

Salvage the Bones: A Novel Study Guide

Salvage the Bones: A Novel by Jesmyn Ward

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Plot Summary

'Salvage the Bones' is a woman's coming-of-age story in the face of a devastating hurricane, written by Jesmyn Ward. Esche lives near the small Mississippi town of Bois Sauvage. Her family is extremely poor, and she lost her mother to the birth of her youngest brother, Junior, many years ago. This tragedy caused her father to become an alcoholic, and as a result the siblings—herself, Randall, and Skeetah, who are both older than her, and Junior—have extraordinarily strong bonds and interdependencies between them. Skeetah, in particular, who Esche seems closest too in many ways, has a peculiarly nurturing side to him, and in fact the novel opens with him helping his dog, China, give birth to a litter of puppies. The significance of these puppies is soon very apparent, though Skeetah does plan to sell them as fighting animals. While Skeetah tends to the puppies and Daddy makes light preparations for the coming hurricane, Esche discovers that she is pregnant, and she knows who the father is, but does not know how to tell the other boy, Manny, in a way that will make him care.

Esche becomes increasingly involved in helping Skeetah care for the puppies, and eventually, when one becomes sick with Parvo, Skeetah decides to steal dewormer from the barn of a white neighbor. The puppies assume great significance with the siblings, because they will be worth a great deal of money when sold, but they are even more important to Esche because she constantly equates China's motherhood to her own future, and has a profound respect for China's ability to handle the situation. When the children return from stealing the dewormer, Manny, the father of Esche's child, arrives, and suggests how to get China to take it. China becomes sick for several days as a result, which deeply worries Skeetah and leads him to believe that Manny intentionally gave him bad instructions in order to poison the dogs.

Meanwhile, Daddy has made very slow progress trying to prepare for the hurricane, and enlists Randall's help in using a tractor to help tear down the chicken coop for scrap that they might need to board up the house. Randall, who has never driven the tractor before, accidentally severs his father's fingers during an attempt to free the tractor from a mess of chicken-wire. He is rushed to the hospital by the siblings and their friend Big Henry, but the fingers are permanently lost, and Daddy is given pain pills which he mixes with alcohol, which completely incapacitates him. The siblings take China to a dog fight where her puppies father is, and Skeetah becomes so angered at Manny he allows China to fight Manny's cousin's dog, Kilo. China emerges victorious, but the children must rapidly prepare for the hurricane—now named "Katrina"—when they return.

The day of the hurricane finally arrives, and the family quickly realizes they are totally unprepared for the level of disaster it brings. Their house is flooded, and they must climb and swim through dangerous weather in order to reach a neighbor's house on the hillside, but they lose all of the puppies and China in the process. They take refuge in the attic of the storm, and make their way into town the next morning, except for Skeetah, who returns to wait for China's return, because he is convinced she survived the ordeal. It also comes out during the hurricane that Esche is pregnant, which causes

her father to quickly re-evaluate his life. The end of the novel brings hope in the face of a great tragedy.



The First Day: Birth in a Bare-Bulb Place

The First Day: Birth in a Bare-Bulb Place Summary

"Salvage The Bones" is a woman's coming-of-age story about a girl named Esche, written by Jesmyn Ward. The novel opens with her brother's dog, China, giving birth to a litter of puppies. Esche's brother, Skeetah, is present and very attentive to the dog. Her other brothers Junior and Randall are also there, with their dad. It is revealed to the reader that their mother died after giving birth to Junior. It is presently summer-time, and they are in a rural swamp area near New Orleans. The family expects a hurricane soon, and has spent the day gathering supplies they will need and securing the house against the winds. Earlier that day a friend of the family named Manny visited. Esche has deep feelings for the boy, which do not seem to be reciprocated. China begins to give birth, and Skeetah pulls out the puppies, the second of which is dead. Over time, other people from the area come to visit them and the new puppies, including Big Henry and Marquise. There is a lot of talk about the hurricane, but no one seems to be genuinely concerned, and several doubt it will even reach them. Daddy instructs Esche to wash out a number of liquor jugs which they will gather water in. She accidentally shatters one and cuts herself. Randall, who is practicing basketball for an upcoming game, stops to help her stop the bleeding. There is excitement about the puppies because Skeetah intends to sell them for use in dog fights, which will bring the family a lot of money. They live on fifteen acres but do not farm the land, and most of the buildings are in disrepair. It is also revealed that Manny has been having sex with Esche, although he appears to have no feelings for her, she believes that she is in love with him.

The First Day: Birth in a Bare-Bulb Place Analysis

The setting and major characters are introduced. The Mississippi coastline is famous for both hurricanes and traditionally poor African American communities, and Daddy's concern that one is on its way foreshadows a major event in the novel. These characters are unmistakably poor, and the strong implication that Daddy is an alcoholic is supplied through the stock he keeps of liquor jugs that he uses to store moonshine. They appear to get most of their money from dog-fights, possibly bootlegging, and other illicit activities. Nonetheless, the males brothers who are older than Esche, Randall and Skeetah, have an unmistakable sense of responsibility to their family, specifically Esche and Junior. Esche herself possesses a level of intelligence apparent through her connection with mythology, more specifically the story of Jason and Medea, which she is engaged in to the point that events in her life are constantly compared to those in the mythology she is presently reading. Contrary to popular assumption, this is not a family of weak bonds. Quite the contrary. Skeetah is exemplary in their interdependency and concern for one another, which is manifested through the way he tends to China and her new litter.



The Second Day: Hidden Eggs

The Second Day: Hidden Eggs Summary

Esche awakens the next morning to the sounds of Skeetah hammering a kennel together. He shows her the puppies again. There are five, and Skeetah is very excited that so many survived through China's first litter. He turns down her offer to make him breakfast, and Esche goes off to search for chicken eggs on their property. It is revealed that she started having sex at the age of twelve with Marquise.

Junior later complains about having scrambled eggs for breakfast. Esche takes them from him and brings them out to the kennels to give to China, and finds that Big Henry is speaking to Daddy nearby. She and Skeetah go to the grocery store for dog food, that he plans to buy with money he saved up from mowing the local graveyard's lawn. Big Henry drives them into town. Esche has been feeling sick for the last couple of weeks, and is feeling particularly ill on their way to the store. They see a car wreck and a woman laying on the ground as they make their way back from the city. A wounded man paces in a ditch nearby, on the phone with authorities, and Big Henry has to take the phone from him because he is too disoriented to explain what has happened or where he is. Big Henry, Esche, and Skeetah are instructed to wait for the ambulance. When they return home, Esche uses a pregnancy test she bought at the store and discovers that she is, in fact, pregnant.

The Second Day: Hidden Eggs Analysis

China's pregnancy and birthing of puppies has assumed a new and symbolic significance for Esche, and a surprising amount of information comes forth about the main character's sexual history. Esche is essentially a motherless girl surrounded by males. In fact, to this point in the novel, the only characters she has interacted with are male, and it is also known that two of them, Manny and Marquise, have engaged in sexual activity with her, at very young ages. She explains these encounters by insisting that it was easier to let these boys have their way with her than it was to fight them off, except she claims to have grown to love Manny. She has already begun to attempt to explain the feelings she has for Manny through the myth of Jason and Medea.

The characters of Manny and Marquise contrast sharply with Big Henry, who, Esche explains, never looked at her in that way. He assumes the significance of a father figure, or at least a protector, since her father is essentially absent from that role due to alcoholism.



The Third Day: Sickness in the Dirt

The Third Day: Sickness in the Dirt Summary

Esche has difficulty sleeping, and wakes up continually because she's worried about the pregnancy. She is even more sick the next morning, and remains in bed reading mythology, until Skeetah comes in to show her to one of the puppies who has gotten sick. Skeetah believes the puppy has parvo, which is fatal. He is worried that the rest of the dogs will catch it. He's been trying to force China to feed it, but China has kept fighting it off, expecting it to die. Esche agrees to camp out with Skeetah overnight. Meanwhile, Daddy has been preparing for the hurricane with Junior. When Junior comes into the shed and sees China with the sick puppy, he gets upset that Skeetah wants to separate it to keep it from infecting the other dogs. Skeetah plans to drown the sick one to keep the others alive, and Junior calls for Randall to try to make him stop. Skeetah insists there is nothing to be done for the dog, and that it will infect the others if they try to keep it. Skeetah takes Esche into the woods in order to hunt for food. They catch a squirrel, and Skeetah suddenly tells her that she and Manny are not right for each other. Skeetah accidentally cuts the squirrel's intestines open while gutting it, and Esche vomits, mostly from how sick she already feels because of being pregnant. Later, after the squirrel has been cooked and Big Henry and Marquise have joined them, Esche decides to name the dying pup Mella. Randall and Manny arrive, and Manny insists that the puppy must be killed or it could kill the entire litter. Finally, Skeetah does so by breaking the pup's neck. He removes his shirt and pants and throws them into the fire, since they also might be infected. The brothers do the same, and the entire group enters the water to bathe. Manny circles Esche and teases her for not taking her clothes off in front of them all. It also becomes clear that Manny has relationships with many other girls, even though Esche has only been with him since their first time. Skeetah shouts at her while she is underwater, and when she surfaces they are the only two there, and he leads her back to the others.

The Third Day: Sickness in the Dirt Analysis

The struggle with the dying dog sheds some light on Esche's thoughts. She wants to keep the sick pup, like Junior does. She goes far enough to give the dying animal a name even though she knows it will not survive, and there is really no way for any of them to care for it. Her feelings for Manny run deep in a way that can only truly occur during adolescence, and she continues to compare their situation to Jason and Medea's, wherein Jason essentially uses Medea for her strength and power, but gives her up once he manages to escape her family. Manny is presumably a few years older than her, still a teenager himself, and apparently has relationships with many girls. Neither of them are remotely prepared for a child in their lives, and it is doubtful that Manny will even take interest in the situation, yet that is most likely precisely what Esche wants him to do.



The Fourth Day: Worth Stealing

The Fourth Day: Worth Stealing Summary

Skeetah is trying to pry the linoleum off of the kitchen floor. He plans to use it in order to cover the floor of the basement and protect the other pups from Parvo, which he believes has gotten into the dirt of their kennel. He asks her to help him in the woods because she is a fast runner. She recalls that she barely used to see him at all before the puppies were born. Daddy comes in through the front door, and it is clear he has been on his tractor. He makes Esche and Skeetah pull two pieces of plywood from the wall in the attic before they can continue with their task. A while back, Skeetah discovered an old run-down house nearby where white people live. Skeetah takes her there. Both of them are wearing earth-tones to camouflages themselves, because Skeetah intends to steal from the house. He has brought a razor along with him, and wants Esche to keep watch while he goes to take cow dewormer from the inside of the barn. They make their way through the humid forests to the house, and discover that Big Henry, Junior, and Randall are there. Skeetah insists that they send Junior home, but Randall instead tries to stop Skeetah from robbing the barn in the first place. Skeetah reminds them that they stand to make eight-hundred dollars from the puppies if they survive, and that he intends to use some of that money to pay for Randall's basketball camp. They all agree, then take positions around the house and barn to watch for the white folk's return. Skeetah races across the field and tries to pry open a window on the barn, but it has been sealed shut. He wraps his t-shirt around his elbow and breaks the window to get inside. Esche suddenly has to pee very badly. She tries to hold it, but has to squat in the field, and suddenly the white folks return in a truck. There is a dog in the man's truckbed, and it leaps out, running towards Skeetah, who has just come back out of the window on the opposite side of the barn. Esche and the others begin to run, and the man calls after them. They are chased by the dog, who follows Esche and Skeetah all the way back past the pit to their house. The dog is attacked by China, and Esche convinces Skeetah to stop the fight. The other dog, Twist, runs away, leaving a trail of blood.

The Fourth Day: Worth Stealing Analysis

The children in this family have been without a mother for some time, and as Daddy barely pays any attention to them whatsoever, they have been forced to fend for themselves. They do a surprising amount for one another, whereas Daddy does not even comment, or seem to notice that Skeetah is tearing linoleum off of the kitchen floor. When Skeetah plans to steal with dewormer from the white people's barn, they all come together in order to do so. Big Henry is not related to Esche and the others, but he is still very close, and does more for the children than their father does at present. Randall agrees with the theft when he learns that Skeetah plans to use some of the money to help him get to basketball camp, which will improve his chances at being recognized for his talent in the sport. Skeetah has a very strong sense of responsibility



for his siblings, and does what he can to provide for them. In essence, the family is really only doing the best it possibly can in order to heal itself from the loss of their mother.



The Fifth Day: Salvage the Bones

The Fifth Day: Salvage the Bones Summary

Esche enters the bathroom the next morning to find Skeetah inside, checking on cuts he got from yesterday's chase. He was badly cut when he escaped through the broken window. She helps him wrap up the cut, and he remarks that she ran slow the day before as they made their escape. When he leaves, she examines her belly in the mirror and realizes that her pregnancy is beginning to show. Daddy has taken a break from gathering piles of scrap in the yard, and is trying to get his dump truck to work because he believes there will be a lot of money to be made from someone with such a working truck after the storm. He sees Esche and asks her where Randall and Skeetah are, but when she cannot answer him, he has her climb into the truck with Junior to try and help him start it. Eventually he gets frustrated and calls her and Junior out of the truck, then heads to town to look for parts that the truck will need.

Later, Esche is with Skeetah, China, and Manny. China is slightly hurt from the day before when she fought Twist. Another series of dog fights is about to occur, and Manny's cousin Rico is said to have a dog named Kilo who is ready to fight. Kilo is also the father of China's puppies. Another dog from Baton Rouge, Boss, will be their, and he is also supposed to be in fighting condition. As they talk the fights over, Manny tries to convince Skeetah that China will not be as good of a fighting dog now since she's had puppies, but Skeetah argues that it will make her fiercer because now she has something to protect. Skeetah spilled the dewormer earlier while trying to get China to take some of it, and Manny teases him, then instructs him to mix the dewormer with cooking oil. Manny leaves, but later returns when Skeetah begins to give China the mixture. The older boy looks for his lighter as Skeetah fills a syringe and gives the dewormer to China. Afterwards, Esche considers her options regarding her pregnancy, and realizes that she has none but to have the child, and that Manny will likely take no interest in it. Daddy finally returns, and he is cursing in frustration. He is angry that the salvage yard did not have the part he went looking for, and he was unable to find it elsewhere in town. He takes his frustration out on Skeetah, who is building a house for China with some of the scrap that Daddy had gathered together. China rushes to attack Daddy after he shoves Skeetah, but Skeetah calls her off of him. He is then told by his father to put the boards back where he found them. Daddy also complains that the children are all unappreciative of what he tries to do for them.

The Fifth Day: Salvage the Bones Analysis

Esche's pregnancy has begun to show, and, as she states, she has almost nothing in the way of options, with no idea how Daddy or any of her brothers will react to the news. The character Daddy will clearly be of little help. While he does not seem overly cruel to his children, he is still clearly incapable of raising the family he already has, and seems to have difficulties planning beyond the tropical storm he's convinced will hit soon. His



children seem to dismiss the idea that the storm will affect them significantly, and continue on with their lives for the most part as if great danger is not on its way. But, really, they probably feel as if they have very little to lose. The house is already being torn apart for scrap, and, as they have survived through hurricanes before, most of them believe that they can survive another. This is an interesting commentary on the hurricane that became known as Katrina, which devastated the southeast coastline of the United States, and suggests that the reality of the disaster was not made clear to the region's inhabitants until very late on, and that this lack of information on the hurricane was brought about by more complex realities than the media presented at the time.



The Sixth Day: A Steady Hand

The Sixth Day: A Steady Hand Summary

The next morning, Esche watches her Daddy in the backyard as he tears down the chicken coop and waits for Skeet to return inside. She finally decides to offer her help to Skeetah, who is in the shed with China and the puppies. He does not look well. He has been up all night, convinced that something is wrong with China, and that Manny may have deliberately given him bad advice about the dewormer in order to poison her. Esche manages to convince him to take a break from looking after the dogs and sends him inside to clean himself up. Junior stays with Esche, and wants to hold the puppies, which he is not allowed to do, and Esche becomes very angry with him. When he refuses to let go of a puppy, she grabs him and scratches him. He China to keep her moving. Shaliyah is with Manny at the park, along with her cousin Felicia. Shaliyah is Manny's girlfriend, although he has sexual relationships with several girls, according to Esche. Manny is on the basketball court, with Big Henry, Randall, and Marquise. The group begins to play, and Esche watches with Junior. After the game Randall asks after Skeetah, and Esche explains that China might be sick. This makes Randall nervous, because he might need to money the puppies will provide them with in order to go basketball camp, in case he does not earn his scholarship there. Big Henry invites Esche to sit in his car with him, since it is extremely hot out, and she agrees.

When the siblings return home, Daddy is still attempting to dismantle the chicken coop. He calls for Randall, and then tells his children that the storm has now been named Katrina. He asks Randall to use the tractor to help pull the coop apart. Randall refuses because he has never driven the tractor before, but Daddy continues to insist. Skeetah takes China back to the shed while Junior tries to help Randall with the tractor. China suddenly kills one of the puppies as it moves in to feed from her, and at the exact same time, Randall surges forward with the tractor with Daddy in the way. The ensuing accident rips Daddy's left middle, ring, and pinky fingers.

The Sixth Day: A Steady Hand Analysis

The relationship between Skeetah, Randall, Esche, and Junior is explored in great detail during this section of the novel. Each of the older siblings looks after Junior as best they can, and it is very common for either Esche or Randall to fuss over him as though he were their own child. This demonstrates a very long history they have had of taking care of both Junior and each other, in the absence of Daddy's parental supervision. It is not even clear if Daddy is aware that Randall may have a large opportunity available to him if he is allowed to go to basketball camp. It isn't even clear Daddy knows that Randall is interested in basketball. The siblings make due without Daddy's help for the most part, and begrudgingly assist him whenever he instructs them to, but the accident at the end of this section occurs precisely because Daddy is an adult who fails to make safe choices for a variety of reasons, but mainly due to the fact

that he is an alcoholic. As to Daddy's lost digits, his injuries may be thought of as an accident waiting to happen. He insisted that Esche perform a similar task with him earlier on in the novel, which could easily said to have foreshadowed this event. It is also notable that the injury would have severed the finger carrying his wedding ring.



The Seventh Day: Game Dogs and Game Men

The Seventh Day: Game Dogs and Game Men Summary

Big Henry drives Daddy to the hospital with the rest of the family, except for Skeetah who stays behind to take care of China. Daddy comes out of the hospital room at three in the morning, and they return to sleep. Skeetah is gone the next morning, along with China. Daddy watches the news, which announces that Katrina has landed in Florida. The newscaster is warning people to be prepared for the storm.

Later, Esche hears China and several other dogs barking in the woods. Skeetah is controlling them all. Randall's basketball game takes place later that day, and Esche asks Skeetah what the barking was about. Skeetah responds that China forgot who he was. Eventually, Randall is ready for the game and they all leave Daddy to rest. Esche encounters Rico with Manny while at the games. Manny soon follows her into the bathroom and has sex with her. He then pushes her away, and she discovers that she is unable to stop crying afterwards. Finally, Junior comes in to ask her if she is okay. She follows him back out to the gymnasium. Skeetah is somewhat aware of what Manny has been doing to Esche, and he is angry about it. Rico leaves his place sitting next to Manny and comes up the bleachers to tell Skeetah that he wants to see the puppies, and that he feels he gets to have one of them, since his dog, Kilo, is their father. Skeetah will not allow it, since he has done all of the work. Rico threatens them, and Skeetah punches him. A fight breaks out. Randall's coach recognizes Randall's family, and throws him out of the game since they are disturbing the entire event. Outside, Rico and Skeetah settle their argument by deciding that Boss will fight Kilo the next day, and if Boss loses, then Rico gets to choose a puppy to take.

The Seventh Day: Game Dogs and Game Men Analysis

The most interesting piece of information in this section is barely mentioned, but it seems that none of the children are very concerned with Daddy's injury, even though he has just lost three fingers and is in need of care. Skeetah does not even go to the hospital with the rest of them, believing that China's obedience to him is more important. Whatever he did with China in the woods near their house involved Skeetah reasserting his dominance over her, as punishment for killing the puppy who tried to feed from her. This should remind the reader that even though China is a mother, she is still a fighting dog and violent by nature.

Skeetah also appears to know that something is going on between Esche and Manny, and given how close the two siblings appear to be, it is safe to assume that he realizes the two have been having sex, and that Manny's constant dismissal of her feelings has

begun to seriously hurt Esche. This is no small reason that the fight broke out between Skeetah and Rico, who is Manny's cousin. Skeetah also still probably suspects Manny of deliberately poisoning China.



The Eighth Day: Make Them Know

The Eighth Day: Make Them Know Summary

Esche is hurt deeply from what has happened between her and Manny, and she is finding it difficult to conceal from her brothers. She compares her story to that of Medea's from Jason and the Argonauts. When she finally draws herself out of bed, she checks on Daddy, and agrees to take Junior to the dog fight. They go to Skeetah, who is busy washing China and arguing with Randall. Randall is upset that Skeetah plans to take China to the fight in the first place. He reminds Skeetah that he promised to help Randall pay for basketball camp with money from the puppies. The siblings go into the woods towards where the fights will happen. Esche is the only girl when they arrive. There are a total of fifteen boys and ten dogs present. Jerome is preparing his dog, Boss, for a fight. The boys gather to decide which dog will fight which. Rico insists that Boss and Kilo will fight, since that was part of the agreement between him and Skeetah. Ojacc fights and defeats Lala first, and Lala is Marquise's dog. Kilo and Boss fight next. Jerome accidentally calls Boss to him in the middle of the fight, and the two animals are dragged apart to correct the mistake. They are cleaned, then begin to fight again. The dogs are clearly an even match for each other, so the fight is ended without a clear victor, and the boys gather together to argue about which dog actually won the fight. Rico still demands his puppy, even though Skeetah and Jerome both insist that there was no clear winner in the fight. Rico gets upset, and Skeetah decides to fight China against Kilo in order to settle the matter. China beats Kilo easily at first, but one of China's nipples is bitten off during the second round. They fight for a third round, and China tears Kilo's throat. Kilo begins wailing.

The Eighth Day: Make Them Know Analysis

The dog-fighting is all completely run by the children, and, in many ways, becomes a stage on which Esche is able to explore her frustration with Manny, who has completely taken Rico's side against Skeetah and China. Skeetah has done all of the work in trying to keep the puppies alive, and feels that Rico's demands are unwarranted. After a string of tragedies and setbacks in the family—Daddy's injuries, the deaths of two puppies, and Randall's failed attempt at earning the basketball scholarship—China's victory becomes important to Esche and the rest of the family because China comes to embody the families triumph. She also comes to embody aspects of Medea for Esche, so that a victory for China means that a victory for Esche is also possible.



The Ninth Day: Hurricane Eclipse

The Ninth Day: Hurricane Eclipse Summary

Esche wakes up and finds Daddy hunched over the toilet. He tells her to get Randall, who is out in the shed with China. The two return to Daddy, then carry him back to his bed, which is surrounded by beer cans. He was not supposed to drink alcohol with the medications he was given to manage the pain from his severed fingers. His children assure him that they will help prepare the house for the coming hurricane. Skeetah is going into town to steal some supplies, and buy a few others.

Later, Esche goes looking for Junior because she needs his help with work that she's been doing. She finds him next to Daddy, and when she pulls him out of the room, he says that Daddy was not breathing. He also has found Daddy's wedding ring, which is still on the severed finger. He tosses it at Esche and then runs away. Randall finds out what Junior has done and spansks him for it. They tell Skeetah later, and Skeetah laughs and jokes about feeding the fingers to China. The children continue to board up the windows and collect water in the jugs. Afterwards, they collect supplies at the grocery store, and cook what is left in the refrigerator when they return.

The Ninth Day: Hurricane Eclipse Analysis

Daddy's sickness from the combination of alcohol and pain medication was entirely inevitable, but it is most surprising that the children finally begin to prepare for the disaster as soon as he is unable to do so. Junior's comments on Daddy's behavior center on the fact that Daddy never seemed to deal with the loss of his wife, and, in his own way, is as in as much pain as any of his children over her absence. The only difference is that the children have all needed him this entire time, and even Junior, who never knew his mother, misses her completely. Throughout, Esches' thoughts are constantly drawn back to memories of her mother. Everything in the house has become a reminder of her absence, and if the house is destroyed in the storm, it is very likely that an additional tragedy of those memories being damaged will follow.



The Tenth Day: In The Endless Eye

The Tenth Day: In The Endless Eye Summary

Esche devours Skeetah's food because she is starving. Randall is arguing with Daddy about the lack of food they have, and leaves to get Daddy's wedding ring for him after Daddy inquires after it. Skeetah is gathering things he may need for China, and eventually Randall suggests they look for eggs, which their mother taught them to do. They gather a total of twenty-four of them. Manny arrives to talk with Randall. He tells him that the basketball team is paying for Bodean to go to camp. Skeetah thinks that Manny gave him bad advice on purpose and accuses him of as much, even though Manny flatly denies that he would ever do such a thing. Esche calls to Manny as he is about to leave and tells him that she is pregnant, and he's the father. He denies it, and she attacks him physically. Manny calls her a slut and leaves after pushing her away. Randall finds her to tell her that they are going back to the white people's house. He notices her crying but she denies that anything is wrong. They make their way to the other house, but it is completely boarded up. Randall kicks some of the boards away, but hurts his knee in the process, and when Esche looks through the boards, she discovers that the white people have taken all of their supplies with them. On their way back, they find China with a dead chicken in her mouth, and Esche realizes it was one of theirs. Skeetah plans to keep China and her puppies in the house during the storm, and even though Randall objects and Daddy agrees with Randall, Skeetah refuses to stay inside the house during the storm if the dogs are not allowed inside. Katrina has become a category five, which is far more dangerous than the last hurricane they faced. Randall and Skeetah almost begin to fight, but Daddy stops them and allows China and the puppies to remain inside.

The Tenth Day: In The Endless Eye Analysis

The family is slowly coming together to face the crisis as a unit, but they are hopelessly outmatched by the ferocity of the hurricane they are about to encounter. The significance of the hurricane becoming a category 5 and being called Katrina is obvious to anyone moderately familiar with recent U.S. history, in which the real hurricane Katrina destroyed the city of New Orleans, killed countless people, and left the surrounding countryside in ruins. According to this novel, one of the reasons that so many people were lost is because the severe warnings were not issued until very late, when people may have been less able to make preparations for leaving, but the area has also experienced hurricanes in the past, and it may, at least in part, also be very difficult for much of the local population to believe that this particular hurricane would be any different from the others they have encountered.



The Eleventh Day: Katrina

The Eleventh Day: Katrina Summary

The children fall asleep watching television. The next morning they get an automated call from the state warning them of the approaching hurricane. Esche answers, and realizes for the first time that they could very easily all die from the catastrophe that is about to occur. She thinks of her mother who died just after a hurricane years ago. She also wonders about her baby and what it will be like. Skeetah wakes up and they talk in the back of the house. They overhear a dog barking outside in the storm. Daddy supposes that the storm will last two or three hours. The children remain in the living room, and Skeetah eventually realizes that water is coming into the house, up through the floor. Esche sees that the water has picked up Daddy's truck and is swirling it around outside. They try to open the attic to escape the flood, but the entrance is stuck shut at first. Once inside, they feel the house tilting, and water begins to flood the attic. Randall begins trying to break through the roof to prevent them from drowning inside. They see the house of some of their neighbors, Mother Lizbeth, and Papa Joseph, and decide to swim to it since it is on a hillside. Skeetah reveals that he knows Esche is pregnant during their attempt to escape their attic, and on her way over, Esche accidentally spills the puppies into the water and they are swept away. She manages to grab the brindle, but the other two have completely disappeared. Skeetah pulls her out of the water. China is pulled away from Skeetah by the flood, and vanishes before they manage to swim into the other house.

The Eleventh Day: Katrina Analysis

The memories of Mama become stronger the closer they get to the storm, and they spend the night before as a family. The realization that the hurricane is life-threatening comes incredibly late in the novel, and the reader is left to wonder how Mama would have handled the situation. For example, would she have insisted that Daddy stop trying to prepare the house for the catastrophe and instead insist on leaving the area? The loss of the puppies and disappearance of China drive home the reality that they are all in true danger, and also represents the loss of their hopes of a better future.



The Twelfth Day: Alive

The Twelfth Day: Alive Summary

The entire family remains in the attic of their neighbors house, cold and exhausted. China and the puppies have all died or at least disappeared. Skeetah suffers from immense guilt and feels as though he has failed his dog. Skeetah leaves on a tractor as soon as the water is low enough, convinced that he can still find China somewhere. When the water finally disappears, Daddy's truck is destroyed, and Randall realizes that they are going to need shelter for the next few days. They begin to make their way toward town, and come to discover that the hurricane destroyed nearly every house in the area. Big Henry and Marquise are still alive, and in front of Big Henry's house. Big Henry invites the family inside to stay until things are sorted out. Manny is also amongst the survivors. They enter Big Henry's house and greet his mother, Ms. Bernadine. Later, Marquise says that Skeetah is waiting for China back at their home, even though it is ruined. Daddy finally talks to Esche about her pregnancy. Esche wants to name the child Rose, after her mother, if it is a girl, and Jason (after Skeetah) if it is a boy. A group of them drive out to the nearby town of St. Catherine, and are surprised that the hurricane caused such incredible damage everywhere. Large trees have been pulled out of the ground everywhere, and roads are covered in mud and split apart in several places. The high school has been similarly destroyed, and they cannot find a place to cross over a nearby stream. They continue on, passing even more wreckage, and search the debris left from a liquor store for Daddy and find several bottles of liquor for him. Big Henry asks Esche who the father of her child is, and Esche says it does not have one, but Henry remarks that the child has several fathers. Esche thinks of Katrina as Medea. They return to their house, where Skeetah is still waiting for China. Big Henry tries to convince him to come back with them to his house, but Skeetah refuses and Esche begins to believe that China is in fact still alive.

The Twelfth Day: Alive Analysis

The force and strength of the hurricane was entirely unexpected until the very day before it hit, and by then it was too late for most families in Esche's area to do anything about it but try to survive. Many of these families were without vehicles, much like Esche's. The tragedy of the lost dogs is lightened somewhat by the fact that everyone has survived, and that Daddy insists Esche go to the doctor to make sure everything is OK, meaning that he does not intend to repeat the same mistake as he did with his wife, Esche's mother. Esche is surrounded by people who care deeply about her, and Big Henry is even good enough to let her know that the child has plenty of fathers, meaning that Esche's brothers and he will look after them both.



Characters

Esche

Esche is a teenage girl who grew up in an extremely poor family without a mother. Her father, Daddy, is an alcoholic, and her brothers Skeetah and Randall, both do what they can in order to look after her. She is intelligent, and very interested in mythology, but began having sexual relationships with boys at the age of twelve, and discovers that she is pregnant very close to the start of the novel. She feels that she is in love with the child's father, Manny, who is another teenage boy, and she has not been with anyone else since they began having sex. She tries to hide her pregnancy from the rest of the family, though it becomes increasingly clear that Skeetah is aware of it, and when it is finally revealed to her father, he apologizes for not having done his role and insists on her going to see a doctor to make sure that everything is safe. She describes herself as thin and boyish, and is often hungry throughout the novel, though whether this is because she is pregnant or because her family generally has very little eat is not entirely clear. She misses her mother deeply, and is currently fascinated with the Greek mythology of Jason and Medea, in which a woman with extraordinary powers performs miracles to prove her love for Jason, but is quickly abandoned by him once the prince reaches his home country.

Skeetah

Skeetah is one of Esche's older brothers. He is obsessed with his dog China, and an avid fan of dog fighting. The novel opens with him assisting China give birth to five puppies, and he goes to great lengths to ensure their survival, even though the eventually perish in hurricane Katrina. Like his sister, Esche, he is very thin, and he often hunts squirrels and other wildlife with his sister in order to stay fed. Skeetah also commonly steals things he would not otherwise be able to afford, and often takes great risks in trying to protect and provide for China and her puppies, and this is mainly because Skeetah desperately wants to care for his family, and the puppies will be worth a great deal of money. More so than anyone else who knows Esche, he begins to suspect her relationship with Manny, and begins to resent his friend as a result. This resentment causes him to place China in a dog fight very early on after her pregnancy, and China is actually wounded rather considerably during this fight. Though he loses his dog during the hurricane, he is convinced that she survived and waits for her at their ruined home after Katrina passes. He and Esche are the closest out of all of the siblings, and she constantly helps him and seeks him out as he tends to China and her puppies. Skeetah also promises to use some of the money they earn from the puppies to help Randall attend basketball camp, which proves that he is not merely selfish in his desire for the money, but very intent on helping those within his family.



Randall

The second of Esche's older siblings, Randall, is an extremely talented basketball player with a knee injury that he hopes to conceal until after he earns some kind of scholarship. Randall is close to his siblings and does what he can, especially for Junior, but he is typically seen with a basketball in hand and is very focused on being a successful player. Unlike his siblings, Randall has much more muscle as a result of his athleticism. He is concerned about the puppies too, but mainly because their survival is necessary for him to thrive in the future. His efforts are unintentionally thwarted by his own family when they begin fighting about the puppies during an important game. The coach recognizes him and throws him out of the game immediately. Junior seems to depend on Randall heavily, as he often runs to "tattle" on Skeetah to Randall instead of Daddy.

Junior

The youngest of Esche's siblings, Junior was born only to have his mother die shortly thereafter, and even though he never knew the woman, he still appears to understand a great deal about her. He is constantly vying for the attention of his brothers and sister, although he never communicates directly with Daddy. He does manage to retrieve Daddy's wedding ring, from his severed finger, and it seems as though he wishes to keep it because he feels like Daddy has forgotten what the ring meant. All of Junior's siblings dote on him and ensure that he is safe and taken care of. He is perhaps the thinnest of all of them, and appears to be involved in minor thefts, just like his older brother Skeetah.

Daddy

The father of Esche, Randall, Skeetah, and Junior, Daddy is an alcoholic who seems to have developed this problem when his wife died in childbirth. Through much of the novel his children regard him with mild scorn, and though he is not habitually abusive, he does become aggressive with his children under certain circumstances. He is generally irresponsible, and winds up losing three of his fingers in an accident that he caused by forcing his son Randall to operate a tractor that the boy knew nothing about. By the end of the novel, and with the discovery of Esche's pregnancy, Daddy does appear to have had a change of heart, and insists that he will help to take care of Esche during and after her pregnancy. Even though the siblings sift through the debris of a liquor store for him after the hurricane passes, there is still a faint amount of hope that he might in fact change his ways.

Manny

Manny is a friend of Randall and Skeetah's. Manny plays basketball, and his cousin Rico participates in the dogfights. He is thought by Esche to be sexually involved with



several other girls, and he tends to treat Esche very poorly during the course of their relationship. He is confronted near the end of the novel with Esche's pregnancy, but refuses to take any responsibility in the matter. Skeetah suspects that something has been going on between Manny and his sister for some time, and strikes Manny's cousin Rico as a result. Manny is also thought to have poisoned China on purpose, although Manny denies it.

Big Henry

Big Henry is a friend of the family that Esche seems to have great respect for. She makes it very clear that he never looked at her in a sexual way. He is described as large and powerful, and is generally very helpful by nature, as when he speaks to the authorities about a car accident on behalf of someone who has been injured, or when he allows Esche's entire family to stay in his home.

Marquise

Marquise is another friend of Esche's brothers, and Esche explains that she first began having sex with him when she was twelve years old. Marquise does not acknowledge this former relationship throughout the novel.

Rico

Rico is Manny's cousin and the owner of Kilo, which is the father of China's puppies. Rico demands a puppy from Skeetah, but loses a bet after China defeats Kilo in a fight.

China

China is the female fighting dog owned by Skeetah. Esche describes her as mostly white and very beautiful. Esche also compares her own eventual motherhood to what China is presently going through, despite the fact that China kills one of her puppies as it attempts to feed from her. China is an excellent fighting dog, and even though she is lost in the storm, Skeetah is convinced that she managed to survive, and waits for her at their ruined home.



Objects/Places

Puppies

The puppies are very important throughout the novel, representing both the financial well-being of the family and Esche's chances at successful motherhood.

Jugs

Daddy's liquor jugs are used to collect water for use during the hurricane.

Chickens

The family owns many chickens, but none of them use the chicken coop any longer.

Basketballs

Randall is a very talented basketball player, and his family hopes that he will be picked up for basketball camp. He is usually seen practicing his skills.

Dewormer

Skeetah insists on using cow dewormer to keep his puppies alive.

Boards

Much of Esche's house is in ruins, and many boards are piled up in the yard as scrap to use against the hurricane.

Pictures

Pictures of the sibling's mother are seen frequently throughout the house and in fact Daddy takes several of them with them when they escape from the hurricane.

The House

The House generally refers to the house that belongs to Esche's family. The vast majority of the novel takes place either on the property or very nearby.



The Pit

The Pit is a large depression on the families' property. It becomes flooded during the hurricane and eventually causes the house to become submerged.

The Kennel

The Kennel for the puppies is where Skeetah does his best to keep the puppies and China alive and well.

Bois Sauvage

Sauvage is the small town in Mississippi closest to Esche and her family.

The woods.

The woods are a very humid forest that surround the house Esche lives on. The characters often hunt for food in the woods.



Themes

Motherhood

Motherhood is perhaps the most central theme to the novel as a whole. The novel opens as China, the fighting dog raised and owned by Skeetah, is giving birth to very valuable puppies. Much of the narrative is invested in describing the efforts of Skeetah and Esche to provide for the infant animals. Esche herself is pregnant, and realizes she has no choice but to give birth, so China's own puppies become a very important metaphor for what her future holds, and also becomes entangled with the mythology of Jason and Medea that Esche is currently fascinated with. Esche compares herself to Medea, and the feelings that she has for Manny with the feelings that Medea must have had for Jason, and wonders how it will feel to her when Manny inevitably passes her up for another girl, which she is rightly convinced he will do as soon as he discovers that she is pregnant. During the entire novel, Esche is constantly reminded of her own mother than the way that her family was before she had died. Esche's own mother is in large part mythologized by her absence, and Esche makes it very clear that it still feels as though her mother is still with them, even while her absence is clearly felt by all. Esche's mother died giving birth to Junior, hence motherhood, to Esche, is not simply nurturing and caring for one's offspring, but also the ability to endure hardships as well as being a strong fighter, as China is for her own offspring. Esche even compares Katrina to the concept of Motherhood, and the hurricane is destructive and unforgiving, much in the same way that China kills one of her own puppies when it attempts to feed too much from her.

Loss/Tragedy

Since before the beginning of the novel, Esche's family has suffered from incredible losses in many shapes and forms. The most notable tragedy they have all suffered is the loss of their mother, but in a way each of them has lost a piece of themselves. Esche is clearly deeply affected by her mother's absence, but Daddy is also greatly damaged by it as well. In the faces of all these tragedies, the family must survive as best they can, and indeed, they attempt to thrive even in the face of so many hardships. Katrina is the most obvious representation of destruction through the novel, and even though it does not make its appearance until the second-to-last chapter, anyone remotely familiar with the hurricane will be familiar with the destruction it brought on New Orleans and the surrounding area. Many, many people died in the hurricane, and Esche's family, with little means to escape, manages to survive completely, as they pulls themselves together and face the tragedy as a whole. Their sense of union is so complete that Skeetah refuses to believe that China is dead, and refuses to stay with the rest of the family so that he can retrieve her when she returns to the house, and he is in fact so convinced that China survives the storm, Esche is equally convinced that the dog will come back triumphantly as well. This is a family that has faced tragedy and knows well what it means to come together in times of dire need.



Poverty

The region that Esche lives in is entirely impoverished, and her family appears to represent the poorest in the area. They must hunt, steal and scrounge in order to survive, to the extent that it may be difficult for the typical reader to believe that such poverty still exists in the modern day. Another indicator that the family is extremely poor is that their mother died in childbirth, and out of a hospital. Such deaths are, again exceedingly rare in modern times, but far more likely to occur without the presence of medical assistance. The poverty that the family must face is devastating, to be sure, but certain stereotypes are disposed of, and in many ways, what the family lacks in wealth, it goes a long way towards making up in other ways. The first myth that this novel challenges readily is that it is directly the lack of education that causes young girls in poor areas to become pregnant. Esche is clearly an intelligent girl, and though her explanation that it is easier to say yes to the boys than to fight them off might seem somewhat lacking, she is in fact emphasizing the reality that she must face every day as a girl in a poor area. Thus, the reason that Esche may have become pregnant had nothing to do with her intelligence, but does have to do with a more general sociological reality surrounding her and her family. The details provided in this book are a marvelous sampling of behaviors that lower income families in such areas may in fact engage in on a regular basis, and many of them speak to thriving cultures despite of economic hardships. For, even in the backwoods regions in Mississippi, the youth is engaged in Basketball and other curricular and academic activities.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of "Salvage the Bones" is first person, exclusively through the eyes and emotions of Esche, the only significant female character present in the novel, aside from China. The point of view is not entirely reliable, as Esche often draws conclusions or makes assumptions that are not necessarily rational or stable, and much of the time she spends comparing her situation to Medea's even when the parallels are incredibly thin. This point of view is vital to the rest of the novel, as it's most central theme is that of motherhood and Esche is bound to become one shortly. Without direct access to Esche's thoughts and feelings, many of the scenes would lack all impact toward the reader.

The story is told mostly through exposition, and many of Esche's thoughts are featured in long sections, especially memories of her mother, which are also central to the novel's plot. Esche is the only female character prominently featured in the novel, and she is surrounded by teenage boys with next to no supervision. Esche spends much of her time with Skeetah, and she appears to understand her brother better than he understands himself. As many if not most of Skeetah's actions are central to the plot of the novel, her point of view is critical in understanding Skeetah as a character, as well as making China's fights significant within the context of motherhood. Without this direct access to Esche's thoughts we would not be privy to many of the secrets she keeps, including her own pregnancy.

Setting

The novel is set in the American Southeast, in Mississippi, just before the onset of Hurricane Katrina. This is a warm, humid area that is traditionally home to poor and African American citizens. Many of the people in the region do not own vehicles they would require for a successful escape from the region, and most of the boys in Esche's neighborhood are involved in some sort of illegal activity or another in order to make money. The area itself is sparsely populated, and many of the inhabitants seem comfortable hunting for squirrels and other small game in order to supplement their income.

Esche's home was once a farm built on fifteen acres of land, but it has fallen into disuse since the death of her mother. Chickens never enter their coop anymore, and Daddy eventually tears it down for scrap, which he collects in piles outside the house. The families' home seems to be constantly falling apart or taken down, as Daddy instructs Esche and Skeetah to remove wooden planks even as Skeetah is busy tearing the linoleum off of the floor.



The final setting of the novel is the destruction brought about by hurricane Katrina, which has destroyed most houses in the area and covered the roadways with mud. Bridges to nearby towns are similarly ruined, and virtually nothing is left of the small town known as Bois Sauvage when Esche and her family arrive there.

Language and Meaning

The language of "Salvage the Bones" tends to be relaxed and informal. Esche is generally eloquent in her descriptions of sights, sounds, or emotions, but generally uses very basic words to construct these descriptions. The conversations between the characters can be a different story, however, as each of them uses slang heavily, and it can be somewhat challenging at times for the reader to understand what someone is referring to or trying to communicate. This tends to slow down the novel at times, especially when Junior reveals that he has Daddy's wedding ring, because a large part of what he is trying to say or otherwise convey to his brothers and sisters is lost. The characters also have a habit of not directly communicating with each other, which further makes understanding what each of them is going through more difficult. However, it does accurately reflect their states of mind and appears genuine as the novel progresses. After all, Esche doesn't admit to being pregnant until Skeetah reveals it to Daddy, and if Esche was intent on keeping such a large secret from her family, it follows logically that they regularly keep their emotions and actions hidden from one another. The inability to communicate was supposedly brought about by the death of Esche's mother, and Esche herself appears to wish that she were still alive, as though her presence would have kept everyone honest and direct with one another.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters, each approximately one day long. Each chapter is labeled by day, and a brief phrase follows that roughly describes or has to do with the contents of that section. The chapters tend to be short, describing one or two main events from each of the day, with thoughts, impressions, and memories from Esche in-between.

The novel possesses three plotlines, the main one dealing with Esche's pregnancy and her attempts to communicate this reality to Manny. China's own pregnancy and the raising of her puppies is another important subplot, and in fact much of the main plotline is dealt with by Esche as she watches China provide for her young and fight with something to protect for the first time. The last plotline is that of Hurricane Katrina's approach and the families' attempts to prepare for the disaster. By the end of the novel, Hurricane Katrina has assumed primary significance as a representation for all of the destruction brought about by the death of Esche's mother.

The novel's pace is neither slow nor swift. It makes for a very short read, and contains a great amount of detail about the characters' lives which is presented in a very genuine and believable way. There are numerous flashbacks throughout the novel, and at in



places the passage of time does become confusing to keep track of, especially during times in which Esche is experience emotional distress. Her thoughts do tend to jump from the past back into the present, and it is not until the end of the novel that she begins to think of the future.



Quotes

"What China is doing is fighting, like she was born to do. Fight our shoes, fight other dogs, fight these puppies that are reaching for the outside, blind and wet." The First Day, p. 6

"When we were little, Big Henry used to let me ride on his back in the deep part of the pit, the part that was lined with oyster shells. He used to carry me so my feet wouldn't get cut, even though his feet were as bare as mine." The Second Day, p. 26

"This is what it means to be pregnant so far: throwing up. Sick from the moment I open my eyes, look up at the puckered plaster ceiling, remember who I am, where I am, what I am." The Third Day, p. 34"

"Skeetah walks into the step he was taking and pulls away from Daddy with his stride. Skeet seems surprised at the way Daddy's fingers slip from his arm, and Daddy looks at me, just for a minute, like he's confused." The Fourth Day, p. 52

"Mama went with us swimming in the bay sometimes. She circled Daddy and his friends, sat in a sagging plastic and aluminum yard chair Daddy'd found on the Pit. She laughed at their jokes sometime, but she didn't drink any beer. Mostly she just sat with a fishing pole braced between her legs. She was the one that caught a baby shark; it was the same color as the water, as long as her arm, and strong." The Fifth Day, p. 69

"'Why?' Daddy breathes to Randall and Big Henry standing over him, the blood sluicing down his forearm. They are gripping Daddy's wrist, trying to stop the bleeding. Skeetah is punching the metal he meets. China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak, I would ask her: Is this what motherhood is?" The Sixth Day, p. 102

"Randall looks lost on the court, the ball cradled in his limp hand. The other referee is blowing his whistle at Skeetah and Rico and Manny and Big Henry and Marquise, who are fighting their way along the side of the court now, the crowd carrying them out of the door in the kind of frothing waves we only get before hurricanes." The Seventh Day, p. 117

"The boys and their dogs talk and smoke in clumps, pass blunts and cigarettes from one to another, ask How old is yours or where you got that collar or How many she done had? There are around ten dogs here, around fifteen boys. I am the only girl." The Eighth Day, p. 123

"He is standing next to Daddy's bed, his small, narrow, back to me, his bald head bent. One arm hangs at his side, and the other he holds in front of him like he's in an Easter egg race, balancing a boiled egg on a spoon. But there is no spoon here, only his pointer finger, which he holds steady in front of Daddy's sleeping nose, nearly brushing Daddy's scraggly mustache, the naked chicken skin above Daddy's lip." The Ninth Day, p. 140



"Skeetah is forwning, beating the blanket clean. China starts from her crouch where she has been sitting next to the bucket; running from the first dig of her toes into the dirt. She runs up to the pilings that were the chicken coop and leaps, grinning, barking. She is trying to lick their feathers." The Tenth Day, p. 150

"When mama first explained to me what a hurricane was, I thought that all the animals ran away, that they fled the storms before they came, that they put their noses to the wind days before and knew. That maybe they stuck their tongues out, pink and warm to taste, to make sure." The Eleventh Day, p. 164

"China. She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of her. She will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought." The Twelfth Day, p. 195



Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast the characters of Randall and Skeetah. Which one of them does Junior seem to depend on more? Why do they argue over what should be done with the sick puppy?

How often does Esche encounter other females in the novel? How might this affect her relationship with Manny and other boys in general?

Briefly describe Big Henry and discuss his role towards Esche in the novel. How does Esche describe him? Does she look up to him?

Does Daddy seem to miss Mama? Why or why not? Briefly explain three things from the novel that support your stance on this idea.

When Esche finally confronts Manny, does she still think that she wants him to love her? What is she trying to accomplish by telling him that she is pregnant?

Briefly explain in three to four sentences how the white people who live near Esche are described by Skeetah and the others. Are they frightened of the white people? Does the fact that they are White possibly play a role in the reason that they were targeted for the theft of the dewormer, and if so, why would this be the case?

Why does China kill the puppy after she returns from the park? What other event may have foreshadowed this incident, and what was Skeetah's reaction to China when she killed her own offspring?