

Our Fathers Study Guide

Our Fathers by Andrew O'Hagan

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Plot Summary

Our Fathers tells the story of a young Scottish boy's journey from a tumultuous childhood to his years of searching for contentment and identity in adulthood. The reader is ushered through three generations of dysfunction that shape the life of each character.

Young Jamie Bawn is an intelligent boy, full of curiosity. He enjoys books and learning, but is discouraged from such interests by his raging, alcoholic father, Robert Bawn, who is angry that Jamie isn't rough or athletic. Robert continually compares Jamie to his own father, Hugh Bawn, a successful businessman and builder, whom Robert criticizes constantly. Jamie's mother Alice loves her son, but always reminds him that he is different from other children because of his interest in the way things are engineered and operate. Despite her husband's violence toward her and his verbal abuse towards herself and Jamie, Alice continually runs back into Robert's arms.

Moving from place to place at the whim of his father, Jamie appears to be exempt from any sign of a normal childhood. The only stability he knows is exhibited in visits to Granda Hugh and Gran Margie's home. Even though Jamie's father has severed ties with his parents, Hugh and Margie make Jamie a priority in their lives and send for him on several occasions. It is during these visits that Jamie feels safe and at home.

Finally, reaching a breaking point and tired of being trapped in a mold-infested home with a drunken father, Jamie feigns paralysis in his legs in order to move in with Granda Hugh and Gran Margie. Alice knows the move is what's best for her son and doesn't try to convince him otherwise.

Once he is settled in with Hugh and Margie, Jamie's legs mysteriously regain their strength and he becomes a young prodigy of the successful Hugh Bawn. Hugh is a popular man and leader of a successful building program throughout post-war Scotland. He teaches Jamie everything there is to know about physics, architecture, business and life. When he is ready for university, Jamie bids farewell to his grandparents and journeys to England, where he begins a new life.

A span of time is passed over after the scene where Jamie leaves for England, and picks up with his return to Scotland to visit his dying mentor, Granda Hugh. It is this final journey home that unravels everything he ever thought to be secure, while at the same time knitting relationships back together and making sense of what never did.

Upon his return, Jamie discovers that the buildings Hugh constructed and became famous for are being torn down, and a new generation of housing and modernism is taking shape. Hugh is no longer the strong man he used to be, but lies wasting away in a bed, sometimes lashing out with a harsh temper. Gran Margie has become a bundle of nerves and she is distraught that Hugh is being investigated for misappropriation of building funds.

Despite Hugh's severe mood swings, he and Jamie are able to share some good moments, including a random trip to the town pubs with Hugh in a wheelchair and a side trip to a cemetery that prompts both men to examine their lives.

While back in Scotland, Jamie also decides to pay a visit to his mother Alice, though he has mixed feelings. As much as he loves her, he still feels that she abandoned him in his youth□but is happy to learn that she had the courage to leave his father and is now happily remarried to a very gentle man. Jamie looks her up and surprises her at a local club, where he feels relief and contentment from their visit, after seeing how beautiful she looks and how healthy she is. Even her new husband Bob is a likable man.

It is during this time that Jamie begins to miss his girlfriend Karen, back home in England, and contemplates fatherhood himself. Karen has always wanted a baby, but Jamie has objected each time, struggling with his view on fathers and himself. For the first time in his life, he believes he could be a good father.

The story begins its close with Granda Hugh passing away the day after Christmas. Jamie helps an emotionally distraught Margie with arrangements and worries about how she will manage without Hugh. On the day of the funeral, Jamie walks to the front of the church to read a scripture and glances out into the crowd. Looking straight at him from the back row is a stranger Jamie finally recognizes as his father Robert. Jamie's last glimpse of his father was many years back as a teenager, when Granda Hugh had taken him to visit Robert in a psychiatric ward. Hugh waited outside, and Jamie went in with good intentions, only to be verbally assaulted by a very sick, very bitter man. At that point, Jamie resolved never to see him again, although the recent turn of events seems to somehow soften things.

Robert ducks out immediately after the funeral and a few days later Jamie sets out to find him in a nearby town, where he is working as a taxi driver. He is shocked. It is hard to believe his father is sober, cleaned up, and working. He is a lot older now and resembles Hugh. Jamie doesn't excuse Robert for the horrendous past, but over a couple of visits, they make amends, and Robert invites him to an Alcoholics Convention to hear him speak.

The story closes with Jamie helping Gran sort through a lifetime of personal effects and the discovery of framed pictures that were special to Hugh. Upon turning one over, Jamie discovers his own handwriting from his early years, scrawled across the back of a print that Hugh saved. "There are ruined buildings in the world," it says, "but no ruined stones."

Part 1, Chapter 1

Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

The chapter begins with six-year-old, teary-eyed Jamie Bawn leaving a seaside English town on a train. He is sad to leave old Mrs. Drake, a neighbor who reads to him from good books in return for his help with odd chores. Mrs. Drake has enclosed a new book for Jamie, along with several titles listed on a sheet of paper. She has gently explained to him that the kind people at the library in his new town would help him find the titles to continue his adventures in learning.

Jamie is returning with his parents to their native home of Scotland, a place his rebellious father Robert stormed away from years ago in one of his drunken furies. As sad as Jamie is to leave behind the afternoon walks, books, and love invested in him by Mrs. Drake, he is excited to be reunited once again with his Granda Hugh and Gran Margaret, who will be living nearby. Hugh and Margaret aren't drinkers, and they know about interesting things such as Robert the Bruce and trees, rivers, buildings and stones.

Jamie tries to settle in as best he can at his new life. At times, he watches as Robert sleeps, passed out in a chair, and marvels at how the man sleeping doesn't at all resemble the hideous monster that rules their lives. Sometimes his mother Alice sits at the foot of Jamie's bed crying, promising that they will run away and leave Robert someday, but this never happens. Even so, Jamie always comforts her and feels the need to protect his mother.

When Robert takes a job as a cook at the Ferguson Boys School, Jamie notices how much his dad loves to be the hero and be praised by everyone. Because of his foul mouth and hostility, many of the boys from the school tout Robert as an ideal father. One evening, one of the delinquent boys from the Ferguson school breaks into their house, and Robert is beside himself that someone was able to steal from his house while he was sleeping. Thus begins his obsessive nightly watch in the bushes with a knife, hoping the culprit will return. One night a pajama-clad Jamie goes out into the rain and leads his cold, trembling, red-eyed father out of the bushes and back into the house. Robert's mental stability had begun to decline more than ever.

Meanwhile, Jamie finds himself advancing in Biology, an interest nurtured in him early on by Mrs. Drake and Granda Hugh. His fascination with the concept of pressure and time also grows, and this appears universally throughout the story. Encouraged by his teacher, Jamie continues to immerse himself in his studies and read books every chance he can get.

Robert's abusive rages at home begin to overwhelm Jamie. One night he hears Robert beating Alice and rushes down the stairs, throwing his father to the floor and punching

him. Alice intervenes, but not before an unstable Robert intentionally cuts himself with a piece of broken glass and threatens Jamie before storming out.

One morning Jamie awakes with sore legs and decides to tell Alice he cannot walk. As he is rushed to the hospital, he continues the charade and suggests that maybe he should stay with Granda Hugh and Gran Margie. Alice leaves the hospital crying but doesn't object, knowing that this is the best scenario for her son.

Hugh and Margie welcome Jamie warmly and give him his own room, complete with new books and a chemistry set. Jamie feels comfortable in the bright, tidy house with his crisp shirt and new jeans. There is no drinking, no shouting, just lots of exciting building projects. He soon becomes Granda Hugh's protégé, learning his tools, his books and all the secrets of Scottish housing.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

Sympathy is created for the character of Jamie through vivid descriptions of the dysfunctional parent/child relationship. O'Hagan goes into detail to paint a monstrous image of Robert. He also details the character of Alice and her willingness to drink in attempt to have something in common with her husband, despite never reading a book or visiting the beach with Jamie. Still, the author is quick to show that Alice does possess a mothering instinct for Jamie by illustrating their morning breakfast meetings. Rain or shine, Alice meets Jamie at an iron gate when she ends her shift at a baking factory. They share hot rolls, a carton of milk and laughs.

Much is revealed about the condition of Jamie's wounded heart. Despite the hatred he feels toward his father, there is also a sort of empathy. When an unstable Robert is freezing, huddled in a bush in the rain, Jamie climbs from his bed and takes on the parent role, leading his father by the hand back into the house to be warmed by the fire.

O'Hagan's detail of Jamie's surroundings, such as Robert and Alice's dark, moldy house in disarray, contrasting with Hugh and Margie's bright, clean smelling home, adds further weight to convincing the reader of the necessity of Jamie's escape.

Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

The chapter begins with Jamie, now a thirty-five-year-old man, coming back to Ayrshire, Scotland on a train to see his dying Granda Hugh. It is a blustery night in October, and this is his first visit back in ten years since moving to England to attend university. During the train ride into Ayrshire, Jamie replays the past in his mind while observing the changing countryside of his youth. He pictures his childhood home, hiding in the dark, with nicotine ceilings and memories inside. He thinks of the train tracks into Ayrshire that have carried him in and out of moments in his life. As the train lulls from side to side, Jamie finds himself once again contemplating pressure and time.

Stepping off the train, he is solicited for change by a group of teenage trick-or-treaters who notice his English accent and begin a curious bantering of questions regarding English ways versus Scottish ways. Realizing how much he has changed since he's been away, Jamie contemplates what lies ahead as he makes his way to his grandparents' flat. He notices the grand buildings that Hugh so proudly constructed are showing signs of time and wear. Even the elevator shafts in his grandparents' building aren't working properly.

Gran Margie greets Jamie at the door and acts as though no time at all has passed since he left home. As Jamie warms himself by the fire, the two catch up over tea with Margie's polite questions and intentional silences. He is amazed at how little Margie has changed since he's been away, but can see the toll that Hugh's health is taking on her nerves.

Hugh lies in a bed in the back bedroom and looks small and fragile, compared to the strong beacon Jamie remembered him to be. As grandfather and grandson reunite, Hugh is unable to hide his contempt that Jamie left home, and his pride finds him downplaying his growing weakness. Nonetheless, it is evident how happy he is to have his grandson home, and he insists on Jamie being at his bedside as he drifts in and out of sleep, telling tales of past projects.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

The author combines cold, dismal weather and nightfall to set the tone for Jamie's uncomfortable return to Ayrshire. He uses the elements to help the reader picture how Jamie feels about leaving the calmness of his new life to come back to the emotions and memories of his past. Weather is used frequently throughout the story to back up emotions with visual imagery.

Great emphasis is placed on the description of Gran Margie's bedroom. Details such as the cleanliness and orderliness of it, along with little flowers in drinking glasses, her Bible, and particular books and articles are provided to help the reader sketch

Margaret's character. Margaret's tidiness may have been the result of her own habits or those impressed upon her by Hugh. Later chapters mention the importance of cleanliness and order to Jamie, who learned this from Hugh. Hugh had this impressed upon him by his mother Famie.

The description of the current condition of Hugh's building is an important foreshadowing of what is to come. Once a revered builder and always the picture of modernism, Hugh's physical body is not the only thing deteriorating—his buildings are as well.

Part 1, Chapter 3

Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

The reader is transported back to the early years of Hugh Bawn and the necessary tales of his mother Euphemia (Famie) Bawn. Famie was married to Thomas (Tam) Bawn, a man who was wonderful at poetry, singing and making laughs, but terrible at handling money and farming. Thomas loved Famie dearly, even though she was an occasional guest in a mental hospital, and Famie loved Thomas just as much. Despite his drinking and their poverty, they were fiercely in love, and Famie's mental health seemed to improve once Hugh was born. Hugh was young when Thomas left Scotland to join the English troops at war. He was killed when German troops spotted his division—the result of negligent Irish soldiers burning lanterns—and Famie Bawn went to her grave despising the Irish because of this.

Left to raise little Hugh alone, Famie became a great pillar and proved herself a faithful friend to the women of Govan, Scotland. It was said that she grew strong from the war; even her appearance changed. Shyness was replaced by boldness and a strong voice. Famie became enraged at the landlords who were charging high rent from women whose husbands were at war. She watched in horror as women and children were evicted from their homes while their husbands were dying in the fields. For a woman with no experience in politics, Famie Bawn soon became one of the most political women in Scotland as she started a rent strikes movement. When a woman was about to be evicted, Famie would gather her mob of women to surround the home and drive off the evictors. Bailiffs became intimidated and they would run from the hordes of women who were wielding brooms, washboards and carpet beaters.

Little Hugh grew up amongst the rent strikes and secret meetings in his mother's home, where women would gather to discuss solutions to housing. He was on Famie's hip as she delivered speeches on municipal housing, and soon the papers were printing her plea. It was not long before the Rent Restrictions Bill was passed and Famie became a Glasgow councilor and builder of the labor party.

By eleven years old, Hugh wasn't interested in playing with other children, but was reading excessively and studying the construction of bridges and buildings. His hero was John Wheatley, a health and housing minister who was building Glasgow cottages. He also idolized John MacLean, a consul who gave lectures on economics. Hugh would sit in the front row at the lectures and wish he had a father like John MacLean.

Hugh became the Corporation Advisor on Building in Glasgow and made quite a name for himself. His years of questions, observation and study began to pay off as he took on the daunting task of rebuilding Scotland after the war. Focusing on municipal housing, Hugh's dreams of Glasgow towers began to take shape and he soon became known as "Mr. Housing."

Hugh met his wife Margaret on a boat during a work trip and they fell in love immediately. He loved her shy smile and the way she spoke. She loved his ambition and the way his hair fell around his forehead. Hugh courted her with letters and flowers until she packed her bags and moved to Glasgow, where Famie found a job for her. The couple married soon afterwards, and Margaret began her new life as the unconditional love and support to the revered Mr. Housing. So busy with projects that he never took the time to eat, Hugh always managed to recite poetry to his wife or surprise her at the local flower shop where she worked.

As accomplished as Hugh became, on the day his mother Famie passed away, he felt like he was absolutely nobody. Famie and Hugh had worked so tirelessly for the same ideals that without her rallying with him, he felt very much alone. Margaret helped her husband clear out Famie's home and Hugh, not wanting to face the memories, donated most of Famie's belongings to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Margaret, however, set aside Famie's washboard and carpet beater, the original weapons of choice for driving away bailiffs during the rent strikes. They would now serve as the family coat of arms.

Margaret gave birth to a son, Robert Bawn, but sadly, Hugh and his son never developed a relationship. From an early age, Robert despised his father for working so much, and Hugh, in turn, despised Robert for having an interest in football rather than building or politics. Robert began drinking at an early age, seeking older men for friends and spending much of his life in the pubs. The bitterness between father and son was so severe that when Robert married his wife Alice, Hugh and Margaret were not even invited to the wedding.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

The reader discovers that Hugh Bawn's fascination with public housing actually originated with his mother Famie, whose strength and work ethic are mirrored in her son throughout the story. The author's introduction of Famie at this point is essential in further developing the character of Hugh and demonstrating the weight of self-imposed expectations. It is stated that Hugh lived in the shadow of Famie's ideals, and Jamie admits that he lives in the shadow of Hugh's. Robert obviously feels the pressure of such ideals, but chooses to run in the other direction.

Chapter three is of great importance, as it is here in the story that the author depicts the fatherless relationships of Hugh and Robert. Hugh's boyhood longing to have a father such as John MacLean reveals a void in his life that he never voices, although it surfaces in the way he lives out his life. Robert's bitterness toward his absentee father finds him seeking the company of older men when selecting friends.

The description of Hugh and Margaret's relationship, beginning with their courtship, is also key, as it gives insight to a rare and genuine happiness within the story. Hugh was capable of loving. He loved his mother, his wife and his grandson. However, by withholding love from his son Robert, his grandson in turn suffered.

Part 1, Chapter 4

Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Two weeks into Jamie's visit, he receives a letter from his girlfriend Karen in Liverpool. Jamie begins to feel homesick for her and recalls all the little characteristics about Karen that make him love her: her orderliness and attention to detail, her laughter and special handwriting.

Jamie passes the time watching television with Gran, eating, chatting and laughing. His visits with Hugh are still unpredictable. Hugh wants Jamie at his bedside but can be extremely ungracious and ill-tempered at times. Despite his coughing, cursing and gruffness, Hugh's eyes are still as bright as they've ever been, and Jamie is as patient with him as can be.

As the days go by, Hugh softens and asks Jamie to play records for him. Cold, frail and shaking, he lies in his bed with tears in his eyes, listening to the songs. One morning he seems to get a second wind from nowhere and asks Jamie to get a wheelchair and take him to the pub. The two spend the day together, visiting pubs, horse races and parks, and riding throughout the city on a bus. Hugh entertains Jamie with stories of people and projects and unfinished plans. While strolling through a church and cemetery, a mischievous Hugh dares Jamie to climb the wall and check the bell.

Jamie feels troubled as Hugh tells him a story of the day the infamous John MacLean paid him a visit a few years back at his Housing Commission office. According to Hugh, he was working at his desk and he looked up to see Mr. MacLean standing in front of him. Mr. MacLean complimented Hugh on the fine job he was doing and made mention of the fine work of Hugh's mother Famie. Jamie knows that when Hugh was a boy, he had wished John MacLean were his father. Jamie knows that John MacLean died before Hugh even began the housing projects.

Later that night, as they sit drinking in a pub with Hugh telling stories and enjoying his spot as the center of attention with the locals, Jamie slips out into the rain to call Karen. Shivering in a phone booth, he listens to her lovely voice on the other end, telling him his accent is starting to sound quite Scottish. He misses her terribly and reminisces about his life back home with her in their neat, cozy apartment. He misses the smell of lemon on her skin. He thinks of all the times Karen has wanted a baby, and all the times her told her no. He thinks of the day it was a reality, but his wishes overruled the matter and she terminated it. Now all he can think of is how wrong he may have been and that maybe he can be a father after all. Their phone conversation is short and just long enough for him to relay how much he misses her and that he'll be home soon.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

As Jamie and Hugh are leaving for their day out, Hugh can sense that the pullers in the elevator are riding down and need oiling. Despite his body and health failing him, this is another instance where the author shows Hugh's refusal to abandon his obsession with work, as he continues to talk of the projects he has left ahead of him. These conversations with Jamie are poignant, because even though Hugh still talks a big game, Jamie is sure that Hugh is aware that he won't be accomplishing anymore of his grand plans.

The author once again uses weather to match Jamie's feelings of sadness and despair in the scene of his phone call home to Karen. The universal importance of tidiness and order is depicted again, as Jamie misses the orderliness of the home they share and Karen's "nice and neat" idiosyncrasies. Perhaps cleanliness and order were things that Jamie, Hugh and Jamie felt they could control when nothing else was controllable.

Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Jamie continues to pass the time with Hugh and Margie, putting up the Christmas tree, rolling cigarettes for Hugh or reading Burns poetry. He notices that Gran Margie doesn't have any living friends left and that she often lives in the past.

Jamie receives a call from Fergus McCluskey, a man in charge of the demolition of Hugh's buildings in Glasgow. Because Jamie was there as a child with Hugh when the buildings were commissioned, he secretly takes the train to see the buildings come down. He is so familiar with Hugh's construction and way of doing things that he even tells the demolition men where to hook the dynamite to best raze the structures.

The event is so emotional for Jamie that he is filled with an urgency to reunite with Alice while in Glasgow. He phones Gran Margie for his mother's number and reaches Alice's new husband, who tells Jamie he can find her at the local Railway Club. Jamie surprises Alice at the club where she is singing karaoke with her friends, and they have an afternoon of good conversation. Jamie has never seen his mother look so happy and healthy, with her hair and nails done, smiling with lots of friends. Alice's new husband Bob stops in at the club to meet Jamie on his way to work and is a distinctly sharp contrast to Robert. Very polite and mild-mannered, he seems genuinely pleased to meet Jamie and is very doting and attentive to Alice. Jamie is happy that for once, Alice has someone who is interested in her well-being and comfort.

The only damper on the event is a drunken journalist who recognizes Jamie as Hugh Bawn's nephew and starts spewing accusations about Hugh misappropriating money. Jamie is quick to defend his grandfather's reputation and confronts the man as several patrons step in and squelch the conflict. Despite this little confrontation, Jamie walks away from the afternoon with a feeling of contentment and peace after having had the chance to reunite with Alice.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

The author is slowly giving closure to events in Jamie's life. His descriptions of Alice let the reader know that although she chose an abusive husband over her son, she still loves Jamie and wants to be a part of his life. Jamie has always been more concerned about the welfare of his mother, and his visit back to Scotland, despite being for sad reasons, is yielding self-discovery and closure for his character.

Watching Hugh's buildings come down, while simultaneously watching Hugh's life slip away, is a difficult form of closure for Jamie. When he journeys home to England, he knows there will no longer be a mentor or familiar grand structure in Scotland for him to return to.

Part 1, Chapter 6

Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

Jamie and Gran Margie share Christmas dinner together and Margie goes out of her way to decorate her little table and lay out the food accordingly. Partway through their meal, she brings up the media accusations against Hugh. She admits that he cut corners on materials, but insists he always made it known that it was only to offer housing at the most affordable price. She claims that if Hugh were to hear the accusations against him, he would be beside himself with hurt and anger. Jamie has always known that Hugh tried to do the right thing and was an honest businessman. While Jamie's generation was a generation of progress that saw a need to tear down deteriorating buildings, some also felt the need to criticize the construction. Those who knew Hugh well enough knew the personal accusations to be false. Jamie can see that all the talk troubles Margie but that she needs to know his opinion of the matter.

Jamie and Gran try to feed Hugh crumbs of cake that night, but he lies huddled in his bed like a small child. Jamie can see the fear in Hugh's watery eyes and tells him how much his life has meant to him, how much he loves him, and that he is one of the greats.

Hugh dies quietly the day after Christmas, and Margie is beside herself with grief. Even though she has seen the end coming for a long while, she is still unprepared now that the moment has actually arrived. Despite Hugh's years of being a workaholic, they had a good, loving marriage, and Margie cannot remember life without him. Jamie writes his grandfather's obituary for the local newspaper and helps Margie with the funeral arrangements.

The priest at Hugh's funeral delivers a lengthy and moving eulogy of the great "Mr. Housing," noting that the task of cleaning up and rebuilding after the war could not have fallen on a better man than Hugh Bawn, and mentioning the many years of sacrifice and hard work Hugh gave for his country. As Jamie reads from the Psalms, he looks out into the crowd and spots his father Robert, almost unrecognizable at the back of the church. He returns to his seat to comfort a weeping Margaret, and communion is served before singing *Faith of our Fathers* and dispersing to the cemetery.

Hugh is buried beside his mother Famie's grave, and Jamie and Margaret bid him their final goodbyes.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

The day Hugh is laid to rest, so are the accusations that he misappropriated money. The priest delivers a eulogy that is not only a moving tribute to Hugh, but also clears his good name, with an emphasis on his noble achievements. Margie is given some sense of closure now that the priest has silenced the matter.

The author once again uses symbolism by choosing the hymn *Faith of Our Fathers* and using flowers, as a grieving Margie tells her husband and lover goodbye with a twist of violets, so fitting to her character.

Part 1, Chapter 7

Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary

Jamie travels to Dumfries, Scotland to visit his father Robert, who vanished quickly after the church ceremony. Jamie recalls his last visit to Dumfries, as a boy, to visit Robert in a mental hospital. He remembers how Granda Hugh had waited outside for him while he tried to visit with his father, only to be verbally beaten down to a pulp. Robert had spewed nothing but hatred to his son and Jamie had left, determined never to see his father again. Now, many years later, here he was, looking for Robert once more.

The locals say Robert is a taxi driver and Jamie tracks him down right away. Robert steps out of his cab with a smile on his face and looks astonishingly well, with no resemblance to his former raging self. Clean and away from his drinking, he has started a new life for himself. He reaches out his hand toward Jamie, calls him "son" and offers apologies immediately. Jamie confronts him about the horrible early years, angry that Robert is trying to blame his illness from alcohol on his terrible parenting. Still, it lasts for only a moment, as both father and son seem more bent on salvaging their future than slugging out the past. Robert invites Jamie to his home, where they have tea and catch one another up on their lives. Jamie notices the hand-painted motivational quotes that Robert has hung throughout his kitchen, urging him to take things one day at a time. He listens intently as his father shares about a friend up the road who is teaching him about the compounds in rocks, and likens it to the study of pressure and time. They talk about everything from driving and the spring fair to life in England and Karen. Robert asks if he'll someday have the opportunity to meet Jamie's girl.

Jamie has written a letter to Karen, letting her know he is coming home. First, he shares more time with his father, having dinner and watching Robert speak at an Alcoholics Anonymous Conference. As they part ways, for the first time, both father and son's eyes smile at one another. Robert has been healed of his sickness and is a different man now. Jamie has been healed of the anger he has harbored and can now work at loving his father.

The chapter closes with Jamie preparing to leave while helping Margie sort through Hugh's belongings. Margie assures Jamie that she will be just fine, and encourages him to return to Karen in England and truly live life.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

The author gives the readers what they have been waiting so long to hear: a bantering of accusations and apologies that have been stifled for so long. While Robert fully expects his son to hate him, Jamie asks Robert why he hated his own father. Robert is quick to respond that he never hated Hugh; rather, he simply felt unloved by him. True

to character, Jamie begins to focus on reconciling with his father rather than remembering things worth forgetting.

The author closes the story with a weight being lifted off Jamie. When Hugh dies, so do all the heavy expectations that have burdened Jamie's shoulders. He is now free to return to England to live his own life out from under Hugh's shadow. His responsibilities in Scotland have ended and relationships have been mended.

Characters

Jamie Bawn

Jamie is a handsome, thirty-five-year-old man living in Liverpool, England who has returned to his native home of Scotland to visit his dying grandfather. He faces a variety of emotions upon his return. Years of living with his drunken father as a child, and a mother who wouldn't stand up to her husband, have left a knot in his stomach and memories he would rather forget. Although the years he spent with his Granda Hugh and Gran Margie Bawn were peaceful and stable, ten years have passed since he's been home, and there is even more to deal with beyond Hugh's impending death. Always the peacekeeper, Jamie's character is sometimes meek and feels swallowed up in his surroundings. The author warms the reader to Jamie with tales of him as a child and his gentle manner with his grandparents.

Hugh Bawn

Jamie's grandfather is a popular man known as Mr. Housing. Hugh has a rough mouth but is extremely business-savvy and is responsible for the successful rebuilding of Scotland after the war. Very intelligent and driven, Hugh never drank in his younger years and was known for having a pint of lemonade at the bar. Because he was a workaholic, he hardly ate because he wouldn't take the time. Hugh carried on his mother Famie's visions of progress, along with her standards of cleanliness and order. He was a mentor to Jamie and loved him more than his own son Robert. Now, as an elderly man in the last stages of his life, he has both hardened and softened in areas as he reflects on the span of his life.

Margaret (Margie) Bawn

Jamie's grandmother is an endearing woman who has been an unending source of love and support to her husband Hugh. She is always fixing herself, mainly out of habit or nervousness, straightening her hair or primping her curls. She has a love affair with flowers and keeps many journals throughout the years, full of pressed petals with their Latin names written in her script. Jamie and Hugh actually associate flowers with Margie and marvel at how much they have learned from her collections and the botanical secrets she shares with them.

Robert Bawn

Jamie's father is a freckled man with orange hair and green eyes whose rough way of living had him using a walking stick before he was forty years old. His mouth is as foul as he is mean, and he spends his days drinking and sleeping. Everyone around him,

even the household dog, fears Robert. From the way the author depicts Robert in his later redemptive years, it's hard to believe he is the same character.

Alice Bawn

Jamie's mother is a quiet, gentle woman who encourages the good influences in her son's life. Before she met Robert, Alice was an only child, living in Scotland without a family. Her father had been killed in the war and her mother was remarried and living in Australia. According to Jamie, Alice had been full of life, but her marriage to Robert knocked all the singing and dancing out of her by the time she was 25 years old. Alice regained her youth later in life when she remarried, and despite her string of poor choices, it is clear she loves her son very much.

Objects/Places

Ayrshire, Scotland

A beautiful town of open moors and salt in the air, where hills are made of broken castles. This is where Granda Hugh and Gran Margie reside, and much of Jamie's trip home is spent here.

Glasgow, Scotland

A city of progress with towering buildings, modern shops and people on the move. Glasgow is the site of the demolition of Hugh's famous structures. It is also here that Jamie meets with his mother Alice at the Railway Club.

Dumfries, Scotland

Jamie's father Robert resides in Dumfries, a seaside village of red rocks, quaint little streets and white bungalows. It is here that father and son have their reunion. This is the first time Jamie has set foot in Dumfries since the terrible summer visit to his father in a mental hospital, many years ago.

Themes

Self-Discovery

The reader is given the notion that, while Jamie was content in England, he unknowingly has been hiding from any self-identity resembling Robert or Hugh. He has also lived with a firm decision never to have any children of his own—although towards the end of his journey, he discovers another part of himself and realizes he could actually make a good father, despite past circumstances.

Jamie also discovers the similarities between Hugh and Jamie and between Robert and Hugh—certain things have carried through, even by the way they perform everyday tasks or arrange their homes. Unfortunately, Hugh's disdain for Robert (which may have started out only as disappointment) carried through with Robert's disdain for Hugh. This eventually gave way to Robert and Jamie's mutual disdain for each other. When Jamie meets a fully recovered and reborn Robert, Robert tells him that he never hated Hugh; they simply never understood one another. Jamie realizes he can have a relationship with Robert that he never thought possible, regardless how late it may seem.

Making a Difference

Famie Bawn had no idea that her resolutions would have such an impact on her family. Acting only on what she believed, Famie was the first to lead the Scotland rent strikes and successfully lobbied for municipal housing. This same drive was passed on to Hugh and Jamie; both men felt an immense need to continually better their surroundings, circumstances and selves. Hugh devoted his entire life to municipal housing and rebuilding Scotland after the war. While Jamie shared Hugh's interest in building, his life was even more focused on making a difference in relationships and peacekeeping.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is the underlying theme of *Our Fathers*. Despite past mistakes and severed relationships, the characters are somehow able to ignore their wounds for a time and make an effort to forgive. Even though Hugh has held a quiet grudge against Jamie for moving to England and not staying behind to build towers in Scotland, Jamie's visit home is enough for Hugh to let go of his anger and resentment.

Despite feelings of abandonment resulting from Alice's constant decisions to choose her husband over her son, Jamie still finds himself unable to leave Scotland without seeing his mother and letting her know he's fine. As much as it is a relief for him to see Alice happy and looking well, it is more important for him to let her know that their relationship has mended.

Despite a deeply bitter feud between Robert and Hugh—Robert even banned Hugh from his wedding—it's important to note that Robert could not let his father be buried without arriving at the church to pay his respects.

Even though Robert doesn't make the first move to reconcile with his son, he immediately responds with efforts to make amends when Jamie takes the trouble to look him up. Perhaps he had been afraid that Jamie would turn away any attempts for an apology on his part.

Style

Point of View

Our Fathers is written in the first person, narrated by the main character Jamie Bawn. The author delivers a convincing portrayal of this young man's life, and because it is written in first person, the reader is able to get inside Jamie's head and share in his array of emotions. This allows the reader to know Jamie's thoughts on the frequent occasions that he decides against voicing them audibly. His feelings toward his mother and his girlfriend Karen, for example, are revealed principally by his thoughts rather than his words.

Setting

The story is set in various towns throughout Scotland, with the main bits taking place in Glasgow and Ayrshire. In many scenes, the main character, Jamie Bawn, is riding on a train; this seems to be a fitting backdrop for many key points in his life.

Because the structure is so transitional, the setting changes from: Early Scotland during the war; to Post-war Scotland with towering buildings going up; to Modern-day Scotland with ruins in the fields, frequent demolitions, and the construction of new buildings.

Language and Meaning

The language of *Our Fathers* is easy to read and very much a representation of native Scotland. Because the author himself is Scottish, he is able to breathe authentic cultural life into his characters and descriptions. Scottish slang and quips are speckled throughout and make for an interesting read. Because the author includes this language, the somewhat dreary plot is actually humorous at times, due to the sarcastic quips by the characters. Additionally, the author refers to native poets, such as Fergusson and MacDiarmid, and drinks, such as hot Vimto, that would be typical to the characters but foreign to the reader.

Structure

Our Fathers contains seven chapters and opens with a leading page quote by Samuel Johnson: "Be not too hasty, to trust, or to admire, the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but they live like men."

The literary structure is made up of back-and-forth transitions from past to present. The author uses chapter one to describe the early years of Jamie Bawn and transitions to his adult life in chapter two. Chapter three takes the reader back to the life of Jamie's great-grandmother and the story of Hugh Bawn as a boy. The reader returns to the

present in chapter four, with Hugh's final days coming to an end. Chapter five begins to prepare the reader for the book's conclusion, with a reunion between Jamie and his mother. Chapter six ushers Hugh Bawn into the afterlife, and chapter seven brings about the reconciliation of Jamie and his father

Quotes

"And books became the only breath in that foreign room he kept us in. The only soothing language known, and all the kindness of printed words just taught me to hate him more, and to pity him." Chapter 1, page 6

"'Indeed, the study of pressure and time, she said. 'But don't forget life, Jamie Bawn. Don't forget life. Ecosystems. For living is all that matters in the end.'" Chapter 1, page 28

"Our fathers were made for grief. I could see it now. And all our lives we waited for sadness to happen." Chapter 2, page 55

"The unplaceable sadness of belonging was suddenly mine on that station platform. I saw that I wasn't here for much. To do the right thing was all." Chapter 2, page 63

"Oh hell for them that couldn't show love without feeling loved themselves." Chapter 2, page 77

"But Hugh listened to John MacLean that day. He was yards away. Hugh could smell the soap. He could smell the soap off John MacLean and he wished he had John MacLean for a father." Chapter 3, page 111

"Everybody has one day - just one diamond day - against which they are apt to judge many of the days of their lies. There will be other great, warmer days, richer times, moments of love or of grief, but none of them will match the movement of life as lived that one day." Chapter 4, page 138

"He had given me his past. He had given me his tools. I would use them to piece together his life's end. And use them to explain something of my own life, separate from his, but bound the same, by ideals and plans and futures we could never know." Chapter 4, page 150

"For years I'd been walking out the door. Walking away. And being always certain I knew the way forward. But now I wanted to walk in." Chapter 5, page 204

"It came as no surprise to me that my mother had found someone who spoke carefully. The first half of her life was nothing but bastard language. I would bet it was a priority; find a man who will speak gently amongst women and strangers." Chapter 5, page 205

"I went back to Margaret. The people had left the grave. She leaned over with a small twist of violets. She kissed them and dropped them in. She spoke seven words with great stillness. 'I won't be long at your back,' she said." Chapter 6, page 254

"He wanted now to take charge of his story; he wished to present himself as he himself thought good, without complication, without the ravenous interventions of those who will always know better." Chapter 7, page 278

Topics for Discussion

What effect did Hugh Bawn's childhood have on the man he became?

Why do you think the author chose to keep Karen in England for the duration of Jamie's journey?

Discuss pivotal points that you believe made Jamie change his mind about becoming a father himself.

Do you think Jamie and Robert would have reconciled if Hugh hadn't died?

Why do you think Margaret and Alice never intervened to reconcile Hugh and Robert?

Did the author cause you to rethink the value of our short lives? Explain.

Speculate about the future life of Jamie Bawn, considering all that is behind him.