

The Painter Study Guide

The Painter by Peter Heller

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Plot Summary

The Painter is Peter Heller's second novel, published in 2014. The novel follows the internal life of fictional successful Southwestern painter Jim Stegner over a few months as he attempts to deal with his grief over his teenaged daughter's death and his failed marriages. On his way to his favorite fishing spot, Jim encounters two men abusing a horse, and assaults one of them, Dellwood Siminoe. Jim learns later that Dell is known for cruel and abusive behavior, and when he encounters Dell while night fishing, he kills him. Though the police are unable to prove Jim's crime, he is the primary person of interest, and Dellwood's family members pursue him outside the law intending to avenge his death. Jim's internal struggles with his guilt are countered by a new romantic relationship with Sofia, his artist's model. Meanwhile, his paintings reflect his ongoing internal turmoil, and he finds out more about the humanity of his victim. When Dell's brother Grant catches up with Jim at an isolated campsite, it results in Grant's death. All the publicity involved in the crimes leads to an increase in Jim's popularity as an artist. While dealing with various pursuers, Jim must find his way to forgiveness and redemption.



Book One: Chapter 1: I-II

Summary

The Painter is the Peter Heller's second novel, which follows the struggles of artist and fisherman Jim Stegner. The story begins four months after Stegner's purchase of a retreat home in western Colorado where he hopes to find peace and paint.

Book One is introduced with the basic artist's catalog description of a painting: "Mayhem," oil on linen, 40 x 50 inches, collection of the artist." There are then several first-person statements of life situations the un-named narrator "never imagined," contrasting childhood expectations versus what he ended up becoming. He never thought he'd shoot a man, or be a father, or be a painter. He then goes on to contrast himself with his father, who was a logger, and very gentle. He never imagined his daughter would be so much like his mother, whom she never met.

The narrator remembers an afternoon at a bar in Taos where he sat and drank Jim Beam and beer, while Lauder Simms drank on the next stool. Simms had escaped prosecution for raping a 12-year-old girl at his movie theater. Simms drunkenly and suggestively compliments the narrator's young daughter. The narrator shoots Simms once, and is stopped from shooting him again by the bartender's intervention. Simms does not die, and the narrator does not regret shooting him.

Chapter One: Part I begins with a basic description of a painting titled, "An Ocean of Women." The still unnamed narrator lives in a small house three miles south of a small town called Paonia on forty acres. The property's back fence is up against the West Elk Mountains of western Colorado, very near the wilderness. The narrator bought the property and moved there four months previous, hoping it would be a good place to relax, but the narrator is not satisfied with this idea.

Sofia arrives in her Subaru, which she calls "Triceratops," because of its age and loud muffler. The 28-year-old young woman has been the narrator's model for three months. He recalls meeting her at the Blue Moon, Paonia's "tiny hippy coffee shop." When they met, she immediately noticed his cap with paint splatters and fishing flies on it, and so pegged him as an artist and a fisherman. He noticed she had big breasts for her frame. She introduced herself and he offered to pay her \$20 an hour to model for him. She asked if he was a violent felon, and when he admitted he was, she raised her pay requirement to \$25, five extra for "danger pay."

When Sofia arrives at the house, he's tying flies. He tells her he's going to paint "An Ocean of Women." She jokes that she's not interested. The title for the painting comes from something a friend told him once, that he "can't always swim in an ocean of women."



Sofia tells him that her hippie boyfriend Dugar wants to move to Big Sur because he read Henry Miller and that she thinks Dugar's poems are childish. She has told Dugar to be happy where he is, and shows him her breasts. The narrator laughs, but when she says she's young, it bothers him.

They begin to work. The narrator paints Sophia swimming, fish around her, a menacing shark, and himself swimming with a fishing rod. The painting is going well, but he isn't in the sort of "fugue state" he hears other artists talk about. He experiences that most often when he's having a good day fishing. He suddenly realizes Sophia is behind him watching him paint. She tells him it's been three hours and she leaves.

In Part II, the narrator explains that he came to the valley four months ago to get away from Taos, in part because of his fame. Two books have been written about him, and he is more well off than he used to be as a result. He has been classified as a "Great American Southwest Post-Expressionist Naif." The idea of him being naive puzzles him, and he thinks it's because so many of his paintings have chickens in them. He bought the house from a poet named Pete Doerr, who left a library of poetry books behind, many of which are by Pablo Neruda and Rainer Maria Rilke. The painter identifies most with Rilke's work.

The house is off the grid with solar power, and the narrator only has a cell phone. He thinks that the fact that the house is solar means the poet was an environmentalist, an idealist and probably miserable.

The painter gets a call from his long-time art dealer, Steve, in Santa Fe. Steve owns the Stephen Lily Gallery. Steve is checking in to see that the artist is painting and not drinking. The narrator also has a history of gambling addiction and costly divorces, but Steve is only worried about the drinking, because it interferes with the narrator's production. This phone call is the first time the narrator is named as "Jim." Steve also wonders if Jim needs money, and tell him that someone bought one of his paintings and was asking about new work. The buyer is a fan of Jim's work, and bought one called "Fish Swallowing All Those Houses" for \$22,000. While Steve tells him he has even better news, Jim thinks about the fact that it is good fishing weather. The news is that Pim Pantela, another fan of his work, wants to commission a portrait of his daughters. Jim is unpleasantly surprised by this information, but is chastened when Steve tells him that his phone has been off for ten days. Jim is not happy that this has been agreed to without his input. The offer is \$35,000, but Jim leaves the dealer hanging.

Jim goes onto his porch and smokes a cigarillo, looking at the brooding clouds. He is worried that if he lets his anger out, he might lose his gallery. He resolves to go fishing, despite the wind. He is torn by the fact that he's been drafted into the commission, but also that he is painting well, and doesn't want to interrupt his work. Also, he knows he can do the painting in two hours, but if he doesn't spend a week on it, the buyer won't feel like he's getting his money's worth.

"The Ocean of Women" is the first big piece he's worked on since he relocated, though he's done smaller paintings. He smokes and thinks of his daughter, Alce, who would



now be eighteen. Alce looked like her mother and bonded with her father over fishing. The last time he and his daughter spent together alone was the summer before she started getting into trouble. They camped and fished and looked at the stars. She told him then that she was a "dreamer and a fighter," combining Jim's nature and her mother's. He was proud of her for this insight, and surprised that she saw her mother as the fighter and he as the dreamer. Four months later, she died.

Jim is disturbed that Steve's greed might hurt his art and that his daughter died for nothing, so he decides to go fishing for his mental health. He always keeps his fishing gear in the truck, ready to go. On the way, he honks his horn at his new friend Bob Reid, who owns a gas station. When they first met they bonded over fishing; Bob recommended him a good place to fish that was off the beaten track, at Sulphur Creek. He also notices Jim's distinctively original fly, the Stegner Killer, on his cap, which is made with orange baling twine. Jim is quite pleased with Reid's recommended fishing spot.

It starts to rain, but Jim can only think of getting to fishing, and tries to get to Sulphur Creek as fast as he can. The anticipation of fishing excites him, and he takes in the full natural environment as he drives. When almost at the creek, he runs across two men attempting to load a balking horse into a trailer. The man is yelling at the horse, and then beats it with a club. This prompts Jim to get out and go after them, shouting and enraged. Jim tackles the bigger man who'd been abusing the horse, and punches him in the face. The two strangers are shocked. Jim yells that the man was going to kill the horse. The man replies that it's his horse to kill, and that she was on the way to the glue factory. Since they can't load the horse, the bigger man tells the other man to cut her loose, let her starve or get eaten by coyotes. He tells Jim to mind his own business and spits on Jim. The men leave, leaving the horse behind. The horse is wounded, and Jim stands with her.

Analysis

Book One begins with the painting, then a prose poem of internal reverie. The painting catalog description is an unusual way to begin a section of narrative, and it is never clear in Book One or even later in the novel what this painting depicts or when it was painted. It is the only painting in the novel that exists in this spare catalog description, never to be mentioned again. Is it a painting from before the time and setting of the novel, or does it refer to the action that follows? Does it refer to the shooting of Lauder Simms or something else? The author leaves no tangible clue to this question except its title.

The prose poem about life events the narrator "never imagined" is typical of what we later find is a middle aged man living in the Southwestern United States—being surprised about how one is different from one's parents, where one ends up in life and career or how one's children turn out is not an unusual reverie. The only exception here is that the narrator has also shot a man without regret in what appears to be a sudden rage. The narrator presents this event as if it was unpreventable, simple, and reflexive.



The reader might wonder about the history between the narrator and Simms, since the incident appears to have progressed so quickly from inappropriate comment to gunfire, but also see this as a sign of just how protective the narrator feels toward his daughter. The seemingly thoughtless and almost animalistic kill-instinct foreshadows events to come.

The narrator remains unnamed through the first sections of the book, and the reader might think of him simply as "The Painter," or, perhaps, "The Fisherman" or simply "The Man" or narrator. This lack of name brings the reader into the mind of the narrator, where we encounter the aimless nature of thoughts and frequent lack of insight and detachment the narrator experiences. It is only when the narrator is called his name on the phone that the reader finally learns that it is "Jim," a patently boring and ordinary American name for a middle aged man.

The Painter has moved away from a chaotic past to a place seeking peace, but it is apparent that he is struggling, or even unaware of how that might be achieved. He's displaced himself far from town and far from his old stomping grounds. The reader is made aware of how he has escaped in the past, into an "Ocean of Women," gambling or drinking, or perhaps even fishing. Painting is the narrator's job, but fishing is his truest passion, the place of refuge. The most poetic, involved writing in the novel, when everything seems to slow down and become zen like, a place of peace, is when the narrator describes natural surroundings or fishing.

It is telling that the narrator says he doesn't achieve a "fugue state" while painting as he does while fishing. It might be the difference between one's job versus one's passionate hobby—something most people experience. However, the narrator betrays this belief about himself when he is surprised to find he's been painting for three hours without noticing his model isn't modeling anymore and is in fact behind him watching him paint.

The narrator is a middle aged man whose hiring of Sofia as his artist's model seems almost laughably stereotypical. She is a young woman he latches on to because he needs a model, perhaps, but also because of her physical attributes and because she pays attention to him, noticing without being told that he is an artist and a fisherman. This might make her unusual, but it is more likely that he's simply lonely and acting on the loneliness of a twice-divorced man of a certain age. The most vulnerable moment in this section is when she callously or unthinkingly talks about showing her boyfriend her breasts and says, "I'm young." The narrator is "stabbed" by this simple statement—he is too old to be considered as a sexual or even artistic object the same way he sees her.

We are finally brought out of the narrator's mind with the phone call from the "real world," or rather the art world, when Steve calls from the gallery. Steve is a business partner more than he is a friend, but because of the nature of their work, he is privy and finds important details and problems in Steve's inner life. His main concern is that Jim is maintaining his sobriety, because it means he can paint, which means production, which means profit. Other personal problems are only a concern insofar as they interfere, and Steve is intimately aware that only drinking or depression will stand in the way of production. Steve is Jim's liaison to the art world, the necessary world of business that



enables him to make a living. As many artists might be, he is conflicted about this necessity. He needs someone to make him money, otherwise he might be completely adrift.

The reader finds that Jim isn't just any artist, but rather an artist that occupies a thematic niche and has been written about in the public sphere. He is not a "struggling artist," but rather a man who's reached a decent level of success. He, in fact, gets to do pretty much what he wants: he can live where he wants, buy the place he wants to live, and fish whenever he feels like it. He even has a handle on his addictions, more or less; he doesn't appear to be struggling mightily with any of them in any case. The reader is aware that Jim is struggling to maintain this equilibrium a bit, but it doesn't seem on the surface of his inner dialogue that it is a difficult fight.

Jim's anger at being drafted into the commission of the portrait doesn't seem serious, and Jim appears to deal with it from a position of privilege. He doesn't technically need the money, and it isn't for doing something he really wants to do, but being paid \$35,000 for a painting is nothing to shrug off or dismiss. His conflicts in general are not those of a hot-headed young artist, who might insist on being "true to his art" rather than accepting a portrait commission. Jim is a more practical man, fitting for a man his age. His worry that Steve's interest in money might hurt his art is a legitimate one.

When Jim goes to fish, the reader finds again he is a man of experience. He knows where to fish, he knows how to tie flies, and he is always prepared to go. His friendship with Bob Reid is a typical manly friendship, of few words and recognition of a man's interests and expertise. A man can look at Jim at first meeting, and see that he is a real fisherman, not a dilettante. He even has his own unique fly, the Stegner Killer. His attachment and excitement for getting to the creek, his special spot on Sulphur Creek that was granted to him by the local insider Reid, is perhaps typical of a passionate hobbyist, but has a spiritual element as well, as depicted by the intimate and loving way the narrator's mind details his natural surroundings. He is on his way to that "fugue state" when he is interrupted by the terrible scene of the young horse being abused by the two men, and the violation has the effect of disturbing his loving intimacy with nature.

The surreal nature of Jim's immediate and violent response to the horse abuse can cast him as renegade hero, but with a fairly realistic aftermath in the next chapter. What does one do after one has saved the 'damsel in distress,' in this case a horse? His actions shock the two men because Jim seemingly has little regard for his own safety. This is an environment where men carry guns in their trucks and defend themselves with them when they are attacked. But the men stick to the masculine ethic of sticking to fists if fists are offered, and the fight isn't escalated.



Discussion Question 1

What kind of man is Jim Stegner? How is his age and station in life reflected in the struggles he faces and the way he sees and deals with the world around him? What are some ways he fits gender stereotypes and the expectations of a "manly man" persona?

Discussion Question 2

How did Jim relate to his daughter through fishing when she was alive? How about now that she is dead?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of the poetry excerpt by Rainer Maria Rilke? Why does Jim identify more with Rilke than Pablo Neruda?

Vocabulary

projectionist, corrosive, juniper, massif, caterwauling, exuberant, sophomoric, prepossessing, incontrovertible, fugue, pretentious, cachet, jaunty, savant, idealist, immaculately, relent, fraternal, pique, suave, gibbous, gauge, cheroots, ochre, confluence, forecourt, somber, taut, withers, convulsions, clamber, seismic



Book One: Chapter 2: I-II

Summary

Chapter Two's Part I begins with a painting description of "The Digger." Jim ties the horse to a tree, and drives back out on the highway to get a cell phone signal, and calls his neighbor Willy, for help. Willy has repeatedly told Stegner to call him if he needs anything. Jim tells Willy about the fight with the outfitter. He calms the horse with feed, and while they wait, Willy and Jim get to know one another. Jim learns that Willy is not from Colorado either, and was helped when he arrived by good neighbors. Jim learns that Willy is a Harvard dropout and wanted to be a cowboy all his life, but also loves yachts. He is often hired by wealthy people to build their kitchens to look like galleys. Willy mentions he'd like to see Jim's paintings, and Jim invites him to stop by anytime. Willy volunteers to take the horse until Jim gets a place to keep her, and informs him he has to get the horse's papers from the outfitter. When Jim mentions that the outfitter's name is "Dell," Willy's face goes "stony" and claims not to know him. When they are ready to go, the mare readily enters Willy's trailer.

Jim can't get the horrible image of the horse abuser out of his head, and how the man seemed much bigger to him than the horse. He calls Sofia to tell her not to come the next day. As he takes "The Ocean of Women" painting down from the easel, he thinks that he is no longer like the image of himself in it. He thinks of Picasso's *Guernica*, which includes a stabbed horse in it. He also remembers a story by Chekhov about a horse being beaten, and how seeing it happen in person was far worse than he imagined.

Part II begins with Jim going out onto his porch to smoke a cheroot. He hasn't eaten because he was so rattled by the abuse and fight. He resolves not to return the mare to Dell, regardless of whether or not the man hands over her papers. He also decides to give Willy a painting, and that he won't tell his dealer about it. He smokes and tries to shake off the tension of the fight. It looks like it might rain, and he looks forward to the relaxing sound of rain on the metal roof of his house.

Jim reads some T.S. Eliot from the "Four Quartets" regarding Time. He thinks that if the poet was correct, he could be with his daughter again. He wavers between feeling that he and his wife and daughter will always be together in the same circle and the idea that he is a hollow bell with nothing inside. He recalls that he remarried less than a year after Alce died and his first wife Cristine left, though it didn't last long. His divorce from Maggie a year and half ago is one reason he moved to this isolated house. He recalls that she was very domestic, cleaning and organizing his studio, and how despite the fact that she was beautiful and wholesome, he often wondered why he married her. He realizes now he never loved her. It disturbs him that he could be that cruel—that he could love a bug but not love his wife. He wonders why he loved Cristine so much when she was such a "world champion bitch" and sometimes violent.



Jim regrets that he got into a fight and broke his inner peace. He recalls the advice of his long-ago lover and fortune teller/healer Irmina. She told him to get to a place of peace, and that he is a planet with a "hot core." She told him he couldn't run away all the time and "swim in an ocean of women." He takes her advice to heart. She has told him that his best work will come from the inner peace he gains through taking a rest. He has been trying earnestly to do that, and did well until today.

He recalls that earlier, after settling the mare in at Willy's place, he went to visit Bob Reid at the gas station to help calm himself down. He told Bob about the encounter with Dell. Bob in turn told him what he knew about Dellwood Siminoe, that he was a hunter's outfitter, running a bow hunting camp for wealthy tourists. He also told him that Dell was known to have a history of abusing horses in his business.

As Jim smokes and tries to shake off his memory of the fight, he watches the weather. He remembers that his daughter told him that rain that doesn't hit the ground is called Virga. He recalls the first time Alce ever caught a fish. He remembers how he moved away from Taos after Alce's death and Cristine didn't move with him, and how he went fishing every day in mourning. He started drinking heavily again and eventually wrecked his car. Irmina came to stay with him for three months, and took care of him, making him go to Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. He took her to the river and talked to her about Alce and their falling out before her death. He told her that Alce was better at fishing than him, more instinctive, and that she quit fishing after she turned fifteen. He also told her that Alce was angry over their arguments, and wanted peace, but couldn't make it happen, and so turned away and into drug use. Irmina attempted to comfort him by reassuring him that she was doing typical teenager things, and needed to become her own person, even in death. Jim imagined her there, fishing, and then painted the only good painting he made after her death. After that, Irmina returned home, having taught him that it is okay for people you love to come and go.

In the present, he stands on the porch and smokes and thinks about the horse, hoping she would recover from the abuse she received. He is unhappy that he has to interrupt his work to go to the city to paint the commissioned portrait.

Analysis

Willy's relationship with Jim brings to the forefront the idea that there is always more to a "manly man" than how he appears on the outside—that real people are complex. An artist can also be a fisherman. A cowboy and reader of Louis L'Amour can also have attended Harvard and love yachts. Willy also represents the "good neighbor" ethic of rural living. When he says to call if Jim needs anything, he means it sincerely. It turns out that his ethic is a form of "paying it forward," since he too was a newcomer once, and was helped by his neighbors.

The fact that Jim is so "rattled" by the fight is realistic in a way brought forward by the author's adherence to the first person limited narration. The reader is in Jim's head all the way, and so feels the aftermath of violence as one truly does—something that



poisons the spirit for some time afterward. There is the sense, however, that like the shooting of Lauder Simms, that something deeper is afoot. Jim appears to be more than just a middle-aged painter who likes fishing—he is also a man who is quick to react physically in an overwhelmingly violent and surprising way to situations that are deeply wrong. Pedophilia and animal abuse are among the most indisputably wrong crimes people can commit, and Jim reacts to these things with overwhelming force to prevent their occurrence. He reacts to them without forethought in a dangerous way.

For the second time, Jim uses the poetry library to find insight into his world and state of mind. In the absence of a wise person to talk to, he listens to the poets in his house, hoping they might have answers for him. He thinks a lot about his failed marriages and his grief over his daughter. There are paradoxes he can't reconcile in his love relationships. On the one hand, his marriage with Cristine was full of drinking and anger and violence, but he loved her more than the domestic wholesomeness of Maggie. In fact, he can love a bug or a fish more than he loved his second wife, which he understands is terribly cruel. Despite the fact that he sometimes appears to act without thought, he is deeply introspective at times, especially when observing nature, and is acutely aware that he is looking for peace and only acting in a "holding pattern."

Jim has the poetry books for wisdom in the absence of Irmina, his "wise woman." The fact that she is his former lover is of secondary importance to her role as his spiritual adviser. The reader learns that this woman is the friend who has told him he can't always escape reality by swimming "in an ocean of women." Her existence and his complete trust in her as a source of help is another example of Jim's complexity underneath the "man's man" exterior. Although it isn't clear he completely believes in new age mysticism, he accepts what he can take from it in a practical sense. He might not actually believe he is "a planet with a hot core," for example, but he agrees he has to seek peace. He appreciates her utter acceptance of him and her insight. It is significant that Irmina delivers him back into the world of the living on the banks of the river, at the fishing spot where Alce last fished with her father. It is there that Irmina teaches him the major life lesson that one cannot stop the river of people's coming and going in and out of one's life.

It becomes clear that water is a motif that Jim is constantly immersed in. There is an "Ocean of Women," and the thought that he and Cristine and his daughter are always together in a river that flows around them. Also, his grief is compared to a "hollow bell"—an object full of sound but never able to hold water. Jim also thinks of himself as a fish, in the way he thinks and the way he is sometimes captured and then released to live again another day. He could have killed Lauder Simms and gone to prison; instead, Lauder doesn't die, his friends prevent him from shooting again, and he pleads down to a misdemeanor assault. This is a foreshadowing of future events.

In this section, we get the full depth of his grief after Alce's death, and how seriously it might have gone far worse. His friends cared for him and he survived and recovered at least some of his life through gaining control over his drinking, gambling and violence. The fight with Dell is a serious lapse in that control, and it worries him.



Discussion Question 1

How does the fragment of T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" address the idea of Time? How does this relate to Jim's thoughts about his family and the death of his daughter?

Discussion Question 2

How does the Virga—the rain that doesn't hit the ground—reflect the mood Jim is in?

Discussion Question 3

How does Jim allow Alce to become her own person, even in death?

Vocabulary

retrofitting, wreaking, sloop, nightjar, arroyo, alder, adobe, mesquite, borealis, grizzled, poaching, scudding, caddis, mullein, inconsolable, insinuating, luminous, surly, residual, cheroot



Book One: Chapter 2: III

Summary

The next morning, Sofia comes over even though Jim has told her not to. He tells her all about the fight, and she wonders if he doesn't want to kill Dell. Jim tells her he just wants to get rid of the "stench in his nose." They watch a hawk and some birds while they are talking, and then while commiserating with him, she begins to get physical with him. She wonders if he isn't turned on by seeing her naked (as a model), and he admits that he is, but is put off by the fact that she has a boyfriend. She informs him that Dugar is stupid and has been sleeping with another woman. Sofia fondles him and they have sex. Jim feels happy, except when he thinks about Dellwood and the horse, but keeps trying to push it out of his mind. They spend the day together.

Dugar calls Sofia on her cell phone, and she rebuffs him, saying she wouldn't be home for a few days. While Sofia makes dinner, Jim paints a picture of a man digging a grave, supervised by some buzzards. He is surprised by having painted it, and feels guilty, so he turns it to the wall after he's finished. He has never hidden a painting from anyone before and it worries him. Later, as Sofia sleeps, he worries about having slept with his artist's model. He watches the moon and thinks of it shining down on the other people in his life, Irmina and Steve and the place in the river where he spread Alce's ashes. His thought turn to fish, and how he sometimes feels like a fish.

At nearly midnight, he slips out of bed and goes fishing. When he nears the creek, he turns off his headlight, and tries to go as quietly and darkly as possible by moonlight. He gets into the creek and loses himself in the fishing, catching and releasing. He works his way upstream and comes across the outfitters and bowhunters and their campfire. He keeps fishing, listening to their loud drunken talk. He hears Dell's voice and it makes him shiver.

Dell comes to urinate in the creek, and Jim can't stop watching him from the shadows, feeling calm. He thinks of the horse's cries. He picks up a rock and approaches Dell quickly. Dell recognizes him and pulls out a knife, but before he can defend himself, Jim bashes him in the head. He falls into the creek face down. Jim stays until he is sure the man has drowned.

Jim slowly makes his way back down the creek, sure they won't miss Dell until the morning. He cleans himself off in the creek, and hikes back to his truck. He wants to smoke, but doesn't. He wants to drink, but can't. He wants to fish and pretend it didn't happen. Instead he gets back to the truck in less than twenty minutes, doing his best not to be seen. He stops at a nearby orchard and washes off his truck. On the way home, he sees a white owl, feeling strongly it was Alce's spirit. He doesn't know if it a sign of warning, thanks or reassurance; he thanks her. When he gets home, he gets into bed with Sofia.



Analysis

On the surface Jim would appear to an outside observer to be calm. He smokes on his porch, watches birds, reads poetry, he has sex, he paints, and he thinks. But underneath is a man trying to find a way around what he appears to feel is a sort of inevitability.

Since the reader only sees Jim's thoughts, it's impossible to know if Sofia is utterly conscious of the fact that she's trying to "save" Jim from what occurs later that night by distracting him with sex, but her question about whether he might want to kill Dell gives us a clue about how deep his rage is. She might be talking off-handedly, or joking, or she might be having some insight into how deeply he is feeling. Certainly, her knowledge that he is a "violent felon" might lead her to believe he is capable of true violence, but it's unclear how seriously she takes her role.

Meanwhile, Jim paints "The Digger," which appears to be compulsive and without thought. He doesn't appear to be able to face the thought that he is not just expressing a wish but an actual intent. Is he hiding it from himself, or is he expressing deep knowledge through the painting? It is the first painting he feels compelled to hide from others, so that action leaves two possibilities: he is afraid Sofia will take it seriously and worry about him, or he is worried that she will see an intention to it, malice aforethought. He is worried about having done the hiding, but it isn't clear if he knows why he is worried. Again, he compares himself to a fish in his thoughts, dark and light, flowing along.

When he gets up to go fishing in the night, at first it seems like such an innocent act, like he is just performing another distraction to help himself get through his feelings. Up until he actually picks up the rock, the reader can't be certain he intends to do anything murderous at all. A normal person might go fishing. A normal person might eavesdrop on the campfire of someone he just fought with if he came across it in the course of doing something else. A normal person does not, however, lie in wait and bash the man's head in when the opportunity presents itself. Jim has allowed himself to be moved along the river, literally and figuratively, to a murder. The fact that he moves upstream to the scene of the murder rather than downstream is significant. He might feel like he is just being pushed along the river of events, but he is going against morality and even the literal flow of the river to make things happen. Even to himself, he can't acknowledge his intent. Even in his thoughts, he appears to be innocent right up to the point where he becomes guilty. His utter lack of panic afterward and his methodical way of dealing with the evidence of his crime leaves no doubt that he has a deep violence within him that is not normal at all.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Jim is consciously aware of or intending to murder Dell? What evidence can you give for or against your opinion?



Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the white owl? As an omen, what do you think it means?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think Jim means when he says there is prayer everywhere?

Vocabulary

halibut, in flagrante delicto, harrier, faceted, stealthily, parabolic, guileless, euphoria, vouchsafed, sultry, firmament, sere, staccato, acclimate, sieved, scrim, cognitive, desolate, quadrant

Book Two: I-III

Summary

Book Two begins with the gallery descriptions of two 24 x 36 inch oil-on-canvas paintings: "Road" and "Road Home."

It is raining when Jim wakes, still spooning Sofia. He thinks that he could die now.

Two police detectives come by. When talking to them through the door, he notices that his fishing vest, hanging there next to him, has blood on it. This makes him feel an "icy grip in the guts." The older detective, Craig Gaskill, who Jim soon begins to call "Sport" in his head, notices this, and asks if he's okay. Jim invites them in for coffee, which they accept. Sofia stays in the bedroom. Jim is nervous, and thinking his way through an explanation for the blood on his vest. They ask him if he often fishes in the middle of the night. He responds that yes he did once in awhile, and that he and his daughter used to when there was a moon. They ask where his daughter is, and he tells them she was murdered at age fifteen. They ask if he fished the night before, and he says no. They tell him his boots are wet, outside under the vestibule, while nothing else is wet. He tells them he left them out in the rain. They they ask him about the vest that is flecked with blood. One detective says it's probably fish blood. Jim responds that it's Dell Siminoe's blood and that they are probably there to arrest him since Dell had pressed charges for assaulting him.

The detectives inform him that Dell Siminoe is dead and how it happened. Jim responds that he hopes the man is in hell, but wonders if they think he killed him because they had a fight. He remembers internally that he wasn't wearing his fishing vest when he got in the fight, but hopes the other man who was with Dell during the fight won't remember that fact. They tell him to tell them everything he did from before the fight onward. He recounts the fight, claiming the blood got on his vest when he broke Dell's nose. They question him about Sofia, and are surprised he doesn't know her last name. They look at the painting, "An Ocean of Women," which Jim thinks might be a great painting. Suddenly, the younger detective turns around the painting Jim has hidden, the one called "The Digger." Jim is surprised and feel violated. They ask when he painted it, and he tells them, and suggests that he ought to get himself a lawyer. Sport asks to speak to Sofia, but Jim refuses and tells them to leave, which they do.

Sofia comes out of the bedroom and tells him she remembers him leaving and wonders about how he killed Siminoe. She doesn't really ask him directly if he killed Siminoe, seeming to believe he did. She tells him he'd better save up some sex for when they put him in jail, and returns to the bedroom. After making love, she implies that she'll give him an alibi.

The police come back with a search warrant, and take his fishing gear and photos of the two paintings. After they're done, Jim asks the police if he can go fishing at the spot



where he fought with Dell, and is told he shouldn't because the hunters are still there. They also inform him that Dell's brother is flying in. Jim asks if he can go to New Mexico for his commission job, and is told he can but to stay in touch. Sofia is asked to come in and make a statement, but she refuses, describing to them in vivid detail their multiple sexual encounters and sleep, insisting this was her statement.

Jim goes to buy new fishing gear and fishes in a new spot, the famous one he's heard of for years where the tourists go. He stops at a fishing shop and bar called Pleasure Park. Inside the store, he is met by Ben, who's obviously had a few beers. Jim buys a full set of everything, impressing Ben with his spending spree. Ben calls Jim Hemingway, because he thinks he looks like the famous author and sportsman. Ben brings up the murder and talks about the man they think committed the crime, and how Dell won't be missed—that his own daughter had a restraining order against him. He describes Jim, and slowly realizes the suspect is standing right in front of him. He tells Jim that Dell was "scum," but then gets nervous, and suggests as he rings up the extensive purchases that Jim might want to use another gear shop in the future.

Analysis

The mistakes Jim has made in covering his tracks - the blood on his fishing vest and the wet boots - reveals that his "cool and collected" actions the night before were more like sleepwalking or a dream than they were methodical. He isn't totally a cold blooded killer who knows how to get away with murder, though the way he thinks his way through the evasion of the police questions might make the reader think so. He shows his cleverness at verbal jiu jitsu by admitting outright that Dell's blood is on the vest rather than trying denial. He is wise enough to know that the police aren't stupid, and doesn't behave like a younger person might.

The fact that the police seem to notice his nervousness points to the fact that Jim isn't nearly as inscrutable as he might think he is. The inexplicable idea that a painting turned backside out would deter the police from looking at it is an example of a person's self-delusions—the idea that we all tend to think we're smarter and less readable than we really are.

Sofia's immediate loyalty to Jim and his alibi, the fact that she doesn't seem to question his guilt or innocence, refuses to talk to the police and brashly puts them off with her sexuality makes her a wild card. Jim can only be conscious that this is in part her youth and makes her potentially dangerous to him.

Jim's refusal to shrink away, asking if he can go fishing at the site of the murder or leave the state shows a disregard for typical behavior. The question is whether he is trying to behave as if he's indignant in his innocence, or whether he's just flaunting his privilege as a semi-famous and well-off white male in the face of small town police. The fact that he goes on an extreme spending spree due to the temporary deprivation of his fishing gear might speak to the latter. Few people would be capable of doing such a thing, and its unusualness is apparent in the gear store. Even in a land of wealthy tourists throwing



their money around, Jim is an anomaly—an outlier. The fact that the salesperson calls him Hemingway is not just about his appearance, but also his demeanor. He is proud of his sportsman persona, and he carries it arrogantly when he feels like it. He seems oblivious to the idea that even an innocent person might want to lie low if they were a "person of interest" in a murder or that average people might not want to have a potential murderer hanging around their place of business.

Discussion Question 1

What do Jim's mistakes in handling evidence of his crime and his cleverness in handling the police say about his state of mind after the murder? Do you think he is clear of mind or muddled in his thinking? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How do the two paintings in this section reflect different states of mind in the artist?

Discussion Question 3

Does Jim's shopping spree and the way he handles the police questioning make him an admirable person or not in your opinion? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

creel, Holstein, reciprocate, averse, gyring, fastidious, premeditation, confluence, conundrum



Book Two: IV-VI

Summary

Jim goes fishing at the famous spot. There are other fishermen nearby, but there's enough room for everyone to have some space. He gets into the zone, and thinks of what he's left behind in his life, his paintings, and how he's no longer a father. He thinks his daughter would enjoy this spot. He thinks that now he's a killer, he's leaving a wake of "absence and pain." He doesn't feel like a killer, but he thinks he has the heart of one.

Jim keeps wondering if there will be bits of Dell's brain on his vest, which will be the evidence against him, but rationalizes that it's not likely there will be. He thinks that plenty of other people would have a motive to kill Dell. He thinks of the Sulphur Creek dust and that he shouldn't have bothered to clean it off his truck since he was there all the time anyway. He worries about Sofia and his alibi, and if she'll turn on him eventually.

Nothing happens for some time, and Jim feels confident. Sofia dumps Dugar and tries to persuade him to go to California like he wanted, and tells Jim all about it. She reassures him that she won't shake his alibi. She asks if he wants to paint her, and he demurs, saying he'd like to be alone. He paints a road with a girl's body under a bush and four carrion birds.

The phone rings, showing a blocked number, and an anonymous caller who sounds like Dell tells him he wants his horse back. Jim is shocked but denies that the caller owns the horse. Then the caller describes Dell's murder and threatens Jim's life if he hangs up. Jim hangs up, and when the caller rings back several more times, Jim doesn't pick up.

Jim retrieves his gun from the armoire. It is the same gun he used to shoot Lauder Simms, which he was allowed to keep because he pled down to misdemeanor assault. He lays it down next to his painting supplies. He also pulls out his shotgun to make sure it's loaded, and lays it down next to the other gun. He calls Sofia and tells her he's been threatened and orders her to visit friends from out of town for her safety. After he extracts a promise from her that she'll go, he hangs up and wishes he had a dog. He calls Willy and hears that Dell's brother Grant has called him demanding the return of the horse, but Willy has refused, saying he's informed the sheriff about the abuse and has been authorized to keep her until the allegations are sorted out. Willy told Grant that if he came by his place, Willy would shoot to defend himself. Willy reveals that he heard Jim's truck the night of the murder, and that he's been asked by the police about what he was wearing after the fight. Willy told the police that Jim was wearing his full fishing gear, including the vest, and mentioned that he noticed the blood on it and would be sure to say so in court. Willy reveals that he did know Dell and that he caught him poaching and that Dell had threatened Willy's wife. He encourages Jim to leave for a



vacation, saying that he's heard Grant is a "meaner snake" than Dell and that if the police had any evidence against him, he'd already be in jail.

Jim paints another painting, this one of a road coming toward him with two horses. One is the abused mare, but looking healthy, and the other is a male Appaloosa Indian horse. Together, the horses carry the body of a girl upon their backs.

He remembers that the week before Alce died, she hung around his studio watching him paint. She was troubled, as was Jim's marriage to Cristine. Alce attempted to talk to him about a boy she was dating. For the first time, Jim noticed she was no longer his "little girl," and it enraged him. He responded to her request for a cell phone with inappropriate anger, and she responded by disconnecting and refusing to speak to him. When she left, he binged on alcohol.

Jim finishes the painting and suddenly hears dogs and smells smoke. Willy's barn is on fire. He drives quickly to Willy's just in time to find his neighbor rescuing his horses from the blaze, and helps with the rescued mare. They get all the horses out just before the stable collapses. The firefighters arrive and when the fire is extinguished, half of the barn is gone. Jim is injured from a fall during the rescue of the horses, from which Willy rescued him. The police arrive, including "Sport." Willy tells them he knows the arsonist was Grant Siminoe and reports the threats about the horse. Jim reports the death threat he received as well. The detective informs them that he went to the hunting camp as soon as the fire call came in and he found Grant there with several witnesses who swore they were there all day. Sport tells him that Grant has done this before and got away with it, due to lack of evidence. He tells Willy and Jim he doesn't want any more deaths, and asks Jim about his fishing. He informs Jim that he will be protected by a police detail. The police confiscate the mare for her safety and care. Jim refuses the police protection.

Jim worries about the horse and the fact that he seems to bring violence with him wherever he goes. He thinks that Irmina's advice about getting some peace is correct. He is reassured by Willy that he has enough insurance to build a better barn.

The next day, Jim packs up his new paintings, painting supplies, and fishing gear to go to Santa Fe. On the way out of town, he stops at Bob's gas station to fill up. Bob sells him gas, but tells him that despite the fact that Dell was a bad man, killing is wrong.

Part VI begins with the catalog description of a painting called "Just Before Fishing," which is in a "private collection."

Jim comes upon a beautiful stream scene, and is torn between fishing and painting. For the first time ever, he chooses painting. He is also trying to shake the scene with Bob. He doesn't think anyone will disturb him here, but he takes the gun with his painting supplies just in case. The police had watched his house all night, and when he left, they'd followed him to the county line.

Jim has a sudden urge to check in with Sofia but finds he can't get a signal. He thinks maybe he ought to leave and find her, but reassures himself that the police would surely



be watching Grant. He has an imaginary conversation with Alce, and she tells him to calm down. He thinks she sounds like Irmina. He paints the creek, almost exactly as he sees it, which he finds freeing.

A truck loaded with hay comes by. A big man gets out, waits for Jim to nod him a welcome, and then approaches. The man notices and mentions that Jim is a fisherman as well as a painter, and compliments his painting, introducing himself as Jason. He also notices the gun. He then mentions night fishing on Sulphur Creek and implies he knows exactly who Jim is and that he was there that night. Jim waits tensely and notices Jason uses an expression he remembers someone using when he was eavesdropping at the campfire on the night of the murder. They continue a tense conversation, and the man tells Jim that Dell was "family" and says that if the law doesn't take care of the crime, then they will. Jason challenges Jim to go fishing with him right there, and Jim agrees. Before doing so, Jim signs the painting, and writes on it: "Just Before Fishing with Jason." He gives the painting to Jason, who is very much taken aback.

Jim puts the handgun in his pocket and they go fishing for over an hour. Jim watches Jason carefully from a healthy distance, but eventually relaxes and loses sight of him. He is shocked to suddenly see Jason only fifteen feet away, holding up something black. Instead of a gun, it turns out to be a large fly that Jason made himself, and he is offering it to Jim, which Jim refuses. They walk up the hill from the creek. Jason is amused at Jim's nervousness, but Jim is not, because he knows he almost shot the man over a fly. Jason compliments Jim's fishing skills, thanks him for the painting, and tells Jim he'll see him again. He gives Jim an expensive Cuban cigar, makes a vague threat, and then leaves in his truck while talking on his cell phone.

Jim heads to Santa Fe and smokes the cigar. He is somewhat shaky about his encounter with Jason, but also happy not to think too much about it. He is in no hurry to get to his commission assignment, because he's excited to have painted outside for the first time. He decides to stop for the night, in part to throw off anyone who might be following him.

He remembers surfing when he was a preteen, and that he wasn't good at it, but was willing to get thrown around by the surf. His surfing friends call him Knotty, after a dog toy made of knotted rags their dog would shake about. This nickname stuck with him until he dropped out of college. He feels a pleasant sort of exhaustion, similar to the kind he would feel after surfing. He wonders if Jason or Grant would attempt to kill him in the next few days, but isn't very afraid. He remembers his first love and their inside jokes. He remembers that when his first love broke up with him, it was the worst night of his life until Alce's murder. He recalls feeding Alce's pet pig the afternoon he heard she'd died. He is told by the same sheriff who'd arrested him before. When Jim responds with shock and incomprehension, the cop is compassionate with him. When Jim goes to feed Alce's pig the next day, the pig refuses to eat. Within two weeks, the pig has starved himself to death.

At dusk, Jim pulls off at a place he's fished before and sleeps under the stars in a sleeping bag. He doesn't fish. In the morning he heads to Santa Fe.



Analysis

Jim goes fishing with the tourists, as if to say he's just one of the crowd. He gets into the usual "zone" he achieves easily with fishing, but at the same time can't help but think about what's in his "wake," the pain his actions have left behind him. He reacts instinctively and angrily to his daughter's request for a cell phone, misses the fact that she needs her father, and ends up losing her altogether. He reacts instinctively to protect an abused horse, and how he's killed a man. He wavers between these guilty insights and the worries of a man trying to cover up his crime.

As time passes, Jim's confidence in the fact that he'll get away with the crime increases. When he paints "The Road," with the dead girl under the bush and the four carrion birds, similar to "The Digger," the reader can't help but be nervous for Sofia. She is, after all, his only weakness at the moment—the only person as far as he knows who can revoke his alibi. Who is the girl? It is only after he paints "The Road Home" later that an alternative can be seen: the girl is always going to be Alce. Is she dead and alone under a bush, or is she being retrieved and carried back home by the male and female horses for a proper burial? Rather than being two choices or futures, they can be seen as sequential and spiritual, Alce was lost and now she is coming home.

The phone call from Grant shakes Jim's confidence somewhat, but he treats it in a sane manner outwardly. He arms himself, wishes he had a dog, protects his girlfriend by getting her out of harm's way, and warns his friend and neighbor. It is only then that he discovers that Willy, too, is covering for him, and he is only "getting away with it" because of the loyalty of his friends, not because they believe he is innocent, but rather because they just want to protect him. Jim doesn't appear to have any thoughts about why that might be; if anything, he appears to think it is because he's rid the world of a bad man and the world agrees with him.

Rather than take Willy's advice to lay low or go away for awhile for his own protection, Jim seems obstinate in the face of danger. He watches his back, but doesn't shrink from his assailant, a rather macho way to react. The way he reacted to his daughter's boyfriend talk and cell phone request are too stereotypically macho as well, and he can clearly see that as a flaw in that case. In this case, not so much.

When Jim helps Willy fight the fire, it is like a scene from a western: the men save the horses, the beam collapses, they help each other escape death. The fact that they might really have died doesn't seem to land a full impact on Jim, but instead he reacts like people sometimes do to near-death experiences: they feel invincible. He worries about how he brings violence with him wherever he goes, but doesn't appear all that concerned about how it might impact himself. He doesn't want anyone else to be hurt, but the possibility that he too might die seems unreal to him.

Again, Jim encounters a "regular Joe"—actually Bob Reid—who can't just blithely accept Jim being possibly a murderer who is getting away with it. Jim is confronted with the fact that someone whose friendship he values is not about to just accept he's rid the world of a bad man, but rather has an attachment to law and order.



Jim's first "pleine air" painting is one that starts out to be a beautiful reverie, but ends up being the sort of thing that might be used as evidence should Jason kill him. He suddenly finds himself vulnerable, despite the fact that he's armed. Painting makes him vulnerable, as does the way fishing brings his guard down. Jason shows himself to be a man of honor and Jim's equal in his understanding of fishing. Jim might be a "Hemingway"—a privileged man obsessed with fishing—but Jason lives and breathes fishing as he has since childhood. Jim might see the water and fishing as being in his element, but for Jason this is even more so. Jim has come to the activity of fishing from elsewhere; Jason appears to have been born there. Jason does not "charge in like a bull," like Jim has been accused of being, but verbally deals with Jim from a position of power and knowledge. He knows who Jim is, but Jim doesn't really know who Jason is. The only time Jim gains the upper hand is when he gives the painting to Jason, a gift that would be worth many thousands of dollars. When they fish together, they fish as equals, though Jim is preoccupied mostly with his own experience and safety.

Jim's thoughts about surfing reveals that he's been reckless since an early age, willing to get tossed around by the waves despite his lack of surfing prowess. His childhood friends have noticed this quality so much they give him a nickname referring to it, a nickname that sticks with him for many years, only disappearing when he reaches adulthood. Would a rational man go fishing with a man who wants to kill him? Or did he have any other alternative? Was it a macho sort of throw-down: like a fish-off? Or was it just because he wanted to go fishing?

It is significant that while driving after this encounter, Jim remembers the worst and saddest part of dealing with Alce's death: his reaction to being notified and the tragic possibly suicidal death of her pet pig. It is also significant that he doesn't fish at the end of the day like he usually would. Facing someone who cares about Dell's death and would even avenge it is an experience he outwardly sees as an attack on his manhood. But internally, it appears to make him vulnerable emotionally.

Discussion Question 1

What does Jim mean when he thinks he "has the heart of a killer"? Do you agree?

Discussion Question 2

Explain the symbolism of the two paintings and what each element within them might represent.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Jim agrees to go fishing with Jason?



Vocabulary

tamarisk, chortle, spurned, moronic, baguette, tarmac, asters, palette, relentless, armoire, palate, jaunty, tandem, tentative, conjured, eaves, dervish, unhampered, luminous, mirth, lumbered, gelding, roan, tenuous, undiscerning, lulled, reprieve, tannin, tremor, malevolent, corvids, benignly, auspicious, tentatively, candescent

Book Three: Chapter 1

Summary

The chapter begins with a catalog description of a 20 x 24 inch oil-on-canvas painting, "In Hostile Country."

Jim remembers an interview he did on a live radio show in San Francisco, during which he was uncharacteristically almost sober. He was sober because his dealer Steve had chastised him for being drunk during live interviews. Jim hated being asked invasive questions, and felt out of place and vulnerable. He gazed out of the window at the harbor far below, watching two boats that looked like they were on a collision course. The interviewer asked him why he chose such an unstable career—being an artist—rather than a stable career like his logger father. The interviewer suggested he must want poverty, or be brave or reckless. Jim remembered his father's death on the job. Jim recognized that the interviewer was characterizing him as "visceral, muscular, exuberant, outsider." He could be a star in the art world, as long as he was willing to fit the theme. Instead of responding with a rude comment, Jim asked if it was really live radio, and asked to shake the interviewer's hand. When he did so, he squeezed the man's hand so hard it broke and the man screamed. He left, felt his father's ghostly approval, and went to get drunk.

Jim wonders if he's remembering this scene because he's on his way to see Steve for the first time in six months. He'd been productive enough to satisfy Steve until recently. He also remembers Steve's response to the handshake incident, which was to yell at him and be happy at the same time, because the radio bit had gone viral, and his paintings sold and the prices went up. He'd become a hero.

Jim arrives at the Stephen Lily Gallery. Steve is upset about the fact that the police have been by and that Jim is a day late for the Pantela portrait, and the girls he is supposed to paint had their hair done. Jim tells him that he isn't a suspect for the murder, but rather a "person of interest." The police were wondering why he hadn't arrived yet. Jim is concerned at that because he wonders if they were there to arrest him. Steve warns him that being a murderer could destroy his art career.

Steve asks him outright if he really murdered someone. Jim hesitates, but reassures Steve he didn't out of compassion. Steve is relieved. He tells Jim they will tell Pim Pantela that Jim's car broke down. Steve tells Jim he's staying at the St. Francis Hotel—on Pim's dime—and not to kill anyone while he's in Santa Fe. Jim goes to the hotel, a place where he's a regular, staying in the Artist's Suite. He craves a bath in the big bathtub in the suite, but instead decides to go to the Ten Thousand Waves spa and hot spring, a Japanese style place of relaxation and meditation popular with artists.

Jim has brought two books with him from the poet's library, one being "Two Hundred More Poems from the Chinese." As he relaxes nude in the co-ed pool, he thinks about



his admiration for Chinese poetry. Celia Anson is at the spa as well, also naked. Jim likes her and has always been kind to her, despite or maybe because of her outsider status in the local art community. Celia tells him she admires his art and that her deceased husband did as well. She also flirts with him and tells him she'd like to see him.

Analysis

Jim's power and privilege show clearly in this chapter. In the past, he could break someone's hand on live radio, and instead of getting into trouble, he goes viral as an art scene hero. He is a macho man whose misbehavior has been rewarded in the past. This explains a bit why he might feel so invulnerable.

In fact, he now enters three places where he is most powerful: his gallery, where his paintings command thousands of dollars; the expensive hotel where he is honored to stay for free in the "artist's suite" and he is a regular; and the Ten Thousand Waves spa, where he feels so safe he can be naked and surrounded by friends and admirers.

On the other hand, the breaking of the interviewer's hand was very much a reaction to a callous attack on his past. The man is asking him why he didn't choose a steady job like his father, oblivious to the fact that Jim has actually chosen the safe job—a job which does not invite death and in which he has become wealthy, two privileges his father could not have had. The trade-off is that he is being forced to accept categorization in exchange for that privilege, and risks the danger of being a parody of masculinity. He has to fit the story or risk losing the interest of those whose real wealth supports his existence. If no one wants to pay lots of money for his paintings, then he would have to return to working for a living, rather than being paid the equivalent of thousands of dollars an hour so he can idle his hours away fishing and sitting around in spas.

Jim has to dance a fine line: he can benefit from legend-making and attracting interest, but as Steve warns him, there is a stiff reality that no one wants to support a genuine murderer, and if his guilt becomes obvious, he could lose everything. He would not only lose his freedom, but the support of everyone who ever supported him. The fact that his wife (violent and drinker that she was) backed away from him after he shot Lauder Simms is a precursor to what may be down the road. Those closest to us, those who can most clearly see our true intentions, are the first to jump ship when we are most obviously wrong.

Discussion Question 1

Can you think of other public figures who have gained beneficial notoriety from acting badly? How does the radio incident bolster Jim's sense of invulnerability?



Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Jim tell Steve the truth about what he's done?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Jim likes or identifies with Celia Anson?

Vocabulary

obliquely, imminent, vagaries, impugned, complicit, apoplectic, asinine, ergonomic, erudite, curatorial, pyromaniac, kanji, melanoma, tantamount



Book Three: Chapters 2-3

Summary

Jim feels refreshed after the spa and decides to paint. He doesn't want to go to his usual studio, so he goes to a mysterious place he calls "Hobbitville" to paint. He paints "In Hostile Country," a depiction of two brothers struggling along a trail. He paints in a sort of serious frenzy, and is clear that the brothers are Dellwood and Grant Siminoe. The painting is very grim, and the brothers are hunched against a compassionless world. He has an insight that losing one's younger brother might be similar to losing one's daughter. At the thought that he's killed someone's little brother, he is so stunned he has to take a break from painting and just sit, thinking and taking in his surroundings. He tries to focus on the horse abuse and Dell's cruelty, but he understands that Grant feels responsible for his failure to protect Dell. Jim craves a drink and realizes it was not his job to take Dellwood's life. He has an urge to confess to the police. He considers leaving the painting in Hobbitville as a tribute, but knows Steve will be happy to sell it for thousands of dollars. He packs up and walks back to his truck. On the way out of the trailhead, he sees Jason in a black El Camino, watching him. Jason makes sure Jim has seen him and talks into a cell phone.

When Jim is back at his hotel suite, Steve calls to inform him that a detective is coming to see him and asks when the Pantelas should expect him. Jim teases Steve by telling him that he'd better wash off the blood before the detective arrives. Steve opines that Jim's latest paintings are disturbingly different from his previous work and asks if he needs to talk about it. Jim responds that the phone is probably tapped and Steve tells him what time to be at the Pantelas.

In only a few minutes, Detective Hinchman calls from the lobby and Jim invites him up. Before the detective arrives, he places the new painting at the hearth facing outward.

Detective Hinchman is very cheerful and very fat, and Jim thinks he looks like he might drop dead of a heart attack at any moment. Hinchman tells Jim that he's admired his painting for a long time, and immediately goes to the new painting to look at it. He asks Jim what it means, and Jim admits that it is a depiction of Dellwood and Grant Siminoe, which surprises Hinchman. He asks why Jim would paint them, and Jim responds that they were on his mind because of the horse abuse and the fact that Dell got murdered and Jim is a suspect. He also is thinking about Grant because he has threatened Jim's life and burned down his neighbor's barn. The detective comments that the brothers appear to be having a rough time in the picture and reveals that indeed they were in foster care from a young age, and would run away to be together. He also reveals that Grant is even bigger in size than Dellwood was (in contrast to how Jim has portrayed him in the painting), and that Grant has been spotted coming this way, undoubtedly looking for Jim. In part, that is why the detective has come to see him. He also mentions that secrets can eat away at a man and make you sick.



Hinchman—"Wheezy" in Jim's mind—wonders if Jim has seen Grant. He shows Jim a Stegner Killer that the police found on a second search of the creek. Jim defends himself by saying he fishes that part of the creek all the time. The detective also gives Jim the transcript from the investigation regarding Alce's murder. Jim remembers how her behavior went downhill, how he mishandled her cell phone request, and that she was trying to open up to him. The details of the crime are revealed to him again—that she was buying pot, fought back, and the robber stabbed her to death in an alley. Jim thinks she died because she was like him (a fighter), and wonders if she'd had a cell phone like she asked if she might have survived. He reads the transcript despite the fact that it upsets him and remembers that she died in the ambulance trying to tell them her mother's phone number.

The detective sympathizes with Jim and wonders aloud if killing Dell over the horse was "getting it right" the second time around. Jim feels like the detective knows he failed as a father. After the detective leaves, Jim is so upset he vomits and tries to forget the images of his daughter's murder.

There is a flashback to Jim's youth, when his father died. He was sixteen years old. He felt let down by his father's accidental death on the job and his mother grieved fiercely and drank excessively. He came home afterward and caught his mother having sex with his father's foreman. Jim ran away to live with his sister. He remembers the depth of his grief, how he dropped out of school before graduation and got his GED. He went to San Francisco and forgave his mother, who died in a drunk driving crash before he could reconcile with her. Two weeks after her funeral, he got into a fight and went to the art museum and saw a painting that changed his outlook on life, "The Fog Warning," by Winslow Homer. This painting made him want to be a painter himself, so he enrolled in art school for a time. He didn't graduate, but he learned enough to become an artist.

Back in the present, Jim realizes he should eat something since he hasn't eaten all day. He normally would take a bath and then go out to eat. But since Pim Pantela is footing the bill, he orders room service. He feels lonely because of his secret.

Chapter Three begins with a catalog description of a 36 x 48 inch oil-on-canvas painting, "Horse and Crow."

Jim watches TV and eats dinner, feeling better. Then he paints a horse on a cliff covered in blue and red fish with a crow watching him. Jim thinks the crow is telling the horse not to jump.

He contemplates adding to the painting, but knows it's time to stop. He also thinks about crows and how smart they are, and that the crow in the painting might be more like the serpent in Genesis, giving the horse the idea of "choice."

Jim thinks about choices and giving up choices. He remembers that a doctor friend of his recommended suicide by lying down in a snowstorm. When Jim had asked him about if it was summer, the doctor recommended using a gun standing in a pond, so



you don't leave a mess for your friends. Jim is not considering suicide, but he is exhausted.

He goes out for a walk and wishes it were winter because he likes the stillness. Instead it is autumn. Jim feels displaced from time and worries that this feeling has been dangerous for him in the past, so he doesn't drive or go to a bar. Instead he walks up a street full of art galleries. In the past, looking at mediocre art has made him angry because of their lack of bravery. He's not sure why he cares so much, but wants to get angry to clear his head; however he doesn't feel angry.

He goes into a tapas bar where he and Cristine used to go, intending to have a non-alcoholic beer. Celia Anson is there, being talked to by a man she is obviously uninterested in. Jim sees the man touch Celia on the shoulder and she shrugs him off. The man leaves the bar, and Jim anticipates he's going to wait for Celia outside. She is too drunk to notice and leaves, not seeing Jim. Jim goes out the back and watches to see what happens. He sees that the man is stalking Celia, watching her walking to her car. When gets there, the man grabs her. Jim intervenes and punches the man in the back of the head. He holds Celia while she cries, checks to see that the man is okay, and drives Celia home. On the way she confesses that the man was an old boyfriend and while she appreciates Jim's efforts, he shouldn't have done what he did. Jim feels like he's losing control of himself. He drops her off with her car and walks back to the hotel, feeling miserable.

He looks at his painting again and feels like it has changed in his absence, and that now the crow is telling the horse about Pegasus while the horse is listening intently. Jim goes to sleep.

Analysis

Jim's painting of "In Hostile Country" is difficult for him because for the first time he acknowledges Dellwood and Grant Siminoe as real people, though only as distant figures. He can't yet look at them in the eyes, it would seem, but is capable of seeing their surroundings, perhaps feels willing to believe that they are not just cartoonish "bad men," but people who have influences and real lives. When he's painting it, he's only imagining their world; it is Detective HInchman who brings the grim reality home. As an orphan himself, Jim undoubtedly looks at his own past as difficult. But to find that he has taken the life of someone who had it worse—far worse—is a real hit at his sense of himself as a "good man."

It is probably significant that he is painting outside for only the second time. The first was a whim, but this time he is purposeful. And he isn't painting what he sees in front of him, but rather from his imagination; however, the surroundings aren't incidental. He's painting in a place he sees as mystical or spiritual; perhaps as much of a church as Jim would be willing to accept. The first time he paints outside he encounters Jason, who could be seen as an avenging angel. The second time is just beginning to approach confession or acknowledgement of sin. Jim confronts the fact that he has deprived



Grant of his little brother and that he deeply understands, though his own experience, what it means to have someone take the life of a person you feel responsible for. He doesn't evade the fact of that, but it is only with Detective Hinchman that he comes to realize the depth of what he's done. He can no longer fool himself that their "hostile country" is just something he made up.

The painting "Horse and Crow" may get at Jim's own dilemma, though he sees it in more archetypal form. Can he be a creature simply swept along by life's river like a fish, or does he have conscious choice? There is the choice of suicide, which he rejects. There is turning himself in, which means the hell of prison. There is allowing himself to be taken by the avenging angel, which would mean a full acknowledgement of his sins without recourse to vigilante justification.

Jim's encounter with Celia Anson and her abusive ex-boyfriend is another blow to his ego and seems to be an embarrassing foray into playing superhero. Until painting "In Hostile Country" and his encounter with Detective Hinchman, he has felt as close to invincible as he ever has, surrounded by admirers and evidence that his talent is to be rewarded. Now it's become very clear that Dell was more than a cartoon villain and here he finds he's not appreciated for the most basic of chivalrous gestures: preventing a woman from being abused. He may have rescued the abused horse, but rescuing a woman is another thing altogether: she may have mixed feelings about being rescued and she can talk about those feelings.

In the context of these events, Detective Hinchman's "low blow" of bringing in Alce's murder investigation transcript into the mix might seem to be rather cruel. But the detective has a single job to do: break the case. He might be the "good cop," all cheerful and friendly and behaving as an ally, but he and Sport are two sides of the same coin.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Detective Hinchman show Jim the transcript from Alce's murder investigation?

Discussion Question 2

Do you agree with Detective Hinchman that Jim sees the abused horse as a stand-in for Alce? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Jim inspired by Winslow Homer's "The Fog Warning?"

Vocabulary

inaudible, alizarin, arroyo, tribulations, emphatically, protocol, candor, smoldering, untether, mote, ominous, existential, languor, repudiated, vertigo, pander, shirred, insinuating, recalcitrant, thrall



Book Three: Chapter 4

Summary

Chapter Four begins with a catalog description of two paintings: "Sisters" (private collection) and "Two Boats," (collection of the artist).

Jim wakes to a phone call from Steve, who is making sure the artist makes it to Pim's on time. The Pantelas' house is near a Buddhist stupa where Jim came for comfort after Alce died. He is met at the expensively furnished and large house by Pim's French-Canadian wife Julia. Jim has told her not to have the twin girls get hairdos, but rather to dress like they do on a normal day. He finds them dressed in sailor suits in the kitchen, which Jim immediately thinks of as the heart of the house, the only place where real living happens. Pim is away on business. Jim tells Julia that he wants to paint the girls there, in the kitchen, which surprises her. Seeing the little girls, named Celine and Julie, Jim can't help but compare them to Alce. They are six years old and intimidated by Jim. He breaks the tension by giving them candy necklaces. After he eats a third one himself, the tension is broken, and the two little girls' faces and sailor suits end up covered in colorful sticky candy. Then he gives them bubble gum cigars. After that, he tells Julia that he's got all he needs and will now paint at Steve's—that the girls are perfect. Julia is puzzled, but offers him some cinnamon toast and espresso while the girls play, and then he leaves.

Jim tells the hotel manager that he needs another room to paint in for three days. He calls Steve to tell him to retrieve the easel and canvas from the Pantelas'; Steve has already gotten a phone call from Julia to report what happened, and Steve thinks his behavior means he's back to his old self.

Before starting the girls' portrait, Jim knows he has to do another painting first. He paints a cold ocean with one boat drifting with a funeral pyre burning inside it. Then he paints another boat, far away near the horizon with smoke rising from it as well, circled by birds. When Steve's errand runner arrives with the canvas and easel, Jim gives him the one of the brothers in the valley, but keeps this new one.

Jim spends two full days painting the portrait of the girls, painting the background first. Then he paints the girls, smeared with colors. He puts a chicken on Celine's head and on Julie's a nest of baby blackbirds with their mother. Instead of being black, they are painted with wild colors.

Jim is happy with the result and takes more time with this painting than most. He wants to take it over to the Pantelas right away, but considers letting it sit for a few days so they don't think he's not working hard for the money they're paying. He thinks about art and effort and how the best work sometimes comes without much effort at all, but from the years of skill-building and mental preparation. But then he can't resist taking it to them, feeling so good about it he wants to show it off. He decides to surprise them. As



he waits in the kitchen for Julia to retrieve the girls, he notices their array of toys. Just as he goes to unveil the painting, two shots are fired from outside the house at him, hitting some crockery above their heads. Jim quickly grabs the girls, covering them with his body and pushing them all behind the granite kitchen island. He calls 911 and hands the phone to Julia. Then he goes outside, trying to draw the gunfire away from the Pantelas. A shot misses him again. Jim reaches his truck and gun, and fires back. He sees the shooter leave in a big diesel pickup truck.

The police come, including "Wheezy." Julia tells them everything, and when they question Jim, he conceals the fact that he fired back or has a gun. When they ask about the gun registered to him, he tells them he got rid of it, which disappoints the detective. Jim again refuses a security detail. When he goes back into the house, he's afraid the girls or their mother will blame him for what happened, but they don't. He tells Julia that the shooter was after him and they would be safe.

As Jim leaves, he is upset and angry at himself, feeling like he kills everything good in his life. He considers that maybe he should kill himself to prevent anyone he loves from getting hurt, but he knows he won't.

He drives with no real destination in mind, thinking to get away for a few days. He reloads his gun and drives with an instinct to get to a peaceful place where he won't encounter anyone else. He tries to reassure himself that he isn't a bad person. He turns off onto a dirt road, looks at the sky and thinks of Alce. He is surprised to find an elk herd that doesn't seem disturbed by his presence. He tries to suppress his grief and turn to his anger at Grant and his "posse." He packs up a bed and some water, cigarillos and his gun, and walks up the hill to camp. At dark, he hears a truck coming. He hides and takes out his gun. At first he thinks it might be a rancher, but then he hears his windshield being broken.

Jim fires at what he believes to be Grant's truck, then tries to scare the man with another blind shot near his own truck. He knows wasn't firing warning shots at the Pantelas, but simply missed. Jim realizes he wasn't paying attention and was followed. He also realizes that as a hunter and poacher Grant will be well armed, including night vision scopes, and will be skilled at night shooting. He assumes Grant is waiting for him to move into the open. At first he thinks Grant is a coward for coming after him at night, but then realizes the irony of that statement giving his nighttime murder of Dell.

Jim worries and waits and tries not to move. He knows that Grant is used to waiting a long time as a hunter and any false move will expose him. Then he decides that since waiting just means he'll get killed anyway, he will have to do something. He grabs his rucksack and runs pell mell down the hill and crouches behind a boulder, fully expecting to get shot at any moment, but nothing happens. He yells Grant's name, getting no response. Finally, he runs toward the truck and finds that while shooting at his truck, he has managed to shoot Grant right through the forehead. He feels sick seeing that Grant didn't even have his gun out, and that Jim has killed him for vandalizing his truck. When he goes to Grant's truck, he finds the arsenal he expected, including night scope. He decides to dispose of Grant's body in a nearby ravine.



While moving the body, Jim tries to reassure himself that Grant was a bad man and finds that he doesn't feel too bad about having killed him. He is worried about being caught and wonders for a minute if he might be a psychopath. He hauls Grant's body into the back of his own truck and rolls the truck off the edge of a small cliff. He cleans off his own truck and covers the blood on the road. Then he changes his clothes, putting everything including his boots in a crate. He goes to a truck stop to sleep, and in the morning sprays down his truck and dumps his clothes in the trash. He gets a new windshield installed.

Jim goes to a café to eat and worries that he might smell or look guilty. He goes to the bathroom to wash up, and finds he doesn't feel guilty. He wonders when Grant's body will be discovered and how they'll find the bullet and it will be the same caliber as the gun registered to him that he lied about not having. He plans to get rid of the gun by burying it in the desert. He thinks that if the police come after him, he'll claim self-defense, though he knows they'll ask him why he didn't call the police and how they won't believe him because he tried to hide the body. He starts to feel like a not-too-smart professional criminal. When he returns to his table and the waitress doesn't come back, he wonders again if he smells like death. He pays and leaves.

Back on the road, Sofia calls and he finds out that she's back home and the FBI is investigating Dell's poaching operation. She asks where he is, says she's been calling him repeatedly. When she called Steve, he told her about the shooting at the Pantelas and that Jim hadn't been seen since. She tells him that Grant has left for no one knew where, and that everyone assumes it is Grant who shot at the Pantelas' house. Everyone also knows that Grant burned down the barn and made threats. She stops herself when she almost says that she's glad he killed Dell. There is a tender exchange of "I miss you" and Jim thinks of painting Sofia. He tells her he'll tell her what happened one day. Sofia cries and tells him that Sport came to her at the café and told her that if she answered questions about Dell's murder she would be a witness, but if she didn't she'd be charged as an accessory and would go to prison. Sport tried to scare her by telling her all about prison. As Jim listens to her, he remembers that he would rather die than go back to prison. He tells Sofia she should talk to them, and she cries hysterically, telling him she doesn't know anything more than she went to sleep, he got up to urinate, and then they woke up together in the morning—that she's already told them everything she really remembers. Then she says she wants to come to Santa Fe to be with him for a vacation in a few days, and that Dugar's still been pursuing her and writing her poems. Jim tells her he'll get his commission payment and take her out every night. She makes him write her phone number on the dashboard. After hanging up, he thinks he might go fishing, but when he gets to a spot, he finds it's too hot.

Jim remembers seeing two paintings in a museum in London that made a deep impression on him. One was by Paul Devaux and featured a sleeping or possibly dead nude woman in a bleak landscape. The painting disturbed him and it looks to him like the scene is during a war that has killed most of the people. The other painting was Picasso's *Nude Woman in a Red Armchair*. He remembers being aroused by both paintings in different ways. He sees the Picasso as an expression of life and the other of death. He resolves that as an artist he will try to move toward life rather than death.



In the present, Jim thinks this is a funny memory since he is a "recent purveyor of death." He keeps looking to see if Jason's black El Camino is following him.

Instead of going back to Santa Fe, Jim spends two nights at a motel in Española. On the third day he goes back to the St. Francis in Santa Fe. He puts his cell phone on the charger in his room and goes to see Irmina, who appears to be expecting him. Together they recall a time when he and Cristine and Alce and Irmina went to the zoo. He remembers feeling lucky, and feels like he was Orpheus, looking backwards and losing everything. He loved his wife Cristine more than ever then, despite the fact that she was drinking too much. At the zoo, Jim remembers them being the perfect family for one hour. Then Alce was attracted by the polar bears playing in their pool, and pushed past some other children, who called her racist names. Cristine at first intervened appropriately as a mother should, but the other child's mother hit Cristine's arm and yelled at her. Cristine responded by slapping the other woman. Jim and a security guard separate the two women. Jim and Cristine were together another ten years after this incident, only separating after Alce's death. Jim has heard she's remarried to a rich alternative therapist.

Irmina remembers how Alce never cried during this incident, but saw her mother as a hero. Irmina points out that Alce learned to fight back from her mother, an idea Jim never considered before. He also realizes that Irmina has also been grieving and he was too involved in his own grief to notice. He holds Irmina's hand and apologizes. They eat and he wants to tell her everything, needing her help to find meaning in what's happened, but he refrains to protect her from the police. He tells her about his new paintings instead. She asks him to give her his gun, but he refuses. She urges him to get rid of it. On his way out, he buries it on her property.

Later, Jim stops at a bar and orders a non-alcoholic beer. He pulls out the line about prayer from T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" he's been keeping in his coat pocket and reads it. He thinks that all his paintings lately have been prayers. He enjoys his beer and feels relieved that he has disposed of the gun. When he leaves the bar, he sees Jason in the black El Camino in the parking lot. He gropes for his gun under the seat and realizes it's gone. He acknowledges Jason and drives away. Jason follows him closely. Jim is frightened because he senses that Jason is serious now.

He tries to evade Jason by speeding up and turning down a familiar road. He thinks he's escaped but then sees the El Camino behind him. Jim feels like giving up, but then Jason honks his horn to make him keep going. Jim goes down a dirt track and ends up stuck in the middle of a creek. He sees Jason pull up and cut his headlights, and thinks Jason wants to watch him drown. He tries desperately to make the truck move, and suddenly sees a flash flood coming. He shouts a warning to Jason and manages to get the truck out on the opposite side just in time. After the flood goes by, he gets out of his car and watches Jason turn on his headlights and leave. Jim cries hard in the rain, feeling like his soul is insubstantial, like a leaf torn off in a flood. He realizes that what he's done or not done in his life was natural and without malice, and he'd loved his daughter as best he could.



The storm lasts a couple hours, and Jim stands in the rain until he's numb with cold. He has to wait until the creek subsides before he can go back across, and decides to get warm by huddling in his sleeping bag. He suddenly realizes he has left his rucksack behind at the scene of Grant's killing. In a way, this causes him some relief because it means he isn't such a stone cold killer after all and has made an idiot mistake. He goes to sleep in the back of his truck. When he wakes the creek is back to normal and it's sunny and warm. As he crosses the creek, he sees the place where Jason might have died had Jim not warned him about the flood. He realizes he isn't worried about Jason—that he feels washed clean.

When he gets to the hotel, he finds the police waiting for him. Wheezy is there, along with Sofia and Steve. Two officers frisk him, but don't arrest him. Wheezy notices the muddy condition of Jim and his truck and asks if he had a rough night. Jim doesn't answer and instead invites him up to the hotel room, offering to show him the new painting. Wheezy tells him they've already searched his room, and so has seen the painting. Wheezy asks if this painting, too, is of Dell and Grant. Jim responds in the affirmative. Wheezy informs him that Steve has already hung the painting of the horse and crow.

The police search the truck and Jim asks if they're looking for the gun again. He surmises they have new information, which Wheezy confirms. They have been tracking Jim's phone, and though it sometimes went out of signal range, they could narrow down the area he'd been. They found Grant's body because of the tracks in the dirt and the buzzards. Wheezy describes the way Grant was armed, that they have figured out the gunshots were from long distance, and that based on all the evidence so far it was probably self defense. He then goes on to say that the killing of Dellwood might be seen as self defense as well, considering that his knife was drawn. He strongly suggests that Jim might come clean and have a good case, but the longer he waits the more that case becomes questionable.

They don't find anything in Jim's truck aside from a few broken pieces of windshield glass. Jim thinks about the evidence they probably have and how court might go. He asks Wheezy if they can match broken window glass, and the detective loses his good cheer. He responds in the negative. He again suggests to Jim that evidence can weigh on a person. He then offers to take Jim out to the crime scene while they look for windshield glass. Jim knows that this is a way for them to get him to confess or screw up, but he wants to go anyway, thinking he can distract them and hide the rucksack. He gets into Wheezy's car and promptly falls asleep.

When they get to the spot, Jim sees the deputies moving toward the boulder where the rucksack should be, so he tells them he has to urinate, and moves toward the boulder. He thinks he can throw the rucksack away into the long grass where the police won't search and come back to retrieve it later. However, the rucksack isn't where he expects it to be, even though he's sure that's where he left it. He knows that if the police found it, he'd have been arrested. They notice his nervousness and search around the rock and up into the grass.



Analysis

Jim's encounter with the twin girls opens a window for the reader into Jim's more playful side, and his instinctive understanding of small children. From Jim's internal reproaches for all the ways he failed as a father, it is possible to see all the ways he was probably a very good father, or had that potential. A portrait might be considered good if it is a "good likeness," but Jim's most ardent fans—and certain Pim Pantela would be one of the most committed—must know that he wouldn't be content to simply paint a likeness of the girls. Jim's paintings up until now have been known for their "whimsy." So instead of the staid portrayal frozen at the height of their cuteness, Jim takes it to the next level, almost forcing them to be real children no matter what they're wearing or what their parents might prefer. Most readers probably enter this scene concerned that since the girls are dressed in fine clothing and have had their hair done, perhaps the Pantelas will reject the portrait. The fact that they don't gives them more depth than Jim seems to expect.

However, this \$35,000 painting completion, which should be a triumph, is almost literally shot to pieces. He is deprived of the pleasure his talent could have brought him, because the Fates are chasing him down. The shooting at the Pantelas is a real shot at Jim's successful career. If your greatest fan can expect his family to get shot at for having you at his house, then one can expect the fan base to shrink significantly. Jim is worried that they will blame him, but he isn't really given any evidence that they do or will. He feels terrible, but one can only imagine how he might have felt if one of the Pantelas had actually been shot or killed. He has the luxury of blaming himself in this case because no one has been hurt.

When Jim is found by Grant, he calls it a "fitting showdown" in the dark, two "cowards in the cloaking dark, cloaking their shame"... Jim questions that shame; he is sure neither of them feels any shame at what they're doing, but then he gets the full flower of shame when it turns out he's killed a man for breaking his windshield. Yes, he finds the man was armed and would have killed him as he feared, but shooting an unarmed man—for even Dell had his knife out—is a low no man wants to reach. Does Jim have the heart of a killer, as he fears? Or is he simply a man taking shots in the dark?

There is a constant contrast between Jim's "criminal mind" and Jim's criminal mistakes in covering up his crimes. On the one hand, he seems practiced in his efforts to rid himself of evidence, but on the other hand he screws up in pretty big ways at the same time. And when he's at the café plagued with paranoia about his smell or his look of guilt he isn't exhibiting the psychopathic tendencies he fears.

The news from Sofia is redeeming: She remains loyal, despite the powers arrayed against her. Jim can't help but imagine the painting he will do of her in the future: she is a graceful and skilled swimmer in this river; he is the wounded elk who drinks the water she swims in. Yet, the old arrogance presents itself in this image as well: the real Jim remains virtually unscathed.



The two paintings that Jim remembers as poles he might point toward are Paul Devaux's "Sleeping Venus" (which is described but not named in the text) and Pablo Picasso's "Nude Woman in a Red Armchair." He must choose how to paint, what his style might be. But along with choosing how he will paint, he also has to choose how to live his life. He is conscious of the fact that his current lifestyle is going against the fundamental choice he made as a young man—to choose to move toward life.

Jim has finally reached the crux of his bad decisions. He needs his priest, or in this case priestess—Irmia. She absolves him again of his guilt over his daughter's death: reminding him that even his daughter told him that her mother was the "fighter" and thus the inspiration for her "fighting back" which caused her death. Jim cannot take all the blame. He is not the only hero. Jim also is faced with recognizing that his grief has been shared by other people, and his immersion in it has been selfish.

He returns to the T.S. Eliot fragment a second time: "You are not here to verify,/ Instruct yourself or inform curiosity/ Or carry report. You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid." He recognizes that all his recent paintings are prayers, whereas before they were about avoiding grief with whimsy.

Jim finds himself in a real chase with Jason, a life or death struggle. The reader can't know what Jason thinks when Jim saves him by yelling about the flash flood, but based on the previous encounter, it can be assumed that Jason has an honor code and can't abide killing a man who has just saved his life. If Jason is the Angel of Death, he spares Jim once again because Jim has shown compassion, humanity. The flood saves Jim though it could have killed him. The flood could have done Jason's job for him, but Jim turns around and saves Jason from the flood.

Back at the hotel, Detective Hinchman or "Wheezy," gives Jim the "good cop" choice again: confess for the good of your own soul, and for the good of people around you. By going with them to Grant's death scene, he's defying Fate, only to find that if the rucksack had actually been there, he'd have been caught cold. Jim, perhaps like most people, is less smart than he thinks he is; he overestimates himself again. Jim as a character reflects a common human theme: humans tend to be self-centered in this way, unable to see beyond our own beliefs and denials. Not only has he overestimated his power for the negative but also the positive. The chance mistake of denying his daughter a cell phone and encouraging her strength did not kill her. If the rucksack had been there, he would not have been able to hide it from the police, no matter what his fantasy.

Discussion Question 1

What are some possible reasons Jason leaves Jim after the flood?



Discussion Question 2

Do you think Jim has followed his moral code in life? Has he chosen the path of life? In what ways has he or has he not?

Discussion Question 3

When Jim calls himself "Orpheus," chastising himself for calling himself lucky, what is he referring to?

Vocabulary

stupa, truancy, cadmium, unison, pyre, banquette, panache, caesura, keening, antics, jocularly, havoc, irrepressibly, burgeoning, resonant, cadence, malevolence, ponderosa, primal, psychopath, lariat, culpable, desiccated, charnel, transfixed, sepulchral, profoundly, proximity, russet, regal, thrall, prodigiously, liturgical, absolved, mundane, chimera, cannonades, corrugated, viscera



Book Three: Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter Five begins with two catalog descriptions of paintings: "My Lover is a Train" (collection of the artist) and "Brothers."

Pim Pantela has decided to have an unveiling party for the girls' portrait. When Jim is asked who he'd like to invite as guests, he tells him John "Wheezy" Hinchman of the Santa Fe police department and Celia Anson. The Pantelas are very happy with the portrait. Jim tells Julia that he has instructed Steve to put a box of bubble gum cigars on a pedestal next to his latest paintings, and someone mistook them for an art installation.

Pim puts Jim up in the hotel for another week, and Jim goes into a frenzy of painting. Sofia stays with him. They go hiking and enjoy the hotel. He shows her Hobbitville, they go to Ten Thousand Waves and tour art galleries. She encourages him not to be so dismissive of the blue coyote paintings, the tourist kitsch, but he can't help himself. She accuses him of snobbery, but he insists that an artist needs to see the truth of the thing they are painting, and the coyote isn't honest.

Jim takes Sofia to El Farol, the tapas bar, and remembers the incident with Celia and her aggressive ex-boyfriend. He has decided internally that despite what Celia told him, Jim was correct that the man was malicious. The tapas is expensive, but Jim is flush with cash because he demanded that Steve pay him his portrait commission in small bills.

Steve has told him that his paintings have changed and become deeper, and are now more in demand as a result. After Alce died, Jim couldn't paint about his grief, and instead his paintings became more light and whimsical. Now things have changed, and Steve has gotten some calls for interviews.

Sofia has visited the gallery and gotten along well with Steve. Jim has depicted their new relationship as two train engines on fire moving toward one another, which he has given to her as a gift. At El Farol he tries to explain the painting of the horse and crow, and how the crow introducing the concept of choice to the horse is like Eve meeting the serpent. He also shares the book by Rilke with her, in particular a few lines from the "Eighth Elegy."

Sofia tells Jim over their dinner that she used to think he was more like an animal, not thinking but just moving through the world, but that now she sees that he's really thinking all the time. He insists that the crow isn't helping the horse and that painting is a way to feel like an animal for a few hours, to be outside of time. He adds that fishing is the same, but she doesn't understand.

On the fourth day of their "vacation," Jim paints a big portrait. Steve is concerned that Jim has not yet hired a lawyer, and sends him a contact. The hotel has told the press



about Jim's painting residency, which attracts them in part because the killings have also been in the news. When Jim sees an article about him in the newspaper he is surprised and feels terrible. He calls Steve to complain, but Steve is excited by the buzz and has been jacking up the prices. Steve informs him that this is Jim's "moment," that a blogger's article about him has also gotten attention, and that the hotel wants to offer him a month's more residency for free. Jim is very upset about it all, and calls Steve a psychopath, who replies, "Who's talking, Vigilante Man?" Steve tries to reassure Jim that the media frenzy will end, and in the meanwhile he will try to make Jim rich, noting that he appears to be happier than he's ever been. Jim is most upset about the idea that Steve and he are in essence making money off the killings.

Jim paints a large portrait of Dellwood and Grant as young boys equal in size to the painting of the girl-twins. He paints them in a kitchen like the girls but out in the desert with more natural surroundings. The boys look scared. On Dellwood's head he puts a model ship in a bottle. On Grant's head he puts three crosses with a dead albatross on the center one. Making the painting is a painful experience for Jim. He wonders if he has joined spiritually with Dellwood and Grant, and it terrifies him.

Afterward, Jim craves a drink. Instead he gets in his truck and drives to the Buddhist stupa to pray for forgiveness, spending the afternoon in meditation. On the drive back, he sees the El Camino. He attempts to stop and confront Jason, but the car leaves before he can approach. He wonders why Jason doesn't just kill him and get it over with.

When he gets back to the hotel, Jim finds the TV news there looking to interview him about the killings. Instead of saying "no comment" and moving on by, he decides to favor the obviously young and new Native American reporter with some answers. She asks him if he's been fishing, and he lies and says yes. She tells him that she and her father used to fish together, and it sends him into a reverie of her fishing with her father. When she asks him another question, he fumbles and is unable to answer, feeling himself turning against her, deciding that being in television will change her in a negative way. He says something between a grunt and a roar and hurries into the hotel, feeling like everyone is watching him.

When he returns to the suite, he finds that Sofia has made a painting—her first in years—called Backstroke. It is of a bearded man swimming in the ocean with a family of otters on his stomach. Jim is impressed.

Three days later, there is a fifteen minute long biographical story on TV about Jim. It includes details found in the book written about him years ago, including the fact of his father's tragic death, his daughter's murder, his failed marriages, and the shooting of Lauder Simms. The story goes on to frame the present day: the poaching ring, the animal abuse, the fight with Dell, the rescued horse, and Dell's murder. There is an interview with Willy about Grant's threats, a bit about the shooting at the Panelas and Grant's killing. The story wonders if Jim Stegner is "the Vigilante Artist" and posits the question of whether Jim sees himself as the "Eliminator of Bad Men?" It also reports that Jim's paintings are now doubled in price. The reporter interviews Wheezy, who says



that Jim Stegner was not a suspect and that Grant's death had not been classified a murder. The reporter is shocked and incredulous, to which Wheezy responds that the death was surrounded by "extenuating circumstances." Then there is a slide show of Jim's recent paintings. The theme of the story is that Jim's work is genius, but that the murders weren't justified.

After they watch the story together, Sofia suggests he will need to get better sunglasses to disguise himself from the public. Both Jim and Sofia are stunned by the quality of the piece and the fact that his whole life has been summed up in fifteen minutes.

The phone rings and Jim doesn't answer it, assuming it is Steve. He can see that Steve has been staying out of the spotlight, which has only increased Jim's mystique as an outsider artist. Jim tells Sofia he feels like drinking, so to distract him she takes off her shirt. However, instead of having sex, he takes her to breakfast, telling her he wants to pretend that life is simple.

Analysis

Jim's conflict with the establishment art world, his opinion on good art get a full showing in these two chapters. First, he invites two art outsiders to the Pantelas' party, Wheezy and Celia Anson. On the one hand, he likes Celia, but on the other hand, he's aware of the fact that her presence annoys people. However the choice to invite them might be seen as an expression of Jim's arrogance as well. He doesn't care what his greatest fan thinks of him—a man who's possibly given him hundreds of thousands of dollars personally—and he doesn't have any problem inviting a detective who might take any evidence against him and put him in prison. He isn't stupid enough to trust Hinchman's "good cop" routine as true friendship or admiration, but he isn't afraid of it, either, and perhaps he should be.

Jim takes Sofia into his world of privilege, but also into his world of safety and power. He takes her to the hotel, expensive restaurants, the spa and Hobbitville. He isn't perhaps opening up to her all the way, but rather sharing his best self: he is a powerful artist and this is his world. The fact that he considers himself above the "tourist art," or what they call the "blue coyote paintings" shows his artistry, but Sofia brings him down to earth on some level—not everyone agrees that just because something is popular doesn't mean it isn't good art. Either Sofia is not sophisticated enough—her age is showing—or she's more accepting of the world as it is, whereas Jim sees himself as somewhat above it. However, his assessment of the "blue coyote paintings" as lacking some fundamental truth that art requires is a thought that seems inherently true. Mass produced art isn't as valuable: certainly it isn't getting the artist thousands and thousands of dollars per painting. So does the fact that Jim's art, which takes him all of a couple hours usually—better art? Does it show a more deep truth? If the reader looks over the paintings that Jim has done in the course of the novel, definitely yes. The blue coyote paintings don't have as much to say as Jim's paintings. Even Jim isn't sure that that makes them worth what people pay for them. It is left for the reader to decide if the paintings that made him



popular in the first place (whimsy with chickens) are better or more shallow than the deeper and darker paintings that have come since the fight with Dell over the horse.

"Brothers" as a painting sits in exact contrast with "Sisters." The sisters are whimsy and the brothers are not. The sisters have the privilege of whimsy because of the charmed nature of their life while the brothers Dell and Grant have never had that sort of privilege. It is Jim's final and most honest effort to understand his violent nature and look straight into the eyes of his victims. Here he finally gives them their full humanity, not tiny figures in the distance or dead bodies in boats but straight on, at their most innocent. The fact that this terrifies him but he does the painting anyway, doesn't avoid it, gives the reader a new facet to Jim's bravery. He isn't just reckless like a bull, but also willing to face his darkest self. He worries that like all killers he has taken the dead into himself, a responsibility not just for taking their lives but also in adding their lives to his own.

Then he goes to the stupa, a place of redemption, where he hasn't been since his daughter's death, and prays for forgiveness openly, spending the afternoon sitting with it. However, his forgiveness can't be gained by mere prayer, as Jason waits for him. At this point, the Virga—the rain that never falls to the ground—is driving him a bit crazy. He wants it to be over, but it isn't up to him anymore.

The television biography piece is stunning because of its reductionism: the fact that a person can be reduced to fifteen minutes (very Andy Warholesque) of suppositions and a slideshow is a modern reality. Jim must struggle against these reductions: Vigilante Artist, Eliminator of Bad Men. He might have tried to see himself that way, he might wish others to see him that way perhaps, but he knows it's a lie, just like Southwestern Naif or any other appellation is too convenient and too simple to be real. He is finally and completely exposed to how the world sees him, and it isn't a pretty sight. Sofia offers herself to him, in effect offering an "ocean of womanhood" for him to soothe himself, but for the first time, he has matured out of this. He's willing to go out into the world and act as if life is "simple," but also as if he's a flawed human.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the two paintings "Sisters" and "Brothers." What might the objects Jim places on the children's heads mean?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Jim invite Celia Anson and Detective Hinchman to the Pantelas party?

Discussion Question 3

How does Sofia portray Jim in her painting, "Backstroke"? Why does she portray him this way?

Vocabulary

resilience, alacrity, whimsical, adversaries, imperative, reclusive, diffidence, guileless, incredulity, didact, extenuating, maudlin, insinuation, reticent, mercurial



Book Three: Chapter 7 and Epilogue

Summary

Jim and Sofia and Steve go to the Pantelas' party. There are many armed security guards. Jim realizes that the party is in one way a gesture of forgiveness from Pim for having put his family in danger. Their arrival gets a lot of attention. The portrait is under a drop cloth. Jim accidentally downs half a bourbon before he realizes with horror that he's just broken almost three years of sobriety. He panics, but when he tells Sofia what happened she reassures him that it was a reflex and he should forget about it.

Pim makes a toast along with his wife. Jim thinks they look like they're running for office.

Jim thinks about the way he loses himself when painting and wonders how this spiritual process fits into the net worth of a collector like Pim, and how the murders have made wealthy people even wealthier. He spots Celia Anson as she makes her way toward him and looks for Detective Hinchman. Sofia notices that Jim appears about to burst out with some negative statement about it all, and she reassures him quietly that he needs "these people," that they love him and his work. The whole environment completely bewilders Jim. Sofia tells him that not everyone can paint—that some just get to love the paintings and buy them. Her touch on his arm relaxes him. Celia greets him and jokes that she has an art dealer for him to kill. Her drunken statements about the press and the idea of artists being above the law set him off again on a negative thought-pattern. Then the twins are brought and press photos are taken of them. Jim sees that they are frightened by the whole scene. The painting is revealed and the girls leave with their nanny. Jim feels the energy of the painting wash over the crowd.

Pim asks Jim to come up and say a few words, which panics Jim. He keeps thinking about how none of this would be happening if he hadn't killed two men. Pim hails him as one of America's greatest painters, while Jim feels like he's being hit by a wave. Looking out at the crowd, he sees Sport and Wheezy watching him. He worries for a moment if they are there to arrest him. Jim begins by thanking everyone for their support and friendship. Then he says he never thought himself above the law or anybody. The crowd is shocked. He talks about Alce's death and then asks if he shouldn't go fishing. He immediately leaves the party with Sofia. Steve picks them up on the road and takes them to the hotel. Later Jim goes fishing while Sofia sleeps in the truck—they're at the spot where Jim and Alce used to fish together.

The Epilogue begins with a catalog description of a painting: "Not Too Scary."

Back at the house in Paonia, Jim has put in a device on the driveway so the horse can wander Willy's and his property freely. The horse likes to peer in the window, watching Jim paint. They've been back for two weeks, and it is now mid-October. Bob Reid has reconciled with Jim. Willy never mentions Dellwood or Grant. Sport has called to tell him



he's keeping an eye on him and the investigation would remain open, reminding him that any new information on his part would be better for everyone.

Jim is painting a picture of two redwing blackbirds sitting on a scarecrow. Sofia has moved in with him, despite the fact that Jim is wary about domesticity.

Jim goes fishing on Sulphur Creek. He thinks that fishing this time of year is the best and most beautiful. He feels relaxed and is enjoying the ambience in a remote part of the creek.

Without warning, He finds himself grabbed from behind with a handgun shoved under his jaw. Jason talks to him about fishing and tells Jim he should thank him for not killing him at the Pantelas' party or when he went fishing with Sofia afterward while she slept in the truck. Jason has brought Jim his lost rucksack and tells him he was stupid, but it was never about the law—that the Siminoe family would take care of their own. He grabs Jim's hair and forces him to look upstream, and Jim thinks this is the last thing he will ever see. He doesn't want to die. Jason tells him that he's hiked in and no one knows he's there. He forces Jim down on his injured knee. The current forces Jim to let go of his rod, the one he used to use when he fished with Alce. He feels broken-hearted about losing it, because more than painting or alcohol, fishing had saved him. Jason instinctively knows the rod was important to him.

Jim is on both knees and the water is close to filling his waders; he thinks Jason might want to drown him. Jim cries. Jason demands that Jim respond about the rod being important, but Jim cries that he doesn't know anything at all, not about his life or the deaths of the people in it.

Jason informs him that Dell and Grant had an older sister named Gwendolina, who was also in foster care separately from the brothers. He tells Jim that Gwendolina was his mother, and that Jason himself had then been put into foster care. Gwen died under mysterious circumstances in a group home before she was seventeen years old. This tragedy caused Grant and Dell to finally run away from foster care altogether. They looked for Jason for years, finding him at age 11 and adopting him, rescuing him from a bad foster home. Jason tells Jim that Dell and Grant gave him a real home, though it was sometimes violent and he didn't agree with everything they did. He tells Jim that he didn't agree with the animal abuse, but that he'd been trying to change it. Jason wasn't involved in the poaching either, but his uncles had respected his choices. Now, because of Jim, he has nothing. He pulls the gun away so that Jim can look at him, and Jim sees that Jason is crying as well, though he is trying to hide it. Jason tells Jim that he could have killed him five or six times over the time he's been stalking him. He details all the ways he thought of killing him, by torturing him and making him answer for making so much money off the killings or by cutting off his hands. But in the end, Jason realized that doing any of those things would hurt himself worse because he'd then have to worry about getting caught, and still wouldn't have his family.



Jason fires the gun just to Jim's right, and informs him that he will treat Jim's existence as his hobby. He wants Jim to have to carry around "a piece of hell" wherever he goes, knowing that Jason is watching him.

Jason turns to leave, and Jim calls after him, apologizing for everything he's done and understands about "things you can never put back." He asks Jason what he should do and whether he should turn himself in. Jason responds that Jim has a responsibility to do something worthwhile for people, that he has to work hard to prove he is worth his life, but that Jason still might come back and kill him someday. Then Jason leaves.

Jim empties his waders of water and sits thinking on the bank of the creek for a long time, and then walks back to his truck.

Analysis

Throughout the novel, Jim craves a bourbon in his sobriety. At the Pantelas' party, he accidentally drinks half a bourbon. Sofia is again the moderating influence: it was an accident, he didn't mean to, it's okay to move on. This gesture of kindness and push to self-forgiveness is a small example of the larger direction Jim is beginning to take. Self-castigation for the "crime" of drinking isn't helpful. Self-blame for his genuine mistakes as a father will not bring his daughter back and doesn't help the living. Thinking and acting like a "stone cold killer" isn't helpful either. The question is whether or not following Wheezy's advice is the correct choice. How much punishment helps the world?

But that question is on hold for the moment. Instead, Jim must face the fullness of his artistic success. His greatest fans surround him with the love only people who don't know him can give. They admire him until he can't help but throw off the labels and crowns they've asked him to wear. He can be the Vigilante as long as it is only rumor. The minute he steps up and denies he thinks of himself as "above the law" shows he's been listening to his own press, and in fact sounds defensive and false. Of all the people in the room, it is Detective Hinchman who appears to know him best, and has in essence finally broken through. If Jim doesn't think himself above the law, then what has he done? Throughout the novel, in fact, Jim has behaved as if he thinks himself above the law. Perhaps for his whole life. He *is* the macho Vigilante Artist who thinks he's ridding the world of Bad Men, if you look at what he does and not what he says (or thinks). Jim shoots Lauder Simms the pedophile. He beats and then kills Dellwood Siminoe for abusing a horse. He shoots Grant Siminoe for breaking his windshield. Those are bare facts. There are "extenuating circumstances" in the last killing, but it could be said that Grant Siminoe was hunting the man who'd gotten away with murdering his brother too.

And not only that, at the dinner, Jim Stegner has profited from his killing. He knows it, and so does Jason, who finally meets him in Sulphur Creek. Perhaps he is returning the favor of mercy when he spares Jim's life, but the reader should take his word for it that mercy is more complicated than that. Jason knows the same thing Detective Hinchman



has been telling Jim all along: your secrets will haunt you. Jason would rather have Jim looking over his shoulder the rest of his life than he would like to kill him. And Jason knows too that putting Jim in prison or killing him doesn't make the world a better place, but, rather, creates more absence and more pain. Jason also forces Jim to let go of Alce as symbolized by the fishing rod. By telling Jim about his childhood, Jim is faced with the truth even more deeply than before: Dellwood and Grant were capable of mercy and respect and familial responsibility. They proved it through rescuing Jason, and through their allowances for his choices. Perhaps Jason would have changed the way they did business through his example or perhaps not, but people don't deserve a vigilante's death penalty, but rather the chance to make things right. Jim now has to make things right.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Pim Pantela hold an unveiling party? Why does Jim's speech upset the audience?

Discussion Question 2

How is it fitting that Jason meets Jim back at Sulphur Creek?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the ways Jason might expect Jim to make his life worth living? Do you think he will come back and kill Jim someday?

Vocabulary

alpaca, aggregate, vertiginous, equivocal, amicable, filament, kestrel, sporadic, quandary, cusp



Characters

Jim Stegner

Jim Stegner is the narrator from whose point of view the entire story is told. He is a big bearded man, age 45, with salt and pepper hair and scarred hands. He is a fairly famous, successful painter, with two books written about him, his style characterized as "Great American Southwest Post-Expressionist Naif." Stegner lives in western Colorado, but has previously lived in California and New Mexico. His primary avocation is fishing, which obsesses him more than his painting. He has been sober for almost three years. Stegner grew up in California, where his logger father died in an accident on the job. His mother died a few years later in a drunk driving accident. He has been twice-divorced and enters into a relationship with Sofia during the course of the novel. His daughter was murdered when she was fifteen.

Some years before the novel begins, Jim shot Lauder Simms in a bar because the man insinuated he'd targeted his young daughter as his next pedophilic conquest. Jim served little time for this crime because he pled guilty and the man didn't die. His first wife Cristine withdrew from their marriage in part due to this crime and because of the subsequent loss of their daughter. For a time after the loss of his daughter and marriage, Jim was lost in excessive drinking and grief. His move to Colorado is the second part of that recovery—having gotten sober he has still not found peace or allowed himself to confront his grief. Along with seeking peace, he has to regularly produce paintings, though he often avoids painting in order to go fishing.

Jim struggles throughout the novel with his overwhelming grief and controlling his violent nature, which leads him to first assault and then murder of Dellwood Siminoe, which then leads to the killing of Grant Siminoe. Jim's conflicted guilt over these killings and his pursuit by the two detectives in charge of their investigation plagues him for some months, during which he produces several paintings, some of which explore the humanity of his victims. Jim's fishing activities, his paintings and the murders make up the main actions of the novel, as he is supported by his new relationship with Sofia and his old friend Irmina.

Throughout the novel, Jim's self-concept and inner dialogue are the reader's only window on his world, and as such the reader has to infer through the actions and words of others how self-aware and honest the narrator is being with himself. On the one hand, Jim is a typical middle aged man: alternately plagued with self-doubts and full of the confidence he's gained through years of experience. He is aware of and has conquered his addictions and has quite a bit of insight gained from his past relationships with women. He is at the height of his chosen career, and can move about the world with the privilege that provides. However, he still struggles with his violent temper and self-justifications for those actions. In fact, this novel appears to be a final piece falling into place: he will gain insight into that violent behavior or he will lose everything.



Sofia

Sofia, whose last name is never revealed, is a 28-year-old woman Stegner originally hires as an artist's model, but who eventually becomes his lover. Stegner meets her at the Blue Moon coffee shop in Paonia and hires her on the spot. He is originally interested in her because of her appearance; she immediately pegs him as an artist and a fisherman. He offers her \$20 an hour to model nude for him, but she raises it to \$25 an hour when he admits he is a violent felon. She has a hippie boyfriend named Dugar, though she is unsatisfied by his poetic nature and immaturity. When she finds out Dugar's been cheating on her, she dumps him for Stegner. She is a steadying influence on Stegner, though he is wary of relationships, especially with his employee. She seduces Jim after his fight with Dellwood Siminoe, perhaps knowingly attempting to soothe the rage she sees in him. It is during their first night together that he murders Dell. She is willing to lie for him about his alibi, but eventually seems confused about whether or not she actually knows anything incriminating.

Since the reader only sees Sofia through Jim Stegner's eyes, it is difficult to say much about who she is. She appears to have some complexity to her, but since Jim is so focused on his own internal battles, she almost could strike the reader as a one-dimensional character. However, this could also be seen as an accurate portrayal of how one sees those outside of oneself if one is fairly self-involved. He thinks she is conventionally attractive and fairly intelligent. She behaves with a loyalty that surprises him. She has an artistic nature which he approves of. She accepts him for who he is for the most part, even in the face of chaos and law enforcement pressure. As their relationship develops, Jim sees her stepping up to challenge him on his opinions of more mainstream art, and while he respects her ability to stand up to him, he feels secure in his own well-earned opinions. She is nearly 20 years his junior, and as a result their relationship is inherently somewhat lopsided in their life experience and accomplishment.

Sofia acts as a steadying or grounding influence on Jim, in a less mature or spiritual way than Irmina does. She is a supporting figure, a love interest and a basically practical person. Because she is just getting to know Jim, however, her steadiness is a surprise and not thoroughly trusted until things quiet down after Grant's killing. Just as one can never truly know the thoughts of others, the reader cannot know if Sofia totally trusts Jim or if she knows for sure about the killings; she never says anything outright or confronts Jim on the actual fact of his guilt. She seems to assume it; why she accepts him in spite of his violent behavior is unclear.

Dellwood Siminoe

Dellwood Siminoe (Dell) is a hunting outfitter, poacher and habitual horse abuser. Jim Stegner first meets Dellwood near Sulphur Creek when he and another man are abusing a horse, trying unsuccessfully to load her into a trailer. Stegner gets into a fight with Dell in defense of the horse. Later, Stegner murders him in Sulphur Creek.



Dellwood is a large man with a reputation for cruelty, and is not liked in the community. His older brother is Grant Siminoe. When the brothers were young, they were in foster care, and when separated they would run away from their placements to be together. As adults, Dell and Grant sought out and provided a home for their nephew Jason. Dell's character is revealed through Jim Stegner's eyes and through two encounters only: the horse abuse incident and the moment when he is killed by Jim. The rest of his character is revealed through the brief stories told by other community members via hearsay. He is not a sympathetic character, except through the stories of his difficult childhood and familial loyalties.

Jason

Jason—whose last name is never revealed but is probably Siminoe—meets Jim Stegner while out fishing. He is a threatening but calm character who joins with Grant Siminoe in the effort to avenge Dellwood Siminoe's murder. He stalks Stegner in a black El Camino. He tells Jim on their first meeting that Jason is "family" to the Siminoe brothers, but it is unclear whether this is a blood relationship or just friendship. In the final scene, Jason reveals that he is the son of Grant and Dellwood's long lost sister, and was eventually found and adopted by them. He feels great family loyalty to the Siminoe brothers despite their criminal behavior, and tells Stegner they always respected his choice to opt out of that lifestyle.

By the end of the novel, it is possible to see Jason as the most clearly moral of all the major characters in the book. He might be a stalker, but he never commits any violent acts and refrains many times from doing so despite his background and pressure from his uncles. He refuses to abuse animals and seeks to end it in his family business and likewise refuses to earn money by poaching or guiding poachers. Despite several opportunities, he does not avenge his uncles' deaths, and has clear reasons for why doing so would be not only immoral but emotionally bankrupt.

While Jim is no longer a "tourist" in the fishing world, he is still a privileged outsider, while Jason has been living in the backcountry most of his life and is more naturally attuned to all that it presents. Jim is primarily a painter who thinks of himself as a fisherman. Jason is an outdoorsman in all ways, and fishing is only a part of that. When Jim and Jason first meet and fish together, it is easy to interpret their act as a tense stand-in for another kind of competition. Jason perhaps wants to see who Jim really is, while Jim is trying to prove himself. While Jim spends much of the time tensely expecting violence, Jason simply seeks to fish. Jason's role might be seen as an avenging angel figure in the novel, but he manages to keep the finality of that role in check.

Willy Kesler

Willy Kesler is Jim Stegner's elk rancher neighbor. Jim calls him to help with transporting and temporarily housing the injured horse. Jim characterizes him as



"friendly, not intrusive." He is a bachelor and ten years younger than Jim. He is originally from New Hampshire and was a Harvard dropout who came to Colorado to be a builder. He wanted to be a cowboy because of reading Louis L'Amour novels. After Dellwood's murder, Willy is asked by the police what Jim was wearing after the original fight, and Willy instinctively lies for him, and doesn't tell the police about Jim's midnight drive. When Willy refuses to hand over the horse to Grant Siminoe, Grant allegedly burns down his barn.

Willy never breaks from supporting Jim even though he is most clear on Jim's guilt in Dellwood's murder. It could be because of his own run-ins with the Siminoe brothers, but it also could be a basic friendly loyalty to Jim. They are new friends, but they are only beginning to count on one another in a neighborly way.

Lauder Simms

Lauder Simms is a man who raped a twelve-year old girl and got away with it. He and Jim Stegner are drinking at the Boxcar saloon in Taos, and Lauder makes inappropriate comments to Jim about his daughter Alce, and how he wants to hire her as a projectionist in his movie theater. Jim shoots him, though he doesn't die. Jim pleads guilty and serves time for this armed assault.

Grant Siminoe

Grant Siminoe is Dellwood Siminoe's older brother, and a very large man. Like his brother, he is an outfitter, hunter, poacher and known for his violent tendencies. After Dellwood's murder, Grant and Jason stalk Jim Stegner to exact revenge. After threatening Willy Kesler and Stegner over the phone, Grant allegedly burns down Willy's barn when Willy refuses to turn over Dell's horse. A few days later, Jim Stegner shoots Grant in the head when Grant catches him camping rough, and Stegner is sure Grant intends to shoot him.

In the novel, Grant's character is only revealed through the anecdotes told by others, and the few words spoken by him are threats. He is considered by people who speak about him to be more cruel and hardened than Dellwood. His death, however, is ambiguous, because Jim was shooting into the darkness and didn't know Grant wasn't yet armed or ready to shoot him. Jim then pushed Grant's truck and body over the edge of a ravine, which is quickly found.

Irmina

Irmina is a fortune teller and healer that Jim consults when he feels troubled. She is his former lover, but now could be considered his spiritual adviser and closest friend. She is described as dark-eyed and possessing a good sense of humor. She is the one whose advice led Jim to buy the house near Paonia in an effort to get some peace in his life. They have reciprocated support in the past: when Irmina had cancer he took care of



her, and after Alce's murder she took care of Jim. After Grant's killing, Jim hides his gun on her property.

Detective Craig Gaskill

Craig Gaskill is a Delta County sheriff's detective that is investigating Dellwood Siminoe's murder. Jim calls him "Sport" because of the way he dresses. Gaskill pursues his detective work diligently, and surprises Jim with his intelligence. He could be considered the "bad cop" of the two detectives in contact with Jim, because he is more aggressive and doesn't seem to like Jim. Unlike Detective Hinchman, he doesn't attempt to appeal to Jim's better nature.

Celia Anson

Celia Anson is the young widow of a wealthy Santa Fe art gallery owner and a bit of an outsider in the art community. It is rumored that her husband had a stroke and subsequently died because he caught her cheating on him. She is fond of Jim Stegner and admires his art, and Jim is kind to her because he is sympathetic to her outsider status.

Bob Reid

Bob Reid owns the gas station in Paonia, a place where old timers like to stop and chat. It is a family business with his father and son. Jim met Bob on his third day in town and they bonded a bit over fishing. Bob recommended a fishing spot off the beaten path on Sulphur Creek, a place that becomes Jim's favorite and the site of Dellwood Siminoe's murder. He is described as short, strong, good-humored and in his mid-forties. After Dellwood's murder, Bob backs away from his friendship with Jim, but they reconcile later.

Detective John Hinchman

Detective John Hinchman is a Santa Fe police detective. He is a fat and cheerful man who Jim calls "Wheezy," because it appears he might drop dead at any moment. He tells Jim he admires his art and attempts to persuade Jim to turn himself in by telling him it will be in his best interest. Despite his apparently friendliness, he also doesn't pull any punches about telling Jim about his daughter's murder and what he thinks about Jim's actions.

Alce

Alce is Jim's daughter, who died in a drug buy and robbery gone wrong when she was fifteen. Jim spends much of the novel dealing with his grief and regrets over his



daughter's death, going over and over the ways he might have been a better father to her. She doesn't appear in the novel except in Jim's memories and as he imagines her and talks to her in his mind's eye. After Dell's murder, Jim believes she appears to him in the shape of a white owl.

Cristine

Cristine is Jim's first wife. She does not appear in the novel except in Jim's memories of her. She left him after Alce's murder.

Maggie

Maggie is Jim's second wife. She and Jim were married for only a year and a half. Jim now realizes he never truly loved her and feels bad about that fact. She does not appear in the novel except in Jim's memories.

The Pantela Family

Pim Pantela is a wealthy Santa Fe businessman and fan of Jim Stegner's art. He commissions Jim to paint a portrait of his twin daughters Celine and Julie. He has a French-Canadian wife named Julia.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Stegner Killer

The Stegner Killer is Jim's distinctively original fly, which is made with orange baling twine. People notice it on his cap and fishing vest, and he is proud of its creation. After Dell's murder, one of them is found at the scene of the crime. As a symbol, its name is representatively ironic: it is a killer of fish and its creator is a killer of men.

Horses

Jim's attempt to save an abused mare is the precipitating event of the novel, which leads to Jim's first fight and subsequent murder of Dellwood Siminoe. She is an innocent victim, which Detective Hinchman for one equates to the innocence of Jim's murdered daughter Alce. While animal abuse is certainly a horrible crime, Jim's leap to murdering Dellwood in the creek in the middle of the night would appear rather extreme unless one connects the crime to his guilt over Alce's murder.

Horses also appear in two of Jim's paintings during the novel: "Road Home" and "Horse and Crow." "Road Home" portrays a male and female horse carrying a dead girl on their backs without effort. It is never clarified who the two horses represent—perhaps they are Jim and his wife or Irmina or Sofia. Or the mare could simply be the rescued horse herself (recovered from her abuse) while the strong male horse beside her represents Jim. Together they are bringing Alce home to safety. It could be seen as representing Jim's wishes from the past, or as a sort of exorcism of present grief, a redemption.

"Horse and Crow" depicts a horse on a cliff being talked to by a crow. At first Jim thinks the horse is being told not to jump, but later he believes the crow is like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, telling the horse about the concept of choice. Jim prefers to believe he lives in an animal-like state where life simply moves him along, and he may identify with the horse and its introduction to the concept of choice. As he grows, he can no longer pretend he doesn't have a choice to commit violence to himself or others.

Paintings

Paintings make up the symbolic spine of the novel. Several sections of the novel begin with basic catalog descriptions of Jim Stegner's paintings, all but one of which are described in detail in the course of the novel. They present a window into the deepest parts of Jim's psyche, a mystical window that even sometimes surprises the artist himself. The narrator later expresses the insight that the whole of them during the course of the novel are "prayers."

The novel begins with a basic description of the only painting that is never fully described: "Mayhem," which is in the collection of the artist. It is through the course of



the novel that the reader is left to imagine what it might look like, but certainly it is a representation of all that the novel encompasses, possibly painted long after the events therein.

The first painting described at the time of its creation is "An Ocean of Women," which Jim paints with Sofia as his model. Its title comes from a bit of insight by Irmina, that Jim can't avoid his life and his troubles by swimming in "an ocean of women," losing himself in his sexuality. It depicts Sofia swimming with fish around her, a menacing shark, and Jim too swimming with his fishing rod.

"The Digger" is painted after Jim's rescue of the abused horse and his fight with Dell. It depicts a man digging a grave, and is the first painting he attempts to hide from Sofia and others. Because it was painted before Dell's murder and his guilty behavior in hiding it, it could be presumed to expose Jim's intent, though he doesn't admit this thought even to himself.

The next two paintings, "Road" and "Road Home" appear to depict the dead Alce, first as a dead girl lost and abandoned and the next as her being brought home by two horses.

"Just Before Fishing" is the first time Jim paints outside, depicting a beautiful creek scene with fish jumping. He immediately gives the painting to Jason, possibly in an attempt to gain the upper hand in a tense situation, or possibly in an attempt at restitution for Dell's murder.

Jim next paints "In Hostile Country" at Hobbitville in a "frenzy." He immediately sees that it depicts the two Siminoe brothers, Dellwood and Grant, working their way along a difficult trail. It is only later he finds that it is an aptly symbolic version of Dell and Grant's lives, in which they had to make their way alone from a young age.

Jim's interpretation of his next painting changes over time. He originally thinks "Horse and Crow" shows a horse on a cliff covered in blue and red fish with a crow watching him, telling the horse not to jump. Later he thinks the crow might be more like the serpent in Genesis, giving the horse the idea of "choice." After the incident with Celia and her ex, He looks at his painting again and feels like it has changed in his absence, and that now the crow is telling the horse about Pegasus while the horse is listening intently.

"Sisters" is the portrait Jim is commissioned to paint for the Pantela family. He enters this assignment reluctantly, but makes it his own via an unorthodox approach. Though the girls' family expects a traditional portrait sitting, he doesn't paint it in their presence at all. Instead he comes to meet them at their home and gives them candy necklaces which stain their faces and clothes with bright colors. He spends two full days painting the portrait of the girls—much longer than he typically takes on a painting—painting the background first as if to make a safe world for them. Then he paints the girls, smeared with colors. He puts a chicken on Celine's head and on Julie's a nest of wildly colored



baby blackbirds with their mother. The painting brings out the most whimsical nature of childhood and is accepted enthusiastically by the family.

Then Jim paints "Two Boats," which he later keeps rather than turning it over to his art dealer. It depicts a cold ocean with a boat adrift, with a funeral pyre burning inside it. A second boat is far away near the horizon with smoke rising from it as well, circled by birds. It too appears to show an interpretation of Dell and Grant Siminoe's deaths.

"My Lover is a Train" and "Not Too Scary" are a return to Jim's less serious paintings, the first symbolizing the meeting of Sofia and Steve, the second that of a scarecrow.

Stegner's most important painting symbolically would be "Brothers," a counterpoint to "Sisters." In "Sisters," the girls live a life of safety and privilege and happiness, with the silliness of birds upon their heads. "Brothers" depicts Dellwood and Grant Siminoe in a more rurally prickly kitchen background, Dell with a model ship in a bottle on his head and Grant with three crosses and a dead albatross.

The other paintings described in the novel include the one painting Sofia paints of Jim she calls "Backstroke," in which he swims with a family of otters on his belly. The rest are famous paintings Jim has seen in museums. The first is Winslow Homer's "The Fog Warning," which makes Jim decide to be a painter. He sees it two weeks after his mother's funeral. To him, the fog represented both oblivion and respite, a place he needed in his grief after the loss of both his parents.

Pablo Picasso's "Nude Woman in a Red Chair" and Paul Devaux's "Sleeping Venus" are described as two counterpoints between paths Jim might go down as a painter. Devaux's "Sleeping Venus" depicts a sleeping or possibly dead woman in a surreal and grim war-scarred landscape and the other is of Picasso's young lover. The second painting depicts the path of life and positivity for Jim and the other depicts death. He resolves when he sees them to take the path of life in his art career.

Fish and Fishing

The novel's writing gets the most lovingly detailed when describing fishing. It is clear that while Jim Stegner is a painter by vocation, his avocation of fishing is his true love. He obsesses over places to do it and can't wait to get there when he resolves to go. In his mind, it might be said that it is the only time he is truly at peace and happy. His best memories are fishing with his daughter Alce. He thinks of himself often as a fish, down in the dark water, or being swept along by river water. He often thinks he can think like a fish, or be a fish. When he imagines other people, like Dell, he often envisions them as fish or as his quarry as a fisherman. When he gets in the altercation with Dell over the horse, he is on his way fishing on Sulphur Creek. When he kills Dell, he uses the excuse of fishing to get him there, even so far as believing his encounter with Dell is incidental to fishing. He first meets Jason while intending to go fishing after painting, and it is because of fishing that he loses track of where Jason is. When he kills Grant, it is significant that he is high and dry, nowhere near a fishing hole.



The novel is called *The Painter* rather than *The Fisherman*, since being called a fisherman implies that this is how one earns one's living. Jim might consider himself a fisherman, but to the world of true fishermen he is just a hobbyist. It is, however, where he thinks he is most himself. However, his paintings are what reveals him most. Fishing is, rather, where he hides himself. Where he escapes to. In painting, he can escape nothing, not his darkest thoughts or prayers.

Birds

Birds appear frequently in the novel. When Jim is mentally recovering from the fight with Dell and talking to Sofia, they watch a hawk and some birds for a long while. Directly afterwards, they make love for the first time. The painting he makes that day, "The Digger," features buzzards looking on, birds that appear later in "The Road."

Jim has been credited for creating a type of regional kitsch, and once he painted his art dealer Steve's pristine gallery desk in blackbirds, which Steve promptly has removed despite its increase in artistic value. Jim has been known for featuring a chicken in his paintings previously, but during the course of the novel, they tend to be darker birds, birds that in many cultures might be seen as harbingers of death. He paints a crow that could be tempting a horse, and in "Two Boats," the birds appear to be feasting on dead bodies. In "Brothers," Grant has three crosses and a dead albatross on his head.

In the real life action of the novel, Grant's body is found because of the buzzards, something Jim neglected to foresee. After Dell's murder, he sees a white owl that he interprets as being Alce, though he isn't sure what her appearance might mean.

Pete Doerr's Poetry Library

Pete Doerr, the former owner of Stegner's house, has left his library of poetry books behind. Doerr favored Pablo Neruda and Rainer Maria Rilke (though in the book, Rilke's full name is never mentioned). Jim Stegner identifies strongly with Rilke's poems, and both his and T.S. Eliot's poems are quoted every now and then in the novel. Jim uses the quotations as a sort of portable oracle when he's questioning his path, a substitute for the wisdom of Irmina in her absence.

His identification with Rilke is illustrated with: "As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,/ the movement of his powerful soft strides/ is like a ritual dance around a center/ in which a might will stands paralyzed..." This quotation is meant to illustrate the way the narrator feels, how he can't escape his nature.

After the fight with Dell, *The Four Quartets*, by T.S. Eliot is quoted: "Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future,/ And time future contained in time past./ If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable." He questions this interpretation of Time in light of his tragic past.



He copies down and sticks fragments from *The Four Quartets* into the front pocket of his jacket and takes them out to read at random times. In particular, this phrase appears twice in the novel: "You are not here to verify,/ Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity/ Or carry report. You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid." He reads this one to Sofia the first day they spend together as lovers. Later, he pulls this one out again after Grant's death and his meeting with Irmina, thinking that his paintings had become prayers.

When Jim goes to Santa Fe to do the portrait, he brings two poetry books with him: "Two Hundred More Poems from the Chinese" and Rilke's *Eighth Elegy*. He particularly loves a poem by Chen Bo, from the eighth century: "On the snowy mountain/ even the crows are silent./ My horse shakes his bridle./ Where are the songs/ you and I used to sing/ in the hillside garden?" This poem might reference his past, how he feels connected to Santa Fe as a place he can no longer return to.

In Santa Fe, as Sofia and he continue to get to know one another and discuss art, he shares Rilke's *Eighth Elegy* with Sofia: "The creature gazes into openness with all its eyes.../Free from death./We alone see that: the free creature/ has its progress always behind it,/ and God before it, and when it moves, it moves/ in eternity, as streams do." He is attempting to use this to explain what he thinks the painting "Horse and Crow" means.

The Black El Camino

After Jim Stegner's first encounter with Jason, he sees Jason following him periodically in his black El Camino. After painting "In Hostile Country," he sees it where's he's parked. After Grant's killing, Jason follows him in the El Camino, and Jim thinks of it as being Death following him, being pulled behind him "like a carcass." They end up in a high speed chase, which ends when Jim and his truck are stuck in the middle of a creek. When a flash flood comes, Jim warns Jason and Jason rides out the flood by getting inside the car. Jim sees the El Camino again after his solitary retreat at the Buddhist stupa. Significantly, it does not appear in Jim's final encounter with Jason. Rather, Jason hikes in to where Jim is fishing.

Water

Water appears as a symbolic and literal entity throughout the novel. It is where Jim is most at home, and where he swims in "an Ocean of Women." He fishes in it, and it is where he kills Dell. He began his life in water as a surfer, where he acquired the nickname "Knotty," because of the way he allowed the waves to throw him about. The famous painting that first inspires him to become a painter is Winslow Homer's "The Fog Warning," which depicts a fisherman in a dangerous sea. He frequently depicts water in his paintings, most tellingly in "Two Boats," which depict the funerals of Dell and Grant. All the times he meets Jason face to face it is involving water: first by painting a creek



and then fishing together, second by escaping a flash flood, and last when Jason holds Jim at gunpoint in Sulphur Creek.

The Rucksack

Jim Stegner's rucksack is where he keeps his sleeping gear, a minor version of a "go bag," which he keeps in his truck and ready to go for overnight fishing expeditions. When he sleeps rough on the night when Grant catches up with him, he uses it as a shield on his way down the hill, but accidentally leaves it behind at the scene of Grant's killing after cleaning up any other evidence of his presence. When he realizes he's lost it, he knows immediately where it is, and goes with the police on a pretext to hide it from their search area. When he gets there, he finds it missing. He only gets it back when he encounters Jason in their final showdown, evidence that Jason uses to prove that his stalking was never about the law, but rather the ethics of family loyalty and revenge.

Bourbon

Jim Stegner, the main character, has been sober for nearly three years. His drink of choice is bourbon, Jim Beam in particular. He is drinking Jim Beam when he shoots Lauder Simms. He tastes the phantom flavor of bourbon in his mouth at crucial moments in the novel when he feels most stressed and questioning his decisions. He craves bourbon when things are at their worst. At Pim Pantela's party, he accidentally drinks half a bourbon, which causes him to panic. Sofia calms him and reassures him that it was an accident and he needn't feel he's broken his sobriety.



Settings

The Painter's House

The Painter's house is small, three miles south of a small town in western Colorado called Paonia. The house, or cottage, lies on forty acres of wheatgrass and sage, has a ditch with cottonwoods and willows and a small pond with a dock. The back fence of the property is up against the West Elk Mountains, near the wilderness. The house was sold to Jim Stegner by a poet named Pete Doerr, who has left him his library of poetry books. It is off the grid with solar electric and no land line telephone. Paonia itself has a hardware store, two cafés, a pizza shop, a Mexican restaurant, an ice cream parlor and a barber. It's half a mile off the county highway.

Jim has bought the house in an effort to find peace after the death of his daughter Alce.

Sulphur Creek

Sulphur Creek is where Jim most likes to go fishing, a stretch of which he frequents. It is also where Jim kills Dellwood Siminoe in the night. Jason ambushes Jim there in their final encounter. While there are many places named Sulphur Creek, it is symbolic that this is the location of Jim's greatest sin and also his redemption by Jason. (Sulphur is often associated with the Christian Hell and the smell of the Devil.)

The Stephen Lily Gallery

The Stephen Lily Gallery in Santa Fe is where Jim Stegner's paintings are sold by his art dealer Steve. It is located in a strip of other art galleries, and Jim makes a point of mocking art's seriousness there by mandating bubble gum cigars be on offer next to his highly priced work.

Hobbitville

Hobbitville is a trail off a logging road on the backside of Lake Peak near Santa Fe. Jim Stegner calls it this name because the area is full of crudely built shelters made out of wood, some ruined and some freshly made. Stegner thinks the place is somewhat creepy and full of weird vibrations. Stegner paints "In Hostile Country" there.

Ten Thousand Waves Spa

Ten Thousand Waves spa and hot spring is a Japanese style relaxation and meditation retreat in Santa Fe favored by local artists. Jim likes going there, and used to go with his wife Cristine. Together they called it the Ten Thousand Steps because of the long stone

path to get to it from the parking lot. Jim returns there twice during the course of the novel, once to find some peace after the killings and once with Sofia.



Themes and Motifs

Nature as Refuge

Throughout the novel, the protagonist and narrator Jim Stegner is attempting to find peace within himself and his world, which he sees clearly can be found in Nature. He has become a fisherman in part because water - and being immersed in it - is where he can lose himself in his surroundings and feels most alive. He meditates on Nature while he thinks and his best paintings depict the natural world. In his new home, he can do so by simply walking out onto the porch to have a smoke, which he does frequently.

Since he was a young man, Stegner as "Knotty" the surfer kid has been willing to throw himself into the natural world and let it have its way with him. When he thinks of his daughter, it isn't in Santa Fe, but rather in the river or in the figure of an owl or in a herd of elk. When he wants to get his mind clear, it becomes urgent that he go fishing, not so much to catch fish but to be immersed in the river. He has become in tune with the weather and sky and birds.

Jim's daughter loses her life when she loses her connection not just to her father, but to Nature itself, having mostly quit fishing in her teen years. When he needs to talk about her death, he takes Irmina to the shores of a creek where he can let go of his grief. When he is trying to shake his stalkers, he goes to natural places to hide, whether Hobbitville or a random road or the Buddhist stupa. It would be unthinkable to him to lock himself in his house.

Premature Death

Jim Stegner is made an orphan in his teen years when his father dies in a logging accident on the job and his mother ends up killing herself in a drunk driving accident. Dellwood and Grant Siminoe, too, lose their parents early. The Siminoe brothers then are taken out of their lives prematurely by Jim Stegner's hand. Alce, Stegner's daughter, is murdered at the age of just fifteen during a drug buy robbery. Jason's mother dies early, which causes him to be put into foster care and eventually adopted by the Siminoes. It is only by restraint that Jim Stegner's death is withheld by Jason, forcing Jim to face his criminal acts and change the course of his life.

All of these deaths are unusual in the normal course of a life, but reach a sort of symmetry in the novel. Jim Stegner and his victims Grant and Dellwood are suffering in the aftermath of the deaths of their parents and then visit this grief upon others or have it pushed onto them. All of this death washes away in the creek in the end, with Jim holding responsibility for making good. He loses his fishing rod, the one he fished with when he fished with his murdered daughter. In its place, he must move on from all this death and change.



Art as Truth

Jim Stegner's philosophy of Art is that the only good art is the kind that gets under into the real sense of something. To him, true art needs honesty, but it needs more than that—it has to be getting at the truth of the things it is depicting. Not just a surface painting of reality, but the undercarriage of that reality. Most art that people buy is decor, something to match the drapes or remind people of where they've traveled to. But for Jim, it has to mean something deeper than that, almost unbeknownst to both the artist and the subject. The antithesis of his art is the "blue coyote paintings"—the tourist art that sells everywhere in thousands of copies all over the Southwest.

Jim doesn't see himself as part of the art establishment, and he isn't, in part because of his background but also because he refuses to make "tourist art." He is lucky that his art demands high prices, but it is as a result of years of education and development that he is able to channel his deepest self into his art. He makes fun of the art establishment with his whimsy, made physical by the bubble gum cigars he offers in the gallery.

More fundamentally, Jim's paintings are his inner truth, whether he wants to show it or not. "An Ocean of Women" is painting the truth of how he feels just as much as "The Digger," which foreshadows his murder of Dellwood Siminoe. Later, his paintings of the Siminoe brothers show truth he doesn't even consciously know, somehow being aware that they have traveled "In Hostile Country" their whole entire lives. While Jim never confesses his murders to the detectives looking to arrest him, he can't help but show them the truth within his paintings, sometimes even feeling violated by them.

Violence and Peace

Throughout the novel, Jim Stegner is dealing with violence and attempting a journey to peace. He has a tendency to respond by "charging in like a bull" to insult or injustice. When Lauder Simms makes insinuating comments about Jim's young daughter, Jim responds with overwhelming violence, shooting the man in a knee jerk fashion right there in the bar. He is afraid that his daughter might not have been murdered if she hadn't fought back against being robbed. When a horse is abused, his answer is to charge and fight the man who is committing the crime. Later, Jim kills him. When the brother of the murdered man comes to find him, Jim also kills the brother without waiting to be clear about the man's intentions. When Celia Anson's ex-boyfriend stalks her, Jim knocks the man out.

These are all overwhelmingly violent reactions to injustice, but also unnecessary and cause consequences that are unforeseen in the heat of the moment. While Jim is supposedly seeking peace by moving to Paonia, he falls pretty hard in the face of his first encounter with injustice—the abuse of the horse. Calling the police or intervening another way might have been other paths, but Jim doesn't even consider these possible ways of dealing. He doesn't seem to try very hard at all to restrain himself from killing Dellwood, and while he feels some remorse for killing him and Grant, he still justifies it



to himself as if he can't help what comes over him. He treats his violence as a sort of inevitability.

It is only through Jim's paintings that he can be honest about the consequences of his violent nature. While he claims to find peace in fishing, it is while fishing that he murders Dell, quite a contradiction. In fact, he achieves a sort of zen mindlessness while fishing, and in that blank space, he commits an act of almost robotic violence. So to find the true peace to be found in nature, while fishing and spread it to the rest of his life is a goal he only begins to see a path toward in the novel. Jason gives him the chance to pursue it for real in their final confrontation, when Jason refrains from violence and releases Jim to life.

Life as a River

Jim Stegner's view of life is repeated throughout the novel, and can be characterized as the idea that "Life is a River." He feels moved along this river without a sense of control, not over his violent nature, nor over the losses he has experienced in life. He disagrees with T.S. Eliot's view of Time as if it is all present in every moment, rather thinking of it all as things moving down and away from you without cease, always moving people away from one another. His daughter moves away down the river after her death, unreachable.

Just before killing Dell, Jim thinks of himself as casting through "time past and time present," but he is moving upstream, against the current, against a more peaceful nature, and toward murder. He refuses to be captured by the river and move along it, pretending it is inevitable, but almost refusing to think that it isn't.

So many of the novel's important moments occur on a river or creek: Dell's murder, dealing with his grief with Irmina, his last fishing trip with his daughter, his three meetings with Jason. These are all important moments in Jim's life, and most of them occur with him literally immersed in the water.

When the flash flood catches Jim and Jason unawares, it is as if the river is intervening in a showdown. The characters are not ready emotionally for what they must do. Jason is ready to kill, and Jim is not ready for full remorse. Afterwards, he thinks of himself or his soul as if it is a "tattered leaf" from a streamside tree being whipped down the river. He realizes that what he's done or not done in his life was natural and without malice, and he loved his daughter the best way he knew how. But he still is not willing to accept his agency in acts of deliberate violence, or even to see them as deliberate. It is only later that he begins to take control over his direction in life.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written in first person limited, in the present tense with some flashbacks. As the narrator, Jim Stegner's thoughts are all the reader sees, and as such, the reader must take into account his own dishonesty with himself about his actions. The narrator appears not to sometimes be aware of his own intentions or lack of control, making excuses for what he does. In this, the author depicts accurately the ways people deny themselves full agency and deny responsibility. In the beginning of the novel, the reader seldom even sees the narrator's name, but, rather, see him as "the Painter" or "the Fisherman." It is only in contact with others that his name becomes known. His view of others is filtered through the character's self-concept, privilege and gender, and insights on the emotions of experience of others is therefore somewhat limited. To Jim Stegner, a lot of what goes on in other's internal lives remains a mystery. He is, however, a man of experience and as a middle-aged man he can appear to know quite a bit about others' intents and he often tries to get ahead of them intellectually as a result. Like most people, however, he isn't ever really quite as smart as he thinks he is.

Language and Meaning

The author writes with fragmentary sentences, sometimes ungrammatically, to show thoughtful hesitation or pauses. In this way the language reflects how the narrator's mind works, how he thinks. The language becomes most poetic and detailed in descriptions of natural scenes, showing how the narrator's mind slows down and takes in these places and the feelings associated with them. Details of daily life are not depicted, but rather it is the language of thought, flitting from the present to the past with associations as they come. The novel is located in the American Southwest, and therefore some language reflects that location and culture—a porch is a "ramada" and a ditch is an "arroyo," for instance.

Structure

The novel is not organized in a standard way, encompassing three Books. The first Book has two chapters divided into two-three sections. The second Book has no chapters, but rather is divided into six sections. The third Book has seven chapters with no subdivisions. The time encompassed in this novel is over a few months in the present day of the novel's publication, the early 21st century. In lieu of chapter titles, some sections of the novel begin with a catalog description of a fictional painting, which in the subsequent sections will be painted and described by the narrator. These painting descriptions are the most important structural markers in the novel rather than the chapter or book divisions, delineating a new place in the narrator's thoughts and experiences.



Quotes

I never imagined I would shoot a man. Or be a father. Or live so far from the sea.
-- Narrator Jim Stegner (Book One paragraph 1)

Importance: This is the first sentence of the novel. It references the three main aspects of Jim Stegner's life: his violent nature, the loss of his teenage daughter, and his affinity for water. He shot Lauder Simms to defend his daughter, his daughter is murdered and out of his reach, and he left a life of surfing for a life of fishing inland rivers and streams. The first would be his chief flaw (his violent impulses), the second his greatest loss, and the last where he feels most at home and at peace.

Somewhere in there among the ocean of women and the darting fish and a man happily lost at sea I hear wind over water and a heart breaking like crockery and the bleating roar of a retreating dinosaur.
-- Narrator Jim Stegner (Book One: Ch. 1: Pt. I paragraph 71)

Importance: Jim Stegner has been drowning his sorrows throughout his life but especially after the his first divorce and the death of his daughter in an "ocean of women." Irmina, the woman he seeks out for wisdom, has warned him that this is not going to work for him long-term. The first painting Jim completes during the novel is titled "An Ocean of Women."

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,/ the movement of his powerful soft strides/ is like a ritual dance around a center/ in which a mighty will stands paralyzed...
-- Rainer Maria Rilke (Book One: Ch. 1: Pt II paragraph 4)

Importance: The painter has been left a library of poetry books by the former owner of his house. He identifies heavily with Rainer Maria Rilke's poems, and while some other poems of Rilke and T.S. Eliot are quoted in the book, sprinkled throughout, this is the first. Jim identifies with this poetry fragment because he, too, feels paralyzed and stuck in cramped circles after the death of his daughter.

Always graceful. Moved like an animal I thought. Moving upstream away from me to fish ahead, the next bend. Moving upstream, away, away. You went around the turn of the gravel bar looked back once, raised your chin. And gone. Gone. Alce.
-- Jim Stegner, the Narrator (Book One: Ch. 1: Pt. II paragraph 66)

Importance: This quote is about the narrator's dead daughter Alce, who was also a fisherman and as she reached her adolescence, moving away from him. He sees her in his thoughts and speaks to her often, especially when fishing.

My daughter was not gone, not completely ever. Nor Cristine, her mother. We were held somehow in our circle and would be always. The river flowed around us.
-- Jim Stegner (Book Two: Ch. 2: Pt II paragraph 35)



Importance: This quote is in counterpoint to a poetry fragment by T.S. Eliot that talks about Time. The narrator does not feel that his murdered daughter could ever be gone into the mists of time, but rather he and his ex-wife and she were held together in the river of life, never able to move on.

Like me, I thought. Idling, barely able to breathe. And then a wriggle and slip against my palm and he was gone, lost among the green shadows of the stones and I said Thanks. Thanks for letting me live another evening.

-- Jim Stegner (Book Two: Ch. 2: Pt. II paragraph 96)

Importance: Jim Stegner often compares himself to a fish, and after the murder of Dellwood Siminoe, compares himself to a fish caught and released again.

Not too late. I could. I stayed. I watched until I was sure the only movement was the back and forth rocking of the pulsing current.

-- Jim Stegner (Book One: Ch. 2: Pt. III paragraph 120)

Importance: Jim has just bashed Dell Siminoe in the head in the creek, and has the ability to save him from drowning, but refuses to do so, instead choosing to watch him die.

The first impulse on seeing the painting was to laugh, but at the same time a queasy feeling rose out of the depths, rose with the big sharks, swimming up to the surface: a tinge of fear: would the man make it?

-- Jim Stegner (Book Two: Pt. I paragraph 107)

Importance: Jim looks at "An Ocean of Women" through the eyes of the two detectives who are looking for Dellwood Siminoe's murderer. He is the figure in the painting, and now he wonders if he will not drown in the face of the criminal investigation.

Do you leave a wake?

-- Jim Stegner (Book Two: Pt. IV paragraph 7)

Importance: Jim wonders after he kills Dellwood Siminoe what kind of wake he leaves behind him—how he influences the world. He has killed a man and now has left death in his wake. He feels guilty about how he treated his daughter, feeling that his actions led to her death.

It was everything wrong with the art world, with the whole goddamn society for that matter, exposed in a raw scream.

-- Jim Stegner (Book Three: Ch. 1 paragraph 21)

Importance: When Jim Stegner is interviewed on live radio, he crushes the interviewer's hand and causes him to scream. This scream goes viral and Jim becomes a hero in the world that finds mainstream art criticism and discussion to be going in the wrong direction.



They were close in age and they had been traveling like this their whole lives. They were Dellwood and Grant for certain. Twisted and hunched and making their way together in a hostile country.

-- Jim Stegner (Book Three: Ch. 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: Jim Stegner paints "In Hostile Country," which depicts Dellwood and Grant Siminoe as brothers struggling against a difficult world that is stacked against them. He later finds out that his painting was intuitively correct, and that they had been orphaned from an early age and left to fight to stay together in foster care.

It can eat at a man. The stuff we do. Secrets make you sick, isn't that what we say?

-- Detective John Hinchman (Book Three: Ch. 2 paragraph 86)

Importance: Detective Hinchman, also known as "Wheezy," attempts to persuade Jim to turn himself in for the good of his soul, reminding him that secrets will hurt him in the end.