Samuel wants his mother to know about his talents and fame. He rarely mentions wanting to spend time with either woman. He seems to prefer that these women see him and know him, and he does not seem to desire an actual, face-to-face relationship with them. One can assume that Samuel does not require a relationship because he has never had one. His mother, we know, abandoned him at age 11. Samuel is not used to having a close relationship, so he does not feel that he needs one. However, he desperately needs those women to understand that he is fine without them. In fact, he wants them to know that he is better than fine. This is a pretty strong glimpse into the passive aggressive revenge Samuel wants to have on both his mother and on Bethany. He wants them to remain at a distance while feeling impressed that Samuel has done such a great job without their help.

Although he is bitter towards his mother, there is still a childish need to be loved by his mother. Samuel wants to think that his short-lived relationship with his mother was genuine and deep. However, learning that his mother did not spend her whole life in Iowa, and that she enrolled and even attended college, enrages Samuel. This revelation of facts makes Samuel feel even more intensely disconnected. All these years, he has clung to the idea that the short time he had with his mother was genuine. Finding out that her time with Samuel was both brief and dishonest seems to push Samuel over an invisible threshold. Throughout the conversation, Samuel seems to be in shock about everything. He goes from amazement, to disbelief, to anger rather quickly. Samuel already knows very little about his mother's life because he was only in hers for a small sliver of time. When he learns new information about his mother Samuel becomes paralyzed at the idea that he knew even less than he thought. He does not even seem upset about the fact that his mother was arrested for suspicion of prostitution because he is blinded by the betrayal that Faye never told him about Chicago. This feels like a fresh wound over his preexisting ones. A new feeling of betrayal related to his mother not only abandoning him but also being dishonest with him, renders Samuel unable to handle anything else. He has already dealt with a lot of sadness when his mother left, but now this new information makes it unbearable to even stay on the phone with Simon. As a result, Samuel rashly refuses to be a character witness for his mother and hangs up the phone.

We are exposed to yet another jab at today's mass media when Hill introduces us to Guy Periwinkle. He is described as being fast-paced, power hungry, and greedy. In fact, although Samuel knows Guy as his editor and publisher, Guy actually defines himself as an "Interest Maker" (64). This is the second time Hill has included the idea that the information the public receives has been doctored up or watered down in order to increase interest. Although Samuel repeatedly describes himself as a novelist who



cares about the authentic "art" of words, he allows his thirst for revenge against his dishonest mother-son relationship overtake him. We see a new side to Samuel, and we witness his first flaw: self-serving and curious greed. Samuel is never worried about a future close relationship with Faye because he has never considered it to be a possibility. Instead, Samuel's deep feeling of betrayal is unearthed and he blinds himself away from any artistic morality he had before that meeting. Nor does Samuel not think about the emotional difficulties he will experience in delving into his mother's life story. His decision had nothing to do with Faye or with any potential reparations he might make with his mother through the writing process.

He has already made peace with the idea that he would never see his mother again. That he would never receive any of the desperate questions he has left over from childhood. This new revelation changes Samuel's entire life and he is left with a big decision. Abandon his mother and never get any of his questions answered or speak to her again and hear answers he might not like. Here is Hill's clear attempt to set up the conflict of the novel. For we know that, while the Packer Attacker incident will be serious, it is not the actual main conflict. Instead, we have a lonely son who deeply yearns for his mother's attention, affection, and approval; yet he is a scorned adult with selfish end goals in mind. Samuel will be dealing with many internal struggles related to just how much love and acceptance he can muster up for Faye. While Samuel seems harsh in this chapter, he has already proven himself to be a rather emotional person. It is doubtful that this strong and vindictive approach will last throughout the rest of the novel. While it is obvious here that Samuel is angry with Faye, he is also curious and hurt and meek, yet he maintains a ferocious appetite to experience watching Faye come to the realization of, ". . . how extraordinary his life is, how inconsequential her absence from it has been" (69). In reality, we know this is not the case at all. We already know that Faye's absence in Samuel's life was hugely influential on him, and he has never fully recovered from the trauma. However, what is interesting, and beautifully multidimensional for an author to create, is the fact that all of Samuel's yearning for his mother's acceptance is then spotted with a dark desire to witness his mother begging for forgiveness. He wants to be a good person. Samuel wants a human connection, but Samuel has also been so far away from it that he has a hard time envisioning his path. And thus begins our hero's journey into tough decisions while he confronts his past.

Once Samuel makes it to Faye's home in Chicago, his emotions overtake him once again. They plague his tough thoughts of revenge and soften him back into an infantile neediness to receive acceptance. A beautiful scene in Samuel's preparations to meet Faye is when he notices his mother's name card on the apartment buzzer. The name is sitting right there for anyone on the street to see. It is in public view, plain as day, and yet she was never as available to Samuel as this name card is to the pedestrians walking past her apartment building. Samuel notes that the sheer plainness of this apartment building befuddles him. As a writer, his imagination generally runs wild. He has imagined several different scenarios where he confronts his mother. Perhaps, though, he has never fantasized about a reunion with his mother in such an ordinary setting with blank doors and generic stairwells. Samuel forces himself to climb the stairs, feeling unable to stay as strong and tough as he plotted. The fact that Faye encourages Samuel to enter her home by saying, "Don't be scared" (74) is rather



significant. Here is a woman, a mother who left her son; and a son who has never repaired from the trauma of losing his mother. Here is a woman whose motherly urge to soothe her son still remains—her desire to calm him and assist him in completing a task and the urge to support him in doing something uncomfortable. And yet, it might have been the worst thing Faye could have said to Samuel. This is the same phrase which served as her final words to Samuel before she walked out of the house with one suitcase in her hand. It is a strikingly circular choice of phrases to have Faye begin the reunion with.

These are the final words of the chapter, and of the 70-something page Part One. When we leave Samuel at his mother's door, we are in 2011 and preparing for a meeting. However, Part Two takes us back to 1988. We are then left to wonder how Samuel will react to his mother's comforting words. Additionally, readers are left all alone to ponder whether or not this simple, short phrase shows that Faye was a good mother, and that she is still a good mother today. After all, we do not know why she chose to leave her family, so how can we judge her mothering skills? That one phrase creates a ripple effect of questions related to Faye's love for Samuel and why she might have left the family.

After we learn that "The Packer Attacker" is Samuel's estranged mother, we begin to understand how these two stories will intertwine. There are multiple thematic comments being made by Hill here. To begin, the entire course of how Faye goes from a woman throwing rocks in a park to a now virtually infamous attacker is a comment on how quickly and falsely news outlets deliver their stories. The story is told with little-to-no actual research, which is a complaint made by Hill throughout the book. This theme of inauthentic news being delivered to mass audiences who are thirsty for drama and bloodshed is shown in a darkly comedic way with Faye. Additionally, Samuel is entirely unaware of this massive news story involving a woman he has wanted to track down for more than 20 years. Samuel is so busy burying his depression and loneliness into a video game that he does not see the world around him. Similarly, he almost misses seeing his mother again because he is so willingly escaping from the world and current events -- despite those current events being mildly fabricated. The approach Hill takes to re-connect Faye with her son, Samuel, is one rich with twenty-first century based themes: inauthentic mass media combined with Samuel's dependence on escapism through video games.

For Samuel, it seems that appearances are more important than reunions, and certainly more important than relationships. While Samuel desires fame through writing, he does not seem motivated to actually get any writing done. Samuel's answer for this feeling of failure is to hide in his computer game, World of Elfscape. There, he plays with many other people who he considers to be friends although they do not know anything about one another. Samuel spends hours each day playing this game at work. This is his escape from reality. This is his happy place where he advances levels and feels the sweet satisfaction of success. Samuel does not feel these things in real life, so he looks to World of Elscape to feel them online. However, with each passing hour playing the game, Samuel removes himself from his own personal success of writing, essentially rendering him his own worst enemy. There is nothing actually standing between Samuel



and writing fame. He chooses to avoid writing because, while he may want approval from Bethany and Faye, he is not sure how to handle it and he does not know if the approval will actually solve anything. He chooses to stay safely in the shadows of himself and play World of Elfscape where he can succeed quickly with the other players.

Although Samuel enjoys playing World of Elfscape, there is also a huge feeling of embarrassment while playing. He equates playing the game to, “Coming home at the end of a long day to someone who's glad you're back” (20). To Samuel, it does not matter that everyone he knows on Word of Elfscape are playing anonymously. The feeling that the game gives to him is that he is loved, supported, and surrounded by friends. In reality, Samuel has no one to call a close, long-term friend. While Samuel thoroughly enjoys playing World of Elfscape, he also feels embarrassed and ashamed by his participation. He does not tell anyone about this game because he does not want to admit that the point of the game is to kill fictional characters. On page 22, Samuel thinks the rhetorical question, “And what could he say? To slay dragons and kills orcs?” Samuel feels ashamed about how much he loves playing the game. He never talks to the other players while playing because he fears anyone at work finding out that he plays. While he plays the game, his mind wanders to Bethany and what she would think of him playing World of Elfscape so often. This is another development in getting to know Samuel as a character. We know that he has many abandonment issues from when his mother left him, so it makes sense that Samuel is afraid of getting too close to any real people. Life seems to be much easier for Samuel when he socializes with strangers via a video game. The fact that Samuel does not hop around to other games is also an interesting detail. It seems that he only plays World of Elfscape so that he can develop fanciful meaningful relationships. These virtual friends fill in the gaps of Samuel's life and help continue the illusion that Samuel is loved by people. This illusion also helps Samuel feel as if he is a member of society. We learn that, “Samuel tries to remind himself that millions of other people do this. On every continent. Twenty-four hours a day. At any given moment . . .” (21). His mother abandoned him but the players on the game never will. Samuel gets to experience the same landscapes and constant avatars who support him and help him achieve his goals. This is much more support than Samuel has felt from humans in his real life. The game, in a way, becomes a surrogate mother figure, always there for him and ready to nurture his development.

In this novel, Nathan Hill has chosen gamers as a way to highlight people who need a daily escape from reality. Pwnage is yet another example of a popular theme of escapism used by a character in *The Nix*. Samuel has his own reasons for delving into the fantasy world of elves and orcs, but both men seem to be actively avoiding their real lives as much as possible. There are a few possible reasons why video games are being used by Hill to show these characters' anxiety and struggles. First, this might be interpreted as a warning sign for what can become of people who play too often. These characters may be symbols of impending social dangers if lengthy video game sessions are not avoided. Another option might be a larger comment about how people seek out technology that helps them escape reality to deal with their problems. So far, neither Samuel nor Pwnage have talked to anyone about their depressed or hopeless feelings. Instead, they retreat into a fantasy game where no one asks questions and winning is a



possibility. Minor but painful mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, social anxiety, or agoraphobia usually go undiagnosed and untreated. Many times, people who are suffering from the above mentioned disorders look for a way to numb their brain from the negative thoughts they feel.

One of the possible reasons people need an escape from reality is how reality, or rather the appearance of reality, is shown to people through mass media. Chapter 1 does a beautiful job tracking how a story on today's news outlets can be hastily manufactured and shared with the public before it is ready. Hill presents a comical interpretation of how one event can quickly turn from someone throwing rocks to a full blown, possible terrorist, attack. Then the story changed to demean and pick apart the suspect who threw the rocks. Faye's reputation is quickly tarnished and her character is almost immediately put into question. This chapter clearly demonstrates the massive problem with information sharing in today's media. Everything seems to be angled for a story instead of taking time to gather facts and present a well-researched report.

Discussion Question 1

Many characters in this book seem to feel the need to escape their real lives. Discuss each character we have met so far, and identify how they escape the parts of their lives they do not want to deal with.

Discussion Question 2

One can argue that Samuel is a mostly tragic character while others may view Samuel as self-serving. Using evidence from the story thus far, what type of person is Samuel?

Discussion Question 3

Part One criticizes many things happening in mass media today. Discuss each of the following events and provide similar examples from real life that connect to each one.

- Faye's attack on Governor Packer
- Guy Periwinkle and his career as an "Interest maker"
- Ghostwriting the story of The Packer Attacker
- Molly Miller and her public exposure

Vocabulary

premeditated, detractors, idleness, fortuitously, infamous, viral video, orc, coincided, detritus, concomitant, hegemonic, disconcerting, amortization, prerequisite, tableau,



demurred, non sequitur, logical fallacies, indignantly, emblematic, incontrovertible,
blase, leverage, conglomerate, ghostwritten, penumbra, bleary



Part Two: Ghosts of the Old Country

Summary

This chapter takes us back to the summer of 1988. It is the summer before Faye leaves her family, but young Samuel does not know that yet. We meet Samuel as an overly sensitive and emotional boy who cannot control his tears. In fact, his emotions are such a problem that his mother and him have categorized them like hurricanes in order to communicate about the severity of the cry. Samuel sneaks off to his room so he can cry without his mother's knowledge. It is the dead of summer and Samuel feels that, ". . . being at home made him want to hide" (76). Faye hears Samuel crying and she suggests going out for a meal. She buys hamburgers for both of them because there is a buy-two-get-one-free deal. However, Samuel secretly wants chicken nuggets. He does not say this to Faye until after she brings the food back to the car. The thought of Samuel having to eat a hamburger when he wants chicken nuggets becomes unbearable. He begins to sob, and Faye patiently turns the car around to get her son the chicken nuggets he so desperately wants.

Faye notices that Samuel is having a highly emotional day again, so she suggests that they go outside for a walk. She asks Samuel to bring nine of his favorite toys in his wagon. As she waits for Samuel to select his toys, she laments about the meek and mild mannered son she was given. "Faye yearned for him to be a little smarter. A little less easily duped. She . . . wanted him to be a sturdier thing" (78). Faye thinks about the fact that she should be proud of having such an obedient and loyal son, but she cannot help but wish he was different. Samuel brings back eight of his favorite toys, a slightly defiant act that both infuriates and delights Faye. As the two of them walk, there is a heartbreaking division in their thoughts. Faye reflects on the life choices that forced into this suburban wasteland. She blames her husband, Henry, for moving them to their house on Oakdale Lane in Streamwood just outside of Chicago. She is unhappy to have ended up where she has. Samuel, on the other hand, seems to try his hardest not to annoy his mother. He hides his emotions from her, he desperately tries to hold back tears, and he even attempts to pull his wagon quitter. "He felt, whenever [a rock got stuck under the tire], like he was disappointing his mother. . . . He was trying to keep up with her since she might be disappointed if he fell behind and she had to wait for him" (79-80).

Faye notices one leaf on a neighbor's oak tree that is moving. The day has been motionless and steaming hot, so the presence of one solitary leaf blowing like crazy is eye-catching. Faye tells Samuel that it is a ghost trapped inside the leaf. She then explains to Samuel that anything can be haunted. Faye explains that the leaf is haunted by a spirit of a person who is trapped and feels restless. Samuel cries as a reaction to this tale. He cries because he fears that he could one day be trapped in a leaf because, ". . . he knew he did bad things over and over" (81). Faye becomes embarrassed by the public display of crying and she marches Samuel back to the house. She harshly



reminds Samuel that he was instructed to bring nine toys, and that it is not acceptable of him to bring only eight. Samuel thinks to himself that the ninth toy is the wagon itself.

Samuel's father, Henry, demands that Sunday night is family night. He works with frozen food, so family night meals usually consist of trying whatever new meal his company has come out with. It is an awkward dinner. There is very little conversation and the conversation which does happen is rather mundane and uneasy. Samuel quickly asks to be excused so he can go play in the woods outside, and Henry unwillingly allows Samuel to leave.

In the woods, Samuel spends his time sitting down playing with plants. His original plan is to hide for a few hours but that changes when he comes across a strange boy hiding above him in a tree. The boy drops down in front of Samuel and holds out a butcher's knife. At this, Samuel begins to cry. The boy apologizes to Samuel and tells him that he will not hurt him. This is Bishop. We are introduced to Bishop in Chapters 2 and 3. Physically, Bishop is similar to Samuel. They are both 11 years old and short. Bishop is described as being, "Tightly skinny" (86) and short. What is more interesting about Bishop is his personality. Almost immediately after meeting Samuel, Bishop takes Samuel to the creek, where he has displayed several dead animals that are now missing heads and legs. Bishop tells Samuel to sit down and then he spreads blood onto Samuel's face while saying, "We're gonna have to toughen you up" (86).

Bishop takes Samuel to his home in a wealthy subdivision called Venetian Village. The development was technically built illegally through a tiny loophole Bishop's father found with some business partners. The homes are close to Samuel's house but it is a gated community with huge houses hosting, ". . . circular driveways curving around dramatic fountains" (87). Samuel has never been to this area before, and he is amazed by the size and décor of each mansion. One of the mansions in Venetian Village is occupied by Bishop's old headmaster from the private Catholic school, Blessed Heart Academy. Bishop makes it very obvious that he hates this man when he shouts, "Fat fuck" (87) and proceeds to throw a rock at his house. Bishop has recently been expelled from Blessed Heart and will be starting grade 6 in public school with Samuel in the Fall.

Inside Bishop's home, the two boys bond over their mutual love for video games. Bishop settles on playing a war game and announces to Samuel that he will be a 5 star general when he grows up. Samuel is interested in the video game until he hears beautiful music coming from somewhere else in the house. He follows the music to find Bethany, Bishop's twin sister. Samuel seems instantly smitten with Bethany, and the two of them have an awkward conversation until they spot a deer dying outside. Venetian Village has placed several poisoned salt licks around the streets. Each time a deer licks one, they stagger off into the woods to die. Although their first encounter does not end in romance, Samuel's life is forever changed now that he has met Bethany.

The story at the Fall house in Venetian Village is interrupted by a Norwegian folktale. Samuel's mother tells 11-year-old Samuel about something called The Nix. The story was told to her by her father while she was growing up, and she wants to share this tale of warning to Samuel. The Nix is a spirit of the water. It seeks out children who are



alone near the water. The Nix changes forms to appeal to the lone child. It always appears as a friendly, large white horse ready to be ridden. The children have a strong desire to ride and conquer the horse, for how could they say no to such a magnificent creature? Soon after beginning to ride, the children get greedy and ride the horse to a place where others can see their new possession and feel jealous. “The kids who were victims of The Nix always felt, at first, fear. Then luck. Then possession. Then pride. Then terror” (103). The Nix continues to allow the child to ride it. It waits until the child is at his or her happiest moment of pride, and then it runs over the side of a cliff, taking the child with it to their deaths. Faye’s father, Frank, the person who told her this story, said that the moral of The Nix was, “Don’t trust things that are too good to be true” (104). However, Faye understands the moral differently. To her, the moral of The Nix is that, “The things you love the most will one day hurt you the worst” (104).

When Faye tells Samuel this story, he does not understand. She warns him that The Nix changes form for everyone now, but that it usually appears as a person. “Usually it’s someone you think you love” (105). She continues to explain to Samuel that, “People love each other for many reason, not all of them good. . . . People can be a Nix for each other” (105). Later on, in Chapter 5, we get the impression that Faye sees her husband, Henry, as her own personal Nix. She tells Samuel of a woman who married the wrong man and was stuck in her hometown to be miserable forever. We already know that Faye will be leaving her family soon and we know how dissatisfied she is in her marriage. She takes her warning to Samuel one step further when she says that, “. . . anyone you fall in love with before you’re an adult is probably a Nix” (106). She follows this warning by telling Samuel that she met his father in school when she was 17.

Hill then brings us back into Samuel’s world in 1988. Samuel and Bishop are now inseparable friends. Bishop is described as the unspoken leader while Samuel falls happily into place as the follower. The boys often meet in the woods to play war games or they meet at Bishop’s house to play video games. Samuel always hopes to visit Venetian Village because it greatly increases his chances of seeing Bethany. She generally leaves the boys alone, and Samuel takes this brush off as an excuse to spy on her from outside at nighttime. Samuel frequently walks through the gated community, past the headmaster soaking in his Jacuzzi tub, and watches Bethany spend time in her bedroom. Samuel comments that Bethany’s aloofness to him means that he has the right to access her through spying. Although Samuel never stays to watch Bethany undress since it would be dishonorable.

Bethany plops herself down in the room with Bishop and Samuel one day. She comments that she is extremely bored and wants to go to the mall to buy something new. Samuel has plans to go to the mall soon, so he offers to buy Bethany a gift while he is there. Faye lends Samuel \$10 and Samuel goes off to a music store in a frantic search for the most memorable and perfect gift someone has ever purchased for anyone else. He settles on a cassette tape he has never heard of because the cashier assures him that no one ever buys it, and he leaves the store fantasizing about how happy he will make Bethany when he gives her this perfect present.



Samuel must wait to give Bethany her present. At school, Bishop is described as being a bully that only picks on “. . . strong and confident and self-possessed” (116) children. Bishop becomes interested in a boy named Andy Berg. He is a traditional bully that preys on the weak or self-conscious. Andy Berg is a perpetual bully who antagonizes children both psychologically and physically. He is in sixth grade now, so Andy decides to spread the rumor that he is having sex with an older woman, his babysitter to be exact. He speaks about his sexual experience with such graphic detail that many of the boys are not actually sure if he is lying or telling the truth. It is this confidence that draws Bishop to Berg. Bishop designs an elaborate plan to publicly embarrass Andy and to put an end to his horrible bullying once and for all. To do it, Bishop tells Andy that he has crazy dirty pornographic pictures. Then, he invites Andy to come look at the pictures with him after school by the loading dock. When Andy gets there after school, Bishop shows him one picture of a naked woman and tells him that the rest of the pictures are down the stairs in a small storage space. Andy walks down to get to other photos while Bishop closes the gate and locks Andy inside. Bishop does have pornographic pictures to share with Andy, but they are all of men. Andy finds himself staring at several different penises while being trapped in that small space. Bishop takes a Polaroid photo of Andy surrounded by pictures of penises. Bishop then stands on the top of the stairs and urinates on Andy. He then says to Andy, “. . . I’m going to take a leak, and you’re not going to do anything about it. And you’re not going to fuck with anybody ever again. Because I’ve got this photo. . . . There you are with all that faggot porn. You want this photo to show up in every locker in school?” (127).

Bishop and Samuel go home, leaving Andy Berg locked outside all alone for the night. A large storm rolls in that night. In the morning, Andy is found in the stairwell but there is no mention of the penis Polaroids Bishop left with him. He was taken to the hospital and missed school that day. At recess, one of the boys who was most tortured by Andy, signals a thank you to Bishop. He responds by saying, “Hooah” (129) and continuing on with recess.

Samuel is having his very first sleepover with Bishop. His father drives him to Venetian Village. He arrives at Bishop’s home to find that the headmaster of Blessed Heart Academy is there at the piano. Recently, the headmaster has been doing a form of social bullying on his own. His health is starting to decline, so he starts going for evening walks around the neighborhood. However, he tends to trap the local residents in mundane health-related conversations if they are unfortunate enough to be outside while he is taking his walks. The locals begin planning their schedules around avoiding these conversations regarding the headmaster’s decaying health. He has come to the Fall household to play a little game with Bethany. He plays a note on the piano and she has to guess the note he is playing. Bethany is able to do this because she has perfect pitch, which means she can identify notes based off what she hears. Bishop is in the room with everyone, but he is not happy about it. Shortly after Samuel arrives, Bishop asks to be excused. He then stomps off to his room in anger, making Samuel feel uncomfortable. Bethany waits downstairs until the headmaster leaves. Then she comes up to check on her brother. Bethany dubiously points out the fact that the headmaster would not bother people on walks if he were not sick.



Later that night, Bethany and Samuel start a conversation about music. This leads Samuel to giving his present, the unique cassette tape. He hopes that Bethany will fall in love with the gift and thank him for being such a kind and thoughtful person. However, Bethany squints her eyes in confusion. She asks Samuel if he knows what he bought her. Samuel pretends that he does, and he recites the same answer that the clerk at the music store gave. Bethany begins to laugh. She then tells Samuel that this recording is a joke in the music world because it is an entire tape of silence. There is no music and only silence. Samuel's dream of giving the perfect gift is crushed although Bethany tells him that, "It's quite thoughtful" (137).

Later that night, Bishop wakes up Samuel to go outside. The boys bring gloves with them, and Bishop's plan is to dump one of the poisoned salt licks into the headmaster's Jacuzzi. When Samuel questions why they are doing this, Bishop responds by saying, "That'll dissolve by morning. . . . No one will know" (139). Samuel requests to go home, but Bishop encourages him to stay by finally explaining to Samuel what he said to the principal to freak him out so badly that he was not paddled. Bishop tells Samuel that he took off his pants when the principal was preparing to paddle him. He then asked, "Here's my ass. You want it?" (139). The principal stared at him for a long time and then returned Samuel to class.

Not long after his sleepover is Samuel invited to Bethany's violin concert. The performance is scheduled to take place at Blessed Heart Academy, and Samuel desperately wants to go. Faye gathers all of Samuel's best clothing and dresses him up for the occasion. Faye accompanies him to the concert, where Samuel learns that she used to play the oboe. He notes that it is yet another secret she has been keeping from him. Bethany plays beautifully. Samuel goes up to congratulate Bethany after the concert. She hugs him and secretly asks him to come over to her house later that night. Samuel arrives later to find both Bishop and Bethany in her bedroom after everyone else has gone to bed. Bethany has news about the blank cassette tape Samuel gave her. Bishop gets bored and frustrated, saying goodnight before leaving the two potential lovers alone in Bethany's bedroom. She explains to Samuel that she hears the silent confusion of the crowd followed by the silent acceptance and amusement of the same crowd that, "Maybe they're not being tricked" (150). Bethany becomes so overwhelmed with happiness at detecting this change that she leans in and kisses Samuel while they are alone in her bedroom. Samuel is surprised to feel that her lips were chapped.

An upcoming writing assignment briefly takes Samuel's attention. He writes a choose your own adventure novel and his teacher, Miss Bowles, likes it so much she invites Samuel to read it aloud to the class. Samuel feels immense pride in this accomplishment. Faye enters his bedroom one morning and asks Samuel what he wants to be when he grows up. He tells her that he wants to be a novelist. She responds by saying, "You write your books. . . . I'll read them" (153). Faye explains to Samuel that she must leave for a long time because she needs to find someone she knew long ago. She uses an analogy of a something called a drowning rock, which gets heavier the longer a person carries it. The result is that the person carrying the rock sinks and drowns. She then tells him, "Don't be scared anymore" (155) and leaves the house. Samuel goes back to sleep but later reports to his father that mother left. His



father goes into a rage. He screams at Samuel to leave the house. Samuel leaves the house and goes to school.

That day, Bishop is not in class. The fact that two important people in his life just disappear brings up a huge sense of worry for Samuel. He comments that, “. . . his misery overwhelmed everything else—all his normal worries were buried. Gone” (156). Samuel leaves school at recess to go in search for Bishop. In front of Bishop’s house are two police cars. At first, Samuel assumes the police are there looking for him. He feels terrible for causing concern, so he decides to walk to the police cars. However, he notices the black and yellow police tape marking a crime scene at the headmaster’s Jacuzzi tub. Samuel understands that the police are questioning the Fall residence about the death of the former headmaster at Blessed Heart Academy. Samuel goes in search of Bishop again. This time he finds him hiding in a tree close to the same place they first met. Bishop encourages them to play war, but Samuel cannot focus. He tells Bishop that his mother is gone. Bishop comments that it’s like Samuel is, “. . . going through training. . . . Difficult training that will eventually make you stronger” (160).

Bishop tells Samuel that he should replace his mother with another woman. He then tells Samuel that he has, “. . . done all sorts of things” (162). He knows that Samuel is attracted to Bethany and he gives his permission to be with her. Samuel decides to leave, but Bishop asks him to stay so that he can show him something. He asks Samuel to close his eyes for a moment, and, upon opening them, Samuel finds Bishop standing in front of him naked. Bishop has tucked his penis behind him, making him look much more like a girl. “This is what she looks like,” he said, “My sister. . . . You can pretend I’m her” (163). The boys remain in the woods for a while. Bishop rubs his naked body against Samuel, who eventually accepts the pleasurable feelings of this act, and Samuel decides that this is the reason his mother has left.

Analysis

We are treated to the beautifully delicate Chapter 1 that depicts a heartbreaking disconnect between Faye and Samuel. Both characters use the walk as a reflection for their own, personal, private issues. It is evident that Faye has had enough of her son. She even struggles to have loving feelings for Samuel. Samuel awareness of Faye’s feelings toward him make it all the more painful for him to relax around her. Instead, we read about Samuel’s deep regret and paranoia for every decision he makes with his mother. Faye seems incapable of focusing on the moment. Rather than thinking about her son and the walk, she zeroes in on her deep dissatisfaction with her life choices. She is fixated on her hatred for her current lifestyle, and her inward focus leaves Samuel wondering why his mother dislikes him so much. There are three separate times when Samuel yearns to speak to his mother about an apology or an explanation, but he never says anything to Faye. We see this miscommunication when Samuel whispers an answer to Faye after she leaves the room. He wants to talk to his mother, and he wants a close relationship, but he feels as if everything he does angers her. We see a clear glimpse of a disconnected Faye and a self-conscious Samuel who are cohabitating but not actually interacting on anything but surface level pleasantries.



Faye's anger at her life is displayed with anger aimed at her husband. Samuel's chance meeting with Bishop in the woods is quite serendipitous. After all, Samuel is wasting time in the woods until his parents stop fighting, but he is not actually doing anything in the woods. Instead, Samuel sits alone and does not pretend or make believe or create any type of game. He is alone and he is uncreative in his wallowing. He meets his opposite. Bishop -- a boy who is aggressive, unemotional, violence-centered, and totally satisfied with having no connection with his parents — is just the person who can entertain Samuel while also toughening him up. Readers can gather rather quickly that Bishop is a character with hidden layers from deep-seeded abuse or issues. For one, his obsession with war, killing, and maiming is often a warning sign for psychological problems. However, Bishop's quick revenge on Andy Berg with the pornographic pictures of naked men tells us something much darker has happened to Bishop. Bishop seems to use sex as both a weapon for blackmail and also as a technique for comfort. Samuel and Bishop's friendship is based on very light-hearted topics. The first time Samuel asks for help and comfort, Bishop's response is to provide sexual comfort. For Samuel, this is an action he would never have considered and he is very confused about what is happening between his friend and himself. For Bishop, however, he seems to be experienced in providing sexual relief to help a person when they are upset.

Bishop is clearly an independent character who does not see much of a point for adults in his life. His mother never appears in the story and his father is shown as driving away each time we see him. They are figurative beings in the Fall twins' lives. Samuel is quite sheltered by Faye. She is a constant figure, and a constant worry, in his life. Bishop reacts to the thought of Faye leaving as being good because Samuel, “. . . can be a man now” (160). He goes one step further by encouraging Samuel that this period of his life is, “Difficult training that will eventually make [him] stronger” (160). Bishop fails to see why Faye's absence is a problem. In many ways, Bishop thinks his life would be easier without his already-absent parents, a feeling that leaves readers wondering why Bishop has such a problem with grownups.

The emergence of Bethany is a nice addition because, not only did we learn of her in Part One, but also because she is a nice yang to Bishop's yin. Bethany is quite a lot more light and gentle and jovial than Bishop, who seems to harbor deep anger towards the world. She is Samuel's second female, life-long obsession. He allows his life to be overcome by her and he wishes of nothing more than to please her. She is instantly idolized as a perfect creature, which is why the tiny imperfection of chapped lips is important to note. This is the first time Samuel seems to realize that Bethany is a real and imperfect human just like him. Before the kiss, he assumes that she is perfect in every way possible.

We cannot fully believe that this is truly a story of young love. We get a strong sense of foreshadowing in Chapter 5 based on where Nathan Hill places the story of meeting Bethany in relation to Faye's story of *The Nix*. It is interesting that Faye warns Samuel that, “. . . anyone you fall in love with before you're an adult is probably a Nix” (106). This is foreboding for Samuel and Bethany's relationship but it is also telling for Faye's marriage. Later in Part Two, Faye makes a rather obvious connection between her



marriage and a drowning rock. She feels as if she is drowning in her quiet life in Streamwood and she plans to escape. However, there is a potential parallel here depending on how obsessed Samuel continues to be with Bethany. Readers know that Samuel does not end up with Bethany. We also know that Bethany is a prominent figure in Samuel's guilt each time he plays *World of Elfscape*. This leads us to believe that Bethany will, in fact, be a type of Nix for Samuel just as Faye seems to be a Nix for Henry.

Faye tries to explain her decision to leave Samuel. She equates herself pretty clearly with a person who is carrying a drowning rock. For readers, we can see this metaphor; but Samuel refuses to believe that Faye's departure was anything but a repulsed reaction to him and his crying. She wants nothing more than for Samuel to understand her rationale at some point later in life. But he never does.

This type of comment has been seen from Samuel before. It seems as though he is constantly searching for reasons to blame himself for his mother's departure. He wants to think that she would have stayed if he did not allow Bishop to rub his body on him in the woods -- that Faye would have stayed with the family if Samuel cried less or was a better son. What is so tragic is the amount of times readers have experienced Faye saying the opposite. She tries several times to explain her departure to Samuel. She mentions that people can be a Nix for the ones they love. She teaches Samuel about the drowning rock. She tells Samuel that she must go away to find someone she used to know. None of this matters to Samuel. In his mind, being different somehow would have convinced Faye not to leave him and his father. Samuel has written his own narrative for his mother's departure. The event of his mother's departure locked in his mind with this moment in the woods" (163). And he feels deeply ashamed of what is happening to him at that moment. He is even convinced that his mother knows. Perhaps the most heartbreaking line in all of Part Two is the final sentence: "It was, he decided, the reason she had gone" (164). Samuel needs to feel responsible for Faye leaving. He needs to know that he is the problem. He needs an excuse to continue punishing himself far into his adult life.

Discussion Question 1

Samuel personally takes on the heavy responsibility for his mother's departure. Using information from the novel, who is most responsible for Faye leaving?

Discussion Question 2

What evidence do we see that proves Bishop Fall is a good friend for Samuel? What evidence do we see that depicts Samuel as being a good friend to Bishop?



Discussion Question 3

What can we infer will be the "Nixes" in this novel? Who is a Nix and how do they harm others?

Vocabulary

purgative, pandering, bravado, esoteric, engorged, profuse, prodigy



Part Three: Enemy, Obstacle, Puzzle, Trap

Summary

It is 2011, and Samuel arrives at Faye's apartment, hoping to have a heartfelt reunion. Instead, he finds Simon Rogers, Faye's lawyer at her apartment. The lawyer seems to be all action regarding the case. He records the conversation and controls how and when Faye responds to questions. Mr. Rogers admits that he is there, ". . . to help with said letter and make sure you are not here under . . . false pretenses" (167). Of course, we know that Samuel has no intention of writing this letter to the judge about his mother being a good person. We know Samuel is there to interview Faye and start his second book attempt for Periwinkle. Throughout this controlled conversation, Samuel becomes annoyed by the fact that he cannot simply talk to his mother. Samuel and Faye begin a quick back and forth, trying to catch up quickly in between Mr. Rogers' short bursts of interruptions. Faye goads Samuel to, "Ask your real question. The thing you came here to find out" (174). Eventually, Samuel works up the courage to directly ask Faye why she left him. Although Faye encourages Samuel to ask the question, her response is, "I'm sorry. I can't" (176). To this, Samuel has a rather aggressive reaction and is pushed out of Faye's apartment by Simon.

After this incident, Samuel, ". . . felt like he was going to crumble" (177). He needs to talk to someone in person, but he realizes that he has no one to talk to. The only way he knows how to reach someone is through World of Elfscape. Samuel sends a message to the group and gets one response. Pwnage decides to meet him in a bar called Jezebels located in the suburbs of Chicago. During their meeting, the two discuss how strange it is to meet outside of the game, but they also discuss Pwnage's desire to start living a healthier lifestyle. All of this talk about diets and health food is punctuated by Pwnage's crisp bites into a tray full of nachos dripping with cheese. Their conversation also goes back to World of Elfscape and the number of hours each of them spends perfecting their skills for the game. Then they begin talking about how meaningful their work on the game is. Pwnage relishes in the fact that he can affect the world in Elfscape much more than in the real world. This power and control seem to be a big reason in Pwnage's obsession with playing. Pwnage complains about the surprise of his wife leaving him, and Samuel relates, referencing Bethany as the woman he screwed things up with.

Then Pwnage explains that, in video games, there are only four types of challenges: enemy, obstacle, puzzle, or trap. He explains that he has a code for determining which person, or character, is which type of challenge. Samuel decides that he must visit his grandpa Frank, Faye's father, in order to get more information about Faye for his book. Pwnage warns that Faye may be a puzzle or a trap. The problems with traps, he warns, is that, "A puzzle can be solved but a trap cannot. Usually what happens is you think



someone's a puzzle until you realize they're a trap. But by then it's too late. That's the trap" (196).

Samuel arrives in Iowa to meet with his grandfather, but Frank is very old and not in very good health anymore. He does not speak much, and, when he does, his words come out jumbled and confused. Nevertheless, Samuel meets with Frank in his care facility. Of course, this incoherence is only outward. To Frank, he thinks clear and vivid memories of his childhood in Norway. Back then, his name was "Fridtjof" (205). Frank remembers fishing for love, and enjoying the feeling of the fish struggle against his nets. He knows where he lives now, and he knows that he hates it. He hates all the doctors and the nurses and the flowcharts and the questions. He hates the invasive situation of his lonely life. Frank recalls his time working at the ChemStar factory back in 1965. He thinks of a man who was killed at work, and Frank remembers going back to work the next day, unaffected and "soldiering on" (206).

Frank continues to come in and out of memories. His memory is interrupted by Samuel asking about Faye. This prompts Frank's memories about his daughter in 1968. He remembers kicking Faye out of the house because she allowed Henry to get her pregnant. Afterwards, Faye went to Chicago in shame and came back to marry Henry. Frank tells Samuel that, "She never really liked him, Henry. Poor guy. He never knew what hit him" (211). Frank still feels guilty about his actions regarding this incident, and he hopes his dementia will get bad enough that he stops remembering Faye and stops remembering that all of her papers are stored in the basement of this care facility. But there is more guilt weighing Frank down. At the end of Chapter 5, Frank hopes that he will be lucky enough to forget, ". . . sailing away from his home, into the darkening night, and judgement" because this, ". . . would be his punishment, this waking nightmare" (212) reminding him of the time he slipped away from his house in Norway.

Samuel is shocked to hear his grandfather talk so much. Usually Frank is a man of few, if any, words, but today he is speaking entire stories. Samuel leaves his grandfather and goes to the basement in search of his mother's boxes of memories to help him write his book. Samuel finds many of Faye's papers and is overwhelmed with the idea that he might finally be able to get to know his mother for real this time. Samuel calls his father to tell him that he has found out the truth about why the two of them got married so many years ago. His father claims that it is not true. He says that he did not get her pregnant and force her to run away to Chicago in shame. He explains that the incident with Frank kicking Faye out in 1968 was a misunderstanding and that she was not pregnant. Samuel's father promises to tell him the entire truth if he comes home and speaks to him in person. Samuel rushes off to leave Iowa, while remarking that, ". . . he never felt closer to [his mother] than he did at that moment" (215).

Analysis

The theme of abandonment continues strongly as Samuel approaches Faye's life story. He is unable to decide what his own intentions are for this memoir. While Samuel plans to adhere to Periwinkle's strict request to destroy her reputation, he struggles with what



his personal goals are. He has spent the majority of his life yearning for his mother's love and support to come back to him. He knows there is a glimmer of this chance in front of him. However, he also experiences a visceral urge for revenge. He is desperately sad that he was raised by Henry alone yet furious about her escape. Most importantly, Samuel notes several times that he wants Faye to admit that he is highly successful without her. He needs Faye to admit that Samuel is talented and intelligent and successful despite her leaving. On the other hand, his own issues of being abandoned leave him in an almost infantile state of needing acceptance. The confrontation he has been waiting for comes at the beginning of Part Three. Samuel is blocked from having any sort of meaningful conversation with Faye. It is this let down, this crumbling of his expectation for the visit to Faye's apartment that leads him to a meltdown. He cannot communicate with Faye when she is a ghost that left him and he is unable to communicate with her when she is a woman sitting in the room with him.

Samuel is forced to come to terms with just how isolated he has made himself as a result of lifelong abandonment issues and an overlying state of depression. He looks outward for support but realizes that he has created no outlet for support. Samuel is always so focused on being sad and alone that he has made his life solitary. Ironically enough, the one place Samuel goes to escape reality is the one place he goes to in order to seek a real life connection. World of Elfscape is not traditionally a place where people meet up in person, but this is Samuel's only option. He is lucky that Pwnage accepts an invitation to meet in person. Just as Bishop was a timely lifesaver for Samuel, Pwnage seems to be a great match for Samuel during this tough adult phase. Each man openly uses World of Elfscape as a form of escapism. However, Pwnage seems to be a warning for Samuel's future if he continues down that path. While Samuel still manages to balance life in both reality and virtual reality, Pwnage is fully immersed in only World of Elfscape. He has allowed the game to consume his mind, body, and spirit; which is why Pwnage can only offer false promises to do things like get healthier and play less. When Samuel meets with Pwnage, he is meeting his own potential future self. This is a crossroads for Samuel. He can accept a reunion with Faye and let go of some of his childhood issues or he can reject Faye and potentially wind up so alone that Samuel becomes Pwnage. Pwnage even mentions that games have a deeper meaning than the real world, an assertion to which Samuel responds with, "I don't think I can accept that a game is more meaningful than the real world" (192). Notice here that Samuel does not disagree with Pwnage. Instead, he admits that he cannot accept this idea. These two men are at different stages in their need for escapism.

Frank is a character who has used life-long escapism to survive something that makes him deeply sad and regretful. The way Hill describes Frank creates an instantly deep and tragic portrayal of a character who has lived his life in secretive pain. While Frank is aware that his Parkinson's will eventually bring about dementia, he sees this change as a welcome relief. He wants to forget his life. He wants to escape into a simpler time in his life when he did not have to hide lies with silence. A beautiful memory by Frank is that he feels that the world now is like he is a fish that has been pulled ". . . from wine-dark water" (206). He is disoriented and out of place and just wants to go home. However, we are not entirely sure where he considers home to be. He remarks that,



“This was a formula for living a life full of secrets. Frank knew this now. People constantly hid. It was a sickness maybe worse than Parkinson’s. Frank had so many secrets, so many things he never told anyone” (207).

But Frank does tell some secrets. In fact, he tells some secrets about Faye almost as soon as Samuel arrives and asks. The information Frank gives to Samuel might very well be everything he needs to begin writing his book. This discovery of Faye’s papers at Frank’s care facility seems overly simple. Readers are left with a skeptical feeling that there will be much more to this research. For now, we are satisfied that Samuel is moving forward and that he is on his way to speak to his father and get the truth. As he skims through his mother’s papers, Samuel realizes that, “. . . a new version of his mother took shape—not the distant woman from his childhood but a shy and hopeful girl. The real person he’s always longed to know” (212). This feels like the first time Samuel has felt lighter and more hopeful. As he drives out of Iowa, he feels as if, “A new world was about to open up. Everything was about to change, He almost felt like she was there with him” (215). It is a nice break from the moping Samuel. This slightly hopeful, seemingly positive Samuel is a refreshing change. Samuel is not thinking about his book designed to tear Faye apart. He is now greedily searching for answers from his past, answers he was never provided.

Discussion Question 1

How has Pwnage's outlook of people being enemies, obstacles, puzzles, or traps affected how he lives his life?

Discussion Question 2

Pwnage says that, "A game will always tell you how to win. Real life does not do this. I feel like I've lost at life and have no idea why" (194). How many other characters in this novel feel like they have lost? How?

Discussion Question 3

Frank describes himself as being a fish out of water, how is this seen in his actions in Part Three?

Vocabulary

immaterial, non-deigetic, bulbous, grandiose



Part Four: The House Spirit

Summary

This section takes us back to 1968. Faye is in high school. She lives at home with her parents and, at night, she sits outside and listens to men like her father working away at the nearby ChemStar factory. It is the night of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Faye is thinking about this and she is also thinking about her impending start to college at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle in four months. On the news, rioters are fighting in reaction to the assassination, and Faye's mother tells Faye how dangerous it is to be in Chicago right now. Faye knows there are riots happening in Chicago right now, but she also knows that her mother wants her to, ". . . stay home and go to the nice little two-year school the next town over" (218). Faye had applied to college in secret. She did not share the information with her parents until she received her acceptance letter. Her mother disapproves and her father, Frank, simply says, "Don't be ridiculous, Faye" (219) and then continues reading the newspaper.

On the night of MLK Jr.'s assassination, Faye's mother continues to comment that "they" are rioting and "they" are acting like, ". . . some kind of animal destroying innocent people's private property" (218). She warns Faye of being raped by them, which we can only gather means black people living in Chicago. Faye cannot take this conversation anymore, so she leaves for Henry's house. While driving to Henry's house Faye is both angry and worried about the fact that the residents of the town know pretty much everything about Henry and her. Many tell her that it will not be long until Henry proposes marriage. Comments like these make her feel like everyone in town wants her to get married and avoid going to college. The questioning does not end there. Almost immediately after arriving to Henry's house, he tells Faye he does not want her to go to Chicago. Faye gives the curt response of, "I don't want to talk about it" (223). Then Henry tells Faye that he will join the army if she goes to college. He then explains to Faye that it would be her fault if he died while serving in the army.

Later on, Faye and Henry go to Prom together. Henry takes Faye to a quiet park after the dance. At the park, Henry remarks that he feels the two of them have come a long way in their relationship, a feeling not returned by Faye. Henry offers her his jacket and ring and asks her to wear them to school. Faye knows that this step is serious. It symbolizes the first step in engagement. Faye does not accept or reject the offer. She starts kissing Henry and does not stop. In her mind, she rationalizes that, "A girl is not a slut if she has a ring" (230). And she thinks about all the times she has been alone with him. She thinks about all the times he should have made a move but never did. She wonders why he never has. Faye makes the bold move to undo Henry's pants, thinking that the offering of his ring was a request for something more than kissing. As Faye puts her hands down Henry's pants, he jumps back and says, "What are you doing?" (231). Faye remarks how amazing it is that Henry's face has turned so cold so quickly after that. Faye asks Henry to take her home. Shortly after her arrival, Faye has a harsh panic attack and needs her mother's help to calm down.



We learn that Faye has suffered from panic attacks since 1958, when Faye's mother forced the family to host a neighborhood barbecue as a way of helping Frank become more popular in the neighborhood. The idea was for Frank to relax and talk to people so they could see what a wonderful man he is. During the barbecue, Frank burned the remaining hot dogs, so he asked Faye to get more food, "From downstairs" (234) in their bomb shelter. Faye did so and came back with food. Faye got the idea to take some of the children at the party down to the bomb shelter. Then the boys came back and told their fathers about the shelter the Andresons had in their house. The neighbors commented that they would come to this bomb shelter now that they know it is available and large enough to accommodate a group. They were, of course, joking, but Frank did not take it that way. "If anyone comes near that door, I will shoot them. You understand?" (236) said Frank. The party ended shortly after that comment. This outcome upset Frank. In order to encourage Faye to be more obedient, he handed her a small glass figurine and used it as a warning. Frank told her that it was a house spirit from a home back in Norway. These house spirits are really called "nisse" (238). They are independent spirits that did as they pleased. The ghost never harmed people unless it felt insulted, and a person could insult it by spilling water or eating its food. After Frank finished the story of a little girl in Norway who was beaten close to death by a nisse she disrespected, Faye apologized for taking the boys to the bomb shelter. Faye understood that Frank meant this as a direct warning to Faye who disrespected him and, in turn, offended the house ghost. That night, Faye was so afraid of a possible house ghost that she could not sleep. Her parents heard a horrible scream in the middle of the night and found Faye shaking in the basement all alone. From that night on, Faye was never the same and she developed the habit of frequent panic attacks. She remarked that this change was because the house ghost was offended and, as a result, would follow her around her whole life thereafter.

Back in 1968, and back at school, Faye finds herself in her home economics class surrounded by sexist posters. The stereotypically feminine room is described as, "Tacked onto the pink walls, posters of women looking lonely and ashamed, advertising products whose existence the boys deny" (241). These are advertisements telling women how to get a man by keeping clean and how to keep a man by tidying up the house properly. Faye feels like, "What a terrible thing, this world of married women" (242), constantly pressured to be perfect and to tirelessly wait on someone else. Mrs. Schwingle is her teacher, and she is seriously focused on every minute detail of being a "proper" married woman. She warns Faye that she should be very careful in college so that she can attract a classy and successful husband who will take care of her and provide the kind of life she wants. Margaret Schwingle, the daughter of the home economics teacher, invites Faye over to her house for a surprise birthday party. She emphasizes that the party is a surprise so no one should know about the party or where Faye is going. She instructs Faye to stop at her father's pharmacy before the party because she wants Faye to pick up a package of her favorite chocolates, which her father does not permit her to eat.

Faye has a date with Henry that night. He seems very nervous, and Faye assumes it is because Henry wants to apologize about his over-the-top reaction on Prom night. Instead, Faye discovers that Henry is nervous because he plans on having sex with her



for the first time. It seems as though Henry is having sex with Faye because he wants to make her happy and he thinks this is what she wants.

Faye is excited to attend a social gathering at the Schwingle's home. She puts on a nice dress and goes to the pharmacy as requested. While there, the pharmacist seems to interrogate Faye and she does not understand why. Faye brings the bag of chocolates to Margaret's house. Margaret opens the door, grabs the bag out of Faye's hands, and tells her that the party is canceled. She encourages Faye to go home and never tell anyone that she came to her house that night. This confuses Faye until she starts to put the pieces of the puzzle together on her drive home. Faye feels stupid and gullible for not looking into the brown paper bag she delivered to Margaret. She gets home and Frank accuses her of buying a pregnancy test from the pharmacy earlier. He is ashamed of Faye, but even more upset that other people in town knew about the pregnancy. Faye tells her parents that she is going to Chicago, and Frank tells her to, "Leave and never come back" (278).

Analysis

We see Henry seriously manipulating Faye into staying with him in a place she despises and in a life she wants nothing to do with. Henry even goes so far as to tell Faye, "If I [died], I guess it'd be your fault" (225), confirming that she would be to blame for his death. This is an immense amount of pressure to place on anyone, let alone an 18-year-old girlfriend. We begin to learn that the relationship between Henry and Faye is actually one built on dependence. Henry seems to need Faye in order to survive and Faye, being a kind and caring person is almost blackmailed into staying with Henry. Faye does not seem to understand how Henry feels so in love with her. Faye does not seem to feel anything close to love for Henry. She remarks that, "He has certainly given her lots of flowers and poems and dinners and chocolates, but he's never told her a secret. She feels she knows nothing about him, nothing more than what everyone else knows" (228). Like Samuel, Faye wants to love someone through their words and personality. She is worried about why Henry has never tried to have sex with her. This hurts Faye's feelings and makes her feel removed from Henry. Her attempt to bond them beyond the ring and jacket is through a physical connection. This physical connection, however, is quickly and urgently scuffed away by Henry who comments that girls like her don't do things like that. The next time they meet, Henry takes Faye to another remote location and decides to take control and have sex with her. However, we get the sense that the sex is more for Faye's pleasure than Henry's. Henry is described as hovering over Faye, ". . . in agony. His face is screwed up in knots." To Faye, he seems to be, "Waiting for her to say no" (264). But she doesn't say no. She allows him to go all the way. It appears as though Henry's thoughts about who he gave his ring to have changed into something more gritty. This is the beginning of a relationship built without communication and freckled with much miscommunication.

Faye desperately wants to go to college, and she wants nothing more than to escape her small, suburban town in Iowa. Like Samuel in 2011, Faye wants to find an escape from her reality in 1968. "Faye is aware of the attention, the neighborly curiosity, the



unyielding abstract gaze of the town, the way everything sort of shifted when word got out about [her college acceptance]" (221). Faye's discomfort in her own quiet, suburban hometown is very much connected to her dislike of Samuel's hometown, where she eventually abandons her family. In her entire life, it seems as though Faye has always wanted to live the adventurous and semi-anonymous life offered in in a big city. However, we know that she grew up in a small town with many eyes and ears and we know that she lived many years with Henry and Samuel in a very similarly boring suburban wasteland. All she has ever wanted to do was escape and live a more exciting life. At some point after leaving Samuel, Faye ends up living in Chicago, which is where Samuel previously met both Faye and Simon Rogers in regards to the letter helping to defend Faye in court.

Faye also begins to form a rather negative opinion of marriage here. The posters in her home economics class are designed to frighten women into perfection, obedience, and submission. She comments that it is, "No wonder the boys are afraid. The girls are afraid." (242). We know that Faye does not enjoy being married to Henry. It seems as though her perception of marriage is seeded in the home economics room that causes Faye to conclude that marriage is, ". . . a terrible thing" (242). The classroom teaches her that men are judgmental and fickle. Above all, that men are disloyal to a woman who is not perfect. This fear extends into her relationship with Henry, who quickly rejects her sexual advance as being offensive. Most importantly, this fear is proven when Frank instantly rejects his own daughter because she is rumored to be imperfect due to false pregnancy news. Faye is quickly taught that the claimed disloyalty of men on those posters in her pink classroom is closer to the truth than she thought possible.

We also begin to get a sense that Faye feels as if her life is cursed. As a result of her fears, Faye makes the conscious effort to be, ". . . a person who never screwed up" (255). We learn more about Faye's belief that she is cursed when she comments that, "This was the moment that would forever divide her childhood, which would set her on a path that made everything that came after—the seizures, the disaster of Chicago, her failure at motherhood and marriage—feel inescapable. Every life has a moment like this, a trauma that breaks you into brand-new pieces. This was hers" (240). Faye's behavior in leaving Samuel might have more to do with her own fears than with her dislike for her life. This is the first time we learn about something internal that affects Faye's self-perception. If she feels like she is cursed, she might very well feel as if she does not deserve happiness or love or motherhood and she will forever try to escape from a life where she believes she brings her own curse upon innocent others.

Discussion Question 1

What leads Faye to being so gullible?



Discussion Question 2

What do you think Henry means when he tells Faye that girls like her do not behave that way?

Discussion Question 3

The girls in the home economics classroom demonstrate very antiquated views of feminism and the role of females in society. In what ways do the girls in the home economics classroom prove that they define themselves based on the men they are dating?

Vocabulary

harbinger, gambit, stoic, exhortation, arbitrary, permutations, contrite, catharsis



Part Five: A Body for Each of Us

Summary

Readers are brought back to 2011 when Periwinkle calls Samuel to complain about his draft. The story of his mother does not say anything about her being The Packer Attacker, so Periwinkle does not like Samuel's work thus far. He then continues to tell Samuel about today's readers and what audiences will respond to. He comments that readers will slip into one of two categories: overly aware and self-righteous or purposefully ignorant of events and situations. Periwinkle offers ghostwriters for Samuel — people who are writers who do not write for literature but who write to make money from books aimed at the right audiences.

Chapter 1 slips into a fun escape designed much like those choose your own adventure novels Samuel loved to read as a child. The topic of this aside is titled, "YOU CAN GET THE GIRL!". In it, the main character, who is obviously Samuel, remarks that he wants to be a famous novelist in order to impress two women in his life: his mother and a girl named Bethany. We learn that Bethany's family moved to the East Coast shortly after the headmaster died. After the Fall family moves away, Bethany continues to write Samuel infrequently. While he is happy that she writes, Samuel is disturbed by the distance with which she writes her letters to him. That is, until Samuel finds a very small, "Love you, Bethany" (287) at the bottom. Samuel dreams about Bethany and where she is when she writes these letters to him. As the years progress, the letters become more infrequent and more distant. The love declared at the bottom of the letter shortens and lessens until it is simply her name. Bethany moves on to college at Julliard and Samuel asks to go to school in New York City. His father refuses because of the cost and the danger of living in a city like New York. Samuel ends up at a state college in Illinois. He is in the writing department and his teacher finds his writing to be lackluster at best. As he gets close to graduation, Samuel's teacher encourages him to "Just write something true" (294). The story he writes is the story of Bishop's childhood.

Samuel reflects on the fact that he realized Bishop was being molested by the headmaster years after Bishop and his family left Illinois. He remembers being labeled as a mediocre writer in his creative writing program at university. The story that brought him to Guy and gave him a chance to be published for the first time was a tale that capitalized on Bishop and Bethany's childhood story of molestation and murder. This is the story that was submitted to Guy Periwinkle, who then offered Samuel his first book deal. This is also the story that was ignored by Faye and read by Bethany.

Bethany's disapproving reaction was to stop writing, which hurt Samuel more than he had ever known. He is completely unable to do any writing, but used his book advance to buy expensive things like a house. This, as we know, is the same advance money Samuel squanders, leading Periwinkle to meet with him in the airport and demand the money back. Bethany finally writes an e-mail to Samuel. In the spring of 2004, she writes to tell Samuel that Bishop is dead. He died in Iraq in October of 2003 when a



bomb went off too close to him. We learn that Bishop graduated from the Virginia Military Institute and then enlisted as a normal soldier in the army. He was deployed to Afghanistan in 1999 and was then moved to Iraq. Then he died. This is the only information Bethany can give to Samuel because she and Bishop did not really talk much. Samuel wrote a letter of grievance back to Bethany and expressed his deep feeling of loss and sadness. It is not until much later when Bethany responds by inviting Samuel to New York for a silent vigil honoring soldiers who have died in Iraq. All of this grief, and Samuel loses sleep over the anticipation that this trip will help him win Bethany's heart. ". . . if you do everything right," Samuel dreams, "you can get the girl" (299).

Samuel drives to New York and arrives at Bethany's apartment. It is an extravagant property nestled in an extravagant building. Samuel is greeted by Bethany's fancy fiancé, Peter Atchison. He is a successful financier and Samuel feels intimidated by him. The fiancé leaves Bethany and Samuel alone while they take a very awkward car ride to the marching area. When they arrive, Samuel is shocked to see a huge crowd, many of whom are described as being liberals, standing around a vast hill area covered with coffins. It seems to be quite the event. People from all backgrounds are crowded in the park, and a woman on a loudspeaker gets everyone into formation. There is a coffin, or a "body," for each person to carry. Everyone in the march will act as pallbearers for a soldier who lost his or her life in Iraq. Samuel quickly learns that this is an anti-Iraq war protest which is making its way from the park to the Republican National Convention nearby. The convention is 30 blocks away, which gives Samuel and Bethany plenty of time to reflect, remember, and talk. Samuel strikes up a conversation with Bethany about Bishop's large personality. Samuel remarks that, "Some people . . . go through life like a pebble falling into a pond. They barely make a splash. Bishop tore through life. We were all in his wake" (314). To this, Bethany becomes silent and reflective.

As their march, or rather a protest at this point, gets closer to the convention, a group of anti-protestors have gathered. Samuel notes that this is the one spot where news crews have chosen to park and tell the story. They finally reach Madison Square Garden and everyone lays their coffins down in front. Samuel notes that there is a large crowd with him today but that it is small compared to the millions of people who are watching this story unfold on the news playing on their televisions. He comments that this story will be debated — whether or not this liberal protest did more harm than good — and that the headline for tonight will be, "Liberals use soldier deaths for political gain" (317). Nevertheless, the protest is completed without any violence or fighting and Bethany takes Samuel back to her apartment.

Samuel notices that Bethany seems to be quite an emotional roller coaster on this trip. In front of her fiancé, she is bubbly and excited; but at the protest she becomes somber and quiet and reflective. This is followed by a cheery offer for a drink almost as soon as they arrive back at her apartment. Samuel agrees. Over drinks, Bethany shares with Samuel that their relationship is "complicated." Samuel responds by saying, "I don't know what you and I are" (320).



This heartfelt conversation continues. Bethany admits that Bishop and her became strangers to one another but that she never understood why either one of them allowed that to happen. She mentions that Bishop was considered the problem child in the family and then, finally, for the first time, directly says, “He was being, well, you know. Being abused” (320). She confirms that it was the headmaster who was doing it and that this was the primary reason she thinks she drifted apart from her brother. Bishop painted Bethany as being more fortunate in her life that she was not abused but he was. This anger inside Bishop eventually turned into him ignoring her. Bethany forgot about her guilt related to Bishop’s abuse until Samuel published his short story that exposed her family’s troubles. She feels horrible that she knew about the abuse at the time it was happening and yet did nothing to report it or to stop it.

Bethany admits that she was angry at Samuel for many years after that story came out. She was not angry at the story but at the fact that the story forced her to confront the feelings she had locked away. Bethany hid the story from Bishop, who never read his own story of abuse as noted by Samuel. She gets up from her spot on the couch to lean over Samuel, insinuating that she wants him to kiss her, but Samuel does not. Bethany tells him that she does not want to marry her fiancé, Peter, and Samuel reminds her, “You don’t have to” (325). Then Bethany asks Samuel to help her avoid marrying him. This request is followed by a kiss. Samuel comments that his insecurities and pining for Bethany, “all seem to shatter” (325) as he kisses her. Bethany stops the kissing before it leads to sex because she wants to tell Samuel about a letter Bishop sent to him before he died. Bethany admits that she read the letter, but she explains that she does not understand what it means. She then leaves Samuel alone to read Bishop’s letter.

Nathan Hill takes us on a flashback to Iraq with Bishop, where we meet many of his buddies who are fighting alongside him. The group of soldiers is riding on the streets, chatting as usual. Except, Bishop is not talking to anyone while riding in the vehicle. Instead he is enjoying silence. Bishop thinks to himself how happy he is that he, “. . . doesn’t even dream over here.” And that war has, “. . . turned him into a sleeping savant” (332). A minor explosion goes off on the side of the road and a young soldier named Chucky freaks out, claiming that he has been hit by shrapnel. Bishop investigates his body to find a small drop of blood on his belly and he makes fun of Chucky for being such a baby about an injury. Chucky laments about all the regrets he has in his life because he never told anyone how he feels about them. Later that night, Bishop learns that Chuck died from an internal injury due to a small piece of shrapnel.

Bishop lies awake that night peeling back multiple layers of anger. He feels angry at the war, angry at the IED that exploded, angry at Chucky, and angry at himself. He is angry at himself for being filled with so much consuming rage at the headmaster. The man who abused him, who told him that their private tutoring sessions would be about, “. . . what to do with girls” (339), and how angry he was that he appreciated receiving a lesson about this at first. The headmaster had tricked him into allowing him to do things to Bishop and had tricked Bishop into doing things to him. The thing that makes Bishop feel the most furious is that he remembers liking it. “He looked forward to it” (340). Shortly after the headmaster worked Bishop up to anal sex, he dropped Bishop and



replaced him with another boy. This made Bishop feel rejected and angry, which led to his expulsion from Sacred Heart Academy.

Bishop remembers poisoning his hot tub, but feels angry and embarrassed that he did this out of jealousy, as if he was a “jilted girlfriend” (341). He knew he was homosexual and he did not know how to handle it. This became a major problem for Bishop in military school because being gay was not tolerated well. As a result, Bishop harshly bullied everyone around him for being faggots. Bishop decides that he wants to reveal his secrets to everyone he feels he needs to apologize to. The first letter he writes is Samuel’s. He finishes the letter with plans to complete the rest of the letters later that day. But he cannot, and he does not, because Bishop dies from a remote detonated bomb hidden in a trash can as he walks down the street.

Samuel is now sitting in Bethany’s apartment, staring at the letter. Inside, he reads two things. First, that Bishop feels horrible for corrupting Samuel and doing a bad thing in the woods with him the day his mother left. And second, that Bishop wants Samuel to stay away from Bethany.

Analysis

This section is incredibly dense with emotion. In fact, one can easily say that this is the most emotional part in this novel. Every page is packed with punches that hit different parts of you. Each and every time we experience a character’s actions, it is riddled with a wide array of emotions, which is perhaps why Part Five is so difficult to digest all at once.

While Part Five covers Samuel, Bethany, and Bishop quite deeply, it is Bishop who reveals so much more than he ever did before. What is the most disturbing part of his personal reveal is that it is provided to readers, not to Samuel or to Bethany. Hill allows us to experience a flashback into Bishop’s world. He seems satisfied with his life fighting in a war. Readers have always been left to use their dark imaginations for the nightmares Bishop must have endured. The fact that he no longer dreams makes us feel hopeful that this is bringing him peace and comfort in his slumber. It seems as though war has numbed his emotions enough to the point where Bishop feels slightly functional again. He still has deep emotions, as one can expect from any person, but he does a superb job hiding them from the other soldiers. Perhaps the most shocking reveal about Bishop is that we learn he is gay. He reflects on the fact that he felt special about the headmaster picking him out from the crowd. He considers his special study sessions with the headmaster to have been a miniature love story. What is interesting about Bishop’s reflection on his murder of the headmaster is that he is most embarrassed for his motives behind the murder. Bishop does not seem to feel overly guilty about killing him, but he is downright embarrassed that he murdered him out of jealousy, commenting that he was like a, “jilted girlfriend” (341). This is Bishop’s great love affair, and a lover who scored him. The fact that Bishop recognizes the abuse behind these meetings is negligible because he looks back on the relationship with fond memories of pleasure.



Bishop is so filled with rage and hate and a strong need to find escape from the real world. He wants to escape so much that he goes all the way to Iraq only to confirm that he, “. . . has terrible things inside him that he cannot bring himself to tell anyone. That great evil secret of his life—sometimes it feels so big it’s like he needs a new inner organ to contain it. The secret sits inside him. It devours time and grows stronger as time passes, so that now when he thinks of it he cannot separate the event itself from his later revulsion of it” (339). He has no plans to change this pattern of self-hate and internal torture until he is a witness to a young soldier dying of a seemingly insignificant wound. The last words he exchanged with the boy were about the young soldier’s lack of social bravery. This seems to light a fire inside Bishop, and this deceased young soldier becomes a personal metaphor for the things Bishop is doing wrong in his life. He uses this soldier’s regrets as motivation for a change he wants to make in his life. Bishop so desperately wants to be happier. He wants to shed these heavy layers of guilt and confusion and self-loathing and secrets and lies. Almost immediately after he learns of the soldier’s death Bishop decides to draft letters to everyone he thinks deserves one. His first letter is to Samuel. This indicates that the thing Bishop needs to tell Samuel has been of the utmost importance to him — that his message is dire and is the most pressing message to get out. Bishop writes the letter, seals the envelope, and never gets the chance to mail it out. He tragically dies before he can send the letter to Samuel or before he can draft any more than that one message. And so this becomes Bishop’s final words: a letter to Samuel confessing something.

Bishop wants to reduce his anger and relinquish as many issues as he can. He never gets the chance to right any of the wrongs he may have caused. What is worse, is that Bishop dies happy. He is happy when he is walking down that street towards a hidden bomb in a trashcan. He is finally satisfied with his choices and he feels a sense of relief for the first time in decades. This is how he dies. The way Hill writes it is so very fast and detached. Bishop is described as feeling cold and alone, like he is in one of his mother’s snow globes. But this death is heartbreaking. It is not painful because we learn that he dies, for we already know he dies. What is truly horrible to read is the first and only lines where Bishop is relieved. “He feels good about it, about getting that off his chest and out into the world, and he feels good about his new project, about letting go of the things that have been bundled up inside him all these years” (342). He is whole but for one morning. That is the only amount of happiness he was afforded in his short life—one brief section of one ordinary day. The rest of his days were compressed with depression. We have come to feel deeply for Bishop. We have seen him progress through life and we have cheered for the day he is healed. Ironically, he is healed the same day his body is ripped apart.

Samuel notices Bethany’s sorrow at the protest, but he is more curious about Bethany’s roller coaster of emotions in the short time he has been with her in New York. In front of her fiancé, Bethany is bubbly and easily excited, at the protest she is overcome with sorrow, and the moment they get back to her apartment she is cheery and offers Samuel a drink. The two of them drink in a way that Samuel knows she is gearing up for something. He has been struggling this entire trip. Samuel has always struggled with his loyalty to Bishop and his longing for Bethany. He feels torn as to whether or not this is the right time to talk to her about his feelings. He has wanted to communicate his love



for her for a long time, but the fact that he is with her because of Bishop's death is a hard dilemma for him. Samuel is overcome with his affection for her, which makes it difficult to focus on the sad task at hand. Samuel thinks to himself, "You are full of conflict here, full of competing impulses. You're holding Bishop's coffin and it feels awful. It ignites all your appalling guilt, the guilt you felt for not saving Bishop when you were young. And the guilt you now feel for trying to woo Bethany at what is essentially her own brother's funeral. . . . Until, that is, until you look at Bethany again, her bare back, the sweat on her shoulders, the strands of hair that cling to her neck . . ." (313-314). This feeling of conflict is nothing new. Samuel has always found a reason to feel guilty for being attracted to Bethany. This seems to be a sort of torture he enjoys putting himself through. If not Bishop's symbolic coffin, Samuel uses his short story as a divider between the two of them, saying, ". . . eventually you understand that the story you hoped would win Bethany back has, perversely, killed any chance you may have had with her" (297). He is self-sabotaging his own chances for happiness. With Bethany, Samuel blames himself as being the reason they have never dated. However, he also consistently blames himself for Faye's departure. These seem to be emotional crutches Samuel uses to mope around in his life. He is so fearful to learn that he is not with Bethany simply because she does not want him. Instead, Samuel must create barriers that separate the two of them.

Throughout this section, Bethany obviously lets her guard down around Samuel. She is honest and real and raw, and Bethany behaves in the depressive way she wants to. She does not feel the need to hide things from Samuel. She can be completely herself with him, which is something she does not seem to be able to do with her fiancé, Peter. The years they have spent apart do not seem to matter because Bethany quickly opens up about her dismay that she grew distant from Bishop. She comments that, "We disappeared from each other. . . . I don't know who started it, but for a while it was easier pretending the other didn't exist" (321). She wants to connect with someone, someone who she can trust and rely on. She feels this kinship with Samuel. Samuel was the last mutual friend the two of them had together. Shortly after moving to the East coast, Bethany and Bishop drifted apart. To Bethany, Samuel is the link that held them together that summer. He is the one person she can talk to about her brother and her guilt about never helping him.

Bishop's letter is the first true crossroads decision Samuel has needed to make. Previously, we have met Samuel in mostly mundane situations where he paints himself as a victim. For example, He chooses not to write his book for Periwinkle so he gets into trouble. Nothing stops this from happening except Samuel himself. He makes the decision to tell a student that she is not very smart, which will probably leave him fired. But this time is different. He has the woman of his dreams waiting for him in a bedroom, waiting with the expectation that they will have sex; and he has this message from his best friend in childhood begging him to reject it. If he has sex with Bethany, he is putting his own selfish needs ahead of everything else. He will go against Bishop's last request and harm Bethany's personal life. On the other hand, if he refuses Bethany, he will continue to live in curiosity and torment. This self-sabotaging behavior is something we have already seen in Samuel in the past. We are left in suspense as to whether Samuel



will have sex with Bethany, and prove he is grossly self-serving; or reject her, and prove that he enjoys living a life of punishment.

Discussion Question 1

Bishop requesting that Samuel stay away from Bethany seems shocking. What events in Bishop's life could lead him to asking this of Samuel?

Discussion Question 2

Bethany knows that her brother asked Samuel to stay away from her and yet she seduces Samuel anyway. Using this event and others from previous sections, can we consider Bethany Fall to be a moral character or an immoral one? How does she seem to influence the people who surround her?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Bishop drawn to a life in the military? Does he find what he wants when he gets there? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

evade, dumbfounded, prerogative, alcoves, opacity, expound, ilk, marginal, malcontent, provocateurs, disquieting, obelisk, bemusedly, parse, tacit, comeuppance



Part Six: Invasive Species

Summary

It's 2011, and Pwnage is upset because it is Tuesday, which is the day World of Elfscape goes offline. We walk around Pwnage's house with him as he fumbles and fidgets with things now that he does not have the game to distract him. We learn that he started playing shortly after his wife, Lisa, left him. He was alone at the house and bored. Nothing interested him, so he went out to buy a new game and he bought World of Elfscape. It helped distract him. He made the conscious decision to be perfect at Elfscape. If he could be perfect on Elfscape then he could carry over this dedication and skill to other goals in his life, namely starting a healthier diet. However, Pwnage knows that he does not actually want to do this because he cannot shop at his local health food store. The second time he went shopping there, Pwnage felt so judged that he had a minor meltdown. He threw his reusable shopping bag at the cashier and shouted something, but the only thing that came out was the lyrics to a song from Molly Miller. He shouted, "You have got to represent!" (354).

Pwnage has three things on his list: start a diet, become a great reader, and help Dodger, IRA (in real life) Samuel, find information about his mother, Faye. He comes to the conclusion that, "Helping his new irlfriend . . . would give him the motivation to finally do everything he needed to do, because Dodger would then owe him a favor, which he could cash in to find a publisher and receive his huge book contract" (354). This, he decides, will give him enough money to make all the changes in his life that he wants to make. Pwnage uses another Elfscape player named Axman to search for information related to Faye since this will help Samuel. After writing one note to Axman, Pwnage sits back and notices how tired he feels from his stressful day.

Chapter 2 brings us back to Samuel's troublesome student, Laura Pottsdam. She is sitting alone in her dorm room experiencing, for the first time, a feeling of doubt. She has never felt this way, and she does not know how to deal with this emotion. In fact, she struggles on the ifeel app to find an appropriate word for it. We get more insight into something we already know about Laura: she is a cheater and unapologetic about the fact. She justifies the cheating because she promises herself that she will only cheat until she is assigned something that actually matters, which has not happened yet. It strikes Laura that she has cheated for so long that she is no longer sure if she can do any of the work assigned to her for any class. Laura's relationship with her mother is a tricky one. Her mother places a lot of pressure on Laura to be a success, which then makes Laura feel like she must impress her mother all the time. She shudders at the idea of her mother finding out anything negative about her or about her performance at school.

Laura invited Larry over to her dorm room because she wants his help breaking into Samuel's computer. Larry, also a student in Samuel's literature class, has a work study job that gives him access to all school computers for assistance. At first, he refuses to



break into Samuel's computer simple because Laura asked him to, but then she tells him that he would be her hero if he did. Laura proceeds to seduce Larry further until he agrees to do what she is asking. The two have sex and Larry leaves her room shortly after.

Laura returns to feel desperate to locate the proper word for how she is feeling at the moment. The dean has scheduled a meeting with Laura, Samuel, and a mediator; a meeting which Laura does not want to attend because she will be discovered as lying about her work in her intro to lit class. Instead, Laura wants to get Samuel fired before this meeting can happen. This way, she will not lose face or get in trouble in any way.

Chapter 3 takes us back to Samuel. He is meeting with his father, Henry, to discuss the truth related to his mother and her time in Chicago. The two meet for dinner, and Henry informs Samuel that he does not actually know very much about why Faye only stayed in Chicago for one month. Henry admits that he was so happy to have her back that he never asked why she left college in the first place. Their dinner continues with idle conversation until we learn that Henry's first job filed for bankruptcy right before he was about to file for early retirement. His money was tied up in company shares and he lost everything when the company officially declared bankruptcy. Because of this, Henry has been forced to work for much longer than he anticipated, and he is not happy about it.

Their dinner is interrupted when Pwnage messages Samuel about finding the women in the photo from the 60's. Samuel races to the same bar they met at before in order to get more answers. The woman Pwnage learned about is named Alice. She lives in Indiana. Pwnage tells Samuel that Alice knew Faye back in Chicago. They were neighbors. Pwnage set up an appointment for the two of them to meet and gives Samuel a map to her home. Samuel is overcome with appreciation and offers to help Pwnage if he needs anything. Right then and there Pwnage mentions the book he has written. He asks Samuel to show his book to Guy Periwinkle. Samuel quickly agrees.

Samuel meets Alice in an open field, where she is delicately picking rare mustard plants from the ground. This is an invasive species that is not native to the land and Alice wants to ensure the safety of all the naturally growing plants in the area. Samuel begins to question Alice about his mother's time in Chicago. We get the sense that Alice is not being completely honest when she thinks to herself that she would not agree with Samuel that something important happened to send Faye packing. Faye is described as being, ". . . dragged into [the movement] against her will" (382). When Samuel asks who brought Faye into the movement, Alice's response is, "Nobody. Everybody. The events of the time. She got swept up. It was all terribly exciting, you see" (383). We also learn that Faye was very quiet and naïve and that she was attracted to a boy named Sebastian. We also learn that Faye left quickly without saying goodbye to anyone, including Alice. Alice spirals into a state of self-reflection. She remembers being part of the antiwar movement and everything that entailed. She reflects on her happiness after leaving the movement and feels satisfied about owning a house and settling down with her partner and her three rescue dogs. She remembers Faye and thinks to herself, "She'd promised to look out for Faye, but things got out of hand, and she failed. She never knew what happened to her. She never saw her again" (385). Samuel seems



desperate to learn more about Faye, but Alice does not feel that she can tell him the truth about any of the details. Samuel informs her that the name of the judge is Charlie Brown, and Alice has a strong reaction against it. “You have to get your mother out of here” (386), she orders. She tells Samuel that the judge, Alice, and Faye were all connected in college, in Chicago. Alice becomes secretly dramatic and suggests that Samuel remove his mother from the area and possible even the country. Suddenly, Alice reveals that she moved out of Chicago and into her home in Indiana because she was afraid of Charlie Brown. “Your mom is in trouble,” Alice remarks, “The judge will never yield. He’s ruthless and dangerous” (386). Part Six ends with Alice agreeing to tell Samuel the story on account of who the judge will be in Faye’s case.

Analysis

Part Six focuses on Samuel’s journey to learn more about Faye and her time in Chicago, but it is also a journey into Samuel’s healing through developing closeness with his mother. Samuel has often wondered what things his mother did not tell him about. He has suspected for a while that Faye had an entire other life she never shared with him before her departure. This sneaking feeling has led Samuel to feel lied to and betrayed for years. Alice is the confirmation Samuel and readers have been waiting for in regards to the secretive young life of Faye. And, although Alice does not seem completely forthright with Samuel at first, it is a relief for him just to be talking to a person who knew Faye when she was in Chicago. There is definitely a dark past lurking in the shadows of Faye’s time at college. For years, Alice has felt guilty and responsible for something that Faye endured. Hill does a great job of building suspense here because readers are weaving as many different possible tales as they can think of for what happened to Faye.

Alice herself is quite a complex character. We are immediately introduced to the strange and finicky nature of Alice while also learning of her past as a badass in the antiwar movement in the 1960’s. The life change that Alice has gone through is gorgeously illustrated here. We are exposed to a flurry of memories Alice has about her time in Chicago and then we are comforted to learn of her change into a boring and cliché suburban life. All of these doubtful feelings on behalf of Alice and we come to find out that she is blissfully unapologetic for buying a home, decorating it, moving in with her life partner, and adopting three rescue dogs. She has no regrets and even mentions that she feels happier than she ever did before. She seems to be the only character who has found inner peace. She does not seem to have any huge overhanging guilt or sad feelings of abandonment. Instead, she is described as being satisfied and settled in her life choices. This is a welcome character to alleviate all of the self-loathing among the other characters in the novel.

Hill finishes Part Six with a gorgeous metaphor. At first, we are led to believe that Alice’s obsession with the invasive mustard plants are simply a character flaw, but Hill transforms her hobby into a metaphor for getting rid of your problems healthily. “The problem with mustard,” Alice comments, “is that you can’t just chop it down. The seeds can last for years. It will always come back. You have to cut it out completely. You have



to cut it out by the roots” (386). This metaphor refers to the fact that many of the characters have problems in their lives that were not cut out properly. Faye repeatedly rips her problems quickly and without care. However, because Faye did not rid herself of her problems carefully, they were still deeply rooted within her and continued to surface. Samuel, on the other hand, has nothing but deep rooted problems that he has never attempted to pick. For Bishop, the start of his letters were an attempt to carefully rid himself of his emotional pain.

Samuel looks to his father for some answers about Faye’s time in Chicago. Unsurprisingly, he is of no help for this history. This continues to paint the picture that Faye never wanted to be with him in the first place. They seem to have been a mismatched couple from the beginning, with Henry much more in love with Faye than she could ever be with him. Henry is constantly painted as a man desperately clinging to a woman he loves who will never love him back. The fact that he knows absolutely nothing about Faye’s experiences in Chicago also leads us to understanding why there was such a large chasm between the two of them. Henry never cared what happened to her when she was away because he was so utterly desperate to have her back with him.

The real surprise in this section is that Pwnage is the person who actually helps Samuel with his book. This is the first time we have seen Pwnage do anything with a purpose. As a character he is flighty and unfocused. He gives himself fake promises which he then quickly breaks each time. However, thanks to the video game being offline, Pwnage is able to conjure up enough energy to write one message on behalf of Samuel. There are two things happening within his character here: selfishness and waste. Readers get yet another glimpse into how much of a waste Pwnage’s life is. He seems to have stuck himself into a repetitive time warp where he does nothing but dream about losing weight while he gains points in Elfscape. This side of him is perfectly fine to help Samuel knowing that he will then benefit from Samuel owing him a favor. What is slimy about his approach is how quickly he asks for his favor from Samuel. Pwnage asks for Samuel to show his book to a publisher in the same conversation as helping him. This act completely negates any of the help he actually gave Samuel.

Discussion Question 1

What is the connection between the Nix metaphor and the mustard plant metaphor?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is middle-aged Alice a unique character in this book? What are some traits of hers that no one else has in this story?



Discussion Question 3

What is Laura's relationship with her iFeel application? How does she use or abuse it?

Vocabulary

encumbered, beholden, deplorable, analog, bulwark, panopticon, altruistic, besmirched, innate, duplicity, banal, amassing, ostensible, ligatures



Part Seven: Circle

Summary

Readers are whisked back to 1968 with Faye as a new arrival to her dormitory. She is not happy with communal living, and she cannot believe that she is living amongst, “Freaky beatniks, psychedelic revolutionaries who needed to learn to clean up after themselves . . .” (389). She dislikes the people at her school and she dislikes the campus even more, commenting that “Faye had been promised a campus fit for the space age, but what she got was a place where every building’s surface evoked the gravel roads from back home.”(391). Henry sent Faye off to college with a sealed letter, which she is supposed to wait to open until she arrived. Henry’s letter simply says, “Come home / marry me” (392), and we learn that Henry has joined the army. He is stationed in Nebraska doing general training against potential hippie rioters. Meanwhile, in addition to her hatred of college, Faye also struggles with the idea of seeing Henry at Thanksgiving. She has no response to his proposal and she does not know how to handle it.

Faye normally takes showers very early in the morning so that she can have some privacy. One morning she is fantasizing about a man while taking a shower and opens her eyes to find a young Alice watching her in the shower. Alice accuses her of not being very fun and insults her for doing as she is told in school. Then Alice invites Faye to a meeting later that night. This meeting takes place in the office of the Chicago Free Voice. The topic of the meeting is, “WOMEN’S SEXUALITY AND SELF-DEFENSE” (395). Inside, women are openly talking about rape and defense, and Faye has no idea how to react or how to take this blunt information in. It is at this meeting when Faye first sets eyes on a man named Sebastian. In the previous chapters, Alice informed readers that this is a man who Faye was very attracted to.

This is the first time Faye is surrounded by women who want to practice modern ideas like free love but do not fully understand how to do it. These are women who come across as so much more experienced than her, but they are equally clueless. What no one in that meeting room knows is that the police bugged that office months ago. They are listening in on this meeting and every other meeting that has taken place there. The cops learn Faye’s name because it is the only name spoken during the meeting. Faye makes the mistake of speaking up during the meeting, claiming that some women might go into public naked because they like it. This comment is not taken well. Nevertheless, the police now have her name and they know a girl named Faye was at this meeting. The person who writes down her name for the records is Charlie Brown, a cop recently promoted to this unit called The Red Squad, “Chicago PD’s covert antiterrorist intelligence unit” (401).

Charlie Brown is described as being too young and inexperienced for his new post. He hates this young, hippie generation and he wants nothing more than to drive them out of Chicago. Charlie is from a long line of proud, pro-American men. He was given this



promotion onto The Red Squad when he promised the police chief that he had a close contact at Chicago Circle, Faye's college. Charlie bends the law as an officer to get things he wants and to punish the people he does not like. He places a star next to Faye's name with the intention that, "He would get to know this Faye very soon" (404).

The next day, Faye is on campus reading Sebastian's publication. Sebastian just so happens to walk by her as Faye reads his paper. He spots her and comes over to start a conversation. The two of them start a deep yet comfortable conversation related to the newspaper and humanity. Sebastian teaches Faye about something called the maarr. He claims that it is deeply connected to the idea of creating empathy between people, but that the largest challenge is that the person must act on that empathy and try to make the other person's life improve in the way they need it.

Sebastian leads Faye to a demonstration – a demonstration against ChemStar, which is where her father works. They are protesting against ChemStar because this company makes napalm. Sebastian leaves Faye when he runs into the small protest with the intention of getting arrested. This, he claims, is how a small protest like this one can make the news.

Faye is very attracted to Sebastian, and she has a hard time thinking about anything else. Her mind drifts to Henry, who is not exactly someone she is in love with. Faye is energized by her interaction with Sebastian, and she wants to know more about his world. She goes out looking for Alice to learn more. She finds Alice spending time in a women's shelter named Freedom House. During her visit, Faye makes it obvious that she is attracted to Sebastian. This does not have a favorable reaction from Alice. She mocks Faye for having a boyfriend waiting for her back home, and then becomes mean when she learns that Faye's boyfriend is in the army. She tells Faye, "Your boyfriend is going to get shot. And Sebastian will have supplied the bullets" (421). This is because Sebastian supports the Viet Cong movement known as the National Liberation Front. Faye leaves angry and ashamed.

Alice goes off for the night looking for free entertainment since she does not carry money or a purse. She spends time with a group of men, one of whom asks her to give him a blowjob. When she refuses, he accuses her of not being liberated because she will not do everything sexual that he wants. As Alice walks home, officer Charlie Brown stops to talk to her. Charlie put his hands around her throat and accuses her of doing something illegal. At first, the assumption is that the cop is abusing his powers with her, but we learn that Alice has a sexual relationship with Charlie Brown. That Alice is the "in" Charlie Brown has on the Circle campus. The two of them have been having sex for a while now, and Charlie has developed actual feelings for Alice. He is deeply afraid of losing her if he does not please her in the way she wants to be pleased. Charlie reflects on how guilty he feels for cheating on his wife but also how his wife's cold behavior has led him to cheat. It is due to Charlie's obsession with Alice that leads him to requesting that he be put on The Red Squad. This way, Charlie is allowed to follow Alice, keep tabs on her, and bug her dorm room.



Faye attends a lecture given by Allen Ginsberg, who tells everyone to repeat the phrase the war is officially over. Faye feels highly disappointed that the poet she reads and loves does not seem to want to teach poetry. Instead, Ginsberg offers mantras and encouragement for an upcoming anti-war march on the Democratic National Convention. Faye spots Sebastian in the class and becomes obsessed with what he is doing in reaction to Ginsberg. Sebastian approaches Faye when she is finally in the moment and trying to mediate. He sucks on her ear, which takes Faye by happy surprise.

Alice spends her Monday nights alone studying, which, as it turns out, she enjoys doing regularly. Faye stops by and Alice apologizes to her for shaming her about her attraction to Sebastian. Meanwhile, Charlie is listening in to the conversation. Alice told Sebastian about Faye's attraction, which is what led to their encounter earlier. Sebastian wants to spend the night with Faye before the big protest.

The two girls stay together and talk about Henry. Faye compares Henry to a puddle of mud, yet tells Alice that she wants to marry him. Faye does not want to mess anything up with Sebastian, and she implies that this is because she would choose Sebastian over Henry. She wants sex advice from Alice so she will not disappoint Sebastian in the event that he will want to have sex with her. Faye opens up about her nervous panic attacks and how much anxiety they cause her. As a result, Alice offers drugs to help Faye relax. The two take the drug and Faye feels happiness for the first time in what seems like forever. She admits that she feels haunted, which is why she thinks she has never felt happiness before. Faye becomes sleepy and Alice asks her to spend the night with her. This is an intimate moment that Charlie is deeply jealous of not being a part of.

Sebastian feels responsible for the upcoming protest. He feels as if he has misguided people into danger. On the other side of town, Charlie is also having a bad night. Alice breaks up with him because she wants to be with someone else. Charlie quickly assumes that she is ending things with him because of the girl named Faye who he listens in on. Charlie tells her that he is in love with her, and she quickly rejects him without feeling. He becomes angry and admits to spying on her private life. As Alice walks away, Charlie shoots an alley dog out of anger. Alice starts to run away from him, but Charlie drives past her in the direction of campus and the direction of Faye.

Faye is in her dorm room getting ready for Sebastian. She is elated and calm noting that, "It seemed like the beginning of the life she actually wanted" (461). She gets a call that she has a visitor, and Faye rushes down to greet Sebastian. Only it's not Sebastian at the door. Instead, Charlie is waiting for her. Charlie arrests Faye and takes her to the police station, all the while, Charlie calls her a whore and books her for prostitution.

Analysis

Part Seven takes us back to the brief moment in Faye's history where the world was her own yet she lived in nonexistent shadows. She was not under the scrutiny of her town, Frank, or Henry. Faye arrives to college with the sour memory of Frank kicking her out



of the house due to a pregnancy mix up. She continues to live as if people are watching. She does not know any other way to be except perfect. Faye has lived in the shadow of her father's judgement for so long, that she continues trying to be the perfect student and the quiet neighbor. Faye dislikes the people at school, judging them for being hippies and beatniks. Ironically enough, Faye is proving herself to be equally judgmental as the people she despised in her hometown. She avoids public areas and she never socializes. She even tries to avoid people by showing early in the morning before anyone is awake. It seems as though Faye is not happy anywhere. She hates her hometown, she feels uncomfortable on her campus, and she hates Streamwood, Illinois so much that she abandons Frank and Samuel. She never seems quite at home anywhere, she is never settled. It seems as though she is always judging the place for not being good enough or pretty enough or green enough. This deep-set judgment is interesting since it was overzealous judgment that caused her reputation back home to be thrown into the gutter.

Faye is so accustomed to being judged by everyone around her that she does not know how to respond when Alice will not give her the satisfaction of judging her after catching Faye on the brink of masturbation in the shower early one morning. This drastic change for Faye instantly attracts her to Alice, and Faye views her as a beacon for enlightenment as well as her only possible friend. As a result, Faye is able to open up to a person for the first time. She admits things about herself that she has never been able to say aloud before. One reveal that is especially significant is Faye's declaration that she is cursed. She has felt this way for more than ten years, yet she has always carried around this secret. Alice's reaction is one of a non-judgmental friend. For the first time in her life Faye feels like she can open up, trust, and feel happiness. It does not matter that her elated feelings come from drugs because she does not remember feeling these things.

Alice feels similarly bonded to Faye as well, which is why she develops a sexual attraction to her. She does not, on the other hand, feel any intimacy with Charlie Brown. The break up scene between Alice and Charlie is chilling. What is interesting about this predicament is that Alice has unknowingly lived out a beatnik stereotype. The stereotype of liberal women at this time is that all of them believe in free love and are sexually open beings. Alice shows this side of herself to Charlie, who is sexually and personally conservative. Hill writes a beautiful commentary on the disconnection between the, then, mass media and real life: "Because despite what the newspapers said, it was not the time of free love. It was the time of free-love writing, when free love was widely condemned, rarely practiced, and terrifically marketed" (398). Alice does not think she is a stereotype, but she acts one out very clearly with Charlie.

Shooting the dog out of anger reveals a frightening and deep capacity for violence in Charlie. Readers are now clearly aware of the dangers Charlie may pose to himself or to others. This type of dangerous personality is not a person who will do good things with a badge and some power. He makes the rash decision to lock up Faye for prostitution while calling her a whore. Charlie is also the judge in Faye's case, so we are provided with an even more scared of the possible violent reaction he will have in her hearing.



Faye's arrest is the second time that Hill has interrupted a tragic character's brief moment of happiness for a complete life-crushing experience. The first time we read this interruption is with Bishop, who finds release and is then killed. Now we have Faye, a tortured soul who feels she is haunted, who thinks she has finally found happiness in Alice and in college and in those tiny red pills and in Sebastian. She is utterly happy about the idea of spending her life with a man like Sebastian, even comparing Sebastian to Henry by using a metaphor of a sparkling clean glass of water and a mud puddle (Henry being the latter). Faye does not want to marry Henry. She knows this very clearly, and yet she continues to keep this easy option open. Henry is her backup to a failure that has not even happened yet. When Faye is fantasizing in the shower, she imagines a man touching her sexually. The only reason she thinks of Henry in this moment is because it is the only sexual experience she can reference. The only man's hands she knows the touch of are Henry's rough palms. She is sexually bored and yet inexperienced all at the same time. This is why Faye is so distracted when she meets Sebastian. She first meets him while attending a taboo meeting. This is an entirely new setting for Faye; it is an exciting possibility for a life change. Sebastian is strong and handsome and controversial. He is different from any man she has ever met before. Henry sees only her physical beauty while Sebastian seems to find her soul. She thinks to herself that, ". . . every time Henry called her beautiful she tended to think he was more pathetic" (415). This is because she is perplexed by Henry's attraction to her since the two of them know so very little about one another.

What is interesting about her attraction to Sebastian is that it does not seem political. While Sebastian does represent a possible road to liberalism, Faye does not talk to Sebastian about that part of him very much. The two of them discuss philosophy and empathy and meditation. They immediately engage in the highly emotional and academic dialogue Faye is missing from Henry and every other boy she has met. Previously, Faye complained about Henry's lack of communication. She dislikes how much she really knows about Henry for how much he claims to love her. Here is Sebastian, the exact opposite. He is talkative and intelligent and worldly. This is a new type of man she has never experienced, and this change excites her much more than Sebastian's political views. Faye is awakened by Sebastian, noticing that, "Nobody had ever spoken to her this way. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and cry" (411). Her attraction to Sebastian is deeply rooted in her thirst to be near a man who can feel the things she feels and talk about the poems and literature she is so engrossed with. When it comes to Sebastian, Faye Anderson does not feel cursed. She feels like she is standing at the brink of, ". . . the life she actually wanted" (461). How truly sad then when her dream night is interrupted by the vindictive Charlie Brown calling her a whore while driving her to the police station for a crime she did not commit.

It is obvious that Faye will not make it to her date with Sebastian, but this might help Sebastian, who is having a rough night. He has incited riots and inspired a much larger protest. Because of him and his semi-untruthful actions, people will be injured or killed. He knows he is largely responsible and he feels as if he will crumble under this immense weight. He is not entirely innocent, however. Sebastian is described as being a person who bends the truth and uses theatrics to get journalists to tell the story he wants. "That was his job, to add heat." He admits, "He had learned something



important: What was printed became the truth. . . . This is what he cared about: the message, the narrative” (457). It is difficult to ignore the parallels between Sebastian from 1968 and Guy Periwinkle from 2011. Both men know how mass media works and both men work it to their own advantage. Of course, Periwinkle wants to profit financially whereas Sebastian only wants an abundance of political, anti-war exposure. We get to see a different side of Sebastian, one that tells us of his personal ambitions and his willingness to manipulate the news for his own purposes.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think attracts Alice to Faye to one another?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Faye begin to change in her brief time at college?

Discussion Question 3

What does Faye mean when she comments that some women may enjoy being naked in public?

Vocabulary

litany, edifices, apotheosis, phalanxing, contraband, vicariously, fellatio, prude, inane, pension, mononymous, efflorescence, corporeal, monolithic, admonished, penitently, reproach, harrowingly, exigencies, burgeoning, calamity



Part Eight: Search and Seizure

Summary

We start with Charlie Brown, who now goes by Charles, in 2011. He is still living a mostly separate life from his wife even though they have been together all these years. He is in a wheelchair now, still working hard only now he is a judge. He is happy to have this case because he still harbors feelings of hatred towards Faye. He is excited to watch her receive a horrible punishment. He refers to Faye's case as a gift (466), and he considers getting this case to be a reward for his lifetime of suffering. He is also happy to have such an important case because it will delay his retirement, which is a milestone he is afraid of since he does not know how to spend time with his wife. Charles imagines trying to travel with his wife, and reflects on how awkward the experience would be. This is largely due to the fact that he knows they both wish they would have divorced each other a long time ago.

Charles and his wife hate each other. He feels that she has been punishing him for his lusty actions while younger. He mentions that he was punished by God as well, but this punishment came in the form of an accident which left him in a wheelchair. This sad daydream is interrupted when the newspaper is delivered to his home. Charles goes outside to collect it, but hears a sound coming from the trees across his street. It is Samuel. He asks Charles to drop all of Faye's charges. He tells Charles that he knows about the affair with Alice and he knows his personal thirst for revenge is why he took the case. Charles reacts with anger and threats. He quickly leaves the house and drives to Faye's apartment. Inside, Faye is drugged up from pills she took to calm her stress. Simon Rogers, her lawyer, informed her that the prosecution is coming at her with worse charges than before. It was Judge Brown (Charles) who asked for the charges to be strengthened.

Samuel offers to take Faye on a walk so both of them can get some calming fresh air. Samuel has a rush of emotions as he reaches for Faye's hand to help her up. While on the walk, we learn that Faye's job is reading poetry for, what is described as, ". . . a one-person nonprofit charitable service" (476). Faye wanted to be a poet when she was younger, but she decided to work with poetry instead. She lived a good life until the recession, which is when most of her well-paying jobs went away. Faye tells Samuel that she wanted to look sophisticated the first time he came to her house. Samuel admits that he visited Judge Brown that morning, and Faye's first reaction is to accuse Samuel's visit as the reason why the charges were worsened against her. Samuel reveals that Judge Brown is the person who arrested her in 1968, but Faye has no idea who he is talking about. Samuel tells her that he has spoken to Alice about her time at college. Faye wants to know why he is talking to all of these people, but the answer to the question is interrupted. As they turn the corner for Faye's house, a SWAT team is in front of her building. They hide until the SWAT team is gone then enter her apartment. Her door is completely smashed in, her furniture has been ripped apart, and her whole



apartment is trashed. Simon is at the house and casually announces that the police were there.

We are suddenly thrust back to Pwnage's house, where he is playing Elfscape like normal. He, again, is promising himself to quit the game. However, this time he is quitting because he will be starting a new career as a famous writer and this time he cannot quit until he personally says goodbye to every player he has played with. He takes action to quitting the game by writing goodbyes to players. Their concerned reactions and then immediate encouragement helps make Pwnage feel good. He continues his detachment by giving other players much of his coins and loot he has earned along the way. Even after he gives away everything, Pwnage does not log off. He goes for a walk as an Elf with no weapons. He cannot bring himself to exit the game. He goes on a very long rant filled with regret and logic related to why he cannot quit the game and what the game has done to his body. He has small seizures and blood clots and reduced brain function, which, Pwnage believes, literally will not allow him to say goodbye to World of Elfscape. An orc appears to Pwnage. This is an enemy, and Pwnage wants to attack. However, he cannot attack because he is having a medical emergency — a pulmonary embolism. The orc murders his avatar and brags about stabbing it. Pwnage lays helpless in front of the computer, vowing to start the game up again and to play as long as he needed to find that same orc and kill it back.

Hill brings us back to Faye's trashed apartment. Samuel wants to know how this action is legal. Simon brings up the post- 9/11 Patriot Act and also mentions that they can infer that Judge Brown is the person who ordered this raid. He also tells Samuel that his letter is no longer needed now that Samuel is involved in a scandal at his workplace. A group of students have created a public, social group solely dedicated to getting Samuel fired. The student group is headed by Laura Pottsdam and is called S.A.F.E. (Students Against Faculty Extravagance). They claim that Samuel is wasting taxpayer money due to the unusually high number of hours he is logged on to World of Elfscape while at work. Samuel's immediate reaction is to leave everything in his life behind. He wants to take Faye with him, but Simon cannot openly tell her to leave the area. Instead, he hints that she would not be placed on a no-fly list yet due to bureaucratic miscommunication and disorganization.

They go to the airport, buy tickets, and are waiting in line to go through security. They are stopped at security, and, as a result, she begins to panic. She admits that she was a Nix to Samuel and that she was hurting him. Faye is convinced that she will be arrested for trying to run away. However, it is Samuel who is on the no-fly list because he took photos of the ChemStar factory when he was in Iowa a few weeks ago. Samuel cannot fly for about six weeks and is asked to leave the airport. Samuel tells Faye to leave without him, telling her that he will find her when he can fly again. Faye asks for permission to leave Samuel for a second time. He gives it, and Faye walks into the airport alone.



Analysis

Charles is much older now, but his vengeful and overly-emotional reactions have only grown. In his youth, police officer Charlie Brown stretched the rules in order to bust the people he wanted to. Now, as a judge, Charles Brown is still out to punish those he deems unfit for society. Charles criticizing other old judges as being lazy while they approach retirement saying, “He would not devolve into that, he vowed” (465), is interesting. Charles finds it more disgraceful to become lazy than to stretch legalities. Even now, when daydreaming about his upcoming revenge on Faye, he has no problems thinking of ways to stretch the law in order to benefit him. This mentality continues when Samuel visits Charles at his house and the judge’s first reaction is to stretch the truth based on the footage that his home’s security cameras were capturing. Even after Samuel leaves, the judge proves his dangerous intentions for Faye. He cannot handle his own thirst for revenge, so he requests horrible and harassing punishments for Faye. This is all before the court hearing. We are left to imagine all of the terrible things Charles wants to do to Faye in a courtroom.

It seems as though Charles is still angry at Faye because he still wonders what life would have been like with Alice, and, of course, he thinks Faye is the reason that did not happen. Charles did not view his encounters with Alice the same way she did. He thought they could run off together, marry, have children, and settle down. He never once stopped to think that he was having sex with a young college student in the back of his car. He lived in his suburban fantasy. When he revealed his heart to Alice and she rejected him, his heart was broken. He was forced to settle back into the idea of staying married to his wife forever. This feeling of being forced into a marriage, this life-long misery and discomfort, is a large reason why Charles Brown is still not over his love for Alice or his loathing of Faye. Charles knows that his wife does not want to be married to him. He knows he does not want to be married to her.

Here, Hill wants to build some semblance of pity for Charles Brown. His marriage is described as being loveless and disconnected. It is so disconnected that Charles dreads retirement because he does not know what his wife and him would be able to do together. This is a sad lifetime of distance built up, and Charles has lived a long life filled with wonderment related to what would have happened if Alice did not reject him in 1968. The narrator alludes to Charles’ paralysis as having something to do with Faye and Alice, but we are not sure what happened. One thing that is for sure, however, is that Hill does a superb job trying to build a case for why readers should take pity on Judge Brown. This sad figure is then ripped out of our imaginations when he threatens both Samuel and Faye. No matter how sad he gets, Charles seems to always be able to conjure up a fight against Faye. This makes it difficult to decide how we feel about him. He is the tortured man with a sad past, but he is a villain.

Readers get a nice balanced depiction of the mother-son relationship between Faye and Samuel when he takes her for a walk after his visit with the judge. This same event, going for a neighborhood walk, was also portrayed earlier in the book during the summer before Faye left Samuel and Henry. This simple act of walking together seems



to be the way for the two of them to relate and converse in a comfortable fashion. While preparing for the walk, Samuel is shocked to be thrown back into a mother-son feeling. This is the first time Samuel has touched his mother since the morning she left. In his first encounter with Faye, she didn't hug him or even shake his hand. Now Samuel has made physical contact and his deep bond to her comes crushing back into him. He is consumed with years of loneliness and longing for a mother's reassuring hug.

This walk is quite different from the last one described in the summer of 1988. This walk is filled with easy communication and brutal, adult honesty. Faye reveals a lot about her life since leaving Samuel, and we are left with a semblance of hope that these two will repair their relationship. The detail of Faye working as a poetry reader is quite sweet. We get glimpses of her love for poetry throughout her high school and college years, so it is nice to learn she is spending time with something that she loves. She has definitely not been living the life anyone in her hometown expected, but she seems content in most of her choices. She knows that throwing the rocks was a huge mistake. She knows it but she cannot go back and fix anything. Now her home is gone, her safety is gone, and her freedom might very well be gone also.

Simon Rogers shows up in Faye's house after (or perhaps during) the raid and comically announces that what happened to her home is perfectly legal in post 9/11 America. He is the law and the law is him. His love for legal logic comes in handy when Simon declares that Faye wouldn't be on the no fly list yet. This is an indication that Simon agrees Faye should flee, although he cannot legally come out and say that. We are led to think that this is the best for everyone. Faye will not be charged with anything. Samuel can run away from his problems at work. Simon can quit a case that he does not seem enthusiastic for.

In the dramatic airport scene, Samuel learns that it is he who was put on the no fly list. This is quite a humorous moment, mainly because this revelation breaks the tension of the scene, but also because it is another example of just how touchy the laws are in America post-9/11. Something as simple and innocent as this taking a photo quickly misconstrued and places him as a possible terrorist. What carries the humor of this scene even further is when the airport security guard informs Samuel that he can take steps to remove himself from the list by calling a 1-800 number. Not only can he call a number to relieve him of this label, he will also have to wait approximately six weeks.

This section is punctuated by a lengthy and rambling chapter about Pwnage. In typical Pwnage fashion, he is at home making several promises to himself that he does not fully intend to keep. However, this time, he seems much more determined to rid himself of the anchor that is World of Elfscape. Hill provides a gloriously written account of Pwnage's internal dialogue. His deep-rooted fears of abandoning the game, his regrets for starting it in the first place, and his fears for his physical and mental functionality from playing the game so much. Pwnage feels elated to read all of the disappointment people feel for his absence. These are reactions he would never get in real life. He goes around giving away all of his loot and rewards, which is another opportunity for people to talk to him and tell him what a great player he is. Pwnage internalizes this as being a good person. But the excitement wears off as soon as Pwnage realizes that these



players wanted the gifts he was giving out. They did not care about him as a person, they cared about the weapons his elf was giving away. We start to see Pwnage transforming into the person he always promises himself he will be. He is starting to separate the game from reality, Elfscape feelings of pride from real life feelings of acceptance.

He is so close to removing himself from the game. Pwnage has made peace with saying goodbye, and he is hopeful to regain his personal health after leaving World of Elfscap behind. But then a feeling of dread comes over him. “. . . he could no longer think of a single excuse to stay in the game, and even though there was literally nothing his avatar could do now in its state of total poverty and nakedness, still he could not log off, still he stared out at the digital ocean, still the thought of abandoning the game and returning to the real world filled him with dread, a dread more powerful than anything most normally functioning human adults ever experience . . .” (489). In a highly dramatic parallel scene, Pwnage suffers from an embolism (or a blocked artery to the heart) while being murdered on the screen. It is as if he is actually in the game. He is watching himself be stabbed by an orc while he himself feels immense physical pain. He cannot move the controller; he cannot defend himself against the orc. In his final moments of staring at the game, Pwnage vows to re-enter Elfscap later with the sole purpose of finding this one orc and killing it. All his hard work to remove himself from the game and he finds yet another excuse to return to it. It seems as though his efforts have failed.

Discussion Question 1

Is Pwnage truly ready to rid himself of World of Elfscap or are his actions in this section an elaborate reason to put off more of his life goals?

Discussion Question 2

Samuel's visit to Judge Brown's house perfect contrasts these two characters' cores belief systems. How do Samuel and Judge Brown's outlook on life differ? How about their opinion of humanity?

Discussion Question 3

What is the reason for Nathan Hill's deep description of Judge Charles Brown's regret-filled life?

Vocabulary

facsimile, megalomaniacs, pundits, gaffes, forestalled, retribution, disquisitions, jurisprudence, piety, ossify, befuddled, ostensibly, zealotry, enclave, gentrified, asceticism, mitigating, fugue, ubiquitous



Part Nine: Revolution

Summary

It is 1968 and Faye is in prison. She cannot stop her panic attacks from coming one after the other in waves. Charlie Brown tells her that she must either leave Chicago forever or stay and go to trial for prostitution and narcotics. Meanwhile, she watches the shadows of the demonstration happening outside and assumes it is happy students who got their way. In reality, it is the National Guard preparing for battle against the protesters. Ginsberg is with the protesters in Grant Park, hoping that the night does not turn violent. However, the protesters around him seem rather aggressive and ready for a fight. On the other side of town, Alice is leading a group of female protesters down the street. The news crew follows this with a helicopter and this is the story being told on the news program being watched by Faye's family back in Iowa. The family is nervous for Chicago but mostly nervous to see Faye participating in the protest. Ginsberg continues to quietly meditate in the middle of angry, screaming protesters preparing for battle. One by one, the screaming subsides as the act of meditation spreads through the crowd.

Politicians have gathered in Chicago. They are all safely holed up in the Conrad Hilton Hotel having drinks and enjoying each other's company. Two off-duty secret service agents comment that the name of the restaurant, Haymarket, is also the location of a laborers riot called the Haymarket Affair, where a bomb detonated and killed many people. The two of them laugh at this coincidence.

While Faye's family continues to watch the women march down the street, they continue to comment on the ugly looks of the women. The girls, as they are referred to, attack a police car and flip it over. At the police station, Faye is still locked up and beginning to tire from all the anxiety. She sees a ghost. It looks like the nisse her father showed to her years ago. Faye thinks she is dreaming, so the ghost opens her ears to all the pleas for help it is getting at that moment. The ghost explains that it is the nisse and the nix and the ghost in the leaf. Faye does not understand, and the ghost responds by saying, "Your map is just way off" (533).

Outside, the women continue to march, only now they are marching right toward a giant police trap. Faye's family watches with pure excitement. They are excited to see the girls get arrested in a brutal fashion and disappointed that Alice ran away from the confrontation. The TV host, Walter Cronkite, says, "The Chicago police are a bunch of thugs" (538). Charlie Brown is down there with the police and he is enjoying hitting all of the hippies he hates so much.

Back in the jail cell, the ghost offers to help Faye get out of jail if she offers him a good deal, so she begins to negotiate. The house spirit admits that he will need vengeance and retribution from her in order to help. The ghost tells her that her father is a terrible and evil man. Frank did something so terrible that his entire family is being punished



and will continue to be punished for generations. The ghost tells her that it is normal and that many people on earth today are paying for crimes committed by ancestors who lived generations ago. Faye refuses to believe that her father is so terrible, or that she is like him in any way. They come to an agreement: the ghost will release Faye if she goes to Norway and learns about what her father did.

Just then, Sebastian appears with the keys to her cell and he releases Faye. Faye tells him that she does not want to go. She is trying to remember the ghost, but Sebastian tells her that she was sleeping when he found her in the cell. Faye learns that Sebastian is not everything he says he is, and she feels a deeper connection with him for having such a complicated life.

Charlie continues to enjoy beating the protesters. He imagines that Alice is watching him embrace this violent side of him he never knew he had, and he thinks this sight will impress her enough to come back to him. Charlie begins beating people so brutally that even the other cops distance themselves from him. The others see news cameras rolling and they do not want to be lumped into a category with someone like Charlie.

Cronkite is changing the tone of his interview with the Chicago mayor. Earlier in the evening, he referred to the police as thugs. The mayor's office and several viewers (including one of Faye's uncles) were so upset by this comment that the network quickly got involved. Instead of asking the questions he wants to ask, Cronkite is told to frame the story of the Chicago police protecting the public. The city calms down a bit. Ginsberg walks among the peacefully resting protesters in Grant Park. He snaps a photo of Sebastian, Faye, and Alice sitting together — the same photo used as damning evidence in The Packer Attacker case. This calm in the park is interrupted by police shooting tear gas into the crowd. The crowd now scrambles to get away, running directly toward the police and the Conrad Hilton Hotel where the politicians are sleeping. Alice knows this is not the direction to run. She tries to tell Sebastian and Faye, but they do not hear her. Alice runs in the opposite direction alone.

The protesters are crunched around the hotel. There is violence and beatings and arrests happening everywhere. Charlie spots Faye in the crowd. He brutally fights his way through the crowd to get to her. Faye begins to have a panic attack about this. Just then, more tear gas canisters are fired and chaos ensues. All of the panicking causes immense pressure on the windows of the hotel and the crowd, along with Charlie and Faye, burst the window open and fall inside. Charlie manages to fall halfway between the street and the hotel. He lands hard on his back and cannot feel anything. Sebastian leads Faye through the kitchen and out the back door of the hotel. It takes a while for the chaos to settle down. No one helps Charlie because they are busy fighting. Finally, two secret service men approach him and call for an ambulance.

Sebastian and Faye end up in a church where the priests are helping the ailing protesters. Sebastian tells her that he is not a cop but that he works alongside the police. He is in charge of inciting protests and getting people to act in ways that will give the cops a reason to crack down on the hippies in Chicago. He wants the police to beat people from the anti-war movement because he thinks this violence gives the



movement more support. Sebastian went to boot camp in Georgia over the summer. He was offered this position as an inciter in place of going to Vietnam. He took the deal. He also admits that his name is not Sebastian. Faye takes the boy known as Sebastian behind the altar of the church and has sex with him to prove that college has changed her. She knows this act will help her feel good about herself when she returns to Iowa tomorrow. The narrator breaks from the action to comment that Faye has been her own problem all along—that she, “is the one who flees” (597).

Analysis

Hill takes us through many view points throughout this 35 chapter section. This gives us a sense that we, the readers, are also somehow stuck in the chaos of this protest. Everyone is everywhere and nowhere. Everyone is fighting in different ways and suffering both together and apart. Hill accomplishes this feeling by creating several short chapters focusing on one character at a time with very few interactions. Instead, each person is engulfed in the action having different experiences.

For Faye's family back in Iowa they are nervous that they will see Faye taking part in the protest. However, they find that they thoroughly enjoy watching this bloodshed and police brutality. They are entertained by the violence as if it were a fictional movie. Never do they seem bothered by the fact that this is real life. That the hippies being beaten on the screen are someone's son or daughter. They watch and enjoy the film running in front of them. They are suspended in this action, noting that, “. . . the uncles feel really present and edgy and almost like they're with the cops or something, and they think that at this moment . . . might be the best thing that has ever happened to them” (535). This is entertainment. It is the type of entertainment that more people will demand from news sources as time goes on. We see this connection to how the news is packaged in Walter Cronkite's several cameos throughout the chapter. Although he is a reporter, he is not actually reporting. Several times, the narrator points out that Cronkite is not actually reporting or asking questions. Most of his time on air with the Chicago mayor is the mayor boasting about himself to keep his popularity points up. He is called into an office for punishment after he calls the Chicago police thugs. This was crossing a line, according to the network. After this, we encounter Cronkite asking polite and leading questions to the mayor. These questions are not what he wants to ask. They are questions designed to tell a story before the reporting even begins: the police are the good guys and the hippies are the bad guys. This must work because Cronkite is shocked to learn of the high volume of callers who phoned in supporting the police and hating the hippy protestors. For Cronkite, this is the beginning of journalism he does not support. For Faye's uncles, “. . . they are just about as grateful to chopper cam as they are to their mother on their birthdays” (534). The chopper cam does not fly over a park filled with meditating hippies. The camera zeroes in on potential violence and drama.

Although one would assume that the intention of the news is to tell the true stories, Faye's uncles do not seem to grasp that this is really happening. They treat the coverage as if it is a movie or a beauty contest. They continue to make sexist remarks related to



the group of female protesters. They are shocked to see a male cop run away from a group of women, and they harshly comment that “. . .if anyone would be carrying oven-cleaner explosives it would be one of these girls because, they figure, girls have routine access to such things” (528). They make nasty comments about the ugliness of the “girls” rioting. These comments come from the place in Iowa Faye so desperately wanted away from. They are coming from people who believe everything that is written on those home economics posters which brought so much terror to Faye and her outlook on the institution of marriage. These are the people she will return to tomorrow.

Faye hallucinates a strange visit from the nisse. After all these years of feeling cursed, she is finally confronted by an image of the ghost she feels haunts her. However, we officially come to an understanding that the nisse (or the nix) is purely a figment of Faye's imagination. It is a leftover piece of anxiety accidentally planted by Frank years ago. It is obvious that the nisse is a demonic presence. It says only cruel and nasty things, but it says the very things that Faye has been scared of since she was a child. In a sense, this is the depths of Faye's fears confronting her. This is a personification of all of Faye's self-doubt and fears. She has haunted herself but given it the label of a nisse.

Sebastian is the second person who is not as wholeheartedly attached to the movement as they say they are. Sebastian is working with a movement that hates big government, opposes the war, and fights against much of the U.S. foreign policy; yet he works with the police. The other character who goes against the things she stands for in public is Alice, who is having a sexual affair with a cop. This leads us to believe that many of the people in the movement are not as committed as they say they are. Although, that does not necessarily mean something bad. This makes the characters multidimensional and complicated in a way that makes them feel wholly human. Life is complicated and human actions can be even more so.

For Faye, all of that confusion comes together while she is having sex with Sebastian. Here is a man who Faye should be angry at. He is a liar and a fake and a man who is largely responsible for the pain and suffering of many people that night, yet she cannot help herself in wanting him. Sebastian makes Faye feel safe to relax. This is a man who Faye is entirely herself around and she does not feel ashamed about anything. The attraction she feels for Sebastian does not even compare to her relationship with Henry. Their sex is described as being entirely selfish for Faye's benefit. This feels like her right of passage, her entrance into womanhood. She is out to prove to herself that her brief time in college has changed her. She wants to be brave and independent and exciting and calm and happy, and she sloughs off the meek and anxious little girl she was in Iowa. She thinks she is accomplishing these things by having passionate sex with Sebastian. But it does not feel like love when we read it. There is definitely pleasure and passion, but there is no love. Faye internally rejoices that she is having sex in a church. She relishes the fact that Jesus is hanging above them in judgment. Somehow, this increases her level of transformation. “This is her great demonstration, to herself and to the world—she is changed, she is a woman, she is doing womanly things and she is doing them fearlessly” (596). Faye has just survived a conflict and now she wants to resolve the largest internal conflict she feels. This sex scene is entirely about the control Faye has over her mind, body, and spirit. She knows she will be returning to Iowa and



marrying Henry. She wants to return knowing that she could have been different. She wants to know there is a seductress inside of her, a woman who escapes from prison, runs through teargas, and makes love in a church.

She celebrates this change and welcomes the new Faye - only she has not really changed. Faye plans on leaving for Chicago in the morning. She just ran away from Iowa. Now she will be running back. Each time something is difficult, Faye runs. This is noted by the narrator who has a moment of insight about Faye, the woman who runs away from everything. This is very true. She has been fleeing and trying to transform herself all her life. Each time she arrives somewhere new, she haunts herself with the person she used to be. This is written beautifully in the novel. "She will long for this other Faye. As the years mount and her days become cluttered with chores domestic and infantile, she will think about this night so often that it will begin to feel more real to her than her real life. She'll begin to think her existence as a wife and mother is the illusion, the façade she's projecting to the world . . . and this belief will hook so deeply inside her, will pierce her so completely that eventually it will take over. It will become too powerful to ignore. And by then it will not seem like she's abandoning her husband and child; it will seem like she's retrieving the real life she abandoned in Chicago many years ago" (596-97). Notice that her commitment to remembering this night, remembering this version of Faye, mentions nothing about Sebastian himself. Everything is about the night and who she was — and who she could always be if she wanted to.

Charlie Brown is being a person he has always wanted to be but never knew it. The protest brings out Charlie's violent side, his pleasure in clubbing peaceful protesters. He enjoys hearing the dull thud of his baton as it makes contact with the many hippies he dislikes so much. He feels good inside, and he wants to share this new self-understanding with Alice. Charlie's injury comes as a direct result of his thirst for revenge and doling out punishments. He gladly struggles through the crowd just to reach Faye so that he can beat her. Faye knows this moment is coming. When Charlie falls halfway through the window, ". . . he's not sure exactly what has happened to him but feels that whatever it is—that is happened, that he deserved it" (589). He almost seems to take ownership for a brief moment, but we know that this feeling does not stay with him because he blames Faye for his accident. Charlie is so blinded with misplaced rage that he uses Faye as a scapegoat for everything bad in his life. He blames Faye for ending his love affair with Alice, even though Alice was never going to feel anything close to love for him. He blames Faye for his accident, although it was Charlie who chose to come chasing after her in the protest. He even uses Faye as a scapegoat for his life of punishment and time spent in an unhappy marriage. Faye is so disconnected from these events that she cannot recall who Judge Brown is or why he hates her so much. But Charles knows why. He knows that he sees Faye as his own personal life-ruiner.



Discussion Question 1

What hints does Nathan Hill provide us to foreshadow the fact that Sebastian was not who he claimed to be?

Discussion Question 2

The narrator comments that there are multiple versions of oneself covering the other selves up. Discuss the many characters in this novel that this quote applies to. How has their desire to cover themselves up affected how their lives turned out?

Discussion Question 3

Part Nine continues to revert back to Hubert Humphrey's protest night. Why was this information included. What does he represent in this section?

Vocabulary

occluded, bourgeoisie, gullet, cavalcade, exhorting, barbiturative, olfactible, discordant, obliquely, penance, dispirited, retort, reprisal, demure, in the fray, penitent, jingoistic, impunity, extolling, incandescent, insensate, supplication



Part Ten: Deleveraging

Summary

Faye decides to fly to her father's hometown of Hammerfest, Norway. Faye is disappointed to learn that Hammerfest is a dead, desolate town with several oil rigs dotting the scenery everywhere she looks. She walks around town trying to find the house her father described to her. No one seems to know what she means by the name Andreson. Faye despises her life and thinks she is stupid for coming here. She thinks about how relieved she felt when Samuel could not come with her. She did not want to deal with all of his questions. Faye comes across a white horse standing on a ridge. She believes it is a nix. She decides that, if it is a nix, it would not be a terrible way to die. Faye places her hand on the horse, and a woman calls to her from the distance. The woman is coming out of a home that matches the description Frank gave so long ago. Faye asks the woman about her father Frank, otherwise known as "Fridtjof". The woman, Lillian, immediately brings Faye into the house. Lillian retrieves her mother who is Faye's sister, Freya. Freya shows the family bible, the same one Frank had, but "Fridtjof's" name has been blacked out because he was a coward who abandoned his family. Freya asks Faye several questions about Frank and invites Faye to eat dinner with them so she can tell her the story of her coward father, Fridtjof.

Fridtjof was a young fisherman with keen eyes on the water. He had a girlfriend named Marthe, who he made love to in the grass at night. World War II was starting and there were many reports of surprise attacks in Norwegian villages. The men on the fishing boat decided to try and sail away from Hammerfest and make it to safety in Iceland. The night before they are preparing to leave, Fridtjof visited Marthe. They made love and Marthe told him that she was pregnant. She insisted that they get married and Fridtjof agreed. He told her that he would be going away on a weeklong fishing trip, but he never returned. Their daughter, Freya, was born in Hammerfest while it was occupied by the Germans. It was a terrible beginning to Freya's life. The two women watch the sun set together, and Freya tells Faye, "These old stories aren't important anymore, Faye. Go back to your son" (615).

Samuel is at the hospital to visit Pwnage. Axman is there as well. The doctor is teaching young interns about all of the health conditions that have been ailing Pwnage. Axman discovered Pwnage's dead elf avatar in the game. The status said "away from keyboard," which Axman found so unusual that he called the police for medical help. They are standing in the room, but Axman feels the need to tell Samuel about a mass murder that happened on Elfscape. Axman planned a vigil for Pwnage's fallen elf avatar. Some orcs found out about it and attacked. Axman cannot control his anger and tells every detail of the story to Samuel while the doctor is giving his diagnosis.

Faye sends Samuel an email stating that she is coming home. She asks Samuel to contact Guy Periwinkle and to ask him to tell Samuel everything. We learn that Guy Periwinkle is Sebastian and that Faye is the reason Guy published Samuel's short story.



Samuel is crushed to discover that all of his success as a writer is because his mother's ex is a publisher who owed her a favor. Guy admits that he used his meeting with Samuel about suing him for the book advance money to incite a violent reaction in Faye. Even Samuel's book deal about the Packer Attacker was orchestrated by a deal struck between Guy and Faye. None of Samuel's professional writing experiences are of his own accord. Guy presents a finished copy of the book about his mother. It was finished by ghostwriters. Samuel wants nothing to do with it, but Guy reminds him that Samuel will be sued if he does not include his name as the author of the memoir.

Samuel is deeply distraught. He goes for a walk and ends up in front of Bethany's building, moaning about his bad choice of saying no to sex with his dream woman because Bishop asked him not to. Bethany is divorced now. Samuel asks to stay at Bethany's home and she welcomes him. He ends up signing his name onto the ghostwritten Packer Attacker book. All charges against Faye are dropped because Governor Packer offers Judge Brown a job in exchange for leaving Faye alone.

Samuel sits in Bethany's apartment and reflects on all of the anger he used to feel towards everyone. Somewhere Laura Pottsdam is happy in her victory, and Pwnage's ex-wife Lisa waits for him to wake up in the hospital so she can announce that he has a book deal with Periwinkle. This book deal was part of Samuel's deal to put his name on his mother's memoir. Bethany and Samuel are close friends but not lovers. Faye returns to Iowa to care for Frank. At some point, Faye tells Frank that she is his daughter, Freya. Frank apologizes to her, but "Freya" comforts him. This helps Frank to feel a bit happier even though his memory is gone. Faye begins to open up to people too, answering many of Samuel's lasting questions and hopes she will one day have a close and honest relationship with him.

Analysis

The final chapter leaves readers with a pretty solid conclusion about most characters. Actually, the whereabouts of all but one of the living characters are mentioned. Sadly, Henry is left out of Part Ten entirely. This is not overly surprising. Of all the characters, he seems to be the one with the least amount of changing needed. Henry is steadfast and focused on his work, so it is safe to assume that his life continues just the way we left him when Samuel left him alone at lunch when he received a text from Pwnage.

The idea of reconnection as a happiness multiplier is a strong message in this final part of the novel. Faye finds happiness reconnecting with Frank in Iowa, Samuel finds happiness reconnecting with both Faye and Bethany, and Frank finds happiness thinking that he reconnects with Freya. The characters spent most of the story spinning around each other, but now they seem to have latched on and now travel alongside one another. Readers get a strong message that there is strength, support, and happiness in numbers. Pwnage is a further example of this. His action to help Samuel find Alice is what led to him requesting a favor, which is then what led to him being a published author. While his pathway to reconnecting with his ex-wife is untraditional, to say the least, we can appreciate that he is happy in his hospital bed because he is with his wife,



he is healthier, and he has a book deal. All of this because of making a real-life connection.

Many of the characters learn to let go of their own ghosts at the end of this story. Samuel is no longer writing to make people love him. Instead, he is writing for the love of the art. Likewise, Faye has let go of her ghost by visiting Frank's hometown and learning more about her father's past. We leave Faye in a much happier and healthier place. She has learned to love herself and to accept who she is. She has opened her heart to the world and, most of all, to Frank. Earlier, she commented that, ". . . her greatest and constant fear all these years was that is anyone ever came to know all of her—the real her, the true deep essential Faye—they would not find enough stuff there to love. Hers was not a soul large enough to nourish another" (652). She does not seem to have that fear anymore. Whatever ghost was following her around is now gone. However, Faye came to the realization that she was the one haunting herself and others when she thought, ". . . maybe she's not haunted but rather she is the one doing the haunting. Maybe the curse is her. Because every time she's gotten close to someone she has paid for it" (603). We leave Faye saying yes. She says yes to people and relationships and closeness. It took her going to ". . . the remotest part of the world, alone. [With] nobody to get tangled up with [and] no more lives to destroy" (603) just to realize that there is nothing destroying them but her own anxiety.

There is also a strong sense that the truth will set you free. For the first time in Frank's life, feels relieved of some of the guilt that was weighing him down. It does not matter that his relief comes from a lie on behalf of Faye because Frank feels it. He believes he has spoken with his long-abandoned daughter and they Freya has cleared him of any guilt that has haunted him. Samuel also finds happiness in the direct honesty with Faye. However, Samuel is most notably satisfied living with Bethany and engaging in a non-sexual relationship with her. He relishes the idea of being open and honest and clear friends. He enjoys learning more about her as a human instead of who he assumed she was as an unobtainable goddess. We see a similar theme in Bishop's death that his truthful letter to Samuel helped set him free before he was killed.

The one beacon of hope for Samuel throughout his entire professional life has been that he is a published writer. This has always been his pathway to vindication and his entrance into Bethany's heart. We would imagine that learning all of this is a lie and that Faye's connection to Guy is why he was every published in the first place, would crush a sensitive man like Samuel. However, he seems to get over his grief quite quickly. In fact, he does not even leave the profession of novelist. He seems changed for the better despite this horribly deflating reveal. We can see this sense of focus in Faye as well. A book was published about her that detailed all of the worst parts of her life. However, she is seemingly unaffected by this. The three Anderson generations — Frank, Faye, and Samuel — have acquired the ability to let things roll off of their backs and put bad news behind them. This is a new resiliency we have not seen from them before.

The book ends on a cynical and sour note for the future of America. Guy reminds us that, "Melancholy . . . had to be invented. Civilization has this unintended side effect, which is melancholy. Tedium. Routine. Gloom" (627). There is a strange disconnect



between depression and hopefulness. We are left feeling happy when we learn about the major characters ending their lives in a more centered and fulfilled way, but the world around them is painted dimly as if it will implode at any second. Once we complete the final sentence, we are left conflicted inside with a myriad of emotions.

Discussion Question 1

Compare the descriptions of the Occupy Wall Street protest with that of the Democratic National Convention protest Faye attended in 1968.

Discussion Question 2

Faye says, "Because her greatest and constant fear all these years was that if anyone ever came to know all of her—the real her, the true deep essential Faye—they would not find enough stuff there to love. Hers was not a soul large enough to nourish another" (652). How do her actions in this book prove that she feels this way about herself?

Discussion Question 3

How does Samuel change from the beginning of the story to the end?

Vocabulary

resplendent, accretion, bemused, aural, consensus, precedence, metaphysical, usurpers, tedium, pinnacle, microfiche, emissary, avarice, austerity, libel, scurrilous, gumption, pluck



Characters

Samuel Andreson-Anderson

Samuel is the son of Faye Andreson and Henry Anderson. Samuel is raised in a boring suburb just outside of Chicago named Streamwood. He is a highly emotional boy who frequently cries. This temperament leads him to believe that his mother does not like him very much, so he spends much of his childhood trying to please her.

At age 11, Samuel's mother abandons him and his father. He is raised by Henry and the two of them bond over the Cubs. Samuel attends college in Illinois and becomes a novelist, just like he told his mother he would be. He has published one short story and has a book deal. However, he never writes the book and is threatened to be sued for breaking his contract with the publishing company. Samuel accepts another book deal to replace his failed one, but he must draft a book that trashes his mother. Samuel accepts the writing job and spends the rest of the novel trying to find out information about Faye's past.

Samuel is also in love with Bethany Fall, a girl he met when he was 11. He often comments that he lives his life hoping for love from Bethany and Faye. He is not married, and he is a mediocre English professor at a mediocre college in Illinois. He is obsessed with playing the video game World of Elfscape, a fact about himself that he tries to hide from the world.

Faye Andreson-Anderson

Faye grows up in a small town in Iowa, where she is one of the smartest people in her class. She applies to college without anyone knowing and is accepted with a scholarship to the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. She begins to develop panic attacks, which are difficult for her to control. She spends only one month there before she returns to her hometown in Iowa and marries her boyfriend, Henry. She moves to Streamwood, Illinois with Henry and has a son named Samuel. When Samuel is 11 years-old, Faye leaves the family and never returns again. She moves to Chicago where she is a self-employed poetry reader.

In 2011, Faye throws rocks at a political figure named Gary Packer while he is giving a speech. She is arrested and charged with terrorism. Samuel finds her again in 2011, and the two of them attempt to start a relationship again. Faye feels that her life has been full of struggles because she has been cursed since childhood.

Bethany Fall

Bethany is the love of Samuel's life. She has a twin brother named Bishop. She attends nothing but the best schools, going from Sacred Heart Academy and moving up to



Julliard for college. As a child, she is described as being beautiful and soft and gentle. She plays the violin and has a deep love for music, which is what leads her to becoming a concert violinist in New York City. She is engaged to Peter Atchison, a Wall Street whiz who works with her father. While well-employed, Bethany is extremely depressed in her personal life.

Charles (Charlie) Brown

Charlie worked as a police officer in Chicago during the late 1960's. He works the night shift because he does not like his wife very much and wants to be away from her. He engages in a sexual relationship with Alice and falls in love with her just when she breaks up with him.

Charlie goes to law school and is promoted to being a judge. It is Judge Charles Brown who is assigned to preside over Faye's case. However, Judge Brown has a deeply rooted hatred for Faye and intends to punish her in a way that no one has been punished ever before.

Guy Periwinkle

Guy is originally Samuel's publisher, but he chases after any celebrity or trend that will make him a fortune. He is described as being thin, fit, and impeccably dressed. He goes from offering Samuel a book deal, to representing pop star Molly Miller, to heading Governor Packer's Presidential campaign.

Frank Andreson

Frank is a thin, quiet man who grew up in Norway. He was a fisherman in a small village until he sailed off one day at age 18. He misses his home very much, and is often distant from others. He frequently tells haunting stories of ghosts and folklore to his daughter, Faye. He moves his family to a small town in Iowa, where he raises Faye. He is close with Faye, but spends a lot of time frightening her. His stories and warnings are the reason why Faye has nervous panic attacks. He also harshly criticizes her and kicks her out of his home when he thinks she is pregnant out of wedlock while in high school. He works at the ChemStar factory his entire life until retirement. He moves into a nursing home in Iowa because he needs special care. He has very few friends, and he seems to prefer things this way.

Alice

Alice was Faye's only friend in college. Alice is a hardcore beatnik who does drugs, refuses to carry money, and never carries a purse or bag. She wears ripped jeans and an army jacket every day. Alice always has friends over in her dorm room. They discuss



politics and the immorality of the current war. She studies on Mondays and takes her school work very seriously.

Later in life, Alice moves to a remote home on Lake Michigan with her partner. She settles down and buys a house and takes her two rescue dogs on walks. Alice is consumed with worry over the plants around her home. An invasive, non-native mustard plant has invaded the area, and she dedicates all of her free time to carefully and painstakingly pulling every plant out she finds.

Henry Anderson

Henry is Samuel's father and Faye's ex-husband. He grew up working on a farm in Iowa as a child. He starts dating Faye and quickly falls in love with her. When Faye goes off to college, Henry joins the army. He moves his family to Streamwood, Illinois, a Chicago suburb. He works a mid-level job for a frozen food company. After Faye leaves him, Henry bonds with Samuel over sports. They become big Cubs fans and frequently go to games together. He lost his retirement when the recession hits because all of his retirement was tied up in company stock. Because of this, he must work much longer than anticipated.

Bishop Fall

Bishop is Samuel's best friend in childhood. He has a twin sister named Bethany. They live in a large home in a gated community close to Samuel's house. Bishop was expelled from his private catholic school, Sacred Heart Academy, and is credited as being a bully to other bullies. He loves to play any game related to war, and he meets Samuel in the woods between their houses while playing war. Bishop dreams of becoming a soldier in the army. He attends a military academy and then enlists in the army as a normal, entry-level private in the army. He is stationed in the middle east and is killed by a bomb while serving in Afghanistan.

The Headmaster

The headmaster is an obese and elderly man who used to be the headmaster at Sacred Heart Academy. He was headmaster for both Bishop and Bethany Fall. Bethany dislikes him because he forces her to show off her perfect pitch. Bishop hates him because he is the man who expels him and makes him deeply disturbed for the remainder of his life.

Simon Rogers

Simon is Faye's lawyer and a profuse sweater. He is very concerned about legalities and is often unemotional when it comes to social situations. Instead, he uses laws and legal boundaries to conduct conversations. He is hired by a mysterious fund that aims to

help liberals stand up to conservatives. Faye does not trust him to do a good job representing her in court because he does not specialize in terror charges.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Nix

The Nix (or the Nisse) is Frank and Faye's personal demons personified. It follows them around and makes them feel as if they are too cursed to enjoy happiness in their lives. Faye talks to the Nisse while she is in prison, and the ghost tells her that she is a horrible person who is cursed. Frank also believes he is cursed by the same thing.

Charles (Charlie) Brown

Judge Brown is the personification of consuming revenge. Charlie is wholly incapable of letting go of his anger toward Faye. He blames her for things which are completely out of her power, and he allows this need for revenge to consume him. Even while preparing for the Packer Attacker case in 2011, Judge Brown still shows the strong desire to exact revenge on Faye. He cannot let go of his anger or his need to hurt others as a form of release.

Sebastian/ Guy Periwinkle

This character is the personification of greed, as he will do anything it takes to get more money. He makes up stories, damages people's lives, and spins fake stories all to make a profit. He has no morals and he makes no apologies for his high level of self-interest.

Pwnage

Pwnage is the personification of inaction. Everything about Pwnage is inaction. He does not take action with his health, his ex-wife, or his wish list. He never advances himself although he knows he is doing damage by remaining stagnant.

Laura Pottsdam

Laura represents in the novel the future of American Politics. Laura lies and cheats her way through school so often that she is no longer capable of doing anything at all. She has no skills and zero knowledge. Readers are presented with a truly annoying and loathsome girl. However, she decides to go into politics. This is Hill's biting way of warning Americans what they have to look forward to electing to run their country later on.



Vice President Hubert Humphrey

Vice President Hubert Humphrey represents the whiny upper-class in the novel. Humphrey sits in his hotel room the entire night. He is so self-absorbed that he does not ask any questions about the protest down below or about the safety of the police. He is concerned about his own personal cleanliness, which is a metaphor for removed upper-class citizens wanting to wash themselves of any hippie or impoverished conflicts. He is in a tower, albeit not an ivory one, and he remarks about how unfair it is that this protest might get in his own way of victory. He is selfish and focused only on himself with no concern for the common folk fighting down below.

The red house

The red house symbolizes how fond memories become grander than reality. Frank remembers the red house as being a grand and majestic property with several juniper trees and a large dock. However, in reality, it is small and faded with only a small garden surrounded by brown grass. Like Frank, so many of us see our past situations as much better than they actually were.

The Poisoned Salt Sticks

The poisoned salt sticks symbolize the poison characters (and people in general, as the author is warning) let into their lives. Like the deer and the headmaster, Bishop slowly dies from poison. Bishop is "infected" at a young age and is never able to rid himself of the poison. Many of us allow ourselves to be poisoned by something, and we carry it around with us wherever we go.

Allen Ginsberg

Allen Ginsberg symbolizes healing in the novel. He is present at the protest, but he stands very much alone in Grant Park. He hopes for peace and nonviolence, and he provides prayers to the injured protesters after the confrontations. Each time he appears to readers, Ginsberg is an all-knowing and calm entity amongst the chaos. He is the peace needed in more of the demonstrators. He is the deep part of each of them that wants nonviolent demonstrations and calm communication. He is the part of everyone deep down inside, the part not everyone allows to act.

Walter Cronkite

The author uses journalist Walter Cronkite to symbolize the death of honest journalism. Cronkite is depicted as a journalist with integrity. He watches his own job unfurl into chaos right before his eyes and he accepts the change because he wants to keep telling himself the lie that he is doing real reporting. Instead, Cronkite is asking leading



questions and is only reporting the side of the story approved by the network. This is the last night of honest journalism.

Simon Rogers

Simon Rogers symbolizes the U.S. government in the novel. Simon only appears three times in this novel, but he unemotionally spouts off laws and statutes and constitutionality. Simon is all business and he does not apologize for any personal inconvenience one might experience as a result. This is also the case with how the U.S. government is portrayed in this novel.



Settings

Streamwood

Streamwood is the small, quiet town where Henry and Faye move after getting married. Their house is on Oakdale Lane and it looks like every other house in the neighborhood. Near the house is a small area of woods. Samuel frequently visits these woods and plays. This is the house that makes Henry happy, Samuel comfortable, and Faye miserable. However, everything changes in this house when Faye abandons the family.

The University of Illinois at Chicago Circle

This is the college Faye Andreson earns a full scholarship to. She describes the campus as being horribly dysfunctional with horrible design patterns that make life more difficult. The buildings are big and ugly and the pathways cause annoyance in many. Most of all, Faye hates her dormitory for the lack of privacy and the noise. While she hated the campus, this is also the location where Faye becomes her own woman and discovers much about the type of woman she wants to be.

Hammerfest, Norway

Hammerfest, Norway is Frank's hometown. It is a cold and desolate place, remarked as the second closest city to the arctic circle. He describes the home he left as being salmon-red with a large field and tall trees surrounding the home. Frank often remembers the beautiful view of the ocean from this home, but he clearly remembers the sight of sailing away from it when he was 18. Faye visits this town to learn more about her father and discovers that she has a half-sister named Freya. It is also Freya who encourages Faye to allow Samuel to learn the truth about her and Guy Periwinkle.

The Streamwood Woods

The Streamwood Woods is a small patch of woods between Samuel's home and the Fall residence. Samuel often goes here to escape his parents' arguing. Bishop often visits the woods to let out aggression and play war. The two friends meet in these woods and frequently return to play war games. This is the location for Bishop and Samuel's sexual encounter, which is the last thing they do together before Bishop leaves Streamwood.

New York City

New York city is home to the Occupy Wall Street movement, Guy Periwinkle's office, and Bethany's apartment. New York City is used as a place that Samuel hates going to.

Each time he is there, there is disappointment and conflict. However, at the end of the novel, a new version of Samuel has moved into Bethany's lavish apartment and is happily setting in to the new city.



Themes and Motifs

Regret

The author uses regret to drive his characters' actions, showing readers how powerful regret can be. Almost every character feels the heavy pressure of regret weighing them down, which leads to each individual going through life without experiencing happiness. This heavy feeling is what causes various characters to alter their life courses as well.

Faye is the best example of a character who feels no happiness, and, as a result, spends her life in a continuous change cycle hoping to find the one thing she cannot. Unfortunately for Faye, she has a hard time finding any complete satisfaction in the places she goes. In her youth, Faye regrets being so easily framed for an unplanned pregnancy in her youth. She then moves on in her misery to regret going to college. Just as she is comfortable in Chicago, she runs back to Iowa and marries Henry. This is perhaps her biggest regret of all. Faye is unable to cope with her decision to marry Henry, live in the suburb of Streamwood, and raise a lovable yet annoyingly emotional son. Faye regrets her life choices so much that she decides to flee her family in search of the one man who she felt a happy release with: Sebastian (otherwise known as Guy Periwinkle). However, the immense pressure of Faye's departure from her son, and the thought of never watching him grow up into manhood, haunts Faye. She spends her time away from Samuel in a deep state of regret, causing her to give up on finding happiness.

Meanwhile, Samuel is growing up and in a similar state of deep regret. Perhaps the biggest regret in his life is his mother's abandonment. Although Faye explained that her leaving was not his fault, Samuel internalized this departure as being his fault. He regrets being such an emotional child and feels that his constant tears are what drove his mother away in the first place. But Samuel's regret does not stop there. His first successful piece, and the only piece of his that ends up being published, is at the expense of the Fall twins. He regrets his decision to capitalize on Bishop's tragic childhood story. He feels remorse for disrespecting his friend, but he also regrets the fact that this approach did not win Bethany's heart. Samuel often comments that he wishes his life was a choose your own adventure book, wherein, if his first strategy did not win him Bethany, he could go back and change course. Samuel appears to be dependent on this negative feeling of regret. He plays World of Elfscape every day yet regrets almost everything about it. He knows very well that his behavior is not "normal." He reflects on his addiction to the game and he regrets playing it, yet he cannot stop himself.

Both of these characters must wait to lift the veil of regret before they are able to feel anything resembling happiness and contentment. One might assume that Faye would regret her decision to throw rocks at Governor Packer. In fact, she mentions that she regrets the incident, however, this small sliver of regret is overshadowed by her relief that her status as the Packer Attacker is what led her to reconcile with her past, her



father, and her son. This regret becomes minimal compared to the positive outcomes throwing the rocks resulted in. Likewise, Samuel never seems to regret accepting a book deal to destroy his mother because, ultimately, it was the book deal that brought them closer together.

Regret seems to be an Anderson family trait. Not only do we see strong veins of regret running through Samuel and Faye, there is also a burdensome life of regret weighing Frank down. He fled his hometown and his country because he feared German occupation. He left behind a happy life, a pregnant girlfriend, and a future daughter. He was never able to get past this memory, and it was his deep regret for this decision that led him to a life of solitude among his family in the U.S. Readers are never able to see Frank lighten any of his deep regret until Faye tells him that she is Freya. Frank has needed acceptance from his abandoned daughter all these years, but he is forced to wait until his dementia allows him to believe it.

While not overtly regretful, Bishop Fall also shows us a glimpse of life-long regret. His final act on Earth was to write amends letters to the people he negatively affected. He feels the need to clear his conscience before he does anything else. Immediately after writing the letter to Samuel, Bishop shows signs of contentment and joy. However, the true tragedy is in the fact that he does not live long enough to enjoy this feeling of letting go of his past regrets.

Between Bethany's regret about never helping Bishop through the abuse, Bishop's regret over murdering his ex-lover, and Pwnage's regret over never keeping promises to himself; it is easy to forget about the one character who seems to have discovered a life free from regrets. We meet Alice in a remote home. She is happy with her life and has no regrets about where she ended up. While Alice is a bit obsessed with the rogue mustard seeds, this seems to be the only thing plaguing her. Somehow, Alice discovered that to be happy she needed to live with a person she loves in a location far away from the media and the news and anti-war protests.

Hill's portrayal of regret is strong throughout the story, leading character's to make self-sabotaging decisions that block their personal satisfaction.

Shame

In this novel, shame is used as a weapon to prevent characters from connecting with the people around them. Each of the main characters in this novel suffers from the feeling of isolation, however, they know and understand that this isolation is established by themselves as a way to feel safer and to protect others from being sucked into their own darkness within.

Hill depicts Pwnage as a darkly comical character who is billowing with shame. Pwnage's wife leaves him before the novel begins. This abandonment leads him to needing a release, a support system that his wife took away from him. Pwnage feels ashamed that his wife left him, and he blames his health, weight, lack of success, and



struggling finances on the break. He sits at home every day feeling too ashamed to leave the house, so he plays World of Elfscape. He escapes into a game where does not feel ashamed because he is a successful player with many “friends.” Pwnage needs time to feel that he has nothing to feel ashamed about. The only problem is, when he is not online or when the game is under maintenance, Pwnage cannot live with himself. All of his shame comes rushing back to him and he is unable to confront himself.

Frank also uses World of Elfscape as a way to escape his own feelings of shame. Samuel cannot fathom why a talented artist such as himself is working at a mediocre college teaching lazy students. He does not want to admit this fact about himself to anyone. He is ashamed that he has not accomplished his goal yet, which is to become famous enough to stir envy and regret in both Bethany and Faye. In Samuel’s mind, his lack of being a famous novelist is his shameful burden. This need to impress the women in his life is his attempt to verify that he has nothing to be ashamed of. This is how Samuel will measure how worthy he is to be loved. He feels embarrassed that he chased his mother away and he believes Bethany will only want him if he is successful. Everything hinges on his need to be a famous, published novelist, but he cannot encourage himself to forget his own shame long enough to allow himself to succeed in writing something.

Bishop is a character riddled with crippling shame that follows him around his entire life. Bishop is ashamed that he enjoys having sexual encounters with the headmaster. He is even more ashamed to learn that he is gay. He takes his heavy feeling of shame with him all the way to Iraq where, again, he feels ashamed at his lack of communication with the people he has affected in the past. All of this builds up inside him until he thinks the cure will be writing apology letters. Bishop cannot handle feeling so ashamed for his actions when he was young.

Frank feels ashamed for leaving Marthe and Freya and his country. He cannot handle the idea that he lied to his girlfriend and then abandoned her to raise their child without him. Even more shameful, Frank finds the American dream when he arrives. He has a decent paying job, a family, and a well-educated daughter. He is never able to overcome this heavy feeling of shame, so he never shares this information with anyone. Surely Frank knows that the German occupied his town and burned it to the ground. He feels immense shame for running away from it all. For Frank, he chooses to live a life alone, wallowing in his shame, instead of telling anyone about it or reaching out to Marthe to check on her.

Faye continues to make life decisions that make her feel ashamed of herself. She leaves for college out of shame. Then she feels ashamed for running back to Iowa and marrying Henry. Her shame for leaving Samuel so many years ago is a sharp feeling that never diminishes. She even has a repeated feeling of shame for leaving Samuel when she says goodbye to him at the airport. She feels ashamed that she says goodbye again and even more shame for being happy about the split. Above all, Faye is ashamed to admit that she feels unlovable. She feels as if she is not a person who is worthy of being loved, so, as a result, she avoids being loved. Faye must grapple with this crippling feeling most of all.



Escapism

The idea of escapism is used to show the very flaw in its success. Ultimately, every character that tries to escape his or her reality winds up feeling horribly empty and defeated. This is Hill's comment that escapism is not a healthy or productive choice in life. Much like Alice's mustard plants, the very act of trying to avoid one's problems only means that those will grow back stronger.

Technology is a common form of escapism throughout this novel. Laura Pottsdam even struggles to use her iFeel application as a way to conjure up feelings of strength and support. Pwnage is an intensely depressing lesson to take away from playing too many video games as a form of escaping one's reality. He plays World of Elfscape so often that he actually comes close to death because of it. Pwnage gets to a point where he does not desire to play the game, but he feels he must in order to thrive. He wants to be successful in the game because he is unsuccessful in his real life. He starts the game out of a combination of boredom and desperation. He continues the game out of dependency. In his mind, he can carry these positive feelings out into real life and improve his life whenever he wants to. However, Hill teaches us that the only way for Pwnage to escape the game and confront the real world is by having a near death experience.

Both Samuel and Pwnage use this game to hide from their real problems and to avoid the real world. While the video game scenes are fun to read and filled with comical descriptions, they are also quite tragic at the core. Samuel needs an escape from his own reality and this game provides it. He has no human connections in real life, so he enjoys playing it because it makes him forget that he is so alone. Ironically, it is the game that brings Samuel and Pwnage together in real life. Each person faces the real world for a brief moment in time, which ends up helping each of them immensely. In only two real-life conversations at the bar, Pwnage makes a friend who eventually gets him a book deal. Similarly, it takes only two conversations in the real world to connect with Alice, who helps him solve many of Faye's mysteries. Hill is proving that, although brief, these two characters being out in the world interacting face-to-face with another human brings success and advancement.

Samuel's escapism does not solely lie within World of Elfscape. Towards the end of the novel Samuel wants to escape the reality of his crumbling life in Illinois. The loss of his job, mediocre reputation, and money all result in his strong desire to run away with Faye. For Samuel, he believes running to a location like Jakarta will help him solve all of his problems. Of course, Samuel's plot for escape is foiled and he is forced to reconcile with his problems by facing them.

Frank is the most literal form of escapism demonstrated in this story because he literally flees from his problems. He is young and scared of the impending arrival of war in his hometown. While it is said that Frank was guilted into leaving due to his keen eyes on the water, he still chose to leave. He escaped Norway, but his deep feelings of sorrow, worry, regret, and shame followed him around like a ghost.



His daughter seems to inherit this reaction because Faye spends her entire life running from both people and places. Every time something becomes challenging, Faye runs away from it. She flees from Iowa, Chicago, Streamwood, and even Norway. Each time, Faye believes that she will solve her problems by leaving, but her escapes only make them grow and follow her around. It is not until Faye returns to her father and to her hometown in Iowa when she feels any relief. She no longer tries to escape her reality but faces up to it. This very act of confrontation is what provides Faye with some relief and happiness.

Judge Charles Brown used Alice as a form of escapism when he was a young police officer known as Charlie Brown. He wanted to escape his life in a loveless and predictable marriage. Charlie wanted to fantasize that he could have a passionate life filled with sex and pleasure and wild infatuation. However, Alice crushed this dream by ending things with him. From that moment on, Charlie was not just a cop that hated hippies, he transformed into a man that uses deep hatred to exact revenge on anyone and everyone, especially Faye. Judge Brown escapes into a dark place with long work hours and harsh sentences. When he is not punishing people in his courtroom, he is hiding in his study reading law books and newspapers. Like many of the other characters, Charlie cannot confront the realities of his life.

The Illusion of Truth

This novel shows current events as being so sensationalized it is an illusion of truth fed to unaware masses. Americans are depicted as two types of people: individuals who pay attention to sensationalized news stories and individuals who choose to ignore current events. Either way, the result is the same. People who share information, such as newscasters or book publishers, are shown to be irresponsible and lack any interest in truthfulness. Part One, Chapter 1 tells the comic yet jarring order of events when news programs learn about Faye throwing rocks at Governor Packer. The story is hastily funneled to audiences as reality, showing dramatics that change the narrative to be more interesting. Catchy graphics and titles are of more importance than researching the actual reason why Faye threw the rocks.

This biased news story is shown in New York City when Samuel notices the news cameras that have gathered at the one spot where conflict is likely to occur. The cameras are described as being poised for conflict rather than ready to tell a story. Again, this focus on conflict is shown during the DNC protest in 1968. The helicopter news crew purposefully zeros in on the eye-catching violence in lieu of the complete story. Mass audiences are exposed to a biased news story that causes the event to seem much more violent and dangerous. When the uncles watching this drama are excited by this coverage, it is understood that this begins news bias and slanted narratives in journalism.

One character that helps twist stories is Sebastian. He is in a position of power as the editor of a radical publication. He fabricates and sensationalizes news stories with only a tinge of guilt. The same person, Guy Periwinkle, still shows no shame in the fact that



he fabricates every story he tells. Periwinkle is the type of person who has helped create these fanciful tales which are displayed to mass audiences as truth. The only thing he cares about is that audiences accept his spun stories as true. Here, Hill is noting that the information we think we get today is not true journalism. The information we are fed is carefully scripted and true stories are actually written by ghost writers.

Even the rule-following lawyer, Simon Rogers, has no problem with Samuel fabricating a letter of support for his mother. Simon cares more about the illusion of truth than the actual truth.

Protesting the Government

Each of the three government protests included in this novel show the demonstrators as disorganized and essentially powerless. They are not highlighted as any type of success or progress, but instead the people participating in the protests are either hurt or ineffective.

In both the DNC march, in 1968, and the Anti-Iraq War protest, in 2011, show protesters that are on very different pages. Each small sub-group seems to be at the same protest so they can protest different things. Chants do not match and there is no clear leader. Alice leads a violent protest while Ginsberg creates a peaceful sit-in. This is at the same event, but the protestors lack a sense of togetherness. There is not one leader at the helm, and, as a result, everyone protests in their own way. This renders the actions of the demonstrators ineffective.

Likewise, there is a huge lack of unity at the protest where Bethany and Samuel carry Bishop's symbolic coffin to the Republican National Convention. Samuel notices that everyone is shouting different things. No one seems to be communicating the exact purpose of the protest. Whether there are demonstrators in 1968 or in 2011, they are all depicted as separate people who have different goals in mind.

This disjointedness carries over to the Occupy Wall Street descriptions. As Samuel walks past the protesters at the end of the novel, there is the same feeling of miscommunication. Only, this time, it is too much communication that prevents action and actual, forward-moving protests. They do not seem to be moving forward anytime soon. While protests are shown as noble in this novel, they are largely depicted as a waste of time. There are never any clear leaders and no change ever comes. It is simply people walking on streets or playing drums on corners.

Styles

Point of View

Much of this book is filled with dark humor and cynical commentary about the state of America today. The voice is cynical and sarcastic, making for a humorous book that makes readers feel slightly guilty for laughing. In fact, much of the humor is only funny after the book is put away and readers get a chance to reflect on what was being implied within certain chapters.

This story is mostly told from the perspective of a third person omniscient narrator. Occasionally, readers are thrust into the mind of a character, revealing internal fears and feelings that person has, but this is rather infrequent. The omniscience of the narrator allows readers to deeply understand the motivations each of the characters have for behaving in the mysterious, and often hurtful, ways that they do. We are treated to an in-depth psychological analysis, making the final reflection of this book feel as if readers were whisked away into a case study that was exhilarating to read. Because of the timing of publication, we must categorize this story as the ever-elusive "post-modern" tale. However, because of its focus on human nature and the reactions people have when they have been severely psychologically harmed, one can find parallels between Hill's novel and the traditional naturalist tales where man is in conflict with nature. In this book, Hill puts man in conflict with his own human nature, which proves to be an intangible obstacle in the minds of the characters.

Although this novel is dripping with cheeky cynicism, Hill provides readers with hope. The final part of the novel proves that there is happiness for any person who allows it. This is a stark contrast to the majority of the seemingly hopeless book. The narrator leaves us in a good place, where the characters have stopped fighting their own human nature and have admitted defeat, which leaves them happier overall.

Language and Meaning

Characters are provided unique voices within this novel. For example, Samuel's father, Henry, is labeled as being a simple man with a basic education and a lack of affection for poetry. Because of his personality, Henry's style of speaking is mostly short, choppy, and easily readable to reflect his own simplicity. Frank, on the other hand, is darkly romantic. His lines are almost gothic in their lengthy and depressing metaphors. He is consistently sharing stories of ghosts and hauntings from old worlds. Frank's style of communicating is off-putting to several neighbors, which flings him into even more isolation and gives him time to dwell on dark memories. Faye is a lover of poetry. She worships figurative language, and her lines match this obsession. Faye's lines contain advanced vocabulary and lengthier, more complex sentences to match her love for the written word. This use of language goes beyond the characters' dialogue. The narrator



also matches these personalities while describing the characters, allowing readers to forget the "presence" of the narrator altogether.

There is also a lot of word play with the names of characters in this novel. Ironically, Charlie Brown is a villain in this novel, despite the friendly connection to the beloved children's cartoon. Faye unlocks her family history by using the power of her father's real name, Fridtjof. Guy Periwinkle changes his name to Sebastian because he thinks a name like Sebastian will encourage more people to follow him in the movement. Even Faye learns that the origin of her name has a sad connection to Frank's abandoned daughter, Freya.

Structure

The narrative spans the years 1968 to 2011. The chapters are not placed in chronological order, and the book swipes readers back and forth between three time periods: 1968, 1988, and 2011. Each chapter hones in on one specific relationship for a character, exploring the personal growth or destruction of that person within that time frame. When spending time playing World of Warcraft with Pwnage, the chapter is quite lengthy and rambles. This gives readers a sense that they are playing a long video game session along with him. On the other hand, the short, choppy, and chaotic chapters related to the 1968 DNC protest help readers feel thrust into the chaos of that night.



Quotes

Seeing ourselves clearly is the project of a lifetime."

-- Narrator (Part Nine: Chapter 34)

Importance: This quote closely summarizes the point of this novel. Each and every character spends their lifetimes trying to learn who they really are in the world. They spend a lot of effort and endure a lot of pain just to get a glimpse of who they really are and what they deserve. Characters like Frank, Faye, Samuel, and Bishop all reject who they are. On the other hand, Alice is quite aware and unapologetic for herself in 2011, and she comes across as the most satisfied and content of the characters we engage with.

Annihilation is inevitable. The point is delaying it."

-- Bishop (Part Two: Chapter 3)

Importance: Bishop is obsessed with war. In a way, it is almost as if he has seen war already. He is very much aware of love and loss. He applies these feelings to both his actions in real life and his video gaming. Readers can interpret this as a tragic foreshadowing for Bishop's own death. He does not die peacefully, and he does die on the battlefield. The best way to describe the bomb that takes Bishop's life is as total annihilation.

Watching them navigate his story - surprised in the places he meant to surprise them, fooled in the places he meant to fool them - he felt like a god who knew all the answers to the big questions peering down at the mortals who did not. This was a feeling that could sustain him, that could fill him up. Being a novelist, he decided, would make people like him.

-- Narrator (Part Two: Chapter 10)

Importance: The author shows Samuel as using his career as a novelist to connect to the two people he needs connections to the most: his mother and Bethany. He hopes these two women will read his work and feel compelled to love him enough to re-enter his life. The narrator shows this as Samuel's fantasy. This dream is what keeps Samuel wanting to write.

A game will always tell you how to win. Real life does not do this. I feel like I've lost at life and have no idea why."

-- Pwnage (Part Three: Chapter 3)

Importance: Pwnage is definitely a tragic character who feels that he has failed. Like Samuel, he finds comfort in the safety of World of Elfscape. He enjoys the rules of it and he likes the black and white nature of the game. The real world frightens Pwnage. In a way, the real world frightens Samuel as well. Pwnage prefers to stay safe playing Elfscape, where he feels like a winner and a success.



Their souls, she thought, must have been terribly shrunken things.
-- Narrator (Part Six: Chapter 3)

Importance: In her younger days, Alice is very much against establishing herself. She refuses to carry money or a purse because she does not want to be tempted to buy anything. She judges other people for their material possessions, thinking that their souls must be shrunken. However, here, the narrator depicts Alice as clearly thinking that she loves the house she owns and has no regrets about her life decisions. The author wants us to understand that this house brings her joy and comfort, two feelings that make her unique from any other character in this novel.

That by choosing a few very private concerns and pouring herself into them, she had never felt so expanded. That, paradoxically, narrowing her concerns had made her more capable of love and generosity and empathy and, yes, even peace and justice. It was the difference between loving something out of duty -- because the movement required it of you -- and loving something you actually loved. Love -- real, genuine, unmasked-for love -- made room for more of itself, it turned out. Love, when freely given, duplicates and multiplies.

-- Narrator (Part Six: Chapter 3)

Importance: The author wants us to understand that Alice is extremely happy in her life choice to live a secluded life with the women she loves. She used to be completely open to the world, but she has actually found more happiness being closed off from it. This novel depicts a world with mass media designed to frighten people and news sources threatening a constant collapse of something essential. Alice finds solace in her life without all of the extra things. The author uses Alice's satisfaction as a beacon for a path to happiness for the other characters.

The problem is, we can never really feel it. Empathy. Most people think empathy is like understanding someone else or relating to them. But it's more than that. Real empathy is the actual corporeal feeling of someone else's emotions, so that it's experienced not only in the brain but also in the body, the body vibrating like a tuning fork to the sadness and suffering of another, as in, for example, you cry at the funerals of people you never even knew, you feel actual physical hunger when you see a starving child, you get vertigo when you watch an acrobat. . . . If we follow this to its conclusion, then empathy becomes like a haunting, a condition that is impossible since we all have separate egos, we've attained individualization, we can never really be another person, and that's the great empathy problem: that we can approach it but cannot realize it."

-- Sebastian (Part Seven: Chapter 3)

Importance: So many of the characters in this novel attempt to be empathetic of another. Samuel tries to empathize with Bishop and with his mother. Faye tries to empathize with Frank. Frank wants to empathize with the family he left behind in Norway. Yet none of these people come close to achieving it. This is a gorgeous reminder that true empathy comes from action, from doing something as a result of a realization. Simply knowing about another person is not enough. One must act on it.



Essentially, this quote is the author's call to action, encouraging the other characters to empathize better.

Porn is a problem for the whole project of enlightenment. If otherwise rational, educated, literate, moral, and ethical men still need to look at this, then how far have we really come? The conservative wants to get rid of pornography by banning it. But the liberal wants to get rid of it too, by making people so enlightened they no longer want it. Repression versus education. The cop and the teacher. Both have the same goal -- prudishness -- but use different tools."

-- Alice (Part Seven: Chapter 4)

Importance: The issue of blind and stubborn polarized politics is a constant issue throughout the novel. Alice's example of porn as an object both sides hate but approach differently is quite comical and yet very poignant. Hill comments that liberals are often taunted for being overly-educated and privileged idealists. While conservatives are often accused of being money-loving and oppression-accepting people. Additionally, the idea of how women are treated by society is an ongoing issue in this novel. While an accurate example, this is depressing comment from the author about the objectification of women.

Like wealth tends to build upon itself, so too fame, which is a kind of social wealth, a kind of conceptual abundance."

-- Narrator (Part Eight: Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote is very much true for Judge Brown, but it also applies to Guy Periwinkle. The narrator wants us to understand that revenge is much more important than fame for Judge Brown. However, the narrator also notes that the addition of fame to working Faye's case makes this act of revenge particularly tempting. Hill provides several examples of people who are greedy for fame, including Molly Miller and Guy Periwinkle.

Children with too much education have problems with the Syllable. Because they do their thinking with their minds and not their bodies. They think with their heads and not their souls. The Syllable is what remains when you get out of your mind, after you minus the Great You.

-- Narrator (Part Nine: Chapter 4)

Importance: In this novel, the author describes Americans as being highly educated and yet willingly unaware. They are not in touch with the world around them and they do not connect with others. Actually, it is this general disconnection from society that leads to Samuel being so depressed and lonely. Many of the characters do not fit in with others, and, as a result, they spend much of their time isolated from anyone else. To the author, America as a whole is not much different. People in 1968 are depicted as people who don't empathize with the protesters on television. People in 2011 are so in tune with their smart phones and video games that they have no concept of what is really happening around them.



The best way to feel like you really belong to a group is to invent another group to hate."
-- Sebastian (Part 9: Chapter 33)

Importance: The extreme and aggressive polarization of American politics is widely discussed in this novel with much cynicism. Sebastian, who we now know as Guy Periwinkle, has spent a lifetime creating groups for others to hate. The author proves that Guy's career depends on these opposing sides. He profits from conflict that will sell a story to mass audiences.

These things were diminished, but what he realized was that the whole was greatly expanded.

-- Narrator (Part Ten: Chapter 5)

Importance: The author carefully shows Samuel spending most of his adult life longing for love and acceptance from both Faye and Bethany. The more he learns about these women's lives, the more he loves them. Hill captures Samuel beautifully opening up. He is provided with much of the connection and acceptance he has wanted for so long, and now the author can allow him to be content.