

Ship Breaker Study Guide

Ship Breaker by Paolo Bacigalupi

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Plot Summary

When Paolo Bacigalupi's young adult novel "Ship Breaker" begins, Nailer, a boy in his late teens, is helping to disassemble wrecked ships for sale to salvage companies. Nailer's existence is brutal. It is filled with hardships, including an alcoholic, drug-addicted father who dishes out regular beatings to Nailer. Nailer's best friend and workmate, Pima, and her mother, Sadna, act as refuges for Nailer. Following a brutal storm, Nailer and Pima find a private clipper wrecked on the beach. All crew members are dead. However, a teenage girl named Nita still survives.

Nita is the daughter of one of the most powerful shipping magnates in the world, whose company has been torn apart by illegal doings. Nita, fleeing her father's enemies, is now seeking to get back to him. Nailer and Tool, a friend of Pima's mother, agree to take Nita to New Orleans to try to find one of her father's loyal ships. Nailer's father, who aligns himself with Nita's enemies, leads a mission to Orleans that captures Nita. Nailer then goes to seek out a loyal Captain named Candless, and they rescue Nita. Nailer is given work on the ship, and he is able to leave his horrible past life behind.



Chapters 1 - 5

Summary

Chapter 1

Nailer, part of a light crew for salvaging specific types of metal, moves through a beached shipwreck to free copper wiring. He sees around by way of the LED phosphorescent paint that is smeared on his forehead. Heavy crews will be along later to strip away larger and heavier metals. He wears a mask over his face to protect him from the dust, mouse grit, and other dirt that is inside the shipwreck. He washes the mask frequently, though his crew girl, Sloth, laughs at him for giving himself more work than is necessary, or for wearing it at all. His mother has told him to wear the mask no matter what, and so he does. As he finishes up work, Nailer puts Bapi's light crew code on the wall, a labor mark that gives him and the crew the right to work on wrecks under Bapi's supervision. The mark is a swirl with the numbers LC57-1844 underneath. Nailer gets outside, gasping for air, getting away from the stifling heat below. All around him, light crews work at salvaging everything from copper and nickel and aluminum to petrol –anything useful.

Sloth is concerned that they won't make quota, but Nailer is unconcerned. Sloth says that Bapi has revealed another light crew is seeking salvage rights in the area. They roll their spool of acquired copper wire along the deck. Up ahead, Nailer can see Bright Sands Beach, which is littered with shipwrecks. The salvaged metals are ultimately recycled and smelted by Lawson & Carlson, which profits from the ship breakers. Out in the ocean, Nailer can see new clipper ships, carbon-fiber hulls and powered by sails. The ships take away the scrap to whatever people or country can afford to buy them. Pima shows up, wondering where they have been. She is both friend and head of their light crew. The light crew gets to work separating the copper wire from its asbestos coating. Among them are Moon Girl, Tick-tock, and a Hindu named Pearly. Some of them know where their families came from; some do not. Nailer's small body is perfect for doing light crew work, though Pima always worries about making quota. Pima, though young, is too big to go into the ships anymore, and in another year, she will have to compete to work on the heavy crews. They wonder about the people who live in Seascape Boston, saying they live well and eat well and grow to be tall and strong. To Nailer, it sounds like Christian Heaven, or the way the Scavenge God promises an easy life for the right offering.

Bapi shows up. He is overweight and dirty, and wants to see that the crew is working well. Bapi reveals that Lawson & Carlson says a storm is coming, and so Nailer needs to go get more wire to keep the crew busy for the few days the crews are off the wrecks. Bapi tells Nailer he will get a bonus if he gets extra scavenge.

Chapter 2



Nailer goes down deeper into the ship to pull out more wire. He thinks of Jackson Boy, a member of the light crew that got lost in a shipwreck and died. As Nailer moves around, he falls through a duct and into liquid.

Chapter 3

Nailer struggles in the oil he has fallen into. He struggles along a wall, using a small pipe to keep himself above the oil. He can swim well, but no one can swim in oil. He thinks of Lucky Strike, who found an oil pocket in a ship, and bought his way to freedom by smuggling out bucket by bucket and selling it. Sloth appears overhead. He tells Sloth to get Pima and Bapi to send help, that it is worth their while to help because of the oil. Sloth drops food and water at the orders of Pima, but then scurries away. Nailer fears she will replace him on the crew. He finds what he believes is the top of a doorway and dives down.

Chapter 4

Nailer struggles to open the door while Sloth returns overhead. She refuses to help, believing that her fate is sealed one way or another. Either Nailer will escape and tell Pima she refused to help, or Nailer will drown and Sloth will take his spot. Nailer manages to get the door open, and with the oil flies through another room and out into the ocean through a hole in the ship's hull. He swims to shore, shouting that he is alive as Bapi, Rain, and Li and the others all come to see what has happened. As he comes to shore, he sees blood streaming down his legs.

Chapter 5

Pima's mother tells Nailer he is lucky to be alive. A blade of rusted metal had nearly killed him. She tells him to keep it for a talisman. She tells him he is blessed, that the Fates loved him today. Nailer doesn't believe in the Fates, so Pima's mother tells him to praise whoever he does believe in, that his life is a gift. Nailer is thrilled to be alive. Sloth has been banished from the crew for her treachery. Pima and Moon Girl come and visit and invite Nailer to go and get drunk with them. They wonder who will replace Nailer in the meantime while they sit around the fire, drinking. Pima vows that Bapi will not replace him permanently, that the decision is theirs. Bapi has even given Nailer healing time because the copper wire he had collected washed out with him. Out in the ocean they see a private clipper, and realize that the people on board must not even know that they exist. They wonder what it would be like to be the next Lucky Strike. They all wonder what will become of Sloth, who has broken her oath to the crew by refusing to help Nailer and has had her work tattoos slashed by knife. Nailer says that seeing so much oil could turn anyone into an oath-breaker, but others disagree. He then heads home, hoping his father will be out drinking. Nailer's home is a shed beside the jungle. But Richard Lopez, Nailer's father, is home –drunk and high. He is incensed that Nailer's arm has been injured. Nailer offers his father some of the liquor from the campfire, which his father takes, sparing Nailer a beating. He begins calling Nailer "Lucky Boy."



Analysis

The world in which Nailer exists in Paolo Bacigalupi's novel "Ship Breaker" is one of absolute poverty, conflicting morality which is based on pragmatism, and exemplifies the social-Darwinian extrapolation of the concept "survival of the fittest". Essentially, life on Bright Sands Beach consists of work or die, kill or be killed, survive or die. This is as true of work for Nailer and his friends as it is true for life in general. Fate, rather than free will, seems to be the order of the day. While other faiths –such as Christianity and Hinduism are popular –by far the most popular faith seems to be of the Fates, which incorporates elements of various religions and philosophies in a rather pragmatic way, which suits the people of Bright Sands Beach just fine.

Nailer doesn't even have the benefit of a family to rely on, either. His mother, dead years before from illness, is long gone –and his father is an alcoholic and drug-addict who regularly beats Nailer. As such, the relationship between them is cold and near nonexistent, at best. Fortunately, Nailer has Pima and her mother, Sadna, to rely on. Indeed, it is Sadna who takes great care to stitch up Nailer, and to make sure he is well enough to be able to continue to get by. Indeed, Sadna believes Nailer has been spared from death for a reason, and he had better recognize that his life is a gift, and not simply a nightmare.

The world into which Nailer is born is also a far cry from the world into which the wealthy elites are born and live. While the poor scrap ships to survive, the rich sail around the world in ships for pleasure, purchasing such ships at will. Nailer dreams of one day sailing on one such ship, of seeing the open ocean, and getting away from his life. However, for the time being, Nailer seems to be trapped where he is –thought he does have the gift of life in the end.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Nailer's relationship with his father. How does this affect Nailer? Is it for the better or the worst? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What is Nailer's dream? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What valuable wisdom about life does Sadna impart to Nailer? Does Nailer take her seriously? Why or why not?



Vocabulary

extinct, interceded, emphatically, feral, quested, miraculously, acrid, betrayed, vehemently, conglomeration, ominous, brutality



Chapters 6 - 10

Summary

Chapter 6

The storm comes in the next day. Outside Nailer's hut, people are rushing to higher ground. Nailer tries to wake his father up, but his father sleeps. Nailer grabs his good luck charms, including the silver earring and good-luck-bag-of-rice. The storm would be deadly, known as a party wrecker or an Orleans Surge. His father is so blown out in sleep by drugs and alcohol that he is immovable. He then sees Pima and her mother trying to lash down a skiff, and he rushes out to help them. As they finish, Pima's mother, Sadna, suggests they go to a rock shelter higher up, but Nailer protests because his father is asleep. Sadna goes for Richard while Pima and Nailer run up toward the rock shelter, a limestone cave, where they take refuge.

Chapter 7

The storm continues unabated for two nights. The morning of the third day brings peace. Nailer and Pima head back toward the shore with other survivors. The beach has been wiped clean of human existence, but the tankers and ships are still on the shore. They come across Moon Girl, and Pearly and his parents. They all drift towards the scavenge train, full of food, and stocked by Lucky Strike. Lucky Strike is giving out food. He has become a black market smuggler with his money and has grown richer and more powerful as he took over gambling dens and made deals with powerful people. Lucky Strike has hired goons helping him keep order, including a half-man, half-dog named Tool. Sadna and Richard arrive a few moments later, and Richard tells Nailer that by getting Sadna, Nailer saved his life. Richard goes to look for work as a goon for Lucky Strike.

Rumor spreads that damage elsewhere has been worse. But, countless bodies and debris still litter the beaches and the jungles. Bapi is missing. Sloth is missing. Tick-Tock and his entire family have perished. The businessmen have all gone inland. The people and the crews are on their own. Pima and Nailer decide to scavenge for food. They move through the Teeth, old cement and stone ruins of large houses built down by the water in previous years. They head out to an island connected by a sliver of land at low tide. Richard has been hired by Lucky Strike, and it is a blessing for Nailer, because Lucky Strike won't let his men work high or drunk. Pima doesn't understand why Nailer saved his father. As they round the island, they see the gull-white glare of a beached clipper ship. Nailer and Pima race for it.

Chapter 8

Nailer and Pima come to the ship, which is a transit clipper. Pima is able to discover, because of its markings, that it is from Boston. They wonder why the ship has been



wrecked, because the ship has computers and the technological ability to outrun storms. Pima insists they claim the wreck for themselves. Nailer doesn't think it is possible. They would need goons to protect their claim –and the goons would probably take it for themselves. They decide to investigate the ship. He thinks they may get a reward if they report it. The ship is full of luxury goods, from silk dresses to good food. They come across the body of a dead man. Pima scavenges it for coins and Chinese red paper cash –enough to feed them for a week. As they explore, they realize the boat is not meant for working. They find three dead half-men below decks. They come across a room full of silver –candlesticks, tableware, platters, everything –enough to pay off work debts and set up their own scavenging business. As Pima bags it all up, Nailer goes to explore the rest of the ship. They come across the body of a beautiful girl. It appears that she is dead, but then she blinks.

Chapter 9

The girl is praying, seemingly crushed by the bed on top of her. She appears to be dying. Pima is ready to kill her, but Nailer doesn't want to do it. Nailer thinks the girl may give them a reward for saving her, but Pima is convinced that sort of thing is a fairy-tale. Nailer realizes that, a few days before, he would have cut the girl to end her life. But, now he couldn't. He tells her that killing the girl is not right, and he apologizes to the girl as well. Nailer and Pima help free the girl and bring her outside. They also bring the silver. They decide to spend the night on the island because the tide is coming in. Nailer also brings food out of the clipper, and wool blankets for the girl. They set up a campfire and give the girl water and some orange slices, and then she goes to sleep.

Chapter 10

The rescued girl has light brown skin and dark hair. She asks why they didn't kill her. They begin calling her Lucky Girl. Nailer asks if Lucky Girl has people who will come looking for her, and she says her father will be coming after her. She throws Pima one of her gold rings, telling them that she is worth more alive than dead. The girl promises them wealth if they can help her reach her father. The girl says that sooner or later, the ship's GPS and distress system will tell her father where to look. Until then, Nailer and Pima are all she has. Nailer tells her that the only way she would be worth more alive to them than dead, is if she can get them out of the hell in which they live. The girl says she will take them with her when the time comes, but Pima is not convinced. They take a blood oath.

Analysis

It appears as if Sadna's assertion that Nailer has been spared from death for a reason – and that idea that his life is a gift he should not be unappreciative of –is both sound and valid. For it is Nailer who first sees Nita's wrecked clipper ship on the shore of the island across the isthmus. The importance of the fact that it is Nailer and Pima who find Nita – and not Richard, nor any of the other goons of Lucky Strike's crew, cannot be underscored enough. Nita, without realizing it just yet, owes her life to Nailer, who



convinces even Pima not to do away with Nita. Suspicious of one another, Nailer and Nita agree to make a blood oath, which they then bring Pima into, in order to be able to trust one another.

There is no clearer demonstration of the gap that separates wealthy and poor than those of the effects of material wealth on display in the ship –everything from silver tableware to sugar to silk dresses. Nailer and Pima, of course, look at the ship as a way to make quick money, but Nailer sees an opportunity for more than just a few bucks and a better existence at Bright Sands Beach: he sees a way to get out of Bright Sands beach altogether. Nita promises him just as much, that upon her safe export, Nailer and Pima will both be taken with her. Without realizing it, Nailer is taking his life much more seriously by choosing escape and freedom over money. Nailer’s future now hinges on the survival of Nita.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Nailer refuse to kill Nita? What does he do instead?

Discussion Question 2

What promises does Nita make Nailer and Pima? Do you believe she intends to follow through on these promises? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What options do Nailer and Nita have when it comes to what to do with Nita? What option do they ultimately choose? Why?

Vocabulary

implacable, deluge, maelstrom, promontory, cultured, exquisite



Chapters 11 - 15

Summary

Chapter 11

Nailer wakes up. His arm is inflamed and painful. He has used it too much since being injured. Pima and Lucky Girl are already awake and making a fire. Lucky Girl goes down to the ship to get sugar, while Pima tells Nailer not to trust her. Pima has been asking her about her family, but Lucky Girl has not been forthright in answering. She is hiding something. They also realize how Lucky Strike's money pales in comparison to the stuff on the ship and what rich people have. Pima wonders if her mother can come with them and leave if Lucky Girl is being truthful. Lucky Girl returns with the sugar. She announces that Nailer's back is infected. She has been trained in first aid at school. Lucky Girl announces there should be something useful in the medical closet on the ship, the "Wind Witch." She brings them back to the ship, telling him that a reward won't do him any good if he is dead. Unfortunately, the medical closet has been destroyed in the storm, and the contents have been swept away by the ocean. She says her people should be there soon. Her name is Nita Chaudhury, and her father's name is Patel—as in Patel Global Transit. Down the strip of land that connects the island at low tide, Richard and a group of men are coming.

Chapter 12

Along with Richard come Blue Eyes, Tool, and Steel Liu, a skull cracker from the Red Python Gang. Nita will have to be hidden. They hope the efforts to scavenge the ship will give them enough time to escape. They quickly explain to Nita that Richard is not good. They climb up two hundred feet to their makeshift camp. Below them, Richard and the others tear over the ship. Meanwhile, Nailer's infection begins to make him sick, giving him icy chills. As they discuss what to do, Nailer's father finds them. Nita is stripped of her jewelry. Richard taunts and threatens her. Pima lunges at Richard, but is batted aside. She still manages to nick his hand with a knife. The others cheer Richard on, urging him to kill Pima, but Nailer reminds him that Pima's mother saved his life. To not pay it back would be bad karma. The others actually agree. So instead of killing her, Richard breaks some of her fingers. They agree to keep Nita alive as well, in pursuit of a reward. Richard then realizes his son needs medicine, but they can't go around flaunting money if they are going to keep most of it a secret from Lucky Strike. But he tells Nailer he will take good care of him because he is blood.

Chapter 13

That night, Nita and Nailer talk while Pima fetches food for the goons. A thin drug-addict named Moby is amazed that Nailer is alive. Nita tells Nailer he has been down for three days. Blue Eyes sends Moby to tell Richard his son is awake, while food is given to Nailer. Nita's people haven't arrived yet, and Richard is getting jittery. He comes to see



his son, impressed that he is alive. He has paid for a doctor to treat Nailer, who suggests reaching out to Nita's people. Nita has apparently told Richard that her people are from the Uppadaya Shipping Clan in Houston. He believes that the rich might come and collect her, pay them, and then kill them. Richard wonders if the girl is just no good to them. The way Richard figures, they are already rich and in good with Lucky Strike. Nita has limited time left.

Pima questions Nita on her use of different names. She finally breaks down and says that she is a Patel, from in the north beyond the Drowned Cities. But, her people won't know where she is, for she has thrown away the GPOS beacons weeks before to get away from enemies within her father's company. Consequently, they went directly into the storm, forcing their pursuers to leave. Pima is amazed that rust rats and swanks are the same at the end of the day. Nita might as well be worthless. She says there are still captains and ships loyal to her father, and they trade in Orleans for Mississippi markets. They ask Nita if she is capable of running.

Chapter 14

No matter what they decide to do, they need to get away from their captors. Throughout then night, Blue Eyes, Tool, and Moby take shifts keeping watch on them. When Blue Eyes beds down and Moby falls asleep on watch. Nailer decides to get the keys of the cuffs that bind the girls from Blue Eyes. But, he must kill her to do so. Blue Eyes has tortured and hurt countless people, and Nailer resolves to do what must be done. However, she awakens, and they grapple. Just as Blue Eyes is about cut out one of Nailer's eyes, Sadna appears out of nowhere to tackle Blue Eyes. A fight ensues during which time Nailer plunges his knife into her throat, but she does not die. As she swings a machete for Nailer and Sadna, she trips and begins to die. Around him, members of Sadna's heavy crew have taken out Richard's guards.

It turns out that Sadna was alerted to what was happening by Tool –an old friend. Down on the beach, people have showed up looking for Nita –Pyce's men, the enemies of her father. Richard has alerted them that Nita is alive. Nailer believes that they should catch the salvage train to Orleans. He will have to go or face certain death by his father for the death of Blue Eyes. Pima will not be going. Nailer is determined to go with Nita to jump the train as it leaves the yard. Tool decides to go as well. He has his own history to hide from the half-men working for Pyce.

Chapter 15

Nailer, Nita, and Tool catch the train by running alongside it and grabbing on. Nita is the first on, followed by Tool, and then by Nailer. He feels safe for the first time in a long time as he is on the train.

Analysis

The fact that Nailer's future depends upon Nita's survival is not something which Nailer takes lightly. Indeed, he is willing to fight to the death to make sure Nita lives –and



Nailer claims the life of Blue Eyes in order to do so, just as Sadna and her crew arrive to secure freedom for Nailer, Nita, and Pima. Ironically, it is the half-man, half-dog beast that alerts Sadna to the dangers that Nailer, Nita, and Pima face. Tool has, before now, terrified Nailer and many of the others. However, the fact that he is a good individual and a good friend to Sadna means that he will not let harm come to Nailer, Nita, and Pima.

As Pyce's men arrive on the beach below, the loyalties of each of those on hand are put to the test. The plan, quickly hatched, is to flee to Orleans by train. Nailer remains loyal to Nita; Pima remains behind, loyal to her mother; and Tool, loyal to his life debt to Sadna, decides to go along to protect Nailer and Nita. Indeed, Nailer's life now depends on getting Nita to those captains and ships loyal to her father. If Nailer does not, his own father will more than likely end his life at worst, and make his life nothing more than torture at best. Nailer, Tool, and Nita then head through the jungle and make it to the rail yards, where as a train pulls out to head to Orleans, they catch it.

The fact that his life is a gift worth having continues to embed itself into Nailer's consciousness. Mere survival doesn't mean living –but, living means life. He is especially determined to make sure that Nita gets back to those who remain loyal to her father.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe that Tool goes along with Nailer and Nita? What could his motives be?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Nailer's life now depend on keeping Nita alive? What will happen if Nailer fails?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Nailer agree to continue on with Nita to Orleans? Would you have done the same? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

jittery, incredulity, cult, skeptically, resolution, lulled, absurdly



Chapters 16 - 20

Summary

Chapter 16

The escape, though so far successful, is not without issues. They have precious few supplies. Attempts to scavenge the train are fruitless. As they travel, Nita explains that the people after her are under the command of Nathaniel Pyce, a business-marriage uncle, who wants her for leverage. Pyce had shady business dealings. Using Nita would allow Pyce to stop her father from causing him trouble. Billions of dollars in Chinese Red Cash are at stake. Pyce has secretly been producing tar sands fuel to ship to China. Tool explains that such fuel is black market material. Nailer is not impressed with the excesses of the rich. Tool is not, either.

Chapter 17

The abandoned wreck of New Orleans soon appears. Nailer is amazed that so many people lived in such nice buildings, and that they all had cars. Another city looms ahead. It is called Orleans II. Orleans II is a wreck. Further up is MissMet –the Mississippi Metropolitan, the third New Orleans. The previous two cities, built during the Accelerated Age, were when people were not prepared for climate change and the catastrophes brought with it. They jump from the train before it gets into the rail yards, where they move among the poor and their shacks. They head toward the docks, to see if Nita can find anyone there that she can trust or any of her father's ships. Nita wonders why Tool has just been able to leave on his own, to walk away from his owner. Tool says he goes where he pleases, that he is smarter than the average half-man, and that he has no patron. They have been dead for a long time.

Nailer, Nita, and Tool come to the floating docks where boats from England and China North can be seen. However, no friendly ships for Nita can be seen. They will have to come back. They will seek out work at the docks in order to feed themselves and to keep an eye out for Nita's friendly ships.

Chapter 18

Work is found quickly at the docks for Tool, while Nailer and Nita deliver messages, haul smaller cargo, and so on. Two weeks pass with no sign of the friendly ships. Despite her classy upbringing, Nita does not oppose hard work and doing her fair share. Nailer comes to find that he is beginning to like her. Out delivering a message, Nailer sees his father and two half-men. They are dressed in good clothes. He wonders how they knew to come to Orleans. He hides until his father and his men have passed.

Nailer then goes to see Nita, who is excited because a friendly ship, the Dauntless, has docked. Nailer says they must hide because he believes his father and Pyce are in league now. The Dauntless and his father showing up on the same day are not a



coincidence, he contends. But Nita believes the captain, Sun Kim Kai, can be trusted. Nevertheless, they go back to the squat they have been sharing with Tool. They decide to wait until the night falls. Tool is late coming back, so they decide to go and look for him. Nailer assures Nita that he wouldn't change the current situation for anything. They end up kissing. They come to see half-men coming against Tool, and shout out to warn him. A fight breaks out. They are forced to flee as Tool fights the half-men. They believe Tool is killed. The only way to escape, Nita realizes, is to get to the Dauntless.

Nailer swims out to the Dauntless. He swims under the dock by the ship, listening to the men above talking about how a schedule must be kept. But, the captain who speaks is not a woman. They talk about how Pyce's men are everywhere and that they want to leave before having to converse with them. Nailer then swims out to speak with the captain and is hauled up on dock by two half-men, Vine and Knot. They believe that Nita has been dead for a month. The captain then shoots his lieutenant, saying the lieutenant could not be trusted. The captain sends out men with Nailer to retrieve Nita. First, however, they need to retrieve their own crew from the city.

Chapter 19

Knot and Vine go from bar to bar to pick up their shipmates. Reynolds is first to be picked up, and she takes command. There is total loyalty among these people, Nailer realizes. Unfortunately, Nita has been taken captive. Tool, though, is alive, but seriously injured. Captain Candless is horrified. They wonder about which ship Nita has been forced onto. Tool also reveals that Richard is determined to find his son as well, sooner or later. Candless resolves that they will search for anyone loyal to Nita on other company ships, and use them to help free Nita, and take back the company. Tool advises Nailer to leave them to it, but Nailer refuses. Tool tells Nailer he is not his father.

Captain Candless welcomes Nailer on board. Nailer is amazed at the order and cleanliness of the ship. Nailer tells the captain about his father. Nailer is given the ability to get cleaned up, put on new clothes, and eat a meal.

Chapter 20

The Dauntless flies over the waves. The ships they are seeking, the Ray and the Pole Star, are somewhere ahead of them. The Dauntless itself, though not a warrior vessel, operates efficiently. Nailer tells Reynolds that when everything is over, he wants work on the crew. Nailer also wonders about how Tool can survive without his master, for half-men are genetically-tied to their masters: when their masters die, so do they. Nailer is given a pistol and instructed some on the knife. Nailer is then put to work oiling the gearing systems for the hydrofoils. Knot tells Nailer he will have to learn to read to be of real use.

Analysis

The plan to get Nita to those who are loyal to her father falls apart in Orleans, first with the overpowering of Tool, and later with the capture of Nita by Pyce's men. Everything



now comes down to Nailer. Nailer, despite the circumstances, has a series of options. First, he can choose to go after and try to rescue Nita. Second, he can find work in Orleans, and start a new life. Third, he can go anywhere else in the world to find work and start a new life. Nevertheless, Nailer decides to go after Nita to try to rescue her, because beyond the blood oath he has made with her, it is the right and just thing to do. This is even a bridge too far for Tool, who believes his blood oath has been fulfilled, and he will not follow Nailer onto the Dauntless to try to rescue Nita.

Ironically, his decision to go after and try to rescue Nita also means achieving his dream, which is to sail on a Clipper. Not only that, but Nailer puts himself up for work on the Dauntless, and he is put to the task of helping to oil the gears of the craft. He is amazed at the craft's efficiency, and how smoothly it runs –both in terms of crew and in terms of mechanics. Nailer is also surprised at how well the crew seems to adopt him into things –with Knot teaching Nailer all about the gears of the ship, and letting Nailer know that the ability to read cannot be more critical to a seaman. Nailer also learns about the importance of being surrounded by good people who are genuinely good people –who value encouragement over punishment. Indeed, Candless, as captain, has presented more of a father figure to Nailer than his own father ever could, by trusting Nailer, bringing him into the fold, and allowing him to work on the ship for the time being.

Discussion Question 1

What is Nailer's plan for dealing with the Pole Star? Why does Candless agree to go along with this plan?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Nailer want to be put to work on the Dauntless? What are the consequences of this?

Discussion Question 3

How does Nailer know he can trust Candless and the crew of the Dauntless?

Vocabulary

precariously, abrupt, acquiesce, flummoxed, metropolis, ardent, trudged, guttural, stifled, dirge, wraith, invocation, automation, reverie



Chapter 21 - 25

Summary

Chapter 21

Knot teaches Nailer how to read. Knot explains that their loyalty to Nita's father is good until Nita is dead. Nita's father is determined to get her back, so they serve Nita's father. Knot explains that some families are different. Not all of them involve brutality.

Chapter 22

The Dauntless comes upon the Ray and gives chase. Marn, the Ray's captain, veers and dodges to avoid them. But, the Dauntless catches them. Captain Candless demands takes control and has Nailer try to find Nita. Candless orders the ship torn apart looking for Nita. Marn scoffs that they could never trust Candless. But, it is a trap. The Pole Star appears on the horizon. They use their cannon to disable the Ray. Candless knows they have to run far and fast. Hopefully, the Pole Stars wants to take them prisoner, rather than just kill them. They search their maps for a place to flee and settle on Bright Sands Beach, for the charts are outdated and don't show the island or the Teeth. Candless decides to use them to his advantage.

Chapter 23

Reynolds is against the idea of using the Teeth. But, Candless is sold. The para-sail is unveiled, and the Dauntless raises up on hydrofoils, racing across the water. Candless intends to slip the Teeth, and make it look as if they are trying to hide. The seas get rough, as a storm approaches. They are unable to bring the para-sail down, so they cut it to let it go. The Pole Star begins to gain on them even more. Nailer guides the Dauntless along, but they pass the island in the dark of the storm. They turn hard and glide over the Teeth and into the calm of the bay beyond. The Pole Star, bigger and heavier, catches on the Teeth as it follows. Crew members of the Dauntless board rafts and head for the Pole Star, which is now sinking. The members of the Dauntless board the Pole Star. Candless tackles the enemy captain, throwing her to the waves. The other crew members of the Pole Star surrender.

But, a surge of crew from inside the ship takes down Candless, and a new fight breaks out. Nailer is almost swept into the sea by a wave. Nailer struggles to his feet and seeks out Nita. He navigates through the ship, working against the incoming water and dodging enemy crew members. He cannot find Nita anywhere. He decides he must head back up. Nailer runs into his father, who had Nita, bound and gagged, over his shoulder. Richard is high, and he dumps Nita onto the floor. He is surprised to see Nailer. He plans to sell Nita for body parts. Nita struggles against her ropes. They fight, and Richard chases Nailer toward the gears of the hydrofoil. Nailer releases them.

Chapter 24



Richard is sucked up into the gears, where he hangs, half-mangled, but still alive. Nailer then helps to free Nita, and they run. They get out through a hole in the hull of the ship. They swim through the storm for the Dauntless as the Pole Star sinks.

Chapter 25

Nailer and Sadna talk about Richard. Nailer misses his father, the way he was before his mother died and he turned to drugs. Nailer is not his father, Sadna explains. Pima and Nailer then watch the Dauntless load supplies and prepare for its journey north. The rescue of Nita has renewed the loyal members of the company to fight against Pyce. Miraculously, Candless has survived and is back in command. Nailer has been taken on as a grease monkey. He realizes he likes Nita. He and Pima laugh and run down the shore while the Dauntless continues loading.

Analysis

Apart from Nailer's dream coming true of sailing on a clipper, Knot brings things one step further by teaching Nailer how to read. It is easier than Nailer thinks it will be. That sort of knowledge, which is seemingly simple on the surface, will mean the difference between life and death at the end of the novel. When Richard confronts Nailer, intent on killing him, it is Nailer's ability to read that enables him to use the ship's gears to stop his own father and his father's drug-induced rage.

The battle that ensues between the Dauntless and the Pole Star is one of luck and intelligence, as through Nailer's knowledge, the Pole Star is drawn across the Teeth and wrecked. Nita is rescued, and is brought back on board the Dauntless when she and Nailer swim away from the wreck. For his loyalty to Nita, and for his efforts, Nailer is awarded a position on the Dauntless as a grease monkey. This means he will be able to travel, and he will no longer have to live at Bright Sands Beach. As such, Nita's promise to bring Nailer along is fulfilled, and the blood oath itself is fulfilled. However, the reader suspects that the way things have turned out for Nailer have less to do with blood oaths or blood family. Nailer simply did the right things to do.

Discussion Question 1

What does Nailer ultimately decide about his father, and the concept of family? How does this affect his actions?

Discussion Question 2

How does Nailer's ability to read come in handy during the struggle with his father? What is the result?



Discussion Question 3

What ultimately happens to Nailer after the Dauntless is victorious? Would you have decided to stay in Bright Sands Beach, or go on with the Dauntless?

Vocabulary

refraction, gossamer, hurtled, ineffectually, capacity, colossally, flailed



Characters

Nailer

In his late teens, Nailer is the principal protagonist and main character of the novel “Ship Breaker” by Paolo Bacigalupi. Nailer works the light crew on salvage, going into ducts to retrieve copper wire. He is close friends with crew mate Pima, and her mother. Nailer’s mother is dead, and his father is a drunkard and a drug-addict who routinely, savagely beats Nailer. Nailer struggles to survive.

When Nailer is nearly killed at work, Sadna tells Nailer that his life is a gift and he has been spared for a reason. Nailer and Pima later find Nita’s clipper wrecked on the shore, and they struggle to keep her alive. Nailer ultimately travels with Tool and Nita to Orleans to find captains loyal to Nita’s father. Nailer rescues Nita when she is captured. He is given work as a grease monkey on the Dauntless when the novel ends.

Pima

Pima is the teenaged best friend of Nailer and the daughter of Sadna. Pima is tough but kind. She acquiesces to Nailer’s desires to let Nita live. Pima helps Nailer take care of Nita until the time comes for Nita and Nailer to head toward Orleans.

Nita

The daughter of Patel, a powerful and wealthy shipping magnate, Nita is fleeing enemies of her father when the clipper on which she travels is wrecked. She is saved by Nailer. Nita promises Nailer money and the freedom to escape if she survives and if he can get her to captains who are loyal to her father. She stays true to her word.

Sadna

The mother of Pima, Sadna is kind, generous, and compassionate, and cares for Nailer as if he were her own son. When Pima, Nailer, and Nita are taken hostage by Richard, she and her crew rescue them. She tells Nailer his life is a gift and should not be wasted.

Tool

A half-man half-dog, Tool is fierce, strong, and independent. He has a streak of moral justness in him. Owing a life debt to Sadna, he accompanies Nailer and Tool to Orleans, protecting them along the way. Ultimately, he chooses not to go with Nailer to rescue Nita on the Dauntless, saying that his life debt has been fulfilled.



Richard Lopez

The sloven drunkard and drug-addicted father of Nailer, Richard beats his son relentlessly. He is harsh, cruel, and murderous. He ultimately dies when he is sucked into the gear mechanisms of the Pole Star.

Pyce

The arch enemy of Patel, Pyce has been illegally producing and shipping oil to China. He intends to use Nita as leverage against Patel to take over the company.

Candless

As the captain of the Dauntless, Candless is loyal to Nita and her father. He willingly takes on Nailer to rescue Nita. He is wounded in the fight for the Pole Star.

Knot

As a crew member on board the Dauntless, Knot teaches Nailer how to oil gears and how to read.

Blue Eyes

Blue Eyes is a murderous goon who tortures people. He becomes a member of Richard's crew. Ultimately, he is killed fighting Sadna and Nailer. It is Nailer who kills Blue Eyes.



Symbols and Symbolism

Copper Wire

Copper wiring, which runs the lengths of ducts in old ships, is used for electricity and collected by Nailer and the salvage crews for sale as scrap. Copper wire is what Nailer is collecting at the beginning of the novel when he almost loses his life.

Metals

Metals, of every conceivable kind, from copper to nickel to steel to aluminum, are collected from the wrecks of old ships for sale as scrap. Smelted metal is then resold by large corporations to countries and people that can afford the purchases.

Knife

Knives are wielded by just about every character in the novel. Nailer uses a knife to fight his father and to kill Blue Eyes.

Tattoos

Tattoos, which identify human beings as belonging to specific crews and give them the right to salvage on Bright Sands Beach, are worn on the cheeks by Nailer, Pima, Sadna, and others. Tattoos are also used to enhance one's fearsome persona, as in the case of Richard Lopez and his dragon tattoos.

Alcohol

Alcohol is consumed in copious quantities throughout the novel by Nailer's father, Richard. It is also consumed regularly by Nailer and the other teens.



Settings

Bright Sands Beach

Bright Sands Beach is the main setting of the novel. It is where the salvage crews live and the salvage companies operate. Bright Sands Beach is where Nailer, his father, Pima, and the others live and work. Bright Sands Beach is pummeled by a storm so bad that it erases every trace of human presence on the shore, except for the wrecks of ships which litter the sand.

New Orleans

New Orleans is located at the mouth of the Mississippi in the southern United States. It was wiped out by a storm generations before.

Orleans II

Orleans II, built further up the Mississippi, is a reincarnation of New Orleans. It, too, is ravaged and made unlivable by a deadly storm.

MissMet

The third incarnation of New Orleans, Miss Met –the Mississippi Metropolis –is a center for trade and commerce. It is the destination of Nailer, Nita, and Tool. It is where Nailer comes across the Dauntless and Captain Candless, who are still loyal to Nita's father.

The Teeth

Formerly a small village of large homes, the Teeth is an area of flooded foundations and steel bars that protrude from the sand that, at low tide, is visible above the water. It is over the Teeth that the Dauntless sails without an issue, but the Pole Star becomes trapped, and wrecked.



Themes and Motifs

Friendship

Friendship is a major theme in the novel “Ship Breaker” by Paolo Bacigalupi. Friendship involves mutual platonic affections, support, loyalty, and compassion for one or more individuals. Friendship in the novel most heavily revolves around the character of Nailer, and his relations with both Nita and Pima.

Friendship with Pima is ongoing for Nailer. While Nailer and Pima are crew mates, they enjoy a friendship that transcends simply being crew. Indeed, their friendship is so strong that they look after one another, and Pima’s mother, Sadna, looks upon Nailer as her own son. Pima often listens to Nailer’s ideas and advice, and agrees not to kill Nita. She even goes so far as to agree with Nailer that she will help protect and hide Nita. This is not a simple decision she makes. Her entire life is in the balance, and she is risking her very existence by remaining loyal to and sticking by Nailer.

Nailer’s friendship with Nita is much more slow, and appears to be a friendship of convenience rather than genuine affection at first. In response for saving Nita, Nailer will be allowed to leave with her, and will be rewarded. But over time, Nailer grows to like and respect Nita, as well as what she says and does. Ultimately, he even comes to have romantic feelings for her, and it is these romantic feelings that ultimately spur Nailer to rescue Nita, more than his own desire to want to be rid of his old life in Bright Sands Beach.

Family

Family is an underlying theme in the novel “Ship Breaker” by Paolo Bacigalupi. Family, thematically, involves feelings of mutual affection, love, compassion, loyalty, and support. It also includes people who behave in a fashion consistent with the traditional family unite, whether or not those people are blood related. Family appears in both a failed and thriving way in the novel for different characters, including Nailer, Nita, and Pima.

For Nailer, family does not exist. His mother is dead, and his father is a raging alcoholic and drug-addict. He can depend upon his father for nothing, and expects nothing, except savage beatings. Nailer, nevertheless, remains by his father, because his father is blood –though nothing else that smacks of family exists between the two. Nailer doesn’t realize this until later.

For Pima, family is a much surer thing. Her mother, Sadna, is loving and tender, as well as protective and courageous. She looks at Nailer as a son. She comes to rescue both Nailer and Pima when they are held captive by Nailer’s father. When Nita goes missing, her father spares no expense to have his loyal captains, ships, and crews continue the search for her.



Fate and Free Will

Fate and free will are an underlying, consistent theme set found throughout the novel "Ship Breaker" by Paolo Bacigalupi. Both fate and free will affect the course of human events. The concept of fate is that people, no matter what they do, have no freedom, and are bound to follow certain paths or behave in certain ways. Free will contends that people do have the freedom to make their own decisions, chart their own courses, and change their lives.

Most of the characters, including Pima to an extent, believe in the Fates, the idea that life is out of the hands of those living it. They believe that whatever happens is destined to be, unaffected by human agents. She does not bat an eye for the dead lost in the clipper wreck, is relatively unconcerned for her own life, except inasmuch as it can benefit her father and his control of their shipping company. Likewise, there is no free will among the half-men that are genetically manipulated and produced to be servants to their masters until death.

However, Nailer and Tool disagree with the idea that there are no such things as choices. Nailer, for example, believes that Nita and her crew sailed into the storm as a choice, and that it was Nita's decision as to whether or not her crew might live or perish. Nailer likewise believes he has a choice to stay and die, or leave and risk death, to get Nita back to her father and his loyal captains and ships. Nailer does not believe in the Fates because of this. Tool, likewise, believes everything is a choice. He is a rare breed of half-man, because he belongs to no one and is able to live his life according to his own wishes. For example, he makes the conscious decision not to go with Nailer to rescue Nita, going so far as to try to talk Nailer out of it, though he fails.

Styles

Point of View

Paolo Bacigalupi writes his novel "Ship Breaker" from the third-person limited-omniscient perspective. This is done because the novel takes place at an unknown date in the future, and much is to be explained about the way the world differs from the one in which the reader exists. A third-person narrator, who acts as a guide of sorts, and recounts a story and historical events, allows the reader to understand the world in which Nailer exists.

Language and Meaning

Paolo Bacigalupi tells his novel "Ship Breaker" in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two very important reasons. The first is that the novel is geared toward young adults, so simpler language is easier to traverse for younger minds. The second has to do with the futuristic setting of the novel, and the lack of education that Nailer, and most of the characters in the novel, have. This strengthens the believability of the times and the characters, especially Nailer.

Structure

Paolo Bacigalupi divides his novel "Ship Breaker" into twenty-five chronological chapters. The straightforward approach directs the reader's attention to the plot of the novel. It also allows the reader to focus energy on understanding the world in which the plot of the novel takes place, rather than focusing on external issues, such as novel structure.



Quotes

An ant's nest of activity, all dedicated to rendering this extinct ship's bones into something usable for a new world.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 5)

Importance: The narrator describes the situation that Nailer and his crew find themselves in. To scrape a living together, they are salvaging remnants of the old world for use in the new world. Everything that the crews do is dedicated to breaking apart ships for sale and future utilization.

Different sides of the same coin. You tossed your luck in the air and it rattled down on the gambling boards and you either lived or died.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 41)

Importance: Early on in the novel, while Nailer does not believe in the Fates, he does not believe in free will, either. Rather, he believes in luck, which relies as much on fate as it does on the free will of others. Nailer's understanding of fate and free will will soon change.

If you're just smart or just lucky, it's not worth a copper yard. You got to have both, or you're just like Sloth down at those bonfires, begging for someone to find a use for you.

-- Pima (Chapter 5 paragraph 51)

Importance: Talking about the course of human action, and whether or not things are decided by free will or by fate, Pima speaks about the need for both knowledge and luck—which is one step closer to free will than fate. She explains to Nailer that he needs both luck and intelligence in order to survive—but doing so would mean that things are indeed not fated.

If he was honest with himself, Nailer could admit he had no idea what he was doing.

-- Narrator (Chapter 10 paragraph 108)

Importance: Here, Nailer considers how much his life has already changed since finding and saving Nita. Free will suddenly occurs without warning for Nailer, who now sees that his dreams of a better life are within reach. Everything he does from here on, he knows, will affect his future. The choices and the decisions are his to make.

Damn, the swanks and the rust rats are all the same at the end of the day. Everyone's looking to get a little blood on their hands.

-- Pima (Chapter 13 paragraph 163)

Importance: This is Pima's reaction when she learns that the Patel company has been torn apart by a civil war and that Nita is wanted dead. She also comes to realize that, despite their enormous wealth and power, the rich are just as prone to base human actions as are the poor.



The fact was, he had already set himself in conflict with his father. There was no hope of resolution now, no matter how much he might have wanted it.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 177)

Importance: Nailer is reflecting on his decision to leave with Nita, to ensure her survival. Staying at Bright Sands Beach means almost certain death, courtesy of his father, while risking his life for Nita's safety could mean life and freedom. This sets in motion the journey to the Mississippi.

I like you. I wouldn't trade you to my dad any more than I'd trade Pima. We're crew, right?

-- Nailer (Chapter 19 paragraph 232)

Importance: Despite their ups and downs, Nailer comes to trust and like Nita. Despite the dramatic difference between them in terms of wealth, at the root of it, they are both good people. They get along well. Nailer's explanation of his loyalty to her is a mix of romantic interest, genuine friendship, and moral rightness.

You are no more Richard Lopez than I am an obedient hound. Blood is not destiny, no matter what others may believe.

-- Tool (Chapter 19 paragraph 248)

Importance: Tool, ever the advocate for free will, explains to Nailer that, although he may have some similarities to his father –such as speed –he will never be his father. There is no such thing as fate. Nailer is his own being, and is not, nor ever will be, his father.

The blood bond was nothing. It was the people that mattered. If they covered your back , and you covered theirs, then maybe that was worth calling family.

-- Narrator (Chapter 21 paragraph 275)

Importance: At long last, Nailer comes to understand that blood does not mean family. Love, compassion, and loyalty mean family. Kindness, support, encouragement – everything missing in his relationship with his father, is found elsewhere. Richard is not family to Nailer anymore.

Killing always costs.

-- Nailer (Chapter 25 paragraph 317)

Importance: Speaking to Sadna about killing, Nailer understands that to kill, even in self-defense, destroys part of the human soul and costs people emotionally. It stays with them. It is not something to be taken lightly.