

Ordinary Grace Study Guide

Ordinary Grace by William Kent Krueger

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Plot Summary

“Ordinary Grace” by William Kent Krueger is the story of the Drum family’s summer in 1961. The story is told thirty years later by Frank Drum who was 13-years old at the time. The Drum family consisted of Nathan and Ruth and their three children, Ariel, Frank and Jake. Nathan was the minister at the Third Avenue Methodist Church in what was known as the Flats in New Bremen, Minnesota. Nathan was a bright and devout man who also led the worship at two other churches in the region, Cadbury Methodist and Fosburg Methodist. Ruth, a lover of music, led the choir at all three churches. Ariel was a brilliant musician and budding composer who played the organ at the churches. Thirteen-year-old Frank and his younger brother by two years, Jake, handed out flyers. All five members of the family were required to attend all three services.

Ruth liked the music but never planned to be a minister’s wife. When she married Nathan he had just earned his law degree and was heading for a long and lucrative career as an attorney. He enlisted in the Army and served in Europe during World War II. Killing the enemy changed his career plans and the life that Ruth thought she would have. Nathan struggled the rest of his life for what he was forced to do during the war. He became a dedicated Methodist minister in atonement for his sins. Ruth wasn’t the typical minister’s wife by any stretch. She publicly smoked and drank, skipped meetings of the women’s auxiliary and had a lot of questions about God and his very existence.

It was hot and muggy in the summer of 1961. There was a disturbing undercurrent in the small town community. A young boy, Bobby Cole, who was a contemporary of Frank’s was found dead on the train tracks just beyond the Flats. It was a stunning occurrence in the small town where nothing out of the ordinary ever happened. Nathan and Ruth forbade the boys to play on the tracks or go near the trestle. Officer Doyle, one of the local cops, warned them that there were bad men who hung out around the trestle. Doyle’s comment made Frank think more than ever that Bobby’s death was not an accident. It was Frank’s nature to allow his natural curiosity and determination to learn the truth that easily trumped his parents’ orders not to hang out on the trestle.

Frank convinced the more reticent Jake to come with him to the trestle. He wanted to look around to see if he could find anything that could hint at the possibility that Bobby’s passing wasn’t an accident. Frank and Jake were sitting on the trestle when they observed an unknown man emerge from the bushes below and sit next to a man on the river bank who appeared to be sleeping. The man took a swig of liquor and noticed the two boys. He told them to join him and that his companion was dead – he was talking up a storm and suddenly just keeled over dead as a doornail. It was the second death that summer and Frank now had more questions than answers.

There would be more dead bodies showing up in small town New Bremen and Frank and Jake seemed to always be right in the middle of things. One of the murders nearly destroys the Drum family and drives a wedge between Nathan and Ruth that at times seemed irrevocable. Frank’s quick mind and Jake’s quiet wisdom solve the most devastating and dramatic death that occurred that summer. Frank had been determined

to uncover all the lingering questions that loomed over the town. He knew it meant the very survival of his family.



Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

It is not yet July but it is oppressively hot in New Bremen, Minnesota, in 1961. A police officer calls Nathan Drum in the middle of the night. Nathan lets his sons Frank and Jake go with him to the jail. Jake is two years younger than thirteen-year-old Frank and has a stutter. On the way to the jail, Nathan tells the boys that Gus got drunk and got into a fight.

Inside the police station Frank spots Morris Engdahl, a bad sort, in a cell. Morris mocks Jake's stutter. Morris was apparently involved in the same fight as Gus. Officer Blake and Nathan discuss the death of Bobby Cole. Officer Doyle questions how the Cole kid was killed on the train tracks. He knew the tracks so well. Doyle doesn't plan on pursuing an investigation. Doyle cautions Frank and Jake not to play on the tracks. There are a lot of bums down there who could be dangerous.

The fight had been about Bobby Cole. Morris said Bobby was better off dead which upset Gus. Gus calls Nathan "Captain" and claims it was his job to know why God lets the innocent die. Gus throws up in the back seat of the car so Nathan asks Frank and Jake to walk home. Frank takes the tire iron for protection.

On the way home, the boys smash out the headlights of Morris' black Deuce Coupe because he mocked Jake. Gus and Nathan fought in the war together. Gus makes a wild statement that "they are all dead" because of the Captain. Frank spots his sister sneaking into the house. He figures his father has a lot to pray for – one son who'll soon be a juvenile delinquent, another son with a bad stutter and a daughter with a harelip who sneaks out at night.

The boys come to a long trestle bridge over the river. They see a man emerge from the woods below. He sits by another man who is sprawled out and asleep. The man, an Indian, spots them and invites them to come down. He tells them the other man is dead. The man is an Indian who is drinking from a small bottle. He claims the man was talking and just died. He doesn't know his name. He called himself Skipper. He says that maybe the man was a captain. The old man finds a photo in the man's shirt. He gives it to Frank who reads the back of it. "October 23, 1944. Johnny's first birthday. We miss you and hope you can be come for Christmas. Mary." (35)

The Indian takes another drink and says he likes the railroad because it's always moving. Like the river, Jake says. Frank is shocked. Jake didn't stutter and he hardly ever talks to a stranger. Frank gets spooked and drags Jake up the slope and back to the pharmacy where he tells Gus and Doyle about the dead man. It is hard for Frank to say what they saw. Jake finally tells the men that they saw a dead man.



Analysis

The theme of human frailty is highlighted by Morris's despicable and uncouth mocking of young Jake who suffers from a terrible stutter. Frank shows his leadership and his protectiveness toward his brother when he decides to trash Morris's prize car in revenge for ridiculing Jake's speech impairment. Frank also displays an underlying anger which he hints at when he thinks to himself that he will become a juvenile delinquent.

The fight between Gus and Morris is symbolic of the controversy that surrounds the deaths and murders that occur in New Bremen, MN, during the summer of 1961. Gus and Morris are drunk when they get into a debate about the death of young Bobby Cole, a contemporary of Frank and Jake. Morris says the boy is better off dead because he was retarded.

Again the theme of imperfection surfaces in the story and Morris is at its center. He symbolizes a society that is obsessed with beauty and perfection and rejects those who do not measure up to its unattainable standards. Morris is the imperfect messenger who ostensibly is acceptable because he lacks external flaws but is imperfect inside mimicking a flawed society that demands perfection.

Frank also broaches the subject of imperfection. He references his own trajectory to juvenile delinquency, his sister's harelip and his brother's stutter. There is an obvious difference between Morris's treatment of flaws in people and Frank's thoughts about it. Morris obviously considers himself flawless while Frank recognizes his own perfection and accepts the flaws of others. Frank is made speechless by the encounter with the dead man on the riverbank. However, when it is up to Jake to tell the truth about the man, he does so without a stutter. Jake's ability to speak without a stutter in this instance symbolizes the old adage that the "truth will set you free."

The author uses transference by portraying a protective Gus who is set off by the slur to Bobby because Jake has a terrible stutter and is also referred to as retarded at times. The disagreement about the death of Bobby and the cause of death sets the premise for the story that has multiple deaths and homicides all of which remain unsolved for much of the story.

A subplot of the story is Nathan's experience as a soldier in World War II. What exactly occurred there is never explained. His loyal friend Gus was in the Army with Nathan and still refers to him as "Captain." The term "Captain" is a term of authority which automatically propels the character of Nathan to one of superiority and wisdom. The author hints through Gus that the incident that won his loyalty was a heroic act performed by Nathan. When Gus is drunk he makes the off-the-wall, wild statement that "they are all dead" because of the Captain. Gus's admiration for the actions of Captain Drum during the war is juxtaposed against Nathan's own struggles with those same actions. Gus's comment is used to plant a seed in the reader's mind about Nathan's lack of resolution about his war experience and to foreshadow his struggles with death and dying.



Discussion Question 1

What is the disagreement between Gus and Morris that leads to their fight? How does Gus connect their argument to Jake?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Frank smash the headlights on Morris's car? Why is Jake reluctant to participate in the vandalism? Describe differences in the characters of the two boys.

Discussion Question 3

Why is the Indian's statement not credible? What explains Jake's sudden ability to speak up without stuttering? Describe the dynamics between Frank and Jake.

Vocabulary

ruse, dawdle, extricate, errant, sanctuary, harelip, virtue, skeptically, profusion, ministerial, regalia, consummate, fakir, trestle, bulrushes, rumination



Chapters 4 - 7

Summary

Nathan picks up the boys and Gus at the police station after they were questioned about the dead man. Frank didn't mention the Indian. Nathan tells the boy the first dead man he ever saw outside a casket was on the battlefield, a young German soldier. Nathan never got used to it. He tells the boys if they need to talk to him about seeing the dead man he's there for them. Ariel is pretty but was born with a harelip which had been surgically corrected when she was a baby. Ariel is their parents' golden child – charming and talented. Frank had been thinking about death since Bobby died. He wants to ask his father a lot of questions about death but he never gets around to it. While sitting outside during a storm, he sees Ariel sneaking away. He didn't have a clue that there would be three more deaths with the next the most painful.

Nathan is the pastor of three churches – in Cadbury, New Bremen and Fosburg. Ariel is sounding uncertain about going to Julliard even though she has a scholarship. She could keep studying with Emil Brandt, the best composer and pianist in Minnesota. Ruth had been engaged to him briefly years before. Ruth thinks she doesn't want to leave her boyfriend, Karl. Nathan and Ruth decide to visit Amelia Klement in Cadbury. Amelia and Peter both have bruises and Travis is not around. Ruth is upset that Amelia didn't come to Nathan with her problems since he's her pastor. Nathan tells her that Amelia's husband, Travis, spent time as a POW in North Korea. He still has nightmares; that's why he drinks. Nathan was in the war too and has nightmares, too but everyone handles it differently.

Karl is the only child of Axel and Julia Brandt. Axel owns the New Bremen brewery which was founded by his great-grandfather. The Brandts are New Bremen royalty, living in a sprawling mansion on the Heights. Karl and Ariel had been going steady for a year. Ruth is not happy with the intensity of their relationship although she likes Karl. Karl plans to play football at St. Olaf's, get his degree and return to New Bremen and help his father run the brewery.

Nathan who is trying to track Travis down doesn't return until very late. Frank overhears Nathan telling Ruth that he and Gus found Travis in a bar in Mankato. He talked to him about his abusing Amelia and Peter. Travis swore it wouldn't happen again. Nathan and the kids visit Emil Brandt. Emil had a storied career as a musician and composer. Lise, his sister, had been born deaf and was tutored at home. Emil was blinded and disfigured during his tour of duty in WWII. The family purchased a farm house for him and Lise. Emil thinks his family was glad when he came home disabled. Purchasing him a house gave them someplace to put Lise.

Nathan visits Emil bringing Ariel and the boys with him. Jake runs to Lise who is working in the garden. He communicates with her using sign language. Frank thinks they get along because they both have difficulty communicating. Emil has been dictating his



memoir on a tape recorder and Ariel's been transcribing it. Nathan mentions Travis' struggles with post-war Korea. He reminds Nathan that the war changes people. When Nathan and Ruth married he had plans to become an attorney. After his final year of law school, he enlisted and went off to fight. He returned a changed man, no longer interested in doing battle in the courtroom. He went into the seminary and was ordained.

Frank helps Danny O'Keefe and Jake search for Danny's great-uncle. They find Uncle Warren sitting in a clearing. He was the Indian who had been with the dead man. Danny hands him a letter that had been delivered for him. He pulls out a pair of glasses, reads the letter, wads it up and throws it on the ground. The boys leave. Jake recognized the glasses that Uncle Warren had – they were Bobby Cole's.

Analysis

Does the author toss out a red-flag when Uncle Warren is seen reading the letter with a pair of glasses that belonged to Bobby? If Warren is not the guilty party, the author's purpose for shining a light on his possible involvement is to throw the reader off, to make the reader suspect. Bobby was allegedly killed accidentally on the railroad tracks. The author is opening up the prospect that Warren killed him and that's exactly what Frank and Jake are led to believe. The author has already planted the seed that Warren is dangerous. When he was found with the dead man on the river bank, the author foreshadowed the prospect that Warren could be a murderer.

The specter of death and dying is broached in this section. In his own words, Nathan commented he never got used to seeing dead men on the battlefield. The first man he saw outside a casket was a dead German soldier. The subtext of his statement is that it was he who killed the young enemy soldier and that it has haunted him ever since. Frank has questions about death. He would like to ask his father who as a minister should have ready answers; however, Frank is reluctant to approach his father with questions. Frank is a smart and a lot more sensitive than he'd like to admit. He senses that death is a subject that Nathan has not resolved for himself.

Human flaws are symbolized by the physical impairments of several of the characters. As talented, beautiful, gifted and fortunate a person is, he or she cannot escape human frailty. Emil Brandt is a member of the wealthiest family in town and was a renowned musician and composer. He fought in the Army during the war and returned blind and with a horribly disfigured face. His sister from that same rich background was born deaf and has a raging anger. Ariel is beautiful and talented but was born with a harelip and has a scarred upper lip from surgery. Jake is kind and wise but has a terrible stutter.

Nathan's flaws are more hidden. Like Emil, he was scarred by the war but his wounds were to his emotions and psyche. He is ridden with guilt about his experience which he keeps to himself. His family knows he was hurt during his military service but he won't talk about it to the boys. He hints at it but he cannot come out and express his feelings about them. He is repressing feelings from long ago. Although he is a minister and therefore a counselor to others, he is repressing feelings and probably anger that he



needs to vent. He may be able to advise others to talk about their problems but he can't take his own good advice.

Three men in this story served in the military during World War II and they were all harmed although in different ways. Gus lives in the past and in the glory of the service. He idolizes Nathan for a heroic deed that is not described. Gus's wartime experience left him unable to move forward in life. He has no direction and is floundering through life in menial jobs. Nathan was wounded emotionally and is living with guilt and sacrificed his plans of becoming an attorney as a way to seek redemption for his actions. He feels that devoting himself to God will wipe away the sins he committed during the war. It was probably the taking of other lives which he hints at when he talks about the first dead body he saw – that of a young German soldier. He probably shot and killed him. Emil's scars are on the outside. He had dedicated himself to music but was blinded in the war and now cannot see to write or read his music. There is a hint of bitterness toward his family because he has been burdened with his disabled sister.

An anti-war sentiment is apparent in, "Ordinary Grace." The author has used the characters of Nathan, Gus, and Emil to symbolize not so much the horrors of war but its debilitating aftermath and how it has life-long and life-changing impact on those who served.

Discussion Question 1

What is spurring thoughts of death for Frank? What old memories that Nathan has about death are always with him and why?

Discussion Question 2

What problems is the Klement family having? What does Nathan suggest may be responsible for Travis's behavior? Explain why Nathan's suggestion has merit but why it is not credible.

Discussion Question 3

What is significant when the Indian, who is actually Uncle Warren, reads the letter that Danny brings him? What does it lead Frank and Jake to believe about Bobby's death?

Vocabulary

notoriously, preamble, chastisement, delirium, sentiments, consummation, itinerant, ubiquitous, tutelage, embellished, prodigiously, staid, tautness, stultifying, consternation, stricture, virtuosos, enclave



Chapters 8 - 13

Summary

The boys decide to tell Gus about Bobby's glasses. They run over to tell Gus who's playing cards with a group of men including Doyle. The boys observe Doyle using the vents to eavesdrop on their father whose office is right above Gus's apartment. Frank decides that he and Jake should keep Bobby's glasses to themselves.

It's the Fourth of July. Nathan helps the boys set off fireworks even though he hates fireworks because they remind him of the battlefield. Doyle had heard that Nathan "cracked" when he was in the service. Frank's ears perk up with they start talking about Uncle Warren. He apparently got into trouble with the Feds and has a rap sheet but nothing serious. At home, Frank catches Ariel upset and crying but doesn't know why.

Frank asks Gus what Doyle meant when he said that Nathan cracked during the war. Gus doesn't tell him specifically but talks about war in general. Killing a man is a hard thing even if it's the enemy. Nathan is the only one who can tell Frank about his experience. He warns him not to believe anything Doyle tells him about it. Emil tries to kill himself. Lise is able to communicate with Jake that Emil is dying. Emil had swallowed a whole bottle of sleeping pills. The fire department rushes him to the hospital. Frank tells everyone that Jake saved Emil Brandt's life and is a hero.

The Brandts need Jake's help with Lise Brandt. She won't leave the hospital without Emil. While Jake tries to coax Lise out of Emil's room, Frank asks his mother if Emil tried to kill himself because of his disfigurement. Ruth replies that Emil is a beautiful man; his face isn't important.

Frank and Jake help Lise move a huge rock that is in the way of new planting. Frank accidentally touches Lise which makes her go on a wild rant. Frank runs out the backyard to get away from her screaming. He walks along the river to the lean-to and hides when he hears someone coming; it's Uncle Warren heading back to the Flats. Frank heads to the lean-to and sees someone rummaging around inside. It's Officer Doyle. After he finishes, Doyle brushes away his footprints with a bunch of bulrushes.

Emil is released from the hospital three days before July 4th. Emil claims his overdose was an accident but Nathan doesn't believe him. Emil concedes that he had attempted to end his life but doesn't have the nerve to try again. Frank takes Jake down to the lean-to. Frank crawls inside and digs up a mound of dirt to find a large tin can. There are many items in the can including a broken Mickey Mouse watch, a Playboy magazine, an Indian doll and a small ceramic frog. There is also a Purple Heart, the photo from the dead man's shirt and Bobby Cole's glasses. Frank puts everything back and sweeps away his footprints just as Doyle had.



Frank asks Warren about his past. He admits that he was in jail. He talks about how the white man had oppressed the Sioux nation which led to the slaughter of white people in New Bremen a hundred years before. Warren claims he was jailed because he spoke the truth.

Analysis

Frank's decision to not tell the police that Warren had Bobby's glasses is based on some intuitive feeling that he has about Bobby's death and about Warren's character. Nathan is reminded of the battlefield on the Fourth of July. He dreads the loud explosions which for him symbolizes the battlefield and death and mayhem that he is trying unsuccessfully to leave behind him. Nathan's stance symbolizes sacrifice and shows his strength of character when he insists on helping his boys set off their fireworks. Even though he hates them, he is a good parent and is not going to allow his boys to be at risk.

Frank is naturally curious and disturbed by Doyle's comment that Nathan "cracked" when he was in the war. Gus refuses to tell Frank what happened because it's not his place. However, it is obvious that he wants to let Frank know what his father did in the military because he considers his actions heroic. He hints at the probably that Nathan killed the enemy by saying that killing a man is a difficult thing to do. Nathan has told the boys on several occasions that they can ask him about death and dying. However, he cannot open up to them about his own experience. By refusing to open up to his sons, Nathan is building a wall between them and appears hypocritical because of his inability to be candid about his experiences when he counsels his sons to feel free to talk to him.

Emil's suicide symbolizes defeat. Emil is giving up on life. He survived the war although he was terribly disabled and disfigured but it seems he cannot survive normal life. Something within is driving him to want to end it all. He is blind and scarred and the sister he lives with is deaf and has a violent streak. Perhaps life was too dismal for him to bear or something else that has not yet surfaced is going on in his life that he can't cope with. His suicide is undoubtedly a foreshadowing of more to come. Ruth who has been portrayed as a superficial woman who is most concerned with her looks and image, does a surprising turn in her response to Frank's questions about Emil's suicide attempt. Frank wonders if Emil wanted to kill himself because he was scarred and blind. The character of Ruth shows her depth by telling her son that Emil was a beautiful person and that his external appearance was unimportant.

The author interjects the allusion of racism in the story. Uncle Warren describes the oppression of the Sioux nation by the white man. It provides a motivation for the killing of the white man by Warren. He is bitter about the fate the Indians were dealt at the hands of the white man. However, would it be reason enough for him to kill? Perhaps the author has merely introduced a red herring into the story to confuse the reader and complicate the plot. The author is going to great pains to throw the light of suspicion on Uncle Warren but is he too obvious a choice? Including the specter of racism in the story could either be the foreshadowing of future developments or it could lead nowhere



and was just interjected into the story as a distraction. Either way, it is reason enough for the reader to keep turning pages.

Discussion Question 1

What could be the motivation behind Frank and Jack not telling the police that Uncle Warren had Bobby's glasses? Compare how an individual may respond to information or facts he hears or learns about versus his "gut" feelings.

Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Nathan like fireworks? Describe the experience Frank had when Doyle and Gus bought some fireworks and set them off in the park. How did Frank react and how would you react?

Discussion Question 3

What could be a reason that Emil tried to commit suicide? How was Jake a hero and instrumental in saving Emil's life?

Vocabulary

influx, dour, admonition, vamoose, viscera, camaraderie, reproof, lackluster, gesticulated, berserk, judicious, profound, blasphemy, interminable, countenance, profusion, fulcrum, fervor



Chapters 14 - 18

Summary

Frank and Jake and their friends ride their bikes to the old stone quarry south of town to swim. Morris is there. He and his girlfriend call Ariel a “skag” and tell the boys to get lost. Frank and Morris have words and get into a physical fight which lands them in the water. Morris is flailing because he can’t swim. Frank pulls him to safety. Morris vows to kill Frank. Ruth and Ariel leave for the final rehearsal of the chorale that Ariel composed. It’s to be the highlight of the Independence Day celebration. Nathan brought his friend, Father Peter, a young local priest home to have dinner with the boys. Frank overhears Father Peter telling Nathan that people in his congregation are talking about Ruth’s drinking and smoking and how she shirks her duties at the Women’s Society of Christian Service. Nathan points out that she leads three church choirs. Nathan says she won’t change and he won’t ask her to.

It’s bothering Frank that Morris and his girlfriend called Ariel a skag. Frank knows about sex and that it’s for married people. He knows Ariel wouldn’t do anything to condemn herself but he has some doubts. Frank asks Karl if he’s going to marry Ariel and if he loves her. Karl is evasive. Emil is at the rehearsal and plans to play for the chorale. In the lobby, Frank overhears her mother tell Emil that she’ll always love him. She loves Nathan but in a different way. She tells him to call her when he has dark times. Emil tells Ruth he loves her, too. Emil is ready return to begin composing music again. His brush with death gave him new purpose. Ruth and Ariel get into a debate about who knows Emil the best. Ariel says he’s a wounded man. Ruth says he’s self-centered.

Frank and Jake watch the July 4th parade in town. When Emil takes the stage at the celebration, the audience erupts into applause. Ruth introduces Ariel’s chorale, “The Freedom Road,” with Emil Brandt on piano. After it’s over, the audience goes wild. It’s a huge success. Ariel and Emil take a bow. After the fireworks display, Frank and Jake walk home. Nathan is in his office. Nobody else is home yet. Frank wakes later and hears his father on the phone and his mother’s worried voice. Ariel isn’t home yet and they’re worried.

In the morning, Frank’s parents are in the kitchen with Karl and Sheriff Gregory. Ariel had been celebrating with Karl and other friends at the river in Sibley Park. Karl left without her. The police press Karl for details about the evening and call the others who had been at the party. Ruth calls Emil but she’s not there. Nathan, Frank, Jake and Karl go to the river where Ariel was last seen.

Frank can’t imagine the possibility that Ariel could be gone forever. The campsite is a mess. Karl says that Morris had a fight with another guy. Frank tells the Sheriff that Morris didn’t like Ariel. The Sheriff plans to get official statements from everyone.



Analysis

The author uses misdirected anger to reveal what Frank is really feeling. Frank becomes enraged when Morris and his girlfriend call Ariel a “skag.” He’s upset that Morris is maligning his sister but the inference strikes at the heart of something that Frank has been concerned with. While Frank’s anger is ostensibly directed at Morris, he is really angry at his sister. Perhaps she is a skag. He’s seen her sneaking out at night and not returning until dawn. Frank is a loyal brother and defends his sister but that she has been sinning preys on Frank’s mind. He is a young innocent who idolizes his sister. He feels that she may have let him down.

Frank’s been worried about her and now Morris is confirming what he has been suspecting himself. He can’t strike his sister. He lets out his frustration and rage by using Morris as a proxy. His confusion over his sister’s behavior leads him to question Karl about their relationship. In effort to make things right in his mind and convince himself that his sister is not a skag, he wants to be assured that Karl loves Ariel and that he plans to marry her.

The author also uses misdirected emotion in another relationship in the story. Ruth has never been satisfied being a minister’s wife. She was engaged to Emil when they were young. He was a talented musician and composer. Ruth loves music and holds Emil up as her ideal. She should have had a life with him instead of a Methodist minister. Emil symbolizes the life that Ruth should have had.

Ruth resents her daughter’s relationship with Emil. He is her tutor and mentor. He lauds her great talent as a musician. When Ariel tells Ruth that Emil’s suicide attempt gave him new purpose, Ruth is insulted. She argues with her daughter over who knows Emil best. While she lives vicariously through her daughter, there is a nagging feeling within her that the life that Ariel is living and the future she has ahead of her should have been hers. Ruth is jealous of her daughter’s career and her youth. Ruth’s life is settled and settled in a place that she would have never dreamed of. She harbors bitterness for her husband’s occupation and their meager lifestyle. Ariel has her whole life ahead of her. Ruth is conflicted about Ariel’s musical career. She resents her daughter because he would have like to have had that choice but she also loves her daughter and wants the best for her.

When Ariel goes missing, Frank is beset with worry and guilt. He had been doubting her character and now that she’s missing, he will never be able to make it up to her. Karl immediately becomes a suspect in Ariel’s disappearance because of their relationship because of his close relationship with her. He could be behind her disappearance but the author may have just thrown in another red herring to confuse the reader and thicken the plot.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Frank get so angry with Morris at the quarry? How does Morris show his weakness and how does Frank show his magnanimous side?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Father Peter feel compelled to tell Nathan that congregants are gossiping about Ruth? What is Nathan's reaction and what does it demonstrate about his feelings for his wife?

Discussion Question 3

How does Ruth reveal her resentment for the relationship that Ariel has with Emil? Why does Ruth envy her daughter's association with Emil?

Vocabulary

surreal, callous, chorale, inexplicable, parsonage, redolent, provincialism, oppressive



Chapters 19 - 24

Summary

Morris has an alibi on the night of Ariel's disappearance. The cops found Warren with a necklace. Nathan confirms that it belongs to Ariel which makes Warren a prime suspect. Frank and Jake find it hard to believe that Uncle Warren would have hurt Ariel. The boys tell Warren that the cops have the locket and that they're going to arrest him. Warren claims he found the locket. Warren takes off running at the sound of sirens. Nathan, Gus and Doyle run after Warren. Frank spots Warren on the trestle, carefully stepping from one crosstie to another. He disappears into the night. Warren is long gone by the time the sheriff's people search the track. Frank keeps quiet about seeing him. He's not sure why; he was following his heart. Nathan is praying more than ever. Frank prays but he doesn't think anyone's listening. Frank's dream is that Ariel just ran away and that she's okay. The investigation is going nowhere.

Frank and Jake sit on the train trestle dangling their legs over the river. Jake has a feeling that Ariel will never come back. He dreams that she's happy in heaven. They spot a pile of debris that caught onto one of the pilings. There is something red in between the branches and debris. Frank stands and peers more closely at it. He tells Jake to go get Nathan. Frank knows he is looking at Ariel's long hair floating out of the debris. Frank isn't allowed to be at the scene when they pull Ariel's body from the river. Ruth is mute. Jake is sullen and withdrawn and refuses to pray. Frank can't stop crying.

Frank prefers to think that Ariel slipped into the water after getting drunk – an accident. He doesn't let himself think about the possibility of murder. If it was a murder then it was he, Frank, who let her murderer escape. The coroner concluded that Ariel was hit on the head, knocked unconscious and thrown into the river. She didn't drown. The cops think it's Warren but Frank insists that Warren didn't do it. Morris is also a suspect but he and his girlfriend have disappeared. Frank feels profound guilt over letting Warren escape.

Frank overhears Ruth tell Nathan to read his Bible somewhere else. She finds no comfort in it. Later, he hears his father leave the house and follows him to the church. Nathan is lighting candles on either side of the altar. Gus steps into the sanctuary. Nathan asks God why Ariel was taken. Why not him – the sins are his. Ariel's death is devastating his family. Nathan thinks Ariel's death is God's way of punishing him for the enemies he killed in the war. Nathan breaks down and sobs.

Another pastor is taking over the services at Cadbury and Fosburg but Nathan insists on leading the worship at New Bremen. Nathan begins the service comparing the day to the dark days that come before Easter. Nathan like Jesus asks God why he had abandoned him. He quotes St. Paul who said that when a loved one is lost, there is still faith, hope and love. In closing he asks the congregants to rejoice in the divine grace of the Lord. Frank rushes home to tell Jake that he is his best friend and always will be. Jake is afraid Frank will die. Frank promises he'll be the first person to never die and



Jake will be the second. Doyle tells the boys that they found Morris. Frank is sure that he's involved. But the autopsy the next day, changes everyone's opinion.

Analysis

Grief and guilt come to the forefront in this section. Nathan's grief is complicated. Ariel who was beautiful and smart and kind was taken from him. She symbolized everything that was good about life. She had a bright future; she was living proof of his redemption. Nathan had lived for years under the burden of the guilt and shame from his war experience. He never expressed exactly what happened but it was devastating enough that it changed his entire life. Ariel had represented life to Nathan, a new young life with promise. He lived through that hope. Now she was taken from him. God almost let him escape but He had taken her in retribution for the men Nathan killed on the battlefield.

Nathan is finally able to express himself and allow his feelings to come out. Unfortunately, his moment of emotional catharsis is in front of the altar and not to his son, Frank, who needs to know his father in order to understand him and by extension find some peace about his sister's death. Nathan feels that God betrayed him. He had literally devoted his life to God after he killed enemies in the war. He had made a deal – not with the devil, but with God. He would serve him and commit himself to Jesus Christ as a means to earn redemption. In the fine print that Nathan included, God was to not let any other tragedy strike Nathan. God was to keep his family safe. But God had abandoned him just like Jesus claimed he had when he was crucified.

Guilt is also plaguing Frank. He finds his sister's body after knowingly allowing her possible murderer to go free. He watched as Uncle Warren escaped across the train trestle when the police were looking for him. Frank is not sure why he didn't speak up and tell the cops where the wanted man went. There was something deep with Frank that told him that Warren wasn't guilty of the homicide. Perhaps Frank suffered from more than just the guilt about Warren fleeing the scene. Frank had been disturbed by Ariel's behavior. He was filled with confusion and a deep-seated fear that she had sinned. After it was confirmed that she was murdered, Frank tried to emulate his father to rid himself of the guilt he felt. He prayed like Nathan but he didn't feel a connection. His guilt was multi-layered. If he had believed more strongly in God perhaps she wouldn't have been taken.

Religion has been a barrier between Frank and Nathan. Frank has had a complicated relationship with religion. He has tried to pray but had really just been going through the motions. He prayed for his sister and his family now that Ariel was gone. But was anyone listening?

Family loyalty is a theme throughout "Ordinary Grace" and is on full display in this section. Frank is moved by Nathan's sermon the Sunday after Ariel's body was found. His brother means more to him than anything else especially after losing his sister. Frank, who is not prone to showing his emotions, is compelled to tell Jake that he is his best friend forever. Jake has accepted religion in his life yet he feels abandoned by it



just as his father does. Why was his sister taken? He tells Frank that he's afraid that Frank will die and leave him. The boys love each other. There is an irony in that Ariel's death has brought Frank closer to religion while Jakes is hurt and feels betrayed by God and questions his religion.

Discussion Question 1

What evidence do the police have that Uncle Warren might be the murderer? How did Officer Doyle probably uncover this evidence? Why do the boys find it difficult to believe that Warren is the murderer?

Discussion Question 2

What manner of death does Frank prefer to think caused Ariel's passing? Other than the violence she may have face, what private reason does he have for hoping that her passing was not homicide?

Discussion Question 3

What is Frank moved to tell Jake after Nathan's emotional service after Ariel's death? What fears does Jake have and what has he given thought to?

Vocabulary

erratic, fervently, sanctuary, marshland, detritus, embankment, undulation, desecration, mundane, profound



Chapters 25 - 29

Summary

Ruth announces that she's leaving the house and staying with Emil. Frank is home alone when the sheriff comes to the door. He leaves word for Nathan to call him right away. The sheriff asks about Ariel's relationship with Karl. Nathan meets with Doyle in his church office. Frank and Jake sneak down the church stairs and listen through the air duct. Doyle tells Frank that Ariel had been hit with an implement like a tire iron but the actual cause of death was drowning. Also, Ariel was five to six weeks pregnant. Doyle asked Nathan about Ariel's relationship with Karl. Doyle is eliminating Warren and Morris as suspects. Apparently Ariel and Karl had a huge fight the day before her murder. Nathan tells everyone the news about Ariel. He asks that no one make any judgments about Karl. He tells them to trust in God to lead them through. All Frank can think about later is how much he hates the Brandts.

Karl's friends confirm that Karl and Ariel had been sleeping together. Her friends tell the police that she'd been upset lately. When Doyle talks to Karl he has a lawyer present who won't let him say much. He neither confirms nor denies being the father of Ariel's child but states that they had no marriage plans. Once the news about the pregnancy surfaces, Ruth stays away from Emil and anything "Brandt." Gus comes by and tells Ruth that Doyle is looking for the blunt instrument that Ariel was hit with. The judge won't issue a warrant to search Karl's car or property. Ruth says the judge won't stand up to Axel Brandt. Ruth questions Gus about killing another person. It had to have been a very cold person who killed Ariel. Ruth tells Nathan that the judge denied a search warrant for the Brandt place. Nathan reminds her that they don't know if Karl is guilty. Ruth is convinced of his guilt.

Ruth leaves for a walk and is not back by dark. Nathan and the boys search for her. The boys find her sitting on the train trestle. She asks Frank if this was the spot that he saw Ariel. Ruth remarks about the three deaths – the itinerant, Bobby Cole and Ariel – all being found right around this spot. She's angry with Nathan because he loves God more than his family. She says that there is no God. Frank holds his mother as she weeps. She asks Frank to do something for her but doesn't want him to tell Nathan.

That night when everyone is asleep, Frank sneaks out and rides his bike to the Brandt estate. Someone had spray-painted the misspelled word, "Murdrer" on one of the stone pillars. He scales the wrought iron fence and runs toward the garage. After completing his task he climbs back over the fence, grabs his bike and hurries home. As he pedals down the road, he is met by Doyle. He's afraid that Karl will go Scot-free because of the family money. Doyle thinks that Frank spray painted the pillar.

Frank tells Jake that he was at the Brandts but didn't do the spray painting. Ruth had asked him to put an envelope on Karl's car. Karl drives over and gives Ruth the envelope. She sits at the piano, takes out sheet music from the envelope and plays



“Unforgettable.” Karl, about ready to collapse, whispers that he didn’t kill Ariel and also claims he didn’t get Ariel pregnant. He never slept with her. Julia Brandt claims that Ariel got herself pregnant to trick Karl into marrying her.

Analysis

Frank’s fears that Ariel had sinned are confirmed when he overhears that she was pregnant when she died. Frank is forced to deal with competing emotions – sadness over the loss of his sister and confusion and anger over her behavior before she died. Frank is too young to understand a romantic relationship between a man and woman. His upbringing has taught him that it is only moral for a married couple to have sex.

Frank defended Ariel when Morris made an inference about her morality. Now Frank is faced with the bitter truth that she was sinful according to his limited understanding. His immaturity does not allow him to perceive an intimate relationship outside the boundaries of marriage. Frank and Jake have both been faced with adult-sized problems in what should have been a carefree summer.

Ruth is devastated by the news that she not only lost Ariel she also lost a grandchild. Ariel represented the life that Ruth should have had herself. Now that is all gone. Not only is her daughter dead, but Ruth’s hope for the future is gone. Ariel symbolized Ruth’s unfulfilled dreams. For Nathan, Ariel was the symbol of his own redemption. He had devoted his life to Christ after his wartime service during which he apparently killed a number of enemy soldiers. Ariel was Nathan’s first child and he put his hope for the future in her who Frank referred to as their “golden child.”

Ruth cannot strike out at the murderer but she can strike out at God for letting it happen. To Ruth, the devout Nathan is the earthly symbol of God; she can unleash her anguish on him. She tells Frank that Nathan loves God more than he loves his family. She blames God, and therefore Nathan, for Ariel’s death. Nathan used his religion to make up for his own sins. Nathan was trapped in the past and came to believe that a life-long dedication to God would wipe out not only what he perceived to be past sins but also felt it inoculated him from future harm.

Ruth is self-centered and bitter but she’s human. Her life had been changed unexpectedly and quite dramatically by Nathan’s guilt over his experience in World War II. Had Nathan paid more attention to his relationship with her instead of focusing so much attention on his devoutness, perhaps his relationship would have been stronger which would have enabled both Nathan and Ruth to get through the tragedy of losing their daughter. Their relationship was already so fragile and damaged that the death of Ariel pulled them further apart.

Nathan was not responsible for Ariel’s death by any measure. However, Nathan was so caught up in his own guilt and shame, that he abandoned his children on an emotional level. He would not talk to them about what hurt them. He was the pastor of three churches and devoted time to his sermons and needs of his congregation. Perhaps he



thought that being the pastor of three churches would make his soul more salvageable – one wasn't enough. But by devoting so much time with his work, he wasn't in touch with what his children were into -- especially where their emotions were. Nathan cared for his children and loved them but he cut them off emotionally. Had he paid more attention to his family perhaps he would have discovered that Ariel was having a disastrous relationship with Emil and learned how unhappy his wife was.

Discussion Question 1

Why won't the judge issue a warrant to search Karl's car and property? Describe how such a ruling can damage an investigation.

Discussion Question 2

Why is Ruth so angry at Nathan after the news about Ariel's pregnancy surfaces? Explain the difference between dealing with anger in an indirect way.

Discussion Question 3

Why has Karl become a top suspect in Ariel's murder? Why does Karl's mother claim that Ariel got herself pregnant?

Vocabulary

incoherent, convergence, constricted, brusquely, artfulness, skulk, gesticulating, ballistic, expletive, stonewalled, sequestered



Chapters 30 - 34

Summary

After Frank meets Gus's girlfriend, Ginger French, on her horse ranch, Frank and Jake rush over to the church basement to eavesdrop on their father's conversation with Karl. Karl apologizes for getting drunk at the party and not watching out for Ariel. She was his best friend, only true friend. He did not get her pregnant because he's gay. Karl blames God for not making him like other boys. Nathan assures Karl that he never thought he killed Ariel. Jake tells Doyle that they heard Karl's confession to their father and that Karl is gay and not a murderer. Late, Doyle spreads the word around town that Karl is gay.

Frank is especially troubled that he and Jake had fun and forgot about Ariel. He feels like crying when he looks down into the grave where Ariel will be laid to rest. The boys tell Gus about Karl's confession and that Doyle is spreading it all over town. Nathan is upset when he learns about Karl's secret getting out. Gus is arrested for assault after getting into a fight with Doyle over his gossiping about Karl. Gus is allowed out of jail so he can finish digging Ariel's grave. It's important to Frank and Jake.

Ruth tells the boys that she'll come back home but just needs some time away. Jake and Frank both worry that she won't come back. Frank is still suffering with guilt over letting Warren escape. Jake talks to Ariel – sort of like praying. It makes him feel better. That night, Nathan gets a call in the middle of the night from the sheriff. Karl Brandt is dead.

Karl had been drinking, was driving too fast on the back roads, missed a turn and ran into a big tree and died from the impact. Frank prays that Karl's drinking had done him in rather than his humiliation over the rumors that he and Jake were responsible for starting. Jake tells Frank that a person can't run away from who he is – he'll always stutter and people will always make fun of him. Maybe he should just kill himself. He's been thinking about death and what it's like to be dead.

Nathan drives over and gets Ruth. It's important to him that the family enters the church together. Another pastor presides at the service. Frank feels like his mother is ready to spring out of the pew any second. Frank averts his attention from the ceremony. He thinks of everything else that had been going on. After the ceremony, they drive to the cemetery. Even though Gus dug the grave, it is still just a grave. He wonders why Jake's eyes are dry.

Analysis

In the year 1961, there was little or no tolerance for homosexuality. Karl Brandt was the future of the Brandt family. He had plans to help run the family business after college. The town looked upon the Brandts as its royalty. When word got out about Karl's sexual orientation, he wasn't the only one who was devastated. His parents were proud elitists



who had little to do with the ordinary folk in New Bremen. Now they are faced with scandal and humiliation of the highest order. Just as Ariel had been the future for the Drums, Karl symbolized the continuing legacy of the Brandt family. Now that heritage rested in a homosexual man and was forever damaged.

The town had to feel a measure of disappointment and confusion that the member of the elite family who was its bright future was, as Karl put it, a freak. Karl was mature and sensitive enough to understand the damage that the revelation brought to his family and its legacy. He was drunk when he drove off the cliff and killed himself. There had to be a lingering question after his death whether his act could have been an intentional one.

Karl's death brings more guilt upon Frank's young shoulders. In the first place, he and Jake should not have been eavesdropping on their father when he had his conversation with Karl. They learn that he is not the father of Ariel's baby because he's gay. They never had sex. Although the boys are surprised, they are in a way relieved that Karl was not the murderer. Jake tells Doyle about Karl's confession, undoubtedly hoping that it will remove Karl as a suspect. However, Doyle is a gossip and spreads the word around town that Karl is gay. As stated above, homosexuality was something that wasn't discussed and wasn't accepted during the time frame of this story. Frank feels guilty about Doyle humiliating Karl with word of his sexual orientation. If they hadn't listened in on their father's private conversation, they wouldn't have known about Karl's sexual orientation and they couldn't have told Doyle.

Frank had pleaded with the police to let Gus out of jail to finish digging Ariel's grave. Gus cared about Ariel. Frank didn't want just anyone digging his sister's grave. Yet when Ariel was buried and Frank looked down at the grave that Gus dug, there was nothing mystical or magical about it. It was just a hole in the ground. Frank was disappointed that her grave didn't feel special, didn't set Ariel's death apart. For Frank, the cold earth that Ariel was lowered into symbolized the reality of her death.

Discussion Question 1

Who spread the news that Karl was gay? How were Frank and Jake impacted by the gossip?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it important to Frank that Gus finish digging Ariel's grave? Even though Gus and Doyle had gotten into a fight, why does Doyle insist that Gus be released to finish the digging?

Discussion Question 3

What drove Karl to drink before his accident? Weigh the possibilities that Karl intentionally drove off the cliff.

Vocabulary

conspiratorial, voluptuous, speculation, altercation, astounding



Chapters 35 - 39 and Epilogue

Summary

At the buffet following the burial, Nathan is asked to offer a blessing. Nathan generally gives complex blessings that are more than just about the food. He remains silent, thinking. There is silence in the hall until Ruth speaks up and chides him for hesitating and not being able to say an ordinary grace. Nathan asks if anyone else would like to say grace. Jake shocks everyone by volunteering. Jake stutters terribly as he begins his prayer. Ruth gently touches Jake's shoulder and he's able to get his short blessing out without another stutter. It's an ordinary grace that no one will remember. Ruth and Nathan both thank Jake. Frank thanks God that Jake got through it.

Ruth returns home that night. Frank is sure that what he witnessed with Jake and Ruth was a miracle. The grieving continues for months and Ruth still has crying spells but things start to get back to normal. Of course, nothing would ever truly be the same. Frank thinks Warren murdered Ariel and wonders if he'll ever be caught and if he'll always feel guilty about Warren's escape. He's getting over his anger about his sister's death and he doesn't always feel sad. While visiting Emil Brandt with his mother, Frank is struck by a dramatic notion. He walks down to the river and railroad tracks with his eyes shut. He walks to the river, steps in and looks down at the murky water. He is just a few hundred yards from the site of the party where Ariel had been the night she was killed. He thinks he knows what happened.

Frank tells Jake that Emil killed Ariel. He killed her because she was pregnant with his child. Ariel was in love with him. The only man she was close to other than Karl was Emil Brandt. Jake doesn't want to tell his parents. He can't bear to think of them being torn up again. They should put things in God's hands and hope for a miracle. After Nathan hears Frank's theory, he is shaken but stresses that no one can be convicted before all the facts are known.

Emil tells Nathan that Ariel loved him but he did not return that love. Emil claims that they had sex just once. He tried killing himself to free her. He did not kill her and claims she never told him about the baby. Nathan tells Frank that a congregation in St. Paul has asked him to be their pastor. They'll be moving in a few weeks. Frank tearfully tells Nathan about letting Warren get away without telling the cops. Nathan assures Frank that God will deal with Warren.

Jake doesn't have to go to speech therapy because his stutter went away. Jake swears it was a miracle. Morris is killed in an accident at the cannery where he works. On the day before the move, Lise asks Jake and Frank to help her in the garden. When Frank goes inside the shed, he discovers Ariel's watch and barrette in a drawer. Frank tells Jake that Lise killed Ariel. Jake says that sending her to prison won't bring Ariel back. Besides, she's already in a prison. Frank confronts Lise. She lashes out at him,



swinging a crowbar at him. She starts to swing the crowbar at Jake when he stops her but she collapses to the ground, sobbing that she is sorry.

It's been thirty years since that summer of 1961. Frank, Nathan and Jake all meet at the cemetery in New Bremen on Memorial Day every year. They put flowers on the graves of Ruth, Ariel and all the others who died. Lise lived the rest of her life in a mental institution. Frank made amends with Warren years before. He reminded Frank that the only difference between the living and dead is one breath of air.

Analysis

Nathan is finally allowing his emotions to surface. They are emotions not only for Ariel's death; his long repressed feelings about his experiences in the war have blended with his current grief and are overwhelming him. While Frank is like his mother and uncertain about the existence of God, Jake is a believer and feels the need to say the blessing while his father's emotions have rendered him immobile. Frank is dying by inches when Jake volunteers to say the prayer. He naturally expects him to stutter all the way through it. Frank shows his loyalty to his brother and his protectiveness toward him. He loves his brother and fears that Jake will be humiliated. However, when Jake gets through the "ordinary" prayer without a stutter, Frank is shocked but relieved. Jake's "ordinary grace" had different meaning for his family members.

Frank had always been Jake's protector and defended his brother from others who ridiculed him for his speech defect. However, in church for the service for his sister, it is one time that Frank cannot rescue his brother. As it turned out, Jake didn't need rescuing this time. Frank may have learned a lesson that he had to let go of his brother and allow him fight his own battles. When he was on his own in front of the congregation and not relying on his big brother to come to his aid, Jake was able to come through for his sister. Jake has a rough start but his mother touches him and somehow frees him of his speech disability.

It was Jake's love for and loyalty to his sister that enabled him to give the blessing at her service and it was his hope that his blessing would help heal his family. In a time of crisis, Jake was able to rise to the occasion. The loving pat that Ruth gave Jake helped. Her gesture was a symbol of her eventual recovery. She would always mourn the loss of Ariel but she had Jake and Frank to concentrate on. In that moment, she saw that Jake needed her.

Was it a miracle? Jake thinks so. Perhaps that's all it takes for a miracle – to believe in its possibility. Ruth shows a softening of her heart by reaching out to her young son who by virtue of his brave attempt to say the prayer is actually trying to save his family. Nathan finds new hope in Jake. Although he's the youngest member of the family, he is able to show his love for the sister he lost and for the family he has.

Frank is puzzled by Jake's ability to speak impeccably but relieved that he got through it. He is wrong to think that Jake's blessing was an ordinary grace. In fact, it was



extraordinary. Jake's bravery in giving the blessing at his sister's funeral symbolized the beginning of the family's healing. As Frank matures, he will realize that the miracle that occurred that day was that Jake's love of family and his hope for healing overcame his disability.

While Jake is making miracles, Frank through his intelligence, daring and tenacity solves the murder. Jake thinks that punishing Lise will be without purpose. Frank ignores his brother's reticence and exposes the murderer of his sister. Frank needed the resolution of the mystery and crime in order to go on. The prosecution and punishment that the guilty party will be subjected to is part of that resolution. Frank is able to free himself of the guilt over letting Warren get away because he, in fact, was not the murderer. Warren's comment that the difference between life and death is one breath of air is a metaphor for the fragility of life which Frank and Jake and their parents learned in a very intimate manner.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Jake volunteer to give the blessing? How does Ruth show her tender side toward Jake? Explain why Jake is suddenly able to speak without stuttering.

Discussion Question 2

What are the sequence of events that lead Frank to think that Emil might be a suspect in Ariel's murder? What does he prove when he "pretends" to be blind?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Jake reluctant to pursue either Emil or Lise as a suspect? Was Frank right to ignore Jake's feelings and expose the guilty party? Why didn't Jake think Lise shouldn't be punished?

Vocabulary

menace, vivacious, colleague, enviable, mentored, enmity, guileless, nocturnal, impediment, altercation, metronome



Characters

Frank Drum

Thirty years later, Frank Drum tells the story of the summer of 1961 when he was 13-years old and his little brother, Jake, was 11. The Drum family lived in New Bremen, MN, where their father was the Pastor at the Third Avenue Methodist Church. The family lived across the street from the church in the parsonage. The boys had an older sister, Ariel, who they were very close to.

As a kid, Frank had an aggressive and independent approach to life. Rules were made to be broken. He even predicted that he was a future juvenile delinquent. Frank was always good-intentioned and never mean-spirited. His intellect and curiosity did get him into some tight spots at times. He was extremely protective of his parents as well as his brother and sister. Frank was especially watchful over Jake because Jake suffered from a terrible stutter that others ridiculed. Frank was always the first to defend Jake and stand up to those who mocked him. Frank took it personally when someone abused a family member.

Frank was a lot like his unconventional mother who wasn't as devout as a minister's wife usually is. Frank tried hard but it never seemed his prayers connected. When his sister went missing, he tried in vain to understand why God would allow harm to come to his loving and kind sister. In addition to being daring and bright, Frank was also tenacious. It was his unrelenting determination to find the murderer of his sister that led to the guilty party. Frank solved the mystery of his own volition putting the cops and sheriff to shame.

Jake Drum

Jake Drum is Frank's younger brother. Frank and Jake are very close. Frank is protective of his brother because he's younger and has a terrible stutter. Jake stuttered ever since Frank can remember. Jake doesn't talk much because of his stutter. The other kids make fun of him and some call him a "retard." Jake's best friend is Frank. Jake relies on him to hang around with and talk to.

Ruth takes Jake once a week to speech therapy but there doesn't seem to be much progress. When Ruth moves out of the house temporarily because of the schism that is growing between her and her husband, Nathan begins taking Jake to the sessions.

Jake has a very kind heart like his father. He has a close friendship with Lise Brandt who is an older woman who lives on a farm with her brother. She was born deaf and like Jake, has no friends other than her brother. Jake empathizes with her and befriends her always offering to help her with her garden. Jake is the only person other than her brother who Lise likes.



While Frank tends to take after his more unconventional mother, Ruth, Jake is very much like his father. Jake believes in God and the miracles that he can create. Jake stuns Frank a few times when he is suddenly able to speak up without the hint of a stutter. After the boys overhear some shocking news about their sister's boyfriend, Frank suddenly goes mute and isn't able to tell his father. Jake speaks up and tells Nathan all the details without a stutter. Much to Frank's horror, Jake also offers to say grace at an after-funeral buffet. Frank is sure he'll humiliate himself. But to Frank's relief and amazement Jake gets through grace, with a gentle touch from his mother, without a slip up. To Frank it wasn't memorable – it was just an ordinary grace. To Jake, it was a miracle.

Nathan Drum

Nathan Drum is married to Ruth Drum and is the father of Frank, Jake and Ariel. He is a Methodist minister who serves three congregations in the region surrounding New Bremen, his main parish. In addition to the Third Methodist Church of New Bremen, MN, Nathan leads worship at the Methodist churches in Cadbury and Fosburg.

Nathan had served in World War II and has struggled ever since because he killed enemy soldiers. He tells his boys that the first dead body he ever saw outside of a casket was in Europe. He had looked down with sadness upon the young German soldier that lay dead. Nathan didn't say that he was the one who killed the soldier but the inference was there. Nathan's experience in the war changed his entire life. He had finished law school when he enlisted in the Army and had planned to have a successful career as an attorney. The war changed his heart and career plans.

When New Bremen is besieged by suspicious accidental deaths and ultimately homicides, Nathan does his best to keep his cool for his family and for the community. He turns to prayer for guidance and solutions and never waivers in his devotion. He and his wife, Ruth, have diverse reactions to the deaths which begin to drive a wedge between them that grows wider with each death.

Ruth Drum

Ruth Drum is the minister's wife and mother of Frank, Jake and Ariel. She is not the typical pastor's wife. She publicly smokes and drinks which drive some of the conservative congregants literally up the wall. Ruth is a beautiful woman – many say she looks like Rita Hayworth – and didn't plan to be a minister's wife. She thought she was marrying a man who was going to be a big-time attorney. Although she is not particularly devout, she loves music and leads the choirs at the three churches.

Ruth loves her children but things like being a good cook or spending quality time with her sons are not priorities. Ariel, Ruth's oldest child and only daughter, is her favorite. Ariel shares her mother's love of music. Ruth lives through her daughter who has won a scholarship to Julliard and has a promising future as a composer.



Ruth, whose emotions are always on her sleeve, is the most devastated by the murders. She leaves home for a while to stay with Emil Brandt, a man she was engaged to when she was very young. He is a renowned composer and his accomplishments to Ruth make her husband's work pale in comparison. A schism grows between Ruth and Nathan during the murders and deaths. Ruth is mad at her husband and mad at God.

Ariel Drum

Ariel Drum is the eldest child and only daughter of Nathan and Ruth Drum. She is an accomplished pianist and budding composer. She had been tutoring under Emil Brandt and is helping him write his memoir. She has been going steady for the last year with Karl Brandt who is the son of the wealthiest family in the area. Ariel has earned a scholarship to Julliard and stuns her family when she tells them that she is having second thoughts about leaving home. Frank has spotted Ariel sneaking out at night and coming home in the wee hours of the morning. When Ariel goes missing and her body is found floating in the river, the family is destroyed.

Gus

Gus is an old war buddy of Nathan's who showed up on his doorstep one day and became a permanent guest. The Drums live across the street from the Methodist church where Nathan has an office. Gus lives in an apartment in the church basement. He is devoted to Nathan and his family. It is never revealed what exactly happened during the war that made Gus such a loyal friend to Nathan, but it was life-changing for Gus. He is always there to help Nathan and his family in any way he can. He looks after the boys, does the maintenance around the church and does odd jobs like digging graves at the town's cemetery. Frank and Jake always turn to Gus when they have a problem that they can't solve. He always gives them sage advice and makes sure that they obey their parents and tell them what's going on. Gus has a hair-trigger temper that he has a hard time controlling at times. He gets into a drunken fist-fight with Morris and they both wind up in jail.

Officer Doyle

Police Officer Doyle is a quick-witted, sharp-tongued local police officer. He is suspicious about Bobby Cole's death. It was ruled an accident but he doesn't believe it. Although Doyle doesn't have the highest morals and isn't always honest and forthcoming, he proves to be a good friend to the Drum family and is tenacious about solving the murders.

Uncle Warren

Uncle Warren is the great-uncle of one of Frank's schoolmates. He has a shady background and is automatically suspect when he is found with a dead body on the river



bank. He claims the man just died. Frank and Jake suspect he had something to do with Bobby's death because he has Bobby's glasses. They also think he might have been involved in Ariel's disappearance because her locket was found in his metal box. Uncle Warren feels the heat and escapes out of town on a dark night across the train trestle.

Emil Brandt

Emil Brandt is a world-class musician and composer. He and Ruth were engaged when they were young but he chose his career over his personal relationship. He served in World War II and returned blind and with a terribly disfigured face. He is a member of the wealthy Brandt family and lives on a refurbished farmhouse that his family bought for him. He lives with his sister Lise who is deaf, uneducated and often displays an uncontrollable rage. Emile is tutoring Ariel and she is helping him write his memoir.

Lise Brandt

Lise Brandt is a member of New Bremen's royal family. She was born deaf and was never educated. Her family is ashamed of her and made a place for her on the farmhouse they bought for Emil when he returned disabled from the war. Lise is very possessive of Emil and doesn't like anyone to visit him and take his attention away from her. The only other person she likes is Jake Drum who is kind to her and often helps her in her garden.

Karl Brandt

Karl Brandt was the rich boy in town and Ariel's boyfriend. They had been going steady for a year before her murder. He became a top suspect by virtue of his close relationship with her. Witnesses had claimed that they had a big argument the night she went missing. Karl loved Ariel but only as a friend. In a tearful confession to Nathan, he revealed that he was gay, had no sex with Ariel and, therefore, was not the father of her baby. Word got around town about his sexual orientation. One night he was very drunk when driving his sports car around a curvy area in the hills. He missed a turn and plunged to his death.

Bobby Cole

Bobby Cole was the first death of the summer of 1961 in New Bremen, MN. He was a school mate of Frank's. Frank didn't believe that Bobby was killed accidentally. Bobby wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer but Frank knew that he could take care of himself on the tracks. After uncovering some surprising evidence, Frank was convinced that Bobby was murdered.



The Itinerant

Frank and Jake sitting on the train trestle spot Uncle Warren emerge from the bushes and onto the river bank. He sits down next to a man who appears to be sleeping. The boys learn that the man is dead. He was never identified. Nathan held a funeral service for the man who was just referred to as an itinerant. It was never established if he died of natural causes or was murdered.

Morris Engdahl

Morris Engdahl is the town bully and troublemaker. He has a short fuse, gets into fights and drinks too much. He is a suspect in Ariel's murder because he openly disliked her and was known for violent outbursts. He drove a fancy Deuce Coupe which Frank and Jake vandalized after Morris ridiculed Jake's stutter on day. Morris was drunk one day at his job at the cannery and died in a freak accident.



Symbols and Symbolism

Train Trestle

Bobby Cole, a classmate of Frank's, was killed on the train trestle under suspicious circumstances. Like the other kids in New Bremen, Bobby knew the train tracks well. It was shocking to Frank and others that he died on the tracks. After Bobby was killed, Nathan and Ruth forbade Frank and Jake to play on the tracks or walk across the trestle. But Frank was known to defy his parents and walked on the tracks and sat on the trestle anyway. Over the course of the story, two other deaths occurred near the train trestle. It was Frank, while sitting on the trestle, who spotted the two dead bodies. Uncle Warren compared the train tracks to the river – they both keep moving.

Jake's Stutter

As long as Frank could remember, Jake had a bad stutter. He had to go to speech therapy sessions once a week. Ruth always took him until she left home then Nathan took him. Jake tried to remain silent because so many kids made fun of his stutter. Since he was so quiet, some people got the impression that he was learning disabled. Once in a while at very pivotal moments of the story Jake would suddenly speak out without a sign of a stutter.

Ariel's Harelip

Ariel Drum was beautiful like her mother. She was born with a harelip which was surgically corrected when she was an infant. She had the remnant of a scar on her upper lip from the surgery. Perhaps it was the slight deformity or just the times but Ariel was subservient to the men in her life. She may have been trying to make up for what she thought was a deficiency.

Morris's Deuce Coupe

Morris Engdahl was the town meany. He was in his late teens yet made fun of 11-year-old Jake's stutter. He also said that Bobby Cole was better off dead because he was a "retard." He drank too much and got into fights. Due to his volatile nature, he was a suspect in some of the murders and suspicious deaths. He drove a fancy Deuce Coupe that Frank and Jake vandalized one night. After Morris was mocking Jake's stutter, Frank led Jake to Morris's Deuce Coupe and smashed his headlights with a tire iron. He gave the tire iron to Jake to smash the tail lights. Jake was reluctant to do so until Frank reminded him how Morris had ridiculed him. At the end of the summer, Morris - who was drunk - died in an accident at the cannery where he worked.



Ordinary Grace

After Ariel's funeral service, Nathan was having a difficult time giving the blessing for the food that friends and neighbors had brought. Ruth openly ridiculed him for being so hesitant. Suddenly, Jake spoke up and said he'd say the blessing. Frank almost died thinking his brother would humiliate himself stuttering all the way through the prayer. Jake started out shaky stuttering the first few words. When his mother touched him gently on his shoulder, Jake finished the entire prayer without a stutter. Frank was relieved and amazed but knew that Jake's prayer wouldn't be remembered because it was an ordinary grace. It wasn't ordinary to Jake. To him it was a miracle.

Karl's Sports Car

Karl Brandt is the rich kid in town and has gone steady with Ariel for the last year. He was always seen driving around town in his little red sports car. After she is murdered, Karl becomes a prime suspect. He denies that he had anything to do with her murder. Karl, upset over Ariel's murder and the on-going investigation, drinks too much one night. He is driving his sports car too fast on a curvy road, misses a turn and plunges to his death.

Bobby's Glasses

Frank was among others in New Bremen who thought that the death of Bobby Cole wasn't an accident. When the boys bring Uncle Warren a letter, he gets out a pair of glasses in order to read it. Frank and Jake are astonished – the glasses he is uses belonged to the dead boy, Bobby Cole. It made Frank even more suspicious of Warren and convinced him that Bobby had been murdered.

Fireworks

Frank was looking forward to the Fourth of July and setting off fireworks. Nathan dreaded the day because the fireworks reminded him of the battlefield. However, Nathan planned to help his sons with the fireworks because he wouldn't allow them to be at risk of injury. Gus and Doyle bought some fireworks including M-80s for Frank and went to the park in the afternoon to set them off. Doyle stuck an M-80 down a frog's throat and set it off. Frog blood and tissue rained down on Frank and the others. That incident ruined fireworks for Frank. He wasn't interested in setting any more off. He'd just watch the display that night in the park.

Uncle Warren's Metal Box

Frank and Jake sneaked into Uncle Warren's lean-to on the river bank and found a metal box buried inside. They found a photo, letters, a ceramic frog and other odds and



ends. They also found Bobby Cole's glasses. Uncle Warren interrupts them as they look through his box. Frank tells them that the cops found Ariel's necklace in the box and that they were looking for him.

Ariel's Jewelry

The necklace that Ariel was wearing on the night she was murdered was found in the possession of Uncle Warren which made him a top suspect in her homicide. Later, Frank found Ariel's watch and barrette in a drawer in Lise's gardening shed on the farmhouse owned by Emil Brandt. Ariel's jewelry and where it was found were all clues to the identity of her killer.



Settings

New Bremen, MN

The Drum family lived in what was called the Flats of New Bremen, MN. It wasn't the poor side of town but it wasn't the wealthiest either. The wealthy people, especially the Brandt family, lived up in the hills that overlooked the Flats and the main street of New Bremen. Across the street from the Drum residence was the Third Avenue Methodist Church where Nathan was pastor. Beyond the Flats was the train tracks and train trestle. The bodies of three dead people were found in the vicinity of the train trestle.

Young Frank and Jake Drum had the run of the city and the Flats although they were told to stay away from the train tracks and train trestle after deaths occurred. The boys walked to the barbershop to get their hair cut and stopped by the local pharmacy for a soda after doing yard work for their parents and grandparents.

Third Avenue Methodist Church of New Bremen

Nathan Drum was the Pastor of the Third Avenue Method Church of New Bremen, MN. By 1961, he had held that position for five years. The church was located across the street from the Drum family home. Nathan had an office in the church. Gus, his wartime buddy, lived in an apartment in the basement of the church. Gus handled any maintenance that needed to be done in the church.

Nathan was a popular Methodist minister and was recruited by two other congregations to lead their worship. Every Sunday, he led the service at the New Bremen church as well as those at Cadbury Methodist and Fosburg Methodist. Ruth Drum led the choir at all three churches and Ariel played the organ. The entire family attended all three services every Sunday.

Emil's Farmhouse

When Emil Brandt returned from serving in the military in World War II, he was blind and had a horribly scarred face. He was unable to work because of his disabilities although he still played piano and composed some music. His family bought and refurnished the farmhouse where he lived with his sister, Lise. The family was ashamed Lise who was deaf, given to fits of rage and completely uneducated. They made sure she had a place at the farmhouse. Emil commented that his family was probably glad he came back disabled so they had a place to "hide" Lise.



The Brandt Mansion

The Brandt Mansion was high in the hills overlooking the town of New Bremen. It was behind large stone pillars and wrought iron fences. After Ariel's body was found, someone spray-painted "Murdrer" (misspelled) across one of the pillars because her boyfriend Karl Brandt was a prime suspect. The family did not socialize with the regular people of the community. Even though Ariel and Karl went steady for a year, Ariel was never invited for dinner or even a visit.

The Julliard School of Music

Ariel Drum was a talented musician and composer. She tutored under Emil Brandt who taught her to play piano and to compose music. She had graduated from high school and earned a scholarship to the prestigious Julliard School of Music in New York City. Her parents were stunned when she seemed to have second thoughts about going to the school but couldn't get her to explain her hesitancy. She composed a chorale for the July 4th celebration which was performed by Emil Brandt.



Themes and Motifs

Jealousy

Jealousy is the driving force behind the most dramatic murder that takes place in the summer of 1961 in New Bremen, MN. Emil Brandt is a renowned pianist and composer who was badly injured during a tour of duty in World War II. He was blinded and his face was horribly disfigured. His family is the wealthiest family in New Bremen and the surrounding region. When he returned a broken man in many ways, his family wanted to metaphorically shove him under the rug. Emil suspected that his family almost rejoiced at his injuries because it gave them a way to hide another black sheep of the family.

The Brandt family bought a farmhouse for Emil and had it remodeled. They also made a place for Emil's sister, Lise, at the farm. Lise was born deaf, had never been educated and had an explosive temper that sent her into wild rages at times. She was, in essence, a huge embarrassment to the Brandts. Living with her brother, Emil, gave Lise purpose. She became his eyes, did his bidding and cooked and cleaned for him. The garden became Lise's obsession; she tended to it with care and devotion.

Lise loved her brother and in general didn't like most other people. There was one exception – Jake Drum. Frank figured Lise liked Jake because of his shyness and bad stutter. She related to him. But her main focus was her brother. She didn't like anyone else around him and was open about her dislike of any visitors who dropped by. She particularly hated Ariel Drum. They had a mutual love of music – something that Lise could not share in because of his hearing disability. Ariel tutored under Emil and was helping him write his memoir. Lise perceived Ariel to be the biggest threat to her relationship with Emil.

Ariel became obsessed with the maestro herself. Her admiration for Emil turned into love and a burning desire to marry him. She became pregnant with his child. Lise may not have known the details of their relationship because of her hearing disability. But she didn't need to know the details. Ariel was just there too much. In a fit of anger and jealousy, Lise wielded a crowbar at Ariel and killed her.

Faith

Faith is a predominant theme in "Ordinary Grace." Quite naturally faith emerges as a presence since one of the main characters is a devout Christian and Methodist minister. It wasn't Nathan's life plan to be a minister. He earned a law degree before he enlisted in the Army and served in Europe during World War II. Nathan was traumatized by his experience during his tour of duty. Although there is a lack of specificity in the story about exactly what happened that caused him to abandon his law career for the ministry, it was certainly life-changing and had to do with killing the enemy. He struggles the rest of his life dealing with the horrors of war and what he had to do as a soldier. His



friend Gus who he served with in the war makes a wild statement that “they are all dead” because of Captain Drum. Gus lauded the heroic deeds accomplished by Nathan but apparently they tore Nathan apart.

When dead bodies begin to show up in the small town of New Bremen, Nathan keeps things calm with his steadfast devotion and belief that God will make things right. Even when there is a devastating murder right at Nathan’s very doorstep, he turns to God to help him and his family get through the pain and grief. Although it’s touch and go for several family members and others in the community, Nathan never loses his faith. Ultimately it serves him well. His belief was unyielding and in the end it was his strength and unwavering devotion that brought the family back together.

Eleven-year-old Jake, Nathan’s youngest child, is very much like his father. He tries to convince his more aggressive big brother, Frank, that instead of trying to solve the murders that they should give it over to God. Frank is at times the polar opposite of his father and brother. He is more like his mother who questions why God would let the murders happen. Ruth’s lack of faith leads to the near break-up of her marriage and her total abandonment of her family. Frank’s stubborn determination to find answers and solve mysteries is tempered by the quiet strength that Jake possesses. Jake’s faith never wanes and never ceases to amaze Frank.

The Flawed Human

There is a motif that runs throughout, “Ordinary Grace” about the imperfection of man. Although these flaws are depicted on a physical level, they represent deeply seated flaws in the character of the individual or on a broader scale that of mankind in general. Jake has a stutter which evokes the worst in others – they ridicule and mock him and call him names. Jake is small and young and the abusive treatment he receives symbolizes how the strong and powerful prey upon the weak and innocent.

Ruth lives vicariously through her daughter, Ariel. Ariel is the golden child. She is everything – smart, talented, kind and beautiful. But she is not perfect. She had a harelip when she was born. An operation corrected it but left a visible scar. The scar is a badge of imperfection, announcing to the world that those who seem perfect really are in reality flawed and nothing like what they seem on the surface. Beneath her beautiful exterior, Ariel suffered from feelings of inferiority and unrequited love.

The Brandt family is ashamed of Lise who is deaf and has violent outbursts. The family hides her away on Emil’s farmhouse. But just like the imperfections of an individual can’t be hidden away, Lise’s character issues surface in the most tragic and violent manner. Anger that lies within cannot be ignored because he doesn’t go away; it comes out in the most unexpected ways.

Karl is the golden boy of the Brandt family. He represents a bright future for the family and the perpetuation of the Brandt dynasty. But he will not carry on the family legacy. He has a secret that in his perception makes him a freak and a huge disappointment to his



family. He confesses that he didn't father Ariel's baby because he's gay. In 1961, being gay wasn't accepted at any level. He represents shame and guilt and demonstrates that secrets just like pent up anger and bitterness do not erode with time.

Suspicion

Suspicion is a theme that emerges throughout "Ordinary Grace," a story about "accidental" deaths and murder in the small town of New Bremen, MN, in 1961. The first dead body found was that of a young boy named Bobby Cole. He wasn't very bright but knew the train tracks well. Protagonist Frank Drum was suspicious right away. He didn't buy that Bobby's death was an accident. Officer Doyle was on the same page as Frank. The boys in town all were familiar with the trains and trestle and found it hard to believe that the boy was accidentally killed on the tracks. Doyle was suspicious of the bums that hung around down by the river bank under the trestle. He warns Frank and his younger brother Jake to stay away from the area.

The boys don't heed the advice of the cops or their parents who ordered them to stay away from the train trestle and river bank. One day when they are exploring they see an unknown man emerge from the woods under the trestle. He sits down next to a man on the bank who appears to be sleeping. The man spots the boys and invites them down. He turns out to be Uncle Warren, the great uncle of one of their friends. He tells the boys that the man is dead – just dropped over with no warning. The boys, especially Frank, is immediately suspicious of Uncle Warren. Perhaps he killed both Bobby and this man. Later, when Frank and Jake see Uncle Warren using Bobby's glasses, they are even more suspicious and begin to believe that Uncle Warren is a murderer.

The most dramatic death that summer hit much closer to home. Ariel, the boys' older sister, is found floating in the river. She had been bludgeoned with something and thrown in the river to drown. The cops have a list of suspects and so do the boys. Karl, Ariel's boyfriend, is at the top of the list along with Uncle Warren who went missing and Morris Engdahl, the town troublemaker. The boyfriend is always a top suspect; Warren was already suspected in the deaths of Bobby Cole and the itinerant; and Morris had a mean streak and didn't like Ariel.

In the end, Frank's natural curiosity led him to suspect the real murderer and follow through with his intelligence and powers of deduction to prove it.

Grief

There are many kinds of grief that manifest in different ways and in different degrees. Nathan Drum and his family suffered the severest grief – that for the loss of a loved one. There are stages of grief and the family struggled as they went through the various stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. A while after his sister's death, Frank forgot himself and had fun. He felt guilty for it later; he was starting to let go, starting to accept her passing. Frank and Nathan agreed that they didn't want to be angry any longer. Jake became depressed and thought about committing suicide.



All stages of grief must be faced on the way to recovery. It's difficult to come to terms with the death of a loved one but there can be acceptance without anger and bitterness.

Nathan grieved his entire life after his war experience where he apparently killed a number of enemy soldiers. He never got used to the dead bodies he told his son. He grieved for these young men who he didn't know and who had been trying to kill him. His grief was so severe that it literally changed his entire life. He had earned his law degree before enlisting but the battlefield altered his career plans. Almost as atonement for his "sins" on the battlefield he became a minister. Perhaps he thought that he could be forgiven for the deaths he caused if he devoted himself to God. Many years later Nathan was still in grief. His pain was never resolved. He even thought that Ariel was taken from him because of his sins of war. Nathan grieved for the man he was before he killed.

Ruth grieved for a life she was cheated out of. She, in fact, had two such experiences. She had been engaged to Emil when they were young but he abandoned her in favor of his career in music. When she thought that she would be the wife of a successful attorney with a lucrative career that dream was also taken from her. Ruth mourned for a life she should have had. Emil was blinded and disabled in the war. Although he survived the war, surely he grieved for the man he once was.



Styles

Point of View

“Ordinary Grace” by William Kent Krueger is told in the first person narrative and from the point of view of the protagonist, 13-year-old Frank Drum. The story takes place in New Bremen, Minnesota, in 1961. Frank Drum tells the story thirty years later as an adult. He is thinking back to that summer because of all the deaths – some of which were homicides – which he and his family had to deal with.

Frank is a bright youngster and self-confessed future juvenile delinquent who often skirts the rules set out by his parents. His younger brother, Jake, is more like their father who is a Methodist minister who is gentle and conservative. Frank takes after his more fiery, non-conformist mother who has an avant garde attitude toward God and church, especially after all the murders.

Frank is well-intentioned when he breaks the rules. He’s trying to solve the homicides and bring light to other suspicious deaths. He is a bold and daring youngster who feels he must have a hand in solving the crimes. The deaths are tearing his family apart and he feels that his personal investigation and intervention will help his family survive.

By writing the story from Frank’s perspective, the reader is privy to his intentions, motivations, disappointments and distress which are all vital to the telling of this story.

Language and Meaning

“Ordinary Grace” by William Kent Krueger is a story that took place in 1961. As such, there are some references to that time especially in the vehicles that are driven by the characters. For example, Morris has a Deuce Coupe which was a vintage car of that era. Gus’s method of transportation is his large motorcycle that has a sidecar, something that was popular at the time. The boys love to ride in Gus’s sidecar. Karl has a little red sports car that he squires Ariel around in. The Drum family car that Nathan and Ruth share is a 1955 Packard Clipper that she calls “Lizzie.” In the past they owned a Studebaker that Ruth dubbed “Zelda” and a Pontiac Star Chief she named Little Lulu.

Two of the subplots of the story involve religion and music. The two converge at the churches where Nathan leads worships. The singing and music is an important part of the service. Ruth leads the choirs and Ariel plays the organ. Ruth loves music and had been engaged to Emil Brandt years before. Emil is a world-famous pianist and composer. Ariel tutors under him and has earned a scholarship to the Julliard School of Music in New York City. Ruth lives vicariously through her daughter who has a bright future in music which she would have liked for herself.



The ambience of a small town in the 60s is depicted by the freedom the boys enjoyed. They walked and played all over town without the fear of getting hurt, lost or violated. The town loses its innocence when dead bodies start to show up.

The story is written from the perspective of Frank when he was a 13-year-old boy in the summer of 1961. Although Frank ostensibly is tough-minded and not sentimental, the private thoughts that the reader is privy to provides quite a different perspective and gives the character greater dimension.

Structure

“Ordinary Grace” by William Kent Krueger is the story of the Drum family who lived in New Bremen, MN, in 1961. The town was beset with a number of suspicious deaths and murders that summer. The narrative is told by Frank Drum 30 years later. Frank was 13-years old in 1961 and his brother, Jake, was 11. The story is told as Frank’s memoir of the summer of 1961, from the perspective and memories of a young boy.

The story begins with the death of a boy who was a contemporary of Frank’s. Frank didn’t believe his death was an accident; he thought the boy was murdered. This first death sets the tone and premise for the rest of the book in which a total of five deaths occur unexpectedly – one of which was verifiably a homicide. The author builds suspense and suspicion with each subsequent dead body that shows up.

The book is separated into 39 chapters and is followed by an epilogue that cleans up the loose ends at the conclusion of the story. In the epilogue, Frank writes as an adult in the present explaining what happened to the various characters. Frank, Jake and Nathan meet once a year in New Bremen to visit all the graves. Author Krueger is a native of Minnesota which is where the story takes place.



Quotes

The man below who'd lifted his head to drink must have heard Jake because he tilted his head a bit more and eyed as where we gazed at him through the crossties above. He lowered the bottle. 'Dead,' he said. He nodded toward the man on the ground. 'As a doornail. You boys want to, you come on down here and see.

-- Frank/Warren (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 33)

Importance: Frank and Jake are witnesses to the second death of the summer in the small town of New Bremen. Under very suspicious circumstances, Warren is sitting next to a dead man who he claims just died for no apparent reason. But with the murder of young Bobby Cole, Frank immediately suspects Warren of being a murderer, perhaps a serial murderer.

And what is happiness, Nathan? In my experience, it's only a moment's pause here and there on what is otherwise a long and difficult road.

-- Emil (Chapter 7 paragraph Page 73)

Importance: Nathan has just told Emil that he only wants his daughter, Ariel, to be happy. Emil who is a renowned musician and composer was blinded and disfigured in the war. He speaks from that experience and wisdom about happiness.

The sun in its setting had gone red and a long beam shot through a break in the branches of an elm and lit her face with a demon light. Her eyes held a wild look and she opened her mouth and began to scream...

-- Frank (Chapter 11 paragraph Page 129)

Importance: Lise Brandt who was born deaf and never schooled shows her rage when Frank touches her. The source of her rage is uncertain at this point in the story. The only people who Lise trusts are Emil and Jake.

Ah, Nathan, it's so much easier being married to the Church.' 'But the Church won't scratch your back when it itches or snuggle up to you on a cold night.

-- Nathan/Father Peter (Chapter 14 paragraph Page 141)

Importance: Father Peter, a Catholic priest, just told Nathan that members of his congregation are gossiping about Ruth. The two men weigh the advantages of being a priest or a Methodist minister.

Ariel, dear, Emil has always been a wounded man. He's always been a man too misunderstood, too little appreciated, too bound by our provincialism here, too everything that did not advance the wants, needs, and desires of his own selfish heart.

-- Ruth (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 154)

Importance: Ruth and Ariel are having a heated debate about Emil Brandt and who knows him best. Ruth had been engaged to him when they were young. The quote



indicates that Ruth harbors a measure of bitterness about Emil that she has kept from her family.

I couldn't conceive that Ariel might be gone for good and I still thought in the way of a child that we were part of an adventure whose end at the moment was a curtain of smoke from which Ariel would somehow emerge and return to us.

-- Frank (Chapter 18 paragraph Page 167)

Importance: The author uses a lyrical manner to describe Frank's deepest feelings when his older sister, Ariel with whom he had a close relationship was missing.

Loss, once it's become a certainty, is like a rock you hold in your hand. It has weight and dimension and texture. It's solid and can be assessed with dealt with. You can use it to beat yourself or you can throw it away.

-- Frank (Chapter 22 paragraph Page 186)

Importance: After Ariel goes missing, Frank is struggling with the prospect of her never coming back. He is trying to cope with the eventuality that he will never see her again and that he could go down more than one path with his grief.

I couldn't stop thinking about Warren Redstone. The weight of my guilt over letting him go was crushing me. I tried to pray but had no idea what to say except that I was sorrier than I'd been about anything else.

-- Frank (Chapter 23 paragraph Page 202)

Importance: Frank is convinced that he let the murderer of his sister go free. He watched as Warren Redstone fled down the railroad track. He didn't tell the sheriff that he saw Redstone escaping because at that time he thought he was innocent. At this point in the story, Frank has changed his mind and now thinks that Redstone killed his sister.

What's left to us when that which we love most has been taken? I will tell you what's left, three profound blessings. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul tells us exactly what they are: faith, hope and love.

-- Nathan (Chapter 24 paragraph Page 207)

Importance: Nathan insists on leading the worship at New Bremen Methodist. He struggles with "why" his daughter had to die and feels like Jesus, that God had abandoned him. But he tries to find a blessing in his misery and convince himself as much as his congregation that there is still love, home and faith.

I'm afraid you'll die, too,' he finally said. 'I won't ever die, I promise.' His eyes slid from the ceiling to my face. 'Everybody dies,' he said. 'I won't. I'll be the first person who never died. And you'll be the second.

-- Jake/Frank (Chapter 24 paragraph Page 209)

Importance: Frank has just come from an emotional service at church led by his father.



He comes home and tells Jake that he will always be his best friend. The boys are both grieving over the death of their sister. Jake has been sulking; this quote captures what is bothering him beyond losing his sister. Frank, in his own way, tries to comfort him.

... We reassured ourselves because Ariel's death had shattered any sense of normality, any firm sense that what any future moment held was predictable. If God could allow Ariel to die – allow little Bobby Cole to be so gruesomely slaughtered as well – then Mother who was not at all on good terms with the Almighty was, I feared, stepping directly into harm's way.

-- Frank (Chapter 28 paragraph Page 236)

Importance: Frank and Jake are out searching for their mother who never returned from a walk. They told each other that she was fine but neither one believed it because of what had recently transpired. Since Ruth is not a believer, they figure she's a bigger target for death than anyone else.

... I understood that something had been lost between them, something that had kept my mother anchored to us and now she was slipping away and I understood too that we hadn't just lost Ariel, we were losing each other. We were losing everything.

-- Frank (Chapter 33 paragraph Page 274)

Importance: Frank is expressing how the family has been devastated by the loss of Ariel. He sees the schism between his parents and between the boys with their mother and their father. He feels hopeless at this point that there can be any resolution.