

# **A Sudden Light Study Guide**

## **A Sudden Light by Garth Stein**

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# Contents

<a href="#">A Sudden Light Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Prologue, Chapters 1-3.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 4-7.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 8-11.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 12-15.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 16-19.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 20-23.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 24-27.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 28-31.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 32-35.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 36-39.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 40-43.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 44-46, Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">46</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">49</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">51</a>

# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this guide: Stein, Garth. *A Sudden Light*. Simon and Schuster, 2014.

*A Sudden Light* is a family drama about redemption and destiny, made more potent with the addition of ghosts.

Trevor Riddell is 14 years old in 1990, when his parents declare bankruptcy, lose their home, and embark on a trial separation. With his mother gone to England to see her family, Trevor accompanies his father Jones to his childhood home outside of Seattle.

Riddell House, now inhabited only by Jones's younger sister, Serena, and aging father, Samuel, is an elaborate wooden mansion almost a hundred years old. However, it is now in disrepair. It was built by Elijah Riddell, a timber baron who grew wealthy in 1904 with a railroad merger. However, when his son Benjamin died in a tragic accident, Elijah proclaimed that the Riddell land could never be developed.

In 1990, that statute has run its course, and Jones and Serena plan on getting Samuel to sign off on a lucrative real estate deal. Jones hopes the success will help him win his wife back, but the land has its own plans.

Trevor hears the house speak to him by name, and before long he sees "the ghost" of Riddell House—Ben Riddell himself. There are rumors of other ghosts, too. Samuel, who appears addled with dementia, claims to hear his late wife dancing at night.

Ben leads Trevor to various places in the house where he can find old letters and journals from the past—those belonging to Elijah Riddell and Harry Lindsey, both of which feature Ben. They tell of a young man at odds with his father's business, perhaps too progressive for his time. Ben was the conservationist son of a timber baron, who preferred climbing trees to felling them. Ben was also homosexual, and while Ben's chosen wife understood this, his father did not.

Following Harry's and Ben's deaths, Elijah reported that he would prevent the 200 acres from ever being developed. As Trevor emerges from these glimpses into history, his view of Riddell House and his role there changes. Rather than aiding his father and aunt, Trevor begins to see ways their scheme is not right. Aunt Serena especially becomes more duplicitous as the plot unfolds, until Trevor eventually realizes she is faking the brunt of Samuel's "illness" and basically planning to kidnap his father in a crazed, incestuous plot.

Trevor tries to confront his father with these details, but Jones refuses to believe him. Ben appears to Trevor in a dream one last time, during which he both releases Trevor from his task yet urges him to stop his father and aunt from selling.



At the novel's climax, Trevor suspects that Serena is tricking her father into thinking the ghost of his dead wife is dancing in the ballroom. He traps her escape route, and the family presses her on her dishonest plotting. She breaks down under Jones's declaration that he wants to return to his wife and let the city have the house for a park. In the middle of the night Serena sets the house on fire. Trevor and his grandfather escape, but Jones and Serena die in the fire.

Twenty years later, Trevor returns to the Riddell land with his own family. It is a large city park by then, just the way Benjamin Riddell wanted it. Trevor's mother sees his father's ghost, and begs Trevor to tell her the Riddell family story.



# Prologue, Chapters 1-3

## Summary

The Prologue introduces the narrator, Trevor Riddell, and his errand for the Seattle summer. He shares that he grew up in Connecticut although his father's entire family is from the Seattle era. His father, Jones, is part of a large timber-baron family from the turn of the century, which culminated in a massive mansion overlooking the Puget Sound. Trevor's mother, who is English, went to be with her family after the family declared bankruptcy and lost their home. The Riddell House is likewise cursed, supposedly, and indeed Jones's father and sister live there in relative ruin. Jones is worried about taking Trevor to the home for the summer, and Trevor is reluctant to open up to his father.

In Chapter 1, Trevor and his father pull up outside of the North Estate, the 200-plus acre tract that houses Riddell House. The guard at the gate mentions the "recent" tragedy of Jones's mother's death, 23 years earlier, the circumstances of which are never mentioned. Trevor is shocked at the size of Riddell House, which is nearly a century old and in a state of disrepair. Despite that, it is a large and grand home. A woman appears; she is Jones's sister Serena. She is beautiful and slightly flirtatious. After introductions, she shows Trevor to his room, and he takes a nap.

Trevor shares a bit of the recent family history in Chapter 2. His parents having recently lost Jones's business and subsequently their house, the summer was intended to be a trial separation. Trevor's mother, Rachel, insists that Jones needs to find himself by returning to his childhood home. Trevor feels it is up to him to help fix his dad.

In Chapter 3, Trevor leaves his room, uncomfortable in the house that seems to be full of secrets. He goes to the front porch and meets his grandfather, Samuel. They have a brief exchange and Trevor joins him for a glass of lemonade. Eventually Serena comes out to summon them to dinner. Trevor is attracted to her in a teenage-boy fashion. Serena sends Trevor upstairs to fetch his father; Jones is in his bedroom, nearly frozen in anxiety. The four sit for dinner and Serena hands Grandpa several pills to take for his dementia. Serena mentions that her boyfriend Dickie will not be joining them for dinner, and then Grandpa Samuel interrupts with erratic questions. Serena and Samuel argue about his food, and she complains about the state of his mind. Trevor mentions that he heard a voice upstairs, and asks if the house is haunted. Serena answers that houses sometimes speak, and that Grandpa thinks he hears his dead wife dancing in the ballroom. Grandpa says that Ben is nervous, and starts writing on a piece of notepaper. Serena suggests Samuel read something different, an apology note he has written for Jones. He does so and excuses himself from the table.

Serena mentions the fate of the house, and how Jones can help her meet the goal. Samuel is heir to the house and land, but refuses to sell it, or to leave. Serena wants Jones to help her convince their father to sell the house and use the proceeds to both



care for Samuel, and to live comfortably. Serena leaves the room; Trevor asks his father to tell him the story of the entire Riddell estate, but he will not. Trevor finds the note his grandfather was writing before he left: "MUIR MTNS CA" (40).

## Analysis

The opening chapters of *A Sudden Light* establish a sense of mystery around the large, imposing Riddell House, a massive cottage on a 200-acre parcel overlooking the Puget Sound that has been the capstone of the Riddell timber fortune for nearly 100 years. The details of the Riddell generational sin, which is symbolized by the house itself, have not yet been detailed in the plot, but the house itself is described in great detail. It is at the same time majestic and ruinous. This parallel will be prominent throughout the story, as author Garth Stein details the family struggles in a past timeline and compares them to the current conflict between Trevor and his father and aunt. The house is crumbling and must be fixed; likewise, there is an obvious rift between Jones and his father, one that is only alluded to in Chapter 3 when Samuel reads his son a scant apology letter—one which does not impress Jones in the least.

A consistent theme in *A Sudden Light* is forgiveness and atonement. Stein barely touches on it in Chapter 3 with the apology letter, but Serena mentions something that happened to patriarch Elijah Riddell—something that changed his plans for the North Estate. When Trevor asks his father the story, Jones will not tell him. Trevor's mother Rachel only hinted to her son that there was more going on in the summer trip than Trevor could imagine, and Jones is obviously shaken when it is time to finally face his father.

When Trevor and his father first encounter Serena, Trevor notes that she "embraced my father in a way that was uncomfortable" (13). This quote is foreshadowing; events in the novel will slowly reveal Serena's very unhealthy attachment to her brother.

Several characters in *A Sudden Light* quote poetry or literature to one another, usually in a debate or in an attempt to intimidate the other. Jones says to his wife, "I feel like an ass when you quote poetry at me" (20). Later in the novel, Ben will try to stimulate Trevor's thoughts about the house with poetry and literature. As the novel unfolds, Serena will try to rely on certain quotes and definitions in order to overpower Trevor.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some of Serena's unsettling characteristics?

## Discussion Question 2

What are some early indications that Samuel is a sympathetic character?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Trevor feel responsible for fixing his parents' marriage?

## Vocabulary

peninsula, pulp, avid, emblematic, perilous, cathartic, artifice, cataclysm, ruminating



## Chapters 4-7

### Summary

In Chapter 4, Trevor explains the story of his great-great-grandfather, Elijah Riddell. Elijah was a workhorse from Minnesota. Eventually he was ready to produce an heir, so he searched the eligible, wealthy heiresses and chose Sara Green. They married and as soon as she became pregnant, he left for the forested West Coast. When his son Benjamin was ten, Elijah sent for him to join him in Seattle. On a short visit to Minnesota, Sara became pregnant again, and opted to raise Abraham in New York until Elijah sent for him.

Chapter 5 sees Trevor creeping along the dark hallway to bed, the old house giving him a scared feeling. He goes to the kitchen for a glass of water and finds Grandpa Samuel there. Samuel asks Trevor to make him some medicine—milk and Jim Beam. Grandpa Samuel is missing a finger and a half from his hand. He asks Trevor if he can hear his wife dancing in the ballroom, and he can. As Trevor leaves the kitchen, Samuel tells him, “You can’t have my house” (49). Upstairs, Trevor hears a ticking sound, and he follows it to a room on the third floor—a ballroom. There are footprints in the dust and a record player on the floor skips at the end of a record. Trevor hears someone in the room with him, but cannot see anyone there.

In Chapter 6, Trevor awakes groggily, as the strange encounter in the ballroom kept him awake. He wanders the grounds in search of his father. He finds him, and Jones describes the era of railroad and timber and mining, and how Elijah had a piece of all of it. Jones cannot find his wedding ring; Trevor cannot find his watch. He asks Jones if the house has ghosts. Jones tells him of his mother, that Isobel was a flake. Ghosts and spirits are different—ghosts being “stuck” because there is a job to do. When pressed if he believes Riddell House to actually be haunted, Jones says no. He changes the subject, reminding his son that the aim is to sell the house, put Grandpa in a home, and try to piece the marriage back together.

Chapter 7 is a short history of Jones Riddell. In 1967, at the age of 16, he left Seattle for boarding school in Connecticut. It was a school for troubled youth, and when he graduated he learned the trade of boatbuilding. Jones was a gifted woodworker and eventually started teaching local at-risk youth his craft. For years it was a successful workshop, until one summer a student burned his woodworking shop down. Jones had a hard time recovering emotionally after the event. It was not long before Jones was losing money on his business, and eventually the family was forced to declare bankruptcy.





## Analysis

Chapters 4-7 take a pause to lay some historical groundwork on the Riddell family. The threads of family run through this novel as a consistent theme; specifically the importance of family and how we are tied by blood and history even if we do not have an active relationship with family members. Jones and Serena are obviously still linked, even though they have neither seen each other nor spoken in over 20 years. Serena repeatedly mentions the importance of her staying at Riddell House with her father even though it has been two long, unhappy decades. In exploring the past life of Elijah Riddell, Trevor discloses that Elijah worked hard in the Pacific Northwest while his son was raised in Minnesota with his mother; and yet, when Benjamin was of age, he dutifully went to Seattle with his father to learn the family business. Through these examples the author shares that people do things for family that otherwise seem unnecessary, even nonsensical.

Chapter 6 includes several long, descriptive passages about Riddell House itself, which is a type of monstrous symbol of family sin and decay. There are unhealed hurts and deep troughs of darkness running through Jones, Serena, and Samuel, and Stein compares these to the decrepit tennis courts, swimming pool, and gardens of the once-luxury family mansion. Practically, the state of the house improves Serena's case for selling it to a land developer because nobody can afford to bring it back; however, Stein's original claim—that characters often do irrational things for family—will come back around as the story unfolds.

Chapter 7 is where Trevor and his father explore more deeply the notion of ghosts in Riddell House. Spiritualism and ghosts specifically are an often repeated motif in *A Sudden Light*. The appearance of a ghost symbolizes a learning experience for the main character; when Trevor sees the image of his great-grand-uncle Ben, or of his grandmother Isobel, each sighting is directly linked to a new piece of the puzzle that Trevor must learn in order to move the story to its conclusion. In Chapter 7, Jones reveals to his son that his mother was a "flake" spiritualist, a person who actively tried to harness energy and communicate with spirits and ghosts. Jones also makes a comparison between those two terms; a ghost being a spirit that is "stuck" in a place until he or she can move on. As the novel unfolds, Trevor has several encounters with several ghosts, and while they are actively teaching him, he is also making it possible for each ghost to be "unstuck."

### Discussion Question 1

How does the use of language evoke a sense of mystery and fear around the house?

### Discussion Question 2

Is Jones's goal for the visit exactly what his wife Rachel sent him home to achieve?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is Trevor equipped to see more clearly than the rest of the characters?

## **Vocabulary**

corroborative, affluent, dubious, reminiscence, subtlety, skiff



# Chapters 8-11

## Summary

In Chapter 8 Trevor wanders to the porch hoping to sit with Grandpa Samuel and have some lemonade. However, his father is there with a blue binder on his lap, looking uncomfortable. A man arrives with a Power of Attorney for Samuel to sign, but as he asks Samuel if he fully understands what he is signing, the older man will only say that his son told him to sign it so that things will be taken care of. In the end the notary will not allow the signing to take place. Jones is angry, and goes inside to talk to Serena. Trevor eavesdrops on their conversation. She chides her brother for thinking it would be easy, and goes on to say that the other option—declaring Samuel mentally incompetent—is much more difficult because it would involve doctors. Jones is upset and angry and Serena gives him a motivating speech about convincing their father that selling the house is best for the family.

In Chapter 9, Trevor talks to his mother on the phone. It is his birthday and he tells her everything that is going on in the house. He tells her about the note Grandpa Samuel wrote a few nights before, and his mother leads him to the book *The Mountains of California* by John Muir. Trevor also tries to tell his mother how great his father is and attempts to convince her to take him back. After their conversation he goes to the library in the house and finds the Muir book. The book is inscribed to Harry Lindsey and a letter falls out to Harry from Ben Riddell. The letter is between two lovers, and also expresses Ben's desire to thwart his father Elijah's plans to develop parts of Washington.

In Chapter 10, Trevor discloses more information about Benjamin Riddell, who was a timber baron's son while maintaining the cause for conservation. Ben went to Yale and learned the way of the Transcendentalists, which was difficult to reconcile with his father's industry. He loved the earth and his father wanted to use it to its detriment. When Ben was a young man, Elijah arranged for him to marry the daughter of railroad baron J.J. Jordan; however, Ben was already involved with Harry Lindsey.

In Chapter 11, Trevor has dinner with Serena and Samuel. She gives him three pills for his Alzheimer's. Jones is gone, and Trevor is annoyed that his father is missing for his birthday. At the mention of his mother, Serena challenges the notion that Jones and Rachel will reconcile their relationship. Trevor asks who Ben was, and a discussion follows in which Serena discusses Samuel's medical condition and Samuel blames Ben for ruining their lives. Ben wanted the land to return to its natural state and Elijah agreed with him. Trevor is left confused. After dinner Jones finally arrives, drunk. He gives Trevor a blank journal to write in, and Serena tells him that they are giving him the entire Riddell library, which raises the question of why she would not sell the books if they were short on money. Serena goes on to discuss how much of his youth Jones sacrificed to care for her and their mother when she was ill. Samuel claims he can remember but Serena cuts him off. Jones starts to cry. Trevor notices how Serena



controls what everyone thinks and feels, and that his father's problem is not just about money.

## Analysis

Chapters 8-11 provide a host of material that drives the plot and expands the many issues between the characters. Serena mentions the many Riddell family sins, and that it is up to her and Jones to atone for how Elijah Riddell raped the land and built the monstrosity of a house. The Riddell family and its sins is a central hub of the novel's plot—everything revolves around it. The constant discussions of redemption and forgiveness—another prevalent theme in the novel—hinge on the sins of generations. There are singular sins such as those hinted at between Samuel and Jones, and also the grander scheme of Elijah's sins against the earth.

Elijah's sins against the earth are another of the author's themes: conservation. The tragic figure of the Riddell past, Benjamin Riddell, was a conservationist when the movement was just getting started. Moreover, Ben's views on saving the earth were at odds with his timber-baron father. Ben's ideas were rooted in a philosophy that all people, things, and actions are connected. Trevor eventually reads Ben's writings to Elijah: "These notes carried a tone of wonderment and fascination, and a belief that all things are connected in ways we can barely fathom" (81).

Ben's ideals can be taken in hand with the author's descriptions of trees and wood in their natural state. Trees are a symbol for life in this novel; when characters are in the woods they appear to be at their most natural, relaxed, and real. There is one great tree that Harry and Ben both climb, when they feel the most alive. In the end, Trevor sees Ben's ghost leave the top of the tree for the sky, finally released. Ben writes, "The life and personality and soul of a tree continue, even beyond its felling, milling, drying, and utilization" (82).

Serena mentions Samuel's illness as a matter of course, although he has not been diagnosed with anything in particular and she does not want to involve any doctors. Nevertheless, she gives him Alzheimer's medication. This anomaly is not lost on Trevor, and is foreshadowing for the reader to notice. Disease and sickness serve symbolically in this novel for family mistakes. They are mentioned consistently with Samuel's disease, and eventually Isobel's as well.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the adults seem to be using Trevor?

## Discussion Question 2

How is Benjamin Riddell already painted as a hero?



## Discussion Question 3

What does Trevor mean when he says that Serena "controls the narrative" of the family (94)?

## Vocabulary

glean, ramifications, carnal, intimacy, sophisticated, realm, docile, pandering, rummage



# Chapters 12-15

## Summary

In Chapter 12, Trevor visits the library to research Teddy Roosevelt and the timber baron era. He and his friends, Trevor learns, were great conservationists and also spiritualists. Trevor further learns that the subject of Ben Riddell and his sexuality even made a Seattle newspaper in 1903. Trevor asks the librarian about what life would be like for a homosexual male at the turn of the century; he learns it was very common, and that especially in the wealthy families, a man would marry a woman for a financial partnership, just like with Ben Riddell and his proposed marriage to J.J. Jordan's daughter Alice. However, it is clear from the old newspapers that Ben died before the marriage took place, and also that Elijah went ahead with the railroad merger and doubled his fortune.

In Chapter 13, Trevor asks his father for more information on the family's reports regarding Elijah Riddell: that he suddenly changed from timber baron to conservationist, putting a statue in his will that for two generations, the Riddell House and the North Estate could not be developed or sold. The statue runs out with Samuel, who is able to do as he pleases. Jones speculates that Elijah felt guilty for everyone that died to serve his empire. The next day Trevor accompanies his grandfather to the barn, where Samuel does woodworking. In an old trunk in the barn he finds many of his father's old things, among them a wooden carving of a hand holding the earth. Trevor asks his grandfather if he knew about the Muir book, Ben, or the letter from Ben to Harry. Samuel says no. When he returns to the house Trevor sneaks to his room. He hears his father call his name from just behind him, but when he turns around there is nobody there.

Chapter 14 describes a dream Trevor has, which is a glimpse into Ben's life. Ben and Harry are climbing a tall tree in the Pacific forest. They climb it together, and once they reach the top they are looking down on the forest floor. When they reach the bottom and make camp, Harry starts carving a sculpture of a hand holding the world. When Ben asks whose hand it is, Harry says "it's yours."

In Chapter 15 Trevor wakes in the middle of the night after his evocative dream. His door is open when he remembered closing it. He leaves his room and follows a certain sense of purpose into the dark and quiet hallway. Remembering Serena's teasing about a secret stairway and the ghost of Riddell House, he follows the sounds of someone until he finds the secret room. He lights a match and sees a man staring at him: Ben Riddell. More than that, he hears and feels breathing in the darkness.



## Analysis

With so much discussion of Ben's homosexual relationship with Harry Lindsey, who is both a younger man but also one from a lower social class, Garth Stein brings another theme to the forefront of *A Sudden Light*: tolerance for non-mainstream viewpoints and lifestyles. Stein demonstrates this both in Ben's sexuality and Isobel's Riddell's apparent interest in Spiritualism. Both of these ideas were progressive in their timelines, and both of them were likewise frowned upon. Trevor's long exchange with the Seattle librarian is a short statement on political tolerance for homosexuality, and it does add a further dimension to Ben's character, about whom the reader only sees in letters and a few flashbacks. Ben is fighting against several stronger, more mainstream viewpoints in order to follow his heart.

Another prevalent theme in *A Sudden Light* is Conservationism, which is the beating heart of Ben Riddell. The following generations of Riddells are not supporters, however, because they have not been allowed to sell Riddell House. Jones add another layer to the stance against clear-cutting land by telling Trevor how dangerous timber work is even in modern times. The deaths are numerous and terrible.

Trevor encounters the ghost of Ben Riddell for the first time in Chapter 15. After putting his hands on the wood carving—a symbol for mastering one's own fate—and taking it back to his room, he has an evocative, realistic dream as Ben Riddell in which he climbs a tree. Trees are definite symbols for the true life, and Trevor is able to see through Ben's eyes what it felt like to sit on top of the world and feel close to the earth. After the dream, Trevor finds the secret room and sees "the ghost" of Riddell House. Ghosts are clearly messengers in this novel; eventually Isobel will appear as well as Ben with words of wisdom for the living. In addition to the ghosts providing a function for the plot, their presence transforms *A Sudden Light* from a family drama to a ghost story.

When Trevor asks his father why Elijah changed his will to keep the family from selling the house, Jones replies that he was probably doing penance for all the people that died clear-cutting his forests. This is another nod to the idea of people needing redemption and atonement for their sins.

### Discussion Question 1

How does Ben's sexuality play a role in the Riddell family history?

### Discussion Question 2

How does so much unresolved family conflict affect the characters in *A Sudden Light*?



## Discussion Question 3

Does the author effectively mingle so many different pots and subplots? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

tendency, dalliance, sardonic, rejoinder, penance, contraption, fathom, varnish





# Chapters 16-19

## Summary

In Chapter 16, Trevor figures his father is failing his mission on purpose, in order to solve a deeper issue. After the adults are gone for the day, he tries to better explore the secret room where he had seen Ben during the night. He follows a series of narrow corridors and stairways to a small alcove lined with bookshelves. He finds Elijah Riddell's journals there, and begins to read. The first entry is from 1904, just after Ben had died, and Elijah claims his dead son visited him to tell him how to right his wrongs against the world. He promises to look over the North Estate until it is returned to the forest.

In Chapter 17, Trevor visits Observatory Hill, a peak on the property and the Riddell family graveyard. When he tries to go to bed that night, it is difficult to sleep, so he goes downstairs and finds his father. He is holding the carving he found in the barn. Together they walk to the barn; Jones collects some tools and odds and ends as they go. Back inside the house, Jones attaches the sculpture to the missing newel on the stairwell, telling Trevor that the carving is full of power. He goes on to share that after his mother died, Samuel told him he was leaving in the morning, and that he was no use to him anymore. Jones said Samuel was cruel because of what happened, will not tell Trevor what that was.

In Chapter 18, it is even later that night when Serena visits Trevor's room. While she praises Trevor for being kind to Samuel, she warns him that eventually his disease will kill him. When Samuel's father—Abraham, brother of Ben—died and Samuel learned that the family was in debt with no recourse, he started drinking and becoming violent. Soon after, Isobel fell ill with ALS. Isobel protected Serena and Jones from their father's rage and sickness, and told the children that the house protected them as well; a spirit that resided over the house, whose power was concentrated in the carving of the hand. One day Samuel took an axe to the hand in anger. Soon after that, Isobel died and Jones was sent away. Serena slyly challenges Trevor to be careful when he digs too deeply into the secrets of the house.

In Chapter 19, Trevor wonders if his father has a special connection with wood. After Jones adds the hand sculpture back to the newel post, Grandpa Samuel is barely moved by the new addition. However, Trevor feels as if the house has awakened, shifting and groaning in the night. Later that night, after Serena leaves, Trevor falls asleep and wakes again at 4:00 a.m. at the sound of footsteps. He follows them to the ballroom and sees his father standing in the dark, probably waiting to see his mother's ghostly dance. Trevor does not disturb him, but climbs the narrow stairs to the higher secret room and reads another entry in Elijah's journal. The entry shares that Elijah eventually did make the deal with the railroad, and further, that he came to understand what Ben wanted from the world. "The forest is eternal; we are merely passers-through" (149). He would let the North Estate return to the forest.



## Analysis

In Serena's discussion of their difficult childhood, which included Samuel's alcoholism and rage and Isobel's ALS, she introduces the subject of disease, which the author uses to symbolize sin. This is demonstrated when Serena specifically feels as if her mother grew ill to take on Samuel's sickness: "...Isobel grew ill because she took on the suffering of her husband, whom she loved very much" (140). There is further discussion on metaphysics and Spiritualism, but the clear message is that Isobel's disease grew from Samuel's wrongdoing. Serena also says, "She allowed herself to become ill because she refused to resolve a psychic rift within her" (140).

In relation to the trees, there are repeated references to the trees being alive, as they are a symbol for a true, real, life. Trevor discusses at length how old trees are, and how wise, and how most trees live longer than entire civilizations; yet humans dispose of them haphazardly. This passage on page 147 could also be associated with another of Stein's main themes, Conservationism. In relation to the carving of the hand—a symbol for controlling one's own destiny—Trevor notes that once his father reattaches the hand to the house's newel post, Riddell House seems to awaken and breathe, as if the sculpture gives it power.

While reading Elijah Riddell's journals, Trevor reads Elijah's thoughts on Ben's death and his parting benedictions to his father. Ben urges Elijah to allow the North Estate, the land which includes the Riddell House, to return to the forest. In this, Ben says, "Your redemption will be complete" (128). Redemption is a very consistent theme in *A Sudden Light*; indeed, each character that Trevor is watching is burdened by a mistake that begs for atonement. Ben reminds the reader that Elijah also has mistakes to make up for.

The letter, which Elijah believes that Ben's spirit wrote through him while he slept, begins with Ben's request that his father to bury his body on Observatory Hill next to Harry's: "Do this for me, as it will show me that you understand we are all connected" (128). This sentiment reminds the reader how much Ben, and indeed the author, believes that all people and actions are connected one to another, and really to the earth as well.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the mood surrounding Serena's visit to Trevor. How does the author evoke this mood?

## Discussion Question 2

What motivation does Trevor have to change his focus, aligning his aims with Ben's?



## Discussion Question 3

Why is it important for Jones to see his mother?

## Vocabulary

apparition, musty, intrinsic, enclosure, visceral, prognosis, affinity,



# Chapters 20-23

## Summary

In Chapter 20, Trevor awakens, finding he had fallen asleep in the secret room awaiting his father. It is pre-dawn, and there is a man standing in the corner of the room. It is clearly the ghost of Ben, but it soon disappears. When Trevor returns to his room he finds on his desk a brochure to a cruise line that was not previously there. He wishes to call his mother, but Serena interrupts him. She gives him some coffee and tries to ply him for information. When Trevor is shift with his answers, she becomes rude and dismissive. Trevor hands her the cruise line brochure; Serena unkindly warns him not to snoop. Trevor makes his way outside and finds his father in the orchard clearing the fire pit that his mother loved. Jones directs Trevor to a cottage in the woods. In the cottage Trevor finds Harry's journals. The entry details Ben's conversation with Harry about Elijah's request to move him to Seattle to build the house. The letter ends with the men making love, and Ben promising to delay his duties to Elijah a bit longer.

In Chapter 21, Trevor falls asleep feeling comforted by his great-grand-uncle and the trees. Trevor awakens in the middle of the night and moves to the ballroom, where he sees a woman dancing. Certain it is Isobel, he tries to turn on the lights, but they will not light, and she vanishes. Trevor follows the sound of her to a sort of plunging shaft that leads down.

In Chapter 22, Trevor asks his dad to help him with the lights and also to buy some supplies to explore the shaft. Jones found a loose fuse in the ballroom, which explains the lights. They go shopping and discuss Jones's past as a boat-builder; Jones says he built boats because with so many Riddells that spent their lives destroying, he enjoyed creating. Trevor presses his father about why he left Washington. Jones talks of how terrible ALS is and what a horrible death it was. Trevor pushes his father further, saying he thinks Jones is there to see his mother dance; Jones slaps him. They go to a store so Trevor can buy equipment to explore the shaft.

In Chapter 23, Trevor heads to the shaft to see where it leads. A few feet down he finds he is in a decommissioned dumbwaiter shaft. He slips and plummets a few feet, landing in the basement. The first thing he finds in the basement is an area that was devoted to butchering meat. Dozens of rooms connect in the dark; a boiler room, pipes, stone floors, and brick walls collide and spread like a maze. The only way out he finds is a collapsed staircase, and he grows nervous. Turning back the way he came, Trevor starts to hurry back through the winding rooms, and smacks his head hard on an iron pipe. Trevor is knocked to the floor and confused; he sees a light and a man. It is Ben. He leads Trevor out of the basement through another door that leads outside. He says Trevor's name. He says, "You've come to save us" (180). When Trevor returns to the house he tells Serena that he saw Ben, and that he wants to stop the development. She is unimpressed, saying it is fine to make a lot of money and offend a few ghosts. Trevor returns to his room and reads more of Harry's journal.

## Analysis

These chapters feature much talk of Isobel, who was Samuel's wife and Jones's and Serena's mother. Music is used intermittently throughout the novel to symbolize Isobel's memory, which holds a spell over both Samuel and Isobel. It is the music that draws Samuel upstairs to the ballroom, and music which causes Serena to assume Samuel is demented. Trevor hears the music as well; at least three times so far in the novel Trevor has ascended to the ballroom to hear music playing, and in Chapter 21 he actually witnesses a dancing figure, whom he obviously assumes to be the ghost of his grandmother.

Isobel also loved to have a fire, and Jones reminisces that the family had one even when it was warm outside. Trevor finds his father trying to unearth the fire pit from a pile of brambles and briars. With so much talk of mistakes, shame, and guilt in this novel, the fire is a symbol for cleansing. The author believes that all mistakes are forgivable and redeemable, and at times they require a burning away so that one can start anew. The most potent use of this symbol is in the end of the novel when Riddell House burns down, allowing the forest to reclaim the ground once more.

Trevor spends some time with his father asking about his grandmother's death, and Jones describes the horror of death by ALS. Disease symbolizes sin in this novel, and in Chapter 18 Serena insinuates that Isobel grew ill because she took on the sin of her husband Samuel, who was an alcoholic. Indeed, the death Jones describes is horrible, but Trevor knows there is a deeper secret about his grandmother that his father will not tell.

Ben stumbles upon Harry's journals and reads about the first time Ben and Harry shared their feelings with other. This event culminated in their lovemaking and it is not surprising that it took place at the foot of the great tree in the Riddell forest. They had just finished climbing it together, and reached so high they were looking down on the tops of the other trees. In this novel the trees symbolize a person's real life or true life, so it is fitting that the two men would find themselves in the tree's cover.

Trevor sees Ben's ghost again in the basement. Ghosts are messengers in *A Sudden Light*, and after saving Trevor's life Ben tells him, "You've come to save us" (180). Trevor's mind has already started to turn away from blindly following and believing his father and his aunt. He finishes Chapter 23 reading more of Harry's journal, which closes with a conversation between Ben and Harry where Ben described having to return to Seattle for a few days to placate his father. Ben dealt with the struggle between who he was and who his father wanted him to be, which is why Harry's statue of a hand holding the world carries such a powerful message. In the end, Ben did believe in changing his father's heart: "Sometimes I wonder if I was brought here to pay for my father's sins. Or, perhaps, I was brought here to offer him salvation. Perhaps it is through me that he will see the truth that has eluded him thus far" (186). The idea of Elijah carrying sin is a prevalent one.



## **Discussion Question 1**

What are some indications that Serena is losing her grip?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Trevor think his father's errand is about more than simply selling the house?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is it important for Trevor to explore the shaft from the ballroom?

## **Vocabulary**

elaborate, nectar, machete, bramble, illusory, hiatus, dilate, shaft, ingratiate



# Chapters 24-27

## Summary

Trevor awakens in the middle of the night and goes downstairs for a drink. Samuel is sitting at the table scribbling furiously on post-it notes. Samuel asks for his medicine, remarking that the whisky-and-milk mixture helps him sleep, while the pills Serena gives him keep him awake. Trevor fixes him a drink and asks about the notes, but Samuel has no recollection of doing them. Trevor reads them and puts them in order. Samuel says that Ben visits him and talks to him about the trees and Harry, and that Serena always reminds him to hate Ben. He goes on to say that Ben does not like what Serena is doing with the house. The notes form a letter, from Ben to Trevor. They speak of being connected, and of obligations, but the clear message is that it is Trevor's job to "deliver the North Estate to the place from which it came" (193). Trevor calls his mother, who tells him that the practice of automatic writing was very popular in the days of Spiritualism. However, she does not believe Trevor and they get into an argument.

In Chapter 25, Trevor returns to Harry's journals. Months before his death, Elijah invited Harry and Ben to dine with him and offered Harry a job, away from Ben. It is clear Elijah was just trying to separate the lovers and throw his power around, and a huge argument erupted. Harry tried to leave Ben, thinking there were bigger battles he could win. Ben turned his rage on his father, but before he could hurt Elijah, Harry intervened, and Ben ended up dislocating his shoulder. After the drama died down, Ben came to see Harry to try to patch up their relationship. He said he could be with him publicly, but the North Estate would always be their special place.

In Chapter 26, Serena plans an elaborate dinner for her boyfriend Dickie. Nobody has met Dickie yet, but Trevor understands that he is the mastermind of the idea behind the development of the Riddell property. When he arrives, he does not seem to be Serena's actual type, and while she finishes dinner he and Trevor have a long talk. He tells Trevor that a house has "history" and that when someone buys a property, they are interested in purchasing the history. Richard tries to sell Trevor on the Riddell House development; he finally confesses that Serena asked him to, because she feels that Trevor is defecting. During dinner Trevor brings up the things he has learned and the adults all feign ignorance. After dinner they go upstairs to dance. Trevor watches Serena dance with Richard and with his father. Eventually Jones breaks down out of grief and Serena comforts him while shoos Trevor and Samuel out of the room.

In Chapter 27, Trevor falls into a fitful sleep. In his dream, he is watching Ben; Ben is looking for Harry in the woods. He finds him in their tree, high up. Harry misses his grip and falls, his bad shoulder giving out on him. He falls to the ground and dies. In his dream state Trevor helps Ben dig Harry's grave.



## Analysis

There is plenty of ghost action in Chapters 24-27. Ben, via Samuel, pens a long letter to Trevor, laying out his philosophy on both conserving natural resources and acting on behalf of the fact that people and actions are all connected, even beyond the grave. Trevor is moved by Ben's letter, seemingly mostly because Ben is more direct and honest than the corporeal adults in Riddell House. The phone call afterwards between Trevor and his mother point out both the long tradition of Spiritualism—automatic writing is an aspect of the belief system in which Rachel was well-versed—and reminds readers of the author's focus on tolerance. All of the adults with whom Trevor tries to share his discoveries shut him down due to a lack of open-mindedness.

Chapter 25 features a flashback in which Ben, Harry, and Elijah discuss Harry's future—basically with Elijah doing his best to separate his son from his lover. The journal entry, written from Harry's perspective, is interesting because Harry makes consistent references to the impressive nature of the Riddell home, most notably the fire. Fire symbolizes a cleansing in this novel, and the scene in question takes place not too long before Ben's and Harry's deaths, which will serve as a catalyst for Elijah's cleansing. Furthermore, the dinner itself is a scene of cleansing: a large fight between all three men ensue, and at the end of it Ben and Harry have come through their first challenge as a couple, and come through it together stronger. Trevor falls asleep that night wondering why, with so many thousands of Pacific forest-land to conserve, it was so vital to Ben's ghost that the North Estate (the land on which Riddell House sits) is returned to forestland. When he sleeps that night, he has the flashback of Ben, Harry, and Elijah. After the fight, Ben, trying to grasp the remnants of his and Harry's relationship, promises Harry that he will keep The North Estate, "their special place," pristine.

Chapter 26 finally introduces Dickie, or Richard, whom Serena claims is her boyfriend and quasi-employer at a real-estate firm. The entire scene is filled with hints and foreshadowing, mainly about Serena's unnatural interest in her brother Jones. Moreover, Trevor attempts to gain the adults' confidence, relaying the story of Ben and Harry and Elijah, but nobody will listen or believe him. However, a key conversation between Trevor and Ben reveals another important symbol in *A Sudden Light*: history. Richard is a real estate developer, but tells Trevor that he really sells history, which makes a house interesting. Considering that Ben's ghost makes a more convincing case than Trevor's own father, this is a key point.

Following dinner with Richard, everyone goes to the ballroom to dance. The music evokes long stories and memories of Isobel, which concludes with Jones sobbing on his sister's shoulder and Trevor and Samuel being dismissed. Serena's innocence and dependability has tipped, and one of the ways it is clear is that Trevor no longer tells her everything he has discovered.

## Discussion Question 1

How is Serena effectively directing her brother's emotional state?





## Discussion Question 2

How are Richard's comments about "selling history" the backbone of this novel's message?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss reasons why Trevor is willing to deny his father's emotional and financial needs in order to satisfy Ben's ghost?

## Vocabulary

metallic, decipher, caustic, complicity, grotesque, gleaned, antidote, nomenclature



# Chapters 28-31

## Summary

In Chapter 28, Trevor is so shaken by his dream that he needs to go to the barn and work with his hands. He and Samuel work with the lathe. During lunch, Jones and Richard appear with plans for developing the Riddell land and sending Samuel to a care home. Jones tells Trevor about the proposed development on the Riddell land, and it disgusts Trevor. Jones goes on to list everything wrong with the house in its current state, implying how difficult it would be to bring it up to code. Samuel insists he cannot leave because Isobel is still there. Jones is angry and warns his father that Serena will win, and she will have revenge on her father if he persists in not signing the house over. Trevor is torn.

In Chapter 29, Trevor overhears his father and aunt talking about Samuel. Jones is questioning the legality of Serena's scheme. He learns that Serena and Richard are not actually a couple; she is hanging out in the real estate office and Richard is preparing the development plan. Serena goes into a wishful monologue about how long she has waited for her brother to return for her. Jones says he will spend the money on getting his old life back, and Serena is not impressed with Jones's old life, stating he has wasted his potential. She says she will travel when they sell the house, see the world; Trevor recalls the cruise brochure he found. She continues to goad her brother, mentioning how Rachel has not called, and how he is a coward like Samuel. Jones slaps his sister and leaves the house. Trevor rushes in to help her. Serena tells him that he is very much like his father, but enough like his mother that he will survive the family.

In Chapter 30, Trevor, seemingly dreaming, follows Ben's ghost through the hallways and begs him to tell him about his grandmother's death, which seems to be the root of his father's strife. But instead, Ben shows Trevor of his own death; that he felt guilty for dislocating Harry's shoulder, which surely caused his fall from the tree. Ben climbs the tree and reaches into the sky, trying to catch Harry's spirit, and falls himself. What Trevor realizes from the dream is why Ben is precisely stuck at Riddell House: he promised Harry to return their special place to the forest, and he cannot move on until that is done.

In Chapter 31, Serena catches Trevor's attention and takes him to Elijah's office and tells him some family history: Ben had a younger brother—Abraham—that was raised with his mother in New York until her death. When he moved to Seattle as a young man, Elijah disliked him for some qualities he knew he had shown in his youth. Abraham's character was the main reason Elijah put the house into a trust that could not be dissolved for several decades. Abe was able to live on the estate, but never sell it. She takes all of the papers related to the house from a safe on the wall and shows them to Trevor, urging him to follow through and sell if anything happened to her. When he presses her on the comment, she says that ALS is genetic and she is afraid she has it; thus she justifies her urgency. Serena will leave everything to Trevor when she dies; she



urges Trevor to get Samuel to sign the Power of Attorney. He is reluctantly convinced that the needs of the living probably outweigh those of the dead.

## Analysis

In Chapter 30 Trevor follows Ben's ghost through the halls of the house. From Stein's descriptions it seems that Ben and the house are working in sync to communicate to Trevor. He mentions how the House directs his steps, how it seems to breathe and pulse and work with Ben to talk to Trevor and also to keep him safe, like when Ben rescued him from the basement. Trevor asks Ben to specifically show him what happened with his father and his grandmother, which Trevor has decided is the root of his father's erratic behavior and difficulty being there. Ben's ghost is, at this point in the novel, truly a communicator of truth. Trevor no longer trusts any of the adults, although he has decided that Samuel is probably not crazy or demented as much as eccentric.

The carving of the hand appears to be a catalyst for Trevor's deepening understanding of the Riddell History. The carving is a symbol for fulfilling one's own destiny and making one's own choices, and so when the hand is reattached to the house Trevor starts to come to his own conclusions about what is best for his family and for the North Estate. The hand gives him a sense of power and confidence.

Stein's view on Conservationism is demonstrated succinctly when Jones explains the redevelopment plans to Trevor. His son acts as if it is a great idea, because he wants to please his father, but inside he is disgusted and enraged: "I had half a mind to grill him on the impact of those twenty soulless McMansions would have on the local environment: the sewage, the toxic fertilizer seeping into the water table, the emissions of dozens of gas-guzzling cars neatly tucked away in their multi-car garages, to say nothing of the aesthetic decimation of the last few acres of old-growth forest in an urban setting" (249). With his newfound discoveries on Riddell family history and Ben's attachment to the land, Trevor is truly torn between two sets of motivations and aims.

Trees, and therefore wood, symbolize true life in this novel. In order to get clear of the house and the oppressive presence of the adults with their expectations, Trevor makes for the barn so he can work on the lathe with his grandfather. It truly fulfills him and calms him, serving to center him back to what actually feels important: "The soul of the wood braiding with my spirit, with the spirits who lived in the Post-it notes, and the playing cards stashed in the walls. Riddell House breathed. It moved. It slunk along so slowly we didn't notice" (244).

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Trevor no longer enamored with Serena?



## Discussion Question 2

Out of Serena's many reasons to enlist Trevor's help in getting Samuel to sign the Power of Attorney, which one is the most effective?

## Discussion Question 3

Although the dreams Ben shows Trevor are not precisely what he wants to know, how do they nonetheless help Trevor form opinions on what is right?

## Vocabulary

decrepitude, queasy, petrified, disavowed, rapacious, avaricious, funicular, brazen



# Chapters 32-35

## Summary

Chapter 32 opens with a bonfire. Jones has succeeded in clearing out his mother's fire pit, and the family, including Richard, gathers for a bonfire. Serena nags Jones into talking about his wedding day. She is controlling the conversation, deliberately patronizing Samuel and speaking of Trevor's parents as if they are divorced. When she, Jones, and Richard are ready to go in, Trevor offers to stay with Samuel. Samuel tells Trevor that his father made him chop wood when he was six, and he lost two fingers.

In Chapter 33, Trevor feels much weighed down by the sadness of his grandfather and the Riddell history. He finds Samuel in the barn and tells him he loves him. Jones and Serena are in town for meetings, and when she calls to instruct Trevor on dinner, she leans on him to get Samuel to sign the Power of Attorney. After dinner, Samuel announces that he feels good because he has not taken his pills, which make him feel bad. Trevor searches the cabinet for the medicine and finds the bottle Samuel indicates, which is filled not with Alzheimer's pills but with NoDoz. Serena has been giving her father NoDoz so he cannot sleep, and then letting him drink whisky in the middle of the night to give the illusion that he is incoherent and befuddled. Trevor does not give him the pills. Samuel tells Trevor he wants to give him the house, and that he will sign the papers. Trevor tries to make excuses, but Samuel insists.

In Chapter 34, Jones and Serena return home late, slightly drunk. Trevor gives them the signed papers and they are thrilled, but he is sick. That night, he does not receive a visit from Ben.

In Chapter 35, Trevor goes downstairs to breakfast and overhears his father and Serena talking on the porch. She is clearly telling him that it is fine to let his marriage go. Trevor knows that the money from the house will not solve his father's problems, and he regrets what he has done. She is giving him a massage and as they both lapse into a dream state, with Serena telling him how wonderful their cruise will be—together. Trevor bangs onto the porch and surprises them both. They are both flustered and wander off.

## Analysis

A Sudden Light moves quickly towards the end as the author begins pulling tightly on the many threads of the stories, binding them together to create a tightly-woven climax. The pressure is on Trevor to get Samuel to sign the Power of Attorney, and there are several issues surrounding the decision that compete for his attention: the possibility of helping his father win his mother back; winning his father's favor and breaking the Riddell 'curse' of fathers hating their sons; giving Aunt Serena a comfortable life before she contracts ALS; satisfying the ghost of Ben Riddell; the simple science of conservation; financial concerns for his own family's future; and concern for his



grandfather's care and safety, which is exacerbated when he learns how Serena has been lying to and manipulating them all. While some of these interests may appear to be on the same 'side, there are nuanced differences, which is a credit to the author. For instance, to insure Samuel's health and safety and protect him from Serena is to put him in a nice care home, which effectively means doing what Serena wants. The author is excellent at communicating the weight and pressure that Trevor feels with this decision.

Chapter 32 starts with the family gathered for a bonfire, and the reader is reminded how fire represents a cleansing process: “[Mother] said fires were transformative.... It is through fire that we can find the answers to our riddles” (280). Considering that the novel ends with Riddell House burning down, these comments are foreshadowing.

Stein continues to mention how the house, which symbolizes the Riddell family in light of their mistakes—is living and breathing. When Trevor was meeting with Ben nightly and immersing himself in the family history, the house seemed to pulse with power. However, once Trevor hands the signed Power of Attorney over to his father and Serena, the house seems to grieve. Chapter 35 opens with a return to the descriptions of the crumbling house, as if the signed papers seal the house's fate.

## Discussion Question 1

Does Jones see the strangeness in how his sister treats him? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Is it surprising that Serena is fabricating Samuel's illness, or has the author successfully laid clues that point to her true nature?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Samuel's story of his childhood complicate Trevor's plans?

## Vocabulary

barrage, solidarity, acquiesce, derelict, fragile, titanic, travesty, conjure



## Chapters 36-39

### Summary

In Chapter 36, Jones and Serena go to the grocery store, and Trevor goes through Serena's things to take the Power of Attorney form back from her. On her bedroom floor he finds a ripple beneath the rug, and finds a hidden compartment under the bed. He finds the Power of Attorney form as well as an old photo of Jones and two tickets to a 9-month cruise, under the names Mr. and Mrs. Jones Riddell. There is also a letter from her to Jones, detailing her plan for the cruise and how right it is to be together. It is stacked with dozens of letters from her to Jones. Trevor realizes that her insanity makes her dangerous. He takes the letter, the tickets, and the Power of Attorney, but puts everything back.

In Chapter 37, it is afternoon and Jones and Serena still have not returned from the store, so Trevor calls his mother. He tries to tell her about Ben and his quandary, and she will not believe him. He presses her on the divorce and she will not answer. After they hang up, he nearly burns the paperwork, but instead hides it in the secret room upstairs. As he is returning down the secret staircase, he hears a noise. He sees a ghostly form of a boy his age and a woman—his father and Isobel. Isobel is telling Jones that she is sick and will die soon, but she will always come and visit. At the last minute, Isobel's ghost looks him straight in the face and touches his cheek and says, "faith."

In Chapter 38, Trevor wakes in the middle of the night, violently nauseous. He walks to the bathroom and sees Ben in the mirror. He recalls how he saw Isobel: Jones had had faith that he would see his mother again, but life wore him down and he lost it. When Trevor emerges from the bathroom, the lights are gone and the house is transformed to its turn-of-the-century glory. There are men milling about, and servants, and Trevor sees Elijah himself. Outside he finds Ben by the fountain. Ben speaks to him, knowing exactly who he is. They talk of the task, and of the house. Trevor says he can try to fix his mistake if Ben will show him what happened to his father. They talk further, and Ben says he will tell Trevor what he wants to know, and then he will leave him alone to make his own decision about the house. When he wakes, he is holding a letter dated March of 1916 and addressed "To My Future Heir" from Elijah Riddell. It says what Trevor already knew: that Elijah wants the land returned to its natural state. He falls asleep and dreams: the scene is of his father and Isobel at her death. It is clear she wants Jones to mercifully kill her; she had asked Samuel and he refused. In the next room, Samuel is drunk. Jones wrestles the syringe from his father's hand and takes it back to his mother's sickbed. When she is dead, young Serena appears at the door. She hugs her brother and makes him promise to always take care of her. He promises.

In Chapter 39, Trevor realizes he must hurry because Serena will soon discover he has taken the paperwork. He lays out everything he needed to talk to his father. He fetches him and tells him everything, about Ben and Serena and how they need to let the house



go. Jones is extremely angry and yells at Trevor. He demands that Trevor go through with Serena's plans. As he leaves the room Trevor brings up the cruise tickets, but Jones leaves anyway, saying he does not believe his son.

## Analysis

Chapters 36-39 throw in a few unexpected surprises and add to the pressure under which Trevor sits with his decision. In Serena's room, Trevor finds shocking evidence of what her true aim has been all along: Jones himself. Taken with the revelation that she has been feeding Samuel caffeine pills instead of medicine, her character comes into sharp focus. Perhaps the most potent thing Trevor realizes is that Serena is probably insane, and that makes her dangerous. His thoughts foreshadow a difficult truth.

Chapter 37 describes a phone call between Trevor and his mother. This reminds the reader that Trevor is a boy, after all, and that in his time of crisis he turns to his parent. Rachel's reaction is the most forcible it has been yet. Throughout the plot she has been gently dismissing his claims of seeing ghosts, but now, with so much at stake, she is positively stoic in her intolerance and non-belief. Only at the end of the novel, when Rachel sees Jones's ghost for the first time, is it clear how her unbelief affected her. Tolerance and open-mindedness, particularly to Spiritualism (Trevor interchanges this concept with faith) is a prevalent theme in this novel, and Rachel's lack of faith makes her useless. She cannot help her son when he needs someone very badly.

That night, Ben stages his most impressive haunting yet. It is as if the time to decide has arrived, and indeed, at the end of the scene Ben tells Trevor that he will not visit him again. He must decide on his own what to do about the house. However, it is clear from their conversation that the weight of sin and guilt has settled on the shoulders of all of the Riddell men: Elijah for spurning his son in his time of need, and Samuel for his treatment of Jones and Serena. Only in these chapters does it become clear that Ben also feels the weight of guilt for causing Harry's death. Their fight caused Harry's shoulder to become dislocated; when he climbed the tree his shoulder, weak, went out and he fell. This is why Ben insists on returning the land to its state. The North Estate is for him and Harry, and he owes it him. Ben tells Trevor of how wise Harry was in his estimation of life. That life was just like climbing a tree (which indeed symbolizes life in this novel): "climbing a tree isn't about getting somewhere; it's about being somewhere" (325). This, according to Stein, is life.

In the next chapter, Chapter 38, the reader learns why Jones suffers as well: he administered drugs to mercifully kill his mother while she was in advanced stages of ALS. Trevor feels the weight of his father's guilt and even feels that the guilt will transfer to him if he does not do something to stop the cycle. The lingering pain and the reason for the drama between Jones and Samuel is finally clear, as well as the reason Samuel sent Jones away. After learning this sad truth, Trevor sees the ghost of his grandmother, talking to an image of his young father. Unbelievably, she looks straight at Trevor, touches his cheek, and whispers, "Faith." It is her encouragement to Trevor, and the author's to his readers. Trevor needs the faith for the following conversation with his





father, in which Jones flatly refuses to believe anything his son tells him about Ben or Serena; on the contrary, Jones is livid that his son would bring up his most painful memory.

## Discussion Question 1

Is Jones's anger at Trevor for bringing up Isobel's death justifiable? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the rightness of Jones's position: "Ideals are nice... but you can't eat them..." (342). What does this statement mean?

## Discussion Question 3

How does seeing Isobel's ghost change things for Trevor?

## Vocabulary

subtlety, vantage, delving, vestibule, natty, stagnant, primitive, absolve, credenza



# Chapters 40-43

## Summary

In Chapter 40, Trevor follows his great uncle-Benjamin's example and takes to the trees. On the way through the house he passes Serena, dancing around the kitchen like a TV housewife with orange toenail polish. He feels helpless against the adults. He goes to Ben's tree to climb. At the top he feels a shift from faith to knowledge. He hears his father calling and descends.

In Chapter 41, Trevor returns and sits down to dinner with his family. Jones gets up to give Samuel his pills; Serena tries to stop him, but he beats her to the cabinet. Trevor watches as his father looks closely at the pills and sees exactly what Serena has been giving their father. After asking her if the pills are effective and hearing her confirmation, he gives them to Samuel. Trevor is confused, unable to discern whose side his father is on. As he leaves dinner he surmises that Samuel supposedly hears Isobel dance on the nights Serena gives him his medicine. Trevor finds that the dumbwaiter shaft leads from the ballroom to the hallway behind the dining room, which would allow someone to leave the ballroom quickly and get downstairs. To test his theory, Trevor gets some small tacks from the barn and tacks the door to the dumbwaiter shaft closed so that nobody can get into it.

In Chapter 42, Jones comes into Trevor's room. He talks of his mother's death: Samuel was supposed to do it, because he was older and could take the difficulty more easily than he. He tells Trevor that it is easier for Serena to think that he is on her side. Trevor gives him the cruise tickets and Serena's letter. Jones admits he has wanted to believe that he could see his mother again. The talk returns to the house, and Serena; Trevor urges his father to let the house go and Jones is worried for his sister, whom he literally raised when they were young. Jones leaves and goes to the secret hallway, where Trevor later finds him lighting matches to find his mother. Trevor reads Elijah's last journal entry, written just before his death, when he receives his last visit from Ben.

Trevor wakes around 3:00 a.m. in Chapter 43. He goes to the kitchen and finds his father and grandfather talking. They argue for a minute about Isobel's death. Samuel turns to Trevor and tells him he did not want to poison Isobel; that he felt guilty for making his son do what he did. Jones promises to get his father a real doctor. Samuel apologizes to Jones and asks for his forgiveness. Trevor heads back to his room, but stops at the ballroom door because he hears music and dancing. He goes inside and sees what he thinks is Isobel, but when the ghostly figure comes close he sees the orange toenails. He calls out Serena's name and she skitters over to the dumbwaiter shaft. Trevor rushes downstairs to where the shaft opens into the dining room, finding his father and grandfather there. He tells them he has trapped a ghost, and when they find Serena, her fingernails are torn from where she tried to open the dumbwaiter hatch, the one Trevor had tacked shut. They sit down to talk. She claims she danced as Isobel to please Samuel. She tries to talk Jones into going on the cruise with her, and kisses



him. Jones is angry and says he will not go on a cruise with her. He makes several accusations to her; she begs him to let her sell the house because it is evil. Jones says they can sell the items in the house for money and he will take Samuel with him, but he will not go away with her. Serena warns that if they leave her alone that night, she will hurt herself.

## Analysis

These last few chapters of *A Sudden Light* deal in redemption, forgiveness, and making difficult decisions for family.

Fathers and sons ask for and receive forgiveness. On Elijah's deathbed, his son Ben visits him and takes over the task of returning the House to the forest. Ben tells his father that it was his promise to Harry, and since Elijah wrote the will that would prevent the house from being developed, he had fulfilled his task. When Elijah specifically asks his son if he is redeemed, Ben says he is. Later in Chapter 43, Jones and Samuel talk about the event that caused their greatest rift—that Jones was forced by Samuel's inaction to mercifully kill his own mother. The curse of fathers vs. sons in the Riddell House is broken when Samuel asks for forgiveness. There is much talk in Chapter 42 about purpose: Why did they come to Riddell House, and what was to happen next? It seems that Trevor, and his attention to family history, and faith, has served as a catalyst to bring his father and grandfather back together.

Also in Elijah's last letter, he realizes the errors of his ways in terms of the forest and his empire. Of conserving natural resources, he says, "Ben taught me that what I have carved from the earth is not for me to keep, but for me to return to the earth" (360). This quote reminds the reader of the author's commitment to conservation and respect for the earth.

Trevor climbs the big tree—Ben's tree—after his father basically says he does not believe his son's claims about Serena. The climb is Trevor's way of moving on, knowing he tried, and grasping life anyway. At the top of the tree, his "faith" is transformed: "Before that, I wanted to believe; after that moment, I knew" (348). Trevor knows as he descends that even if he cannot do this one thing, there are other ways he can work in his family to make it better.

Even in light of Serena's deception, Jones defends not her actions, but her life to this point in time. One of the themes in this novel is family, as the entire novel is about family entanglements and threads. However, in this passage the reader can see Jones struggle with condemning her even in light of the evidence. He pleads with his son to understand that he raised Serena. With one parent sick and the other an alcoholic, Jones was all she had, and while it is not right for her to form a romantic attachment to him, Jones has empathy for what she has been through. This truth demonstrates the author's opinion that sometimes with family, the right thing to do is not so clear.



## Discussion Question 1

What function does Trevor's tree climbing, at a moment when it seems he has no hope of success, serve?

## Discussion Question 2

At what point in the conversation of Chapter 43 is it clear that Serena really is mentally unhinged?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Jones's take on his sister's guilt: he both knows she is guilty yet still feels the need to defend her. Why?

## Vocabulary

spongy, complicity, benign, emasculation, corrosive



# Chapters 44-46, Epilogue

## Summary

In Chapter 44, Trevor wakes up at 5:00 a.m., very groggy from the night's events. Samuel is in the doorway saying that Isobel is dancing again. Trevor takes his grandfather upstairs, where Serena is indeed dancing in the ballroom. It is beautiful. They watch for song after song. Trevor begins to notice that it is hot and that it smells like campfire. Soon it becomes clear that Serena has set the house on fire. She cackles while Trevor starts screaming for his father. Jones appears with a report that fire has spread everywhere. The men climb down the dumbwaiter shaft, but Jones goes back upstairs to look for Serena despite Trevor's pleas.

In Chapter 45, Trevor returns to a bit of history: the day that his parents met. Rachel was at Harvard, but spent a summer working in Newport. Jones appeared on the deck of the restaurant where she was waiting tables. They collided on the deck and Rachel spilled gin on his shirt, and he asked if he could take her sailing. They fell in love on the boat that first day.

In Chapter 46, Trevor and Samuel watch the fire burn Riddell House to the ground. It has not rained all summer and it is a hot day. The local firefighters are flummoxed by the flames, unsure of how to combat them. Jones and Serena have died in the flames. Trevor hopes for a while after that they had escaped together, but their remains are eventually found and identified by dental records.

The Epilogue takes place 23 years in the future, far enough for Trevor to have married and had children, and far enough for Grandpa Samuel to have died. Trevor is at the North Estate with his wife and daughters to spread Samuel's ashes at his home in Washington. He tells his daughters what happened next: how he and his grandfather traveled to England after Jones's death. They let all of the North Estate return to the wilderness, a large city park of over 200 acres. Trevor tells his daughters how, the day after the fire, he went out to the house to watch it smolder, and after feeling a breeze on his neck, turned to Ben's tree. He saw Ben's ghost climb the tree to the very top, and then disappear into the sky. Trevor's wife takes his daughters to Observatory Hill to see the graves, and he goes to find his mother at the gazebo. A man sits with her—the ghost of his father. She was hardened after his death, and seems to finally be peaceful. Mother and son share a moment of comfort together. Rachel apologizes for never believing Trevor's story of the summer of 1990, and asks him to tell it again.

## Analysis

The last few chapters of *A Sudden Light* end in a cathartic and unexpected climax. Jones dies in an attempt to rescue his sister, Serena, who had lied, deceived, mistreated her grandfather, and planned to escape with her brother in an incestuous



relationship. Despite all of this, Jones recognized the need to put her first and keep his promise to her, even above his own safety. In the Epilogue, when Trevor sees his father's ghost—always a symbol of communicating in this novel—sitting with his mother, he feels a sense of peace at the unjust death of his father: “I want to tell [my father] that I understand his promise to Serena, and his promise to himself, and his promise to the dead, and that his leaving me was not an act of abandonment, but an act of love” (391). One could argue that Serena was another casualty in a long list of Riddell family sins, and that Jones's act of sacrifice was his way of ending the neglect.

Riddell House, the grand symbol of the Riddell Family in its state of decay, burns to the ground, such that when Trevor returns 23 years later one cannot even tell where the house stood. Fire is a symbol for cleansing and purifying, and truly, the Riddell line exists in purity and integrity by the end of the novel. Jones and his father reached a state of redemption, likewise Jones and his son, and the land is returned to its rightful state. It is for this that Trevor sees the ghost of Ben climbing his tree—the symbol for life—and disappearing into the sky, his own promise to Harry finally fulfilled.

## Discussion Question 1

When trying to convince his father not to go back into the house to rescue Serena, Trevor says, “Dad, she doesn't want to survive this” (386). Is this true? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

The short chapter detailing how Jones and Rachel met sits right at the height of the climax, before the reader knows that Jones and Serena do not survive. What function does this chapter, including its placement, serve?

## Discussion Question 3

How did the summer of 1990 shape Trevor's future?

## Vocabulary

fidgety, quaking, flouncing, inferno



# Characters

## Trevor Riddell

Trevor is the main character and first-person narrator of *A Sudden Light*. He is a 14-year-old boy who feels forced to accompany his father Jones back to the family estate for the summer. Trevor, who does not have a good relationship with his father, is only compliant because he feels that helping his father sell the mansion will play a role in reconciling his parents' marriage. As a character, he is an analytical, highly intelligent kid; but he also has a bit of a romantic side, which is evidenced by how easily he is drawn into the history of the Riddell Family and their saga.

After seeing repeated visions of a ghostly figure—later revealed to be his grandfather's uncle Ben, who died young in a tragic accident—he becomes conflicted between helping his father succeed in listing the mansion for sale and thus securing their financial future and hopefully rekindling the romance between his parents, and returning the Riddell land to its original state. When his Aunt Serena appears to become more manipulative and less kind, Trevor throws in his lot with the ghost, hoping it is enough to save his father in some way.

Trevor is the hero of the novel, because he is one of the few characters that sees clearly and is able to let go of assumed notions of truth and look beyond his own circumstances.

## Jones Riddell

Jones is Trevor's father, a man crumpling under the weight of guilt and unrealized dreams. After an unhappy childhood, Jones moved from his Seattle home at 17 to finish school in the Northeast. At that point, his life took a dreamy turn, when he met and married his wife Rachel. However, from that point on, Jones has lived under a cloud of disappointment, with the nagging feeling that he has never lived up to his potential. Indeed, he begins the novel after filing for bankruptcy and separating with his wife. Taken with the fact that over 20 years have elapsed since he spoke to his father or his sister, the trip to Seattle holds quite a threat.

For much of the plot, Jones is hamstrung by guilt for euthanizing his mother and for leaving his sister behind, in the care of their distant and alcoholic father. Despite the urges of his son Trevor, Jones cannot see past his aim to sell the house and take the money, which he hopes will aid in getting Rachel back. It takes until the final moments in the story for Jones to actually see his son with real eyes—eyes which also detect the duplicitous nature of his sister, Serena. In those moments he also reaches a state of atonement and forgiveness with his father Samuel.

The reader never gets to see how Jones would have dealt with the sale of Riddell House; in the final pages, his sister Serena sets the place on fire, and they both perish.



The task is left to Trevor, who unequivocally decides to let the land go back to its origins. However, his father dies a hero.

## "Grandpa" Samuel Riddell

Grandpa Samuel is in many ways a tragic character himself; however, when his grandson enters the picture, the old man is able to reclaim some lost things and live out the rest of his years in peace.

When Jones and Serena were young, Samuel was not a great father. All Riddells lived under the cloud of the patriarch's will, which determined the house not to be sold until Samuel's heir. Thus, the Riddell family grew more and more poor as generations passed, and the effect showed on Samuel, who was an alcoholic. When his wife Isobel died a terrible death to ALS, Samuel grew even more erratic, and after Jones left it was only him and Serena in the big house.

The novel begins when Samuel is an old man, supposedly suffering from dementia. While he is a certainly a man that is haunted by his own demons, it is later revealed that Serena is adding to his problems by messing with his medication and pretending to haunt the house as his dead wife.

Trevor's attention brings the old man out of his shell, and by the end of the novel, he sees clearly enough to seek forgiveness from his son, Jones—an act that probably brings him more peace than anything. When the house burns down and his children die in the fire, Samuel is able to peacefully finish his days with his grandson knowing that he has satisfied his demons and the wishes of his forefathers.

## Serena Riddell

Serena is Trevor's aunt, and a well-crafted character, a devious mind buried beneath an appealing and free-spirited exterior. For the main character Trevor, she is a marvel of beauty and fun, nearly the only fun person in the house. As the plot unfolds, Serena shows herself to be sneaky and diabolical; not only is she fabricating her father's dementia and masquerading as her mother's dancing ghost, she has planned to practically steal the family home. Perhaps the most chilling of her plans is to force her brother on an extended vacation; while she does not expressly advocate an incestuous relationship, it is implied that she has morphed their sibling bond into that in her mind.

Stein does a skillful job of revealing her true nature to Trevor in stages; he responds by cleverly adjusting how he deals with her. In the end, Serena completely loses touch; when it is clear that she has lost, she sets the house on fire and perishes in the flame.





## Benjamin Riddell

In the present timeline, Ben is the Riddell House ghost, one who helps Trevor both physically—when he is trapped in the basement by leading him out—and emotionally, as he leads him to the truth.

In the past, Ben was the son of Elijah, patriarch of the Riddell fortune. He was a conservationist, outdoorsman, friend of Teddy Roosevelt, and a homosexual when it was uncommon (or at least undisclosed in public). When Ben's lover Harry fell from a tree to his death, Ben died in the same way the next day.

## Elijah Riddell

Elijah is shown through flashback, mostly in the way of journals and letters that Trevor finds in the house. The patriarch of the Riddell fortune was at first a cruel taskmaster, caring little for the lives lost and land raped in pursuit of his empire. However, after Ben's tragic death and subsequent "visit" to his father, Elijah set out to right his wrongs by promising to return Riddell House to the land, if his heirs would comply.

## Harry Lindsey

Harry was Ben's lover and is a well-drawn picture of a young man on the cusp of the timber industry, one facing issues of wealth, influence, and conservation. There is also a hint of class struggle, as Harry was an uneducated worker and Ben was the prince of the Riddell fortune.

## Isobel Riddell

As Samuel's wife and Jones's mother who died a tragic and painful death from ALS, Isobel is a source of guilt and sadness that binds both men. Samuel swears he can hear Isobel dancing at night, and Jones hopes to see her as well to atone for having mercifully administered a fatal drug to ease her pain. However, it is revealed that Serena is dancing to confuse her father, so the only character that actually sees Isobel's ghost is Trevor.

## Rachel Riddell

Rachel is Trevor's mother and Jones's estranged wife. During the events in the novel, Rachel is away in England, and only provides a sense of motivation for Jones and a foil for Trevor's insistence that Riddell House is haunted. Jones dies in the end of the novel, but Rachel finds peace in seeing his ghost when she and Trevor visit the site of his grave, 23 years in the future.



## Richard/Dickie

Richard is a real estate developer that is supposedly Serena's boyfriend. Early on he is believed to be helping orchestrate the sale of Riddell House. Later, Trevor learns that their romance is a ruse to cover Serena's plans to sell everything and run away with her brother. Richard plays along because he is supposed to get a large percentage of the profit.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Disease/Sickness

Disease is symbol for mistakes, or generational sin in *A Sudden Light*. The most potent example of this is Isobel's ALS, which Serena proclaims she developed as a way of taking on Samuel's alcoholism and rage. In a manner of speaking, her disease came as a result of his sin.

## Ghosts

Ghosts symbolize, and are communicators of, messages that help the living learn. Ben appears first to Samuel and then to Trevor to show the way of learning and atoning. Isobel's ghost appears to Trevor to tell him to have faith at the time in the novel when he feels most like he has failed.

## Woodcarving of Hand

The woodcarving that Harry Lindsey carved in 1904, the statue of a hand holding the earth, symbolizes making our own choices and controlling our own destinies. Harry clearly sees Ben as a larger-than-life figure with the world at his fingertips. Later in the novel Samuel takes an axe to the sculpture, which had been fashioned into a newel post. This event, closely followed by Samuel's sending Jones away, symbolizes Jones's loss of control over her future.

## Quoting

Quoting, be it literature or science or the dictionary, symbolizes a kind of winning over or mastering of an argument. Ben often quotes literature at Harry, whom he is trying to "improve" with assigned reading. Rachel and Serena both quote literature and science, respectively, to win arguments with Jones.

## Wood/Trees

Wood and trees both symbolize true life and the need to preserve it. This can be seen in how significant the scenes are when Ben, Harry, and Trevor climb trees and feel connected to the earth and sky. Moreover, the trees are instruments of Ben's and Harry's deaths. Trevor often references feeling wood "hum" beneath his hands as he touches it.



## Riddell House

The house itself is a symbol for the Riddell family. Built during the tumult of Ben's fight with his father, it is a bone of contention for three generations of Riddells. That it is in such decay at the beginning of the novel, and that it burns to the ground in the end, is indicative that the family sins have been laid to rest.

## Music

Music is a symbol for the beloved past, and most specifically of Isobel. Music always appears in the novel in conjunction with thoughts and memories of Isobel.

## Fire

Fire symbolizes coming clean, refining one of their pain and mistakes. The fire takes Riddell House down to the ground, and Serena and Jones with it, thus purging the land of its owners' negativity.

## History

History is a symbol for the connectedness which the author wishes to foster through our choices and how they affect our circumstances. This idea is most succinctly summarized by Richard: "Then they had to do real work, the craftsmen felt that the house held part of their spirit. They wanted to imbue the house with soul. My job, when I'm selling a house, is to understand that my client isn't buying a bunch of anonymous rooms glued together in a more or less convenient configuration. My client is buying the history of a house as well" (216).

## Journals/Writing

In *A Sudden Light*, writing symbolizes objective truth. Trevor, the most clear-eyed of the characters, is referred to as a writer, and his father gives Trevor a journal for his fourteenth birthday. When Trevor learns something real during his search for truth, he always tries to write it down in his journal. Moreover, he spends a lot of time reading and re-reading the journals of Elijah Riddell and Harry Lindsey in search for truth.



# Settings

## Connecticut

Trevor's childhood home is only a true setting in Trevor's flashbacks, but the loss of his farmhouse is so recent and so hurtful that he has an idyllic longing for the place. It is also the place where his parents met and fell in love, so it holds even more importance.

## Observatory Hill

This location is a spot on the vast Riddell estate that has a great view of the Puget Sound. It is significant because the Riddell family is buried there. The most significant is that Ben buried Harry there after his accident; when Ben died the next day, Elijah buried him next to his love. At the novel's end, Trevor takes his mother there to see Jones's grave, and she sees his ghost.

## Riddell House Ballroom

This is where Trevor first feels an extra presence in the house. Samuel thinks he hears his dead wife dancing up there; and Trevor does hear the music and see footprints, although later the reader finds that the dancing and the music came from Serena.

## Ben's Tree

There is a tree in the Riddell forest that is significant because it is a catharsis for the characters to attach to their true destinies. Ben and Harry climb it together before they decide to pursue their relationship. It is also, sadly, the tree from which Ben and Harry both fall to their deaths. Trevor climbs it before he commits to sabotage his aunt's plans. In the end, after Riddell House burns down, Trevor sees Ben's ghost at the tree's top, dispersing into the sky.

## The Barn.

Grandpa Samuel spends a lot of time in the barn, using woodworking tools. As Trevor becomes more sympathetic towards his grandfather, he spends more and more time in the barn as well. In addition, he finds several old family treasures there.



# Themes and Motifs

## Environmental Conservation

Through the many struggles in the Riddell family related to the house and the dissolution of the family fortune, the author clearly holds a strong interest in conserving natural resources. Indeed, it is a central philosophical conflict between several of the novel's main characters.

In the past timeline, Ben, the heir apparent of Riddell Timber, begins to feel conflicted not only about the danger of the timber industry but the rampant clear-cutting of thousands of acres of land. With Teddy Roosevelt as a personal hero, Ben must go up against his shrewd and cruel timber baron father, Elijah, with his philosophical support of conservation and the idea of national parks. This business conflict in addition to Ben's personal life conflict leads to a family rift and Ben's possible suicide. Ben is clearly depicted as a tortured hero, as opposed to Elijah.

In the present timeline, the main character Trevor is set directly against his father and aunt Serena, both of whom wish to sell Riddell House to a developer. As Trevor delves into the Riddell family history, he comes to believe that the house is best left standing, as their forebears wished it. This thread of keeping the land clean and pure is mingled amidst other issues involving family dynamics and forgiveness, but the characters that support developing the house—namely Serena—are given duplicitous, cruel natures and manipulative tendencies.

Finally, as the story ends with the house gone but the two hundred acres intact, the author certainly leaves the Riddell land as he wished it to be—wild and free.

## Redemption

Several plot elements in this novel involve setting wrongs to rights as well as atoning for past sins; through these details the author demonstrates that redemption is a vital piece of the human story.

Trevor states, "Looking back, I see clearly that the guild of generations of Riddells was pressing down on my father with such force, it was suffocating him...I did feel it in a way I couldn't quite explain: the oppressiveness of that guilt would spill over to me if I didn't take corrective action" (330). This novel contains several parallels of redemption stories. The story of Riddell forefather Elijah and his timber empire, which was built on the deaths of many as well as destroying thousands of acres of forest, is set against his son Ben. After Ben's tragic death, Elijah changes his business model and will in hopes of atoning for his life of disregarding those around him.

Trevor's father and grandfather—Jones and Samuel—likewise spend the novel circling one another in search of forgiveness. Samuel lived a life of alcoholism and cold



distance from his children and in his older, befuddled state seeks a way to apologize to his son.

Jones lives beneath his own weight, having helped his mother, who suffered from ALS, ease her pain into death. Isobel asked her son to administer enough morphine to kill her because Samuel was too drunk and too sad to do so. Thus Jones both felt he owed a debt for his mother and carried anger towards his father.

By the novel's end, all of these characters have asked for and receive forgiveness, achieving a sense of peace through this redemption. All of them were stuck, in a manner, until they are able to atone and be forgiven.

## Family

This plot is filled with tangled family relationships; however, the author makes a point to emphasize the importance of these blood relationships and attempts to keep them intact.

Perhaps the most tangled of these relationships is that of Jones and his sister, Serena. Because of their father's alcoholism and poor parenting, coupled with their mother's ALS, Jones practically raised his younger sister. Their difficult childhood created a strange bond, one that is particularly unhealthy on Serena's side. As the novel unfolds the reader learns that Serena is manipulative and unhinged; and although she had a plan that destroyed many, Jones is still devoted to caring for her. Despite her treachery he feels bound to caring for her, and he sacrifices his life to save his sister, as he had promised to do when they were children.

In addition, Trevor experiences the pull of family. The first time he has ever met his grandfather or aunt is in the opening of the novel; his father had left at age 17 and not returned since. Only the task of selling Riddell House to developers brought father and son home. Although Trevor has no context for his family history, he spends the bulk of the novel exploring and learning all about his forefathers. He spends much time with his grandfather Samuel, as well as poring over the journals of his great-great-grandfather Elijah and his son Ben. In the end, it is Trevor who secures Samuel's signature on the needed documents to sell the house, and Trevor who fulfills the Riddell family legacy, effectively devoting his time and energy to a family he had just met.

## Open-Mindedness

Running through *A Sudden Light* is a challenge from the author to push up against cultural norms and view life with open and accepting minds.

One of the ways Stein's characters challenge convention is the belief in an active spiritual life. Ghosts play an active role in the narrative, and Trevor has to challenge his mother's assertion that he has not seen what he thinks. Not only does Stein constantly push up against the assertion that ghosts do not exist, through this plot he urges the



reader to listen when they communicate. Moreover, Isobel Riddell, Jones's mother, was an active Spiritualist.

Another way the author brings an issue of tolerance to light is the story of Benjamin Riddell, the son of Elijah, who is the originator of the Riddell empire. Ben was a homosexual in turn of the century America, and his relationship with one of the timber workers scandalized his father and Seattle society.

In one scene, Trevor asks a local librarian what being homosexual would have been like in that period of history; Stein uses the opportunity to share his personal opinion on the matter.

Several exchanges between Trevor and his mother speak of faith lost and found again—faith in the sense of the ability to believe or accept something against what one feels is normal. Only in the last scene of the novel does Rachel regain her faith, and is able to see the ghost of her husband Jones. After that point she is at peace. In these ways, the author urges the reader to view all aspects of life with a clean slate.

## Connectedness

In the relationships between family members, and men and nature, the author wishes to communicate that all people and things are connected.

Ben Riddell says, “We are all connected—I believed it then and I still believe it now—at least in an energetic sense. And who’s to say this energy is not real? We can’t see gravity, either, yet we don’t deny it” (196). This theme is often repeated throughout the plot events. Ben is principally discussing man's responsibility to care for the land, and conservation is a central struggle in the plot. The characters that do not care for the land also struggle with a lack of peace. Serena is a good example of someone who strives to develop Riddell House for money, and she is completely focused on wrong goals and wrong means of achieving them. Ben would say that this wayward path is because she is not honoring the fact that her actions and circumstances are connected, and indeed, she dies a terrible death without reaching any of her goals.

As Grandpa Samuel grows towards the end of his life, he frequently sees the ghost of Ben, thus forming a connection to his past. The more he nurtures the connection, the more willing he is to align with his forefather's wishes to return the Riddell land to its national state.

Trevor too feels this connection and revels in it. He often reflects on a childhood filled with books, but was light on connection with his parents. Throughout his weeks at Riddell House he connects to Ben's story, and as a result, feels a link to his family home and the land on which it stands.





# Styles

## Point of View

The bulk of this novel is narrated in first-person by Trevor. This is an appropriate choice for POV because he is the catalyst for the transformation that occurs between the family members. It is also appropriate because he cannot see what Serena is doing behind-the-scenes.

Exceptions to this are the journal entries of Harry and Elijah that are written from their own perspectives. However, even Trevor's dreams, in which he dreams through Ben's eyes or acts as a bystander, are written in first-person. The nature of these accounts are best told by someone who is there, and indeed the vivid descriptions of the settings in these scenes lend extra dimension to them. An example, taken from a flashback scene narrated by Harry: "Like a child, I was impressed by the fire: gaslight—seemingly everywhere—glowing so brightly that the house looked like it was aflame inside. I was mesmerized by the dancing flames" (199).

## Language and Meaning

Author Garth Stein's writing is not overly involved, but there are several moments of excellent imagery and description. About the house itself, Stein says, "The flower beds were unkempt; ivy snaked up the log pillars, heavy and tenacious, glued to the wood with pale tentacles" (9).

He uses quotes and literary allusion often throughout the narrative, and perhaps his greatest strength is his voice in depicting the habits and mental energy of a 14-year-old boy. The reader has a very easy time stepping into Trevor's character because of this skill.

## Structure

A Sudden Light is comprised of 43 numbered and titled chapters, along with a Prologue and an Epilogue.

Aside from the few flashbacks peppered in, A Sudden Light is written in a straightforward, chronological format. Each chapter is given a name in addition to a number, which is a nice descriptive element that gives the reader more to go on. Examples include Chapter 4, titled "The Mighty Elijah," which introduces Elijah's character and history, and Chapter 7, titled "The Book of Jones," which elaborates on Jones's family history.

The narrative plot progresses in a traditional manner, with exposition to Trevor's back-story introduced early in the novel. The back-stories of Trevor's ancestors progress the



plot as he seeks to discern his family's history. The rising action of the plot occurs with the introduction of Ben's ghost and progresses through to the climax, which occurs with the burning down of the Riddell House. In the Epilogue, the author provides the falling action and denouement, with the revelations that Trevor has gained and the preservation of the land where the Riddell House once stood.



## Quotes

To the east of the pool was a patio with fluted urns sitting upon a sturdy balustrade that opened to a broad staircase stepping down to a clay tennis court with no net and broken standards and a cracked and brittle surface.

-- Trevor (chapter 6 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This quote is one of many well-written quotes in which the author describes the state of Riddell House: disrepair and decay. The house is in a similar state of the Riddell family affairs, and Stein uses these passages to demonstrate this.

A lost wedding ring, a missing watch, a spirit in a hidden stairway, dancing footsteps, and a man in the wall calling my name... You brought me to Weirdville so we could tear down the house. But we can't tear down the house because the man who owns the house thinks his dead wife still lives here."

-- Trevor (chapter 6 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** This quote both illustrates the central conflict of the novel, and demonstrates the author's effective use of voice and point of view.

But in real life, there is no guarantee that any questions will ever be answered. Real life is messy because we don't know where it's going to go.

-- Serena (chapter 7 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote describes the cryptic, free-spirited way in which Serena speaks, especially to Trevor. Moreover, it speaks to the wild theme of the novel, of living life fully and owning that our choices affect others, no matter what they are.

If anything, we owe it to the world to wipe this place off the face of the planet. It's our duty to obliterate the brutal history of our forefathers, who raped and pillaged this country for profit.

-- Serena (chapter 8 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** In this quote, Serena passionately refers to the generations of Riddell sin and how developing the house will put an effective end to it.

Everything has life. Everything has a history. The trick is allowing yourself to hear it.

-- Jones (chapter 13 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** In this quote, Jones refers back to how history connects us all.

Perhaps that's what life is about—the search for such a connection. The search for magic. The search for the inexplicable. Not in order to explain it, or contain it. Simply in order to feel it. Because in that recognition of the sublime, we see for a moment the entire universe in the palm of our hand. And in that moment, we touch the face of God."

-- Trevor (chapter 19 paragraph 3)



**Importance:** This quote is another illustration about connectedness, which is a prominent theme in *A Sudden Light*.

I felt a twisting in my gut: a pang of guilt or inner conflict. Again, I was forced to confront my dilemma. Of course I wanted my father to succeed, to get some money, and then to fly to England with me so he, my mother, and I could live happily ever after as a family. But, at the same time, I didn't want my father to succeed by destroying what was left of Ben's legacy. I wanted to come through for Ben. As much as I wanted my father to succeed, I wanted my father to fail."

-- Trevor (chapter 28 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote presents a secondary conflict for Trevor, whether or not to support his father's goal or stay true to Ben Riddell's desire to keep the land in its natural state.

Because we all choose our fate, whether or not we admit it. Do you see? I think so. It's not so much how we act, but how we judge ourselves for our actions. I am responsible for Harry's death— But it was an accident. At least what I saw. But not what I saw. I saw it differently. And until I can absolve myself, I can't move on—I will not move on. When this area has returned to the wild forest, it will be the symbol that I have done so."

-- Trevor and Ben (chapter 37 paragraph 3-4)

**Importance:** This conversation between Ben and Trevor occurs during Ben's long "haunting" that occupies one of Trevor's dreams. It refers to Ben's need for redemption for Harry's death, another of the novel's prominent themes.

And I thought that perhaps my believing that I had to conquer the tree to climb it wasn't the point at all. The point was for me to join the tree and be one with it."

-- Trevor (chapter 40 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Trees are a prominent symbol for life, and this quote comes from the chapter in which Trevor climbs the tall tree to feel more connected with the land.

I didn't know what to do. Chase him down? Grab him by the ankles as he climbed down the ladder in the chute? Pull on him until he fell on top of me, then hit him on the head and drag him out of the basement? I couldn't do that. And even if I could, he would have found a way around me. Because he was committed to something—a promise he made—and he wasn't going to stop until he had fulfilled it, as Ben wasn't going to stop until his promise had been fulfilled.

-- Trevor (chapter 45 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** This quote reflects Trevor's perspective on his father's decision to try to save Serena from the fire. It demonstrates the strong ties of family in this novel; that although Serena had been treacherous, Jones felt bound to her by his promise to keep her safe.



Because the earth calls. The soil, the rocks, the clay. It calls to us to remind us, to make sure we remember. The earth will ultimately win. It always does. We will, all of us, end our lives here. Even the birds.

-- Trevor (chapter 46 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Conservation is another prevalent theme in this novel, and here the author reminds us of the sanctity and predominance the earth holds over us all.

Their deaths were necessary, I've always told myself, to free me, and to free future generations of Riddells from the burden Elijah carried.

-- Trevor (Epilogue paragraph 5)

**Importance:** As atonement and redemption is another present theme in the novel, and this quote reflects how Trevor feels his father's death somehow freed him from the burden of his family's tumultuous past.