

A String in the Harp Study Guide

A String in the Harp by Nancy Bond

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Plot Summary

A STRING IN THE HARP is the story of a mysterious harp tuning key and its powers to merge present day life in Borth, Wales with the ancient, mythical time when the land was ruled by kings, warriors, and bards.

The novel opens with Jen Morgan making her way to Borth, Wales to visit her family during her winter break from school. After Jen's mother died, her father and two younger siblings had moved to Wales while she had stayed behind, living with an aunt and uncle, to finish her schooling. When Jen arrives, she quickly sees that her family has fractured; her father spends his days locked in his study while her younger brother, Peter, is hostile, withdrawn, and clearly depressed. He feels lonely and wants nothing more than to return home. When the novel shifts to Peter's perspective, the reader learns that while out on a walk, Peter comes across a mysterious Y-shaped key, pockets it, and takes it home. Soon, Peter realizes that the key has magical powers. It vibrates, sings, and shows Peter mysterious images of an ancient world. The longer Peter has the key, the more time he spends in its mystical world, become more and more withdrawn from his family in present time. Until Jen's arrival, no one notices his change in character because everyone is too concerned with their own lives and adjustments in the new country. Sensing that he may have an ally in Jen, Peter tells her about the key and its magical powers. Shocked, Jen refuses to believe Peter and refuses to help him solve the mystery. Completely disheartened, Peter absorbs himself more fully in the key's images, leading to him completely fall behind in school and become more and more aggressive with his family.

As the Morgan family spends more time in Wales, the mystery of the country comes to the forefront of their time, particularly as they meet various characters who believe in magic over science, including Dr. Rhys, a leading scholar in Welsh literature, and Mr. Evans, a farmer who believes the mythic stories of the bards and kings of ancient Wales are fact. Meeting these people confirms the stories Peter believes the key is showing him; he believes he has the famous Welsh bard Taliesin's tuning key, and that it is his destiny to return the key to Taliesin's grave. The only problem is that no one knows where Taliesin truly is buried. While Peter embraces the mysteries of Wales, they make Jen increasingly uncomfortable. She thinks the key is dangerous and that it is causing trouble within her family. She believes that the only way to repair her troubled family is to get rid of the key once and for all. She reaches out to Dr. Rhys and his academic partner, Dr. Owen, and tells them about the key. Meanwhile, the power of the key is beginning to affect the physical present-day world, not just in Peter's mind. This affectation begins with Peter viewing images of the ancient world superimposed over what he is experiencing in the present-day world, as if he is experiencing two worlds at once. At first, Peter is the only person who straddles the two eras simultaneously, but soon, this too begins to change; first, while out on a hike, Peter's siblings find a coracle, an ancient fishing boat, and even see Taliesin himself in the distance. Later, a wolf from ancient times appears in the present and begins killing farmers' sheep. Finally, Peter and his friends witness Taliesin's funeral in the distance, although no one is quite sure what they are seeing.



As the power of the key grows, so does Dr. Owen's desire to have it for himself. Even though he is not sure exactly what the artifact is that Peter is guarding so jealously, he will stop at nothing to obtain it and even threatens to take legal action against the Morgans. As the novel progresses, however, Jen has a change of heart and begins to trust her brother's journey with the key. Although she is still skeptical of believing that the key is magical, she cannot ignore the signs that Taliesin's ancient world is beginning to merge with the present, an acknowledgment that terrifies her. She knows that only Peter has the power to stop the merging worlds, and that nothing will end in peace if Dr. Owen obtains the key. By the end of the novel, Peter has figured out where Taliesin's grave is, and safely returns the key to its rightful owner, and the world returns to normal. Through the process of protecting Peter, and trusting that he will do what is right with the key, the Morgan family heals, and begins to work and live together as a family unit.



Chapters 1 & 2

Chapters 1 & 2 Summary

In Chapter 1, Jen Morgan makes her way from Massachusetts to Borth, Wales, where her family lives. Since her mother's death, Jen has been living with an aunt and uncle in Massachusetts while her younger brother and sister are with their father in Wales where he teaches at a local University. Jen is only visiting her family for Christmas vacation, and will have to return to Massachusetts afterward to finish high school. Her family is eagerly awaiting her arrival at the train platform and whisk her off to the home, Bryn Celyn. It becomes immediately clear that while Becky, who is ten, seems to be thriving in Wales, Peter, who is twelve, hates every moment away from home. He is particularly vocal about how there is nothing to do in Wales and how he hates learning Welsh, which he claims is a useless language, in school. Upon arrival, Jen is immediately interested in the Borth Bog located behind their house, and the fact that their father is always absent from the family, choosing instead to lock himself in his office or spend his days at the University.

In the morning, Jen awakens to a freezing house where heat is only produced by a small coal stove in the office and a tiny paraffin heater which is usually kept in the bathroom. She makes breakfast for her siblings since their father has already left for the University, and learns that the neighbor woman, Mrs. Davies, has been hired to tidy the house and prepare lunch and dinner for the family. When Mrs. Davies arrives, it is clear that she now expects Jen to help her around the house even though Jen is on vacation.

Chapter 2 shifts to following Peter rather than Jen. He spends his days alone in his room absolutely overcome with homesickness. He hates everything about Borth and desperately wants to return home. Secretly, he is envious of Jen because she has been allowed to stay home while he has been forced to move away. He feels distanced from his family and friends and would do anything to go back to Massachusetts. The only comfort Peter has is in a small object he found three weeks ago while wandering near the bog. He had found a path of rocks leading into the water, seemingly for no reason, and underneath one of these rocks he found a piece of metal. He had pulled it from the water, cleaned it up, and found it was shaped like a Y-shaped key. Slowly, Peter has begun to realize that the key holds some sort of power. When it is in his pocket, he can hear it hum, and then, when he rests his fingers on the key, the humming turns to distant singing. Gradually, as he becomes braver, Peter holds onto the key for longer increments of time and is soon transported to a world far away.

In his first vision, Peter sees a group of boys chanting near a hut. There, a blind man sits with a beautiful woman named Cardiwyn. The blind man announces that one of the boys would be chosen to follow the Bard, Aneirin. The beautiful woman walks along the row of boys, resting her hands briefly on each of their heads, before selecting one boy, whom she renames Taliesin, as the chosen one.



Chapters 1 & 2 Analysis

In this section, the Morgan family dynamics are introduced. It is clear that each of the family members is choosing to grieve their mother's loss in a different way. While Becky seems to be thriving in Borth, already making lots of new friends, Peter despises his new home and clearly feels as if he cannot speak about this with his father, who locks himself away in his office or at the university. Once Jen arrives, it becomes clear that Peter had planned to speak to her about returning home, but it doesn't go as he planned. Jen is not receptive to Peter's requests and says that he should grow up and quit making trouble. Peter is devastated that his sister doesn't understand him, and spends his time reading books silently in his room, or playing with the key, which he has kept a secret from the rest of his family. For all the problems in the Morgan family, it is clear that Peter's key will be the impetus for change, forcing the family to come together to solve the problems that arise from the magical key's discovery, but none of these changes have yet been put into motion.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The Morgan children all head into town to do some shopping for Christmas decorations. Afterward, they meet up with their father for lunch near the university. At lunch, David is surprised to see his colleague, Dr. Rhys, eating in the same restaurant. The children learn that Dr. Rhys is the head of the Welsh Studies program and that he knows a lot about the myths and fairy tales of Wales.

Jen and Becky spend the next few days exploring the landscape. Sometimes Peter joins the girls, but more often than not he stays behind to investigate the key. He also ruminates on how he might have blown things fighting with Jen about returning home. He realizes he said too much too soon. That night, Becky invites her friend, Rhian, over for dinner. There is a terrible storm, and it is soon realized that Rhian must stay the night. In his bedroom, Peter fears the storm, knowing something is coming for him but he doesn't know exactly what. Peter leaves the house and is caught in the middle of the storm when the key begins humming. He returns home, drenched, and feeling a bit out of it. Jen is furious that Peter had gone out in the storm without telling anyone but doesn't say anything about it. Soon, Gwilym arrives and helps the children close the windows and fireplace as well as mop up the leaks until David gets home.

While playing a game of cards that evening, the key around Peter's neck suddenly begins to hum. Then, without warning, it transports him out of the study and back to the land of the Low Hundred where a storm threatens to flood the entire land. People crouch wherever they can find shelter, shaking and hungry. Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the image vanishes and Peter is back in the study with both his sisters calling his name. Just then, David arrives home. He does his best to get into contact with Rhian's family, not wanting them to worry when Rhian doesn't show up on the bus that night, but Rhian's family lives on a farm and doesn't own their own phone. Finally, David manages to get through to the Forestry Commissioner who promises to get a message to Rhian's family. After that, the children all soon settle into bed.

Peter wakes in the middle of the night, completely unable to sleep for the key's humming. The key transports him back to the Low Hundred where the land has been completely decimated by the storm. It appears that danger is approaching the land but the guards are all drunk and not out on patrol as they should be. Then the picture suddenly changes, and Peter sees a man building a raft against the gray sky. A small boy huddles next to him watching the raft be built. All around the raft builder, people clutch whatever belongings they had been able to save during the flood and balance themselves on coracles. When he wakes, Peter walks downstairs to find Jen. He tells her about the visions he's been having with the key. Jen doesn't believe him and tells him that his imagination is being overpowered by the books he's reading. No matter how hard Peter tries to convince Jen that he's telling the truth, she refuses to believe him and they both go back to bed.



Chapter 3 Analysis

In this chapter, Peter begins to realize the similarities between the land of the key and the land he and his family inhabit. There are eerie parallels between the two worlds, particularly regarding the terrible storm that sweeps through both lands simultaneously. This is the first time Peter has feared the images the key brings to him, but he feels like he cannot turn away.

In this section, Peter once again tries to reach out to Jen and tell her what is happening in his life, although she, again, refuses to listen to him. The reader is left wondering what Jen fears so much and why she refuses to listen to Peter. It appears that Peter has absolutely no support network in Wales since he has no friends in school, an absent father, and a sister who doesn't believe a word he says. The only other outlet for Peter might be Becky, but he feels she is too young to understand what he is going through.

This section also introduces various other characters who may be helpful in Peter's search for answers about the images from the key. Dr. Rhys is a professor of Welsh history with a specialization in fairy tales and folklore, exactly the images that seem to be appearing from the key. Rhian is introduced as the daughter of a farming family which has spent their entire life on the land of the bog. Not only do they have access to hundreds of acres of land, they also have familial history with the property that may come in handy later.



Chapters 4 & 5

Chapters 4 & 5 Summary

The morning after the storm, Jen and Becky make their way to Rhian's farm to drop her back off to her family. Rhian lives in a rural farm with her parents, three brothers, and toothless grandmother who doesn't speak a word of English. When they arrive, Mrs. Evans is making shepherd's pie for lunch and all the men soon come home from the fields to eat. During the meal, Mr. Evans begins speaking about the Electric, and the people he refers to as "The Old Ones." He tells them, gravely, about the flood thousands of years ago in the land called the Low Hundreds, when sixteen towns were lost to the waters. When Jen hears this, it sounds eerily familiar to the story Peter had told her the night before and she feels somewhat uncomfortable.

Chapter 5 focuses on Christmas in Wales. Jen remembers the last Christmas the year before, right after their mother died. She remembers seeing her father cry through the carol service at church, an image that has really stuck with her. This Christmas, Becky demands that everyone go into town together to purchase the Christmas tree, just like they had always done when their mother was still alive. It takes some prodding, particularly for David to agree to leave work early, but in the end, everyone agrees. While Becky and Jen busy themselves making arrangements for the Christmas day meal, Peter circles the bog over and over, wondering if the stories about the flood are true and if there really are villages buried beneath the water. Recently, the tune of the key's singing has changed and Peter no longer sees disturbing images of the flood. Now, he sees the man, Aneurin, walking with Taliesin close behind him. Around Taliesin's neck is the same harp key Peter now clutches in his hand. No matter where they go, Aneurin and Taliesin make a good pair, working together, playing music on the harp and singing to show thanks to the villagers that welcome them into their homes as they travel. Through the visions, Peter watches as Taliesin ages and matures into a man.

Throughout the Christmas preparations, Becky pesters Jen about Peter, wondering if something is wrong with him. Jen ignores the questions and continues to ignore Peter, clearly uncomfortable with the idea that Peter's visions might be real. The day before Christmas eve, David takes the children to a carol concert at the local church. It reminds everyone of the day their mother died, but none of the children is sad. They all simply remember what it feels like to be part of a family. Christmas Eve, however, is the complete opposite. At the Christmas eve meal, David chides Peter for not being happier, which causes Peter to explode in anger, shouting that his father never asks him why he's feeling a certain way, he only demands that Peter change. He goes on and on about how David doesn't care about his family and only cares about himself and his research. Storming away from the table, Peter is overcome with an extreme sense of injustice.

In his room, the key beckons for Peter. It takes him away to where Taliesin is a grown man now imparting the wisdom of a bard to a young boy named Elphin. During one of



his stories, Taliesin catches a fish with his bare hands to illustrate how dangerous it is for Elphin to be trusting, like the fish had been when it had grown accustomed to Taliesin's hands in the water. Soon after, Peter watches in horror as a gang of men, who appear to be pirates, accost Taliesin and Elphin, kidnap them, and take them onto their ship to use the men as slave laborers.

Chapters 4 & 5 Analysis

In this chapter, Jen and Becky meet the Evans family. Mr. Evans is yet another adult in Wales who believes in fairy tales and folklore of the past. He tells the story of the great flood which leaves Jen feeling extremely unsettled because it sounds very similar to the stories Peter claims to have seen in visions. Rather than tell Peter what she has heard, Jen continues to ignore the stories, closing her mind and imagination to the possibilities of magic. It is possible that now that her mother is dead, Jen feels an extreme responsibility to care for her younger siblings and to keep them grounded in reality. If she were to believe these childish stories of magic, perhaps she fears her family would not be able to cope without her authoritative voice, especially now that their father is almost completely absent as a parental figure.

The other main purpose of this section is to show the completely fractured nature of the Morgan family. They cannot even come together during Christmas eve, one of the happiest holidays of the year. Peter does everything he can to communicate his emotions with his family members, first Jen and then David, and he is constantly ignored. Feeling that no one is listening to him, he snaps, shouting at his family and storming off to his room. It is clear that Peter feels completely alone in Wales and his only comfort is the transportive quality of the key. After this disastrous Christmas meal, the reader is left wondering how the Morgan family will ever repair their familial damage.



Chapters 6 & 7

Chapters 6 & 7 Summary

On Christmas morning, the family congregates together for their Christmas breakfast with no one mentioning the fight from the night before. Through the window, the family can see Gwilym out near the bog watching birds and they go out to join him. David wins Gwilym's admiration when he compliments the boy on his archaeological skills when Gwilym continues telling the stories of the sunken cities that may be hiding underneath the bog's waters. He even compliments Gwilym on his high-tech binoculars. Peter's ears perk up when he hears about the drown cities for the first time. His mind works furiously piecing together the images from the key's visions.

Suddenly, everyone catches a glimpse of some very strange boats making their way down the river. They look extremely old and must be replicas. Only Peter knows that they are not replicas but the real thing; he has seen these very boats capture Taliesin and Elphin in an earlier vision. When the boats disappear, Gwilym invites the Morgans to join him on a hike the next morning where hopefully they'll be able to catch another view of the strange boats. The children all wake up to meet Gwilym at six am. Armed with packed lunches, they take to the woods. A few hours into their hike, they stop to eat their packed lunches and Gwilym catches the first glimpse of something strange. He sees a single boy paddling along in an ancient handmade boat known as a coracle. Peter's heart leaps to his throat; he knows the boy must be Taliesin. They all agree to continue hiking six miles through the woods in the hopes of getting a closer look at the coracle. When they finally approach the coracle, the boy owner is gone. They inspect the boat and find that it is made of real leather and doesn't look like a replica, just as Peter had thought. They also see small saplings cut and placed in the river, forming a fishing weir.

When they return home, Becky immediately confronts Peter about the coracle and the fishing weir. She knows Peter knows more about these strange objects than what he's letting on. As Peter is trying to speak to Becky, the key screams in his pocket and whisks him away. In the next vision he sees Taliesin escaping from his captors, crouched low in a coracle, setting himself silently back out to sea. He knows he will never see Elphin again, but he must save himself. When Peter's mind returns to the kitchen, Becky is staring at him like she knows something.

Soon after, the Morgan family is invited over to the Rhys home for dinner. There, Dr. Rhys speaks emphatically about the history of bards in Wales, much to Peter's delight. He explains that bards held the task of holding Welsh history, passing it down to each other generation to generation, when no one knew how to read or write. It is his job, now, to try to translate the work of bards and enter the information into the national canons. As he sits listening, it is as though doors are bursting open in Peter's mind and he begins to feel dizzy. Seeing his interest, Dr. Rhys offers to lend Peter some of his books about the ancient bards, including Taliesin. Peter is more than happy to accept.



After the meal, the Rhys and Morgan families make their way to the church for a harp concert. Both Jen and Peter are transfixed when the harpist pulls a harp key from his pocket and begins to tune the instrument. They both know, instantly, that this object is exactly the same as the object around Peter's neck.

The day after the concert, Peter, Becky, Jen, Rhian, and Gwilym go on another hike. As they are walking, it begins to rain and they must seek shelter in a dilapidated hut hidden in the woods. There, they are startled to notice that the coals in the fireplace are still hot and someone must be living there. They all look through Gwilym's binoculars and finally see a group of men in the distance making their way toward the hut. Intrigued, Rhian runs through the woods to greet them. Again, Peter knows that these are the men from his visions and he doesn't know whether to feel terrified or excited. No matter how quickly she runs, though, Rhian realizes her path and the path of the strangers will never cross. She can't comprehend that someone would know the paths of the woods better than she does and demands to know who these men are and from where they've come. As they are walking, the key pierces icy cold against Peter's skin and transports him to the same location, thousands of years in the past. He sees Taliesin greet a blind old man and tell him that he has lost Elphin. The blind man chooses another boy, the blonde boy Peter, and says that he will be the next bard. The blonde boy is never to leave Taliesin's side. After this vision, Peter realizes that the key is giving him this information for a purpose. He confides in Becky that he has the key, and that Taliesin had one too.

Chapters 6 & 7 Analysis

In this section, everything starts to become clear to Peter, although he's not sure why the information is coming to him yet. He knows that there will be a trial in the future and that he will need to use the information from the key for something. He also seems to realize that he will need help in completing whatever task the key asks of him, so he confides in Becky, which is an interesting choice because she had been his last choice. It is clear, though, that Becky's heart and mind are both open to the possibility of magic in the world, unlike Jen and her father.

The other important thing to note in this section is that it's very clear now that the characters from Peter's visions are starting to show up in real life and that other people, people who do not hold the key, can see them. Even though it is clear that these characters are real and are embodying the same physical space as the children - they could feel the heat from the fireplace coals, after all - they have not yet interacted physically. In fact, it appears that whenever the Morgan children get close to the mysterious characters, the characters somehow disappear. The only clue that they are all in the same physical space is that Jen claims Taliesin looked straight at Peter.



Chapters 8 & 9

Chapters 8 & 9 Summary

School starts again for the younger Morgan children, leaving Jen alone, and lonely, in the house. Becky comes home for lunch and tells Jen that she'll miss her very much when she returns to America, and that she should consider asking their father to stay in Wales. Jen and Becky argue for a while about whether or not their father would ever allow her to stay, what she would do about school, and how disappointed relatives in America would be if Jen stayed, but Jen finally agrees to discuss it with her father, even though she is certain he will put her on the first plane back home.

Later that day, Jen approaches her father in his study. He is very confused as to why Jen would want to stay, but she insists that she'll be able to help him out with housework and taking care of the children. Even though she has some doubts, Jen argues that it would be better for the family if all the children were to stay together. Surprisingly, David agrees. He agrees that Mrs. Davies will have to teach her how to cook and clean, but will be pleased to have some time off from the Morgan household when her daughter has her baby. He also agrees to put together a reading list for Jen so that she doesn't fall behind in her schoolwork, but she can stay. Jen isn't sure whether she is excited or petrified. The other Morgan children, however, are delighted. Jen does her best to adjust to the new load of housework, but finds that she often forgets laundry that's been hung out to dry, and has a difficult time keeping track of when things like toothpaste and cornflakes need to be replenished. Becky does her best to help out, however, though Peter remains aloof, much to Jen's frustration.

In Chapter 9, the narration once again shifts to Peter who no longer minds that Jen refuses to accept the key. Peter spends all his time wandering with the key, listening for it to start singing. Soon, this wandering begins to affect his performance in school. Although Peter continues to show up for class, he is not mentally present and falls behind in his homework, not even bothering to provide excuses for the work's absence. Meanwhile, the scenes from the key seem to signal that war is coming. Although Taliesin does not like fighting, he knows that it is his job, as a bard, to be on the front lines of the war. That day, Peter goes for a walk in the afternoon, listening to the key. When he does not return for lunch, his family is annoyed. When he still is not home for dinner, they are panicked. When he finally arrives home, everyone is angry and shouts at him. Peter is completely apathetic to their anger and excuses himself to the bedroom.

Later, Jen confronts Becky about the key. Jen knows that Peter has confided in Becky about the key's power, and she is determined to get to the bottom of why Peter isn't doing his schoolwork. Becky admits that Peter talks with her about the key and that she believes his stories. Jen is deeply annoyed and asks Becky to join her at Dr. Rhys' the next day. She hopes that discussing the key with Dr. Rhys will set Becky straight, once and for all, that Peter's stories are nonsense. That night, the family is awakened by fire in the sky. They hope it is something to do with a Welsh celebration, but no one can



think of a reasonable excuse for the sounds of gunshots. Peter knows that war has broken out in the land of the key, and for some reason, everyone in present time can experience it, too. That night, while Peter is in bed, the key takes him to the front lines of the war. Maelgwn, Taliesin's enemy, kidnaps Elphin. Taliesin promises the king that Elphin will be returned.

Chapters 8 & 9 Analysis

This section marks a shift in the way the Morgan family interacts. Here, Becky and Jen have open communication about Becky's desire for Jen to stay, unlike previous chapters in which none of the Morgans had been able to communicate what they wanted from each other. Even though Jen does not believe their father will allow her to stay, she confronts him about the possibility and is shocked when he agrees, so shocked, in fact, that Jen doubts whether or not she actually wants to stay in Wales. She worries that Becky has pushed her too hard, too fast, and wonders if she is making a mistake. At any rate, it's too late, her father has already agreed. It seems that Jen's argument that the family should stay together has had a profound impact on David and is the reason why he allows Jen to essentially drop out of school at fifteen to become a housewife. Although it is unclear whether or not this plan will backfire, it is clear that David is listening to his children's needs for the first time in over a year.

This section also highlights the change Peter is undergoing. The key is now starting to affect his performance at school; the outside world, apart from his family, are beginning to realize that something is consuming, even possessing Peter, but no one knows exactly what it is. The key also makes another connection between the old world and the new world with the display of fire in the sky. Only Peter understands that they are seeing the ancient battle between Taliesin and Maelgwn light up the sky. In time the connection between the two worlds will become ever more present in the lives of the Morgan family and those living close to them.



Chapters 10 & 11

Chapters 10 & 11 Summary

The next morning, Gwilym comes over for breakfast. He does not have any idea what the fire in the sky had been the previous night, although he had seen it too. When Rhian comes for lunch, she claims that it was something supernatural, that no one in town could explain the fire. This explanation irritates Jen who thinks Rhian and her family explain away too many things with mystical explanations. After lunch, Jen sends Rhian back to school, but takes Becky with her into town to discuss the key with Dr. Rhys. When they arrive at Dr. Rhys' office, however, Jen is deeply disappointed that Dr. Rhys does not think Peter is being silly. When he hears about the key, he grows concerned. His voice even becomes sharp when Jen mentions Taliesin's name. Dr. Rhys claims that he had given Peter the books about Taliesin after Christmas, but Peter had found the key before Christmas, so it clearly isn't his books that influence Peter's stories. Jen begs Dr. Rhys to say that Peter is making the stories up and that the key has no magical powers, but Dr. Rhys won't admit it. In fact, Dr. Rhys essentially tells Jen that he believes Peter's stories, a statement that shocks her. Jen feels as if she must get away from Dr. Rhys as quickly as possible. Back home, she simply asks Peter if he knows what happened on the bog the night before, with the fire. He doesn't look up from the key and quietly says, "Yes."

After the meeting with Dr. Rhys, Jen is eager to return to life as normal. With Mrs. Davies away helping her daughter who has recently given birth, Jen decides that now is as good a time as any to try to make her first dinner unaided. She decides on the menu: roast chicken and mashed potatoes. Even though she plans everything out, the meal is a disaster. She feels as if everyone in town is judging her, wondering why she is preparing a meal on her own. She panics in the butcher shop and purchases a chicken with its head and feet still attached. She overcooks the bird and even makes the mistake of cooking it with all its innards still inside. The peas are undercooked, and the potatoes are lumpy. When Jen sees her family struggling to eat the meal, she bursts out into tears. David takes everyone out for fish and chips, which greatly cheers up the family. After dinner, Becky confronts Peter about the key. She tells him that she and Jen had gone to Dr. Rhys' office and asked him about the stories. Peter pretends to be uninterested, but there is clearly fear and excitement in his eyes. Becky tells him that Dr. Rhys says Peter's stories could be true. Peter lets Becky hold the key, but it does not work in her hands. Then the two go for a walk to explore the Low Hundreds, Taliesin's old stomping grounds.

Chapters 10 & 11 Analysis

In this section, Jen confronts Dr. Rhys as a way of proving to herself that Peter's stories are impossible. She pleads to Dr. Rhys as a scholar to debunk Peter's stories. Even though the reader may have expected Dr. Rhys to agree with Jen, he doesn't. Here, Dr.



Rhys makes an impassioned argument about the difference between magic and science, even going so far as to say that schools in America rely too heavily on science and ignore everything in the world that cannot be easily explained. This conversation highlights the cultural differences Jen faces in her acclimation to life in Wales, where magic and mysticism are much more readily accepted as a part of life than they are in America: "They teach you that reason can answer everything, and that there is a scientific explanation for even the most unscientific events. People do not like not understanding, do you see. Because as long as we understand, we feel we have control" (Page 196).

Dr. Rhys' acceptance of magic is also mirrored in the Evans family, particularly in Rhian and her father, Mr. Evans. In speaking to Dr. Rhys, it becomes clear that Jen is on her own the battle against Peter's imagination. The reader is left confused about which character's victory they should root for - Jen's or Peter's. It is still unclear whether or not Dr. Rhys is to be trusted, but this section casts Dr. Rhys in a sympathetic light. Upon leaving Dr. Rhys' office, it is also clear that a line has been drawn between Jen and Becky; Becky believes Peter's stories while Jen finds them impossible. The reader is left wondering if the progress the Morgan family has made to come together will again be fractured by Jen's insistence that the key has no place in their household.



Chapters 12 & 13

Chapters 12 & 13 Summary

David has business to attend to in Cardiff, so he takes all three children by bus to the bustling city. The kids are overwhelmed with everything there is to see and do and buy. David gives them all pocket money for the day and tells them to meet him on the steps of the National Museum at 3:00. After they part ways with their father, Jen, Peter, and Becky, make their way to the Cardiff Castle. After a small spat with Jen about whether or not King Arthur actually lived in a castle - Peter claimed the castle was build hundreds of years after King Arthur existed - the children explore the castle for a while and then head off to meet their father at the National Museum. There, they meet with Dr. John Owen, a friend of Dr. Rhys. The children immediately feel uncomfortable around Dr. Owen and are disappointed when he offers to personally show them around the museum. The children feel like Dr. Owen is a bit suspect, like they shouldn't fully trust him. During the tour, Dr. Owen tells the story of a priceless bowl that was found in a farmer's shed. The way he tells the story, Dr. Owen makes the farmer sound like a total fool for not knowing the worth of the bowl. This story deeply disturbs Becky who believes that farmer should have been allowed to keep the bowl, since he is the one who found it. Dr. Owens chuckles at Becky's argument as if to say she is a silly, naïve child.

Not wanting to miss the opportunity to prove a point to Peter, Jen asks what she should do if she found a valuable item in Wales, signaling to Peter that he should hand over the key. While he is answering the question, Dr. Owens brings the children around to see the ancient harps he has collected as well as models of their tuning keys; he claims that no one has ever found a really ancient tuning key and that if found, these artifacts would be extremely valuable. Jen feels sick and continues pressuring Dr. Owens to admit what should be done if a tuning key were really found. Dr. Owens, of course, says that it should be immediately turned over to the National Museum. Jen starts to say that Peter has found a tuning key, when Becky breaks into loud sobs. She crumples on the floor, weeping that she feels hot all over. Clearly she has interrupted Jen so she won't admit that Peter has the key. David rushes over to Becky and claims that she needs fresh air. He apologizes to Dr. Owen and sweeps his children outside, where Becky miraculously recovers. Later, when she is alone with her sister, Becky insists that the key is not for Jen to hand over. It is Peter's discovery and he must be the one to decide what should be done with it.

Soon after the day at the museum, Gwilym comes bursting through the Morgan's front door, frantic, asking if they've heard about the hunt. A farmer has spotted a wolf in the fields, and the wolf has taken two of his lambs. David claims that this is impossible since there haven't been wolves in Wales for generations. Even so, the men have decided to hunt the beast, and all the Morgans go into town to help with the hunt or to listen to the gossip. Even though the girls put up a fuss, David only allows Peter and Gwilym to join



him on the hunt, while the girls are sent to Rhian's house to cook and clean with Mrs. Evans.

In the woods, the men split up into two teams that will hike toward each other, hoping to corner the animal in the middle. In the woods, Peter finds it impossible to tell the difference between his real life hunting party and the hunting party from the key. The images are nearly identical, superimposed atop each other. He tries to walk, but stumbles, confused and afraid. And then, Peter hears an anxious shout to his left and the cry of excited dogs, followed by gunshots. He hears the voice of Taliesin saying that the animal has been slain. He runs toward the huddle of ancient men, who slowly morph into his father and other present-day men. David and the rest of the men huddle around the body of a giant, dead wolf. All the men are speechless because wolves are thought to be extinct in Wales and this one was clearly a nursing female, which means there could be pups and a mate nearby. Peter knows that the wolf is not of this world, and he suddenly feels very tired.

Chapters 12 & 13 Analysis

In this section, the Morgan children meet Dr. Owen, the benefactor for the National Museum in Wales. Although Dr. Rhys' motivations in dealing with the Morgan children are sometimes ambiguous, Dr. Owen's character is clear: he is not to be trusted. In this section, Dr. Owen is clearly set up as the enemy in his patronizing, predatory treatment of the Morgan children. It is clear through Jen's questions that she has made her decision; the key should be handed over to the authorities, but Becky and Peter have another plan. This conflict sets up the major conflict of the novel: to whom does the key truly belong, Peter who found it, or to the entire country of Wales? The characters will struggle with this debate for the rest of the novel. The reader can also expect the conflict between the Morgans and the outside world to increase now that more people, particularly academic scholars like Dr. Rhys and Dr. Owen, know about the key's existence. It will get harder for Peter to keep the key's power a secret, particularly as he is beginning to lose control over when the key possesses him.

Also in this section, the key once again creates an unpleasant overlapping of the ancient and present worlds with the introduction of the wolf. Not only is the wolf a shocking scientific find as wolves are thought to be extinct in Wales, it also highlights the danger of the two worlds colliding. There has been bloodshed with the lambs, which immediately casts an ominous feel over the key's power. Will the Morgans and their friends be safe if Taliesin's world and their world combine? It is also irrefutable that the key has brought tactile objects, not just images from the past, and outsiders, as well as Peter, experience this overlap. The intermingling of the two worlds is reaching its climax, just like in the hunt. Peter knows that he can no longer hide from the key's power and that it is affecting everyone around him; soon he will be forced into action.



Chapters 14 & 15

Chapters 14 & 15 Summary

After the hunt, the men make their way to the Red Goat pub, near the hunting grounds. The owner, Mr. Roberts, is clearly very pleased to have fifteen wet, hungry men for whom to care, and he is equally excited to hear the story of the hunt. The story of killing the wolf is told several times, with men frequently making their way to the holding shed to have a look at the beast. Gwilym calls the police to tell them about the kill, but the authorities are very skeptical. Upon returning home, Gwilym claims that he doesn't think they will find any more wolves around this part, but he doesn't know why he feels so certain about it. Time passes, and the Morgan children become more interested in the land surrounding their house. They find old maps that David bought when he first moved to Wales and use them to navigate the new landscape. Even David occasionally joins the children on their expeditions, clearly eager to explore some of the land himself.

David's birthday approaches and the children decide to throw him a dinner party, inviting the Rhyses as their guests. They also decide to take David on a special expedition to a new part of the land previously unexplored. They wake David up on the morning of his birthday and explain that they're taking him on a picnic in Talybont, a few hours' hike away from home. Although he is tired and groggy, David agrees, much to the children's delight. The family hikes for a few hours before stopping to eat their picnic lunch near a mound Gwilym points out as Bedd Taliesin, or the tomb of Taliesin. Although Rhian is sure the hill is where Taliesin is really buried, Gwilym claims that the hill is far too old, since Taliesin didn't even live until the sixth century. Gwilym claims that no one knows where Taliesin is actually buried, but this hill is as nice a place as any to remember Taliesin's legacy. Peter, who remains quiet for the entire discussion, knows without question that Taliesin is not buried in the hill. The key would have told him if he was.

The next day, the Morgan family is busy preparing for the dinner party with the Rhyses. Over the meal, they discuss the wolf that was recently killed, Jen's progress as a cook, and magic. Then, Dr. Rhys explains that he has recently had a conversation with Dr. Owen about Jen's questions at the museum. Since Dr. Rhys already knows about the artifact Peter has found, he has encouraged Dr. Owen to pay the Morgans a visit. Now, he wonders if that statement had been a mistake. He looks around the room and sees horror on Jen, Becky, and most importantly, Peter's face, and realizes that it, indeed, had been. Unfortunately, it is too late to take it back now, and Dr. Owen will be arriving at the Morgans' house in less than a month. Afterward, the Rhyses thank Jen for a lovely meal and awkwardly leave. After the dinner, David confronts Jen about the trouble at dinner, but she's not willing to say anything. David has to confront Peter if he wants any answers. In turn, Peter claims that he knows the artifact he has is important, but that he simply can't hand it over to Dr. Owen. The key is still telling him a story and he must figure out what that story is before the key is locked up behind museum glass.



The next day, Peter pays Dr. Rhys a visit and offers to show him the key. Dr. Rhys refuses, saying that he desperately wants to see the key but he doesn't want to be implicated in Peter's plan to keep the key out of Dr. Owen's hands. Dr. Rhys confirms to Peter that the key certainly might be magic and that if he is going to figure out the puzzle of the key, he had better work quickly.

Chapters 14 & 15 Analysis

In this section, Peter is clearly being ushered into manhood as he is welcomed into the hunting party and the stories of battle at the pub afterward. He is even allowed to drink bitter beer with his father, symbolizing his coming-of-age, which will become increasingly important since Peter will soon be forced to face a big decision in regards to the key. The rest of the Morgan family is changing too, as all three children have taken a new interest in the land surrounding their home, highlighting the fact that they are beginning to view Wales not only as a source of adventure, but a place where they feel like they belong, a far cry from the angst and hostility they felt toward Wales at the opening of the novel, when none of the children wanted anything to do with the new country and could see no value in exploring its land.

The discovery of Bedd Taliesin during David's birthday hike is particularly significant because both Peter and Gwilym are quick to point out that Taliesin is likely not buried where his tomb is stated. This will become important later in the novel when Peter and Gwilym set out to discover where Taliesin truly is buried so they can return the harp key to him. Also, Rhian's insistence that Bedd Taliesin really IS where Taliesin is buried highlights her naivety and underscores the fact that, while magic and mysticism are highly revered in Wales, it, too, is sometimes wrong. In this scene, Nancy Bond seems to be making a diplomatic statement that neither science nor magic is the solution, but that it must be a happy marriage between the two to understand how the world, and history, really work. The dinner party with the Rhyses does little more than to accentuate the fact that Dr. Owen is in search of the key and will not rest until he has it. Dr. Owen's impending visit simply adds suspense to Peter's big decision about what he should do with the key, and the fact that he has no idea what the key wants him to do, but he must act fast since time is running out.



Chapters 16 & 17

Chapters 16 & 17 Summary

Chapter 16 opens with Taliesin making his way across a peaceful field. He is old and takes in the sights, smells, and sounds of the land with extreme happiness. It becomes clear that he has finished his job as the bard and is returning home to the town he has not seen since he was twelve-years-old and was taken to do the king's work.

Meanwhile, David confronts Jen about Peter's key while the two are enjoying a day in the city. David wonders whether or not it is smart to let Peter make his own decision about the key, or whether he should have just confiscated it. Even though Jen does not want to admit that the key is magic, she confirms to David that leaving Peter with the key is the right thing to do. Peter believes wholeheartedly in his mission, and he has set out to do the right thing. He is not acting selfishly. Of that, Jen is certain.

Peter walks down to the shore and the key once again takes him to the land Taliesin is revisiting. He has found his childhood hut, much neglected during the years he has been away, and is making it homey once again. While he is there, Taliesin's enemy, Maelgwn arrives and says that Taliesin is not welcome here. He forces Taliesin to his feet and says that he must finish his days living in exile. Although Taliesin pleads with Maelgwn to let him stay, saying that he wants nothing more than to live and make a small living for himself, Maelgwn refuses. After this vision, Peter falls very ill with a cold and must miss school for nearly a week. While he is home sick, he comes out of his room, panicked. The key has lost its magic. He holds it, cold, in his hands. The story from the key has simply ended. Jen does her best to comfort Peter, but he is beside himself. He knows that he has only a limited amount of time to figure out what he should do with the key, and he feels completely lost without the key's guidance of what he should do. In the last vision, the key shows Taliesin being set out to sea on a coracle. For two days, Taliesin floats on the tiny boat before a storm erupts, throwing him from the boat. The boat sinks, and Taliesin swims to the cliffs. Then, the key had gone dead. Peter knows that Taliesin lives out the rest of his exile on land, but he doesn't know where. All he knows is that the key is clearly guiding him to return the key to Taliesin, he just doesn't know how, or where.

A few days later, Dr. Owen arrives, as promised. He makes small talk with Jen and David in the lounge before turning on Jen. He wants to know what the artifact is about which she had been asking questions at the museum and he would like to see it, now. Jen does her best to dodge Dr. Owen's questions, not wanting to implicate herself or her brother, but it is clear that Dr. Owen knows she is hiding something and that he will certainly get to the bottom of it. When Peter disappears, and Dr. Owen begins threatening the family with legal action to force them to turn over the artifact, David finally steps in and says that he trusts his children will do the right thing, even though he himself has never seen the artifact, nor does he know if it is worth anything. He says he will not stand by and watch his children be bullied. But Dr. Owen is not so easily swayed and does not relent, badgering the children, nearly forcing them to hand over the artifact



immediately. In the end, Dr. Owen softens when Jen repeatedly states that she doesn't know where the artifact is, and he leaves. He hopes that Peter will contact him in the next few days and will "do the right thing" by bringing him the artifact.

The next day, the Morgan children go with Rhian and her brother to fetch some of their sheep that have wandered off in the night. As they are trekking through the mountains, all four children spot a massive orb of light in the distance, making its way along the mountain ridge and over the water reservoir, as if it knows its own path of the land. The light is far brighter than a lantern, and the children are very confused by its presence. They are transfixed, and cannot explain the light's magic. Upon returning home, Rhian states that the light they had seen is a *Cannwyl Corph*, or corpse candle, which marks the path of a funeral. They all know that it is impossible that anyone had been buried in the reservoir last night, but Peter wonders if something else had been happening. He now knows what he should do with the key. That night, he agrees to meet Gwilym at the shed at eleven-thirty and they will take Gwilym's motorbike back to the place where they had seen the light and search for Taliesin's tomb.

Chapters 16 & 17 Analysis

In this section, Taliesin is reaching the end of his life and longs to return home, drawing a parallel to Peter's earlier desire to leave Wales and return to Amherst. In this parallel it is hinted that the desire to return home is the reason why Peter had been selected to receive the power of Taliesin's key. This desire to return home also highlights Peter's decision to return the key to its proper owner, symbolically to the key's proper home. Taliesin, however, is not able to rest peacefully and is sent into exile to finish out his days. In the vision of Taliesin's exile, Peter suddenly loses contact with the story of the key, around the time Taliesin is thrown overboard from his coracle. Although Peter cannot make the connection of why the story stops in the middle of the ocean, the reader has probably surmised that this is where Taliesin is buried and where Peter should return the key. Now it is just a waiting game until Peter figures it out.

Dr. Owen's arrival at the Morgan household again highlights his role as the villain in the story. He wants the key and will stop at nothing to get it. He even threatens to bring legal action against the Morgan family, which is when David finally steps in and defends his family. In this moment, David has made a clear decision to side with his children, regardless of the cost to his personal and academic life. This is a far cry from David's character at the opening of the novel when he had rarely spoken to his children and had only cared about his studies. It is clear, now, that while the key threatens the Morgan family, it also acts as a binding and healing agent bringing them closer together. Even Jen, who until recently has refused to acknowledge the power of the key, feels like cheering when her father stands up to Dr. Owen and refuses to give him any information about the key or its whereabouts. The reader is left wondering, however, how far Dr. Owen will go to get his hands on the key and what the repercussions of the Morgan family's silence will be.



Another important aspect of this section is the introduction of the corpse candle. Again, it is a moment from the ancient world that everyone in present day witnesses together, highlighting the continual overlap between the two worlds. It is also safe to say that Peter recognizes, almost immediately, that the funeral they witnessed had been Taliesin's funeral, and that the light had been guiding him to Taliesin's burial ground, where he should return the key.



Chapters 18 & 19

Chapters 18 & 19 Summary

Peter and Gwilym meet in the shed and make their way by motorbike toward Nant-y-moch, where they had first seen the orb of light. When they reach the reservoir, neither boy is surprised to see that the water is no longer there, but has magically been replaced with empty fields. Together, they have traveled back thousands of years to when Taliesin was first buried. Wordlessly, Peter finds the pile of rocks that signals Taliesin's grave. There is even a headstone proclaiming Taliesin's name and even though Peter cannot read it he knows innately what it says. He pushes aside some of the rocks until a small barrow is formed, and he drops the key into the grave. When he lets go of the key, the air rings so joyously loud that it shocks him. He makes his way back to the motorbike and he and Gwilym drive away. When they look back, neither boy is surprised to see that the reservoir has once again filled with water.

The next morning, the Morgan family seems to sense that the trouble with the key has lifted. Everyone is elated to see that Peter has returned to his normal self again. Peter arranges to meet with Dr. Owen and he explains that he no longer has the artifact, and that he never possessed it. Dr. Owen is clearly disappointed but does not press the matter any further. Peter finds that rather than hating Dr. Owen, he feels sympathy for him. Dr. Owen only wants to do his job, and to do his job well, no matter how many feathers he ruffles along the way; in this sense, he and Peter are similar. Upon driving back home, David tells Peter that the University in Amherst has offered him his job back, as well as the University in Wales. Rather than make the decision of where to take the family on his own, he calls a family meeting for everyone to make the decision together.

Chapters 18 & 19 Analysis

This section brings the entire story full circle. As suspected in earlier chapters, Peter and Gwilym make their way to Taliesin's burial ground and Peter deposits the key there. It is no surprise, to the characters or to the reader, that the land has made its final overlap. First the reservoir returns to land so Peter can make the deposit, and then, as soon as Peter is gone, it returns to the present day reservoir of water, symbolizing that the journey of the key is complete. The Morgan family itself also comes full circle in David's decision to include the entire family in his decision of whether they should stay in Wales or should return to Amherst. The individual characters have come full circle as well. David has become a loving, caring, and trusting father, while both Peter and Jen have come to love Wales as their home and have accepted their new roles in the family after their mother's death.



Characters

Jen Morgan

Jen Morgan is one of the two protagonists of the novel. After her mother dies, Jen is separated from her family who all go to live in Wales while she stays behind in Amherst and lives with her Aunt and Uncle so she can finish school. At the opening of the novel, Jen is making her way to Wales to visit with her family over her Christmas vacation. Once she arrives in Wales, Jen is disheartened to find that her family has completely fractured and her father has little interest in what is happening in his children's lives. Jen is also bothered by the fact that her younger brother, Peter, is obsessed with a metal key that he found, and has become somewhat withdrawn, aggravated, even hostile. When Jen realizes that her family cannot cope without her, she asks her father to let her drop out of school and remain in Borth, Wales, claiming that her family needs to stay together. Although she is interested in keeping her family together, Jen is also interested in getting to the bottom of the mystery surrounding Peter's key. Jen believes that the key is trouble and that Peter should hand it over to the authorities. She even goes so far as to tell Dr. Owen, benefactor for the Wales National Museum about the key's presence, which opens up a world of trouble for the family. By the end of the novel, Jen has completely transitioned and now believes that Peter should decide what to do with the key. Her transition into trusting her brother, even though she struggles to admit that the key is magic, helps her entire family heal after the loss of their mother.

Peter Morgan

Peter Morgan is the second child in the Morgan family. At the opening of the novel, Peter wants nothing more than to return to Amherst. He hates everything about Wales, especially the language. He struggles to make friends in his new school and quickly falls behind with his schoolwork. Peter clearly feels isolated from his family, particularly from his father with whom he has almost no relationship after his mother's death. One day, while walking alone down the shore in Borth, Peter finds a rusted old key in the water. He decides to take the key home and soon finds that the key has some magical powers: it vibrates and sings to him, then it shows him ancient images of a world Peter cannot comprehend. Through the images from the key, Peter begins to piece together the story of Taliesin's life, the famous bard in Wales. Peter guards the key jealously, knowing that there is value in it, but not wanting to share the magic with anyone else. His relationship with the key soon gets to a point where Peter is almost completely absent in his everyday life, he has fallen totally behind in school and is unbearable to be around. As the novel progresses, Peter realizes that the key is not just showing him old memories, but is calling him to action; he just doesn't know what the key is asking him to do. Soon, he realizes that the key is asking to be returned to Taliesin's grave. Through the magic of the key, Peter is able to find Taliesin's grave and put the key to rest, but along the way he makes many enemies, including Dr. Owen who believes Peter should hand the key over to the National Museum, not keep it for himself. Even though no one



understands Peter's journey, his family and friends stand by him. In the end, Peter does what is right and claims that he never possessed the key, the key possessed him.

David Morgan

David Morgan is the patriarch of the Morgan family. After his wife dies in a terrible car accident, David moves his family from Amherst to Borth, Wales where he plans to study Welsh literature and to teach at a local college. Once there, David becomes absorbed in work and completely loses contact with his younger two children. He spends his days shut up in his office, totally out of touch with his children's needs. When Jen arrives, David expects her to do most of the cooking and cleaning while he continues to lock himself in his study. As time passes, David slowly becomes more involved in his children's lives occasionally joining them on hikes to explore the vast wilderness. Although David doesn't believe in magic, he supports Peter when Peter is confronted by Dr. Owen to hand over the harp key. Even though it may be a mistake, David completely trusts Peter to do the right thing with the key. In the end, it is this trust in his children that leads to the healing of the broken Morgan family.

Becky Morgan

Becky Morgan is the youngest of the Morgan children. She has a bright, optimistic attitude that is often contagious. When the family moves to Wales, Becky does her best to adjust to her new life and even begins to make new friends. When Peter finds the harp key, Becky believes all Peter's stories and becomes an unlikely ally in his search for the truth. Jen believes that Becky is too trusting of magic, but it appears that Becky is much smarter than she appears.

Mrs. Davies

Mrs. Davies is the next door neighbor to the Morgans when they move to Borth. She is hired by David to help with the cooking and cleaning. Peter and Becky both think Mrs. Davies is shrewd, but she proves to be a helpful ally to Jen when Jen takes over the cooking and cleaning. Mrs. Davies teaches her everything about being a housewife and supports her along the way, filling in as a mother figure for Jen.

Hugh Davies

Hugh Davies is also known as Hugh-the-Bus. He is married to Mrs. Davies and is the father of Gwilym Davies. He drives the bus in town, hence his nickname. He is a big, gentle-faced man with snow-white hair, a wide amused smile, very blue eyes, and driving cap typically tilted back on his head. He is also known to whistle while he drives.



Gwilym Davies

Gwilym Davies is the next door neighbor to the Morgans. He is an avid birdwatcher and didn't have many friends before the Morgans arrived. He is extremely awkward socially and would prefer to be out birdwatching or inspecting plants in the bog than interacting with people. Gwilym has dark brown hair and glasses that perpetually slip down his nose. As the novel progresses, Gwilym warms up to the idea of new friends and eventually helps Peter solve the mystery of where Taliesin's grave might be, and secretly drives him to the location on his motorbike.

Taliesin

Taliesin is the famous bard in Wales whose memories haunt the harp key Peter finds in the water. Taliesin is known to have been a good, honest, and strong bard. He is exiled from his home at the age of twelve to collect the king's war stories, and spends the rest of his life carrying around the king's stories in a time when Welsh do not have a written language. It had also been Taliesin's job to find the next bard and pass on the stories to him. Taliesin had been a brave fighter, and had always fought for good in the world. In the end, he dies in exile, away from his home, and is buried in an unknown grave until the key leads Peter to the place, miles below the reservoir, where his body lies.

Dr. Rhys

Dr. Rhys is a colleague of David's at the University, studying ancient Welsh literature. He has a particular interest in Taliesin and even lends some of his very old books about Welsh mythology to Peter when he shows interest in the topic. He is described as a thin little man in a well-worn suit and wire-framed spectacles that slide down his nose. As the novel progresses, Dr. Rhys shows great belief in Peter's stories asserting that not everything in the world can be explained by science.

Rhian Evans

Rhian Evans is Becky's best friend in school. She lives on a large farm with her family and speaks with a Welsh accent, which is noted in the text of the novel. She is described as small and dark, with long braided hair. She is loud, brash, and talkative, and her movements are described as quick and decisive. She proves to be a very good friend to the Morgan children, sharing information and gossip with them, and never turning her back on the family when things get difficult.

Mr. Evans

Mr. Evans is a farmer, and father to Rhian Evans. He is strongly built, fair-haired, with a pleasant open face and big red hands. Mr. Evans fully believes in magic and mysticism,



especially when it comes to Welsh history, and has clearly passed this belief onto his daughter, Rhian. It is Mr. Evans who first talks about the Old Ones, the people who died in the Great Flood of the Low Hundreds, and it is clear he believes the stories even though they have never been proven.

Elphin Rheged

Elphin Rheged is the boy Taliesin had chosen to become the next bard. Elphin is described as a gangly, near-grown boy, brown and careless. As the novel progresses, Elphin ages in the key's vision and is eventually kidnapped by pirates who want to use him for his labor. He is never seen or heard from again.

Mrs. Rhys

Mrs. Rhys is the wife of Dr. Rhys. She is large and perpetually smiling with wild gray hair and very blue eyes. She speaks with an accent that is not Welsh. Mrs. Rhys is primarily in the story for comedic effect, but is also another kind, welcoming woman who treats the lonely Morgan children with affection.

Dr. John Owen

Dr. John Owen is one of the main benefactors of the Wales National Museum. He is a slim, sandy-colored man with a sharp, clever face. He is usually dressed in a brown corduroy jacket with elbow patches and a dark green turtleneck giving him the appearance of being very cool and confident. He is a shrewd businessman and is obsessed with preserving old relics. When he hears that Peter may have found a valuable artifact, he becomes obsessed with collecting it, even though he doesn't know if it is worth anything. It soon becomes clear that Dr. Owen will stop at nothing to have the key, and even threatens to take legal action against the Morgans if they refuse to turn the key over to him.



Objects/Places

The Harp Key

The harp key had once belonged to Taliesin, and he had used it for tuning his harp. Many centuries later, Peter finds the key in the water near the shore of Borth. The key is shaped like a Y, about four inches across. Each arm of the Y is a hollow six-sided shaft and each has a slightly different diameter. There is a hole through it where the three arms come together, which Peter uses to fashion the key into a necklace, the same way Taliesin had. The key vibrates and sings and shows Peter images of the past, Taliesin's past, urging him to return the key to its proper owner, Taliesin. The key proves to be a much sought after artifact, but Peter resists the call to turn the key into the National Museum, and finds a way to return it to Taliesin's grave.

Borth

Borth is the city in Wales where David relocates his family after his wife's untimely death. Borth is described as a peculiar town, one street wide and two miles long. Shops and houses are strung out on the street "like beads on a cord." To the west is a wide margin of sandy beaches and to the east is the Borth bog.

Bryn Celyn

Bryn Celyn is the name of the home where the Morgans live in Borth, Wales. It is a two story stucco house with a bow window and a gate and a tiny scrap of garden in the front. The house is often windy and freezing cold, but the Morgans do what they can to make it homey.

Aberystwyth

Aberystwyth is the large town near to Borth where Peter teaches at the University. Compared to Borth, Aberystwyth appears to be a mega-metropolis with none of the buildings closed for winter and the streets filled with people. The main street is very broad with shops at the top and guest houses at the bottom.

Coracle

A coracle is an ancient, small boat typically built for one person. It is described as looking like a huge black turtle with its legs and head drawn inside the shell and is formed by a hide stretched tight over a basket like frame.



Llechwedd Melyn

Llechwedd Melyn is the farm where Rhian Evans and her family live. It is set in a cleft on the Northern side of the valley, a collection of buildings huddled together including a farmhouse, cowbarn, and many sheds with a hill rising behind them. The house is built of stone and has two great chimneys rising on either side of the slated roof. Inside, the house is always warm and dry, and full of the smell of freshly baked bread.

The Low Hundreds

The Low Hundreds is a mythical land that is said to have stood where Borth stands today. It is storied to have been a low, flat land that completely vanished during a terrible storm, which Peter sees through the visions of the harp key. Some say that the bells still ring under the water from all sixteen towns that made up the Low Hundreds.

Cardiff Castle

Cardiff Castle has a moat around its walls, full of grass instead of water, but still houses an air of mystery and history. The Morgan children all believe that King Arthur once lived here until Peter sets them straight, that this castle was built hundreds of years after King Arthur ever lived. When Peter visits the castle, it feels familiar to him because of the draw from the key. He knows that Taliesin once passed through the very gates at which he sits and stares; this makes him feel at one with the land, for the first time since moving to Wales.

The Red Goat

The Red Goat is the pub where all the men sit together after the wolf hunt to share their stories. This pub is typical of many pubs throughout Wales, and only becomes significant after the wolf hunt, when the importance of verbally shared stories and experiences comes to light. The pub is a low-ceilinged, whitewashed public bar that is plain and clean, with benches set against the wall, polished wood tables and chairs, and a high dark wood bar.

Cannwyl Corph

Cannwyl Corph is also known as the corpse candle. It is a very bright light, much brighter than a lantern, that leads a funeral procession. The Morgan children all see a Cannwyl Corph in the shape of a bright orb while they are on a hike near the water reservoir. When Peter sees this light, he knows it is from Taliesin's funeral and is guiding him to where he should bury the harp tuning key.



Themes

Language

One of the main themes of the novel is language. There is a big difference between the English language and the Welsh language, and the Morgan children are forced to muddle through it. All of the children feel like they are leaving their past behind, including their dead mother, and starting afresh with their new country and new language, which is why all three, at least momentarily, rebel against the new language. Language is also important to the theme of storytelling in the novel. Because Welsh did not have a written language for thousands of years, the people relied on the use of bards, like Taliesin, to record national history. The bards were called to remember the great stories of the nation, particularly battles, to preserve national history for generations to come. When people learned to write, they soon began to record the Welsh stories, but many were still lost. Both Dr. Rhys and David Morgan now work at the University decoding and translating some of the early Welsh stories, including some poetry from Taliesin himself. Language is also important in day-to-day life in Borth, symbolized by the shared stories of the men after the wolf hunt when Bond writes, "Their lives were hard and isolated, but they knew one another well, and word of mouth was still the best way of circulating news, just as it had been for thousands of years" (Page 249).

Ownership

A main theme of the novel is the theme of ownership. This theme is most exemplified with the artifacts that are held in the Wales National Museum. When the Morgan family arrives for their tour of the museum, Dr. Owen tells them the story of an old farmer who had found an eighth-century chalice and had been using it to hold apples on his counter-top. The museum has seized the item and it is now on display at the museum. When Becky hears this, she wants to know who really owns the chalice, the farmer who found it or the museum where it is kept. This question splits the characters in the novel, particularly as ownership relates to Peter and his magical harp tuning key, which proves to be the major conflict of the novel. Half of the characters - Jen, Dr. Owen, and David - believe the key should belong to the museum and thus the nation. Becky and Peter, however, believe that the key should remain with Peter. He is the one who found the key and it should be his decision what he should do with it. At the end of the novel, Peter claims that he never really possessed the key, but the key possessed him. The question of ownership also feeds back to the theme of storytelling, particularly in relation to the bards. The bards kept personal stories from the kings and their warriors, passing the stories down bard to bard, not for their own benefit or the benefit of the kings, but for the benefit of the entire nation, to whom the stories, and history, belong.



Patterns

Patterns are an important theme in the novel, particularly in relation to the patterns between history and present day. These patterns are seen through the superimposed images of ancient times over present time, as presented by the harp tuning key. Frequently, Peter sees ancient events happening at the exact same time that he sees them happening in present time. For example, when Peter is on the wolf hunt, he runs after a hunting dog that he believes is from his own hunting party only to realize that he is chasing after an ancient dog. He witnesses the death of the wolf at two different times, simultaneously, in the exact same spot. Similar events are scattered throughout the novel as Peter experiences Taliesin's memories of the land while he and his family explore the land in present time. It is through these superimposed images and patterns that Peter begins to piece together the mystery of the tuning key, leading him to Taliesin's true burial site. As he reaches this site, Peter states that, "The pattern was right, it was working itself out. People spent their lives weaving patterns, borrowing bits from one another, but making each pattern different," suggesting that while he and Taliesin were following the same path in Wales, each was making the history their own and battling through their own journey. The theme of patterns is supported by Jen's hobby of knitting. As the novel progresses, she learns knitting patterns from various characters in the novel and becomes a progressively better knitter as she learns.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is third person, limited omniscience, meaning that the narrator writes about the characters as "he" or "she" and only has omniscient knowledge of one character's thoughts and emotions at a time. While the narration is limited omniscience, it is fully reliable. Because the characters are attempting to solve a puzzle throughout most of the novel, this reliability is crucial for the reader, who is trying to solve the puzzle alongside the characters. If the narration were unreliable, it would damage the relationship between the characters and the reader, and much of the enjoyment of the novel would be lost.

The story is divided equally between exposition and dialogue. There are some very long descriptive passages, particularly about the land, that appear to be boring and may be skimmed over by some readers. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes clear that these long descriptive passages about the land give additional clues to the puzzle surrounding Taliesin's harp key, and some readers may flip back through the book, combing through these passages for clues. Almost all the information the reader receives about Taliesin and his history is filtered through Peter's thoughts and experiences. At times, this information is confusing, particularly when large spans of time pass, and Taliesin ages. Because the reader is not receiving this information directly, and it is filtered through the mind of another character, often out of sequence, the time line of events surrounding Taliesin's life is somewhat confusing.

Setting

The setting of the novel is in the real-life town of Borth, Wales. Borth is the city in Wales where David relocates his family after his wife's untimely death. Borth is described as a peculiar town, one street wide and two miles long. Shops and houses are strung out on the street "like beads on a cord." To the west is a wide margin of sandy beaches and to the east is the Borth bog. Throughout most of the novel, The Morgan children spend their time exploring the land. When not outside, the characters are typically either in Bryn Celyn, the Morgan household, or Llechwedd Melyn, the Evans' household. Bryn Celyn is the name of the home where the Morgans live in Borth, Wales. It is a two story stucco house with a bow window and a gate and a tiny scrap of garden in the front. The house is often windy and freezing cold, but the Morgans do what they can to make it homey. Llechwedd Melyn is set in a cleft on the Northern side of the valley, a collection of buildings huddled together including a farmhouse, cowbarn, and many sheds with a hill rising behind them. The house is built of stone and has two great chimneys rising on either side of the slated roof. Inside, the house is always warm and dry, and full of the smell of freshly baked bread.



The novel progresses on two historical plains simultaneously, which leaves the setting somewhat confusing. The story progresses in present time, with the Morgans, and in ancient time, with Taliesin. The land is often seen in both present and past time, simultaneously, the images superimposed atop each other. When the land is viewed in present time, it is called Borth. When the land is viewed in ancient time it is referred to as The Low Hundreds. The Low Hundreds is a mythical land that stood where Borth stands today. It was a low, flat land that completely vanished during a terrible storm, which Peter sees through the visions of the harp key. Some say that the bells still ring under the water from all sixteen towns that made up the Low Hundreds. The only time the characters are not present in either Borth or The Low Hundreds is when they travel into the city of Aberystwyth, the large town near Borth where Peter teaches at the University. Compared to Borth, Aberystwyth appears to be a mega-metropolis with none of the buildings closed for winter and the streets filled with people. The main street is very broad with shops at the top and guest houses at the bottom.

Language and Meaning

Because this novel is written for young readers (ages 10 - 14), the language of the novel is relatively accessible, in that it is written conversationally and without large vocabulary words readers might stumble over. That said, the novel was written in the 1960's, so some of the structure of the sentences is somewhat stiff and inaccessible to present-day readers simply because the language is no longer current. Once the reader gets used to the style, however, it should not hinder the comprehension of the novel. Additionally, the novel is set in Wales, which occasionally calls for the use of Welsh language. Although the introduction of Welsh language is somewhat clunky, most readers will be able to deduce the meaning of the Welsh phrases contextually. If not, the Welsh phrases never have direct impact on the plot or understanding of the novel, so even readers who skim over the Welsh phrases will not be lost. Although the Welsh phrases may take some getting used to, the introduction of a foreign language gives the reader a glimpse into life in another country, which is particularly important to understanding the emotional growth of the Morgan children, since as it helps to characterize the culture of Wales.

Language is also important to the theme of storytelling in the novel. Because Welsh did not have a written language for thousands of years, the people relied on the use of bards, like Taliesin, to record national history. The bards were called to remember the great stories of the nation, particularly battles, to preserve national history for generations to come. When people learned to write, they soon began to record the Welsh stories, but many were still lost. Both Dr. Rhys and David Morgan now work at the University decoding and translating some of the early Welsh stories, including some poetry from Taliesin himself.

Structure

The novel is divided into nineteen chapters of relatively equal length. Chapter 3 is the longest chapter at 33 pages, while Chapter 18 is the shortest at 7 pages. The rest of the chapters roughly average 20 pages. Each chapter has a name that refers to some action or event within the novel that foreshadows what the reader is about to read. The chapters tend to be long and switch point-of-view, from Jen to Peter, at least once. Also, each chapter typically has at least one scene, or image, from ancient time, seen through Taliesin's experiences. As the novel progresses, these dips into ancient time happen more frequently than in the beginning of the novel.

The plot of the novel is relatively straightforward, in that the major plot is Peter's struggle to puzzle out what clues the harp tuning key is giving him, why he has been chosen as the recipient of these visions, and what he is supposed to do in the future. The subplots all revolve around Peter's change in character as he gradually becomes withdrawn from his family, and even aggressive. Although Bond attempts to flush out the story with subplots, they rarely have any impact on the major plot of the novel and could be interpreted as fluff. Because of this fluff writing, the pace of the novel is relatively slow, and many readers may figure out major plot points before the characters do. Additionally, Taliesin's scenes and history sometimes appear out of sequence, which may prove to be frustrating and confusing for some readers.



Quotes

"Not even the last outpost of civilization.' The tips of his ears were miserably red. 'Civilization must have decided it wasn't worth coming out here'" (Page 9).

"Becky kept telling Peter it would get easier for him, but it didn't because Peter wouldn't let it. He had to hang on to his hardness and hate or he couldn't survive. Without the hate, there were only the intolerable homesickness and the desperate longing for his mother. These hurt far too much for to bear alone" (Page 26).

"Jen was dazzled by the richness of the colors and how quickly they changed. You had only to look away for a minute and when you looked back they had altered mysteriously. It was impossible to ignore the country. It was ever-present, not as a backdrop, but as an active part in everything that went on" (Page 55).

"The cards were blank squares of white, the voices faded. Frightened, he tried to shut out the singing, but it grew relentlessly around him. He had thought he'd be safe with other people around - it had always come when he was alone before - but he was helpless to stop it. His hands gripped the arms of the chair and he went on rocking, back and forth, back and forth, automatically. The study vanished" (Page 66).

"Then, with reluctance, Taliesin moved and moved so quickly the boy saw only a sudden flash of light an a glittering rainbow of drops in the air above the pool, and Taliesin held the great fish helpless in his hands, watching it gulp, its eyes bulging. 'You are too foolish and trusting,' Taliesin told it softly" (Page 109).

"All the while she'd been insulated in her own cocoon of unhappiness, she'd missed her father's grief. And he in turn missed Peter's. It was as if they'd all built separate little rooms to live in instead of one big one" (Page 114).

"The trees were all pine and all the same age, planted tight against one another, so their branches were tangled together and all the lower ones had died from lack of light. It was dark and silent and oppressive beneath the trees. Nothing grew on the ground under them. Nothing stirred" (Page 147).

"He could only watch: he, Peter could do nothing to prevent any of it. And it was happening again. The pattern was set by the past and could not be altered. He was only a spectator, not of the time, and therefore powerless" (Page 185).

"They teach you that reason can answer everything, and that there is a scientific explanation for even the most unscientific events. People do not like not understanding, do you see. Because as long as we understand, we feel we have control!" (Page 196).

"But between you and me alone, one hunt is very like another. There are hunters, and there is the quarry, and there are hounds. There is a chase, a moment when all seems to be lost, when everything hangs in the balance. And then - triumph!" (Page 251).



"It had once been a scared, magic place for people so far distant in time they could hardly be imagined: strange, hairy, dark, little figures that appeared in history and science books. You knew perfectly well they had been real, but you couldn't actually believe in them. But here there was contact. Here, that dim, conceivable world touched the present for an instant. The magic hadn't all worn away" (Page 272).

"'But one becomes extremely vulnerable when one admits a belief in magic, especially in my position,' said Dr. Rhys. 'It makes people uneasy when I speak of it, perhaps because such an admission touches beliefs in them they would rather ignore'" (Page 282).

"The pattern was right, it was working itself out. People spent their lives weaving patterns, borrowing bits from one another, but making each pattern different" (Page 330).



Topics for Discussion

Describe the journey the Morgan family undergoes during their move to Borth from Amherst. What emotional state is the family in at the opening of the novel, and what emotional state is the family in at the close of the novel? What key element(s) do you think aid the Morgan family through their familial transition? Do you think the Morgan family is stronger or weaker as a unit by the end of the novel? Why?

Discuss the idea of ownership as it is presented in the novel. What is Dr. Owen's belief about historic artifacts? According to Dr. Owen, to whom do historic artifacts belong? Which characters agree with Dr. Owen's assessment of ownership? Which characters disagree with him? What argument do the disagreeing characters give? To whom do they believe historic artifacts belong? How do these conflicting arguments affect Peter and his harp tuning key? In your opinion, do you think Peter should have handed the key over to Dr. Owen? Why or why not?

Discuss David Morgan's opinion of education. How does David's opinion of education affect his three children's academic studies? Do you think David Morgan values his children's education? Why or why not? What formal education do the Morgan children receive in Borth? What informal education do they receive? Given the major conflicts of the novel, which form of education proves to be more useful for the children? How can you tell?

Discuss Jen's transition from teenager to adult throughout the course of the novel. How is Jen's character described at the opening of the novel? How is her character described at the end of the novel? Do you think Jen is ready to undertake the pressures of adulthood when she arrives in Borth? How can you tell? Do you think Jen has any choice in the matter? Do you think Jen is forced to grow up too soon? Why or why not?

Discuss the use of historical mythology in the text. First, describe the major mythology that is presented in the text. Which mythical characters are of the most importance in the novel? What role do these mythical characters play in the overall plot of the novel? How does Nancy Bond weave together fantasy and reality in the novel? Do you think this marriage of genres is effective? Why or why not?

There are three major academic figures in the novel - David Morgan, Dr. Rhys, and Dr. Owen. First, describe each of the three men and their academic stance on Wales history and literature. How do each of these men influence the way Peter views his magical harp tuning key? If given the opportunity to own the key themselves, which man do you think would take the best care of the key? Which would value it the most? How can you tell?

Describe the idea of home in the novel. First, describe the Morgans' home, both in Amherst and in Borth. What is the same about these homes? What is different? How are the lives of the Morgans different in each home? Then, describe Taliesin's home. What message do you think Nancy Bond is sending to her readers about the value of



home? By the end of the novel, do you think Peter and Jen ever feel truly at home? If so, where? If not, why?