

# **The River Why Study Guide**

**The River Why by David James Duncan**

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# Plot Summary

The River Why by David James Duncan is ultimately a coming-to-life story about a child fishing prodigy and his search for happiness and fulfillment.

A child of two proficient fishing parents, Augustine "Gus" Orviston is a fishing prodigy, catching his first large fish at the age of four and his first steelhead on a fly at the age of six. His mother, Ma, fishes only in the bait-and-hook style, while his father H2O, fishes in the fly-fishing style. For this reason, Gus is proficient in both styles. However, instead of embracing the differences of their fishing styles, Gus is tormented by his parents' constant bickering and arguments over which style is best, including a constant interpretation of *The Compleat Angler* by Izaak Walton, a pivotal book in fishing and to the Orviston family.

Gus leaves his family after school to get his own house by the Tamanawis River to execute the Ideal Schedule in fishing. He comes up with a specific plan with all the hours of his day to maximize his fishing time while simultaneously keeping an exact fishing notebook on the number of fish he has caught.

After Gus comes across a dead fisherman named Abe, he starts to question his relationship to fishing and with Life in general. From there, he resolves to be less solitary, introducing himself to all of his neighbors and finding out answers to bigger questions like whether or not there is a higher being.

Along the way, Gus also falls in love with a woman named Eddy who helps to show him the true meaning of love and the presence of a higher being in his life.



# Book One, The Compleat Angler: Gus the Fish and The Rogue River Fishing War

## Book One, The Compleat Angler: Gus the Fish and The Rogue River Fishing War Summary

The novel opens with Gus discussing his birth and a description of his family in general. His father, Henning Hale-Orviston, is of English aristocracy and has very refined behaviors, including drinking Glenfiddich Single Malt Scotch, driving a Rover while in the city, sleeping in silk pajamas, and fishing in a full set of tweeds. On the other hand, Carolina Carper or "Ma", as Gus calls his mother, is the exact antithesis of Henning. She refers to him as "Hen" (much to his chagrin) and is considered Henning's nemesis. Ma has gained infamy and notoriety mostly because she is a bait fisherman, which is an astounding fact when one considers how refined and famous her husband's fly fishing skills are.

To explain how his parents met, Gus relays a story famous among the Carper clan. Gus's uncle Zeke tells the story of how Carolina and Henning met. One early fall day in 1953, Henning went out and caught a steelhead trout on his fly rod. After fighting the fish for hours, another person comes around the area and put their rod into the water next to his fish. Henning, of course, is outraged, demanding that they see and recognize that he is in the middle of fighting a huge steelhead and can the individual go elsewhere? Rather than back down, the individual sticks their fishing rod in the same place as his pool and continues to fish. When it nearly comes to fisticuffs after Henning loses the fish, the individual takes off her hat and it is then that Henning realizes the person is a girl. Henning laughs and refuses to fight her.

While he is laughing, the woman sticks her baited hook into the water, pulling out a thirty-pound fish—with Henning's custom lure sticking out of its mouth. Henning laughs manically and Carolina takes pity on him. For that reason, she passes some of her alcohol to him and as the night continues on, Henning and Carolina talk and fall madly in love. And that very same evening, Gus was conceived.

After that trip, since both Henning and Carolina are not very well off, they come up with a story that Henning actually caught the fish and used one of his custom rods. They make up this story in an effort to have Henning's rod sponsored. While on their honeymoon together, Henning writes a number of articles in an effort to have the whole trip paid for from their publication. However, it is on their honeymoon that the "Rogue River Fishing War" happens. Because this event has been talked about so many times, Gus can only say that the following actions actually took place. H2O tries to teach Ma the "true" way to fish, which is fly-fishing in his eyes. Instead of being a success, Ma ends up throwing her costly wedding present of a new set of fly-fishing equipment from



H2O into the stream. From there, they both enter into a two-man, two-day Fishing Derby with Ma significantly out-fishing her husband.

At the fishing lodge, bets are taken on what hour the divorce would occur and who would murder who in the marriage. Not helping the situation, Ma and Henning actually get into fisticuffs while at the bar after fishing all afternoon. Despite the fierce and aggressive competition, however, both Ma and Henning were also madly in love and random truces were inexplicably called at different times, which resulted in rabid lovemaking. At the end of the honeymoon vacation, certain concrete resolutions were agreed upon, including the idea that they would never again fish together nor would they ever allow their marriage vows to be weakened again.

With this history, Gus relays that it is no small wonder that he was born a fishing prodigy.

## **Book One, The Compleat Angler: Gus the Fish and The Rogue River Fishing War Analysis**

Gus's love for fish and his natural talent with fishing started with his parents. By explaining his parents' direct opposition in the world of fishing, Gus is shown as the ideal combination between his parents.

Henning and Ma's relationship is a bond built on fishing and the commitment to their marriage vows. When Zeke relays the story of how the two met, he tells the first half as if written by Henning and the second half as Ma talking to give the best depiction of their differences. Through Gus, H2O and Ma will resolve their differences in a unique way.

Despite their differences and sometimes physical altercations, Ma and H2O have a common bond of fishing, their sons, and the commitment to their marriage vows.



# **Book One, The Compleat Angler: Concerning Statistics, Some Biographical Statistics and Statistical Improbabilities**

## **Book One, The Compleat Angler: Concerning Statistics, Some Biographical Statistics and Statistical Improbabilities Summary**

Statistics are a tool that anglers rely heavily upon. Gus mentions the story in the Bible of Jesus and his fishermen disciples who caught exactly 153 fish during their travels together. A fish without statistical evidence, to Gus, is a non-entity, whereas a fish with its exact (or exaggerated) proportions becomes a living, breathing thing when the fisherman retells the story of the big catch.

Since Gus is a fishing prodigy, he is a solitary figure. He starts school a year later and ultimately fails the fifth grade because he fishes too much and studies too little. Gus isn't antisocial; he is just lopsided in a way common to most prodigies. At age four, he catches his first steelhead on a worm. At six, he catches his first steelhead on a fly and spends every weekend and school vacation fishing with either Ma or H2O. If it is raining outside, Gus would spend the afternoons tying flies and building rods or studying manuals.

While Gus is proud of his fishing abilities, there is something he is even more proud of—his ability to duck and dodge his parents' persistent questions as to whether he uses bait or fly fishing more frequently. In order to avoid conflict, he takes both his bait and fly-fishing gear with him everywhere he goes. Although Gus is devoid of most societal references, like Mickey Mouse and Richard Nixon, he does pass the hardest test in his family in the same year that he fails the fifth grade. Gus succeeds in fishing as well as his parents that year. For that, they are infinitely pleased and satisfied with him.

Gus points out that his parents have some common traits together. They are both hyperactive, hot-tempered, ambitious, talkative, and very loyal. Even though they both scorn the other, the moment they think another person is being negative to their partner, they will attack him or her. On the other hand, Gus and his brother are dispassionate, slow-moving, close-lipped, and not at all defensive about their family. When Ma finds out she is pregnant again, she is certain that she does not want another child called something similar to the pretentious "Augustine", and names her second son "Bill Bob".

Bill Bob is the family anomaly in an already abnormal family. He isn't "merely disinterested" in fishing, he doesn't know a single thing about it. In this way, he is the



exact antithesis to Gus, just as their parents are the exact antithesis to each other. Gus has the singular talent of being wholly separated from fishing and water in a family that is completely obsessed with it. Gus knows statistical facts about Bill Bob, but his brother is very difficult to actually get to know in general.

The most important book for the Orviston family is not the Bible or another other major historical or religious piece of work. Instead, their most important book is *The Compleat Angler*. However, when Bill Bob is roughly three, he finds a Bible and calls it his "Good Book". He uses this book to write "checks" that Gus uses for cash. When their father finds out that Bill Bob has been ripping pages out of the Bible, he starts to whip Bill Bob as punishment. Ma races in and argues with him, commencing an argument that goes on so long that both Gus and Bill Bob just wander out of the room.

## **Book One, *The Compleat Angler*: Concerning Statistics, Some Biographical Statistics and Statistical Improbabilities Analysis**

Gus's mention of the Bible in this chapter is the first indication that he has any religious studying whatsoever. This is a foreshadowing of the religious questioning and studying that he will undertake in the future.

Even though Gus doesn't complete the fifth grade, it becomes obvious that to Gus and his parents that the natural world and conquering of fish in general is more important than school. In this way, the highly unusual Orviston family is better explained. The reader will immediately recognize that Gus and his family members are sure to be a non-traditional group whose focus is with fishing instead of other intellectual pursuits.

Bill Bob is finally introduced in this chapter. Gus indicates that Bill Bob is a tough person to get to know—even at the young age of three. This description of him is a foreshadowing of Gus and Bill Bob's relationship and communications in the future. Again, how the family handles religion is not in a traditional manner, which foreshadows Gus' future searching for religious meaning.





# **Book One, The Compleat Angler: The Great Izaak Walton Conversy: the Parental Version and The Great Izaak Walton Controversy: My Own Rendition**

## **Book One, The Compleat Angler: The Great Izaak Walton Conversy: the Parental Version and The Great Izaak Walton Controversy: My Own Rendition Summary**

H2O is a devout fly-fisherman, and as Gus points out, his devotion to fly-fishing parallels that of a religious convert. Just like a strong religious convert, he feels that it is his life mission to find other people to convert to his new religion. In this way, H2O is a prolific writer for fly-fishing and considered a brilliant fisherman by other fly-fishing purists.

The day after Gus is born, H2O attends a conference about Izaak Walton, a famous fisherman whose book *The Compleat Angler* is a staple for anyone who loves to fly-fish. During the conference, H2O is suddenly inspired to give Ma this book in order to convert her to his way of life in fly-fishing. It takes Ma two days to read and finish the book, although she deems it "old-fashioned". She breaks a cardinal family rule and interrupts H2O while he is tying flies, but when H2O sees that she has his book in her hand, his demeanor immediately softens.

Instead of being converted to his fly-fishing through *The Compleat Angler*, Ma uses H2O's favorite book against him, pointing out flaws to start an argument with H2O. Thus the marathon debate on *The Compleat Angler* began, mere days after Gus's birth. Throughout Gus's childhood, the debate rages on just as one convert would argue that his version of religion is better than another. As soon as Gus can read, he sets out on his own to read the book and come up with his own opinions about the controversial book in his family.

By the time Gus is fifteen, he has read *The Compleat Angler* to form his own opinions. To Gus, Izaak Walton's book is only casually about fishing. In Gus's interpretation, it is mostly about a love for God, which generally makes him uncomfortable at the time. After reading the book and Walton's praise for God's love and His Creation, Gus starts questioning who God is and why he hadn't met Him yet. Although he has fished as ardently as Walton, he has walked away without seeing or feeling the presence of God in any form or fashion. As far as his parents' debate over the book, Gus comes to the conclusion that their argument has less to do with the book and more to do with their all-consuming stubbornness. He dismisses the book as an antique rendition of fishing and nowhere near the explaining the fishing prowess that he has, but does take away a



single notion. Currently, he takes very strict and detailed records about his fishing and thinks he might analyze and record any dealings or sightings of God and His Creation in the future.

## **Book One, The Compleat Angler: The Great Izaak Walton Conversy: the Parental Version and The Great Izaak Walton Controversy: My Own Rendition Analysis**

The Compleat Angler, for the Orviston family, is their parallel to the Bible in most religious families. Since the Orviston clan (minus Bill Bob) consider fishing to be their religion, it's fitting that they would consider The Compleat Angler to be their controversial book of choice. While most people would read the book without debate, The Compleat Angler is open to vast interpretation for Ma and H2O.

Similar to most religious families or fanatics, Gus, as their offspring, ventures off to come up with his own conclusions about a book that transformed and cultivated his childhood. Here is Gus's first foray into discovering his own religion and his own way of dealing with God and Higher Beings. Interestingly, he thinks that he can record his dealings with God and religion in the same statistical method with which he records his dealings with fish.



# **Book One, The Compleat Angler: Excerpts from the God-notebook and Being Educated and Gittin Brung Up**

## **Book One, The Compleat Angler: Excerpts from the God-notebook and Being Educated and Gittin Brung Up Summary**

Gus's God-notebook is filled with references of God like "R. Lord", "Fathern Heaven", and "Great-Gawd-Amighty". From what he can see, Walton's "God of nature" does not exist in the suburbs of America, nor do any of these gods fish, from what he can tell. The closest Gus gets to religious fanatics are the men who come knocking on their door to "save" them. When they knock on the door, Ma opens it with a double-barreled shotgun aimed at their knees (thinking that if you shot off their knees, you shot off their ability to pray). The closest Gus gets to associating these men with fishing is when one of the door-knockers accuses Gus and Bill Bob of "baiting a servant of Thlord" with secular comic books.

Gus's other references to God are found from his grandmother, Celestial Darling Carper. By eavesdropping on her conversations, Gus comes to a number of conclusions about God, some of them relevant and others not. Gus reads the Bible and sums it up in a rough paragraph, stating that it is "good in some places" and "dull as a seed catalogue in other". After reading it, he's convinced that God would be happy if he just keep fishing, which is exactly what he plans to do.

The education of Gus and Bill Bob constituted of a number of "fine words" from H2O, while Ma doesn't use many fancy words but more actions. Although Gus is a loner without many friends, he puts his fishing to good use by participating in secret charity events like putting a number of fish hidden in a large puddle at the end of the driveway of a poor family to give them a nice family dinner. Every fall, the lot of his high school becomes flooded with the rains. Gus stocks the new lake with a number of eight-pound carp for three weeks before someone spots one. The Portland newspaper hears about the spectacle, taking a picture and coming up with the theory that the fish swam up the sewer pipe and half-swam, half-crawled the half mile to the parking lot lake. From then on, that parking lot is called the Karping Lot. However, shortly after, three third-graders end up in the hospital for contracting a high fever after spending the evening fishing for more carp in the sewer pipe.

As Bill Bob is growing up, H2O takes interest in him only when he thinks Bill Bob is trying to say his first word: Dada. What H2O doesn't realize is that Bill Bob's vocabulary is already much more vast than that, but when Bill Bob climbs into his lap and says "Mama" as clear as a bell, he loses all interest in Bill Bob. This instance makes Gus



wonder if his father is perhaps less than the greatest father in the world and what kind of relationship they would have if Gus did not fish.

Before Bill Bob is born, Gus is taught by Ma to sell Christmas cards door-to-door as part of his upbringing and education. One of the neighbors down the street has a large Doberman that has already attacked other children in the street. As Gus is biking by the Doberman's fence, the dog leaps over the fence and starts to go after Gus on his bike. Although he is biking as fast as he can, Gus knows he is no match for the dog and starts screaming for Ma. He weaves into the street in the hopes that cars will hit the dog, to no avail. Gus's bike slams into the curb and the Doberman attacks him on the shoulder. Instead of being savagely attacked, however, moments later, the Doberman is on its side, dead. Ma is standing over both of them with a wide grin and smoking twelve-gauge shotgun.

Gus stands up and vomits as his mother takes him into the house. She gets a brainstorm and drives to the local dog pound to find a Mexican hairless/Chihuahua mix and places the apparently-shrunken version of the Doberman into the neighbor's backyard. After a few drinks that evening, the neighbor becomes enamored with the miniature version of his former pet and never questions as to where the Doberman disappeared to. When he moves away in future years, he takes the smaller dog with him.

When Gus asks his mother later how she knew to be in the right place at the right time, she calmly explained that she knew he would be running late for his favorite television show and would take the shortcut by the neighbor's Doberman. With that knowledge, she grabbed the shotgun and headed in that direction in order to be there when her son needed her most. For that reason, Gus calls Ma very intelligent, although she possesses what he calls a "native intelligence". Gus feels that one can't learn native intelligence, but instead one has to be a product of and very familiar with one's surroundings.

There is yet another important piece of childhood education that Ma and H2O give their sons. It is Bill Bob's lack of emotion that makes him the apple of Ma's eye. However, Gus's three emotions of glumness, happiness, and orneriness disappoint Ma. She and H2O have only two emotions—happiness and orneriness. She appreciates a straight-from-the-hip attitude and direct honesty that makes Gus frustrated at times.

## **Book One, The Compleat Angler: Excerpts from the God-notebook and Being Educated and Gittin Brung Up Analysis**

Gus's God notebook is filled with a number of comical references that underlie how religion is actually perceived by young children growing up. Especially if one considers that the religion of choice in the Orviston family is fishing, it can be as troublesome for Gus to find good answers about God as a preacher's son learning how to fish, without



any real guidance from his parents. However, it is important to note that Gus still has a yearning to search for a higher being in his life to see whether or not one exists for him at all.

In addition to the lack of education from either parent about religion, Gus denotes a difference in education between his parents in other ways. His father is filled with pretty words, which is appropriate for his fishing publications. His mother, however, has the "native" intelligence that deals in terms of actions rather than words. She is there for Gus when he needs him. While Gus might doubt how important he'd be to his father if he did not fish, his mother saves him by knowing when he will need her most, as illustrated in the Doberman adventure. However, it is her straight-from-the-hip blunt honesty that Gus most dislikes in her because he recognizes the same qualities in himself. She, on the other hand, does not approve of his "glumness" as she calls it, preferring Bill Bob's stoic unemotional state.



# **Book One, The Compleat Angler: The Ideal Schedule and Voiding My Rheum**

## **Book One, The Compleat Angler: The Ideal Schedule and Voiding My Rheum Summary**

Gus quickly becomes obsessed even more with fishing. He creates his ideal schedule, which dictates each hour of his day to allow the most time for fishing. He plans to sleep only six hours a day and plans for only thirty minutes a day for eating (in between fishing casts). He manages his schedule in such a way that he can enjoy 14.5 hours of fishing each day. In order to achieve this schedule, he sets particular goals, including to not go to college, to move to a small home by himself next to a year-round lake, and to experiment with nicotine and caffeine.

Although very nervous, Gus practices his speech to tell his family that he is moving out to live by himself in a small house by a year-round lake. While at dinner that night, Ma and H2O start to argue over one of the fish that Gus recently caught instead of listening to him. After interrupting him a number of times, Gus finally loses his patience, screaming at them to shut up. In the middle of his trying to correct their story, they start to interrupt him again and Gus snaps. He takes Nijinsky, the stuffed fish that Ma and H2O first met all those years ago, and smashes it into the fireplace. At first, there is nothing but silence, but soon Ma bursts out laughing. Bill Bob disappears and reappears with fifths of Glenfiddich, Christian Brothers, and a few glasses. After enjoying some liquor, no one cares at all when Gus relays that he will be leaving the house. They are proud of him and happily help to move him to his new home.

## **Book One, The Compleat Angler: The Ideal Schedule and Voiding My Rheum Analysis**

Gus plans to have the ideal life of fishing 14.5 hours each day. He has no loftier goal than fishing for the work and beauty of the sport that he excels at doing. The events surrounding Gus's admission that he is moving out of the house illustrate how the parents are the centerpieces of the family life and drama in the Orviston household. Ma and H2O's constant fighting is ever present for the boys. Even though Gus has important news he wants to share, his parents are only interested in whether his latest catch was caught fly-fishing or bait-and-hook style.

Destroying Nijinsky is an important and life-changing act for both Gus and his parents. Months later, Bill Bob will tell him that by destroying Nijinsky, a wall broke down between Ma and H2O and they taught one another about the benefits of fishing in the alternate person's style. For that, Ma will learn to tie fly lures, while H2O appreciates the patience and directness of bait fishing. It is a tense moment that leads Gus to destroy the fish

that represents all of the fighting and controversial debates that he has heard from his parents for years, but when they all begin to laugh, he realizes it's the best thing he could have done. Now his parents are free to concentrate on other things besides constant bickering with each other over the "right" way to fish.



# **Book Two, The Undoing of a Scientific Angler: Where I Lived and What I Lived for and Water on the Brain**

## **Book Two, The Undoing of a Scientific Angler: Where I Lived and What I Lived for and Water on the Brain Summary**

Gus describes his cabin in the woods, his solitary paradise into the fishing world he adores. He doesn't have electricity. H2O, worried that he can't tie lures in the dark, gives him three Coleman camp lanterns. Ma gives him a battery-operated AM/FM radio, while Bill Bob gives him some Lone Ranger comics and frequently writes him letters. However, the most outrageous housewarming gift is a fifty-gallon aquarium that H2O gives Gus as a way to test fly larvae and water bugs with new flies before trying them on the actual lake environment.

As Bill Bob has predicted, Gus starts to get lonely. He catches small steelheads and places them in his tank. His two favorites are Alfred the Great and Sigrid the Small. Sigrid is less than two inches long. She spends hours staring out the window at the rolling river nearby. Alfred, on the other hand, is a vivacious fish whose eating times are a memorable occasion for Gus. After settling in, Gus starts his ideal fishing schedule for two weeks—and says he does not have a single happy memory from that time. After two weeks, Gus becomes an insomniac. Even when he does sleep, he dreams of fishing and hears the water.

Around the Fourth of July, Gus's family shows up to visit him. After weeks of being alone, Gus's power of speech is hindered. Once his parents hear about his ideal fishing schedule and statistics-keeping notebook, they are fascinated and happily enter into a debate between themselves about Izaak Walton and *The Compleat Angler*.

Gus's parents leave, but Bill Bob stays behind. Gus has trouble sleeping as usual and Bill Bob asks him if he is happy. Gus tells him that he doesn't know the relationship between happiness and fishing. He wakes up the next morning and Bill Bob is outside sitting on a stump, looking at chipmunks playing. It's the first thing Gus has done in the house that is not fishing. After breakfast, they take a hike into the woods. As they are walking, Gus realizes that the greenery and peaceful silence away from the water is like a balm to his ears. While Bill Bob has a high view of the river and its surrounding countryside, he sketches a map on four different pieces of paper.

When they return to the cabin, he complies with Bill Bob's request to take the Ideal Schedule from the wall and put up his four maps instead. Bill Bob smiles and says that he actually likes the Tamanawis River. Since it's such an unusual statement from Bill





Bob, Gus asks him why. Bill Bob laughs and says that the question is exactly what the river is asking him. The conversation leaves Gus confused.

That night, they spend time roasting weenies and Gus sleeps well for the first time in weeks. When he drops Bill Bob off at the bus stop, he becomes very sad. Bill Bob has exposed that Gus is falling apart by fishing so much, but the idea of being depressed and not fishing is too terrifying for Gus to consider. By mid-July, Gus is completely altered. After killing a blueback fish and filleting it, he comes back to his house and remembers that he has forgotten to feed his fish today. He grabs a handful of pellets and throws them into the water hastily.

Suddenly, all of the fish go berserk, banging themselves against the glass. Alfred the Great starts to go belly up and Gus is horrified—until he realizes that the food he threw in was tainted with the blood of a mortal enemy! He fishes the pellets out of the water and eventually the other fish are okay, including Sigrid the Small, who resumes her sorrowful stare at the lake. Alfred the Great, however, lies stunned and never recovers.

Gus scoops Alfred the Great up and puts him in a water bottle. He walks him down to the Tamanawis River in the middle of the night, letting his body float down the river. After that, he is severely depressed and upset about the loss of Alfred the Great.

## **Book Two, The Undoing of a Scientific Angler: Where I Lived and What I Lived for and Water on the Brain Analysis**

Gus takes to fishing like he has never fished in his life during this phase of his life. He goes after his Ideal Schedule so fervently that he cannot see any potential drawbacks, such as the isolation, lack of sleep, or problems that lack of nutrition might give him. He quickly settles into his new home and enacts the Ideal Schedule to the last detail. Of course, Gus says that he has not only single happy memory of the Schedule because the Ideal Schedule reduces fishing to a type of job for Gus instead of the relaxing venture it is for most people.

His family comes to visit and his parents are elated to hear about his Ideal Schedule, as though it truly is his job. When Bill Bob stays behind after his parents leave, Gus experiences relaxation for the first time. He finally sleeps through the night and contemplates whether or not he is happy when Bill Bob asks him. Most importantly, Bill Bob points out to Gus that the River is asking him "Why?" every time he fishes in it. Why is Gus so obsessed with the fishing? Why is he taking all of the fish out for no purpose other than to record them in his notebook? Gus will later find out that Bill Bob literally saw what Gus was too blind to notice; from above, the shape of the Tamanawis river forms the word "why". This revelation will later be significant to Gus.

The strong reaction towards the loss of Alfred the Great exemplifies how lonely and lost Gus has become through his solitary living. The death of his fish combined with the

death of a human the next day will provoke Gus to really strive for and understand more about higher beings and the source of his water to find a spiritual place of his own.



# **Book Two, The Undoing of a Scientific Angler: Anvil Abe and the Phantom Fisherman and Fainting Before the Duel**

## **Book Two, The Undoing of a Scientific Angler: Anvil Abe and the Phantom Fisherman and Fainting Before the Duel Summary**

After Alfred the Great's death, Gus drinks heavily that evening. He awakes at dawn and decides to go fishing, which he later regrets. As he is fishing down the stream in Sardine, his canoe, a fog starts to roll in quickly. Soon, he cannot even make out the shore, which he knows is just a few feet away.

Hungover, he continues to try to find his way to Eaton's dock, which he knows is nearby. Another boat passes him and although he could cry out to them, his sense of communication is so thwarted after weeks of living alone that he doesn't say a thing. The other fisherman wonder to each other if that noise they just heard was the Phantom Fisherman. Shortly after, Gus hears a man screaming for his friend Abe. Gus is freezing, so he reaches for his slicker under him and accidentally loses his paddle. The fog is so thick he cannot find it anywhere. He sees something floating in the water and using his hands, paddles over to it. He casts a line towards it to reel it closer to the boat. That's when he sees the white hand floating in the water and realizes he has just caught a dead man.

He is sickened, but fights nausea and starts to haul Abe behind the boat as he paddles with his hands in the water. After awhile, he gives Abe a life jacket to help him float better as he pulls him. All the while, Gus talks to Rodney, his fishing rod, to stay calm. They cruise along until suddenly Abe gets caught on something under the water. Despite his revulsion, Gus jumps in the water next to the dead man to release him. He frees Abe's caught boot and they finally find Eaton's dock.

Gus is sick and numb when he reaches the dock. He feels a man lift him up. The man's name is Titus Irving Gerrard. Titus takes Gus back to his house—and away from the clutches of Maggie Eaton and her rough veterinary medicine—to help him get well again. Once he is able, Gus goes back to his house and is asleep before his head hits the pillow.



## **Book Two, The Undoing of a Scientific Angler: Anvil Abe and the Phantom Fisherman and Fainting Before the Duel Analysis**

Finding Abe the Fisherman is an important moment in Gus's life. He manically fishes every day, but the appearance of Abe will change the way he sees life. After all, Abe was a fisherman like Gus and now he's dead. It leads Gus to think about bigger questions than just focusing on fishing every day.

Fortunately, one of the people who will help Gus to answer some of the bigger questions in life is the man who helps nurture him after he falls sick rescuing Abe's body. Irving will later expand Gus's perspective on life and give him the philosophical training that his lack of schooling and H2O could not provide.



# Book Two, The Undoing of Scientific Angler: I Reckon and Anamnesis

## Book Two, The Undoing of Scientific Angler: I Reckon and Anamnesis Summary

When Gus wakes up again, it's 8:45, but he's not sure if it's day or night. He doesn't eat for three days before he finally has some breakfast. Taking this as a good sign, Gus bundles up and goes outside to see the natural surroundings with which he is so familiar. Instead of fishing, however, he takes in the scenery in a much more contemplative manner since, as he feels, another fisherman is dead. He feels he has some rudimentary philosophical foundation and starts to contemplate what a pathetic lot fishermen are, they who just destroy, deceive, and torment the very things they swear to love.

Looking through his father's past publications and other important fishing publications, he searches for some references towards death, life, and dying. He finds very few and nothing that helps him. He knows his father's idea of life and death is summed up in the Sum Total theory, while Ma feels there is nothing to say on the topic so talking about it at all is pointless and she has no patience for hearing about others' theories on the topic. Gus concludes by seeing himself as nothing more than a random collection of molecules—or a vast nothing.

When Gus comes back inside his house again it is dark. Suddenly, a unique word pops into his mind: Dreefee. When Bill Bob was a child, he went to sleep with dreefees, which replaced the typical teddy bear or blanket of the usual child. The dreefee was something that Bill Bob had found during the day that had enticed him. He could not sleep unless this dreefee was with him.

One night, as Gus is tucking him in, Bill Bob asks if he likes his dreefee for the evening, a pine knot. While talking about his dreefee, Bill Bob tells him about Garden Angels, which is Gus's shadow. When you die, according to Bill Bob, you immediately change places with your Garden Angel. The head of all the Garden Angels was the Queen who lived with them in an idyllic, beautiful world.

Gus remembers this story as he stares at a pine knot in his own home, taking refuge and consolation in the idea of the Garden Angels and their Queen. He imagines Abe the Fisherman rising from the water and rising into the sky, being welcomed by the Queen and her Angels.



## **Book Two, The Undoing of Scientific Angler: I Reckon and Anamnesis Analysis**

Gus's philosophical beginnings now blossom with the death of Abe. He searches for more answers in the only books he knows—fishing publications. When he comes back empty-handed, it is a past conversation with Bill Bob that gives him the most assurance.

What's interesting about this scene is that Gus is getting philosophical answers from his brother's experiences as a seven-year-old. And these explanations make a great deal of sense to Gus. As Gus points out, his thoughts are wholly his own, with no trace of H2O, Ma, or his own input. As Bill Bob says, he is only telling him what he remembers, having seen the Queen himself when he was a child. Gus needs more philosophical foundations and is obviously lacking in human contact and communication during his isolation by the lake.



# Book Three, Characters in Nature: The River Writes, Neighbors and The Warble of the Water Owl

## Book Three, Characters in Nature: The River Writes, Neighbors and The Warble of the Water Owl Summary

Gus awakes the next day and only has the desire to look at things and not fish. He is so consumed by the beauty of the Outdoors that he dresses, throws some fruit in a rucksack, and goes outside. He hikes to the top of the hill in the same spot that he and Bill Bob had been to earlier. It is on this trip that he sees what Bill Bob had seen—the shape of the river forming the word "why?". There it is, in Gus's favorite element, a continual questioning of why.

The question unsettles Gus, making him question his murderous actions of killing fish just to make a note in his fishing notebook. He starts to question the difference between the need to fish for food and greed of fishing for statistics and because he is good at it. When he was small, he met an Indian named Thomas Bigeater, who was a friend of Ma's and a superior fisherman. Before he killed his fish, he said a small prayer of thanks that the fish was about to give up his body to the nourishment of Bigeater's. Bigeater tells both Ma and Gus a story about two Indians who had abused and terrorized some of Nature's creation and the price that the Indians and their tribe had to pay for the malice.

He also recalls a story from Piscator that encourages some friendliness for personal growth. With this story in mind, Gus sets out with a few of his own treasures to meet his nearby neighbors. The first house he visits he nicknames the Coke and Doughnut Dairy, meeting the six children, three dogs, and two parents that live there. Next, he travels to a weatherbeaten home of candlemaking hippies. From there, he visits other fishermen and makes a half-dozen other stops throughout town. By giving away free fish, he exchanges with his neighbors, getting an oil change, bag of corn chips, pamphlets, and a history of the Tamanawis River and more. He feels he has found his people and reverses the idea that solitude is the cure-all for all the world's problems and the thing that would make him the ideal person. Instead, he realizes that solitude is just a raw material, allowing a man to make him what he really is—which is a terrifying and tremendous concept to hold.

The next day, Gus goes into town for a huge breakfast, grabs a bag of oranges and feels like sitting in the sun and going skinny-dipping, which is odd because he has never gone swimming for fun in all of his twenty years. As he pulls into a random part of the river, he puts his oranges down with the idea that he will pick them up again soon, but he never recovers the oranges. He sees a person up in the alder and goes to see a beautiful woman fishing. She is fishing in a way that he has never seen before and Gus



is mesmerized by both her beauty and her skill at fishing. As he watches, she hooks a fish and throws her rod like a spear, chasing after it on land before taking off all of her clothes and swimming after it naked. Gus hides behind a rock to avoid being seen by her.

He hides until she wanders out of view and he tries to pretend like he has just stumbled across her. He is so nervous and unaccustomed to conversation, however, that he cannot hold a conversation and after mumbling nonsense, he wades into the water, emerging on the other side so that she won't be scared of him.

## **Book Three, Characters in Nature: The River Writes, Neighbors and The Warble of the Water Owl Analysis**

The walk that Gus takes will again transform his life. Essentially, Gus meets the girl of his dreams, but loses her just as quickly as he discovers her. Her unique way of fishing will command his attention and steal his heart, depressing him when she is not around. Eddy's character in the story is reminiscent of the Goddess Diana for her athletic prowess, grace and agility. In a similar way, Gus finds Eddy naked in the same way Diana was caught bathing naked in the water, turning Acteon into a deer for his own dogs to hunt him.

Gus recalls Thomas Bigeater's story about the two Indians who abused other fish, and starts to appreciate his own natural surroundings and environment more. Later, with Eddy, he will say a prayer to the fish before he kills them for food as a way of thanking them for their sacrifice.





# Book Three, Characters in Nature: Eddy and Jesus Keeps Fishing

## Book Three, Characters in Nature: Eddy and Jesus Keeps Fishing Summary

The girl stares at Gus from across the river, but sits down cross-legged to hear him speak, which calms him. All he can think to say to her, however, are quotes from *The Compleat Angler*. She tells him her name is Eddy and he tries to tell her his, but it comes out as "Gust". He finally tells her that she has a bite and off she flies, far away from him.

Gus is highly distraught. He jumps in his car, thinking she might have driven away. He overtakes a car only to find it is not her. He returns to the alder where he found her and sees no trace of her other than her rod with the steelhead that she had caught still attached.

Gus is depressed. He has lost Eddy and has no information about her whatsoever. He feels that he no longer fears Death, but fears never seeing Eddy again. Fortunately, he has the children from the Coke and Doughnut Dairy visit him for fishing lessons to keep his mind off of her loss.

A few days later, he sees a man fishing in the river. He wonders who the joker might be when he recognizes the vocabulary of his friend Titus. He comes up to Titus, laughing at his fishing attire and lack of skill. They have a bourbon together and Gus tells Titus about his week, including the adventure with Eddy. Titus offers to take Gus back to Portland to teach him a few things about philosophy in exchange for Gus teaching Titus how to fish. Gus, for lack of anything better to do, agrees to go along, despite his reservations towards the big city.

## Book Three, Characters in Nature: Eddy and Jesus Keeps Fishing Analysis

Eddy takes off, seemingly for good here. Also illustrated in this chapter is Gus's true inability to hold a good conversation at this point. Interestingly, he starts to quote *The Compleat Angler* in a way that a son of a strong Christian family would start quoting the Bible. In essence, this book is what Gus is most familiar with, which lends a high amount of humor to the situation. Eddy, however, appreciates the reference and understands the quotes, which signals that she is just the right person for someone like Gus.

When Gus sees Irving attempting to fish again, they strike their deal: trade philosophy stories for fishing tips and they will both be better off. It amounts to a remarkable friendship for Gus.



# **Book Three, Characters in Nature: Descartes and Philosophizing**

## **Book Three, Characters in Nature: Descartes and Philosophizing Summary**

Gus wakes up in a strange room, hungover. He returns to a rocking chair where moments later, a large dog is angrily staring at him. Irving walks in the back door with food and Gus pleads to Irving for help. Irving tells Gus he is sitting in Descartes chair. Gus cautiously climbs out and over to the couch, where moments later, they all three have tea together. Irving interprets Descartes' thoughts through "Psychic Dictation".

Gus eats some oatmeal to help repair the damage of the night before and then he and Irving resume their philosophical discussions, with Irving leading the way. All day long, they eat, drink tea, and read as Irving helps Gus make different philosophical realizations about his world. After two days of this, Gus leaves Irving's home with fourteen new philosophical books to read.

## **Book Three, Characters in Nature: Descartes and Philosophizing Analysis**

Gus's relationship with Irving is cemented when he spends these two days with Irving. He gets a philosophical breakthrough when he imagines his relationship to a higher being similar to how he relates to Rodney, his fishing rod. Once he makes the comparisons to fishing, Gus's understanding of a higher being starts to make more sense to him. The fourteen books he brings home from Irving's house will provide ample answers and start to help him question and delve deeper into the bigger questions in life.



# **Book Three, Characters in Nature: Little, But Strong and Closing the Door**

## **Book Three, Characters in Nature: Little, But Strong and Closing the Door Summary**

Gus goes to his parents home and walks right in the door. When he arrives, however, they all seem very nervous to see him and tell him they were playing Musical Chairs, which Gus does not believe. He walks out the door and heads towards the US Grant Creek, otherwise known as the Sisisicu to the local Indians. He starts walking beside it and wonders where its source is now. He is depressed by how dirty and clouded it is compared to how it once was. After a false start into a commercial building, Gus finally discovers the source of the Sisisicu located under an imitation Liberty Bell under a mock Independence Hall.

That evening, back at home, as his parents start squabbling, Gus returns to his old bedroom. He is infinitely sad because of what has happened to the old stream, and the fact that he is lonely and does not have Eddy. Later that evening, he tucks in Bill Bob and his dreefee of the day. He tells Gus about a singing mouse that a friend of his had seen. He teaches Gus the sad mouse song and as soon as he learns it, Bill Bob falls asleep.

The next day, Gus travels to the Sisisicu again, but this time he is searching for any fish in the stream. He finds a single fish, and in view of an odd VW bus that watches him, he lands the fish and sets it free. Watching the single dingy fish go free makes Gus realize he has nothing else for him back at home. He thumbs a ride back to Tamanawis River immediately.

## **Book Three, Characters in Nature: Little, But Strong and Closing the Door Analysis**

Gus is on a search for the beginning of things—their source. When he reads his philosophy, he is questioning his own existence and beginnings on his own life. Gus retraces his steps to his childhood home and explores one of the first rivers he knew, walking to the site of its source. Ironically, it is under the imitation Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, both strong symbols of America and of the people who sunk the source of this stream underground for their own capitalist endeavors.

Gus sets the final suburban fish free and inspires himself to do the same, to break free from what is comfortable for what is right for Gus and where he is meant to be. The fact that he is being watched by the silhouette of a VW bus doesn't dissuade him at all.



# Book Four, The Line of Light: Hemingway and Dutch

## Book Four, The Line of Light: Hemingway and Dutch Summary

When Gus arrives home, he immediately starts to read all of the philosophical minds that he had brought home from Irving's house. He stops by the Coke and Doughnut Dairy and tells the parents that they can send the kids over whenever they feel like. The kids feel like following him two and one half minutes after he walks into his front door. He takes all of the children fishing, but it is Ernie II, dubbed "Hemingway", who is the only child who shows real talent and resilience to the sport, even though he is only six.

One day, he hooks a fish, but as he is bringing it in, the fish sinks to the bottom and he loses it. Hemingway bursts into tears, but the other siblings immediately stick their rods into the water in the hopes of helping Hemingway. In a moment of brilliance, Gus dives to the bottom of the river and, finding the fish still on Hemingway's line, he nets it, grabs Hemingway's line, and shoots to the surface. As soon as the children see the fish, they all fly into the water to be with Gus. Gus hands the fish to Hemingway, who holds the enormous ten-pounder like a baby.

From that day on, Gus is a hero in the area and starts to tie lures and make rods for local shops. People from Portland start to stop by his house, especially once they find out he is the son of Henning Hale-Orviston.

## Book Four, The Line of Light: Hemingway and Dutch Analysis

Gus's relationship with Hemingway gives him fame throughout his area, but more importantly, it gives him a unique and special story for him to share with his neighbors and their children. This story will cement his relationship with everyone at the Coke and Doughnut Dairy, as well as eventually fall on Eddy's own ears.

The story of his fishing skill will also bring in financial gain from the rods and lures that he sells.

Later that week, Gus goes fishing and runs into a man who can't fish very well. In addition, he keeps scaring the fish, irritating Gus. They start talking, however, and Gus helps him catch a big fish. Suddenly, the man says he has to hurry back to write tomorrow's column in the Oregon Reporter. It is only then that he realizes the man is the Flying Dutchman, Dutch Hines. He is a famous writer about fishing and now wants to interview Gus about his fishing style. Gus's imagination takes off; this interview could make him famous and rich! With slight pause, Gus agrees to do the interview.

The interview is later published and it is obvious that Gus is making fun of the entire situation.



# Book Four, The Line of Light: Nick the Convert and The Trek

## Book Four, The Line of Light: Nick the Convert and The Trek Summary

Gus keeps very busy with making fifteen rods and three hundred flies each month. In addition, he has a ton of wonderful gifts from bartering with his neighbors, including a small goat from Hemingway. A man named Nick is a slow but consistent worker, who asks to stay with Gus to learn how to make flies and lures like he can. The day that he leaves, Nick tells him the story of how he was injured on a submarine. When he leaves, Gus is sad.

Gus lies down after Nick leaves, thinking he will be tired with the wine. Instead, Gus's mind is filled with Nick's story. At 2 am, he makes himself a large breakfast and takes a journey to the source of the Tamanawis River. He finds the source after a few days of living in nature.

Gus's trek to the source of the Tamanawis River is the culmination of his spiritual searching. Since the Tamanawis River is so important to him, surely the source of all this great water would yield a holy, spiritual place for him.

Finding a rusty cup there, he drinks from the source of the river. After staring at the water for some time, Gus realizes he is not inspired and does not feel the presence of a higher being. With that, he realizes he is hungry and tired, no longer fasting on his quest, and he takes off. That night, walking home, no car drives by to give him a ride and he finds he has a third and fourth wind to carry him on. While walking, he imagines himself a raven that is soaring through the sky.

## Book Four, The Line of Light: Nick the Convert and The Trek Analysis

Nick's presence initiates Gus's sudden inspiration to find himself and go on a trek.

Just as with any book about spirituality, Gus has gone to find his spiritual place of awakening at the location that makes the most sense to him—the source of the Tamanawis River.



# **Book Four, The Line of Light: The Raven and the Why, and Googler and Mangler**

## **Book Four, The Line of Light: The Raven and the Why, and Googler and Mangler Summary**

After he returns, it rains for three days. Shortly after, it is Halloween and in the hopes of visitors, Gus carves a number of pumpkins. Once he realizes the whole neighborhood is at a party that he was also invited to, he heads over to the Coke and Doughnut Dairy. While there, he enjoys a number of games and has an enlightening conversation with Hemingway and Arjuna, son of the nearby candlemakers. Both of them have an imaginary friend that gets them into trouble—Googler and Mangler.

After a full night, he returns home to see a VW bus parked next to his pickup. He realizes that Eddy is alone inside his house, waiting for him.

## **Book Four, The Line of Light: The Raven and the Why, and Googler and Mangler Analysis**

Gus's Halloween adventures show him that he has made great friends within the neighborhood. Of course, the best thing that happens to him that evening is the sudden and unexpected appearance of Eddy.





# Book Four, Trick or Treat and The Line of Light

## Book Four, Trick or Treat and The Line of Light Summary

Gus walks in and, despite his shock, manages to hold a good conversation with Eddy. Through her tales, he finds out how she found his place. She had watched him catch and free the fish at the Sisisicu River, as well as having heard the story of his wondrous fishing from Hemingway. Finally, she read the famous column where he pleaded with her to visit him, assuring her that he was normal. That night, they kiss and go to sleep—Gus on his couch and Eddy in his loft.

After a few days, they start to share his bed together.

Much to Gus's dismay, Eddy tells him that she needs to go to Portland to talk with her parents. Gus is very worried that she will disappear and he will lose her again. Before she leaves, she makes him promise to do one more favor for her. She hooks a large salmon with a line and leader that are too light to actually catch the fish. She tells him only to play the fish, and kissing him, leaves.

Gus spends the remainder of the day and evening with the fish. Eventually, both the fish and human get accustomed to one another, and when it is time to unhook it, Gus has a spiritual moment with his fish unlike any other. She is so calmed by his presence that she lets him dive under the water and unhook the line from her mouth by hand, holding her while she is still alive, under the water.

Gus is so tired after unhooking the fish that he cannot even fathom what he has just done. As he is walking home and dawn rises, he hears a raven in the distance. That is when he receives the sharp pain and sees a thin line light, feeling the presence of the Ancient One. He falls to his knees and eventually the presence passes, but the good pain that it has given him is left in his heart.

## Book Four, Trick or Treat and The Line of Light Analysis

Finally, Gus achieves the presence and conviction of a higher being—without even searching for it. Through his promise to Eddy and his nurturing relationship with the salmon, the fisherman has come full circle. No more fishing to kill the animal and record it in his notebook. Gus has just fished and handled the fish, releasing it to the water and establishing a relationship unlike any he has had before.

In one small fishing expedition, Gus finally achieves the presence of the higher being and understands true and unending love for Eddy.



# Book Five: At the End of the Line

## Book Five: At the End of the Line Summary

Gus says he's relayed all that he needs now. Eddy comes back to him and they are married shortly thereafter. Bill Bob, Irving, and Descartes are witnesses. It is after Gus gets married that he meets one of the most important females in his life—Julia. Julia is the tiny baby sister that looks identical to H2O and comes along with Bill Bob when he comes to visit Gus.

It turns out that Gus's destruction of Nijinsky released a bondage between Ma and H2O. Afterwards, they started embarking on learning about the other's method of fishing. When Gus walks in to his nervous parents and Bill Bob playing Musical Chairs, Ma was actually tying flies for fly-fishing. Somewhere along the way, she also became pregnant with H2O's child and gave birth to a little girl they named after a philosopher that Irving had introduced them to. Gus is very pleased.

## Book Five: At the End of the Line Analysis

In his own way, Gus finally ends the debate and controversy that encompasses his parents' entire relationship with the destruction of Nijinsky. In addition, the day that Gus walks in on his family and they say they are playing Musical Chairs, they aren't completely lying. They are playing Musical Chairs with their fishing styles, opening their minds to something new.

Gus gains a little sister, a wife, and a new set of friends by the end of his journey.



# Characters

## Augustine Gus Orviston

Son of the famous writer Henning Hale-Orviston and Carolina "Ma" Carper and brother to Bill Bob Orviston, Gus is a fishing prodigy. He grows up in a family whose main focus is fishing and not intellectual pursuits.

After completing high school, Gus moves to his own cabin in the woods next to a year-round stream. He moves here in the hopes of achieving his Ideal Schedule, which is fishing fourteen and one half hours each day. He gives himself only six hours to sleep and minimal time to eat, transportation to the river, etc. in order to achieve this goal. He is inspired to the Ideal Schedule in part by reading *The Compleat Angler* by Izaak Walton, whose book is one piece of literature that the Orviston family lives by.

After weeks of living by himself, talking to no one and fishing all day, Gus starts to lose his mind. After finding a dead body floating in the river, he starts to question his lifestyle overall. He starts to introduce himself to his neighbors and reads philosophy with a man named Titus and his dog Descartes. He finds more reward in these interactions with his neighbors. One day, he walks to a new part of the river and spies on a girl with whom he immediately falls in love. After an awkward meeting, she runs away from him. Gus will lament Eddy's sudden departure immensely.

For Halloween, he attends a neighborhood party. Upon his return, he finds Eddy in his house in front of a warm fire. He recovers from this shock to find that she read a newspaper column about Gus while he was fishing with a columnist earlier in the month. At the end of the column, Gus petitions Eddy to find him again, giving his address and hoping that she will read the column. She does and they fall in love. Gus has finally found a fishing partner and life partner to keep him happy and fulfilled.

## Eddy

The love of Gus's life, Gus first sees Eddy while she is fishing farther up the Tamanawis River. She is fishing in a way that he has never seen before, which immediately entrances him. He watches her from afar as she holds a fishing pole made of tree bark and shoots it through the sky once she catches the fish, racing after it on the ground before diving into the water with the fish to catch it.

When Gus interrupts her, she is obviously startled, but he races to the other side of the river to calm her fears. Since he has gone so long without talking to another human being, he cannot carry a conversation, but instead quotes fishing books as a means of communication. She tells him her name and races off to get away from him.

Later, Eddy will read about a local fisherman in the popular fishing column and realize that it is Gus. At the end of the column, Gus has asked the columnist to include his



contact information in the hopes that Eddy will read the column and come find him. His wish is granted when she appears one evening after he comes home from a Halloween party. They talk about fishing and fall madly in love.

She returns to her home in Portland to get some of her things and talk to her parents, commanding Gus to fish for a large salmon on a very small leader and line. He knows he can never catch the fish this way, but does as Eddy says and follows it, never losing it after hours of its traveling upstream. After awhile, Gus realizes the implications behind the exercise and recognizes his deep love for Eddy. She returns and moves into his house to stay with him forever.

## **Carolina Carper**

Otherwise known as "Ma" throughout the novel, Carolina is Gus's mother and Henning's wife. Unlike her husband, Ma is a bait-and-hook angler, preferring a good set of worms to fly-fishing lures. She is the direct opposite of her husband in her upbringing as well. While Henning is more refined and elegant, Ma comes from a more rugged background. For this reason, she is very protective of her sons and calls it just like she sees it. She defends her son against a neighbor's Doberman and seems to have an inherent foresight in her that allows her to be there when she is most needed to protect and defend her sons.

## **Henning Hale-Orviston**

Gus's father, Henning Hale-Orviston, is a famous angler and writer of fishing expeditions. Called "Hen" by his wife and "H2O" by his son, Henning is an avid fly fisherman and one of the leaders in the fishing industry on fishing with a fly. His relationship to fly fishing helps mold Gus with his own fly-fishing skills from the time he is a small boy. Although Gus questions whether his relationship with his father would be as strong if he were not a fishing prodigy, he does hold some respect for his father's knowledge and training.

## **Bill Bob**

Although he is Gus's younger brother, Bill Bob has an "old soul" mentality and presence about him. In fact, one of the people that helps to form Gus's views on the world is Bill Bob, through his interpretation of the world and afterlife. Bill Bob wants to have nothing to do with fishing and hates water as well. For this reason, he sticks out in the Orviston family. However, because he has no emotions and is so independent, he is the apple of Ma's eye.

Bill Bob's theory on the Garden Angels and their Queen helps Gus to define his own perspectives on higher beings in his world. Bill Bob gives Gus this theory when he is merely seven years old. In addition, Bill Bob is the one who recognizes the true



message of the Tamanawis River, which asks the perpetual question of "Why?" with its unique shape. He is Gus's best friend even if their relationship is an unusual one.

## **Titus Irving Gerrard**

Gus's philosophical teacher, Titus and his dog Descartes save and protect Gus after his river trip when he recovers Abe's body. Gus teaches Titus how to fish while Titus teaches Gus different philosophical leaders.

## **Descartes**

A character of pure humor in the novel, Descartes is Irving's dog. According to Irving, Descartes's highest goal in life is to be human and he does everything he can to act like a human, including rocking in his own rocking chair and drinking tea with his master. Irving relays Descartes's comments as he can read his dog's mind.

## **Hemingway**

One of the children from the Coke and Doughnut Dairy, Hemingway is one of the many children Gus teaches to fish, but one of the only ones with a real commitment and talent for the sport. He will later be in Gus and Eddy's wedding.

## **Maggie Eaton**

Gus has a deep fear of Maggie Eaton, another humorous character in the novel. When he drags Abe the Fisherman to Eaton's dock, he knows that he is sick, but dreads Maggie's care. Maggie specializes in veterinary care, but believes humans can benefit from the rough and inexact science as well as animals.

## **Abe the Fisherman**

Although he never speaks, Abe's presence as Death in the novel sparks Gus to go in search for a deeper meaning to life. He searches his fishing publications and other sources to find out his own beliefs about a higher being and what happens to one when one dies. It takes Abe's body to force Gus to ask these questions.



# Objects/Places

## Tamanawis River

The location where Gus moves to when he buys his own house by the river. It is here where he plays out his Ideal Schedule and eventually sees and feels the presence of a higher being. As Bill Bob points out, the Tamanawis River constantly asks the question "why?" with its shape.

## Nijinsky

The name of the fish that brought H2O and Ma together when they were younger. Through a pre-arranged deal for sponsorship money, they agree to tell everyone that the large fish was caught on H2O's rod, even though Ma had actually caught it. Gus later destroys the fish, essentially freeing the family from the lie.

## Rodney

Gus's custom, handmade rod and reel, Rodney becomes Gus's best friend before he meets Eddy. He talks to Rodney as if he is human throughout his fishing adventures.

## Rodneyette

Gus makes a version of Rodney for Eddy when she moves in. Together, they fish with their custom rods and reels for fish.

## Sardine

The name of Gus's boat and what he is fishing in when he finds the dead body floating in the water.

## Dreefees

For Bill Bob, deefrees are the items that he has selected throughout the day to be his companion at night. These items have bigger significance than the everyday uses and come to signal a higher religious significance for Gus as well.

## Bag of Oranges

When Gus takes the random walk through the woods to the river, he brings a bag of oranges with him as a snack. Upon seeing Eddy on the alder, however, he drops the



bag, never to pick it up again. Eddy will later find the bag of oranges and know that he had been spying on her for quite some time before actually making his presence known.

## **The Fifty-Gallon Fish Aquarium**

When Gus first moves into his new home, H2O gives him a fifty-gallon fish tank on which to practice his fishing lures before taking them out into the "real" world on the stream. Gus places small fish in there, including Alfred the Great and Sigrid the Small, who will be his first friends in his new home.

## **The Carping Lot**

After a heavy rain, the parking lot of Gus's high school floods. For fun, he places a large fish in there. When the fish is spotted feeding there one day, a newspaper columnist speculates on how the fish could have ended up there. The fun continues until three third-graders go to the hospital after a bad fever from fishing the sewer the large fish supposedly came from.

## **Ma's Twelve Gauge Shotgun**

When religious fanatics come to the door as Gus is growing up, Ma greets them with a twelve-gauge shotgun. When Gus is chased down by the ferocious Doberman in his neighborhood, it is Ma who knows that the incident is about to take place and kills the Doberman immediately before he attacks Gus, using her twelve gauge shotgun. In essence, the shotgun and its fast arrival symbolizes Ma's "native" intelligence and her direct, to-the-point approach to life.





# Themes

## Fishing

The concept of fishing is an important one throughout the novel. Gus is a fishing prodigy who comes from two parents who fish—albeit in directly opposite fashions. The dichotomy between Ma's direct bait-and-hook approach and H2O's fluid, elaborate fly-fishing style produces a unique fisherman in Gus. He is proficient in both styles, but cannot tell either parent how he caught his fish without a debate brewing in his household. Fishing is the platform on which all conversations and communication is held in the Orviston family. And until the destruction of Nijinsky, their different styles of fishing do little more than cause strife in the family. When Gus destroys Nijinsky, H2O and Ma are suddenly open to the idea of fishing in the other's style, quelling the flames of debate that raged for decades in their house.

Through fishing, Gus gains a deeper appreciation for and understanding with Nature. When he wants to seek a higher being and gain better understanding of God, he literally goes to the source of his happiness and talents when he searches for the mouth of the Tamanawis River spontaneously one afternoon. It is a journey similar to those in believers of the Bible or other Seekers, but all based and influenced by Gus's love of fishing.

Fishing is also the vehicle through which he finds Eddy and how they communicate initially. When she leaves to go home and talk to her parents, she leaves him with a fishing conundrum through which he finds the true meaning and acceptance of his love for her. However, his final act of fishing before she returns will ultimately show him toward the higher power that he sought after, and will establish a relationship with the fish he catches that he will maintain for the rest of his life.

## Spiritual Religion

Gus is a man who loves to fish. However, the solitary life that he gives himself in the pursuit of the Ideal Schedule leads him to other questions and pursuits as well. Although he originally strives to fish fourteen and one half hours a day, he soon learns that this goal is not fulfilling. When he fishes a dead body out of the river with Abe the Fisherman one foggy afternoon, the questions that had been lingering in Gus's mind attack him with full-force. What is death? Where is God and spirituality in the world that he lives in?

Gus comes home to read his best source of knowledge to date—fishing publications. When he comes back empty-handed, Gus goes on a quest to find the higher being that others mention. Through Irving's philosophy and his own trek to the source of the Tamanawis River, Gus starts to find some answers. However, it is not until the end of the novel when he is fishing with the large salmon on a too-small leader and line that Gus is hit by the presence of and connection to a higher being. By respecting and



creating a relationship with a fish—instead of just hunting it to add a statistic to his notebook—Gus realizes the true meaning and appreciation of Nature and all of its animals. He feels an immense love for Eddy to show him the way to true love, and from then on, before he kills a fish, he says a prayer, thanking it for a good life and for sacrificing itself for the nourishment of his body.

In a way, Gus's search for a spiritual religion is very similar to another solitary writer, Henry David Thoreau. One of the chapters—Where I Lived and What I Lived For—is a direct acknowledgment of how closely tied to Thoreau's book Gus's own search is. While Thoreau went into the wilderness to find out how to live on his own, Gus is going as an escape from suburban life, and in the quest of living and fishing in the beauty of Nature without the confines and perversions of city living. Gus will gain a higher appreciation for his natural form of spiritual religion in this environment.

## Communion

Gus is a solitary and quiet child growing up. Although he says he has no social limitations, his talent of fishing lends him to have a quiet, reserved personality. He compares himself to most prodigies like Mozart who were essentially normal as far as development, but whose prodigy separated them from their peers significantly.

When Gus goes to live by himself after school, he does not worry about loneliness. It is Bill Bob alone who recognizes that Gus's solitary nature, previously buffered by his debating parents and the presence of his little brother, might strain from being alone all of the time. Bill Bob gives Gus "The Lone Ranger" comics as a sign, and questions his state of happiness the first time he visits Gus in his new home by the Tamanawis River.

Gus solves the problem of his diminishing mental state and incapacity to communicate with others by visiting his neighbors and the nearby town. By exchanging gifts and making friends, he learns the importance of having a good base of people around one—while still enjoying one's solitude. As Gus states, solitude is nothing more than the chance to be alone to make yourself into the person that you are. With his budding relationships with neighbors, Gus learns the importance of communion and human interaction in his life.

It is with this lesson of the importance of communion that Gus lives a more satisfactory life. After all, had he not intermingled with his neighbors, he would never have met Eddy, who runs into Hemingway and hears about Gus's famous fishing abilities, or the other people in town who rave about Gus and his kindnesses. When he exchanges the items that he readily has around the house, he comes home with many more gifts than he had expected, as well as the addition of having a community of "his people" surrounding him.



# Style

## Point of View

The entire story is written from the point-of-view of the main character, Gus Orviston. He tells all of the events that happened to him through his own eyes. In fact, even his birth is relayed to the reader from a story that his uncle Zeke Carper, his mother's brother, tells during Carper family reunions. When important characters like Eddy disappear from the novel for a time, Gus is as confused and lost as the reader as to when and if she will return or if he will see her again.

It is important that the point of view never leaves Gus in other aspects of the novel as well. When Gus is running from the Doberman attack dog, the reader truly wonders how the situation will unfold, and the horror of the situation is conveyed through Gus's descriptions. Had the novel switched to Ma grabbing her shotgun, this dramatic scene would lose its impact. Also, at the end of the novel, when Julia appears, Gus is floored and confused since he was not there to witness the changes that had been happening at his home. In this way, he receives the information suddenly and is filled with satisfaction.

## Setting

Most of the novel is set in or near the Tamanawis River, which is appropriate for a novel that centers around a fisherman and his life journey. Gus travels to the source of the Tamanawis River in his search for a holy and spiritual place, since the water is such a source of consolation and livelihood for him. In addition, it is on this river that he learns to appreciate and respect the meaning of life. Other settings of interest include Irving's home in Portland, where Gus recovers after finding Abe, and where Irving starts Gus's lessons on philosophy. Eaton's dock is the location of Gus's departure from the river with Abe the Fisherman's body.

The setting of the Tamanawis River is very important for Gus. He yearns for a place far away from the city life, initially for his fishing. He wants to be far away from his family, which is typical for many young people seeking a life on their own. It is the beauty and the exact physical look of the Tamanawis River with its "WHY" shape, however, that leads Gus on a path for spiritual understanding and communion with his neighbors instead of true solitary living.

## Language and Meaning

The language throughout the novel is very descriptive and intellectual. The range of vocabulary is set for an advanced, college-level reader. The reader is often given a great insight into the surroundings or personality of the character through the humor and descriptions that are found within each passage. There are few chapters of heavy



dialogue, which helps to convey the silence and solidarity that Gus encounters every day in life. Heavy dialogue is present rarely in the novel, and it typically exists to show his parents fighting or to better illustrate the personality of a particular character, such as in the case of Irving talking for his dog Descartes.

The dialogue that Duncan uses will vary, depending on the character. In this way, Duncan can more easily portray the type of person that his character is. A perfect example of this is the dialogue between Ma and H2O. While H2O's language is refined, Ma exhibits a more rustic and rugged form of speech, instilling a true comedic flair with all of their exchanges. One can almost picture Gus rolling his eyes during their great debates.

## Structure

The novel consists of three parts with roughly six to eight chapters in each. The three parts indicate different changes in Gus's life, from his early years and childhood to living by himself to finding a life and spirituality with Eddy. The chapters themselves are not very long, but relay a few stories and instances at a time, making the novel very easy to read despite the long, descriptive paragraphs which can sometimes slow down the reader. Of course, the humor and wit of the writer is evident throughout, making the novel a page-turner.



## Quotes

"mine were the sure, swift dartings of a deformed but hefty trout at home with the water, finning and hovering in its warm black pool." p. 3

"If a man's wife was his nemesis, his antagonist, his antithesis, Ma is H2O's." p. 5

"And anyone who thinks I brag is stating that I understand fish-thought is obviously ignorant of the way in which fish think. Believe me, it's nothing to brag about." p. 13

"A fish without an exact weight and length is a nonentity, whereas a sixteen-incher or the twelve-pounder leaps out of the imagination, splashing the brain with cold spray." p. 15

"After all, I'd fished as intently as perhaps any boy had ever done, and I not only failed to encounter Walton's God, I failed to see the least evidence of His existence." p. 38

"The Doberman lay quivering and jerking on the lawn a few feet away, its eyes rolled back, its tongue lolling out and turning grey, a hole in its chest the size of a cantaloupe. I squinted toward the house. There stood Ma, twelve-gauge still smoking and the wildest green-eyed grin I'd ever seen on her face." p. 51

"Then it was all over: she looked at H2O, he looked at her, and they exploded into real, relieved, belly-cramping, face-contorting, uncontrollable laughter — a kind I hadn't heard in that house in all my life." p. 67

"All my life I'd longed for such a marathon — and I haven't one happy memory of it." p. 75

"Suddenly, it hit me what a pathetic lot we fisherman were. We sneaked, pursued, teased, deceived, tormented and often murdered the objects of our obscure lust; we compounded our crimes by gloating over them." p. 109

"Before coming to the Tamanawis I'd believed that solitude was a cure-all, a psychic panacea, an invisible knife certain to cut me clear of all the parental debates, the wasted time, the drivel of school, the unending parade of cars and machinery... But solitude, I found, was no guarantee of anything." p. 147

"And so I learned what solitude really was. it was raw material — awesome, malleable, older than men or worlds or water. And it was merciless — for it let a man become precisely what he alone made of himself." p. 148

"But my pain grew sharper: mad with joy, I sank to my knees on the white road, and I felt the hand, resting like sunlight on my head." p. 278



## Topics for Discussion

Where does the word "dreefee" come from? Why is it significant to Bill Bob? What significance does it later hold for Gus?

Why doesn't Gus tell the readers where the Tamanawis River is located? How does his keeping the information to himself make him different from H2O?

What role does Irving and his dog Descartes play in Gus's life?

Why does Gus travel to the source of the Tamanawis River, and do you feel he finds what he is looking for when he reaches the spot?

Why does Eddy have Gus try to fish a large salmon on a line and leader that are too small?

What significance does the book *The Compleat Angler* by Izaak Walton play in Gus's life?

What is Nijinsky, and why is it such an important symbol for the Orviston family?