

# **Out Stealing Horses Study Guide**

**Out Stealing Horses by Anne Born and Per Petterson**

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# Plot Summary

Out Stealing Horses, by Per Petterson (translated by Anne Born), begins with Trond Sander, a 67-year-old man living in a small secluded cabin on the Swedish border. Though he has lived most of his life in the city, he began life in a small place not unlike the one he is now in.

The reader learns some background on Trond. He has been married a couple of times; he is once divorced, and then his second wife, died, leaving him a widower. The reader is not told why he has chosen to be solitary, but the reader does learn that he has a lot of family that he has left back in the city, with whom he has broken off all contact. Trond would have been well on his way to his life of quiet and solitude except that one evening, a person he thought he would never see again shows up in the small town there. His name is Lars Haug. Seeing Lars sparks off a chain reaction of memories, which cascade and form the bulk of the story. Trond speaks of the time when Lars accidentally shot his twin brother, Odd, in the face, during the summer of 1948. As he thinks about that sobering event, he becomes lost in his memories of that summer.

Trond's memories drift back to the time prior to the summer of 1948. World War II was still ongoing. Trond, his sister and his mother were living in Oslo, but their father lived in a small cabin just on the Swedish border. Though he and his family didn't know it at first, he would later learn that his father was a part of the resistance movement, and often moved documents, supplies, or people across the border. Their code word for making these dangerous missions was called 'Stealing Horses'. Trond and his family never knew what it was that he did, and they didn't see much of him during the war years. When he returned to them on the conclusion of the war, it was as if a stranger had returned.

In order to reconnect with Trond, his father took him to the very same cabin where he operated the resistance from. He had purchased the cabin and the land and intended to cut down the trees to sell for lumber. Trond and his father grew very close and Trond realized, at the age of 15, that his father was as close to a hero as he'd ever met. Trond was terribly proud of him.

There were some other boys that lived on the neighboring farm, Jon, Lars, and Odd, who routinely came over to hang out with Trond. Jon, who was older than Trond, took a liking to him. He taught Trond about the woods in the area, and how to live off of the land. Jon was also reckless and enticed Trond to take risks. One of those risks, over the course of the summer, was to steal horses. This entailed the boys sneaking up on horses, jumping on them, and riding them wherever they would take them. Almost the equivalent of going for a joy ride in a car. Jon also had a dark side, as Trond learned one afternoon while they were exploring the woods. Jon climbed a tree and found a bird's nest with some perfect looking eggs in it. They both remarked about how beautiful they were, then Jon smashed them all, laughing. Trond was horrified.



One day, when Trond was over at Jon's house, Jon left his rifle leaning in the corner of the room. Lars, who was ten, didn't think that it is loaded, and started playing with it. In the process, he killed his twin brother, Odd. The family was devastated, and Jon, feeling that it was his fault, couldn't live with the guilt and shortly left never to return. This hurt Trond terribly, as Jon was his best friend.

Jon's father died shortly after that from injuries he obtained from chopping trees down. It is while Trond's father and Jon were at the hospital, that Trond met Franz, who was a friend of his father's. He told Trond about his father's exploits during the war. Once again, Trond was extremely proud to be the son of such a daring war hero.

This image of his father was fractured when shortly after Jon's father's death, Trond caught his own father kissing Jon's mother and was ashamed of him. Trond is also secretly upset because he, too, had found himself attracted to her. He decided to ask Franz about why his father would do such a thing as to betray his mother. Franz told him that most likely it was because Jon's Mother and Trond's father served together during the war, moving documents across the border. This type of thing draws people together, he explained to Trond.

Trond realized that the tension he'd always felt between Jon and his own father must have been because Jon knew about the affair. This also explained why Jon's father always seemed distant to all of them. For the first time in his life, Trond began to view his father as a human being - a flawed human being - instead of viewing him from the perspective of a young boy's hero worship.

As the summer came to a close, Trond's father told him that he needed to pack his things to head home. Trond asked him why he wasn't packing, and his father told him that he would come later. Trond arrived home and each day afterward rode his bike to the train station to see if his father would get off soon.

The story jumps back to the present day where Lars and Trond help each other cut fire wood and haul it in. Though they don't say a lot, what they do say indicates that both men, as younger men, had chosen to distance themselves from the adulterous parent. Now, both approaching 70 years old, all they want is to be left alone.

Ellen, Trond's daughter, comes looking for him. She finally tracks him down and is in the cabin waiting for him when he returns from chopping wood one afternoon. Ellen can tell that he is in good health and is there for some peace and solace after his second wife's death. He agrees to regularly check in with her just to let her know that he is okay. Then, she leaves.

The storyline jumps back to Trond's arrival back in Oslo after his summer with his father. Several months had passed, and Trond's father had not arrived. That morning, Trond's mother received a letter from Trond's father telling her that he was not coming back. He wrote that the money he and Trond made selling the lumber from the summer had been left for them in a Swedish bank. The entire summer had been a planned betrayal by Trond's father. They traveled to the bank to draw the money out, and Trond's mother



was disappointed with the amount that had been left to them. Still, there was enough there, she thought, to purchase Trond his first suit. She thought that he would now need a good suit. Trond thinks, as he recalls walking down that street with his mother, that even then he knew that each person decides when and where they will be hurt, and how they will deal with it.



# Chapters 1-3

## Summary

In these chapters the reader is introduced to the main character, Trond Sanders, who is a 67-year-old man living in a remote cabin on the Swedish border in Norway. The year is 2004. He shares with the reader that he lives in a fairly remote place, but that within sight there is another cabin, with another old man (a little older) living there with a dog, just like Trond. He shares that since moving out to the wilderness his perspective on world events has shifted. He still listens to the BBC, but it is just more an entertainment more than his wanting real information any more. His dog, Lyra, is his only companion, and he likes it that way.

Trond spends his days fixing things, occupying his time with staying busy around the area. He has lived most of his life in Oslo, a major city in Norway, and had always longed to live as he is living now. He has a type of self satisfaction, having made a decent living before retiring. One night he is wakened by the other old man standing out in the cold calling for his dog. Trond tries to ignore it, but knows that he won't be getting back to sleep anyway, so he puts on his clothes and goes to be a good neighbor. They introduce themselves to one another, and the neighbor, Lars, hesitates when he hears Trond's name.

Lars spots his dog in the shadows and calls for him again. The men walk toward the dog, but it bares its teeth at them. They both stop and Lars is shocked at his dog's behavior. He tells Trond about a time that he had to shoot a dog once and thought that he would never have to do that again. When Trond asks Lars about the dog that he shot, Lars said it was many years ago on his parents' farm when a large German Shepherd had come onto their property killing deer, in particular fawns. Lars' dog, Poker, deciding that Trond is of no consequence, consents to come back inside.

Back in his cabin, Trond recalls where he knows Lars from. Lars lived on the farm next to Trond's father's summer cabin. The year was 1948, in July. Lars' brother, Jon, had been Trond's best friend when Trond had come to help his father cut timber to sell. The story continues on in Trond's memory of that summer.

(Flashback)

Jon taught him about the woods, and how to 'steal horses', which amounted to the boys sneaking up on the horses in Barkald's pasture, jumping bareback on the horses, then riding them. The horses were never actually 'stolen', but the boys thought that calling it that made it more fun. There were twins, Lars and Odd, that were Jon's younger brothers, but Trond didn't hang out with them. The older brother Jon was his best friend.

The Older Trond pauses in his memory to remark that one can't steal horses alone, that it is impossible, in fact. Definitely a two person job.



Trond recalls that during their 'stealing horses' escapade when he'd jumped out of the tree onto his horse that first afternoon, that he'd hit so hard it had sent a jolt up through his body and made him vomit on the horse's neck. He thought at the time that it is lucky that Jon was so far ahead because Jon would surely have made fun of him. Soon, the sick feeling subsided, and he enjoyed riding through the brisk air. This was short lived as both horses raced towards a fence, then stopped short, throwing Trond over the barbed wire fence onto his back. Jon had thought to bring a rope with him, so he had been able to control his horse better.

Trond had gone home and his father caught him coming around the far side of the barn. Though Trond's arm was bleeding, his clothes were torn, and he looked as if he was aching all over, his father handed him a scythe and told him to cut down the stinging nettle plants on the other side of the barn. Trond told his father that it would hurt. His father replied that a person decides what will and won't hurt in life, then walked away.

Jon hadn't been too far from Trond, and he caught up with him by Trond's barn. Trond told Jon that he had to cut the nettles down, but Jon convinced him to slip into the woods with him quickly, as there was something that Jon wanted to show him. They went into the woods, Jon climbed up into a tree, and there where the two branches divided, was a nest. He told Trond that it was a Goldcrest's nest. Trond thought that the nest was glorious as it was constructed to the point where it looked as if it hovered in place. Jon retrieved the one tiny egg from the interior of the nest, so small that it fit on the tip of his finger. Trond said that he's just amazed that something so tiny and perfect could grow wings and fly away. A look had come over Jon, his eyes grew dark, and he dropped the egg from his finger where it smashed on the roots below. Then, before Trond could react, Jon had ripped the delicately made nest from the tree, shredded it, and smashed its remains against the trunk. Then, angrily, and without explanation, he slid down the tree and ran off.

The temperature was dropping and Trond could tell that the weather was about to take a turn for the worse. He climbed down from the tree and went home, wondering what it was that he'd said that made Jon so upset. Half way to the farm the rain started to fall.

The timeline shifts in Chapter 3 to describe Trond's trainride to the farm that summer of 1948. His father and he had boarded a train and made the long trip together. He recalls that the terrain was the same and unchanging and that he slept most of the way. Then, when they arrived, Trond recalls that his father called all the fish "Jacob" though Trond never knew why.

Still in the summer of 1948, and Trond had managed to leave the woods and had walked through the rain to his father's cabin. By the time he reached the cabin he was drenched. Without judgement, his father had him get out of his clothes, stand by the fire, and eat some dinner. Trond fell asleep wondering what his father was going to do with him in the morning. When he woke his father asked him if he had been out with Jon, and Trond told him that they were 'stealing horses'. His father's face had suddenly shifted quickly, almost warily, and Trond hadn't known why. His father asked him to describe what he was talking about, then seemed to relax.



The next day Jon went hunting, and ended up shooting some hares. He brought them home and had just remembered that it was his turn to watch his brothers while his parents were out. He quickly leaned his gun in the corner of the cabin, then looked for his brothers. They were nowhere to be found. He searched all over the property, and had run into Trond down by the creek. Suddenly, they heard a shot from Jon's cabin. Both boys went racing toward the house. Jon's father raced out of the woods for the cabin and had gotten there first. When Jon and Trond got there, Jon's father was holding Odd's body. Lars, who had been playing with Jon's rifle, had accidentally shot Odd through the heart.

Later, when he returned to his own cabin, Trond learned that this was not where the tragedy for that day had ended. Early in the morning, Jon's mother had been given a lift in a van that was headed for Innbygda and wasn't home. Jon's father hitched up the horse and headed there to get her, as she was not supposed to come home until the next day. When they arrived home, it was clear that Jon's father had not told his mother about Odd's death.

The funeral was Trond's first funeral to ever attend. He most remembers that neither his father nor Jon's father could look one another in the eye. Then, graveside, Lars broke away from everyone and took to running and sobbing among the headstones. Finally, Jon captured him, and gave Trond a dark look before he left. Back then, the older Trond interjects, he had no idea why Jon should hate him so.

## Analysis

One of the first things readers may start to notice in this notice is the use of 'doubles'. There are two branches that hold the bird's nest, two horses, two twin boys, and in the present, two older men who both live in cabins where their only companion is their faithful dog. There is also the reference to 'stealing horses' being a two-man job. This phrase will resurface in later chapters, and also indicates a possible doubling. The reader also learns that Trond, the narrator, has had two wives.

In Chapter 2 Lars talks about having to shoot a dog and that it was one of the worst things he'd ever had to do. What is important to note about his retelling of the scene is that symbolically the dog, a German Shepherd (Alsatian) had been terrorizing their farm, targeting the young fawns and calves, but more importantly represents the wanton destruction of the Third Reich. That the dog targeted the young and innocent gives a subtle nod to the millions of innocents that were destroyed, often, by the German killing machines.

The phrase that Trond's father told him in regards to the nettles ("a person decides what hurts them") will also come back later on in the novel. This is a piece of advice that Trond heard and uses in his life to make himself successful. Trond's father most likely was referencing the time he spent in the war and how he dealt with things that were horrible and difficult to face.





The Goldcrest's nest is also a symbol of unthinking, brutish, barbarity. Again, it is the destruction of the innocent by a larger, greater force, for no good reason. Trond didn't know it at the time, but Jon's destruction of the nest and the egg was retaliation against Trond for something that Trond's father had done. At the time, Trond just thought it is a barbaric act and was appalled.

The fact that Trond's father called all things that are hunted (fish and wild game) "Jacob" is a Biblical allusion to the story of Jacob and Esau, two brothers, and a betrayal. The author may very well be suggesting that there will be a very large betrayal coming, and that brothers may be involved.

In Chapter 3, the reader sees that, indeed, two brothers were involved in a tragic death. Jon had been out shooting, and had come back with two hares which he hung inside the cabin. Because he'd forgotten that it was his turn to watch the boys, he looked around, couldn't find them, and dashed back out. Of course, the death was an accident, but Jon didn't believe he can stay after this.

That Jon's mother wasn't even at the cabin, but away in the city is interesting. When she returned, Jon's father had not told her that her child was dead. The author describes how nicely she was dressed and how happy she seemed. At this point in the story, the reader may tend to overlook this detail, but this would be a mistake, as this particular author does not waste space on the page. She was happy for a reason that the reader does not know yet. The narrator, Trond, also recalls that Jon's father and his own father could not look at one another at the funeral. Trond still didn't know why.

The theme of Family is introduced with the trip on the train and Trond expounding on how wonderful his father is. It is clear that he idolizes his father. Later, the family relationships between Jon and his family is also explored. The overall message being that family is there to take care of one another and the share the burden of living.

The theme of War is touched upon lightly, not only in the symbolism offered, but by mention. Trond knows that his father was a war hero, helping to smuggle documents, supplies, and people across the border during WWII. The destruction of war is only suggested through the symbolism, but it does lay the foundation for later expansion.

Overall, the predominant theme of these chapters is that of Loneliness and Isolation. Trond has purposely sought this lifestyle out, even after having lived in the city most of his life. He prefers not having to answer to anyone, having anyone ask him for anything, and he enjoys pleasing only himself. The reader can infer from this that Trond has been a very involved person for most of his life, and this call to peace and solitude is something that he has been seeking for a long time.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of doubling and doubles.



## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Family, in particular the similarities and differences between Trond's family and Jon's family.

## Discussion Question 3

What are some of the possible reasons why Jon's father and Trond's father would not look one another in the eye?

## Vocabulary

homesteads, barbed-wire, prosaic, scornful, pondering, paraffin, ajar, chattering, trousers, welled, paddock, hares, jetty



# Chapters 4-6

## Summary

These chapters open up with Old Trond still remembering the past. The reader learns that Trond had found out from his father shortly after their arrival that they were to chop all of the timber down on the North side of the cabin. Trond thought at the time that it was because his father didn't like how it cast a shadow over the cabin for most of the day, or possibly because they needed the money badly.

When they were back in Oslo, Trond's father had told him that they had reached a crossroads. He asked if Trond wanted to come with him to the woods for the summer, or stay in Oslo with his mother and sister. Of course, Trond had jumped at the chance to be alone with his father. Trond's sister had felt slighted, but then had relented when she determined that even if she had gone she would have not had fun, but would have been relegated to cooking and cleaning.

(Flashback)

The plan was to chop the trees down, then float them down the river to the Swiss log processing plant. Trond didn't understand why his father hadn't hauled them to Jon's father's house where there was a saw mill. But, Trond also hadn't wanted to make his father cross, and besides, he reasoned, maybe Jon's father's operation wasn't large enough to handle the load.

Trond and his father went over to Mr. Barkald's farm (the same farm where Jon and Trond had gone for a joy ride on the horses) to assist with putting up the hay. They agreed to help in exchange for the use of a couple of horses to help haul the larger logs out of the forest. While there for the event, Trond noticed the absence of Jon or his father, but Jon's mother was there. There were other women helping, of course, but Trond was stricken by Jon's mother's beauty. He was embarrassed when his father caught him looking at Jon's mother. Trond also thought that his father seemed to understand the effect that she had on him, which made Trond curious.

In the present, as an old man, Trond recalls that at first he hadn't made the connection between Lars's name and his boyhood friend. Trond finds that he is a bit disgusted that of all the places he should choose, where he wants to be left alone, not known, he should land right next door to someone he grew up with. He hopes that Lars has not recognized him. Trond plans to continue as if he doesn't remember Lars. Later that week, he sees a lynx, shortly after he'd been run off the road by a logging truck. He tells some of the men in town what he saw, but they hadn't believed him.

The reader learns that the house where Trond lives is called, The Top. The man at the garage, named Olav, where Trond takes his car to be fixed (from being run off of the road) offers him a cup of coffee while he waits. His place is called The Top because it



sits at the top of a hill and overlooks the lake. The man says he looked at buying The Top but that it needed a lot of work. The mechanic shares that his father has just died. Trond offers his condolences, but thinks that it is never just as simple as missing your parent. At least, for Trond, it has never been that straightforward.

It is later, back at The Top, as Trond is taking a chainsaw to a downed tree, that he remembers, again, the summer of 1948 when he had begun chopping wood in the forest with his father. He'd never been so tired. In a flashback, he is 15 again, swinging an ax. He quickly learned that one ate and drank, while working, but not too much. He also learned that to look at the sum total of the work would only slow you down, so he stopped counting the number of trees that he'd cut up, and the work went faster.

Trond spoke with the other men when they took breaks and they all shared some part of their past and memories of his father. These were things that Trond had never heard about his father, and he began to see his father in a different light. Not just as his father, but as a man. He was unsure of what to do with the information. One thing was for certain: every man in the crew couldn't keep their eyes off of Jon's mother. Jon's father eventually joined them, and he watched Jon's mother, too, but in a different way, Trond notes. He couldn't make sense of what was not being said, but it was just as surely as loud and as palpable as if someone had spoken.

Later, both Jon's father and Trond's father got the timber into the water, and were standing on them. The way the light slanted in on them was surreal, and Trond thought that it all looked like a painting. Jon's mother stood next to Trond and he was very aware of her. All of a sudden he didn't want to be seen as anyone's child or son. Companionably, he rested his arm across her shoulders. At that moment both Jon's father and Trond's father looked over at him, and Jon's father lost his balance on the logs in the water. He was trapped, then pinned. He wasn't in deep water, but he was hurt badly. They had gotten him out and to the doctor over in Innbygda.

Back at their cabin, a thunderstorm erupted in the evening. Both Trond and his father soaped up and ran out into the rain for a quick, but cold, shower. When they ran back indoors to warm up, Trond's father told him that he knew that Trond was almost a man. In all seriousness, he turned to Trond and said that what happened with Jon's father was his fault and that it should never have happened. Trond had thought at the time that he was speaking about Jon's father's accident. But he wasn't certain. Later, Trond went to bed. When he got up in the middle of the night, his father was not there. His bed had not been slept in.

## Analysis

The theme of Coming of Age is most notable in these chapters. Trond heard from the other men on the logging crew, different stories about his father, some from the war, some from when he was a young man. This is a different perspective and understanding that Trond was gaining in regards to his father, and he began to see his father, not only as his father, but as a friend, a war hero, and a man. In some respects this saddened



Trond, because with this realization came the understanding that his father was human and was liable to make mistakes. Trond had crossed into that state of limbo that all adolescents enter, which is realizing that his parent(s) are real people and not perfect, or super strong, or able to handle everything.

Trond also learned from Franz, one of the workers, that he found it mighty peculiar that his father would be chopping wood to float downriver at that time of the year, when the sap was clearly up in the trees (making them heavier). Franz said that he wouldn't question it, of course, but he just found it odd. Trond, upon learning this, also began wondering why his father was in a hurry to chop down all of the woods.

Symbolically, the woods are a hindrance, a very real barrier between Jon's house and Trond's father's cabin. Though Trond didn't know it yet, Jon's mother and Trond's father had been involved for some time. By chopping the woods down, Trond's father made the decision to remove the barrier. Additionally, the money that he made from the sale of the wood would be used to absolve him of any guilt, which will be explored later in more detail.

Old Trond seeing the Lynx is significant as well. Many people who've lived in the region their whole lives scoff at the idea that he's actually seen one, but he is adamant that he saw what he saw. This will directly relate back to some of the images that he will recall in later chapters of stolen moments and hidden desires that he also witnessed, something, too, that many will deny or believe happened.

The broken headlight on Old Trond's car is also symbolic of Trond and his ability to understand some things clearly about his life. The car, quite literally, can't provide enough light to see. With the oncoming winter, Trond realizes that he must get it repaired, that it is important to be able to see clearly. So, too, is the author suggesting that Trond also will need to begin seeing things as they truly are, and not just dim shapes of suggested outlines of things in his past.

Old Trond finds out that his house is called The Top by the locals, because it has a commanding view of the entire lake. From up there, one has a clarity of vision and perspective. The author is suggesting that by living there, Trond will receive some of the clarity and solace that he has been seeking.

The theme of Solitude is touched upon with his upset over realizing that Lars Haug is his childhood friend from that summer in 1948. Trond truly wants to be anonymous and not have anyone depend on him, need anything from him. He wishes to be a hermit. And, yet, in many ways his actions don't line up with his declarations. He goes into town, speaks with people, and they know about him. He helps Lars look for his dog one evening, when he didn't have to. It is clear that what Old Trond says, and what he truly believes deep down are in conflict.

The author uses the suggestion of a 'cold shower' to perhaps suggest that both Trond and his father were affected by Jon's Mother, but it was Trond's father who acted on that attraction. Though Trond couldn't fathom where his father had gone, the suggestion is



that knowing that Jon's mother was alone at her cabin was too much of a temptation, and he had gone to be with her. Trond didn't even consider this as a possibility, which shows that in many ways, at this point in his life, he was still very naive when it came to intimate relationships between men and women.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the theme of Coming of Age, in Chapter 5, and how Trond's perspective is shifting towards his father.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the symbolism of the broken headlight on Old Trond's car.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why do the locals call Trond's house, The Top, and what is its significance?

## **Vocabulary**

confirmation, bitterness, overwhelmed, burstingly, oppressively, humid, slates, forestall, eaves, intimidating, threshold, frisky, icily



## Chapters 7-9

### Summary

These chapters open up with Lars making an impromptu visit to Trond's cabin around dinnertime one evening. Trond remarks that the time of night, right before dark, is what he calls the 'blue time', that it paints everything in a washed out blue color. Trond is surprised, and a little put out, but he invites Lars in and offers him dinner. After they've eaten, Lars clears his throat and tells Trond that he remembers who he is. Trond acknowledges that he, too, has figured out who Lars is. The two men leave it at that, finish their meal, and part.

(Flashback)

Trond's father was gone, that much was clear. He searched the cabin, but his father had clearly not spent the night in the cabin. Trond was frightened as he'd never been alone before, even when one or the other of his parents went out for a time, someone was always there, or at least they would come back in a short while. This was not one of those times. Trond went down to the lake's edge and noticed that the row boat was gone. The smell of all the cut trees from the day before still hung in the air. For some reason, Trond knew that he was not the boy that he had been just the day before.

Trond walked a good distance down the graveled road, but didn't see any sign of his father. Even though it was the summer, the night air was chilly and he decided to go into a cow barn to warm up. He fell asleep. A milkmaid woke him the next morning and she told him that it was okay that he slept there. He sat there and watched her milk the cow and became aroused. He was also afraid that somehow she would know and he would be embarrassed, so he stayed very still.

Trond decided that he needed to try and get his mind off onto something else so he could leave the barn. He thought back to when the Germans first invaded Oslo, and his father had started going away for longer and longer periods of time. As he recalled feeling so afraid for his father, and wondering how his life would change, he found that he was now able to move around without evidence of his earlier arousal. The milkmaid offered him some cream for an impromptu breakfast. He knew that it would make him sick, but he drank it anyway, then left.

Trond wandered down by the river for a while, and ended up just below Jon's family's homestead. It was still very early in the morning, and the sun was barely over the horizon. As he glanced up at Jon's house, he saw his father and Jon's mother sitting on a bench together. They were kissing. Trond is shaken to his core, with a flood of emotions assaulting him. He was alternately jealous, appalled, angry, and then felt empty. Silently, he turned and headed back to the cabin, without saying anything. As he glanced over his shoulder he could see that they are walking hand in hand back to the farmhouse together.



Instead of going straight home, Trond went to Franz's house. Franz offered him breakfast, and not wanting to think about anything of what he'd seen, he went in.

Back in the present, Old Trond is not sleeping well. There is a storm and it is howling around the house like a terrible wind-fed animal. In the morning, he assesses the damage and sees that a very large, very dead birch tree has fallen across his driveway. He'd been meaning to take it out before something like this happened, but just hadn't gotten around to it. He observes that the birch is huge and fills the entire front yard, blocking any leaving. Tired, Trond lies back on his bed, and soon his thoughts drift back to the last day of the summer, when in 1948, his time with his father had ended.

(Flashback)

Trond's father put him on a train headed home. His father assured him that he knew how to make it back home, that he was quite the grown up lad now. He told Trond that he would come along later, catching a later train after he'd closed up the cabin and cleared things up with the last of the logs. Trond wondered about the curious look in his father's eyes that he couldn't quite figure out.

In the present, Old Trond pauses in the recollection to wonder if even at that point in time he'd not understood that his father was saying good bye for real and forever. He falls asleep.

Waking with a start, Old Trond is surprised that he went back to sleep so soon after waking. He chastises himself and tries to get up, but is lightheaded and slightly ill. He brushes this aside, calls Lyra to his side, and they go out for a walk. After only a few steps he stops and is sick.

## Analysis

The theme of Coming of Age is demonstrated in Trond's arousal to the girl in the barn who was milking the cow. That he was embarrassed by the feeling, and wasn't sure exactly how to process the emotion indicates that this was not something that had happened to him very often. The theme of Isolation is also demonstrated in the earlier scene when he woke up and finds that his father has left and hadn't told Trond where he is going. Trond realized with this instant that he's never truly been alone. This is ironic juxtaposed with the Old Trond's desire to BE alone, and who's greatest desire is to be left alone.

Likewise, the author offers up a subtle message about the theme of Peace and Solitude. Though Trond has solitude by the bucketfuls, he does not have peace. This is because his problems, his internal issues have not been left behind in the city.

The color blue is introduced more prominently in this chapter. Trond calls dusk, 'the blue time' because the light is not completely gone, not completely dark, which makes everything blue. This is indicative of all color being drained from the world, as well as





there is an old Slavic belief that the color blue keeps the flies away. Symbolically, it seems to represent a tendency to keep the smaller problems at bay.

The theme of War is touched upon lightly in this section as the reader sees the first initial invasion of Norway. Trond recalls seeing the soldiers coming into the streets, many people crowding into the trains at the station, and his father being gone for longer and longer periods of time. From a child's perspective, the larger workings and political implications/impacts were not there.

Finding his father with Jon's mother was upsetting to Trond in a way that he couldn't explain. He never told his father about seeing them together, and yet it was a profound shock to that image of his father. This, too, is a Coming of Age moment in that Trond no longer saw his father as a larger than life image. His father was a man, a man who made mistakes and bad choices.

The birch falling across the driveway in the storm is symbolic of a very large internal obstacle that is not going to go away. It is so large, just like the birch, that Trond can no longer ignore it. It must be dealt with. And, time is running out. The fact that he is ill and short of breath indicates that at age 67 he is not a young man any longer.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why can't Trond find the peace and solitude that he has been craving?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How was Trond's image of his father adjusted and transformed?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why did Trond go to Franz's house after he saw his father and Jon's mother together?

## **Vocabulary**

squintingly, catapult, flickering, gangway, protagonists, crucial, fateful, cohort, postponed, Magritte



# Chapters 10-12

## Summary

It is once again the summer of 1948, and the trees had been all felled and sent down the river. Having seen his father and Jon's mother together, Trond had gone to Franz's house for breakfast. Sitting in Franz's kitchen, Trond remarked about how nice and clean, bright and blue it was. He noticed that Franz had a red star tattoo on his forearm. He tells the reader that many of the lumberjacks sported them as a sign of solidarity with the communists.

When Trond asked about the tattoo, Franz told him about his father during the war. The year was 1942, Franz's father had come to the area and had needed a base camp, a small place where he could recover after a mission. No one but Franz, at the time, knew that he needed it for a mission. Most people just thought he was getting out of the capital where the Nazis were.

Franz, he explained to Trond, was Trond's father's contact. When it was time for another mission, Trond's father would go to Franz's home and say the prearranged phrase, "We're going out stealing horses." Trond was shocked to learn this. Many times Franz would run the documents himself across the border when the German guards stationed in the village and out in the countryside were watching Trond's father too much. Sometimes it would be Jon's mother who would take them across the border, using the excuse that she was cooking for the lumberjacks and handymen at Barkald's homestead.

As far as Franz could recall, Jon's father never took part, but he didn't turn anyone in. He just turned a blind eye to people staying in his barn for a night or two, or his wife slipping out to deliver documents to Trond's father, or carrying them upriver to Barkald. Then in 1944 a man clutching a suitcase was shown into the barn. He made it through the night, but he was afraid, and sometime in the early hours of the morning, he lost his mind. He began making all sorts of noises, and picked up a crowbar and began beating on the inside of the barn. Jon's mother knew that he would be heard and Jon's father was not willing to do anything. "Let the Germans take him, and they would just act innocent," he suggested.

Franz says that this was incomprehensible to Jon's mother, who went to the man, took him warmer clothes, then took him to the river and put him in the rowboat. Whenever there was trouble she knew that she was to go to Trond's father's cabin. And it was there that she had to go then. Only it was daylight and their footprints were evident in the snow. The man's shoes were clearly not the type of boots worn by those living in the area. She hurried back to ask Jon's father if he would retrace the route and use his boots to cover up the man's tracks. Then she left. Once she was in the middle of the lake, instead of covering up the tracks, Jon's father just closed the door and went back to his children.



Back in the present, Trond is feeling better, having sat down on a bench by the lake to see if his earlier nausea will subside. It has and he and Lyra start back toward the house. When he arrives, he sees Lars standing by the large birch, his chainsaw in his hand. He asks if they should tackle the birch and grinning, Trond says yes. The two older men begin to work on removing the smaller branches, and those that are most easily cut first.

The action shifts abruptly, again. It is 1944 and Jon's mother was still in the middle of the lake with a man who was talking and laughing to himself, clearly unstable. Franz told Trond that for some reason, on that day, at that hour, a young German soldier on a motorcycle stopped at the Haug farmstead to warm up and have a cigarette, but that the boy never made it to the house because he saw the tracks. Immediately, he'd jumped on his motorcycle and made for the village. Franz told Trond that he saw the soldier riding like mad and he knew that something bad was about to happen.

Quickly, since he'd planned for this day, he told Trond that he pulled up the floorboards where he had a detonator hidden. He'd blown up the bridge, so the motorcycle rider could not cross. The guard was thrown from his motorcycle and was joined by another guard whose charge it had been to protect the bridge. They both jumped on the motorcycle and headed down toward the river. When they reached it, Jon's mother had just made it to the other side. The soldiers opened fire on them, and hit the briefcase man. He fell to the ground. Both Trond's father and Jon's mother ran into the woods, but went back for the man's suitcase. Then, they ran hand-in-hand into Sweden.

Trond asked Franz why he was telling him all of this just now. Franz told him that his father asked him to tell Trond when the time was right. Franz decided that the time was right.

## Analysis

The color blue is prominent throughout the flashback sequences. In these scenes from Trond's father's past, it was Jon's mother who was wearing the color blue. Her coat and her mittens were a distinct blue. But, in fact, whenever the reader encounters her she is wearing the color blue, and her eyes are the color of blue. So, blue, is not only a ward against flies and other pests, but it represents something longed for, but never obtained. It represents a certain kind of truth (true blue). And, now, Trond began to understand, not as a son, but as a young man, what had happened to draw his father and Jon's mother together.

This understanding demonstrates, also, the theme of Coming of Age. Trond's father knew that one day Trond would want to know why his father did what he did, or would want to know about the war. That Trond's father couldn't talk about it shows just how distanced he was from his family, and his son.

There are several types of betrayal going on in this novel, which are uncovered more fully in this chapter. Not only are both lovers betraying their respective spouses, but



Jon's mother is betrayed by Jon's father, who deliberately does not cover up the man's tracks in the snow. And, of course, Trond was betrayed when his father lied to him and said that he would come back on a later train to be reunited with his family in Oslo.

Learning that his father's and Lars' secret phrase was "We're out stealing horses," shocked Trond. This was because he has heard Jon use it before, though he hadn't attributed any more significance to it than a colorful phrase. However, now, with the hindsight of many years and maturity, Trond knows that Jon somehow had been aware of the affair. And, with a feeling of shame and anger, Trond now knows why Jon had smashed the bird eggs, had acted toward Trond as he had, and why, in the end, he had to leave.

Lars helping Trond in the present to cut up the birch is symbolic of a friend from Trond's past helping him to overcome this large obstacle, a large burden, that he has borne for a long time. The author takes great care to describe the methodical way in which smaller branches are removed before starting in on the larger task at hand. In the same manner, Trond is dealing with the summer of 1948 when his father left him and his family forever. Franz had filled in the holes all those many years ago, but as a young teen, he hadn't had the maturity to understand fully how the war had changed his father, or drawn him into the arms of another man's wife. The theme of War is offered in this chapter as well when Trond speaks about how each time his father would visit them during the war that each time he returned he seemed different, changed in some way.

It is interesting to note that Jon's mother and father were such polar opposites when it comes to being involved in the war. She was very much involved in helping to aid the resistance in any way she possibly could, while Jon's father was not. In fact, while he didn't actively turn them in, he also didn't actively help, either. Thus, when she asked him, for the first time ever, to directly become involved, he refused. It was this refusal to become involved that eventually caused his wife to have to run for her life into Sweden until the war was over.

## Discussion Question 1

How did Jon's father's inaction contribute to the burgeoning romance between her and Trond's father?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of War as it affected Trond's father, and Jon's mother.

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Lars showing up to help clear off the fallen birch tree in Trond's driveway?

## Vocabulary

minimize, dazzling, helmeted, detonator, floorboards, slayed, sidecar, motorcyclist, tussocks, thwart, uttered, zigzagging



# Chapters 13-15

## Summary

This section opens up on the timeline in the past, right before the logs have been floated down the river, and after Trond has learned about his father's past from Franz. In fact, Trond's father went to Franz's house to discuss floating the timber, and when he returned in the evening, Trond could tell that Franz had not told him of their conversation of the other day, and that Franz had not been a fan of his father's plan to float the timber so soon.

The next day he, his father, and Franz met down by the river. As Trond watched his father and Franz work, two things struck him. First, he wished that he had a friend like his father had in Franz. And secondly, he realized that he didn't completely trust his father any more. His father had had a secret life all this time, and maybe an even more secret life that not even Franz knew about.

They worked for a very long time, and then Trond's father called for a break. Trond was grateful for a rest and sat down under a tree and promptly fell asleep. He was awoken by a hand on his face. When he opened his eyes it was Jon's mother kneeling over him. She was wearing her blue cotton dress with the yellow flowers on it, he noted. She'd fixed food for everyone.

When he went to fix himself a plate, he purposely forced himself between a space that was between his father and Jon's mother. He knew what he was doing, and took an amount of pleasure in doing it, moving a bit more roughly than he needed to, in fact. Franz stared at him over the fire, then wouldn't meet his eyes at all. Trond didn't care. He sat and ate in silence the rest of the meal.

The timeline jumps to the middle of the war. It had been eight months since they'd seen Trond's father. Trond's father was seen coming down the road, slowly. All of them piled out of the home to greet him. Trond's mother ran down the road and threw herself into his arms. All of them finally gathered around him, but Trond could tell, immediately, that this was not the same man he'd called father when he was younger.

Back in the present, Trond wakes, then goes with Lyra to sit on the bench down by the water. Soon Lars will come back over and they will finish pulling the last of the tree out of the driveway. He enjoys watching the sunrise, then makes his way back to the house. Most of the birch tree has been moved, but Trond is still shocked to see a strange vehicle parked in the driveway. As he draws closer he sees that it is his older daughter, Ellen. It has been six months since he's seen her.

They embrace and then she chastises him for not having a phone. She tells him that she's had to call all over trying to find which district he was living in. He tells her to come on in and have some breakfast. She asks him if he really wants her there and he tells



her that he doesn't mind it. She asks him if he really wants to live as he does and he says that he definitely likes it. She makes him promise to get a phone and he tells her that he will honestly consider it. She leaves later on in the afternoon.

## Analysis

This section brings back the theme of Family, especially with the return of Trond's father from the war, and his daughter's return to his home from the city. Trond's daughter didn't really know where he lived, whereas Trond's father knew where his family lived. However, both were not certain they were welcome when they returned, and both were never quite able to connect with Trond.

The theme of Coming of Age is also touched upon in this section, most notably when Trond realized, as he viewed Franz and his father working together, that he didn't not have a friend like his father had, but more importantly, that he didn't really believe he can trust his father any longer. This is reiterated when he did something that he never would have done as another man's son, but most definitely would have done to someone who was in the wrong, and that was forcing himself between Jon's mother and his own father.

The arrival of Trond's oldest daughter, Ellen, brings many things back to the present for Trond, who has been living more and more in the past. He enjoys visiting with her, but is relieved when she leaves, just the same. She is a reminder of a life that he no longer wants. It is in that instance that he understands his father, in a way that up until now he never has. The intense yearning to break free of the rigors of a life that no longer fits, like a tight pair of shoes, is a shared experience that only now he understands. His father's actions in the war changed him in ways that he might not have been aware of, but nonetheless made him a different man from the one that he once was. While this touches upon the theme of War, it also indicates that Trond is beginning to make peace with his father's secret life.

Though they've spent many days together moving the birch tree, and it is nearly all gone except for the large upturned roots, neither Trond nor Lars have spoken about what happened after Trond's father left him and his sister and mother that summer. Trond wonders if Lars replaced him in his father's eyes, if Lars took the time that should have been his. He dismisses this thought as unkindly, and does not blame Lars one way or the other. He finds that, in fact, he rather likes Lars and is now glad that he lives next door.

Additionally, the theme of Silent Suffering is demonstrated as Trond understands how his father, and Jon's Mother, must have suffered quietly all of those years that they spent away from one another. And, he marvels that knowing what her husband did that almost got her killed, was not enough to make her stay away. She'd returned to the farmstead. However, Trond does not disclose at this time whether he kept in touch with them, or if he knew fully what happened after his father walked away from them.



## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the symbolism of the birch tree and the fact that only the roots are left.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Describe the visit with Ellen and what it shows the reader.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the theme of Family as it applies to Trond's discovery about his father's affair.

## **Vocabulary**

committed, aeroplane, obvious, capricious, shielded, squinting, poverty-stricken, woodbox, bursting, stays, reflection





# Chapters 16-17

## Summary

In these final chapters the reader sees Trond back in the past, remembering once again. It was the day after the timber had been sent down the river. Franz came down to visit. Trond thought that the sky was a bluer blue than he'd ever seen. Trond also noted that his father was acting rather strangely. He acted restless, as if he was waiting for something and was impatient for it to happen.

The next day his father had two horses for them to ride across the border on. Trond was excited for the adventure. They rode for half a day and finally at the bottom of a hill his father told him that at the top of the hill, by a lone pine tree was the border between Norway and Sweden. Feeling daring, Trond told his father he would race him to the tree. But Trond was not an experienced horseman at all and before he got close to the tree, he lost the stirrups and fell to the ground. His father caught his horse, then came to see if he was okay. When he saw that Trond was fine, except for his ego, he pulled his son into one of the only hugs Trond could ever remember receiving from his father. Trond recalls as an old man that even as a young man the hug felt oddly out of place and he hadn't known what to make of it then.

They spent the night camping, then returned the next day. As they reached their river they were both concerned to see that all of their timber had jammed in the bend of the river. The two of them worked to get the one log free that was holding everything up. Trond was the one that came up with the solution and his father told him that he was proud of him.

Many months have passed and Trond, as a young man still, was back in Oslo. In those days, he still believed that his father would return. Each day he or his sister, or both of them, went to the train station in the offhand chance that this one would be the one he would have taken to come home. They continued for many months to be disappointed. And then a letter arrived.

The letter was direct and to the point. Trond's father was not coming home. Jon's father had died, and he was going to remain in the cabin. He thanked his wife and children for the happiness that he had shared with them, but he had changed too much from the war and he was not going to return. The money that he'd made from the timber over the summer was all put into a bank for them to draw out. He wished them well. Trond was devastated, as was his mother and sister. Trond noted that the heaviness that he saw in his mother's face that day never left her.

His mother borrowed money from her brother that hadn't been shot by the police, Uncle Amund. She bought tickets to the bank in Sweden where the money was waiting on them from the sale of the timber. Trond's sister stayed behind. When they arrived at the bank, all the money that was in the account was 150 kroner. At once Trond knew what



must have happened. Most of the logs must not have made it to their destination, being so full of sap, just as Franz had warned. Most likely they simply sank. Then his mother started to laugh. She told him that the ironic part of the whole thing was that they weren't allowed to even take the money into Norway. Because it was Swedish money, it had to be spent there.

She had gotten a determined look in her eye and they went to a clothes shop. She purchased Trond his first suit of clothes. When he was trying them on he felt that he was a different person all together. They purchased the suit and walked arm in arm down the street. That day they spent without a care, but when they returned home, all of that carefree attitude would disappear forever from his mother's face, he recalls. He remembers, and the novel closes, with something his father had told him several times throughout their time at the cabin. You decide for yourself when something will or won't hurt.

## Analysis

These shorter chapters bring things full circle for Trond, though the reader does not learn how Trond finally fared in his cabin in the woods. The novel ends with Trond's declaration that a person decides for himself what he will let affect him. In this respect, then, the reader most certainly is assured that the roots of the birch tree were definitely taken out of the driveway, and symbolically, Trond was finally free of the emotional baggage that he'd had since his father left them. The theme of Family is demonstrated in his train ride and subsequent adventures with her in Sweden. That she bought him a new suit is indicative and predictive of the life that he will lead later on in life. He becomes a noted businessman, perhaps a lawyer, who owns a rather large and lucrative firm. Though they start out with meager means, he makes sure that they do not live that way for long.

The theme of Coming of Age comes full circle as the last vestiges of being a child were whittled away with each trip to the train station to see if his father had returned. With the receipt of the letter and the withdrawal of the money from the bank account, Trond was no longer a child, no longer his father's son, and now, he was the man of the family.

It is ironic that the money that Trond's father so wanted to make so that his guilt would be lessened, didn't really materialize. This is because he acted rashly and didn't take Franz's advice on when to fell the trees. That Trond's father was impatient to start his new life, is evident. It is this impatience that cost his former family much strife for many years.

The scene in Chapter 16 with the father and son on horseback, going for what would be their last adventure together, is both poignant and heart breaking as the reader already knows what the young Trond does not: his father is saying good bye, and he doesn't intend to return to Oslo.



## **Discussion Question 1**

How has Trond finally made peace with what his father did to him and his family?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the symbolism of Trond's mother buying him the suit of clothes.

## **Discussion Question 3**

How did Trond and his family fare after their father left them in Oslo?

## **Vocabulary**

invincible, coveted, peasant, hereabouts, cyclops, portcullis, diagram, cobble, aloof, pathetically, sullen



# Characters

## Trond Sanders

When the reader first meets Trond Sanders he is still very naive and young. He still sees his father as strong and superhuman, a war hero, and a man to be admired and emulated. Trond is a boy who is full of questions, but he does not ask them, trusting that life will eventually work out the answers for him.

Trond is very innocent even in his friendship with Jon. He is flattered that the older boy has taken an interest in him and he can't see that Jon is trying to find a way to get back at him for what his father has done to their family. Trond is completely unaware of his father's relationship with Jon's mother for most of the novel.

As the summer progresses, Trond loses much of his childish notions about life. He finds himself attracted to Jon's mother, and then to a local milkmaid. He is unsure of how to deal with such longings and urges, and does not discuss them with anyone, either. However, it is because of this new found understanding of his own body's yearnings that he is able to see them apparent in his father's eyes when he looks at Jon's mother.

Trond loves his father fiercely and trusts him implicitly until one night when he sees his father and Mrs. Haug kissing in the moonlight. Though he tries to rationalize it as someone else and not his father and Jon's mother, he knows that it is true. This devastates him and his trust for his father is dissolved. He loves his father, but he has come to the point in his coming of age that he realizes that his father is a human being, capable of making bad choices like everyone else. When Franz fills Trond in on the war years, Trond understands a little more about how his father could fall for Mrs. Haug, but at the same time, holds him accountable for causing his own family so much distress.

Later, when his mother buys him a suit of clothing, the reader knows, from various remarks that the Old Trond has made in earlier chapters, that this is the start of his starting to become a successful businessman, because he'd had to become the breadwinner in his family because his father would not.

As an older man, Trond has not made peace with his father's betrayal, which is represented in the large birch tree that falls across his driveway. That it is removed with the help of a Haug son indicates that the two families made the problem, and the two families have it in their ability to remove it, which they do. In the end, the reader learns that Trond will live out the rest of his life happy in the cabin on the Swedish border.

## Trond's Father

Trond's father, who is never given any other name in the novel, is shown to have been a normal Norwegian man until the war struck. He volunteered and joined the Resistance which took him away from Norway for many months at a time. During his time away he



faced many dangers, many of them with his fellow Resistance worker, Mrs. Haug (Jon's mother).

Trond's father already knows that he's going to leave Trond and his family when he asks Trond to come out to the cabin in the summer of 1948. The money from the timber sale is to go to the family to help support them. Unfortunately, it does not work out as he has planned and the money is only enough to buy Trond a suit of clothes, to make him the man of the family. This responsibility and duty is thrust upon his son, something that has made his son resentful for most of his life.

Trond's father became damaged by the work that he did for the war, and when he returned after the war he knew that something was different in him. It was not only the affair that he'd started with Mrs. Haug, but it was also his perspective on life in general. His favorite phrase and piece of advice that he gives to Trond is that a person decides what will and won't hurt.

## Trond's Mother

Not much is said about Trond's mother as she is not in much of the action of the novel. However, at the end of the novel, when she must take the train into Sweden to retrieve the money that has been left for her, the reader sees a very heartbroken woman, determined to see her son succeed despite his father's abandonment of them, and also the first signs of a desolation and bitterness that Trond reports she never lost throughout her life.

## Jon Haug

Jon is the oldest Haug son. He befriends Trond when Trond spends the summer there. Jon is hot headed, and impetuous. He is also fairly irresponsible and pushes limits all of the time.

He also knows about Trond's father and his mother and it compels him to try and make life difficult, although subtly, for Trond. He suggests they 'steal horses' to go for a joy ride on, but it is only Trond that ends up hurt from the stunt. Then they climb a tree and when Trond admires the beautiful nest with the very small egg in it, Jon smashes it and starts screaming about smashing homes and destroying families. Something that Trond does not understand at the time.

Later, Jon blames himself for not watching the twins while his parents are away at work. It was his day to watch them, but instead he'd forgotten and gone hunting with Trond. It is his rifle that the twins find and end up firing.

Later, Jon is so ridden with guilt he leaves the area all together.



## Lars Haug

Lars is one of the twins in the Haug family. He is only ten when he accidentally kills his twin brother, Odd. They were playing with their older brother's gun.

Later as an old man, he has purchased the cabin next to Trond's but didn't realize it until his dog, Poker goes missing in the night. When they introduce themselves to one another, it is clear that Lars instantly recognizes Trond, but it takes Trond a while longer to realize who his neighbor is.

Lars ends up becoming a good friend to Trond, and helps him move the tree from his driveway, clearing up a literally and metaphorical blockage that Trond has carried for many years.

## Odd Haug

Odd Haug is the twin brother that is shot and killed. He and his twin, Lars, are playing in the cabin and get hold of their brother's rifle, which is usually unloaded. Thinking that it was unloaded, Lars points the gun at Odd and shoots him point blank.

## Jon's Mother

Jon's mother very rarely says anything in the novel and most of what the reader learns about her is second hand knowledge through other's observations of her and from Franz's stories.

The reader learns that she was part of the Resistance during World War II and that she worked closely with Trond's father to smuggle people, packages, and documents across the border. Jon's mother was an active participant, but his father was not. He did not support his wife's actions, though he didn't turn her in, directly. It was his actions in the end, that eventually make it so that she has to escape into Sweden to avoid being shot by the German soldiers.

Trond observes Jon's mother and Trond's father kissing and embracing when they believe they are alone at Jon's home. It is this observation coupled with the information he later learns from Franz that changes Trond's perspective toward his father.

## Jon's Father

Jon's father seems downtrodden and long suffering. He knows that his wife is having an affair, but his children also need their mother. He is willing to pretend it isn't happening to keep the family together. In the same way he tries to pretend that the war isn't happening, nor that there are certain clandestine operations taking place on his farm for the Resistance.



However, when he sees his wife smuggling a man out of their barn to take him to Trond's father, then something snaps in him and he doesn't make sure she is kept safe. When she asks him to cover up the man's tracks with his own bootmarks, he lies and tells her that he will, and then he doesn't.

As a result, both she and Trond's father barely escape with their lives. Later, because of their difference during the war, neither man can look the other straight in the eye. Later, when helping to do the logging at Trond's father's farm, Jon's father is injured horribly.

## **Ellen**

Ellen is the older daughter of Trond from his second marriage. She comes to visit him at the cabin. She is upset with him for not telling anyone where he was going, or even having a phone where they could call him if they needed to. After her visit she makes him promise to get a phone at least.

## **Franz**

Franz is Trond's father's best friend. They worked together in the Resistance during the War. After the war Franz helps Trond and his father to cut the trees and float them down the river to Sweden.

It is also Franz who tells Trond about his father's war stories, and about his involvement with Jon's mother. Franz tells Trond about the betrayal of the two by Jon's father, and how he'd had to blow up the bridge when the Germans came after them.

## **Uncle Amund and Uncle Arne**

Trond has two uncles who were targeted by the Gestapo. One was killed (Arne) and the other lived (Amund). They are part of the doubling symbols used in the novel.

## **Olav**

Olav is the mechanic who fixes the headlight for Trond. He also attempts to befriend him, but it doesn't take.

## **The Milkmaid**

When Trond is 15 he takes refuge in a cow shed and falls asleep. In the morning she wakes him and he finds himself aroused for one of the first times in his life.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Titmice

At the beginning of the novel there are several birds, called Titmice, that are banging themselves against the window trying to get into the cabin. Trond is confounded at what they are trying to get from him. These birds represent memories from his past that have been kept at bay for long enough, and with his move to the cabin, are not going to be ignored. But like birds, his memories are fragile and if he doesn't deal with them soon, it will be too late.

## Weather

The weather is used throughout the novel to indicate and set the tone/mood for the scene. In many instances there is a snow storm or a terrible thunderstorm just before something ominous happens. Likewise, when he is the happiest, the sun is at its height.

## Doubles

There are many doubles throughout the novel. First, there is the double meaning in the novel's title. It was what Trond and Jon called taking the horses for a joy ride, and it is also what Trond's father used as a code phrase for his missions during the war.

The doubling happens in the timeline, as well. The reader is alternately popped into and out of Trond's summer of 1948 and his present time as an old man living in a cabin near Sweden. Ironically, he is living next to another older man, who also owns a dog, who is nearly the same age, and could be his twin.

There are two sets of twins in this novel. Both of these sets of twins meet with tragedy. Uncle Ame is the one that is killed by the Gestapo, and Odd is the twin that is accidentally shot by his twin brother, Lars.

There are two families, two fathers, both who are distant from their families, and both who betray their spouses. Additionally, there is a double branch that holds the nest in place, which Jon later destroys out of anger.

Later, the reader learns that Trond has had two marriages, and two daughters.

## Lyra, the Dog

Lyra the dog is representative of several things. First, she is Trond's reality check. Anytime he drifts too far down memory lane, she brings him back to the here and now, remind him that he is still living in the present, not the past.





Secondly, she is also representative of true friendship and loyalty, something the reader is lead to understand Trond has not had a lot of in his lifetime.

## **Fallen Birch Tree**

The falling tree in the story plays a huge role in Trond moving forward with his life, without coming to terms with his past with Lars they cannot move the tree. The moving of the tree symbolizes moving forward with his past.

## **Goldencrest's Eggs**

The nest represents the family's home, and the egg represents the precious and delicate nature of a family's structure. When Jon smashes it, he is symbolically showing Trond what a devastating and senseless act has been committed, not only by the Germans in WWII, but by Trond's own father by having an affair with his mother.

## **Lynx**

The Lynx represents something that is elusive and rare. When Trond sees one and reports it to the people in town they don't believe him.

## **Broken headlight**

The broken headlight represents the fact that Trond is not seeing clearly. It is only when he realizes that he is not doing himself any favor by not repairing it, and that he truly does want to see things more clearly, that he gets it repaired. When he does get it repaired, he also begins to deal with things in his past that he has not yet dealt with.

## **The Top (Trond's cabin)**

The house is in disrepair, just like Trond. In fixing it up he visualizes how his father would have tackled a task, then imitates it as best he can. In this regard, he is still influenced by his father.

## **Horses**

The horses that Jon and Trond steal to jump onto represent their two families. Trond's horse hurts him and throws him from its back, while Jon manages to control his to some extent and escapes injury.



## German Shepherd (Alsatian)

The German Shepherd that killed the fawns around Jon's farm was a dog that escaped, most likely, from the German soldiers who were stationed there during the war. That it targeted the young and innocent is indicative of the cruelty of the German dogma and policies.

## The Color Blue

The color blue makes many appearances throughout the novel, but each time it does, the reader can be assured that it is pointing in the direction of some truth that is about to be presented in some way.

When Trond goes to Franz's cabin he finds that some of the walls are painted the most beautiful blue. It is also there that he learns the truth about his father and what he was involved with during the war.

The color of Jon's mother's eyes are blue and she tends to wear this color a lot. Thus, she represents the truth about Trond's father and her involvement, but also in Trond's awakening sexuality.

Trond notices how incredibly blue the sky is when he and his father are out on the last adventure they would ever spend together. His father hugs him shortly after this and it is the one and only time Trond could remember being embraced by his father.

## Trond's Suit

At the end of the novel, Trond's mother buys him a real man's suit. This indicates that Trond has come of age, and is now the man of the family.

## Jacob

In the earlier chapters, Trond recalls that his father always used to call miscellaneous animals, especially fish, the name Jacob. This is an allusion to the story of Jacob and Esau, two brothers. Not only does this offer another doubling within the story's structure, but the story of Jacob and Esau has as its central point, betrayal.



# Settings

## Oslo, Norway

This is where Trond's mother and sister, and he, live, with the exception of the one summer in 1948 when Trond spends time with his father in a cabin. Oslo is where the reader is lead to believe Trond spent most of his adult life, too.

## Father's Cabin, Swedish Border

During the war, Trond's father used a small cabin on the Swedish border as a waypoint for the resistance movement. After the war, Trond's father purchases the cabin and the land, and invites Trond to come with him to harvest the lumber. This, as Trond discovers, was the place where his father betrayed his mother.

## The Woods

There is a large stretch of wilderness near where Trond's father's and Jon's cabin/farm is. The boys explore the woods there, with Jon showing Trond how to live off of the land.

## Jon's House

Often, Trond would go to Jon's house to hang out with the other boys. But, he also went there because he had a crush on Jon's mother. Later, when he finds out that his own father has been having an affair with her, he is upset.

## Trond's Cabin, Swedish Border

Trond, as an older man, has decided that he needs some distance and quiet for contemplation. His wife has died in a car accident, and here, at the end of his life, all he wants to do is return to the peace and quiet of the countryside.



# Themes and Motifs

## Loneliness and Isolation

There are many characters in this novel that experience loneliness and isolation, both as a desire for it, and as a result of something happening to them. The people who chose to live alone, like Lars and Trond, as well as Trond's father, want to be separated from the larger world, and in particular the people who've placed demands on them their whole life. They seek freedom in the ruggedness of the wilderness.

Trond hints that his mother suffers horribly from loneliness, both during the war, and then after the war when Trond's father leaves them. Though she is not physically isolated, she isolates herself in later years, Trond reports, and never is able to recover from being abandoned by Trond's father.

Loneliness and Isolation are also touched upon as a result of the war. The war left many people without spouses or family, and so people were left with how to restructure their lives. Many could not do it and became very lonely people. Franz is one such character, who has never married, and never will.

Isolation is shown to be a double edged sword. It can be a source of freedom of self-reflection and growth, a tool of this pursuit, or it can likewise, tear a person apart with the memories that tend to come back, like Titmice against a window.

## Peace and Solitude

Peace and Solitude are what both Trond and his father sought out in the wilderness, in much the same place. Both seem to suggest that this type of peace, at least for these two men, only comes in removing themselves from society, or by surrounding themselves with nature.

For both men, peace comes with solitude, and the quiet and the silence is achieved even in speech. The reader sees this when Lars and Trond work together to remove the fallen Birch tree in the driveway. Both of the men don't say much, but just work steadily. If they talk, they do not talk about anything of significance, though Trond sorely would like to know what happened to his father after the summer of 1948.

Trond understands, and Lars most likely does too, that to broach that topic would ruin the solitude that they have both sought out, and with that gone, so would go their peace. There is the space between thoughts, between actions, and between feelings with both of these men, and it is this space in action and reaction that allows both of them to find some measure of peace that they seek.



In the end, Trond finds the peace he has been looking for through his solitude, where devoid of even a television, he has to face many things that he has repressed and not thought about, or sorted out, for 50 years.

## War

The war immediately referenced in this novel is World War II. Norway's invasion by Germany didn't take very long, and they became an occupied territory. However, it did not stop many of the citizens of that country from working actively for the Resistance movement globally.

It is against this backdrop that the novel is set, and given that it is World War II, the reader, if they've had any background in World War II, can automatically assume some things about the war. First, there is the understanding that Germany was ruthless and unflinching when it came to following rules. The symbolism of the German Shepherd targeting and ravaging the fawns on the Haug farm suggests the destruction by Germany of the innocent.

This also indicates that the war, by its very nature, is very destructive. This is reinforced by Jon's destruction of the nest (again a destruction of innocence), and the destruction of two families because of an affair between the two Resistance workers who were drawn together because of the war.

In the end, the war changed everyone that lived through it, even those who were well removed from the actual battles, such as Trond and his family. Because of what Trond's father had to deal with in the war, he was changed. As a result, because he was changed, his way of dealing with his family, and how he viewed them changed. Ultimately, the war destroyed both of their families.

## Silent Suffering

There are several characters who suffer in silence. First, there is Mr. Haug, Jon's father. Not only did he suffer because his son died in a senseless accident, but he has also had to turn a blind eye to his wife's affair.

He turns a blind eye to this because of his poor choices during the war, a choice that he obviously feels guilty about later on after his wife returns to the farm. He knows that his wife is working with the Resistance, but chooses to ignore it, or pretend that she isn't involved. But, in the end, he does know. He also knows about her affair with Trond's father. He knows that he is powerless to do anything about it, so as far as the reader knows, they never discuss it.

Trond's mother is another silent sufferer. She must wait at home through the war and wonder when her husband will come home, if at all. Then, those times that he did return home, each time he was different, hardened, and changed. Later, after the divorce, she had to suffer a lot as she tried to keep a roof over their heads. It would not be until



Trond later went into business for himself that she could quit worrying about providing for them.

Jon's family was very long suffering and silent about it. This is obvious in Lars' refusal to discuss any of the past, of any consequence, with Trond when they are older men. Though Trond is very curious to know about his father and if Lars enjoyed being his son, neither man discuss it, as nothing good could come of the knowledge.

## Family Relationships

The notion of family and family relationships winds its way through this novel. First, the reader is introduced to the family that Trond perceives as a 15-year-old boy in the summer of 1948. His life is very black and white and until that summer, when he begins to learn that there are shades of gray, he does not consider that people can be cruel, manipulative, or have ulterior motives. Until the summer of 1948 he'd never experienced the death of another person that he'd known personally.

Trond learns that families are very much like spiderwebs, woven together, functioning on their own, but better as a whole. When his father separates himself, on purpose, from them, Trond decidedly steps in to fill the void as best he can.

The reader also sees Trond's mother determined that her children should not suffer because of their father's selfish act. In sending them money, he had acknowledged his understanding of the hardship they would face, but in the end, he had chosen to walk away.

Jon, after Odd is killed, can't stay at the farm where he is reminded of his careless act and the death of his brother. The family is weakened not only by his distance, but by Jon's father's emotional suffering, and Jon's mother's feelings of being trapped with a husband she does not love.

On the whole, in this novel, family relationships are shown to be supportive and nurturing, but also destructive with long ranging damage. Here after 50 years, both Trond and Lars are battling demons from the choice that their parents made so many years prior.

## Coming of Age

The novel, on the whole, revolves around Trond's movement into adulthood. This process began during the summer of 1948, but would complete itself years later. The first movement toward adulthood was Trond's realization that his father was a human being, with flaws like the rest of them.

When he speaks with Franz he finds out that his father, whom he admires, also has some rather undesirable traits as well. He also finds some passion and understanding



for the situations that his father must have faced in the war, and how it changed him from the man he once was.

Trond also becomes sexually aware, especially when around Jon's mother. He finds this mildly disturbing, though he understands on some deeper level that nothing would ever come of it. Still, he finds himself dreaming of her, and one day he even becomes so bold as to put his arm around her. Later, he finds himself aroused when he watches a milkmaid milking a cow.

Finally, Trond comes of age when he finally has to face the fact that his father, whom he still admired at the end of the summer, had lied to him about coming home. He knows that as the only male in the family that the responsibility will fall on his shoulders, and it is a responsibility that he does not take lightly. He starts to allow it to make him bitter, but then remembers that it is his choice to decide how something will affect him. This is advice that works well for him in most things.

# Styles

## Point of View

The point of view is the first person narration, from the viewpoint of Trond Sanders (both 67 years old and in memory 15 years old). He is quite the unreliable narrator as a 15 year old as his perspectives are assumptions based on his limited knowledge of human nature. He believes, for instance, that he determines what will or won't hurt, but in the end, though he doesn't invite it, the hurt from his past rises like waves to be confronted and dealt with, and he has little choice but to face them or finally be taken under by them in his older years.

## Language and Meaning

The language is accessible and easy to read, with phrases from Norway, as well as cultural references from Europe thrown in for authenticity. Some of the terminology regarding World War II are also offered, and a greater understanding of the novel would arise from someone having some basic understanding of the causes and the effects of World War II, especially their involvement with Norway.

## Structure

The structure is non-linear and bounces back and forth between Trond as a 67-year-old man in the present, and Trond as a 15-year-old boy in the summer of 1948. Trond, himself, says it best when he muses that a man cannot steal horses alone. He understands on some level that he has an honest reckoning coming, and thus the past shapes the future, and the future interprets the past. Thus, the structure is offered as a bouncing back and forth between the two time frames.





## Quotes

All my life I have longed to be alone in a place like this. Even when everything was going well, as it often did.

-- Trond (chapter 1)

**Importance:** Trond is nearly 70 and is finally in a cabin on the Swedish border, a cabin he'd longed to live in and own for most of his later adult years. It is not unlike the same type of cabin he spent a summer in, in 1948, with his father.

Time is important to me now, I tell myself. Not that it should pass quickly or slowly, but be only time, be something I live inside and fill with physical things and activities that I can divide it up by, so that it grows distinct to me and does not vanish when I am not looking."

-- Trond (chapter 1)

**Importance:** For much of his adult life, Trond has lived in the city, where people hide who they are, socialize only superficially, and are aggressive. He has no desire to live like that any more. He wants what time is left to him to matter, to count, to not be taken for granted.

WE WERE GOING OUT STEALING HORSES. That was what he said, standing at the door to the cabin where I was spending the summer with my father."

-- Trond (chapter 2)

**Importance:** This is where the title for the book comes from; the act of stealing others' horses and going for a ride on them. Jon teaches Trond how to do it. Later, of course, Trond finds out that the term, stealing horses, was also the code word for the work that his father did during World War II.

He wanted to show me the eggs in a goldcrest's nest high up in a spruce tree, and then suddenly he crushed the whole nest, like this,' I said and held my arm out again and made a squeezing gesture with my fist..."

-- Trond (chapter 3)

**Importance:** This is one of the more important symbols in the novel, showing Jon's dark nature, and the senseless destruction of the war.

People like it when you tell them things, in suitable portions, in a modest, intimate tone, and they think they know you, but they do not, they know about you, for what they are let in on are facts, not feelings, not what your opinion is about anything at all, not how what has happened to you and how all the decisions you have made have turned you into who you are."

-- Trond (chapter 5)

**Importance:** Trond is learning, as a boy of 15, that very often people speak, but don't



really say anything of true importance or significance. They don't talk about the deep issues.

...but my idea was that living alone you can soon get stuck to those flickering images and to the chair you will sit on far into the night, and then time merely passes as you let others do the moving. I do not want that. I will keep myself company."

-- Trond (chapter 7)

**Importance:** Trond is referring to the flickering images of a television set, which he has purposely not brought with him to his cabin. He was afraid that in his old age, that if he had a tv, all he would do was watch it and waste what time he has left.

He kissed her, and I could see she was crying, but it was not because he kissed her she was crying, and anyway he kissed her, and anyway she cried."

-- Trond (chapter 8)

**Importance:** Trond is speaking about when he was 15 and he caught his father kissing the neighbor's wife.

But that's life. That's what you learn from; when things happen. Especially at your age. You just have to take it in and remember to think afterwards and not forget and never grow bitter. Do you understand?'

-- Trond's Father (chapter 9)

**Importance:** This is what Trond's father said to him at the end of the summer when he put him on the train to go home. At the time, Trond didn't know that his father did not mean to come home at all.

Lyra raises her head from where she lies in her place by the black stove, but there is nothing wrong with her inner clock, she knows we are not going out now, it's only two in the morning."

-- Trond (chapter 12)

**Importance:** Trond wakes in the middle of the night, but other than being curious about it, Lyra goes back to sleep. Lyra acts as a symbol in the story, and this particular quote is significant toward illustrating that function. She acts as a reality check, the here and now. What truly is.

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."

-- Ellen (chapter 15)

**Importance:** This is a very significant quote, upon which one could argue, the book is based. The question is posed: will you become the hero in your own story, or will someone else be the leading character of your life?



And when someone says the past is a foreign country, that they do things differently there, then I have probably felt that way for most of my life because I have been obliged to, but I am not any more."

-- Trond (chapter 16)

**Importance:** Trond realizes that he doesn't have to accept anyone else's version of the past, because he, too, was there. He will believe what he has concluded, now.

...the suit was fine, and the town was fine to walk in, along the cobblestone street, and we do decide for ourselves when it will hurt."

-- Trond (chapter 17)

**Importance:** This is the last few lines of the book, and indicates that here, at the end of Trond's life, he has come to a reconciliation with his memories of various events in his past, most notably the summer and the aftermath of the summer of 1948.