

Reservation Blues Study Guide

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Plot Summary

The novel *Reservation Blues* tells the story of several Native Americans who start a band on an Indian Reservation near Spokane Washington. The band encounters many allies and adversaries along the way, but sometimes it is difficult to tell who genuinely wants to help the band and who wants to take something from them.

The story begins when Robert Johnson arrives at the Spokane Indian Reservation. Considered one of the greatest of blues players, Robert Johnson was believed by many to have sold his soul to Satan in exchange for his phenomenal skill at playing guitar. He arrives on the Spokane reservation in search of Big Mom, a woman he believes can help him escape his deal with the devil. Thomas Builds-the-Fire is the first reservation resident to speak to Johnson and when Thomas gives Johnson a ride near Big Mom's house, Johnson intentionally leaves his guitar behind in Thomas's van. After a conversation with the supernatural guitar, Thomas decides to invite two bullies to join him in forming a band.

Victor and Junior have been friends all their life and for as long as they can remember, they have enjoyed picking on Thomas. Nevertheless, Thomas asks Victor to become the lead guitarist and Junior to become the drummer. Thomas will play bass guitar and perform vocals. Because of scant prospects for employment on the reservation, Victor and Junior agree. Thomas gives Victor Robert Johnson's guitar and soon Victor is a guitar master like no one has ever heard before.

The trio practices on the Spokane Indian Reservation and they begin to attract a following. Soon they receive invitations to play at bars outside the Spokane Reservation and at one performance on the Flathead Indian Reservation, they meet two Native American sisters who join the band. Soon the band named Coyote Springs begins to attract a great deal of attention, but some of the characters they meet do not necessarily have the band's best interests in mind. Two white women who own a bookstore in Seattle and have stereotypical views of Native Americans follow the band and attract the interest of Victor and Junior. These two women happen to have the same names as some famous comic book characters. The recording executives that the band encounters seem to be three of the same generals who led nineteenth century military campaigns against Native Americans, and their company is named Cavalry Records.

Reservation Blues is more than merely a comical story of several young Native Americans who want to start a band. It is also the story of how modern day Native Americans continue to face hardships and the peculiar sense of humor that comes from enduring a tough life. Whether it is facing the high rates of alcoholism on the reservation, the stereotypes and prejudice of non-Native Americans, or trying to survive on substandard government-supplied food, the characters of the novel retain a dark and fatalistic sense of humor.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Reservation Blues is the story of a few Native Americans in the northwestern United States who start a band. In their quest to achieve fame, these Native Americans encounter a cast of colorful characters, from Big Mom who may have taught all the legendary musical greats to recording executives who may be U.S. Cavalry generals who led raids and massacres on the Native Americans of the late nineteenth century. The adventure begins one day when legendary blues performer Robert Johnson appears on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

A black man carrying a guitar arrives on the Spokane Indian reservation and walks to an intersection and waits. Thomas Builds-the-Fire arrives in his van and asks if the man is lost. The man answers that he has been lost for a long time. Thomas introduces himself and offers to shake the man's hand. The man says that he will not shake hands because The Gentleman might hear, but he introduces himself as Robert Johnson. Johnson says he has come to the reservation in search of a particular woman. He says he made a bad deal years ago, and he needs the woman's help to get rid of his sickness.

Thomas offers to take Johnson to his home. Johnson says he is tired. He has been walking from crossroads to crossroads in search of the woman he sees in his dreams. Johnson says he has been running from The Gentleman ever since Johnson faked his death in 1938. Thomas says that the woman Johnson describes sounds like Big Mom, and Johnson asks Thomas to take him to Big Mom, but Thomas says that only special people get to go. A person must be invited. Johnson says that he is sure that he is invited, and he gets into Thomas's van. Johnson says that he sold his soul to The Gentleman, and he hopes Big Mom can help him get it back. When the van reaches the base of the mountain where Big Mom lives, the engine dies, and Thomas says that Johnson will have to walk the rest of the way. Johnson gets out and begins walking, but he leaves his guitar.

One hundred and thirty-four years before Johnson's arrival, Big Mom hears the horses scream. Even in the present year of 1992, she still hears and sees the cavalry massacre of the Indian's horses. The horses periodically reappear along with the emergence of new musical artists. Big Mom has seen seven generations come and go, and in the present she sees the arrival of Robert Johnson.

Thomas takes the guitar with him everywhere. Victor and Joseph, two local bullies, arrive. Victor and Joseph have always bullied Thomas. They ask the name of the guitar, and then Victor chokes Thomas when he will not tell. They make a bet. If Thomas cannot play a song, then Thomas will have to forever stop telling stories. Thomas tells and re-tells stories. It is a compulsion, and it often tests the other reservation residents' patience. Thomas agrees to the challenge, but before Victor returns the guitar to



Thomas he smashes it. Despite the guitar being broken, Thomas somehow manages to play a song. Victor and Junior leave.

Thomas cries over the broken guitar and then he takes the pieces of the guitar and gets into his van. He notices that his fingers are cut from having played the guitar.

As Junior drives the water truck, Victor sleeps and has nightmares. Junior thinks that dreams are visions with messages. When Victor awakes, he wants Junior to abandon work and go to a bar. Junior says he still has five more deliveries before he can go to a bar.

During the night, Robert Johnson's guitar fixes itself. Thomas had planned to burn the guitar, believing it was not fixable. The guitar speaks to Thomas, and the two talk while Thomas eats salmon. The guitar plays the same song for hours, and the guitar tells Thomas that Victor and Junior can also hear. Victor and Junior are far away sleeping in the truck after a night of drinking. The guitar tells Thomas that Victor and Junior will be coming soon. It also says that Thomas must start a band with Victor and Junior.

Victor and Junior sleep in the truck. Junior dreams of his dead parents, and Victor dreams of his stepfather. They wake to the sound of Robert Johnson's guitar. Victor and Junior look outside the truck for Thomas, and they are surprised to discover that he is not there. They drive to Thomas's house.

The guitar asks Thomas to tell a story while they wait for Victor and Junior, and Thomas tells the story of Benjamin Pond and Turtle Lake.

Victor and Junior arrive and Thomas says that he wants to start a band. Junior immediately agrees, but Victor hesitates. Thomas gives Robert Johnson's guitar to Victor. Though Victor has never played guitar, he immediately knows how to play Robert Johnson's guitar. Junior will be the drummer, and Thomas will play bass and sing.

Chapter 1 Analysis

All of the chapters of the novel begin with song lyrics. The publication page of the novel gives credit for some of the song lyrics to Robert Johnson, and some other songs are attributed to a real band called Coyote Springs.

Early on, the plot of the novel draws on the legend of Robert Johnson. Johnson was a blues player during the 1930s, and his talent was so amazing that the only way some people could explain it was by believing that Johnson had traded his soul for his guitar talent. Johnson died in 1938 from poisoning.

The character Big Mom seems to be immortal. If she witnessed events in the nineteenth century and is still alive to witness events over a hundred years later, she is not a typical Indian woman. It also seems that Big Mom has had something to do with the emergence of some of the most famous musicians in American history.



The relationship between Thomas and his tormentors Victor and Junior is familiar and conditioned over time. Clearly these men have known each other since childhood and they continue to act the same way toward each other as they did as children. Victor and Junior are the oppressors, and Thomas is the passive victim. This dynamic makes it all the more interesting that Thomas, on the advice of the guitar, chooses Victor and Junior to help him form a band.

This opening chapter also reveals another important element of the novel, the supernatural. Robert Johnson's guitar is no ordinary piece of wood with strings. The guitar has supernatural powers and is able to exert control or at least influence over people. The guitar is perhaps the agent of a more malevolent force.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Thomas, Victor, and Junior practice in an abandoned building. Local church groups are upset, but Father Arnold of the local Catholic church sees nothing wrong with the band's activity.

Father Arnold had been performing with a band when one day while eating at McDonalds when he was struck with the idea of becoming a priest. He finished his Big Mac and then walked across the street to a catholic church to ask how to go about becoming a priest. Years later Father Arnold was happy to be sent to the Spokane Reservation but disappointed not to see buffalo.

David WalksAlong visits a rehearsal and says the band is too loud. He also threatens the group. When he returns to his office he finds that his nephew, Michael White Hawk, has been released from prison. White Hawk has a history of bullying and frightening everyone. When Thomas, Victor, and Junior hear news of White Hawk's release, they end practice and go home.

Thomas is surprised at Victor and Junior's rapid improvement. Many people come to watch the band's rehearsals, including many strangers from outside the reservation. Many of these strangers expect some kind of Native American spiritual enlightenment, but instead they get punk rock.

Betty and Veronica are two white women who own a bookstore in Seattle. They take a liking to the band and spend the night with Victor and Junior.

Word spreads to other reservations, and many come to see the band practice. Thomas says that the band needs a name, and he suggests Coyote Springs. Victor and Junior do not like the name. During the night the Coyote steals Junior's work truck, and Junior gets fired. The band decides to adopt the name Coyote Springs.

Thus far the band has been playing songs made popular by other bands, and Thomas says that the band needs their own songs. He sets out to write some original songs. Thomas tries for hours and achieves nothing. When he is discouraged, out of food, and ready to give up he writes "Reservation Blues."

A Federal Express package arrives from a bar owner on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana.

The band arrives on the Flathead Reservation, but they soon become lost. They stop to ask for directions before finally arriving at the bar. They believe they are two hours late, but they discover that they are hours early. In the evening, the band sees dozens of cars arriving. They perform away from home for the first time.



Chapter 2 Analysis

The band rapidly improves, but they are already acquiring enemies. Most of the local church members believe the band's music and activities are immoral, and the tribal councilman, David WalksAlong, is also against the band. His animosity seems more personal.

The characters Betty and Veronica are darkly comical to begin with. They believe that Native Americans have some sort of spiritual insight or wisdom. In this way they view Native Americans as stereotypes and fail to appreciate the individual. It is ironic that the two have the names Betty and Veronica, the same names as two characters from a famous comic book series. Though ironic, in this way Betty and Veronica are stereotypes of white people who have unrealistic views of Native Americans.

The incident where the Coyote steals Junior's water truck is both confusing and humorous. The reader cannot know if the Coyote, a supernatural being of Native American lore known for trickery, really took the vehicle or if Junior and Victor wrecked the truck while under the influence of alcohol.

Toward the end of the chapter when the band arrives on the Flathead Reservation, the reader is introduced to the concept of "Indian time." Though no specific formula for calculating Indian time is given, it seems that Indian time means simply that events will occur when they occur and not according to any precise time of day.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Chess and Checkers Warm Water watch the band and discuss how they are not that good. Checkers is considered the most beautiful woman on the Flathead Reservation. Victor and Junior are getting increasingly drunk and it is affecting their playing. Thomas finds Chess attractive. Thomas wants to play a song for Chess, but Victor and Junior refuse at first and then Junior follows Thomas onstage. Victor remains at the bar.

The narrator describes the drinking history of Victor, Junior, and Thomas. Victor began drinking at an early age. Junior tried to avoid drinking because of what he witnessed with his parents' drinking, but Junior eventually succumbed to Victor's encouragement to drink. Thomas does not drink, but he has a father who is an alcoholic.

The guitar forces Victor onstage to help with Thomas's serenade of Chess. Thomas sings for Chess and the crowd loves it. They push Chess onstage so she can sing a duet with Thomas.

Newspaper reviews of the performance are mixed.

After the show, Victor and Junior pass out and Chess and Checkers help Thomas load the van. Thomas and Chess speak while Checkers sends telepathic messages to Chess, which Chess repeats verbatim. Chess invites Thomas to come to her house. Chess and Checkers make coffee, and then Checkers leaves Chess and Thomas to talk while Victor and Junior sleep in the van.

Thomas and Chess discuss their families. Chess tell the story of her brother's death, and she tells how her father turned to alcohol. Thomas realizes that Chess tells stories the way he does. Chess convinces Thomas to sleep on the couch before attempting the drive back to the Spokane reservation. Thomas asks how Chess's mother died, and she says that her mother died of cancer. After Chess says good night to Thomas, she thinks about how her mother really died.

Victor and Junior awake. Somehow during the night the guitar has come into the house to Thomas. Victor cooks breakfast for everyone, and the entire group is surprised. He says he learned from his stepfather.

Chess and Thomas eat their breakfast outside. Thomas tries to explain that the band is usually better when Victor and Junior do not drink so much. Chess is happy to hear that Thomas does not drink, and she thinks about her past boyfriends. Chess is also happy to hear that Thomas does not have any ex wives or children. Thomas asks Chess if she and Checkers will join the band. She at first jokes that she doesn't want to have to dress like Victor, and then she declines.



Thomas calls the Victor and Junior outside. The three play and Victor's skills on the guitar astound Chess and Checkers. They agree to join the band.

The new band remains on the Flathead Reservation to practice, and then they call the owner of the Tipi Pole Tavern and arrange a performance with Chess and Checkers in the band. The crowd loves the new band. After the performance Chess, Checkers, and Thomas discuss how well the band performs when Victor and Junior remain sober. When the three go looking for Victor and Junior, they find them in the van naked with Betty and Veronica, the bookstore owners from Seattle. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers are shocked and troubled.

A newspaper article appears in the local paper on the Spokane Reservation. Michael White Hawk openly states his dislike for the band.

Chess wakes from a bad dream and finds Thomas writing songs. The two become physically intimate.

On the way to their first performance at a venue not on an Indian Reservation, Thomas's van breaks down. A policeman stops and upon learning of the situation arranges to have a tow truck come to get the van and help the band get to their performance. The band is surprised by the policeman's kind actions. After the performance, a newspaper review praises the performance.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Thomas is immediately attracted to Chess. He discovers that his attraction is more than merely physical after he has the opportunity to talk to Chess. After the performance, Thomas and Chess have the opportunity to talk through much of the night, and they discover that they have much in common.

Alcoholism has had a profound effect on the members of Coyote Springs, as it has with many Native Americans. Thomas, Victor, and Junior have all encountered tragedy due to alcoholism, whether it be one's own alcoholism or the excessive drinking of a relative.

The second performance on the Flathead Reservation goes well for the band. It appears that Chess and Checkers make a popular addition to the band, and the satisfaction felt by Thomas, Chess, and Checkers is tempered only by the revulsion of seeing Victor and Junior engaging in intimate encounters with Betty and Veronica.

This chapter has some notable firsts for the band. The second performance at the Flathead Reservation marks the first time that Victor and Junior performed while sober. The performance in Ellensburg, Washington marks the first time the band has performed at a venue other than one on a reservation. The band seems to be well on its way to success.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The band arrives at the Spokane Indian Reservation late at night and finds Thomas's father unconscious in the yard. Chess and Checkers help Thomas carry his father inside. Chess and Checkers sit up with Thomas while he tells his father's history. Samuel Builds-the-Fire had been a star basketball player.

Samuel picks up Lester Falls Apart in his car, and as the two drive along Samuel asks if Lester has heard that Samuel is about to get married. Lester asks if Samuel wants to have children and Samuel answers that one is already on the way. Officer Wilson, a reservation policeman, pulls over the car, and he is rude to Samuel and Lester. Samuel challenges Wilson and all the other police to a basketball game against him and Lester. Lester reminds Samuel that he cannot play basketball, but Samuel says they can beat all the police. Samuel and Lester face six cops on the court.

The sisters know that they need to get some sleep, but they are both worried about leaving Thomas alone. Checkers asks if Chess is in love with Thomas, and the two sisters discuss Checkers's habit of dating only older men.

In a narrative switch back to the game between Samuel and the cops, Samuel is in the lead by two.

Victor dreams of the time his stepfather took his mother away, and Victor ran after the car. The dream turns into something about an encounter with men in black robes. The dream has nightmare like qualities, and the men in black robes are sinister.

In switch back to the game, Samuel and Lester are up by three points, and then the cops get violent and break Lester's nose. The cops score their first basket.

Junior dreams of the time when he was a child and left in a car with his younger siblings while his parents spent time drinking in a bar. He also dreams of the horrible auto accident that killed his parents.

In a switch to the game, the cops are up by three points.

Thomas and Chess discuss the problems with drinking alcohol, and they discuss all the alcoholism they have witnessed among Native Americans.

In a switch to the game, the police continue to play in a violent manner, and Samuel responds in-kind. He injures the police chief, but the cops are still in the lead by two points.

Thomas and the sisters stay up all night. Thomas tells how his mother decided to give up drinking, and he tells how Victor and Junior's parents died.



Back to the game, Samuel makes a miraculous shot and the cops lead by only one point.

Victor and Junior awaken and Victor makes a joke about cooking Samuel. Checkers becomes enraged and she begins hitting Victor. Victor tries to restrain her without harming her at first, but then he loses patience and throws her to the floor. Thomas intervenes, and then Victor and Thomas begin fighting. Junior manages to stop Victor and Thomas from fighting. Thomas goes outside, and Chess follows. The two discuss kicking Victor and Junior out of the band.

Checkers has been hurt from being thrown to the ground, and Thomas is about to inform everyone that Victor and Junior are no longer part of the band when they hear a knock at the door. A Federal Express letter has arrived. Thomas reads the letter and says that the band has been invited to play in Seattle for \$1000. But they must leave immediately. Checkers decides not to go. All the other members depart.

Along the way, the van stops at a rest area and Victor and Junior meet a white man and his son who are curious to have met real Indians. Victor is, as usual, sarcastic. As they are arriving in Seattle, Chess says that the city was named after an Indian chief and she asks who won the game between Samuel and the police. Thomas responds, "Who do you think won?"

Chapter 4 Analysis

The narrative in Chapter 4 switches back and forth between the present and the past when Thomas's father, Samuel, played basketball with the tribal police. The incident with the police shows in many ways how some reservation residents resent any member of the tribe that succeeds. While some reservation residents engage in almost hero worship of one who excels, plenty of others seem to feel jealousy to the point of hatred. This incident might in part explain some of David WalksAlong's animosity toward the band.

Again, the adverse effects of alcoholism are discussed. Thomas and Chess are grateful that they have found another that does not drink. It seems that every single resident of their two reservations has been negatively affected by alcoholism.

Victor and Junior's dreams tell something of the extreme hardships they have faced in childhood. The black robed figures in Victor's dream seem like priests, but they also seem to be sinister figures who want to harm Victor. In Junior's dream he relives the incident where his family was killed in an auto crash. This tragedy was directly related to alcohol consumption.

The fight between Checkers and Victor seems to be a case of misdirected anger. Checkers is troubled by other things, and Victor's callous remark that he intended as humor sparks Checker's anger.

Chess's question at the end of the chapter and Thomas's answer tells much about the outlook of those that have endured lifetimes of hardships. Chess asks who won the basketball game, and Thomas answers with the question, "Who do you think won?" The obvious conclusion is that the police won. Happy endings do not seem to be a part of the reservation experience.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The band arrives at a downtown Seattle motel and wonders how they will pay. Thomas thinks the bar that invited them ought to pay since they invited the band. He uses a telephone inside the motel. After Thomas completes his call, he informs his band that he misunderstood the invitation. The band was not invited to play, but they were invited to participate in a contest where the winning band receives \$1000. Upon hearing that they will have to face twenty other bands, Victor wants to go home. Thomas says they do not have enough money to get home. They have only enough for food if they sleep in the van.

Checkers visits the church to meet Father Arnold. Checkers tells Father Arnold that she has quit the band. Checkers says that Victor and Junior are doing some bad things, and Checkers admits that she is particularly upset about the white women, Betty and Veronica. Being around Betty and Veronica reminds Checkers of how inferior she felt being around some white girls during her youth. Checkers begins to cry, and Father Arnold suspects that more is bothering Checkers.

Chess cannot sleep. Junior is having nightmares, and he is making noise in his sleep. Junior dreams he is a warrior in the late nineteenth century, and he is captured by General George Wright. General Wright and General Sheridan sentence Junior to death. Junior's shouting wakes Thomas. Chess and Thomas talk. Chess asks if Thomas is a Christian. He says that he is not and that he stopped having any sort of respect for the Christian religion after he witnessed an event that involved burning books. Thomas had been instructed to take part in the burning, but instead he grabbed a book and ran. He still has that book. Chess says that she is considering remaining on the Spokane reservation.

Victor dreams of an incident when he was young and a priest acted in an inappropriate manner.

In a journal entry, Checkers admits that she is in love with Father Arnold.

The band visits Pike Place Market. Victor meets an Indian that knew his grandfather. Victor is uncharacteristically kind and friendly. He takes a particular pleasure in speaking to the many drunks. The band has such a good time that they lose track of time. Thomas realizes the late hour and realizes that he must find Victor and get to the sound check on time. Thomas hears beautiful music and finds Victor performing with an old Indian. The guitar Victor plays is made from cardboard. Chess reminds Thomas that they must get to the concert venue, but they continue to watch Victor and the old Indian for another hour. Thomas takes the guitar from Victor and gives it back to the old Indian. While Thomas holds the guitar he notices that it burns his hands. As the band runs toward the van, Junior says that they should have asked the old Indian to join the band.



Thomas writes a journal entry listing ten commandments given by the U.S. government to the reservations. The commandments are designed to oppress the Native Americans.

Checkers' attraction to Father Arnold has progressed and she has a sexual dream of Father Arnold.

In a radio interview, Thomas discusses the band's performance including the fact that they won the contest. Betty and Veronica sang with the band and Victor played so well that his guitar started a fire.

Father Arnold has a dream that he is trying to help Native Americans, but they do not want to listen to him until some Christian missionaries arrive. Once the missionaries arrive, Father Arnold notices that the Native Americans listen to his sermons. He also learns that the missionaries use fear to coerce the Native Americans.

The band in addition to Betty and Veronica return to the reservation. Chess asks Thomas if he will attend church with her, and he says maybe. Thomas asks Chess how she can support a church that has brought so much trouble to Native Americans. He equates Christianity to General Custer, serial killers, and Republicans. This prompts Thomas to tell the story of Wounded Knee.

While Thomas tells the story, he notices that Chess cries. She says that the God is not responsible for the horrible actions of people. While Thomas and Chess discuss white hatred of Indians, Betty interrupts with an absurd comment and Chess makes it clear that Betty's opinions are not appreciated. Thomas agrees to accompany Chess to church, but he says that will not promise anything beyond simply going. The band arrives at Thomas's house.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Stranded in Seattle, the band has no choice but to enter the contest. The lack of money and ability to purchase alcohol may work to the band's advantage since Victor and Junior will have no choice but to perform sober.

Checkers is now conscious of the fact that she is in love with Father Arnold. Whereas before she may have merely suspected that she had feelings for the priest and known those feelings were inappropriate, she is now too deeply affected by emotion to alter her course.

Junior's dream is horrific in its detail. Wright and Sheridan were actual historical figures involved in the forcing of Native Americans onto reservations. While Wright might seem more compassionate to the Native American viewpoint, Sheridan seems to have no such weakness.

Elements of the supernatural are present in the band's visit to Pike Place Market. The guitar that Victor plays should not be capable of producing such pleasing sounds, yet

the crowd is delighted. When Thomas touches the guitar, he notices that it burns his hands, just like Robert Johnson's guitar did previously.

All of the major characters in this chapter seem to be plagued with fear and doubt. Chess contemplates remaining on the Spokane Reservation, and she wants Thomas to join her in her religious observances, but Thomas has long since rejected Christianity. In fact, he equates Christianity to other negative and sometimes unquestioningly evil practices. Father Arnold and Checkers are individually locked in their own bouts of self-doubt. Victor and Junior are still haunted by experiences from their childhood.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Robert Johnson stays at Big Mom's house. She has told him he is safe, but he still worries. In the past, he tried to leave the guitar behind many times, but it always found him. Johnson hopes this time his guitar will not return. Johnson sings, and Thomas who is far away hears him.

A letter from Council Chairman WalksAlong is printed in the reservation newspaper. He criticizes the band for many things, including having two non-Spokane Indians and also for having two white women in the band.

Thomas walks to church with Chess and Checkers. He is uncomfortable. During the service, he has a dream-like and surreal vision. When he wakes, an old woman says she is glad to see that he has quit the band. She says that the religious people do not like the music the band plays and no one approves of the white women. Thomas decides he must get Checkers to rejoin band, and then they can vote out Betty and Veronica.

Victor and Junior have stayed drunk ever since the concert in Seattle. They have spent almost all of their shares of the prize money on alcohol. When they go to a store to buy more beer, Betty and Veronica follow. Michael White Hawk sees them and attacks Victor and Junior. Betty and Veronica try to intervene, and White Hawk beats them too. A man often thought of as crazy for his announcements that the end of the world is near stops the fight by hitting White Hawk with a board. When the ambulance and police become involved, they have to transport the three men to the hospital, but they do not mention the fight. They say all the men were in a car wreck because they do not want outside authorities becoming involved in tribal affairs.

After they are released from the hospital, Victor and Junior have to stay at Thomas's house. Their own house has been ransacked by White Hawk's friends. Betty and Veronica decide to leave the band and the reservation. Chess taunts them as they go, and Thomas gives them a ride to Spokane, Washington.

The band stays at home most of the time because of the recent controversy. They cannot get bar owners at reservations to hire them because word has spread about the recent trouble. One day a fancy car arrives on the Spokane reservation, and someone asks for Coyote Springs. Two men arrive at Thomas's house and they introduce themselves as Phil Sheridan and George Wright of Cavalry Records. They want to discuss a recording contract.

Sheridan and Wright send a fax to Mr. Armstrong, their boss at Cavalry Records, describing each band member.



Wright and Sheridan speak to Mr. Armstrong on a car telephone and Armstrong wants the men to visit a white female duo in Seattle and then bring Coyote Springs to New York. Wright and Sheridan drink from a very old flask, and the narrator says that the two men have been working together for a hundred years. Sheridan gives the band some money and tells them to be ready to leave the following week.

Thomas receives a letter from Big Mom. She says she needs to speak to him, and she asks him to bring the band.

Chapter 6 Analysis

David WalksAlong's letter shows his own petty nature and it reflects the sentiments of many people on the reservation. Like the lady at church told Thomas, almost all of the reservation residents resent Coyote Spring's inclusion of non-Native Americans. It also seems that no matter what the band does, they will surely offend some people.

When the ambulance takes Victor, Junior, and White Hawk to the hospital, the EMTs say that the men were injured in a car wreck. If they had told the truth, the authorities would have had to pursue criminal charges against White Hawk for assault. The matter would then have been out of the hands of the tribal authorities.

The two men from the record company have the same names as the generals in Junior's dream and these men were actual figures. Both Wright and Sheridan seem to be the same men that could have been generals in the late nineteenth century, but the band members seem unaware of the similarities. They also seem to be unaware of the strange coincidence in the record company's name of Cavalry Records. Any doubt for the reader that these men are actually Generals Wright and Sheridan is removed after the conversation with Mr. Armstrong, possibly General George Armstrong Custer, when the men share a drink from a very old flask.

In the fax that Wright and Sheridan send to Mr. Armstrong, it is clear that the men are already planning on how to commercialize Coyote Spring's music and image.

It seems that the duo that Wright and Sheridan must visit might be Betty and Veronica.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The band walks to Big Mom's house carrying instruments. Along the way, Victor is skeptical. Thomas, Victor, and Junior have heard many legends about Big Mom, including how she has taught many of the most famous musical artists how to perform.

The band sees Big Mom standing in front of her house. They are immediately shocked by her immense size. Big Mom advises against Victor continuing to play Robert Johnson's guitar, but Victor adamantly disagrees. Victor is increasingly rude until Big Mom says that Victor should forgive the priest that molested him long ago. Big Mom gives Junior two drumsticks and then she refers to Chess and Checkers by their real names of Eunice and Gladys.

Big Mom plays a giant guitar and the sound knocks Coyote Springs to the ground. When Thomas wants to play Big Mom's guitar, Big Mom explains that he must play his own instrument. Thomas asks about Victor playing Robert Johnson's guitar, and Big Mom explains that case is an exception because the guitar chose Victor.

In the past Big Mom had tried to teach Michael White Hawk to play the saxophone, but he was more interested in fighting and ultimately went to prison for assault.

For a week Coyote Springs practices for twelve hours a day. At night, Thomas confides to Chess that he is afraid of fame. Chess says she too is afraid, but she asks why Thomas started the band if he did not want his stories to be heard. Thomas answers that he wants to be well liked, but he is also afraid of being well known.

The band practices for the last time in Big Mom's yard. The following day they are supposed to depart for New York. Thomas wants to continue practicing, but everyone else, including Big Mom, says that the band is already as good as it is going to get. Thomas says the band needs Robert Johnson, and he calls to Johnson, but Big Mom says that Coyote Springs is on their own. Thomas is afraid.

Junior leaves behind a letter for Big Mom. He thanks her for all her help, and he also offers apologies for Victor's behavior and general lack of respect toward Big Mom. Junior tells of times in their childhood when Victor was capable of kindness.

The band asks Big Mom what their future will hold. She says that depends on their choices. The band leaves Big Mom, meets Sheridan, and goes to the Spokane International Airport. At the last minute Victor refuses to board the plane. The rest of the band pleads with him and even agrees to buy him drinks. During the flight, the plane encounters turbulence and Thomas gives each band member an eagle feather.



Chapter 7 Analysis

Big Mom's words to Victor regarding his past with the priest explain some of the content of his nightmares. The revelation also might explain much of Victor's aggressive and mean conduct. On a more humorous note, Big Mom's revelation of Chess and Checkers real names explains why the women go by nicknames.

Thomas's fears show that he is more of a thinker than the other male members of the band. While Victor and Junior joined the band with little thought, Thomas has been the guiding force. From the start, Thomas has been the member to make all important decisions, except when a vote is required, and he takes on the task of composing original music. Thomas's fears regarding becoming famous show that he thinks about future outcomes rather than latch onto an unrealistic and idealistic view of the effects of fame.

When the band asks Big Mom what their future holds, she says that depends on their choices. She has given them the skills to succeed, but she has not imparted some sort of magic formula for success. Despite their musical talent, they must make decisions and accept the consequences like everyone else.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Coyote Springs waits in a recording studio to begin their audition. When Wright, Sheridan, and Armstrong are present, the band begins playing. The band plays well at first, but Victor's guitar causes more pain than usual and even makes his hands bleed. The band tries to resume playing but is unable. Armstrong says the band has no merit, and he leaves.

In an article from the local newspaper on the Spokane Indian Reservation, the band members are interviewed before departure. Victor is arrogant, but the rest of the band is humble.

In the studio, Wright and Sheridan explain that they will try again with Mr. Armstrong in a few months. In the meantime Coyote Springs is supposed to return to their reservation and remain there until Wright and Sheridan contact them. Victor becomes enraged and Thomas and Junior have to restrain him from attacking Wright and Sheridan. The whole band is thrown out of the building. Victor disappears into the crowd on the sidewalk, and Junior follows.

Thomas, Chess, and Checkers wait at the hotel worrying about Victor and Junior. Chess decides that she and Thomas must search bars while Checkers remains at the hotel.

Victor and Junior are in their fourth bar. They have already been thrown out of three bars. Victor often comments on the number of beautiful white women and Junior asks Victor why he is so fascinated by white women. Junior thinks about a white girlfriend he had in college.

Thomas and Chess try to file a missing person report with the police.

Checkers has a dream that Sheridan comes to the hotel room. The things he says to Checkers indicate that he seems to confuse her with American Indians in general of the late nineteenth century. Sheridan physically attacks Checkers.

Thomas and Chess stop in a bar and ask about Victor and Junior. The waitress and cook refuse to believe they are Native American.

Junior remembers the time when his white college girlfriend said she was pregnant but she could not marry Junior because he was Indian. As he remembers the incident he often speaks aloud, and Victor thinks Junior is talking to him. Victor passes out, and Junior carries him out of the bar.

Checkers is still dreaming of being assaulted by Sheridan when Wright arrives at the hotel room. He hears Checkers scream, and he bursts into the room.



Thomas and Chess arrive at the hotel and find Junior and Victor in the lobby. The three carry Victor up to the room. Chess is surprised that Junior does not appear to be intoxicated. He explains that he refrained from drinking in order to look after Victor. When the group arrives at the room, they are surprised when Wright answers the door. Wright says that he found Checkers in the midst of a nightmare. The band asks Wright why he is helping them, and he answers that he owes them.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Wright and Sheridan's command to the band to return to the reservation and stay there until contacted is an insult. It is reminiscent of what Native Americans heard repeatedly as they were confined and disenfranchised.

Even in the police report, the running gag of "who is the lead singer" appears. For some reason while taking the missing person's report, the police officer thinks it is relevant to mention that Thomas is the lead singer.

Junior's care and concern for Victor becomes apparent while the two are going from one bar to another. Just like in Junior's letter to Big Mom where he apologized for Victor's behavior, Junior is able to see good things about Victor that are concealed from others. While Victor drinks himself into oblivion, Junior stays sober so he can better keep his friend out of trouble.

Wright's explanation that he came to the hotel room because he felt like he owed the band for past wrongs might be reminiscent of how the real George Wright felt about Native Americans before his death in 1865.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The week after the band returns to the Spokane Indian Reservation, Junior steals a rifle, climbs a water tower, and kills himself.

The night before Junior killed himself, Checkers had sneaked out of Thomas's house by climbing out a window. The tribal police had ordered the band to remain in Thomas's house because the band had received many death threats. Checkers continues to have nightmares about Sheridan, so she leaves Thomas's house in order to go to the church and find Father Arnold. When Checkers arrives at the church she finds Father Arnold crying. He says that he is leaving the reservation. Checkers asks where Father Arnold will be reassigned, and he says that he is not being reassigned. He is leaving the priesthood.

Checkers thinks that everything the band hoped for has been lost. They did not even bother to bring their instruments back from New York. On the flight out of New York, the band barely spoke. Neither Junior nor Victor drank alcohol. Chess tells Checkers that she and Thomas are leaving the Spokane Reservation and perhaps moving to the Flathead Reservation. They want Checkers to come along. She asks why they cannot stay on the Spokane Reservation. Checkers does not understand how much the band is hated on the Spokane Reservation.

Junior imagines the plane crashing, and he also thinks back to the pain after the break up with his college girlfriend. Victor weeps in mourning over losing the guitar.

In the church, Checkers tells Father Arnold that he cannot leave the reservation. Father Arnold says that he has been dreaming about Checkers. Father Arnold walks out of the church.

The day before Junior killed himself, Victor dreamed that he heard music in Thomas's house. He searched for the music and found the guitar he left in New York. The guitar speaks to Victor and says that Victor can have the guitar and anything else he wants if he will agree to give up what he loves the most. While Victor dreams, Junior is outside the house. He thinks he hears Victor calling his name.

The night before Victor dreamed of the guitar, Chess and Thomas talked. Chess says that they do not have to move to the Flathead Reservation, but she definitely wants to leave the Spokane Reservation. Thomas agrees with Chess that they should leave the Spokane Reservation.

Robert Johnson sits at Big Mom's house and looks across the reservation. He sees White Hawk and asks Big Mom what is the matter with him. Big Mom says that White Hawk is no different than anyone else, but Johnson thinks that White Hawk displays some of the behaviors of a boxer that has taken too many blows to the head. Johnson



also sees protesters carrying signs outside the community center. The protesters are angry at Coyote Springs. Johnson asks Big Mom what will happen, but she does not know.

Johnson can see into Victor's dream of missing the guitar and he asks Big Mom whom the guitar belongs to. Big Mom says the guitar belongs to who wants it most.

The previous day, Father Arnold had telephoned the bishop to say that he should be replaced. The bishop says that it is not possible and that Father Arnold must remain on the reservation. Father Arnold decides that if the bishop will not replace him he will leave the reservation on his own.

The day after Coyote Springs returns to the reservation, Wright, Sheridan, and Armstrong have Betty and Veronica in the studio. Sheridan proposes marketing Betty and Veronica as Indian. He says that with some tanning, hair dye, and perhaps cosmetic surgery, they can be made to look Indian. Wright refuses to participate in the venture. He leaves the recording studio and hails a cab. Once inside the cab, he simply says that he wants to go home. The cab driver takes Wright to a cemetery in Sacramento, California.

When Coyote Springs arrived at the airport in Spokane, they had no ground transportation to take them to the reservation. They begin walking, but are soon picked up by another reservation resident who lets the band hide under a tarp in the back of a pick up truck.

Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter tells the story in reverse order. It begins with Junior's suicide and then progresses backwards to when the band returned to Spokane. Periodically, the narrator uses the phrase "the day before" to indicate that the action is being told in reverse order.

Most characters seem to be in a state of despair in this chapter. Checkers believes that all the band hoped for is lost. Father Arnold intends to leave the priesthood. Victor and Junior are in such a state of shock that they do not drink alcohol. The band did not even bother to bring their instruments back from New York. It is as if they know that their musical aspirations are over. Only Thomas and Chess attempt to make any plans. They keep the option of moving to the Flathead Reservation as their default choice and then examine other options.

Victor feels responsible for Junior's death. Though his conversation with the guitar took place in a dream, Victor believes that when asked to give up what he loves most in exchange for the return of the guitar and musical talent he gave up Junior and caused his suicide.

Betty and Veronica's relationship with Cavalry Records compounds the insult to Coyote Springs. The plans to commercialize the duo and capitalize on the public's fascination

with Native Americans at the cost of trivializing the plight of Native Americans reveals the record company's sinister profit driven motives.

When the band finally arrives back in Spokane, they are worse off financially than before they began.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Few people come to Junior's funeral services, but some send flowers. Lester Falls Apart gives the remaining members of the band three dogs.

Big Mom sits at home and cries. Robert Johnson convinces her to go down the mountain and comfort the band. As she is leaving, she gives Johnson a wooden harmonica she has carved. She says that he was always meant to be a harmonica player, and he does not need the guitar anymore.

On her way to meet Coyote Springs, Big Mom encounters Father Arnold as he is packing in preparation to leave the reservation. She convinces him to come along to help her comfort the band.

A Spokane newspaper advertises a job opening for a telephone operator.

Big Mom, Father Arnold, and the remaining members of Coyote Springs have a funeral service for Junior at the tribal cemetery. Thomas says that Victor will get the dogs that Lester gave, but he does not say why. Big Mom suspects that the reason has something to do with Thomas and Chess's plans to leave the reservation.

Everyone at the funeral says something kind about Junior. Victor lies and tells the others that Junior has a child. Victor had earlier found the letter from Junior's college girlfriend telling of the abortion, but Victor decides to change the story. Chess believes she sees a white woman and child in the distance. Chess thinks of many things she would like to tell the woman and child before she realizes that she is merely imagining the image.

Chess tells Thomas that she wants to marry him and have Indian babies with Indian parents.

After the funeral, Chess talks to Checkers. She wants to know if Checkers will come with her and Thomas to Spokane. Chess says she has secured a job as a telephone operator. Big Mom tells Checkers that Father Arnold wants to speak to her. Father Arnold apologizes, and Checkers says that Father Arnold no longer has to leave the reservation because she is leaving. Checkers also returns a bottle of wine she stole from the church while angry.

Victor takes Thomas's van and parks near Turtle Lake. Junior appears in the passenger seat and frightens Victor. Victor asks why Junior killed himself, and Junior says that he was tired of living. He also says that he was tired of drinking. Junior offers Victor a drink, but Victor says that he wants to stop drinking. Junior produces flask after flask, and Victor throws them all in the lake.



Victor goes to Tribal Chairman David WalksAlong's office with a resume hoping to get work. He says that he wants to drive the water truck that Junior used to drive. WalksAlong is extremely rude and orders Victor to leave.

A local newspaper has an article describing Father Arnold's Catholic Team's first ever basketball victory.

Thomas receives a package from Betty and Veronica. They include a recording of their latest song. Thomas finds the lyrics insulting to Native Americans, and he destroys the tape.

Victor has taken to wandering the reservation followed by the three dogs. People worry about the dogs.

As Thomas, Chess, and Checkers drive away from Thomas's house on their way to Spokane, they pass Big Mom. Thomas stops to give Big Mom a ride. She says she is on her way to a feast, and she wants Thomas, Chess, and Checkers to go with her. The three are wary of going to the feast because they know how much they are disliked by many on the reservation. Big Mom prevails in persuading them to join her. Robert Johnson also attends the feast and speaks to Thomas. He says that he intends to remain on the reservation because he thinks the Indians could be helped by his music. This makes Big Mom happy. Big Mom calls for the feast attendees to contribute to a collection for Thomas, Chess, and Checkers. She succeeds in getting several hundred dollars to help the three find housing in the city.

Thomas, Chess, and Checkers are afraid to start a new life off of a reservation. As they leave the reservation and drive along the highway, they see that shadow horses are running alongside the van.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Robert Johnson, a man who Big Mom saved from a lifetime of torment, convinces Big Mom to act despite her despair over the death of Junior. Once Big Mom begins to act, her influence is powerful and beneficial to all she encounters. She saves Father Arnold from making a mistake, and she helps Checkers and Father Arnold to reach a civil agreement. Later, she helps Thomas, Chess, and Checkers to get some much needed funds for their new lives in Spokane.

It is not immediately clear why Victor revises the story of Junior's college romance. Perhaps he misses Junior so much that he would like to believe that his friend has a child. The story of Junior's half-white child causes Chess to reach an important decision. First she wants to warn the mother of Junior's child of the hardships of being of mixed heritages, and she specifically wants to recommend that the mother and child take steps to ensure that future offspring have as little Native American heritage as possible. In thinking along this line, somehow Chess finds that she can take pride in her heritage and wants her future children to have two parents they can be proud of.



Whether an actual event or just the product of Victor's imagination, the conversation he has with Junior at Turtle Lake seems to also mark a turning point in Victor's life. After hearing that part of the reason that Junior committed suicide was because he saw no other way to escape alcoholism, Victor also decides he does not want to drink anymore. This seems like a positive turn for Victor, and it is unclear if David WalksAlong's harsh treatment of Victor caused him to abandon his goal of abstaining from alcohol and getting a job. While Victor is seen wandering aimlessly through the reservation, it is unclear if this will be an ongoing condition or if it is merely a way for Victor to heal from the recent trauma of losing his only friend.

The presence of the shadow horses as Thomas, Chess, and Checkers drive away from the reservation seems to be a positive omen.



Characters

Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Thomas is the protagonist of the novel. The first qualities one notices about Thomas are his tendency toward kindness and compassion toward his fellow man. His kindness extends beyond his fellow reservation residents. When Robert Johnson arrives on the reservation, Thomas is the first person to stop and speak to him. Thomas also offers assistance, and it is through Thomas's help that Robert Johnson finds Big Mom and is freed from his previous arrangement with The Gentleman.

From an early age, Thomas has felt a compulsion to tell stories. His stories are generally of a historical nature and he tells them in a captivating manner full of detail. Nevertheless, many reservation residents tire of hearing the stories, and some even think of Thomas as perhaps somewhat mentally unstable, even though he does not drink alcohol like so many others on the reservation.

Though a meek and humble character, Thomas becomes the leader of the band. A running joke throughout the novel casts him as leader merely because he is the lead singer, but Thomas is truly the leader because he is the smartest and most caring member. Thomas quickly finds himself attracted to Chess Warm Water. From the first moment Thomas sees Chess he is smitten. He seems not to even notice Chess's sister Checkers, who many regard as better looking. In a break with his usual shy demeanor, Thomas sings a song for Chess the first time he meets her. Once Chess and Checkers join the band, Thomas has two allies that share his rational views that are often in sharp contrast to those of Victor and Junior.

Victor Joseph

Victor can be thought of as a tragic character. Since his youth was full of hardship, Victor has turned into a bully in adulthood. But Victor is not only a thoughtless ruffian. He is quick-witted and often funny despite his words and actions being of a mean-spirited nature. Victor does not spread his vitriol to everyone. He has demonstrated incredible kindness to his only friend, Junior Polotkin.

Before encountering Robert Johnson's guitar, Victor had interest in only two things, which were drinking alcoholic beverages and bullying easy targets like Thomas Builds-the-Fire. After experiencing playing the guitar and being admired by a few people who witness the band's rehearsals and performances, Victor enjoys the idea of becoming a rock star, but his addiction to alcohol remains. Victor's reliance and obsession with alcohol is stronger than any other influence in his life and both Victor and those around him suffer.

Aside from being a belligerent drunken bully, Victor does have a few other notable traits. All of his clothes are from the 1970s. In fact, all of his clothes were purchased long ago



during a rare moment that he had spare money. He has since had no money, so he wears the same tattered clothes and looks like he is frozen in time. Victor is also the source of much of the story's humor. Whether he has the quickest wit or is simply the only person among his group brazen enough to say some of his outlandish remarks cannot be known, but more often than not, the meanest person in Coyote Springs also happens to be the funniest.

Junior Polotkin

On the surface, Junior can be thought of as Victor's sidekick, or toady, however there is far more to Junior than merely being Victor's faithful stooge. Unlike many on the reservation, Junior has had the opportunity to go to college. Unlike his best friend, Victor, Junior is actually kind at heart. Like his best friend and so many others on the reservation, Junior's life has been plagued with hardship.

As the story of the band's exploits unfolds, so does the history of many of the characters. Junior's childhood was interrupted by the death of his family in an auto accident. The accident was directly related to alcoholism, and alcoholism is something that haunts Junior for the rest of his life. After the departure of his family, the only person Junior can count on is Victor and to Victor's credit, he proved himself a good friend when the two were children and young adults.

Junior's decisive and drastic action toward the end of the novel must certainly come as a shock to most readers. He did not seem to be any more troubled than the other characters, yet his response to stress and disappointment was the most extreme. Though possibly only a product of Victor's imagination, the conversation Junior had with Victor at Turtle Lake may be the only explanation for Junior's shocking act.

Chess Warm Water (a.k.a Eunice)

Along with her sister Checkers, this character joins the band Coyote Springs after hearing them perform at a bar on the Flathead Indian Reservation. She soon forms an intimate relationship with Thomas, and the two share many similar qualities, including the love of storytelling and a deep concern for the welfare of Native American people.

Checkers Warm Water (a.k.a Gladys)

Of the two Warm Water sisters, Checkers is general considered the more physically beautiful. Like her sister Chess, Checkers can sing well. She has a preference for older men and she falls in love with Father Arnold.



Big Mom

This character is large in both physical stature and in her influence over the Spokane Tribe and many aspiring musicians. Some believe this character is immortal.

Robert Johnson

This legendary blues musician is regarded as one of the greatest of all time. Some people believed that his musical talent could be explained only by his having made a deal with Satan. Though he was believed to have died in 1938, he arrives on the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1992.

Father Arnold

This Catholic priest once played in a rock and roll band before deciding to enter a seminary. In the time he has spent on the reservation, he has come to care deeply for the Spokane people.

Lester Falls Apart

This character is one of the most beloved residents of the Spokane Indian Reservation. Despite being an alcoholic, Lester is loved for his caring personality.

Samuel Builds-the-Fire

This character is Thomas's father. In middle age, he is a homeless alcoholic, but in his youth, he was a basketball star.

Phil Sheridan

This character is an executive with Cavalry Records. He is also probably General Philip Sheridan, an American army general who led campaigns against Native Americans, particularly the Plains Indians.

George Wright

This character is an executive with Cavalry Records. He is also probably General George Wright, an American military official stationed on the West Coast who led military campaigns against Native Americans, including operations during the Yakima War.



Mr. Armstrong

This character is the president of Cavalry Records. He is also probably General George Armstrong Custer, an American military leader who led violent acts of oppression, including massacre, against Native American people in the nineteenth century.

Betty

This bookstore owner views Native Americans in stereotypes and believes they possess secret wisdom that she can learn if she spends enough time around them. Along with her colleague Veronica, she embarks on a musical career with songs that are insulting to Native Americans. This character and her friend Veronica share names with fictional characters of the Archie comic book series.

Veronica

This bookstore owner views Native Americans in stereotypes and believes they possess secret wisdom that she can learn if she spends enough time around them. Along with her colleague Betty, she embarks on a musical career with songs that are insulting to Native Americans. This character and her friend Betty share names with fictional characters of the Archie comic book series.

Michael White Hawk

This violent ex-convict was once a student of Big Mom. Big Mom tried to teach this character to play the saxophone, but he was more interested in acts of violence against white people, and he eventually was convicted of assault.

David WalksAlong

This character is the tribal chairman. He has a strong dislike for the band Coyote Springs and he has disliked Thomas's father for years.

The Gentleman

This is the character that Robert Johnson made a deal with in exchange for mastery of the guitar. This character is probably also known by others as Satan.



Objects/Places

Spokane Indian Reservation

This is the main physical setting of the novel. The Spokane Indian Reservation is in eastern Washington near the Spokane River.

Spokane, Washington

This is the nearest large city to the Spokane Indian Reservation.

Wellpinit, Washington

This small town is located on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

Benjamin Pond and Turtle Lake

Many people believe that these two bodies of water on the Spokane Indian Reservation have a subterranean connection. Some people believe that Turtle Lake is bottomless.

Doppelganger Bookstore

This is the name of the bookstore that Betty and Veronica own in Seattle.

Flathead Indian Reservation

This Native American reservation in Western Montana is the location of one of the band Coyote Springs's early performances. Here they meet Chess and Checkers Warm Water.

Arlee, Montana

This town in the vicinity of the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana was named after a Flathead Indian Chief. Thomas and Chess contemplate moving to this location after feeling unwelcome on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

Pike Place Market

This popular outdoor market in Seattle Washington is where Victor performs with a homeless man and delights the crowd.



Cavalry Records

This is the name of the record company that brings Coyote Springs to New York for an audition. It is ironic that the record company bears the name of the branch of the U.S. army that oppressed the Native Americans of the nineteenth century.

Ellensburg, Washington

This community in western Washington is the location of Coyote Springs's first performance at a venue not on a Native American reservation.



Themes

On the Losing Side

Repeatedly throughout the novel many of the principle characters demonstrate a pessimism or fatalism brought about by generations of suffering and disenfranchisement. One such character, Victor, even refers to himself as a fatalist. Other characters, though more subtle, are no less fatalistic in their worldview. Perhaps one character, Chess, says it best when she says that a person is not truly Indian unless at some point in that person's life the person has wished not to be Indian.

This sense of defeatism is not confined to the present generation. Regarding the recent past, characters like Thomas recall stories about how his father suffered because of his talent at basketball. While some reservation residents readily got behind one who had the potential for success, other reservation residents resented a Native American who demonstrated great promise. It is as if they accept the role of failure and expect other Native Americans to do the same. At the conclusion of Thomas's story about his father's basketball match against the Tribal Police, Chess asks who has won. Thomas responds with the question, "Who do you think won?" This seems to say that of course, the Indian always loses.

The memories of defeat extend beyond a mere one or two generations. The very fact that they live on a reservation serves to remind characters like Thomas that his people have long been discriminated against. Whether it is the oppression of outside forces or the self-defeating behaviors such as alcoholism, the people on the reservation seem to have adopted a worldview of fatalism.

Indian in My Bones

Some of the non-Native American characters see other principle characters, who happen to be Native Americans, as caricatures. These non-Native American characters see and think in stereotypes. Betty and Veronica present the best example of such characters.

Upon first meeting Betty and Veronica, the band and many other residents of the Spokane Indian Reservation notice that the women wear an abundance of Indian jewelry. In fact, they wear far more Native American-themed jewelry than any Native American wears. Betty and Veronica further anger many reservation residents by singing songs about seducing "Indian boys." Once Victor and Junior spend time alone with the two white women, Victor learns that they are "groupies" who prefer to date Native American men. Once when interrupting a conversation between Thomas and Chess, Betty states that all white people want to be Indian because all Indians "live at peace with the earth," and all Indians are "so wise." Thomas and Chess see the



sweeping generalization for what it is and make it obvious that they do not appreciate Betty's uninformed and ludicrous opinions.

The most blatant example of how viewing an entire group as a stereotyped caricature can be both ignorant and insulting comes with the demo tape that Betty and Veronica send to Coyote Springs. They sing a song about how they are white but are "Indian in my bones." In the song they also make references to what they believe are Native American religious symbols, such as the four directions, Father Sky, tobacco, and dying buffalo. Not only have they grouped all tribes into one, they have managed to do the impossible, which is to send Thomas into an angry fit.

Storytelling as a Compulsion

Thomas Builds-the-Fire is a storyteller. Early in the novel he considers this trait to be a disease he was infected with before birth. This regard for his habit of storytelling is more a reflection of the way that other reservation residents respond to his stories. Generally, they respond negatively to Thomas's stories, partly because they have heard most of them before from Thomas and partly because they fail to appreciate the value and function of the stories. Before Coyote Springs forms, Victor and Junior are willing to agree to a bet where if they win Thomas will be forever barred from telling stories. They feel so strongly about this prospect that Victor cheats in an attempt to win the bet. They fail to understand that storytelling is more than an annoying compulsion. It serves multiple purposes.

The most readily apparent function of Thomas's storytelling is preservation of the past. Thomas tells the stories, and the incidents do not fade from memory. An equally important, but less appreciated, function of Thomas's stories involves using them to understand the present via comparison to the past. A notable example of this occurs when Chess's questions about Thomas's religious beliefs prompts him to tell the story of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. In an example of a story from more recent history, Thomas tells the story of the resentment that his father faced by some fellow reservation residents because of his skill at basketball. This story helped to explain the feeling of pessimism that is so prevalent on the reservation.



Style

Point of View

The point of view in *Reservation Blues* is from the perspective of an omniscient and third-person narrator. The narrator is able to access the inner thoughts, dreams, and even journal entries of all major characters. The omniscient aspect of the narrative gives the reader a more complete story. If the plot depended on the perceptions of a single person such as the protagonist, then much of the depth of character development of the other characters would not have been possible.

The third person aspect of the narrative gives the tale a more believable quality than it would have coming from a first-person narrator, and this is due to the supernatural events in the plot. If these events had been reported only by a single character serving as narrator, the events might be easier for readers to dismiss as merely the faulty or mistaken perceptions of one individual. Since the descriptions of the supernatural events come from a neutral third person narrator, they seem to be more believable, and their believability does not hinge on just one person.

The narrator's tone is uniformly neutral. Whether the narrator is relating a tale of a painful and even horrific event or an anecdote that would make a funny joke, the narrator's tone is deadpan emotionless. This has the curious effect of making each conveyed story both more believable and more poignant. By leaving the reader to draw conclusions without unnecessary editorial or commentary by the narrator, the storyteller also allows the reader to find greater humor and pathos.

Setting

The primary physical setting of *Reservation Blues* is the Spokane Indian Reservation. Most of the action takes place on the reservation, and some of the peculiarities of life on the reservation as described by both the narrator and the characters give the place a distinctive quality. Few people besides those that have lived on a reservation or lived in a state of poverty can imagine subsisting almost entirely on government subsidized and inferior food products. The reservation residents refer to these items as "commodity foods." The reservation is also a place with a distinctive culture, and this unifying culture and belief system helps to make some of the harder-to-believe aspects of the novel, such as the instances involving the supernatural, easier for the reader to grasp after a suspension of disbelief.

Other physical settings, such as the Flathead Indian Reservation, Seattle, New York, and bars and taverns provide a contrast to the Spokane Indian Reservation. These contrasts serve to illustrate the unique qualities of the Spokane Indian Reservation.

Equally important to the physical settings of the novel are the varieties of non-tangible settings. These can take place in the minds of the principle characters, or they can take



place in an unknown un-earthly place. Instances of this occur when time and space are suspended, such as in the case of Big Mom being able to see years into the past or in George Wright taking a cab from Manhattan to a cemetery in Sacramento.

Language and Meaning

The language of *Reservation Blues* consists of everyday contemporary American English. There are few terms that will require a typical reader to use a dictionary. The dialogue consists of the same mainstream contemporary English with only a few exceptions. Generally the language is transparent without hidden meanings.

One such exception is the use of the term "enit." This term always occurs at the end of a sentence in dialogue, and it always seems to be in the form of a rhetorical question. Judging from context, the term seems to be equivalent to the word "true" when used as a question. Instances like these such as the Native American practices such as the use of sweat lodges, capture the distinctive environment of the reservation while not making it seem so foreign as to be inapproachable. The residents of the reservation speak in the same language as the typical reader, but their life experiences are vastly different.

Using everyday mainstream language has a curious effect on the elements of the supernatural as described in the novel. By presenting these events in the same neutral tone and language as the rest of the book, the narrator relates these tales in much the same way that other books employ magical realism. The events themselves are fantastic and under normal circumstances would be difficult to believe, but through telling of them in normal customary language, the magical quality of the event is preserved and they seem more believable or more likely to have actually occurred.

Structure

With a few minor exceptions and one major deviation, the narrative of the novel *Reservation Blues* is presented in a traditional linear and chronological manner. The novel begins with Robert Johnson's appearance on the Spokane Indian Reservation, and it ends after the band Coyote Springs dissolves. The deviations from linear presentation serve to give the otherwise chronological order a greater impact.

Some of the minor deviations from linear progression include flashbacks. These flashbacks, sometimes to the recent past and sometimes to the previous century, serve to give the story more depth, particularly in the area of character development. Each of the principle characters become known to the reader through multiple instances of flashback such as in the retelling of Big Mom's life in the previous century or more recently the childhoods of Victor and Junior.

A notable and major exception to the chronological structure of the novel occurs in Chapter 9 "Small World." This chapter is told in reverse order. The chapter begins with Junior's suicide and then progresses backwards to the band's return from New York. By telling Junior's suicide at the beginning of the chapter when neither the reader nor the



other principle characters are aware that Junior is in such a state of desperation, the revelation produces shock and a desire for the reader to understand what has brought Junior to such a drastic action. Slowly, over the course of the entire chapter, events are presented in reverse order day-by-day.

Quotes

"In the one hundred and eleven years since the creation of the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1881, not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever arrived there by accident. Wellpinit, the only town on the reservation, did not exist on most maps, so the black stranger surprised the whole tribe when he appeared with nothing more than the suit he wore and the guitar slung over his back" (Chapter 1, pg. 3.)

"In 1992, Big Mom still watched for the return of those slaughtered horses and listened to their songs. With each successive generation, the horses arrived in different forms with different songs, called themselves Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, and many other names" (Chapter 1, pg. 10.)

"Victor wore gloves when he played Robert Johnson's guitar but still suffered little burns and scratches. At first, Thomas had worried that his amplified bass and Junior's drums would overwhelm the acoustic lead guitar, but Victor could have kicked the guitar around the floor and it would have sounded good enough" (Chapter 2, pg. 33.)

"Chess and Checkers danced in front of the stage. Chess had fancydanced when she was a teenager and shook to Three Dog Night on her childhood radio. She danced well in both the Indian and the white ways. Not as pretty as her sister, Chess, living up to her nickname, planned all of her moves in advance" (Chapter 3, pg. 55.)

"He was such a good basketball player that all the Spokanes wanted him to be more. When any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of the tribe starts expecting Jesus. Sometimes they'll stop a reservation hero in the middle of the street, look into his eyes, and ask him to change a can of sardines into a river of salmon" (Chapter 4, pg. 97.)

"As a child, each member of Coyote Springs had run from drunks. They all still ran from drunks. All Indians grow up with drunks. So many drunks on the reservation, so many. But most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians" (Chapter 5, pg. 151.)

"But Johnson was still not comfortable in his safety. He dreamed of that guitar he had left in Thomas-Builds-the-Fire's blue van. He couldn't decide if he had left it there on purpose. Certainly, he had tried to leave it behind before, on trains, in diners, on the roadside. He buried that guitar, he threw it in rivers, dropped it off tall buildings. But it always came back to him" (Chapter 6, pg. 173.)

"Coyote Springs carried two guitars, a drum set, and a keyboard up the hill toward Big Mom's house. She lived in a blue house on the top of Wellpinit Mountain. She was a Spokane Indian with a little bit of Flathead blood thrown in for good measure. But she was more than that. She was a part of every tribe" (Chapter 7, pg. 199.)



"Still, Big Mom had her heart broken by many of her students who couldn't cope with the incredible gifts she had given them. Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Elvis, They all drank so much and self-destructed so successfully that Big Mom made them honorary members of the Spokane Tribe" (Chapter 7, pg. 201.)

"'Michael White Hawk,' Big Mom said to the toughest Spokane Indian man of the late twentieth century. 'Don't you understand that the musical instrument is not supposed to be used in the same way that a bow and arrow is? Music is supposed to heal'" (Chapter 7, pg. 208.)

"Coyote Springs looked at Big Mom. They sort of felt like baby turtles left to crawl from birth nest to ocean all by themselves, while predators of all varieties came to be part of the baby turtle beach buffet. They sort of felt like Indian children of Indian parents" (Chapter 7, pg. 217.)

"All you can do is breed the Indian out of your family, Chess said. All you can do is make sure your son marries a white woman and their children marry white people. The fractions will take over. Your half-blood son will have quarter-blood children and eighth-blood grandchildren, and they won't be Indians anymore. They won't hardly be Indian, and they can sleep better at night" (Chapter 10, pg. 283.)



Topics for Discussion

Chess Warm Water, one of the Native American characters, says that one is not truly Indian unless at some point in life one has wished not to be Indian. What might she mean by this?

In this novel, alcoholism affects each individual character as well as Native Americans as a whole. Thomas says that most Indians do not drink, but the ones that do get all the attention. Discuss the way alcoholism affects individuals, both drinkers and non-drinkers, and the way that alcoholism affects entire groups as presented in the novel.

Some of the residents of the Spokane Indian Reservation are delighted and proud of the band's success while others resent the band for a variety of stated reasons. Discuss why some people are proud of the band while others resent the band for the same reasons. Could this be an example of what in the current vernacular is meant by the term "hater?"

A recurring motif or running gag concerns others' response to the band and only wanting to speak to the lead singer. How does the stereotype of a band's leader also being its lead singer create humor in the novel?

Robert Johnson was a renowned blues musician so admired that the only explanation many could believe regarding his impressive talents involved the supernatural. How has Johnson's legend concerning the infamous crossroads continued to affect music today?

During her vision of the white woman with Junior's child, Chess feels the need to tell the woman that the best thing she can do for her son is to force him to marry a white woman so his children will have less Indian heritage than he has. Later Chess tells Thomas that she wants to marry and have children so the children can have two Indian parents. Discuss these seemingly contradictory views.

Another running gag in the novel concerns the Native Americans such as Big Mom and Thomas having a negative opinion of Jim Morrison. Who was Jim Morrison and why might some of the stories he told about himself be offensive to Native Americans in the same way that Veronica and Betty offended both Thomas and Chess?