

People of Darkness Study Guide

People of Darkness by Tony Hillerman

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Plot Summary

People of Darkness is a novel by Tony Hillerman. The People of Darkness are a group of people in a peyote church who survived an explosion at an oil well because a peyote induced vision warned them not to go to work that day. These men would later die of cancer, a highly unusual event that would lead tribal police officer Jim Chee to realize that something more sinister than nature is at work here. People of Darkness is a tightly plotted novel that takes the reader from mere curiosity into the heart of a culture where motives as simple as greed are rare and seen as the sinister acts of a witch.

Tribal Police officer Jim Chee arrives at the home of B.J. and Rosemary Vines. Rosemary Vines talks to Chee about a box that was stolen from her husband's study. Rosemary believes a man named Emerson Charley might have stolen the box out of false assumption that it contains something that represented good luck in his father's peyote church. Rosemary wants to pay Chee three thousand dollars to recover the box before her husband is released from a hospital where he is recovering from a stroke. Chee does not commit one way or another to the case, but does go to the local sheriff to report the theft. The sheriff, Gordo Sena, warns Chee not to get involved with the Vines.

The following day Chee talks to a past tribal police chief about Sena. This chief tells Chee that he and Sena had a falling out after an explosion at an oil well killed Sena's brother. Sena learned that Dillon Charley and a group of roustabouts were supposed to be at the well that day but stayed away based on a vision Charley supposedly had. Sena arrested Charley and held him even when the tribal police attempted to take jurisdiction. This caused a rift between the two law enforcement agencies even though Charley was eventually released without being charged.

Shortly after this meeting, Chee gets a call from B.J. Vines requesting a meeting. Chee is told that Rosemary stole the box herself and that there is no reason for Chee to attempt to find the box. Vines then gives Chee a check for two hundred dollars for his time. Chee is not convinced, however, and decides to speak to Tomas Charley, the son of Emerson Charley. Tomas admits to stealing the box and tells Chee where to find it. Tomas also tells Chee that his father died of cancer and that his body has disappeared.

The following day, Chee and Mary Landon, a woman he met at a quilt auction, go to the malpais where Tomas said the box could be found. When they arrive, they discover Tomas's dead body and see his killer. The killer attempts to shoot them, but Mary manages to get a gun from Chee's truck and push him back. The killer blows up Chee's truck and leaves them stranded. Chee and Mary walk back to the highway despite the fact that Chee has been shot in the chest. Chee is hospitalized and visited by several law enforcement officials, one of whom tells Chee that the man who attacked him is the same man a witness saw planting a bomb in Emerson Charley's truck.

That night, Chee investigates to see how easy it would be for someone to steal a body from the hospital. On his way back to bed, Chee sees the killer talking to a nurse. Chee



hides and the killer kills his roommate instead. After being released from the hospital, Chee and Mary begin investigating the men who survived the oil well explosion under the belief that this explosion is connected to Vines box and the killer. Chee and Mary quickly discover that most of the men died of a documented bout with cancer. Chee and Mary decide that this too must be connected to explosion.

In an attempt to retrieve the thigh bone of a cancer victim in order to prove the cases are connected, Chee and Mary go out to a remote area of the desert. The killer devises a way to follow them. Chee sees the killer and is able to outwit him by triggering the bomb the killer has left in his truck. Chee also leaves a note on the killer's car that informs him of the identity of his anonymous employer. After being rescued, Chee and Mary go to Vines' home where Chee has sent the killer. Chee has figured out that Vines is worried about his box because it is proof that he was the geologist supposedly killed at the oil well and that he caused the explosion in order to exploit a vein of uranium he discovered in the well. Chee arrives at Vines' house right behind the killer to find Vines dead and the killer dying.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

Jim Chee is a tribal police officer who recently took the exams to enter the FBI. Chee was accepted, but cannot decide if he wants to enter the white man world and become an FBI agent, or remain in the Indian culture and become a Navajo yataalii.

In chapter 1, a bacteriologist is looking out the window of her lab when she sees an Indian man park his truck in a reserved parking spot. The bacteriologist then sees a blond man come up to the truck and leave a paper sack in its bed. A short time later, a wrecker comes to remove the truck from the illegal parking spot. When the truck is lifted by the wrecker it explodes. In chapter 2, Jim Chee arrives at the home of B.J. and Rosemary Vines. Chee notices two grave stones next to the garage and is amused to see one is an Indian whose epitaph says "A good Indian." This brings to mind the dictum spoken by General Sheridan that said the only good Indian was a dead Indian. Chee goes inside and speaks to Rosemary Vines who tells him that a box filled with mementos was stolen from her husband's study. Rosemary Vines does not trust the local sheriff and would like to hire Chee to find the box. Rosemary tells Chee that she believes a man named Emerson Charley took the box because he believes it contains a good luck charm from his father's peyote church. Rosemary also says that her husband was involved in Charley's peyote church until, for some unknown reason, the Indians begin to refer to Vines as a witch. Chee leaves without committing one way or another to the job.

In chapter 3, Chee goes to the sheriff's office to report the theft at the Vines' residence. The sheriff himself is there and invites Chee into his office. Gordo Sena is a conceited man who clearly has a problem with the Vines. Chee tells him about the break in and is interested that Sena seems very curious about everything Mrs. Vines told him about the People of the Darkness, the members of the peyote church. Chee also notices a picture on Sena's wall of an apparent explosion. Before Chee leaves, Sena warns him about jurisdiction and tells him not to cross the line. Sena also mentions that Emerson Charley is dying of cancer and that his truck was involved in a bombing in Albuquerque. In chapter 4, Chee asks his co-worker about the People of Darkness and wonders about their amulet, a mole. Chee thinks almost anything would be a more glamorous amulet than a mole.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The main characters, as well as the central mystery, are introduced in these chapters. Chee is a tribal police officer who has recently taken over the office in this small town. Chee is approached by a rich woman, Rosemary Vines, who feels privilege should allow her to bypass the legal channels and hire anyone she wants to find a box missing from her husband's study. While Chee is amused by Rosemary's white woman ways, he is



reluctant to take her money. Chee is also a little put off by Rosemary's story in which she claims a group of people involved in an illegal peyote church stole the box because they believe it contains the good luck of their church. The story seems far-fetched, but Chee's reaction tells the reader that it is not quite as far-fetched as it sounds even though he is also taking it with a grain of salt.

Chee then goes to see the sheriff and the reader is instantly aware of the tension between the white sheriff and the tribal cops. This tension appears to be mostly one sided and based on something that took place before Chee came to the area. Chee is used to the tensions that exist between Indians and whites, so this tension does not bother him. However, it does introduce a tone of racism and tension into the novel.

Chee also learns the name of the family associated with the People of Darkness, the people who attended the peyote church associated with Vines' box. This family, the Charleys, consist of a father, his son, and his grandson. The father has died and the son is dying of cancer and his truck was involved in an explosion a few weeks before. This explosion is described in the first chapter of the book, leaving the reader aware that someone was clearly trying to kill Emerson Charley, but unsure why.



Chapters 5-7

Chapters 5-7 Summary

In chapter 5, Chee goes to see his predecessor, Henry Becenti. Becenti tells Chee that relations between the tribal police and Sena were destroyed in the aftermath of an explosion at an oil well in which Sena's brother was killed. Sena was convinced the explosion, which happened while the men were lowering nitroglycerin into the oil well, was intentional even though all the evidence pointed to an accident. When Sena learned a group of roustabouts did not go to work that day because their peyote chief had a vision that something was going to happen, Sena arrested the peyote chief, Dillon Charley. The tribal police wanted Charley because they felt it was their jurisdiction, causing the friction that still exists between the tribal police and Sena. However, Charley was never charged in the explosion. Becenti also tells Chee that Charley had a grandson, Tomas, who might have been crazy enough to steal the box from Vines' house.

In chapter 6, Chee goes into the office and learns B.J. Vines has been trying to reach him. Chee calls Vines and is requested to meet Vines at his home to discuss Rosemary Vines' request to hire Chee. In chapter 7, Chee visits Vines at home where he is told that Rosemary stole the box in order to see what was inside it, the contents of which have never been seen by anyone but Vines and Dillon Charley. Vines gives Chee a check for two hundred dollars, on top of the five hundred Rosemary already gave him, for his trouble. Before Chee leaves, he asks a few questions, including why Sena dislikes Vines. Vines claims it is because he ran another man against Sena in the race for sheriff a few years ago and the man won. Chee also asks about the explosion at the oil well and learns that Vines believes Sena set off the explosion to kill his brother, removing him as a rival for the family inheritance.

Chapters 5-7 Analysis

Chee speaks to his predecessor about Sena and learns that Sena dislikes the tribal police because he saw them as an impediment to his ability to arrest the man he felt was responsible for the death of his brother. Sena's brother died in an explosion at an oil well and Sena believes Dillon Charley set up the explosion somehow because Charley told his men not to go to work that day. This reveals a rivalry between Sena and the Charley family that the reader suspects might come into play as the plot continues to develop.

Chee is then called to the Vines' home even though he suspects that Tomas Charley took Vines' box. Vines' claims that wife took the box to satisfy her curiosity about what was inside. This causes Chee to wonder what Vines' is hiding because he is pretty sure Rosemary Vines did not make up the story about the People of Darkness. Vines has

attempted to get Chee off the case, but this only makes Chee more curious about the box and its contents.



Chapters 8-12

Chapters 8-12 Summary

In chapter 8, Colton Wolf is working in his trailer, preparing his guns for future jobs. Wolf is a hired killer who is in New Mexico waiting to make amends on a botch job he had been hired to do a few weeks earlier. While Wolf waits, he checks his mail and finds a letter from a private investigator in California he hired to find his mother. This is the second investigator Wolf has hired because the first gave up when Wolf could not give him enough details to go on. Later Wolf makes a cautious phone call from a phone that cannot be traced back to him and learns that his target has died. In chapter 9, Wolf rents a station wagon and changes the license plate with a car in long term parking. Wolf then goes to a deserted place where people dump junk and begins to dig a hole. In chapter 10, Wolf goes to the University of New Mexico and enters the hospital attached to it. Wolf is dressed as though he works for a mortuary and goes to the morgue where he takes a body from the cooler. Wolf takes the body to his car and transports it to the hole he has dug where he buries it.

In chapter 11, Chee drives out into the desert listening to some songs his uncle wants him to memorize in his training to become a yataalii. Chee is looking for the home of Tomas Charley, but when he reaches it he learns Charley is at a quilt auction in town. The nephew who gives Chee this news also asks him to tell Charley that a blond man came asking about Charley's old Chevy, a junk car that Chee cannot imagine anyone wanting to buy. In chapter 12, Chee returns to town and goes straight to the auction where he finds Charley's truck in the parking lot. Chee asks a white woman inside the school where Charley might be and at first she seems reluctant to help. Finally Chee finds Charley. They talk for a time and Charley admits to stealing the box. Charley claims the box only contained some war medals and a bunch of rocks. Charley then tells Chee where to find the box. Charley also tells Chee that his father died a few nights before and his body disappeared from the morgue. Chee finds this interesting. Chee goes to find the young woman who helped him before, learns her name is Mary, and asks her to coffee. As they leave, Chee sees Charley speaking to a blond man and realizes it must be the man who wants to buy the car. Over coffee, Chee tells Mary about the case and invites her to go to the malpais to retrieve the box with him. As Chee takes Mary home, he notices that Charley's car is still in the school parking lot.

Chapters 8-12 Analysis

In the first few of this set of chapters changes narrator from Chee to Colton Wolf, a hired killer who is waiting in New Mexico to fix a mistake he made when he did not kill the intended target with a bomb at the cancer research and treatment center. This information tells the reader that Wolf's target was most likely Emerson Charley. However, the reader does not know why Wolf's employer would target Charley at this point. The reader does learn that the employer does not want Charley's body autopsied,



which is most likely why Wolf was told to hang around and bury his body secretly. This suggests that the employer is attempting to hide something about Charley's method of death, even though the reader already knows that Charley died of cancer. It is confusing why the employer would want to hide this death when it is already well documented. Therefore the reader hopes this is foreshadowing a moment when the cause of death is revealed and its significance is explained.

Chee continues to investigate Vines' box even though Vines has asked him not to. Chee learns that Tomas Charley took the box, as he had suspected, confirming what Chee had already assumed, that Vines was lying. Now Chee and the reader both are curious as to why Vines would lie about something so simple and what it is he is hiding. Hopefully Chee will be able to figure this out in the next chapter when he goes to find the box. Another mystery also appears at this point when Chee finds Tomas' truck abandoned at the school. It could be nothing, but the reader wonders if the blond man Chee saw him speaking to might be Wolf, who is also described as blond.



Chapters 13-16

Chapters 13-16 Summary

In chapter 13, Chee takes Mary out to the malpais where they plan to have a picnic after retrieving Vines' box. Chee takes Mary for a brief walk on the malpais and tells her the Indian lore about the area. As they approach the area where Tomas said the box would be, Chee finds Tomas' body. The body is still warm, telling Chee the killer is nearby. Chee sends Mary back to the truck as a car pulls into sight. The car turns toward Chee's truck so Chee calls to Mary to run. Mary escapes the truck with Chee's shotgun. Chee runs in another direction, drawing gun fire from the killer. Chee takes a bullet to the chest. Mary fires at the killer but misses. The killer blows up Chee's truck and drives away. In chapter 14, Wolf realizes he has been seen and he will have to kill the witnesses. However, Wolf first has to get out of the area. Wolf dumps his car at a mechanics and takes a bus to Phoenix and plans to fly back to Albuquerque where he can pick up his truck. Then he will focus on getting Chee.

In chapter 15, Chee wakes in the hospital where he has had surgery for his bullet wound. Sena is there, grilling Chee over and over about the killer. Sena then tells Chee about his brother's death and his opinion that Dillon Charley caused the explosion. Then Sena asks Chee to tell him if one of the Charleys tells him anything about the explosion at the oil rig. After Sena leaves a cop from the Albuquerque Police Department visits him. This cop, Hunt, tells Chee that the man he described as the killer is the same man who bombed Emerson Charley's truck in Albuquerque. This incident with Chee tells Hunt that Emerson Charley was the intended victim. After Hunt, an FBI agent interviews Chee and tells him about the status of the investigation. The agent tells Chee to be careful because he is more than likely the killer's next intended victim. In chapter 16, Chee attempts to find Mary Landon only to have her show up on her own. Chee tells Mary she should leave town. Mary refuses, insisting she wants to help Chee solve the murder. Chee relents and says their next move should be to investigate the oil rig explosion at the library.

Chapters 13-16 Analysis

Chee takes Mary out on the malpais where they share a few carefree minutes discussing Indian lore before coming across a dead Tomas Charley. Before Chee can consider the significance of Tomas's murder, he realizes the killer is still nearby. Suddenly Chee and Mary are in the middle of a gun battle, ending in the explosion of Chee's truck and a bullet wound in his chest. Now Chee knows what the killer looks like, placing him in danger. Mary is also put in danger, leaving Chee feeling responsible for her safety, showing the reader what a strong, moral man he is. At the same time, this situation pulls these two people together, suggesting the required time to begin a relationship.



In the hospital, Chee is visited by Sena, Hunt from Albuquerque, and an FBI agent. Chee is updated on the investigation, but he is also forced to give a description of what happened over and over again. Sena's curiosity appears to be unusually deep, explained when he tells Chee about his brother's death and the connection to the Charley family. Sena has clearly realized that Chee has stumbled onto something that might end in the truth about the explosion at the oil rig where his father died. Chee has not made this connection yet, but Sena's interest in Tomas's death opens this door for Chee. Clearly this will be Chee's next step in the investigation.



Chapters 17-23

Chapters 17-23 Summary

In chapter 17, Chee has trouble sleeping. Chee sneaks out of his hospital room and goes down to the morgue to see how easy it would be to break into it in the middle of the night. Chee discovers there are several easy ways to get into the room and steal a body. In chapter 18, Wolf arrives at the hospital and makes his way up to Chee's floor. A nurse approaches as Wolf enters the floor, so he distracts her with a lie in order to get close enough to shoot her in the head with a gun equipped with a silencer. In chapter 19, Chee spots the killer speaking to the nurse. Chee knows he cannot leave the room without being seen, so he slips an acoustic tile off the ceiling and hides in the crawl space. Chee waits and listens, hearing as the killer comes into his room. When the killer finally leaves, Chee slips back into the room and discovers the killer mistook his roommate for him and killed him. Chee also finds the nurse dead at the nurse's station. In chapter 20, Wolf thinks over the killing as he slips out of the hospital and realizes he shot the wrong man, but it is too late to go back now.

In chapter 21, Chee and Mary are at the library looking through microfilm of newspaper articles from the year the oil well exploded. They find several articles that discuss the confusion of the sight and how officials originally could not be sure who had died. It was originally assumed all twelve of the men expected to be there that day died, including six Indian roustabouts, four oil company employees, and two employees of the explosives company. Among the oil company employees, Chee notes there was a geologist named Carl Lebeck. A few days later, the whereabouts of the roustabout crew is discovered and reported in the paper. After that there is an article discussing the arrest of Dillon Charley, but nothing about the charges against him or mention of his release. Chee decides they should try to find the five surviving roustabouts and see what they know about the explosion. In chapter 22, Chee has a list of the surviving roustabouts. However, he already knows one of them has died and is having trouble finding the others. Chee takes Mary to visit the sister of one of the men. On the way they discuss the chances that the majority of them will be alive. In chapter 23, Chee and Mary talk to the sister of one of the men and learn that several of the men became ill after the oil well exploded and that the people believed a witch was making them ill. A ceremony was held to rid the men of the curse that was making them ill, but it did not work. When Chee hears this, he knows they must have known who the witch was and convinces the woman to tell him it was Dillon Charley.

Chapters 17-23 Analysis

Wolf sneaks into the hospital and attempts to kill Chee, but Chee sees him and is able to hide. This episode shows how fearless Wolf is and how determined he is to kill Chee, causing both Chee and the reader to feel real fear for his safety. This episode also

shows how cold Wolf is that he would kill a nurse and the wrong patient and not feel any guilt or remorse.

Chee and Mary begin to investigate the oil well explosion and decide their best option at this point is to find survivors who might know who was behind the explosion. This leads them to the sister of one of the men, since they cannot find any of the men themselves, who tells them that the men were all cursed by a witch. It turns out the relatives of these men believe that the witch was Dillon Charley, the men's leader, their church chief, and a man who died of cancer years ago. This also points a finger at members of the Charley family, the same people Sena has blamed for years.



Chapters 24-29

Chapters 24-29 Summary

In chapter 24, Chee explains everything the sister said to Mary and they discuss what it might mean. Chee believes it might have something to do with what the men were dying of and might explain why Emerson Charley's body disappeared. Chee believes someone is trying to hide a method of murder. In chapter 25, Chee and Mary visit Emerson Charley's doctor. They are told that Emerson had leukemia and that it had metastasized. There is no foul play involved. However, when Chee tells the doctor several other men associated with the Charley family also died of cancer, including Charley's father, she sends them to talk to their epidemiology people. The epidemiologist tells Chee and Mary that cancer is tracked on a computer. Chee has the doctor look up the names of the men who were part of the roustabout crew as well as the Charleys. They discover that most of them had some form of cancer, a highly unlikely scenario in nature. In chapter 26, Chee examines Emerson Charley's clothing that were accidentally left behind by the killer and finds a mole amulet in his leather pouch that must have belonged to his father. Chee has heard that Vines gave each of the roustabouts an amulet carved to look like a mole, just like this one, and wonders if Vines carved them all himself.

In chapter 27, Chee learns that the FBI have found the killers car and believe he might have left the area. In chapter 28, Chee and Mary track down the sister-in-law of the final man they could not track to ask about his whereabouts. They find the woman attending a ceremony for Emerson Charley at the peyote church he founded. The woman tells them that her brother-in-law died and is buried in a remote canyon. Chee wants to see the body so he can take the leg bone back to the epidemiologist for testing. In chapter 29, Wolf begins driving around Grant with a police band radio. From the road Wolf calls Chee's station and pretends to be an FBI agent who needs to get in touch with Chee immediately. Then Wolf listens as the tribal police contact Chee on the radio and Chee responds with his location.

Chapters 24-29 Analysis

Chee and Mary speak to Emerson Charley's doctor and discover that there is nothing unusual about his cause of death. This makes Chee wonder if the incidence of cancer is what is unusual and not the cancer itself. Chee poses this question and is sent to the epidemiology department where he learns that most of the six roustabouts had documented cancer, making it highly unusual. Cancer does not normally happen that way in such a small group. When Chee looks at Charley's personal belongs he finds a mole amulet and he begins to wonder if perhaps the amulet, the one object all the men have in common, has something to do with the cancer incidence.



Chee continues to look into the whereabouts of the men, hoping to prove his theory. This leads Chee to the sister-in-law of another of the roustabouts who is able to tell him where one of the men is buried. As Chee and Mary head to this location, Wolf begins searching for them and finds their location. This suggests to the reader that even as Chee gets the answers he needs, he might be stopped. The killer is ruthless and will stop at nothing, as the reader has already seen, leaving the reader frantic for Chee's safety.



Chapters 30-32

Chapters 30-32 Summary

In chapter 30, Chee and Mary are in a remote area of the reservation searching for the location of one of the roustabout's burial site. On the way, Chee talks about the case, suggesting that the person behind the explosion has to be either Sena or Vines, but Vines did not come to the area until several years later. However, Chee believes that Vines is connected and something in the box proves it. A short time later, it begins to snow as they reach the area shortly before nightfall. As Mary and Chee climb up a canyon to the burial spot, where Chee not only finds another mole amulet but evidence of bone cancer. As Chee finishes inspecting the remains, Mary tells him that she can see someone approaching. They both know it is the killer. Chee and Mary hide in the blow hole until it gets dark. Chee then slips out and makes his way onto the canyon floor where he searches for the killer. Chee cannot find the killer, but finds his car. Chee leaves a note on the car using Vines' two hundred dollar check, warning him that Vines has turned him over to the FBI. Chee then returns to the canyon where he guesses that the killer has planted a bomb in his truck. Chee sets the bomb off, hoping the killer will come into the open to check for victims. Instead the killer drives away.

In chapter 31, Chee and Mary spend the night in the canyon. As they wait for sunrise, Chee tells Mary what he has figured out. Chee thinks that Vines is really Carl Lebeck, the geologist at the oil well. Chee believes Lebeck found the uranium and knew that if the explosion got the oil flowing he would never be able to make a claim on the uranium. Lebeck devised a plan to cause the explosion to not only fake his death, but to end the oil company's interest in the area. Then Lebeck returned when the oil company's lease on the mineral rights was over, and claimed the uranium find under the name B.J. Vines. Chee also believes that Dillon Charley most likely knew the truth. That is why Vines kept him so close and buried his body on his property. In chapter 32, Chee and Mary are picked up by a gas company helicopter that flew over the area to check their lines. Chee radios Sena and tells him what he believes and then has the helicopter take him directly to Vines' house. When Chee enters the house he discovers that Vines has been shot and the killer is bleeding to death from a shotgun wound inflicted by Mrs. Vines. Chee helps the killer to the fireplace and sits with him until he dies.

Chapters 30-32 Analysis

The killer comes after Chee and Mary once again, but once again Chee outsmarts him. Wolf seems to be proving that he is not as intelligent as he had believed himself to be. At the same time, Chee leaves a note for Wolf that will send him to Vines' home. Chee has figured out that Vines is really the geologist who worked for the oil company and that he caused the explosion to fake his own death. Vines wanted to claim the mineral rights to the area for himself and knew the oil company would have to leave first. It was greed, a theme of the novel, that caused the deaths of five men.



Chee is rescued and goes to Vines' house, but discovers it is too late. Vines is dead and the killer is dying. Chee shows his kinder nature as he helps the killer to die in comfort. As Chee watches Mrs. Vines watch over the killer, he realizes that the white world is not the place for him and plans a healing ceremony for himself and Mary. This suggests to the reader that Chee has made his decision not to join the FBI and to remain close to his native traditions.



Characters

Jim Chee

Jim Chee is a Navajo Indian who was raised on the Big Reservation. Chee is a college educated man who is now a police officer with the tribal police. Chee is called to the home of a wealthy woman in the town where he works and asked to find a box that was stolen from her home. This box contains items that the woman has never seen but she knows are important to her husband. Chee does not accept the case, but promises to think about it. Before Chee can make a final decision, the woman's husband informs him that he knows who took the box and he is no longer concerned with finding it.

While Chee is no longer on the case, he continues to be curious about why everyone seems so interested in the box. Chee begins asking questions because it is his nature as a police officer and an intelligent man to want to answer all unanswered questions. As Chee investigates, however, he becomes a witness to murder and is hunted by the killer. Chee continues the investigation anyway because he is an honorable man and he wants to learn who the killer is and why he has killed this particular person over a box no one seems to know the contents of.

Chee begins to search for survivors of an oil well explosion who have been blamed for the explosion because they were warned not to go to the oil well that day. Chee soon discovers that all these men have died of cancer, an unusual number of men who died of the same types of cancer. Chee quickly puts it all together and realizes these men died to protect the identity of a man who faked his own death in order to cash in on some uranium he found in the oil well where the explosion took place.

Rosemary Vines

Rosemary Vines is the second wife of B.J. Vines. Rosemary asks Chee to her house in order to hire him to find a box she believes was stolen by an Indian man. Rosemary recants a story of how her husband befriended and employed an Indian who was the leader of a peyote church. This church began to suspect that her husband was a witch and that he was causing the deaths of people associated with the church. Rosemary believes they stole the box because it contained some artifacts from this peyote church and they believed that if they could get them back it would cure the son of her husband's employee who was now in the hospital dying of cancer. Chee does not accept the job, but promises to think about it. Before he can decide, Rosemary's husband calls him and tells him that his wife stole the box herself and they no longer needed his services.



B.J. Vines

B.J. Vines is a wealthy man who made his fortune by discovering a large vein of uranium under the town and taking a portion of the profits from the company he sold his rights to. B.J. Vines owns a box in which he keeps mementos of his past that no one but he and his friend, Dillon Charley, have ever seen. This box is stolen at the beginning of the novel and B.J.'s wife attempts to hire Chee to find it. Later, when B.J. learns of this deal, he calls Chee and resends the offer. By this time, however, Chee is already interested and he begins to investigate anyway. Chee learns what is in the box and where to find it, but when he goes to retrieve it, he becomes a witness to murder.

Vines turns out to be a liar. As Chee continues to investigate this box and the people surrounding an explosion at an oil well twenty years previous, Vines name continues to come up. Eventually Chee is able to prove that Vines was a geologist working on the oil well when he discovered the uranium in the well. Vines knew that if the oil company found out about the uranium, they would have the mineral rights and would profit. Vines also knew that if the well produced oil that he would never be able to get to the uranium himself. Therefore, Vines caused the explosion at the well and faked his own death, coming back a few years later when the lease had expired and pretended to find the uranium for the first time. However, to protect his new identity Vines had to protect himself from six survivors of the explosion. Vines gave them each amulets carved out of uranium containing rock and watched as they all died of cancer.

Dillon Charley

Dillon Charley was the leader of a peyote church and the leader of a group of roustabouts who worked on the oil well that exploded. The night before the explosion, Dillon told his people he had a vision and was warned to stay away from the oil well. These men survive and are given mole amulets to wear to signify their special place in the church. Later, when Vines comes to town, he employs Dillon and they appear to be good friends, running the peyote church together. However, when the six roustabouts begins getting sick, including Dillon, the Indian people turn on Vines and call him a witch. Dillon dies of cancer and is buried on Vines' property.

Emerson Charley

Emerson Charley is the son of Dillon Charley. Emerson takes over his father's church upon his death. Emerson also begins wearing his father's amulet in a leather pouch tied around his waist. Over time, this amulet begins to make Emerson sick, just like it did his father. The day Emerson goes to check into the cancer research and treatment center, his truck blows up and kills two tow truck drivers who came to tow it out of the spot where it was parked illegally. The police believe this bomb was meant for the man who normally would have been parked there, but Chee comes to discover that the bomb was meant for Emerson. It appears that the cancer and its cause has become suspicious and the man behind it has hired a killer to get rid of Emerson so that an autopsy cannot



be performed on his body. When the bomb fails, the killer is hired to hide the body so that it cannot be autopsied.

Tomas Charley

Tomas Charley is the son of Emerson Charley and the grandson of Dillon Charley. Tomas has heard the stories about Vines all his life and believes that Vines somehow poisoned both his father and grandfather. Tomas breaks into the Vines' home to steal the box that holds items rumored to be associated with his grandfather's peyote church in the hopes that it will contain something that he can use to cure his father. Tomas is disappointed to discover the box only contains a few war medals and a bunch of rocks. When Chee comes to Tomas to ask about the box, Tomas readily admits to stealing it and tells Chee where he can find it. When Chee goes to get the box, he finds Tomas's dead body and is confronted with his killer.

Gordo Sena

Lawrence 'Gordo' Sena is the sheriff of Grant, the small town where Chee works for the tribal police. Chee meets Sena when he goes to report the break in at the Vines' residence. Sena advises Chee to stay away from Vines. Later, when Chee is shot by Tomas' killer, Sena comes to visit him and tells him how his brother was killed at an oil well more than twenty years ago and how Dillon Charley was suspected to be involved. Sena tells Chee to be careful and to come to him with any information he should stumble across about the Charleys or the explosion at the oil well. Sena blames Charley for his brother's death and has every intention of proving it one day.

Colton Wolf

Colton Wolf is a hired killer who was hired by an anonymous person to kill Emerson Charley. When Colton fails to kill Charley, he is told to wait until Charley dies and then to steal his body. The anonymous employer wants the body to disappear so there is no chance an autopsy will ever be performed. Colton does as he is told, but becomes curious about the employer. Colton begins checking into the man he has been asked to bury and this leads him to yet more questions. At the same time, Colton is seen leaving the murder scene of Tomas Charley, the man he has killed to retrieve a box filled with mysterious black rocks. Colton decides he must kill these witnesses, and spends a great deal of time hunting them down.

While all this is going on, Colton is also attempting to find his mother. Colton was abandoned as a child and has been searching for his mother ever since. Colton has had no luck, but he fantasizes about finding her and them caring for each other for the rest of their lives. It does not bother Colton that he knows next to nothing about his mother, including her real name. Colton only wants a mother who will care for him and allow him to care for her.



Mary Landon

Mary Landon is a white teacher whom Chee meets at a quilt auction. Mary is a beautiful woman and Chee finds her fascinating because she is white and because she appears to be fascinated by him. Chee takes Mary with him when he goes to retrieve Vines' box, unwittingly walking her into a murder scene. Mary manages to help protect Chee with a rifle she takes from his truck and scare the killer away. This brings Mary and Chee closer together as they begin investigating the murder in order to find out who the killer is and bring him to justice. There is a hint of romance in this relationship, but it is never really showcased in this novel.

Six Roustabouts

There are six roustabouts who worked on the oil well along with the six men who were reportedly killed in the explosion at the oil well. These six men were Indians who all belonged to a peyote church run by Dillon Charley, who happened to be the leader of these men. Charley warns the men one night not to go to work the following day because something terrible is going to happen. Charley claims to have seen this in a peyote induced vision. The men do not go to work and learn the following Monday that an explosion killed everyone on the sight. The men feel as though they are special and are given special amulets to wear to signify their status. However, a little more than twenty years later all these men are died, everyone having died from cancer. Chee is later able to establish that these men contracted cancer from wearing amulets made from uranium enriched rocks.



Objects/Places

B.J. Vines' Box

Rosemary Vines approaches Jim Chee and asks him to locate a box that was stolen out of her husband's study. The box is said to contain old mementos and Chee later learns it contains mementos from a life of a man who is thought to have died in an explosion.

Oil Well

Twelve people are rumored killed in an oil rig explosion when the workers are thought to have accidentally set off some nitroglycerin while attempting to lower it into a hole while searching for oil. Eventually police learn that only six people were killed that day.

Vines' Check

Vines gives Chee a check for two hundred dollars for his time after telling him he does not want him to find his box as Rosemary Vines had asked Chee to do. Chee later uses this check to leave a note for Wolf, hoping Wolf would go after Chee so that Chee could catch him.

Police Band Radio

Colton Wolf uses a police band radio to discover where Chee is so that he can find him and kill him.

Vines' Grave Yard

B.J. Vines has two graves next to his garage that include the grave of his first wife and that of his friend and employee, Dillon Charley.

Mole Amulet

Each of the six roustabouts who survived the explosion at the oil rig were given a carving of a mole to denote their special standing in the peyote church. Chee later discovers that each of these carvings are made from radioactive rock and caused each man to die of cancer.



Leather Pouch/Medicine Bag

Navajo men traditionally wear a leather pouch around their waists and tucked into their pants that contain good luck items including an amulet. This is where the six roustabouts wore the mole amulet that was later proven to have caused the cancer that killed them.

Trailer

Colton Wolf moves from place to place in a travel trailer so that the police cannot track his movements.

Stolen Car

Colton Wolf uses a stolen car to chase after Jim Chee after Chee sees him leaving the scene of a murder.

Malpais

The malpais is a section of the desert where ancient lava still covers the ground. Tomas Charley leaves Vines' box on the malpais. Chee goes to the malpais to retrieve the box only to walk in on a murder being committed.

Big Reservation

The Big Reservation is an Indian reservation that covers land on the borders of New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah.

Checkerboard Reservation

The Checkerboard Reservation is a section of the Big Reservation where the government deeded every other square mile of a sixty-mile-wide strip of an Indian reservation to the Atlantic Pacific Railroad to subsidize extension of its trunk line westward. Eventually the Navajo Nation bought back some of the land, but not all. This checkerboard ownership causes problems with jurisdiction when a crime is committed.

Albuquerque, New Mexico

The cancer research and treatment center where several of the characters in this novel died is located in Albuquerque, New Mexico, not far from the small town where the characters all live.

Themes

Greed

In the beginning of the novel, Chee is called to the home of B.J. Vines, a wealthy man who made a uranium discovery early in the rush to develop uranium. Chee is asked to find a box that is very important to this man, but of whose contents no one is sure. Chee is not interested in taking the case, but begins to investigate it when several people warn him to stay away. At first it appears that the box was taken by the son of a peyote church chief because the son believes it contains bad luck that has led to his father's illness. However, Chee soon begins to realize this belief is not true.

Chee begins looking into the explosion at an oil rig that took place several years before B.J. Vines came to town. This explosion was ruled accidental, but the local sheriff has always believed it was intentional. Everyone assumes the sheriff's beliefs are based on the fact that his brother died in the explosion, so no one takes his claims seriously. However, the more Chee looks into the survivors of this explosion, the more he begins to think the sheriff might be right.

Chee begins to research the backgrounds of both the men who died and the men who lived. Soon Chee comes to realize that almost all the men who survived died of cancer. This is highly unusual and much too suspicious to be coincidental. In time Chee realizes that each of these six men carries with them a carving of a mole to signify their special standing within the peyote church. When Chee makes this connection, he finally finds a motive for the explosion at the oil rig and a possible culprit. Chee believes the geologist on the rig discovered uranium in the hole and realized that if the oil company found oil there, they would own the mineral rights and therefore would profit from the uranium. To prevent this, the geologist killed the men working on the rig with the explosion and disappeared for several years, making everyone believe he had died as well. Then the man returned using a new name and made his claim. It was greed that motivated this man and it was this motivation that makes greed a theme of the novel.

Indian Culture

Jim Chee is an Indian who was raised on the reservation and is now a police officer with the tribal police. Chee has always embraced the culture of his people, but attended a white college at the urging of his uncle. Chee's uncle believed the best way to get along with white people was to study them and to understand them. During his time at college, Chee became fascinated with white people and enjoyed studying them. It was almost like another class Chee was taking.

Before the novel opens, Chee takes the exams necessary to join the FBI. As the novel begins, Chee is faced with the decision of whether or not he wants to become an FBI agent when an acceptance letter is sent to him. Chee has been training to become a



yataalii, a type of shaman or medicine man. In order to become a yataalii, however, Chee must embrace everything about his culture and turn his back on the white culture. This would mean Chee would not be able to become an FBI agent. Therefore Chee finds himself struggling with his love of his Indian culture and his desire to further his career and embrace the white culture. It is this struggle that makes Indian culture a theme of the novel.

Revenge

In the fifties, a group of men were attempting to lower nitroglycerin into an oil well to create an explosion that would hopefully begin the flow of oil. However, something went wrong and the nitroglycerin exploded before it entered the well. All the men died, their bodies so badly damaged that it was impossible to identify them or even tell how many there had been. One of the men was the brother of the sheriff's deputy who found them, a man who would later become sheriff.

The sheriff was convinced from the moment the explosion was discovered that those men were murdered. When the sheriff heard that six of the Indian roustabouts who were supposed to be working that morning had not shown up, he became suspicious. These men told the sheriff that they had been warned away from the job site by their peyote church chief who claimed to have had a vision about something bad happening that day. The chief was arrested, but no evidence was ever found and he was eventually released.

Now, more than twenty years later, these men have all died of cancer. The sheriff, unaware of this fact, still holds a grudge against these men and still believes his brother was murdered. As a result of these emotions, the sheriff has made many enemies among the Indian people and continues to try to find evidence that they knew the explosion was going to take place because they knew who caused it. Eventually Chee proves the man right, but he is unable to get revenge on the man who committed the crime because he is killed by a hit man he hired to cover up the evidence.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is third person omniscient. The narrator is Jim Chee through the majority of the chapters, but the killer, Colton Wolf, does narrate a few of the chapters as well. Jim Chee is a tribal police officer who works on the Big Reservation in an area known as the checkerboard reservation. Chee becomes involved in a case that is connected to a decades old explosion at an oil well near where Chee lives. This case causes Chee to accidentally witness a murder, causing the killer to come after him. As Chee shares his thoughts and feelings with the reader as he investigates the case, the killer also shares his thoughts and motives.

The point of view of this novel allows the reader to develop a relationship with Jim Chee, the main character of the novel. Chee is a tribal policeman who is investigating the curious deaths of cancer of several men who survived an oil well explosion more than twenty years ago. This investigation is mostly research and speaking to people, therefore it is important that the reader has access to Chee's thoughts and feelings. At the same time, a killer is on Chee's tail attempting to stop him from identifying the killer. For this reason, the killer is given several chapters to narrate in order to show the reader why he is after Chee and how he intends to get him. This builds suspense in the plot, explaining why this point of view works.

Setting

The setting of the novel is New Mexico on a small part of the Big Indian Reservation in that area that is called the Checkerboard Reservation. The reservation is called checkerboard because portions of it were sold to a railroad in order to enable them to extend their line to the west. Some of that land has been bought back by the Indians, but some of it still belongs to the railroad, therefore there is a great deal of confusion about who owns what part of the area and therefore what law enforcement agency has jurisdiction. Parts of the novel also take place in Albuquerque, New Mexico where several of the characters are treated at a cancer research center.

The setting of the novel is appropriate to the cast of characters. Jim Chee, the main character of the novel is a tribal police man and was raised on the Navajo reservation. Several of the characters that Chee comes into contact with throughout the novel are also Navajo Indians, therefore it makes sense that the novel would take place on an Indian reservation. Also, the reservation is located in New Mexico, therefore it also makes sense to the reader that the character would visit the closest large city for supplies and medical care, so the setting of Albuquerque also fits well with the characters and the plot of the novel.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The language is simple and easy for even young readers to understand. The novel also includes several Spanish words and a few words native to the Indian culture and the Navajo language. These words are often explained within the text, therefore they do not pose a hindrance to the comprehension of the novel. In fact, these words serve to enhance the characterization of the novel and the setting.

The language of the novel is used to enhance the characters in the novel by using Indian words that would be spoken by these characters to further explore who they are as a people and to fully develop them for the reader. The use of these words has the potential of causing the reader some comprehension problems, but the writer handles these words in such a way that the reader has no trouble understanding the words and their meaning within the text of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into thirty-two short chapters. Each chapter is narrated either by Jim Chee or Colton Wolf in the third person point of view. The chapters usually revolve around a single scene, or several short scenes that are connected in some way. The novel is told in a linear fashion with no flashbacks, except for a few memories told to the reader either through dialogue or internal dialogue. The novel is told using equal amounts of dialogue, exposition, and internal dialogue.

The novel has only one main plot with several subplots. The main plot is the investigation Chee finds himself involved in that revolves around an explosion that took place at an oil well more than twenty years before the novel begins. During this investigation, Chee witnesses a murder and becomes the target of a killer. The first subplot revolves around the local sheriff whose brother died at the oil well. This sheriff has suspected foul play since finding the bodies and has spent much of his life attempting to prove it. The other subplot revolves around Chee's budding relationship with a young white girl whom he finds romantically fascinating.

Quotes

"It was a job which required waiting for cultures to grow, for toxins to develop, for antibodies to form, for reagents to react. And while she waited, the bacteriologist would roll her wheelchair to the windows and look down upon the world." Chapter 1, pg. 1

"Faithful to B.J. Vines? It seemed an odd thing to put on a tombstone, but then everything about the white man's burial customs seemed odd to Chee." Chapter 2, pg. 5

"He was looking at a framed photograph on the wall behind the sheriff. It seemed to be a disaster scene, twisted steel wreckage in the foreground, a burned-out truck on its side, two men in khaki uniforms looking at something outside the frame, a police car and an ambulance of 1950 vintage. The scene of an explosion, apparently. A small white card stuck in the corner of the frame bore six typed names—all apparently Navajo. Victims, perhaps." Chapter 3, pg. 20

"'This is Charley's truck,' he said. 'Why would he leave it?' The truck was locked. Frost was turning the windshield opaque. Chee walked around it, shone his flashlight into the cab, looking for anything that would answer that question. He didn't find it." Chapter 12, pg. 80

"Malpais, translated literally from the Spanish, means 'bad country.' In New Mexico, it signifies specifically those great expanses of lava flow which make black patches on the map of the state." Chapter 13, pg. 81

"While he was saying it, Mary became aware of the blood on his shirt. Childish as he knew it was, being wounded made him feel a little less foolish. If the rib hadn't hurt so much, and if he hadn't had a five-mile walk back to the highway ahead of him, it would have been almost worthwhile." Chapter 13, pg. 88

"He had answered a question that no one had asked, and that didn't matter anyway. But now he could sleep." Chapter 17, pg. 110

"The chest under Chee's palm moved not at all. No lung stirred, no heartbeat. The mouth Chee saw was a dead mouth." Chapter 19, pg. 118

"'I've noticed that Navajos build their houses as far as they can possibly get from other Navajos,' Mary said. 'Any significance to that?' 'We don't like Indians,' Chee said." Chapter 22, pg. 133

"The row of bare dead trunks now served as an incongruous landmark for a ruin that had otherwise almost returned to nature." Chapter 30, pg. 168

"Now Chee lay in the darkness looking out across the landscape illuminated by fire. It was the ideal place to be. When the blond man came to make sure of his victims, Chee would shoot him." Chapter 30, pg. 186

"But he knew the cause, and the cure. Changing Woman had taught them about it when she formed the first clans of the Dinee from her own skin. The strange ways of strange people hurt the spirit, turned the Navajo away from beauty. Returning to beauty required a cure."
Chapter 32, pg. 202

Topics for Discussion

Who is Jim Chee? What is his nationality? How does Chee's culture define who he is? How does his culture dictate what Chee plans to do with the rest of his life? Why did Chee take the entrance exams for the FBI? Did Chee want to become an FBI agent or was he only hoping to prove he was smart enough for the job? Will Chee take the job with the FBI? Why or why not?

Who is Gordo Sena? Where did Sena get a nickname like Gordo? What is Sena's real first name? Why is Sena obsessed with the explosion at the oil well? Who died there? Would Sena be obsessed with it if that person had not died there? Why or why not?

Who is Dillon Charley? What did Dillon Charley have to do with the explosion at the oil well? How did Dillon Charley die? Why is he buried at Vines' house? What kind of relationship did Charley have with Vines? Was this a friendship of mutual respect or mutual need? Explain your answer.

What is in the box that is stolen from Vines' house? Why does Vines' wife want the box returned? What motivated the theft? Is the motive based on fact or superstition? Where is the box eventually found? By whom? What is it about the contents of the box that finally leads Chee to figuring out who caused the explosion at the oil well?

Who is Mary Landon? How does she become involved with Chee? Why is Chee attracted to her? Why does Chee take her to the malpais with him? What happens while they are there? How does this endanger both their lives? How does this lead to a deepening of their relationship? Is the relationship romantic? Why or why not?

Who is Colton Wolf? Why is Wolf looking for his mother? What does Wolf hope will happen when he finds his mother? Is this likely to be the case? Why or why not? How did Wolf's childhood lead him to be a contract killer? Is Wolf good at his job? What has recently changed? Why?

Who is B.J. Vines? How did Vines become rich? Why was Vines friendly with Dillon Charley? Did Vines respect Charley? Why did Vines bury Charley at his home? Why has Vines not told his wife what is in the box he keeps in a safe in his study? What is in the box? Why is Vines hiding it? What does it tell about Vines' past?