

Plainsong Study Guide

Plainsong by Kent Haruf

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Plot Summary

Set in the expansive high plains of eastern Colorado, the novel *Plainsong* tells tales of multiple characters, all of whom face major changes. Each of these characters will first have to learn to accept the change, and then each will help and be helped by others. In many ways *Plainsong* is a novel about how people must help and rely on each other.

Tom Guthrie tries his best to continue life as usual despite his wife's increasingly isolationist behavior. She spends all of her time alone in a darkened guest bedroom. Tom does not know what to do about her depression, and it is unclear, after having to endure it for so long, how much even wants to help. His young sons, Ike and Bobby, are the real victims. They miss their mother and find her behavior confusing.

Victoria Roubideaux enters the novel already experiencing what most would consider an awful and lonely life. She is seventeen years old with few or no friends. Her mother is verbally abusive. Victoria has had one boyfriend in her entire life, and he disappeared weeks ago. She is pregnant, and when her mother discovers this, she locks Victoria out of the house. With nowhere else to turn, Victoria seeks help from a teacher, Maggie Jones.

Maggie Jones is facing her own problems. She is trying to take care of her elderly and senile father, and for some time she has been attracted to a fellow teacher, Tom Guthrie. Guthrie might now be romantically available, but Maggie does not yet know if he is interested in her or if she wants to introduce a new complication to her life. Maggie does the best she can to both help Victoria and take care of her father. When balancing both tasks become impossible, she seeks the help of two elderly brothers who live on a ranch far outside of town.

The McPherson brothers have never married and have lived their entire lives on their ranch seventeen miles from the nearest town. The only life they have ever known has revolved around each other and their farming and ranching. The brothers' parents died when they were in their teens, and though the brothers are well liked by many local characters, they have formed no close relationships. It is with these two brothers that Maggie suggests that Victoria might find a home.

Ike and Bobby do the best they can at trying to understand their abruptly altered home life. First their mother secludes herself in a room, and then she moves out entirely. After some time at a rented house in town, their mother moves far away to Denver. Unlike other characters, the boys have little control over their lives, and they have even less understanding of why adults so drastically alter the security they once knew.

In order to cope with the obstacles in their lives, the main characters all have to turn to each other for support. Each character helps another and is helped. While *Plainsong* is a story about isolation, both physical and emotional, it is also a story about community



Pages 3-22 (Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, Guthrie)

Pages 3-22 (Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, Guthrie) Summary

Plainsong tells the story of multiple characters living in or near a small town in rural Colorado. Tom Guthrie and his two young sons, Ike and Bobby, try to cope with abandonment by their wife and mother. Victoria Roubideaux is a seventeen-year-old woman from an impoverished background who discovers she is pregnant. Harold and Raymond McPherson are two elderly bachelors who find themselves helping Victoria. These characters and others interact in an effort to live and find happiness in a small town.

Guthrie

Tom Guthrie stands in his kitchen and watches the sun rise. His wife and two sons, age nine and ten are also in the house. He wakes his two sons, Ike and Bobby, and tells them they should have gotten up earlier on their own. Tom feeds his sons breakfast and tells them that he must go to school early today to see Lloyd Crowder. The boys are curious about why their father must leave early. Guthrie says that he has to see Lloyd Crowder about a boy in American history class. His sons want to know what the boy did, but Guthrie does not answer.

Ike asks if his mother will be leaving the room and coming downstairs today. Guthrie says he does not know but tells the boys not to worry.

Guthrie goes upstairs and into the room where his wife, Ella, lays in bed. He asks if she wants anything, but she does not answer. Guthrie leaves the room and Ella looks around before folding her arm across her face. Guthrie leaves the house and drives away in his pick up truck.

Victoria Roubideaux

Victoria wakes feeling nauseous and runs to the bathroom. She vomits, and her mother arrives in the bathroom to ask if she has been drinking. Victoria says she has not been drinking, and then she gets sick again. Her mother says she thinks Victoria is pregnant, and her mother is verbally abusive. She says Victoria can no longer live in the house. Victoria dresses and walks to school.

Ike and Bobby

Ike and Bobby ride their bicycles away from home. At the train station the boys get the newspapers for their delivery route. While the boys fold the newspapers, Ralph Black,



the train depot agent asks the boys why they are late. Ike starts to say it is none of Black's business but stops. Black threatens to paddle the boys. Then he threatens to call their father if they lean their bicycles on the wagon in front of the train depot. The boys do their best to ignore Black.

Ike and Bobby separate to complete their paper route. After an hour of delivering individually, they meet and ride home. The boys go into their mother's room. They ask if their mother is feeling better, but she gives nothing but vague noncommittal answers. The boys walk to school.

Guthrie

Guthrie is in the main office of the high school. He listens as the secretary talks to a parent on the telephone. Guthrie moves into the office of Principal Lloyd Crowder. Crowder arrives and asks about Guthrie's family. Then Crowder wants to know why Guthrie is giving a failing grade to student Russell Beckman. Guthrie says the student has not done the required work. Crowder urges Guthrie not to fail the student because without a credit for American history the student will have to remain in high school another year, and none of the teachers like the student. Guthrie suspects that the basketball coach has asked Crowder to intervene, but Crowder says that the basketball coach has said nothing. Guthrie says he will not pass Russell Beckman unless he does the required work.

Guthrie goes to the copy room to prepare some materials for his upcoming class. He encounters Maggie Jones, who says that Guthrie looks tired. While the two talk, another teacher, Irving Curtis arrives and puts his arm around Maggie and whispers something in her ear. Maggie is offended. After Maggie leaves, Curtis begins to say something about Maggie to Guthrie, but Guthrie stops him and says Irving has already told him.

Pages 3-22 (Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, Guthrie) Analysis

Guthrie

From the description of the property, it appears that the Guthrie family lives near but outside of town. Perhaps the property is a small farm or ranch.

Ella Guthrie seems to be displaying the signs of depression. When Guthrie leaves the room and the narrator describes Ella's actions, we can see that the narrator is not limited to only Guthrie's perspective. We cannot yet make any judgments about the narrator's level of omniscience.

Victoria Roubideaux

Though no specific age is given, we can infer that Victoria is a high school student. We can also infer that she is accustomed to verbal abuse from her mother because Victoria



does not seem alarmed until her mother says she will kick Victoria out of the house. Prior to that, Victoria listened to her mother's abusive name calling as if it were a normal occurrence.

Ike and Bobby

Ike and Bobby seem accustomed to hearing Ralph Black threaten and bully them. They pay him little attention and simply try to finish their work without encouraging conversation. Based on the description of Ike and Bobby's route and their ability to walk to school from their home on the outskirts of town, we can conclude that Holt, Colorado is a small town.

Guthrie

Guthrie's refusal to pass a student just to get him out of the school shows that Guthrie believes in the integrity of the institution. He takes pride in his work.



Pages 25-38 (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux)

Pages 25-38 (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux) Summary

Victoria Roubideaux

During her lunch break Victoria walks to a convenience store. There are many other high school students present. Victoria searches for something that will not aggravate her nausea. She chooses some popcorn and a soda. While she eats her popcorn, a male student from the high school offers her a ride back to school. She refuses, and the young man is rude.

After school Victoria walks to the Holt café where she washes dishes every day after school. A co-worker or possibly Victoria's employer, Janine, notices that Victoria appears upset. Victoria says she is fine.

Ike and Bobby

The boys arrive home and notice that their mother is still in her room. They wonder if she has been there all day. The boys go to the corral and herd the horses into the barn. They saddle the horses and ride west along the railroad tracks.

Victoria Roubideaux

Victoria leaves the café and walks home. When she tries to open the door she finds that it is locked. Victoria knocks repeatedly, and she sees a light in the back of the house go off. Victoria continues to knock and to plead with her mother to let her in. After receiving no answer, Victoria gives up and walks away from the house.

Victoria knocks on the door of Maggie Jones' house. Maggie invites her in, and the two talk. Maggie asks about the father of the baby, but Victoria says she does not want to say his name. She is certain that the young man will want no part of being a father. She says he is from another town and has already finished high school. Victoria tells of meeting the young man at a dance the previous summer. Victoria began to meet the boy frequently at a park in Holt. She would not take the boy to her house or let him meet her there because she thought her mother would not approve. They often went to a secluded area outside of town. Not long after school started in August, the young man stopped coming to the park, and Victoria has no idea where he might be now.

Maggie asks if Victoria used contraceptives, Victoria says she did. Maggie asks if Victoria wants to have the baby. She explains that she will go with Victoria to speak to a doctor if that is what Victoria wants. Victoria says she wants to keep the baby, and



Maggie says that if Victoria changes her mind the offer to help her see a doctor still stands.

Maggie says it is time for bed, and she also mentions that she shares the house with her father and does not know how her father will feel about Victoria living there. Victoria sleeps on the couch.

Pages 25-38 (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux) Analysis

Victoria Roubideaux

Victoria seems to be a solitary person. During her entire lunch break she makes no effort to speak to anyone except when they first speak to her. It seems that she does not have any friends her age. Fortunately her co-worker or manager at the café, Janine, seems to think highly of her.

Though she might be accustomed to a cold and even abusive mother, Victoria is genuinely surprised to be locked out of the house. No normal or sane mother could do such a thing to a daughter.

Maggie Jones is caring and supportive without being judgmental. Her offer to accompany Victoria to "speak to a doctor" is a euphemism for helping Victoria seek an abortion. When Victoria says she does not want an abortion, Maggie remains supportive.

Ike and Bobby

Signs of Ella Guthrie's depression continue. Nine and ten year old boys Ike and Bobby seem to enjoy a great deal of independence compared to similar aged children who live in cities.



Pages 39-57 (Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby)

Pages 39-57 (Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby) Summary

Ike and Bobby

On Saturday morning the boys feed the horses and then leave on their bicycles to collect the fees owed by their paper route customers. At the barbershop they wait while the barber, Harvey Schmidt, is cutting the hair of a customer. In front of the all of the customers in the barber shop, Harvey asks the boys why they have come. They say to collect for the paper. Harvey says he is considering not paying the boys. He asks them if their mother moved out of the house. The customer in the chair tells Harvey to leave the boys alone and pay them. Harvey says since he buys the boys' paper they ought to pay him to cut their hair. Once he finally pays the boys, Harvey insists that they say thank you.

After the barbershop, Ike and Bobby go to Mrs. Stearns apartment. She says that before she pays the boys, they must sit and have a conversation with her. She asks the boys about school and if they like their teachers. Mrs. Stearns tells the boys never to start smoking cigarettes or they will end up like her, living alone and ill. Ike asks about Mrs. Stearn's family, and she says they are all dead.

Bobby tells Mrs. Stearns that their mother moved out of the house. Ike tells Bobby to be quiet and that he should not tell people about their mother. Mrs. Stearns says it is all right and that she will not tell anyone. Mrs. Stearns says the boys must be lonely, and she encourages them to come see her any time they want to.

Victoria Roubideaux

Though Victoria is certain she is pregnant, Maggie says she still must take a pregnancy test. Maggie gives Victoria the test, and Victoria takes it into the bathroom. The test is positive. Victoria is indeed pregnant. Maggie says she will make an appointment with Dr. Martin. Victoria asks if there a female doctor and Maggie tells her there isn't one in Holt.

Ike and Bobby

From his bedroom window Ike sees light from a house that should be vacant. He wakes Bobby and shows him the light. Ike dresses and leaves the house, and Bobby follows. The boys sneak out of the house being careful not to wake their father. As they walk toward the house they see a dark colored car parked outside. No one is in the car, but the boys hear voices coming from inside the house. Ike and Bobby look through a



window. The room is lit by a couple of candles. The boys see a young blonde woman lying naked on a mattress. Next to her is a large teenage male, also naked except for a t-shirt. They recognize both as being local high school students.

The young man refers to the young woman as Sharlene, and he wants her to have sex with his friend. She does not want to, but Russ persists. Finally Sharlene relents and tells Russ she will do it.

The boys continue to watch as another young man arrives in the room and has sex with Sharlene. After the act, Sharlene is angry and yells for the young man to leave the room. Russ returns fully dressed. The boys watch as Sharlene dresses, and they watch the three teenagers drive away. Ike expresses his disgust with the teenage males, and Bobby agrees.

Pages 39-57 (Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby) Analysis

Ike and Bobby

Harvey Schmidt's question to Ike and Bobby regarding their mother was a completely inappropriate topic to discuss with a nine and ten-year-old. Like the depot agent, Ralph Black, Harvey seems to be the type of adult that enjoys bullying children.

From what Bobby tells Mrs. Stearns in regard to his mother moving out, we learn that a few weeks have passed since the opening of the novel. We also learn during the conversation that Ike is the older of the two boys.

Witnessing the teenagers having sex must be both an awe inspiring and terrifying experience for Ike and Bobby. We can understand their simultaneous curiosity and revulsion. The fact that they took the initiative to leave the house in the middle of the night without permission shows once again that they are independent compared to other boys their age.

Victoria Roubideaux

As she has been all along, Maggie continues to be supportive and caring. Victoria's surprise at needing to take a test and needing to see a doctor reveal how unprepared she is for this event in her life.



Pages 58-78 (McPherons, Victoria Roubideaux)

Pages 58-78 (McPherons, Victoria Roubideaux) Summary

McPherons

Harold and Raymond McPheron, two aged brothers, wait for Tom Guthrie to arrive to help with vaccinating cattle. Guthrie arrives with Ike and Bobby. Raymond and Harold joke that they cannot afford to pay two extra "hired men," and they certainly cannot afford to pay "city wages." Raymond asks the boys how much they charge, but Ike and Bobby have no idea how to answer.

The men work to herd the cattle individually into chutes for restraint while they administer vaccines and check to see if the cows are carrying calves. Guthrie asks the boys to help, and he shows them how to move inside the corral to herd the cattle. Guthrie gives Ike a whip and Bobby a cattle prod. One cow has a misshapen horn, and Guthrie and the McPheron brothers have to remove it.

The last cow is wary of the boys. It panics and runs over Bobby. Ike and Guthrie check to see if Bobby is okay. After a few moments he catches his breath, and work resumes. The panicked cow tries to jump over the fence and gets stuck. Rather than risk further injury to the cow, the McPheron brothers decide to leave it alone.

While Guthrie and the boys are sitting in the truck waiting to leave, Harold and Raymond speak to them. Raymond goes to the window on the passenger side of the truck and gives each boy ten dollars and tells them they are welcome to return any time. After they drive away, the boys ask Guthrie why the McPheron brothers never married. Guthrie says he does not know.

Victoria Roubideaux

Victoria visits Dr. Martin for the appointment Maggie has scheduled. Before he begins, the doctor explains what he will do during the pelvic examination so that Victoria will not be frightened. After the examination the doctor confirms that Victoria is pregnant. The doctor asks a series of questions, beginning with whether Victoria wants the baby. He also wants to know that Victoria will not attempt anything on her own to end the pregnancy. Dr. Martin says that Victoria should return every month. When he asks if Victoria has any questions, she asks if the baby is all right.



Pages 58-78 (McPherons, Victoria Roubideaux) Analysis

McPherons

Guthrie demonstrates that he is a kind and supportive father when Bobby is hurt. He reassures Bobby that he is doing a fine job. The McPheron brothers are delighted that Guthrie has brought the boys. The McPheron brothers must feel a special affection for the boys who are also brothers. The boys are also interested in the McPherons, as indicated by their questions about why the old men never married.

Victoria Roubideaux

The only question Victoria has for the doctor is whether her baby is all right. Clearly she does want the baby. At this point it is difficult to say why Victoria wants to have the baby despite the hardships pregnancy and motherhood will cause. Perhaps because Victoria has never had a fulfilling family life she is ready to love a child of her own.



Pages 79-99 (Guthrie, Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux)

Pages 79-99 (Guthrie, Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux) Summary

Guthrie

Guthrie listens to students giving speeches. He calls on a female student who says she is not ready. He tells her to do the best she can, and she rushes through reading her few notes. Guthrie calls on a male student, and his report lasts less than a minute. When Guthrie asks why the report was so short, the student says he could not find any information on his topic. Guthrie asks again if the student was unable to find any information on Thomas Jefferson, and the student says indeed he could not.

The next student Guthrie calls is Victoria Roubideaux. While Victoria gives her speech, Guthrie's thoughts drift to Maggie Jones telling him that Victoria is staying with her. Guthrie thinks that Victoria is already looking better.

Russell Beckman says something that makes Victoria freeze. She is unable to speak. Victoria runs out of the classroom. Guthrie asks Russell what he said, and Russell denies having said anything. Russell then says he was merely talking to another student. Guthrie tells Russell to step out into the hall. Again Guthrie asks Russell what he said to upset Victoria, and again Russell denies having said anything. Guthrie reminds Russell that he is failing the class, and Russell says he does not care. Russell curses at Guthrie, and Guthrie grabs Russell's arm. Russell continues to spout profanity at Guthrie, and again Guthrie grabs Russell's arm. Russell strikes Guthrie and then runs away. Guthrie discovers that one of his teeth is broken, and then he returns to the classroom.

Guthrie tells the students to read quietly for the remainder of the period.

Ike and Bobby

Ike and Bobby take a classmate to the house where they saw the teenagers. On the way the boys are fascinated with every detail concerning the incident, including the tire tracks from the teenager's car. Inside the house, the third boy speculates on how the young woman might have behaved during sex, and Ike and Bobby are revolted by his crude language and ideas. An old man arrives with a shotgun and points it at the boys. The boys leave, and once outside Ike and Bobby learn that the third boy has taken a candle as a souvenir, which upsets the brothers.

Victoria Roubideaux



One evening, instead of going straight to Maggie Jones' house, Victoria goes to a pay phone and makes a call. The woman who answers the telephone is rude and abrupt. Victoria asks for Dwayne, but the woman will not give Dwayne's number. She says he has a job and should not be bothered.

Victoria is still not ready to go to Maggie's house. She walks to a café she used to frequent with Dwayne. She sees a mother and two children. One of the children spills milk all over the table. The mother gets angry and leaves. While the café owner mops, she asks Victoria if she ever saw such a mess.

Victoria arrives at Maggie's a little after 10 p.m. While Victoria is in the bathroom preparing for bed, Maggie's elderly father enters. He does not recognize Victoria. He is angry and he repeatedly slaps Victoria. He also says something about how she will never find it because it is in the bank. Victoria locks herself in the bathroom and waits for Maggie to arrive.

Maggie arrives home, puts her father to bed, and tries to comfort Victoria. Victoria wants to leave, but she has nowhere else to go.

Pages 79-99 (Guthrie, Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux) Analysis

Guthrie

Though the narrator does not often do so, in this section he demonstrates the ability to access characters' thoughts, such as Guthrie's during the student speeches.

Details about Russell Beckman, including his red hair, dark blue car, and high school letter jacket indicate that he is the same person as the "Russ" Ike and Bobby saw in the abandoned house with the two other teens.

Ike and Bobby

The boys seem to regard the area where the incident took place with a degree of reverence. Indeed, they seem to think of the house as some sort of shrine. It is difficult to imagine how a nine and ten year old might feel about an event that older people would regard in a matter-of-fact manner. Their annoyance at the third boy for stealing a candle is almost like they feel like he has desecrated a place of great importance.

Victoria Roubideaux

It is unclear whether Victoria views the scene with the mother and children as a sample of what she will soon be facing. It is also unclear if she understands the café owner's meaning when she asked if Victoria ever saw such a mess. Victoria thinks the café owner is referring to the spilled milk, but the woman is actually referring to the mother.

The abuse Victoria suffers at the hands of Maggie's senile father is particularly sad because Victoria comes from an abusive home, and Maggie's house is her only sanctuary. Victoria must be terrified of the present and the future.



Pages 100-121 (Ike and Bobby, McPherons, Ella)

Pages 100-121 (Ike and Bobby, McPherons, Ella) Summary

Ike and Bobby

Ike and Bobby sit on their bicycles across from the house where their mother now lives. After they knock on the door and their mother answers, they immediately notice that she looks unwell. She invites the boys inside, but they find conversation with her difficult because she seems so listless. The boys ask if they can get anything for her, and she says that she is out of coffee. Ike and Bobby go to the grocery store and charge coffee to their mother's account. Then they go to another store and use their paper route money to buy her some perfume and bubble bath. When the boys give their mother her gifts, she cries.

McPherons

Maggie Jones drives to the McPherons' ranch. She knocks on the door, but there is no answer. When she looks through the doorway into the house, she sees the clutter of two old bachelors. Maggie waits by the barn, and after a while the brothers arrive on a tractor. They invite her in for coffee. She tells them she has a favor to ask.

Maggie tells the brothers that a young woman needs help. She explains Victoria's situation, and when she mentions that Victoria's mother is Betty Roubideaux, the brothers seem to understand why Victoria is not getting familial support. When Maggie says that she is asking if Victoria can come stay with the brothers, both Harold and Raymond are astounded. They ask if she is joking.

Maggie asks the brothers to think about it, and then she leaves. The brothers go back to work and do not talk about the matter until later in the day. While both agree that they may be entering into a troublesome situation, they both agree that they will help Victoria.

Ella

Guthrie's wife, Ella, has called him and asked him to come to her house. Guthrie immediately notices that she has packed suitcases, and she informs him that she is moving to Denver. The discussion quickly becomes an argument. Once they are able to regain composure and become civil again, Ella says she would like the boys to come over and spend the night. That evening Guthrie drives the boys to their mother's house. They have a somewhat awkward time with their mother, and then Guthrie returns for them in the morning.



Pages 100-121 (Ike and Bobby, McPherons, Ella) Analysis

Ike and Bobby

It is very touching that the boys use their own hard-earned paper route money to buy gifts for the mother who has effectively abandoned them. The fact that she cries when presented the gifts indicates that she is not so far gone in her depression that she fails to appreciate her sons' gesture.

McPherons

The McPheron brothers live seventeen miles from the nearest town. The setting of this novel is in a land less densely populated than most readers will ever encounter. It is not clear why Maggie Jones thinks of the McPheron brothers when she is searching for a home for Victoria, but it is clear that she knows both brothers well since she speaks to them with a great deal of familiarity.

Ella

Guthrie is understandably annoyed. Ella has abandoned her two sons, and believes she is entitled to half the family's savings simply because she feels bad and needs some time to figure out what she wants out of life. Guthrie seems to want to avoid conflict. Perhaps he realizes that arguments or protests would accomplish nothing, or perhaps by this time he is ready to see his wife go away.



Pages 122-143 (Victoria Roubideaux, McPherons, Guthrie)

Pages 122-143 (Victoria Roubideaux, McPherons, Guthrie) Summary

Victoria Roubideaux

Maggie Jones drives Victoria to the McPherons. Victoria is nervous, but Maggie convinces her to give the McPherons a chance. She also says that the men will be understanding because they lost their own parents in an automobile accident. The brothers are waiting and have even dressed for the occasion. Maggie also notices that they have cleaned the house. The brothers show Victoria her room. It is the room that the McPheron brothers' parents once occupied.

McPherons

After dinner the brothers sit at the dining table, and Victoria is in her room. The brothers wonder if Victoria ate enough, and Raymond worries that Victoria did not like his cooking. Raymond looks in on sleeping Victoria and puts two wool blankets on her. During the night Victoria wakes hot and sweating.

Guthrie

Guthrie is in Lloyd Crowder's office with Russell Beckman and his parents. Crowder explains that they are gathered because Russell has acted inappropriately. Mrs. Beckman is immediately angry. Crowder reads the incident report, and Mrs. Beckman argues with liberal use of profanity. Russell denies everything he is accused of, and Mrs. Beckman continues her vulgar tirade. Crowder announces his decision to suspend Russell for five days, and Mr. Beckman is angry that Russell will not be able to play in the weekend's basketball tournament. On his way out, Mr. Beckman threatens Crowder. Once the Beckmans are gone Crowder warns Guthrie to be careful and to pass Russell even if he does not complete the required assignments.

Pages 122-143 (Victoria Roubideaux, McPherons, Guthrie) Analysis

Victoria Roubideaux

The McPheron brothers are even more nervous than Victoria, and they have gone to a great deal of effort to try to make the best impression possible. Maggie decides that there is no reason to delay letting the brothers and Victoria get acquainted, and she leaves them.



McPherons

The concern the elderly brothers show for Victoria's comfort is touching, and they are clearly two caring, nurturing people. The brothers are not merely concerned with offering shelter. They are already making a sincere effort to ensure that Victoria is happy.

Guthrie

The source of Russell's tendency for inappropriate behavior is obvious. With parents who lash out in vulgar tirades it is little wonder that Russell sees bullying and violence as acceptable behavior. Though Crowder is more willing to relent and pass Russell just to get him out of the school, he supports Guthrie and suspends Russell.



Pages 144-158 (Ike and Bobby, Guthrie)

Pages 144-158 (Ike and Bobby, Guthrie) Summary

Ike and Bobby

The boys visit Mrs. Stearns. She is surprised to see them because it is not Saturday, and when she asks them why they have come, they cannot answer. Mrs. Stearns invites the boys in and suggests that they make cookies. She sends the boys with a list to the grocery store. Mrs. Stearns also gives the boys a key so she will not have to get up to let them in again. The boys have difficulty choosing the items because Mrs. Stearns did not specify brands.

When they return and give Mrs. Stearns her receipt and change, they also try to return the key, but she tells them to keep it in case they want to visit again. Mrs. Stearns instructs the boys to make cookies according to a written recipe, and she tells the boys that from now on if they can read they can cook.

While the cookies are baking, Mrs. Stearns shows the boys a photo album. Most of the pictures are of her son who died in World War II. Bobby says that his mother has moved to Denver, and Mrs. Stearns says that she must miss the boys "like breath itself."

Guthrie

Guthrie, along with many other teachers, is at a party at Maggie Jones's house. Guthrie begins to leave, telling Maggie that he does not feel comfortable at parties. He says that he is going to a bar to have a drink, and Maggie says she will come by the bar when the party is over.

Guthrie goes to the bar, and he sees the office secretary, Judy, and she waves. Guthrie sits at the bar and visits with an old acquaintance. After they have a few drinks, Judy comes to talk to Guthrie. Judy asks about the situation with Ella, and later Judy invites Guthrie to come to her house some time for dinner. Guthrie leaves the bar alone before Maggie arrives.

Pages 144-158 (Ike and Bobby, Guthrie) Analysis

Ike and Bobby

In the grocery store the boys demonstrate an impressive amount of reasoning for children their age. When faced with decisions, they typically try to select the solution closest to the middle. Mrs. Stearns hopes the boys will come again, and she allows them to keep the key to her apartment. The revelation that Mrs. Stearns had a son explains why she is able to build a rapport with Ike and Bobby so easily. The revelation



that her husband left her and her son explains why Mrs. Stearns is so sympathetic to the boys' situation.

Guthrie

When Judy asks if Ella will return, Guthrie readily admits that he doubts she will. He is not so ready to admit whether or not he would want her to return. It seems now that both Maggie Jones and Judy are romantically interested in Guthrie.



Pages 159-186 (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, McPherons)

Pages 159-186 (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, McPherons) Summary

Victoria Roubideaux

Victoria visits Maggie Jones in her classroom. Maggie asks if anything is wrong, and Victoria says that the McPheron brothers rarely speak, even to each other. Maggie asks Victoria why she does not initiate conversations, and Victoria says she knows nothing about cows.

Maggie encounters Harold at the grocery store and tells him about her conversation with Victoria. Harold wants advice on what to talk about with Victoria, but Maggie will not offer any.

At home Harold tells Raymond about his conversation with Maggie. Both brothers agree that they must do something immediately, but neither brother has any idea what to discuss with a young woman. After dinner Harold makes his first attempt at starting a conversation. He asks Victoria what she thinks of "the market." Victoria admits that she has no idea what he is asking, and both brothers use the opportunity to explain the farming industry. Victoria seems happy to listen.

Ike and Bobby

The boys spend Christmas week with their mother in Denver. They notice that their mother seems passive and dominated by her sister. Ella is again spending time alone in a dark bedroom. The boys are often bored and unsupervised. Their mother stays secluded in her room, and their aunt is gone to work much of the time. The boys are forbidden to leave the apartment during the day, and they are captive on the seventh floor. In an effort to combat boredom they spend time on the balcony. They discover that it is fun to drop things from the balcony, and they seem to enjoy dropping eggs the most.

Eventually someone tells the boys' aunt about the egg dropping, and the boys are then forbidden to go onto the balcony. Both boys are happy when Guthrie arrives to take them back home.

McPherons

There is no school over the holiday period, and Victoria grows increasingly bored staying on the ranch. She begins staying up late at night and sleeping late every morning. The brothers are concerned, and they discuss the issue. Harold compares



Victoria's pregnancy to the pregnant cattle they tend every day, and Raymond is annoyed and astounded. The brothers try to think of ways to cheer Victoria, and Harold suggests going to a movie. Again, Raymond is astounded by what he regards as a bad idea.

Harold calls Maggie Jones and asks her where she would go to buy a baby crib. She suggests going to a department store in another town. The following morning the brothers tell Victoria that they would like to take her out for some shopping and some fun. They have lunch at a café and then visit the department store.

The brothers are surprised by the variety of cribs and their level of complexity. They ask Victoria which one she likes, and she says that all of them are too expensive. The brothers chose the most expensive model, and Victoria is moved to tears.

When they arrive home they discover that some cattle have gotten loose. The brothers go to herd the cattle back to pasture, and when they return they find that Victoria has prepared dinner. After dinner the brothers assemble the crib. The following morning Victoria sleeps late, but the brothers are no longer worried.

Pages 159-186 (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, McPherons) Analysis

Victoria Roubideaux

When Maggie encounters Harold at the grocery store she again acts with a great deal of familiarity. It is as if she has known Harold her entire life, and maybe she has. The brothers' immediate concern about Victoria's happiness shows that they have come to enjoy her presence. While the farming industry is something Victoria has probably never thought about, she finds it interesting because it is important to the McPheron brothers.

Ike and Bobby

The boys must be absolutely miserable being captive in a small apartment when they are accustomed to so much freedom at home. Like any bored unsupervised children will do, the boys find ways to stay entertained, and those ways are not always appreciated by adults.

McPherons

The McPheron's solution to Victoria's boredom is simple and effective. Victoria has no idea how to respond initially because it is likely that never before has anyone shown genuine interest in her happiness and made her feel valued as an individual. The brother's are indeed genuinely interested, and they seem to look forward to the birth of the baby.



Pages 187-199 (Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux)

Pages 187-199 (Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux) Summary

Guthrie

Guthrie lies in bed with Judy at her house. Judy asks Guthrie what prompted him to come over that night, and he says he was lonely. Judy begins to kiss Guthrie, and he asks about her ex husband. She wonders why he wants to have that discussion at this particular time.

Two hours earlier Guthrie had driven past Maggie Jones' house, but it appeared that either no one was home or she was already asleep. Guthrie bought some beer and drove around with no particular destination in mind before he decided to go to Judy's house.

As Guthrie is leaving Judy's house she asks him if he will return. He says maybe.

Two days later Guthrie discovers that everyone in town knows that he paid a visit to Judy. Even Maggie Jones knows. One day after class has been dismissed Maggie goes into Guthrie's classroom and confronts him. Guthrie admits that what he had really wanted that night was to see Maggie, and he says that his relationship with Judy will not continue.

Victoria Roubideaux

In the hallway at school a young woman gives Victoria a note. The note is from Dwayne asking Victoria to come outside to the parking lot. Victoria goes outside to where Dwayne sits in his car. She asks what he wants, and he says that he heard that she was pregnant and living with two old men. Dwayne also says that he wants her to come live in Denver with him. Victoria does not appear happy to see Dwayne, so he asks if she will at least get into the car and talk to him. Victoria gets in the car, and they immediately leave Holt for Denver.

In Denver, there is little for Victoria to do all day while Dwayne is at work. She cleans the small apartment just to stay occupied. Victoria discovers that she feels alone and regrets her rash action.

Pages 187-199 (Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux) Analysis

Guthrie



Guthrie's visit to Judy as a diversion to help with his loneliness nearly ends his chances for a relationship with Maggie Jones. Readers more familiar with larger urban settings may find it difficult to understand that in small communities most residents are aware of the actions of other residents, and it is common to share information. Maggie reminds Guthrie of this when she says that Holt is a small town and everyone recognizes Guthrie's truck.

Victoria Roubideaux

It must come as a shock to most readers that Victoria departs with Dwayne without saying anything to Maggie Jones or the McPherons, and Victoria's behavior is certainly irresponsible, even rude. Before we allow ourselves to judge Victoria, we first have to remember that she is only seventeen-years-old, she has never been in love before, and recent events have left her confused. While her rash decision is not admirable, it is understandable.



Pages 200-216: (McPherons, Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux, McPherons)

Pages 200-216: (McPherons, Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux, McPherons) Summary

McPherons

The brothers have been driving around Holt for three hours before they stop at Maggie Jones' house. They explain that Victoria is missing, and Maggie calls some students. Eventually she reaches the student that gave Victoria the note. When Maggie tells Harold and Raymond that Victoria likely left with Dwayne, the brothers are sad, and they wonder if they have done something to upset Victoria.

When the brothers arrive back at their ranch, they find that one of their cows is having difficulty giving birth. They try to assist the cow by gentle means, but conclude that the cow is exhausted and cannot give birth on her own. They have to resort to using a device with a chain to pull the calf free of the cow. Though exhausted, the brothers still worry about Victoria.

Guthrie

Lloyd Crowder calls Guthrie to warn him that the Beckmans are complaining to the school board. Crowder advises Guthrie to bring his grade book. When Guthrie arrives the school board meeting is going smoothly, and concerned parents are voicing opinions on topics like order on the school busses. Then when Mrs. Beckman speaks she immediately launches into aggressive accusations in her usual vulgar manner.

The school board chairman says that the board does not like to interfere with how a teacher conducts a classroom, and the chairman has to warn Mrs. Beckman to stop using profanity. The board members try to pacify the Beckmans, but the couple continues their tirade. Mr. Beckman even threatens to bring legal action against the school.

Victoria Roubideaux

Victoria takes a part-time job at a convenience store working on the nights that other employees are unable to work. On the third night she works, a man comes into the store late at night and asks if she knows one of her co-workers. Victoria answers that she does, and the man claims he is in a relationship with the woman, and she has locked him out of the house. He also claims to have a gun in his car, and he specifies that the gun contains three rounds: one for the woman, one for him, and one for the woman's dog. The man says he has the dog in the car and might only kill the dog. He buys some chewing gum and leaves the store.



Victoria records the license plate numbers on the man's car and gives them to her manager the following morning. Days later her co-worker tells her that the man is insane but harmless. She says she does not even own a dog.

Dwayne and Victoria attend a party. Victoria is uncomfortable at first but before the party ends she uses both alcohol and marijuana. The following morning Victoria cannot remember all events from the party, and she is concerned about some bruises she does not remember getting. Victoria also feels intense guilt and shame that she might have done something to harm her baby.

McPherons

After a meeting of the local farmer's cooperative, Raymond goes with other members to a bar for drinks. While there Raymond speaks to a man who insinuates that his and Harold's relationship with Victoria was sexual. Raymond grabs the man and tells him never to speak that way about Victoria again or Raymond will physically harm him.

After he arrives home, Raymond stands in Victoria's room before going to Harold's room. Harold says he can tell that Raymond is angry. Raymond tells his brother that people are talking about the nature of their relationship with Victoria. Harold says that Raymond should have expected as much and that he ought to disregard it.

Pages 200-216: (McPherons, Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux, McPherons) Analysis

McPherons

The brothers are understandably worried. While they might feel some little bit of relief in hearing that Victoria ran off with her boyfriend, that does not stop them from worrying about her health and general welfare. The brothers have grown fond of Victoria beyond the level she is aware of. When they return home and find a cow unable to deliver its calf on its own, this is symbolic of the brothers' anxiety about Victoria's welfare and their desire to help and protect her.

Guthrie

Like a bad pest that will not go away, the Beckmans continue their campaign to damage Guthrie's career. Rationality plays no part in their desire for revenge, and they are not at all concerned that they are asking that their son be granted privileges and accolades that he does not deserve.

Victoria Roubideaux

Working nights at a convenience store is not an ideal job for a young woman in the advanced stages of pregnancy. The encounter with the insane man reveals the possibility of danger on the job. Victoria's unhealthy and irresponsible behavior at the



party is likely the product of her loneliness and confusion. At this point, as readers, we can only hope that her guilt serves to teach her to avoid such behaviors in the future.

McPherons

Raymond's departure from his normally calm demeanor is not surprising. The man's crass comment offends him, and it comes at a time when he is missing and worrying about Victoria. Harold offers the voice of reason and reminds Raymond that idle gossip is to be expected in a small community.



Pages 217-242 (Ike and Bobby, Maggie Jones, Victoria Roubideaux)

Pages 217-242 (Ike and Bobby, Maggie Jones, Victoria Roubideaux) Summary

Ike and Bobby

The boys awake and notice that one of their horses is acting in a peculiar manner. The horse seems to be trying to kick itself in the stomach. The boys inform Guthrie, and he calls the veterinarian. The boys want to know why the horse is behaving so strangely, but Guthrie does not know. Bobby says he thinks Ike's horse will die, and Ike is not at all pleased with the comment. The boys want to stay and wait for the veterinarian, but Guthrie tells them that they must attend to their paper route.

After the boys have delivered the papers, they meet and ride home together. The veterinarian is still tending to the horse. The horse is lying on its side, and Guthrie tells the boys that they should go into the house. The boys do not want to go, and Guthrie cautions them that what they will see will not be pleasant. The horse is dead, and the veterinarian will perform an autopsy.

The boys sit on the fence and watch the entire gruesome ordeal. The veterinarian determines that the horse died from a twisted intestine. After the autopsy, Guthrie offers to buy the veterinarian lunch, but the man has promised to take his son fishing. Guthrie has to use his pickup truck to drag the horse out to pasture. He offers to let Ike and Bobby take turns driving back, but the boys are too upset and decline the offer. Later, the boys go into the barn and sit in silent sadness.

Maggie Jones

Guthrie and Maggie dance in a bar. Ike and Bobby are away in Denver visiting their mother. Maggie admits she has been attracted to Guthrie for many years. After leaving the bar, Guthrie and Maggie go to her house. In Maggie's bedroom Guthrie tells her that he is impressed that she always seems so confident. The two are intimate, and then they wonder if Guthrie should leave before dawn. They decide that he should stay.

In the morning Guthrie encounters Maggie's father in the kitchen. The old man believes Guthrie is there trying to sell Maggie a car. Guthrie leaves Maggie's and delivers newspapers for Ike and Bobby. When he goes home he takes a nap, and he wakes thinking of Maggie. Guthrie telephones Maggie and invites her to dinner.

Victoria Roubideaux



Dwayne arrives home and informs Victoria that he wants to go to another party. Victoria does not want to go. Dwayne is angry and goes to the party alone. Victoria thinks about how unhappy she is and how living with Dwayne is nothing like she expected or hoped for.

Dwayne returns home drunk at 3 a.m. While Dwayne sleeps Victoria calls Maggie Jones. She asks if she can come back, and she asks if she can return to living with the McPherons. Maggie says they will have to ask the brothers. Dwayne wakes while Victoria is packing. She tells him she is gathering laundry, and he returns to sleep. Victoria leaves the apartment and catches a city bus to the bus station.

While she waits in line to board her bus, Dwayne arrives. He forcibly pulls her out of line. The bus driver intervenes. Dwayne snatches away Victoria's purse, and she boards the bus without it.

When Victoria arrives in Holt, she uses a pay telephone to call Maggie Jones. Victoria wants to know if she can return to the McPheron's, but Maggie says she has not spoken to the brothers. She says that Victoria will have to do it in person.

Pages 217-242 (Ike and Bobby, Maggie Jones, Victoria Roubideaux) Analysis

Ike and Bobby

Many months have passed since the beginning of the novel. It is now the end of April.

This might be the boys' first experience with death. They are shaken and upset. They cannot even get interested in Guthrie's offer to drive the truck nor do they have much appetite when he takes them to the café.

Maggie Jones

Despite being such a significant character, this is the only chapter named after Maggie. The first sign that this is a serious encounter and not merely a one-time event comes when Maggie and Guthrie decide that he should stay all night rather than leave before dawn. They are well aware that if he remains until after dawn that the townsfolk will notice and everyone will know they are having a relationship.

Victoria Roubideaux

Victoria has finally realized the full extent of her folly and the wonderful opportunity she might have lost. In an effort to salvage her life and improve the health of her baby, she again turns to the same person she turned to at the beginning of her troubles. Victoria's determination to get away from Dwayne is encouraging. Previously Victoria had been meek and easily convinced to do the will of others. She is adamant about her decision to do what is best for herself and her baby.



Pages 243-262 (McPherons, Ike and Bobby, Guthrie)

Pages 243-262 (McPherons, Ike and Bobby, Guthrie) Summary

McPherons

Maggie Jones drives Victoria to the McPherons' ranch. When they arrive Harold steps out onto the porch followed by Raymond. Victoria stands before the brothers and says she has come ask if she can live with them again. They do not answer. Victoria says she also wants to apologize for the trouble she caused and to thank them for all they did for her. Again, the brothers do not reply. Victoria says she hopes both brothers are well, and she says she will not bother them again. She turns to go back to the car. She has almost reached the car when Harold says that she couldn't leave like that again. Raymond wants to know if she is all right. Harold wants her to come into the house. While Harold and Victoria wait on the porch Raymond goes to retrieve Victoria's belongings and speak to Maggie.

Inside the house the brothers want Victoria to tell them what happened. She asks if it is all right to wait until tomorrow for an explanation. The brothers agree. When Raymond mentions how worried they were when she left, Victoria cries.

Ike and Bobby

Ike and Bobby finish watching a movie and then leave the theater. It is after dark, and they are walking home. On a deserted street, Russell Beckman's car stops near the boys. Russell asks the boys if they want a ride. The boys say they do not want a ride, and they try to continue walking. Russell says they are getting a ride anyway, and he asks if Guthrie knows where they are. Sharlene and the young man the boys saw in the abandoned house are also in the car. Sharlene tries to convince Russell to leave Ike and Bobby alone. Russell and the other young man get out of the car and grab Ike and Bobby. They force them into the car.

Russell drives out of town, and all the way the girl pleads with Russell to leave the boys alone. Russell stops the car at a spot on a dark deserted road five miles from town. He tells the boys not to tell anyone about the incident or he will return. Russell starts to leave, but the other young man asks if they are not going to do more to the boys. Russell restrains Ike while the other young man throws Bobby to the ground and strips his shoes, pants and underwear and throws them into the dark beside the road. Ike breaks free from Russell and tries to attack the young man. Russell grabs Ike and takes away his shoes, pants, and underwear. Russell again threatens the boys and then drives away.



It takes the boys thirty minutes to find their clothing, and then they begin walking back to town. They consider stopping at a farmhouse but worry about dogs. Guthrie is not at home when the boys arrive well after midnight. When he does arrive, the boys will not talk, and Bobby cries. Guthrie asks what happened, and Ike says the big red haired boy said not to tell.

Guthrie

Guthrie sits with the boys through the night, and in the morning they are able to tell the full story. Guthrie drives to the Beckmans' house. He tells Mr. and Mrs. Beckman that Russell hurt the boys, and he demands that they get Russell. Guthrie, barely able to control his anger, speaks to Russell, and Russell denies the incident. Guthrie grabs Russell and shoves him into a wall. Both Mr. and Mrs. Beckman try to get Guthrie away from Russell. The neighbors become aware of the disturbance and call the sheriff.

The fight turns increasingly violent with first Mr. Beckman hitting Guthrie and then Guthrie striking back. After Russell tackles Guthrie to the ground, the three Beckmans beat Guthrie until the sheriff arrives. The sheriff orders all four to come to the station immediately to discuss the incident.

Pages 243-262 (McPherons, Ike and Bobby, Guthrie) Analysis

McPherons

The brothers' initial silence is probably due entirely to shock rather than anger. They have missed Victoria, and once they grasp the situation they readily agree to let her return. Victoria is again astounded to discover that what the brothers felt during her absence was worry, not annoyance or anger. She still finds it difficult to believe that others care for her.

Ike and Bobby

This is by far the most disturbing chapter so far. Russell Beckman has moved beyond bullying and bad behavior to committing a felony. His victims are two defenseless children that have already been traumatized by the departure of their mother and the death of one of their horses.

Guthrie

The tension in this chapter is nearly unbearable. While the reader surely shares Tom Guthrie's anger, the reader will no doubt be worried that he will do something violent and illegal. The neighbor's call to law enforcement comes not a moment too soon.



Pages 263-279 (McPherons, Ike and Bobby)

Pages 263-279 (McPherons, Ike and Bobby) Summary

McPherons

Victoria tells the brothers about her departure with Dwayne and her time in Denver. Afterward the brothers take Victoria to see Dr. Martin. On the way Victoria cries and tells the brothers about her behavior at the party. To console her, Raymond tells Victoria about a cow that swallowed barbed wire and still gave birth to a healthy calf.

After Victoria sees the doctor, the brothers talk to Dr. Martin. They want to ensure that Victoria is well. In his enthusiasm, Raymond nearly threatens the doctor.

Ike and Bobby

While home alone the boys grow bored. They go to see Mrs. Stearns, and when they let themselves in the apartment, they find her dead. The boys return home and saddle a horse. They ride far out of town and have to stop at a farmhouse for directions. They arrive late at night at the McPherson ranch. The brothers and Victoria are shocked that the boys rode all the way on a horse. Raymond calls Guthrie and convinces Guthrie to let the boys stay the night.

Guthrie arrives the next morning, and on the way home the boys tell of finding Mrs. Stearns. Ike asks if his mother is ever coming home, and Guthrie says he does not think so.

Pages 263-279 (McPherons, Ike and Bobby) Analysis

McPherons

When Harold asks Raymond where he got the story about the cow and the barbed wire, Raymond admits that he invented the story. He also says he will make up whatever he has to in order to give Victoria peace and health.

The brothers' brash behavior is more comical than threatening. They do not mean to be obnoxious, but their passionate concern for Victoria's welfare and their lack of interest in social graces utterly disrupts the usual decorum of the doctor's clinic.

Ike and Bobby

The shock and fear that the boys must feel is unimaginable. It is difficult to say what prompted them to go to the McPherons'. Certainly they feel lonely. The brothers did tell

the boys that they were welcome to return, and perhaps in their efforts to soothe their loneliness they remembered the kind old brothers.



Pages 280-end (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, McPherons, Holt)

Pages 280-end (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, McPherons, Holt) Summary

Victoria Roubideaux

Victoria goes into labor at noon on a Tuesday. The brothers want to take her to the clinic immediately, but she waits until 9 p.m. Victoria remains calm, but the brothers are in a state of quiet panic. Victoria's labor lasts a long time, but she gives birth to a healthy baby girl.

The day after delivering the baby, Dr. Martin receives a call from a man wanting to know what the doctor wants to do about the half steer the McPherons left for him.

Ike and Bobby

Ike and Bobby wait by train tracks. On the tracks they have placed coins and one of their mother's bracelets. After the train smashes the coins and jewelry, the boys bury them.

McPherons

The brothers return from tending livestock and find an unfamiliar car outside the house. Inside the house they find Dwayne talking to Victoria. Dwayne says he is taking Victoria away, but Victoria says she is not going. The brothers tell Dwayne to leave, but he grabs Victoria's arm. The brothers pick up the shouting Dwayne and carry him to his car.

Holt

Tom Guthrie, Ike and Bobby, Maggie Jones, Victoria Roubideaux and her baby, and the McPheron brothers are gathered at the McPheron ranch for a Memorial Day celebration. The brothers tell Guthrie how they hope that Victoria lives with them for a long time to come.

Pages 280-end (Victoria Roubideaux, Ike and Bobby, McPherons, Holt) Analysis

Victoria Roubideaux



The gift that the brothers present to Dr. Martin is not a mere token of appreciation. It is extravagant and expensive. A half steer, also called a side of beef, is worth well over a thousand dollars in the current market.

Ike and Bobby

Though it is not clear, it is possible that the little cemetery the boys visit is where Mrs. Stearns is buried. The event by the railroad tracks is one of the more poignant scenes of the novel. It shows that the boys have accepted the departure of their mother and are ready to move on as best they can.

McPherons

This brief chapter also has deeper meaning. It shows that the bond between Victoria and the brothers is solidified. There is no longer any doubt to any of the concerned parties that Victoria wants to stay and the brothers want her to remain.

Holt

This final chapter is the only moment in the story where all of the major characters are together. It is a fitting ending of a story about people helping each other. Now all of the characters that have helped each other through some trying times are able to come together and share a moment of happiness.



Characters

Tom Guthrie

Tom Guthrie is a good teacher and a good father, but he is encountering severe obstacles in both roles. It would be wholly inaccurate to view Guthrie's currently chaotic life as part of a mid-life crisis. Guthrie is not confused. In terms of work and home he knows exactly what he wants. He wants to continue being what he has been, a good teacher and a good father.

At home, Guthrie's efforts to provide a good life for Ike and Bobby are impaired by his absentee wife. At first she is emotionally absent, and then she becomes physically absent in a few stages. She moves to a guest bedroom where she stays all day and all night. Later she moves to a rented house in town. Later still she leaves town. These constant changes and disruptions make it impossible for Guthrie to create the stability and reliability he knows his young sons need.

At work, Guthrie faces challenges of a bizarre and violent nature. One of his students is a bully, and rather than listen to Guthrie criticize him for poor academic performance and rude treatment of fellow students, the young man attacks Guthrie. Guthrie receives support from the school's principal, but the parents of the young man refuse to believe their son can do anything wrong, and they embark on a vendetta against Guthrie.

Guthrie also faces challenges in his romantic life. He learns that two different women, both co-workers, are interested in him. Over time he discovers that he has genuine interest in one, but the other is sometimes more convenient.

Victoria Roubideaux

When thinking of Victoria, the term underprivileged immediately comes to mind. She has never had some of the chances that many others take for granted. Her father left the family years ago. Her mother is a troubled and mean spirited person. Victoria never seems to have any friends. She is shy and tends to keep to herself. She does socialize with others but only in a distant sort of way, like the people she works with at the Holt Café. She has had one boyfriend, but he disappeared without a word. Into this sort of life, Victoria finds herself pregnant at age seventeen.

It is probably safe to assume that if it were not for her pregnant condition and the coming winter, Victoria may not have sought help at all. In desperation, she seeks help from one of the only kind people she knows, a teacher. Maggie Jones saves Victoria at a time when she needs help the most. Victoria has no idea what to expect from pregnancy, and Maggie arranges for medical treatment. She also helps Victoria find the only true home she has ever known.



With the McPheron brothers, Victoria for the first time in her life feels truly appreciated. This baffles her at first. When the brothers buy a baby crib, Victoria repeatedly asks them why they want to do such a thing, and then she cries because she cannot believe that someone truly cares about her. Before Victoria can fully appreciate the brothers she has to leave them for a while. The contrast between her brief life in Denver and her life on the McPheron ranch helps her begin to realize what a wonderful opportunity the brothers present for her and her baby.

Ike and Bobby Guthrie

Rather than view Ike and Bobby as individual characters it is best to think of them as a pair just as the narrator always presents them. Ike is the oldest and ten, and Bobby is nine. As their father and the narrator observe at the opening of the novel they could easily pass for twins.

The situation with Ike and Bobby is the most heart wrenching. They are just little boys but they have to try to understand on their own, with little adult clarification, why their mother no longer seems interested in behaving as a mother. They watch powerless as she first secludes herself into a room, then moves out to a rental house, and then leaves town all together. The boys try to find solace wherever they can, first with the elderly Mrs. Ida Stearns and then with the McPheron brothers.

Not everything in Ike and Bobby's life is unpleasant. They enjoy freedoms that few children their age today can comprehend. The boys have horses that they can ride whenever they want. They have bicycles that they use for transportation. The boys even have their own income. Compared to most other nine and ten-year-olds, Ike and Bobby Guthrie are amazingly self-reliant.

Harold and Raymond McPheron

Just like the brothers Ike and Bobby Guthrie should be viewed as a pair, so too should Raymond and Harold. With only one very brief exception, the brothers are always presented together. They have lived their entire lives together as bachelors. While still in their teens the brothers lost their parents in an automobile accident. Ever since they have managed the family farm. It is the only life they have known.

By nature the brothers are kind, and in some ways they are charmingly naïve, especially in relation to women. It is with these most unlikely characters that Maggie Jones seeks a home for Victoria Roubideaux. They know little about adult women and even less about seventeen-year-olds. The brothers take on the task first out of sense of charity that develops into genuine love for the young woman and her baby.

In some ways the brothers are the best examples of the theme of plain and unadorned speech. In fact, the brothers rarely talk. They have lived so long together that they have developed an understanding of each other that does not rely solely on verbal communication. When they speak, they do so in few words, and their message is



always clear. There is nothing cryptic about the brothers. They are simply good honest caring people.

Maggie Jones

Maggie is a teacher at Holt High School and she is whom Victoria turns to for help after being evicted. Maggie is a kind a nurturing person. In addition to trying to help Victoria, she takes care of her elderly and senile father. Though her mood is almost always consistently pleasant, Maggie's personal life is somewhat lacking. Perhaps as a result of having to care for her ailing father Maggie has been unable to form romantic attachments. This situation might also be attributed to living in small town with few eligible or desirable men. To further complicate matters, for some time Maggie has been romantically interested in Tom Guthrie. Until recently he has been in a conventional marriage and Maggie has had to keep her desires secret. Now that he may be available, Maggie has to decide if he is as desirable as she has previously thought. After Guthrie does something that Maggie finds hurtful, she tells him in explicit terms that she likes him and wants him, but she will not compete for his affections.

While only one chapter is named after Maggie, she is in some ways more important than other characters. In some ways she is the catalyst that promotes healing for many. She introduces Victoria the McPherons, something that gives Victoria a much needed home and enriches the lives of the aged brothers. She helps Tom Guthrie to find happiness, which can only help him to continue to be a good father and help his boys adjust to life without their mother.

Ella Guthrie

This character is Tom Guthrie's wife and Ike and Bobby's mother. She suffers from severe depression and spends most of her time in bed. Unable to cope with her depression and the responsibilities of being a mother, she moves to Denver to live with her sister.

Judy

This character is a secretary at Holt High School. She is attracted to Tom Guthrie, and has a one-time sexual encounter with him.

Lloyd Crowder

This man is the principal of Holt High School. He supports Tom Guthrie, but when possible Crowder would prefer to take the route with the least controversy.



Russell Beckman

This character is a bully with serious disciplinary problems. He bullies his girlfriend. He humiliates Victoria Roubideaux. He even attacks young children. Russell has no respect for authority, as revealed by his violent attack on his teacher, Tom Guthrie.

Dwayne

This character is the young man that impregnates Victoria. After disappearing for several months he re-enters Victoria's life and takes her to live in Denver for a brief period.

Dr. Martin

This aged doctor provides medical care for Victoria during her pregnancy. After the successful delivery of Victoria's baby, the doctor is pleasantly surprised to learn that the McPheron brothers have given him an extravagant gift.

Sharlene

This high school student is the girlfriend of Russell Beckman. The young boys Ike and Bobby Guthrie see her naked through the window of an abandoned house, and they believe she is treated badly by Russell and his friend.

Betty Roubideaux

This callous character is the mother of Victoria Roubideaux. She evicts her daughter when she learns that Victoria is pregnant.

Mr. Beckman

This character is the father of Russell Beckman, and he is incapable of speaking without making threats.

Mrs. Beckman

This character is the mother of Russell Beckman, and she is incapable of speaking without using vulgar terms.



Ida Stearns

This elderly woman lives in an apartment in town. She is in poor health but feels sympathetic toward Ike and Bobby after learning that their mother has left. On one occasion Ike and Bobby visit Mrs. Stearns and find her dead.

Ralph Black

This character is the depot agent in Holt. He seems to enjoy picking on Ike and Bobby when they are retrieving their papers and preparing to deliver them.

Harvey Schmidt

This man is the local barber. He picks on Ike and Bobby when they come to collect for their paper route, and he makes comments about their mother that are inappropriate.



Objects/Places

Holt, Colorado

This small town on the high plains of eastern Colorado is the setting for much of the novel.

Denver, Colorado

Ella Guthrie leaves Holt to live with her sister in this large city. For a brief while Victoria Roubideaux lives with her boyfriend Dwayne.

Railroad Street

This is a street that runs parallel to the railroad tracks, and it is the street that runs nearest Guthrie's house.

Holt Café

This is where Victoria works every weekday after school as a dishwasher until she moves in with the McPheron brothers.

Phillips, Colorado

This is the nearest town to Holt that has a department store. It is where Victoria Roubideaux and the McPheron brothers go to buy a baby crib.

Gas and Go

This is a convenience store in Holt. Victoria Roubideaux sometimes buys lunch here and sometimes uses a pay telephone.

The Chute Bar and Grill

This is where Guthrie goes after he feels uncomfortable at a party at Maggie Jones house. It is where he learns that Judy is romantically interested in him, and later where he and Maggie go to dance.



Schmidt's Barber Shop

This is where Ike and Bobby go to collect fees for their paper route and learn that everyone in town knows that their mother has moved out of the house.

Holt Train Depot

This is where the boys Ike and Bobby Guthrie go every morning to get the newspapers for their delivery route.

Holt County Clinic

This is where Victoria goes for medical care during her pregnancy and where she gives birth to her baby.



Themes

Loneliness and Isolation

The novel's most apparent and predominant theme is loneliness. Each of the main characters experiences this emotion. Some characters experience it from the opening of the novel, and other characters encounter it as the novel progresses.

The first character encountered, Tom Guthrie, is facing the loss of his wife. It is not a loss through death or initially physical distance, but it is a loss nonetheless. His wife, Ella, is also suffering from feelings of isolation. Her depression has left her in a state where she feels foreign to everyone including herself.

Other characters, such as the McPheron brothers, encounter loneliness as the novel progresses. They become fond of Victoria Roubideaux, and then she departs for a time. The McPheron brothers are familiar with feelings of loneliness. When they were teenagers they lost both parents in an automobile accident. This familiarity with loneliness does not lessen the amount of worry and concern they feel for Victoria.

Victoria Roubideaux has felt loneliness her entire life. She has never been shown kindness by her own family. Her father abandoned the family years ago, and her verbally abusive mother locks her out of the house on discovering her pregnancy. The father of her baby has disappeared. Victoria has no one.

The loneliness that Ike and Bobby feel is probably the most frightening for any character, and probably the circumstance with which the audience sympathizes most. Ike and Bobby are only nine and ten-years-old. They cannot understand why their mother has left them, and they have no frame of reference for knowing what to expect in the future.

Accepting and Adapting to Changing Circumstances

Every one of the major characters in the novel *Plainsong* face significant changes that they at first find difficult to accept. Guthrie and his sons are losing a wife and a mother. The McPheron brothers willingly decide to change the way they have lived for decades. Maggie Jones is confronted with an opportunity to act on her attraction to Guthrie, though that act might endanger her emotional security or even her career. No character faces more alarming and sudden changes than Victoria Roubideaux.

For the first time in her life another person expresses genuine interest in Victoria. A few short months later the person disappears. Shortly thereafter Victoria discovers that she is pregnant. There seems to be no end to the obstacles Victoria faces. As if being pregnant at seventeen is not challenging enough, Victoria finds one evening that she has been locked out of her house. She first finds refuge with a teacher, but the teacher's elderly and senile father ends that arrangement. Then Victoria finds herself living with



two aged bachelors on a ranch seventeen miles from the nearest town. Just as her life is starting to have some form of stability, Victoria makes a rash decision that puts everything in flux once again.

In a symbolic and emotionally satisfying act, the young brothers Ike and Bobby Guthrie finally learn to accept that their mother is gone. One afternoon the brothers find a piece of their mother's jewelry. They take it to the railroad tracks and wait for a train to come and crush the jewelry. This act seems to symbolize the young boys' acceptance that their mother is gone and will not return. It also marks the first time they are honest about the resentment they feel.

Rural versus Urban Life

Plainsong could not have been set in a fast-paced urban setting. The story and the behavior of the characters could occur only in a small town and the outlying rural area. In some ways this setting presents a greater degree of freedom for the characters, and in other ways it presents more restrictive obstacles than one would find in a large city.

One of the first aspects of rural life that might strike many readers is the amount of freedom and responsibility given to the young boys Ike and Bobby Guthrie. The boys have the freedom to ride horses nearly any time they choose, but they also have the responsibility to care for the animals. Already at the age of nine and ten the boys are employed and earn money from a paper route. These sorts of activities are rare or unheard of for children living in densely populated urban centers. An example of this occurs during the boys' visit to Denver. They cannot leave the apartment alone, and soon find themselves bored to a state of misery.

Rural life can also be restrictive for some characters. Most people living in large cities do not have to be concerned that their every action is being observed and reported on. In small communities all residents of the town know every individual's actions. When Guthrie visits Judy, a day later every single person in the town knows about it, including the one person he wishes did not know.



Style

Point of View

The point of view in the novel *Plainsong* comes from the perspective of an omniscient third person narrator. In the beginning of the novel, the reader cannot know if the narrator is omniscient or limited to a perspective near a principle character. Over time we see first that the narrator is able to describe the actions of characters while the principle character of the particular chapter is not present. Later, and only in a few instances, the narrator accesses the thoughts of the characters.

Throughout much of the text the narrator maintains a distance and reports only on the characters actions and spoken words. This distance seems to create a feeling that the narrator is more reliable than most. By usually refraining from reporting on a character's inner thoughts, the narrator leaves the tasks of speculation and interpretation to the readers. By saying less somehow the narrator becomes more believable.

This distance on the part of the narrator is also in keeping with the concept of "plain" both as something unadorned and as a flat and featureless landscape. The narrator's constantly neutral tendency to report on just the tangible, observable facts and leave conjecture out of the story gives the tale a beauty and realism not found in other works with a great deal of opinion or excessive exposition.

Setting

The rural and semi-rural settings are vital to the plot of the novel. Much of what occurs could happen only in this rustic place. The high plains of eastern Colorado are a sparsely populated area where the number of cattle and other livestock exceeds the number of human residents. This isolated setting helps convey one of the novel's main themes, loneliness.

The McPherons' ranch is a good example of one of the novel's isolated settings. It would be difficult to find many places in the continental United States that are as isolated as the McPherons' ranch. The two brothers live seventeen miles from the nearest town and many miles from the nearest paved road. The nearest town, Holt, is no sprawling urban center. The two youngest characters, Ike and Bobby Guthrie, are able to cross the entire town on foot or on bicycles.

Other aspects of the novel, including the attitudes and behaviors of some of the characters, could exist only in a small town. Residents of a densely populated urban location would probably not notice any two particular residents carrying on a romantic relationship. Certainly no nine and ten-year-old children could saddle horses and ride all day and into the night.



Time is an important aspect of a setting, and though the narrator does not specify a year, the reader can make some guesses based on clues. The photograph of Mrs. Stearns shows her young and vibrant around the time of World War II. At the time of the novel she is elderly. Likely the novel is set toward the end of the twentieth century, but not so recent that computers and cellular telephones play an important part in characters' lives. As for the time of the action in the novel, it takes place over the course of an autumn, winter, and spring.

Language and Meaning

The language and its meaning is a significant component of the novel. The first indication of this occurs before the narrative even begins. In the opening pages of the novel, the author gives a definition: "Plainsong—the unisonous vocal music used in the Christian church from the earliest times; any simple unadorned melody or air." The latter part of the definition is applicable to the language and meaning of this novel. Plainsong is not a religious novel in any way. It is never mentioned. It is, however, full of unadorned yet beautiful, even poetic, language. These poetically visual passages are often found in the parts of the novel that describe the regional setting, whether it is a windmill on a secluded ranch or a seldom-used railway depot.

There are few words in the text that will send readers to a dictionary. If these instances occur, they are more likely to pertain to terms related to farming, ranching, and rural life in general rather than simply being unnecessarily complex and rarely used vocabulary.

Some readers may notice a curious trait of the narrator concerning substitution of the word "have" for the word "of." At first some may suspect this of being a grammatical oversight by the author and publishers. Closer examination reveals that this peculiar construction occurs only in dialogue. Rather than being a grammatical error it is an intentional act intended to capture the peculiarities of the regional speech. That is the way many characters speak, and staying true to accurate retelling, that is the way the narrator relays the dialogue.

Structure

Plainsong is divided into individual chapters, and each chapter has a title bearing the name of one of the novel's characters. The chapters are named after the principle character in that segment, or in the case of the McPheron brothers and Ike and Bobby Guthrie, the chapters are named after multiple characters. Most of the principle characters have multiple chapters named after them, but in the case of Ella and Maggie Jones, there is only one chapter for each. Ella is a lesser character, physically or emotionally absent most of the time. Maggie, on the other hand, is an important character who plays important roles in chapters named after other characters.

The progression of the novel is linear and chronological. It spans an approximately nine-month period, roughly equal to a school term or a human pregnancy. Generally the narrator reveals the progression of time through subtle details like the changing weather



or the occurrence of a major holiday. There is little backtracking, but there are instances where some chapters retell events occurring at the same time as the previous chapter but from a different principle character's perspective.

One notable exception to the structure of the novel occurs in the final chapter. Instead of being named after a character, the final chapter is named "Holt," the name of the town in which much of the novel is set. In this chapter, all of the novel's main characters are gathered in the same location, The McPheron ranch for a Memorial Day celebration.



Quotes

pp. 46-47, Ike and Bobby

They could not think of what she should do, how she might correct the way her life had turned out. But she said no more about it. Instead, she appeared to be looking past them toward the curtained window overlooking the alley. Behind her glasses her eyes were the pale blue of the finest paper and the whites too appeared bluish, with the finest squills of red.

p. 49, Victoria Roubideaux

What if I am? But I might not be, how would that feel after these weeks believing I was, that could be worse, the loss of that after already beginning to wonder about it and plan on it a little, thinking ahead. But what if I am?

p. 58, McPherons

They had the cattle in the corral already, the mother cows and the two-year-old heifers waiting in the bright cold late-fall afternoon. The cows were moiling and bawling and the dust rose in the cold air and hung above the corrals and chutes like brown clouds of gnats swimming in schools above the cold ground.

pp. 111-112, McPherons

So for a while they stood below the windmill in the failing light. The thirsty horses approached and peered at them and sniffed at the water and began to drink, sucking up long draughts of it. Afterward they stood back watching the two brothers, their eyes as large and luminous as perfect round knobs of mahogany glass.

p. 117, Ella

They'd arrived at this place one more time despite whatever good intentions they'd started with. It didn't matter, this is where they would end up. It had been this way for the past three or four years. They were waiting, both trying privately to regain some calm in themselves.

p. 166, Victoria Roubideaux

And so the two McPheron brothers went on to discuss slaughter cattle and choice steers, heifers and feeder calves, explaining these too, and between the three of them they discussed these matters thoroughly, late into the evening. Talking. Conversing. Venturing out into various other matters a little too. The two old men and the seventeen-year-old girl sitting at the dining room table out in the country after supper was over and after the table was cleared, while outside, beyond the house walls and the curtainless windows, a cold blue norther began to blow up one more high plains midwinter storm.

p. 171, Ike and Bobby

The boys were glad the next day when their father returned to pick them up. They wanted to go home again, but they felt confused and uneasy about leaving their mother in Denver in the apartment with her sister. Guthrie tried to make them talk on the way



back. They wouldn't say very much of anything, though. They didn't want to be disloyal to their mother.

p. 175, McPherons

He rubbed his hands together beneath his knees, warming them; his hands were chafed and red, cracked. It does appear to me like we just did this, he said. Or something next to it. That night when we was talking to her about the market. I tell you, it seems like you get one thing fixed and something else pops up. Like with a young girl like her, you can't fix nothing permanent.

p. 178, McPherons

They set out in the bright cold day, riding in the pickup, the girl seated in the middle between them with a blanket over her lap, with the old papers and sales receipts and fencing pliers and the hot wire testers and the dirty coffee mugs all sliding back and forth across the dashboard whenever they made any sharp turn, driving north toward Holt, passing through town and beneath the new water tower and carrying on north, the country flat and whitepatched with snow and the wheat stubble and the cornstalks sticking up blackly out of the frozen ground and the winter wheat showing in the fall-planted fields as green as jewelry.

pp. 241-242, Victoria Roubideaux

The bus went on and they crossed into Holt County, the country all flat and sandy again, the stunted stands of trees at the isolated farmhouses, the gravel section roads running exactly north and south like lines drawn in a child's picture book and the four-strand fences rimming the bar ditches, and now there were the cows with fresh calves in the pastures behind the barbed-wire fences and here and there a red mare with a new foaled colt, and far away on the horizon to the south the low sandhills that looked as blue as plums.

pp. 285-286, Victoria Roubideaux

After a little while, when it was finished, she opened her eyes again but it was clear that her concentration was still focused on what was going on inside herself and nowhere else except there, and the McPheron brothers sat in the chairs against the wall near her bed and worried more about her than they had ever worried about anything in the last fifty years and watched it all and stayed with her into the night.

pp. 292-293, Ike and Bobby

They waited. They were squatted back fifteen feet from the raised railbed in the cutout, their backs against the high embankment, shaded by the sheared red dirt. No one out on the high plain could have seen them, had anybody been looking at this hour late in May in the middle of the afternoon.



Topics for Discussion

The characters Ike and Bobby Guthrie and the characters Raymond and Harold McPherson are almost always presented as pairs rather than individuals. Despite the vast difference in age between these pairs, they have many similarities. Describe some of these similarities.

Victoria's departure is rash, and she soon realizes that she has made a mistake. Considering what Victoria has recently endured and considering the emotional needs that have never been met, discuss why her rash decision is somewhat forgivable.

The title of the novel, *Plainsong*, has a meaning that is offered at the beginning of the book. Discuss how this meaning of the title is reflected in the text itself.

On one occasion Guthrie copes with his feelings of loneliness by visiting Judy. In your opinion, is this action a healthy choice or is it selfish? Base your conclusion on descriptions of how Guthrie's action affects other characters.

The rural setting of *Plainsong* is a vital component of the story. While the story could possibly be set in another rural environment, could it be set in an urban location? Describe some of the aspects of the plot that could occur only in a rural setting.

What is the significance of Ike and Bobby smashing a bracelet and burying it? What might this act symbolize for the boys?

While it is often an oversimplification to divide stories with "happy" endings and those with "sad" endings, in which category would you place *Plainsong*? Base your conclusion on descriptions of the situation the main characters find themselves in at the end of the novel compared to their lives at the opening of *Plainsong*.