

Ship Fever Study Guide

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The Behavior of the Hawkweeds

The Behavior of the Hawkweeds Summary

Antonia, the adult narrator and protagonist, was born in 1921 and was raised in the same house as her immigrant grandfather Anton "Tony" Vaculik, who she calls "Tati". Vaculik was born in 1856 in Moravia, and emigrated to Albania in 1891 and then on to the United States in 1900. Until about 1931, Tati works in a plant nursery grafting specimens. Antonia helps her grandfather at the nursery until one day a new supervisor attempts to sexually molest her—Tati intervenes by stabbing the assailant in the hand with a pruning knife. The man leaps back, stumbles, falls, and hits his head, causing severe injury. Over the next weeks, Tati becomes increasingly distressed as the man's condition worsens and, finally, he dies. Tati learns he will be prosecuted for manslaughter and most of the neighborhood, unaware of the assault, believes Tati to have participated in some type of national revenge killing of the German supervisor. The day before the trial is to commence Tati, at the time seventy-five years old, dies at home in bed, apparently of a heart attack.

In the next decade, Antonia meets and marries Richard, an older man who is a university professor. Richard was born with six fingers on each hand and the corrective surgery left his left hand scarred—he habitually keeps it in his pocket. Richard's precise age is difficult to determine from the narrative, but he works as a professor from the age of thirty-five until an apparently forced retirement at age sixty-five, prior to 1991; he becomes tenured in 1971 and also served in the US Navy during World War II. Richard is a biology professor and is deeply interested in genetics—his particular fascination is the life and work of Gregor Mendel, the famous geneticist. During their early courtship, Antonia confides in Richard that her grandfather had actually met Mendel in 1866 at the abbey where Mendel performed his investigations on peas and, later, hawkweed. Also in 1866, Mendel wrote a series of letters to a distant scientist and gave early drafts of the letters to Tati. Much later, Tati gave the letters to Antonia. And Antonia then gives one of the letters to Richard, to whom it becomes a prized treasure. During college presentations on Mendel, Richard presents the letter to the class as an artifact of the past.

During 1970, Antonia and Richard live alone, their daughters having moved away. Antonia falls into a deep and prolonged depression and simultaneously observes the social upheaval happening all around her. Richard is afraid somewhat of going to the university where the students routinely demonstrate and hold mass rallies—he is often challenged in class about the relevance of science. Richard becomes afraid to display his prized Mendel letter for fear it will be seized and damaged or destroyed. About this time, one of Richard's graduate students, Sebastian Dunitz, a German, begins to visit with Antonia. She quickly becomes infatuated and insinuates a physical relationship would be desirable. Dunitz declines her offer and quickly departs from the university; Richard, apparently aware of the situation, uses his influence to have Dunitz moved.



The Behavior of the Hawkweeds Analysis

The story is related in 1991 from the vantage of time, the narrator being approximately seventy years old and the events described being far in the past. The construction features a complex chronology that partially must be assembled from inference. Scenes and events are not described chronologically. The early emphasis placed on the racial and national tension between Moravians and Germans does not carry through the generations and is not a prominent theme beyond the opening of the story. The introduction of Mendel, a historical figure, as a non-fictional element is interesting and compelling. Though Mendel does not appear directly in the story, one of his letters does. The primary metaphor used in the narrative is a complex parallel comparison of Mendel's groundbreaking genetics work with the muddied experience of phenotypic existence. Mendel's famous work—with pea plants—fortuitously focused on an organism with straightforward inheritance patterns. Mendel's forgotten work—with hawkweeds—largely was a failure because of hawkweed's typically complex, non-Mendelian, genetics. Many hawkweed species are apomixic, and the species group frequently shows polyploidy and inter-species hybridization, making for an exceptionally complex genetic environment. Thus, Mendel's work on peas, so comprehensively astounding and intellectually pure, apparently did not apply to hawkweed. Likewise, Antonia's early life seemed so sure and directed, but as time progresses, the early lessons learned from stable family relationships often do not seem to apply to martial relationships. This extended metaphor works very well within the narrative construction but does assume readers have more than a passing familiarity with Mendel and his life's work.



The English Pupil

The English Pupil Summary

The historical person Carl Linnaeus, known after his ennoblement as Carl von Linné, is the protagonist of the story set in December of 1777 about one month before Linnaeus' death. In the story, Linnaeus is crippled by age and senile; a series of strokes has left him mostly paralyzed and fairly unable to speak. He nevertheless manages to talk a servant into bundling him into a horse sleigh and taking him to Hammarby, his favored estate in Sweden. On the voyage, Linnaeus reflects on his life in a series of chaotic and usually unlinked reminiscences. He recalls his wife, Sara Lisa, as a shrewish woman. His living son, Carl Jr., is lazy and indolent; his daughters are like their mother except for the youngest, Sophia, who dotes on Linnaeus but is also engaged or married—he cannot remember which. Johannes, a deceased son, died as an infant at the age of two. Linnaeus spends more time reminiscing about several of his famous students, including Pehr Artedi, Pehr Lofling, Pehr Forskal, Pehr Osbeck, Pehr Kalm, Christopher Ternström, Fredrik Haselquist, Falck (probably Johan Peter Falck), Carl Thunberg, Marten Kahler, Daniel Rolander, Peter Collinson, and Rotheram. With the exception of the titular character of Rotheram, the remaining students have preceded Linnaeus in death. For each of the men, Linnaeus remembers their name, their origin, their particular interest, their contributions to the cause, fragments of their voyages, and their eventual premature deaths. In this respect, his memory is fairly acute. However, his chronology of reminiscences is convoluted and quite difficult to follow. After sitting by the fire for some time, Sophia arrives, announces the whole family is out looking for him, and with Rotheram and the sleigh driver, bundles Linnaeus up, loads him into the sleigh, and proceeds to take him home. As the sleigh drives away, Linnaeus envisions or sees a procession of ghostly students following along behind him in ghostly sleighs.

The English Pupil Analysis

With the exception of Rotheram, all of the students listed in the story are well known "apostles" of Linnaeus and they are all historical figures; within the story, their names are somewhat anglicized. The fictional portrayal of the men largely is accurate. Note that Linnaeus, Sophia, and Pehr Kalm are all three mentioned later in the collection during the story *Rare Bird*. Carl Thunberg is portrayed as dead within the story—or at least within Linnaeus' comprehension—though lived well beyond this date. Rotheram is perhaps a historical person of little renown or a conflation by the senile Linnaeus of a wished-for surviving protégé and Sophia's husband. The narrative assumes the reader to be familiar with Linnaeus' monumental contributions to early science and assumes a familiarity with many of Linnaeus' listed twelve 'apostles' who appear in the narrative only in Linnaeus' fragmentary memories. Rotheram, the titular character, is thought by Linnaeus to be his latest devoted student, an English pupil, and Linnaeus hopes that at least this one student will outlive him and carry on the great work of scientific nomenclature. Also throughout the story, Linnaeus remembers having named things. He



is found by the child of whom he is most fond—she alone thinks to look for him in his favorite retreat. The story is quite interesting in the fictionalized portrayal of so many historic persons. Note the spellings of the various names are Anglicized.



The Littoral Zone

The Littoral Zone Summary

Several scientists accept a temporary job to travel to a distant tropical location and teach summer biology courses to motivated students. Two such scientists, Jonathan and Ruby, meet each other for the first time at the summer retreat. Jonathan has been married for about twelve years, and Ruby has been married for about six years. They have little interaction until the twelfth day of the twenty-one-day course. On that day, they meet during coursework and immediately share a common attraction. They spend nearly all of their free time together, often sitting, talking, and drinking wine in a common area of the center at which they are teaching. Although they are both married, on the eighteenth day of the science retreat, they engage in a joint extra-marital affair which continues until the end of the teaching course. With the rest of the teachers and students, they return home. Arriving by ship, they both lightly scrutinize each others' spouse and families during the tumultuous arrival—and then they go their separate ways, presumably to never meet again. One week after coming home, however, they both attempt to contact each other and their affair resumes with a passion. Their affair lasts for about three years, and then they both divorce and then marry each other. Their relationship continues for twelve more years—about fifteen years from their first meeting—and both of them are about fifty years old. Jonathan has three children: Jessie, about ten during the affair and now twenty-four; Gordon, about eight during the affair and now twenty-two; and Cora, about five during the affair and now nineteen. Ruby has two children: Mickey, about seven during the affair and now twenty-one; and Ryan, about five during the affair and now nineteen. After the divorces, both of the ex-spouses took custody of the children, leaving Jonathan and Ruby to start without children living at their home. After the divorce, they both struggle with post-affair guilt; they recreate their life histories, eliminating difficult segments; and they avoid blaming themselves or each other for the many lives they feel they have ruined or damaged. They grow to middle age, telling fictionalized life stories that emphasize their marriage and courtship and diminish or eliminate their previous marriages.

The Littoral Zone Analysis

The Littoral Zone has little actual plot and instead is a mood piece that provides a deep characterization of the two protagonists. Most of the story focuses on the pre-during-post affair emotions and dynamics of the couple. In this aspect, the title of the story provides an excellent metaphor for the process of their relationship: a littoral zone commonly being interpreted as that zone between the high-water mark, through the typical shoreline, and down to that region of the sea that is permanently submerged. It can thus be seen as a type of transition zone, as Jonathan and Ruby move from their early marriages through an affair, divorce, and into a new marriage that matures. They view this process with a somewhat detached eye typical of scientists, and apply a biological term—littoral—to the transition process. The symbolism is strengthened



because their relationship starts in the sea, literally, from which they return at the end of the science retreat. Probably the most interesting portion of the story lies in the fictionalized and controlled history that the two scientists recreate for themselves; that history that excises the difficult portions, that avoids assigning blame and that seeks to ameliorate guilt. Obviously this is a human process—a non-scientific process that must rankle deeply the scientists that find themselves engaging in it. The story is related from the vantage point of fifteen years' history; the affair, their divorces, and their marriage are all ancient history in the primary narrative timeline of the story.



Rare Bird

Rare Bird Summary

Rare Bird is set in 1762. Sarah Anne Billopp, the protagonist, is twenty-nine years old and lives under the care of her brother Christopher, their parents having both died. The parental estate has passed to Christopher entirely, and Sarah Anne lives more-or-less as his guest. Both children are extensively educated in contemporaneous scientific theory, though Sarah Anne is brilliant and insightful while Christopher is possessed only of an average intellect. They have lived thus for several years, and Christopher routinely hosts convocations of scientists and other thinkers. Sarah Anne is fairly forward for a woman of her time, and participates in these discussions and holds her own opinions. Eventually Christopher meets and becomes engaged to Juliet Colden, a very proper and typical young woman. Juliet dresses snappily, is uneducated, and acts the part of a traditional young woman. Christopher compares her to Sarah Anne and begins to find fault with Sarah Anne's dressing, housekeeping, and lack of shyness. He begins to chastise her having opinions of her own. As the wedding draws near, Sarah Anne comes to realize she will no longer be the woman of the house—that will be Juliet—and she will then become a spinster boarder.

One evening, several scientists gather at Christopher's house and a general discussion is held about the overwintering of swallows. Some hold that swallows overwinter under the water, flying down into the reeds and then diving into the frigid water where they overwinter in matted piles of wet swallows. Several classical natural philosophers hold this view. One man suggests that swallows must be migratory and fly away during the winter. Sarah Anne argues that swallows certainly could not overwinter underwater and even suggests an experiment to prove the fact. Christopher is angered by her forwardness and later rebukes her for speaking out. Sarah Anne envisions herself like a sleeping, wet, cold, matted swallow, trapped in an icy environment. About this time, Sarah Anne meets Catherine, an older woman who thinks much like she does. Over the next weeks and months, the two women become good friends and carry out several experiments that offer strong evidence that swallows are incapable of surviving underwater. In 1762-63 Christopher and Juliet marry. Life for Sarah Anne becomes a bore, save only her secretive excursions with Catherine. Christopher and Juliet move more and more to exclude Sarah Anne from society. In 1765, Juliet dies during childbirth, leaving Christopher bereft. In his deep sorrow, he cloisters Sarah Anne even more completely. Then, Sarah Anne and Catherine depart for America, secretly, and are not seen again. Years go by and Christopher continuously envisions Sarah Anne in America. He eventually decides to follow her there, but in his years in America, he does not find her.



Rare Bird Analysis

Sarah Anne Billopp is obviously the "Rare Bird" of the title, which also plays on the idea that swallows somehow overwinter underwater. Sarah Anne's and Catherine's relationship does not present any overtly sexualized overtones, but their friendship does suggest something perhaps closer than merely close friends; their emigration to America has elements of an elopement, though Sarah Anne's domestic situation probably would have required something at least furtive in any departure attempt. The heart of the story is found in the tension between the severely conservative society in which Sarah Anne lives and her immense intellect. Indeed, she is more intelligent than the coterie of scientists that gather in her brother's house on a constant basis. While they discuss the probability of swallows somehow overwintering underwater, she immediately proposes an experiment to determine whether or not swallows can survive even in warm water—and of course they cannot. The swallow then becomes a metaphor for Sarah Anne. Swallows cannot survive the winter, nor can they adapt by hibernating underwater: Sarah Anne cannot survive intellectual stifling, nor can she adapt to the rigid conservatism of the time and place. Swallows must migrate to survive—to escape: Sarah Anne must migrate to America to survive and flourish. Swallows are widely misunderstood, especially by men: Sarah Anne and Catherine similarly are not understood. The story presents a masterful metaphor and is one of the strongest pieces in the collection. Note that Linnaeus, Sophia, and Pehr Kalm—all historical figures—are mentioned in *Rare Bird* and also appear earlier in the collection in *The English Pupil*. Here, Linnaeus erroneously supports Aristotle's assertion that swallows hibernate in a torpor under the water during the winter. Although this idea is bizarre today, it is perhaps understandable. Swallows often spend much time over and near water, and they often nest deep in littoral dense reeds. As the weather turns, swallows can occasionally be found in a sort of torpor. Thus, it might be concluded that as the winter approaches they somehow winter under the water's surface. Today this idea is discarded in favor of migration.



Soroche

Soroche Summary

Zaga, a Hispanic woman, is the protagonist of the story. The story presents a complex chronology of Zaga's life—she is probably born around 1947, to a poor family. She is an excellent cook but lacks advanced social graces. In 1971, at twenty-four, she marries Joel, who is forty-two. Joel, divorced from a previous marriage in 1956, is upper class and has lots of money. Although his friends look down on Zaga, Joel appears to put her forward as an equal. Joel has two children from a previous marriage—Alicia, fourteen in 1971, and Rob, twelve in 1971. For their honeymoon, Joel and Zaga travel to Chile, accompanied by Joel's two children. During the trip, Zaga is pregnant and suffers greatly from altitude sickness, or soroche. Alicia and Rob find Zaga's presence irritating and after a few days of tentative care, Joel abandons Zaga to the hotel while he goes skiing with his children. Sometime after the trip, Zaga loses her baby through miscarriage. After eighteen years of marriage, Joel dies in 1989. He leaves his considerable fortune from pharmaceuticals to Zaga. After Joel's death, Zaga's sister Marianna appears, looking tentatively for money, which is not forthcoming.

During this time, Zaga reminisces about her great-great-grandfather Sepulveda who had explored with Charles Darwin. She recalls the story of Jemmy Button. Jemmy Button was a native Fuegian from the islands around Tierra del Fuego. He was brought aboard HMS Beagle by Captain FitzRoy and then transported to England, where he became something of a curiosity and celebrity. Jemmy Button was accompanied by York Minster and Fuegia Basket, two other Fuegians. After about a year in London, the Beagle returned the three home; also on that voyage was Charles Darwin. At first, Jemmy Button did not fit in with his native culture and populace and was seen after a few weeks to be emaciated and nearly naked. Nevertheless, Jemmy Button declined an offer to return to England.

Zaga finds her vast wealth confusing and she enjoys giving it away. She makes several huge donations to an art museum, believing she is following Rob's suggestion. In fact, Rob probably intended the donation to be small, but Zaga makes repeated large donations. Marianna rails on Zaga for "wasting" the money and instead wants it spent on the family. Zaga declines and gives it all away. She is eventually nearly penniless and moves back into her old poor neighborhood. There, she finds herself somewhat estranged from the culture and society in which she grew up.

Soroche Analysis

Zaga's life parallels Jemmy Button's life in broad concept—she has been taken from her poor upbringing into a rich world where she does not fit; she then returns to her poor world where she does not fit. Of course her life is not nearly as ruined as Jemmy Button's, but the extended contrast is certainly intended. Even Zaga's name indicates



she is "foreign" to the culture of the story. Charles Darwin, Jemmy Button, and Captain FitzRoy are all historic figures here presented as lightly fictionalized. The voyage of HMS Beagle is perhaps the most-famous voyage of any ship because of Darwin's presence and deductions during the voyage. The story features one of the most complicated chronologies of the collection, and as with many of the protagonists, concrete details about Zaga are not readily available. She is probably born around 1947. Why she chooses to marry the much-older and divorced Joel is not discussed, though she appears to love him. The relationship between Zaga and Joel's children is obviously distant and somewhat strained. After Joel's death, they are nearly entirely estranged. Zaga's inheritance is considerable, but the exact amount is not disclosed. She is profligate in her giving, however, and soon reduces the fortune to nothing. Giving makes her feel good, just as it returns her to her roots. The story is related some two decades after Zaga's and Joel's marriage, which persists for eighteen years. Zaga thus donates all her inherited money in probably about two years or less.



Birds With No Feet

Birds With No Feet Summary

The story begins in 1853. Alec Carrière, the protagonist of the story, was raised poor near Philadelphia and has determined to make his fortune and fame by traveling the world collecting rare specimens of animals, plants, and minerals. While an apprentice in a leather-valise-making shop, he learned of science. He is self-educated, young, ambitious, and very energetic. His collections will bring enormous sums when sold in the United States to various museums and organizations. Carrière has spent the past few years in the Amazon rainforest basin, amassing a huge and valuable collection. On his return voyage, he is aboard a sailing ship that catches fire in the galley. As Carrière watches from a lifeboat, the entire ship is engulfed in flames and his vast collections either burn or sink. As he watches his fortunes vanish before his eyes, Carrière recalls having recently met Alfred Wallace, a kindred spirit. Wallace, like Carrière, has been in South America recently, collecting specimens. Also like Carrière, Wallace loses his specimens to a fire and sinking aboard his transport. Dejected, Carrière returns home, where over the next months he reads Wallace's published papers and books. Carrière concludes the two men are much alike.

In 1855, Carrière is in the Malay Archipelago pursuing specimens. Wallace too is in the area, collecting. The two men meet again and enjoy discussions and friendship. While collecting, Carrière adopts an orphaned orang-utan and bonds with the tiny creature (Carrière had shot its mother for his collection). A few weeks later, Carrière comes down with fever—probably malaria—and becomes insensate. While he is ill, the baby orang-utan dies, apparently of the same disease. Although Carrière is delirious, Wallace arranges for him to receive proper medical care and Carrière recovers. Sometime later Carrière reads more of Wallace's published works, some of which become well-known and respected. Carrière reflects that Wallace's career is blossoming while his own is stagnating in partial successes marred by repetitive failures.

In 1862, Carrière admires Wallace's extensive work. Wallace has become famous throughout the world, while Carrière is virtually unknown and almost penniless. Much of Carrière's wealth from specimen sales has been defrayed to his profligate father. Carrière has been away from home for many years and the letters he does receive bring him news of people—his family—that he scarcely recognizes. Carrière then makes a great breakthrough. He manages to collect specimens of *Paradisaea apoda*, the so-called footless bird of paradise. The bird's plumage hides its feet, and early specimens that arrived in Europe had been cured by native taxidermists who routinely cut off the feet. Thus, most Europeans and American scientists believe erroneously that the bird has no feet. Carrière knows that returning to America or Europe with intact specimens will at least establish him as the first to correct a widespread misunderstanding. Carrière returns to America, finally with extensive collections intact including his fabulously rare specimens of the "footless" bird of paradise. But there he discovers the country embroiled in the war of Southern secession. War fever consumes



the North and money is not available for specimens. Indeed, museums and scientific organizations are entirely focused on the war and Carrière's specimens do not receive much attention. Dejected, Carrière enlists in the military.

Birds With No Feet Analysis

The story compares and contrasts the lives of the fictional Alec Carrière and the historic Alfred Wallace. Today, Wallace is remembered as a scientist par excellence who independently co-discovered the theory of evolution by means of natural selection. Few names are more revered in the biological sciences than that of Alfred Wallace. Carrière is a shadow-Wallace, a fictionalized version of the real man, with the same intellect, ambition, desire, and ability, but without the breakthroughs of success. The two men spend nearly their whole lives in the same general areas, doing the same general things, and experiencing the same general outcomes. But yet Wallace becomes famous and Carrière remains entirely obscure. In this, the story plays with the notion of the fickle hand of fate, blessing one and cursing the other. The story's construction is fairly straightforward, divided into three dated and named parts, each featuring a major episode in the protagonist's life. The names describe the major events of the sections which also are major turning points in Carrière's life—the ship fire, the prolonged sickness, and then the distinction between the two men. Money becomes a preoccupation of Carrière, first as he loses his fortune to fire, then as his father intercepts and perhaps squanders Carrière's wealth, and finally as his supposed wealth is disrupted by war fever. An unhappy string of circumstance leaves Carrière a poor enlistee in the Union forces. His ultimate fate is not disclosed in the story. The story presents a wealth of biological information as is typical of most of the stories in the collection. Note that the bird received its biological name from Carl Linnaeus himself. The story is enjoyable and well-written, and tightly focuses on the protagonist's characterization and life story.



The Marburg Sisters

The Marburg Sisters Summary

The Marburg family history begins with Leo Marburg, who started a winery in Hammondsport, New York, near the west shore of Keuka Lake. The winery does well because of some unconventional but insightful early decisions made by Leo. The winery passes to Leo's son Theo, who runs it well and makes many improvements. Theo marries Suky and they have two children, both girls, Rose and Bianca. Both daughters are named after aspects of wine as the winery culture penetrates all aspects of the family's life. Rose is one year older and is the narrator of the story. Both girls probably are born in the 1950s, and Rose tells the story from 1991. When Rose is ten and Bianca is nine, Suky is killed in an accident. Theo buries himself in winery management and the two girls run wild. As teenagers, they gain a strong interest in biochemistry and they become excellent biochemists. Still, they are notoriously out-of-control. After high school, they attend college. Rose graduates with a biochemistry degree, but Bianca drops out just shy of graduation. Rose becomes a well-established scientist and professor while Bianca lives a Bohemian life.

In August of 1980, Bianca visits Rose at Rose's laboratory. Rose's position is obviously very stable and secure and her laboratory and offices are impressive and expensive. Bianca hangs out with Rose in the laboratory. Then they "sneak" out the window and go swimming in a nearby muddy pond, bathing nude, and then hanging out on the shore. Rose is obviously more circumspect than Bianca. Bianca gathers up some mushrooms and they return to the laboratory where Bianca extracts hallucinogens from the mushrooms. They take the drugs, smoke marijuana, and drink alcohol. They spend the night talking, laughing, arguing, and getting high. They wish they could speak with their mother. Some months later, their father dies. They meet and hold a type of séance, where they talk with their mother's spirit, and they recount the past years of their lives and their father's long decline and death. The séance involves "spinning water" in the lake into a whirlpool with a paddle, and then looking into the hole in the water to speak with their mother. Theo had lived in contact with only a few close friends and with two dogs, who shared his bed and house. After the funeral, the dogs disappear. Bianca runs away out of the country with a painter who paints her nude. Rose fortuitously meets Harry, her father's lawyer, who has adopted one of her father's dogs—a white one—from the pound. Rose moves in with Harry and the dog and looks toward a new life as a couple. She remains in contact with Bianca and the two sisters, with Harry, reminisce from time to time, often discussing their father's life and death.

The Marburg Sisters Analysis

The lengthy story is divided into four named parts, each presenting a different time. Chronologically, part three probably comes somewhere in the early middle of part four, though this is difficult to establish. The construction of the story is very peculiar, as the



early portions are written in the first-person plural point of view, as if both sisters were narrating at the same time. Later portions of the story make it clear that Rose is the narrator and is speaking, usually, for both sisters. The end portions of the story align more and more with Rose as the narrative proceeds. The third segment of the story features a type of séance experience where, presumably, the voice of Suky is heard speaking. The narrative technique allows a variety of interpretation at this point however, and it is entirely possible to read the story as though Rose were supplying her mother's answer in her mother's voice. The story presents the lives of two sisters who are essentially similar except in a few salient points that happen to define, largely, their individual experiences. The story is difficult to read but has enjoyed wide critical acclaim. Though Rose is a biochemist, the story is light on the biological themes that heavily mark most of the other stories in the collection. There are few turning points in the story beyond the deaths of the sisters' parents. Their mother's death sets them on a path of wild-child release, which Bianca pursues the rest of her life. Their father's death brings them back together in a way, though the reunion seems transient. Beyond this, both women behave in a remarkably consistent way—consistent for their own personalities, as it were.



Ship Fever

Ship Fever Summary

Dr. Lauchlin Grant lives in Quebec. His childhood friend Mrs. Susannah Rowley lives in a very expensive part of Quebec, and Grant visits her often. Lauchlin has a romantic interest in Susannah that is not reciprocated. Instead, she is in love with her husband Arthur Adam Rowley, a famous, wealthy, and influential newspaperman. The year is 1847, and Arthur Adam is in Ireland, writing newspaper articles about the severe Irish famine. Arthur Adam also sends letters to Lauchlin with some frequency, but does not often write to Susannah, his wife. Lauchlin calls on Susannah frequently and his presence causes the servants—loyal to Arthur Adam—to resent him. One servant in particular, Annie Taggart, finds Lauchlin's continuous presence socially objectionable. In their many discussions, Lauchlin confesses that his top-notch European medical training hasn't done him much good; that he does not care to be a doctor to the rich; and that his interests lie in medical investigation. His practice is poor and he is not doing financially well. Susannah mostly tires of Lauchlin's complaining—he is capable, educated, and has access to society, yet he prefers to pine for her and yearn for something he doesn't have.

Lauchlin returns home, thumbs through piles of scientific books, examines the rundown state of his father's estate and considers that he should be directing its repair. Then he receives a letter from Grosse Isle Quarantine Station, written by Dr. George Douglas. Douglas invites Lauchlin to come and work at Grosse Isle Quarantine Station, where many hundreds of sick Irish immigrants are quarantined. The station is in dire need of supplies and staff, particularly trained doctors.

Lauchlin travels by ship to Grosse Isle to examine the employment opportunity. He is met at the dock by Dr. Jacques, who is brusque and somewhat cold. Jacques takes Lauchlin immediately upon a tour of a few arriving ships, packed with nearly-starved Irish immigrants. Typhus, dysentery, and other fevers are prevalent in not only the passengers but the crews. The ships' conditions are miserable. The people all refer to typhus as "ship fever" because the crowded, filthy conditions aboard ship during the prolonged transatlantic crossing give the disease a perfect habitat in which to flourish. Lauchlin is appalled and sickened by the ships, but Jacques flatly states the quarantine station has no room for any but the worst cases. A few passengers are offloaded, but most must stay aboard and hope to survive the diseases. On one ship Lauchlin vomits. On another he finds a still-living fever victim wedged under some corpses. He insists that the victim, a young woman named Nora Kynd, be taken to the quarantine station. Jacques objects that there is no room, but Lauchlin carries her away himself. Nora's two younger brothers, Ned and Denis, survive, but they are sent away with transport. Nora remains at the quarantine station.

Over the next weeks, Lauchlin keeps a journal of the horrible conditions. He notes that thousands of Irish are held at the quarantine stations, and many of them die. Many



thousands more are pushed on to other cities even though they are known to be ill. The quarantine system is wholly inadequate and the process breaks down. Lauchlin makes some abortive attempts to understand the epidemic but usually is too tired from daily work to do much good. Nora begins to recover and becomes his particular patient; many healthcare providers, including nurses, orderlies, and doctors, sicken and a few die. After several weeks, Lauchlin is sent to Quebec on an attempted political mission to gain support, supplies, and staff for the quarantine station. He posts an ad for Nora, seeking Ned and Denis, in several papers. He then finds the politicians disinclined to further assistance—indeed, they blame the quarantine station for passing on ill immigrants to the city. Lauchlin's political mission is a failure. He visits Susannah, where Annie treats him very cruelly. Susannah receives him and applauds his work; she too has started offering aid to the poor immigrants, much to Annie's disapproval. Arthur Adam remains in Ireland writing polemics for the Canadian press.

Lauchlin returns to the island and resumes his work, now with a renewed interest in the patient and less of an interest in science. He finds Nora much recovered; Nora is recruited as a nurse assistant. Then Lauchlin falls ill of fever and becomes Nora's particular patient. As the days go by, Nora proves her worth as Lauchlin sickens and then finally dies. With the end of summer comes the end of the immigration season and the ships stop arriving. Over several weeks, the quarantine station begins to shut down, just as renewed materials begin to arrive. Nora travels to Quebec where she is unable to locate any information about her brothers. She visits the Rowley's home and talks to Arthur Adam, recently returned from Ireland. Nora learns that Susannah is ill with typhus and is not expected to survive. Annie softens to Nora and offers her employment in the household, but Nora declines—instead looking across the water to Detroit in America, determined to live there.

Ship Fever Analysis

The short story can be considered a novella in narrative structure. Several major characters are presented and characterization and development take up the bulk of the narrative development. Lauchlin starts as a sort of self-focused and complaining man, with societal access but without knowledge of how valuable that is. Instead he pines for Susannah, whom he cannot have, and wants a position that does not exist. He ends the story selflessly giving his life to treat patients who can never repay him. In the process of service, he finds happiness and a sense of self. The same process, to a lesser degree, is mirrored in Susannah's and Arthur Adam's development. Nora Kynd remains fairly stable throughout, while Annie Taggert softens throughout the narrative. Presumably, Susannah does not survive her illness.

The quarantine island, Doctors Jacques and Douglas, and the entire epidemic process are historically accurate portrayals. In this light, the story can be viewed as historical fiction and a type of social commentary upon the political processes that led to the Irish famine. The Canadian response to the immigration crisis is summarized in the voluble discussion that Nora overhears in Arthur Adam's home (see pp. 247-49). The curious attitude of Annie Taggert is unfortunately sometimes common among people.

The story features a peculiar construction. The narrator is unnamed, reliable, and entirely effaced. The narrator has access to the interior thoughts and motivations of all characters. Yet the narrator tells only part of the story; major sections of the story are taken from Lauchlin's diary, which is delivered by Nora to Arthur Adam at the end of the narrative. They are inserted in sequence to create a chronological cohesion, but this raises several interesting meta-fictional questions that the narrative does not address. Finally, the story gives its name to the entire collection.



Characters

Antonia appears in *The Behavior of the Hawkweeds*

Antonia is the narrator and protagonist in *The Behavior of the Hawkweeds*. She is a third-generation immigrant, born and living in the United States, with her parents and her immigrant grandfather. In the story, Antonia relates a fairly complex chronology that focuses on three principle points in her life. The first major event involves an apparent attempt at sexual molestation when Antonia, born in 1921, was but ten years old. Antonia's grandfather intervened, accidentally causing the assailant's death. Antonia's grandfather dies of a heart attack before his trial, sparing her the notoriety of being a victim.

The second major event involves Antonia's marriage to Richard, a biology professor at a typical university. During their courtship, Antonia gives Richard a gift—a draft letter written by Gregor Mendel. Richard treasures the letter but proves fairly uninterested in how Antonia came to possess such an incredible artifact. Antonia's actual marriage to Richard is not much considered in the story—they have children who grow up and move away and he retires from his job.

The third major event describes a period of social upheaval and depression that Antonia experiences in 1970; she is left alone in her house and becomes introspective and isolated. Richard appears either oblivious or uncaring and does not intervene. Antonia then meets one of Richard's graduate students who expresses considerable interest in her early life. Antonia proposes sexual intimacy but is rejected. Richard soon moves to have the graduate student sent to another university. Later, Antonia receives an affirmation letter from the young man. By the time Antonia narrates the story she is approximately seventy years old, recovered from her depression, and looks back on her life with considerable reflection and insight.

Carl Linnaeus appears in *The English Pupil*

Carl Linnaeus (1707 - January 1778), or Carl von Linné after his ennoblement, is a Swedish botanist and taxonomist who founded the modern discipline of binomial nomenclature. He is known as the father of taxonomy and is widely recognized for other major contributions to the sciences of biology and ecology. Linnaeus' early education was at Uppsala University, where he eventually lectured in botany. Throughout the mid 1700s, Linnaeus traveled widely through Northern Europe, making collections of animals and plants which he categorized with his taxonomic system. Widely revered within his lifetime, Linnaeus has become recognized as a major contributor to not only biology but natural philosophy.

As Linnaeus' fame grew, he began to recruit other scientists to travel abroad, taking collections, making observations, and spreading Linnaeus' system of taxonomy. These



students were collectively referred to as apostles by Linnaeus. Many of these students died of fevers or accidents during their travels—those who did return generally shared their collections with Linnaeus and thus built on his taxonomic system, helping it to receive a global influence. In the story *The English Pupil*, Linnaeus is aged, nearly paralyzed, and fairly senile. He spends an evening by a fireside thinking about some of his favored apostles and reminiscing about their interests, abilities, voyages, and untimely deaths. The story is set only weeks before Linnaeus' historic death.

Jonathan and Ruby appears in *The Littoral Zone*

Jonathan and Ruby are the protagonists of *The Littoral Zone*. They met fifteen years previous to the opening of the story, as scientist-teachers at a summer biology retreat. They were both married with children but dove into an extra-marital affair with each other that lasted for about three years before ending both of their marriages. They then courted and wed, forming a sort of blended family with five children—Jessie, Gordon, Mickey, Cora, and Ryan, in order of descending age. Both of their ex-spouses retained physical custody of the children, leaving Jonathan and Ruby in a sort of littoral zone, or prolonged transition. Though not explicitly stated in the story, it cannot be a coincidence that Jonathan and Ruby do not feel their relationship is resolved until both of their youngest children—Cora and Ryan—are nineteen and thus legal adults. Jonathan and Ruby's life together is typical of many whose relationships started out of infidelity: it is marked by mutually-agreed-upon revisionist history, the avoidance of affixing blame, and pervasive but unspoken guilt. Within the story, the two are treated as almost a single person; the story positions their relationship as the central actor and the point about which the narrative revolves.

Sarah Anne Billopp appears in *Rare Bird*

Sarah Anne Billopp is the protagonist of the story *Rare Bird*. She is also closely aligned with the narrative voice, highly sympathetic, and the primary actor in the story. She lives with her brother Christopher, as their parents have died. Following the custom of the time, the parental estate has passed entirely to Christopher, making Sarah Anne his dependent. Both Christopher and Sarah Anne have extensive and excellent education, with a strong focus in natural philosophy. While Christopher is rather an average intellect, Sarah Anne is exceptionally intelligent. This is in a way unfortunate for her, because the mores of the time frown on intelligent and educated women.

As Christopher ages, he begins to find Sarah Anne's capabilities socially embarrassing. He routinely hosts gatherings of scientists and Sarah Anne is respected among them—until Christopher makes it known that her appearances in the gatherings is not proper. In this, Christopher is supported by his new bride Juliet. Thus, Sarah Anne finds herself beyond typically marriageable age, cut off from meaningful contact, and isolated in her brother's house where she is only nominally welcome. When Sarah Anne meets Catherine, she finds an older woman much of the same determination and intellect. The two become fast friends, though their relationship remains somewhat secretive or



furtive, because of Sarah Anne's social situation. Catherine is not only older, but also less restricted by society. The two women carry out a series of scientific experiments and investigations. Meanwhile, Juliet dies in childbirth, leaving Christopher a desolate and angry man. As Sarah Anne's situation deteriorates, her friendship with Catherine becomes closer. Eventually the two women emigrate to America, secretly, about 1765. Sarah Anne apparently is successful in America, though the story does not discuss her fate. She does not return and eventually Christopher also emigrates to America in search of her, though he never does find her.

Zaga appears in Soroche

Zaga is the protagonist of the story Soroche. The story presents a complex chronology of Zaga's life—she is probably born in 1947, to a poor family. She is an excellent cook but lacks advanced social graces. In 1971, at twenty-four, she marries Joel, who is forty-two. Joel, divorced from a previous marriage in 1956, is upper class and has lots of money. Although his friends look down on Zaga, he appears to put her forward as an equal. Joel has two children from a previous marriage—Alicia, fourteen in 1971; and Rob, twelve in 1971. For their honeymoon, Joel and Zaga travel to Chile, accompanied by Joel's two children. During the trip, Zaga is pregnant and suffers greatly from altitude sickness, or soroche. Alicia and Rob find Zaga's presence irritating, and after a few days of tentative care, Joel abandons Zaga to the hotel while he goes skiing with his children. Sometime after the trip, Zaga loses her baby through miscarriage. After eighteen years of marriage Joel dies in 1989. He leaves his considerable fortune from pharmaceuticals to Zaga. After Joel's death, Zaga's sister Marianna appears looking tentatively for money, which is not forthcoming.

Alec Carrière appears in Birds With No Feet

Alec Carrière is born in Pennsylvania to a poor family in 1834. Without prospects, he is yet very intelligent and highly motivated. He spends his early youth self-training and self-educating in the sciences and reads widely about scientific adventure and expedition. In 1851, he decides to embark upon his own voyage of scientific discovery and collection. His plan is to travel to South America and amass a collection of specimens to sell to the scientific market in the New England area. He successfully voyages to the Amazon rainforest and learns his trade by experience. In 1853, Carrière has amassed a large collection that will make him wealthy and famous, and he returns to New England to sell it. Unfortunately, Carrière's ship catches fire in the galley and he loses all of his collections to the sea. Destitute, Carrière returns to a life of collecting and this time travels to the Malay Archipelago where he enjoys some successes before succumbing to fever—probably malaria. In an ironic twist, Carrière's father manages to intercept most of the monies generated from the sale of shipped specimens and Carrière is thus left still destitute. In 1862, Carrière manages to collect several rare specimens of the so-called footless bird of paradise and returns home with many collections intact. At home, however, he finds the country embroiled in the Civil War.



With no immediate marked for scientific curiosa, Carrière is once again stymied. This time he enlists in the Northern military forces and looks forward to trying his luck at war.

Rose Marburg appears in The Marburg Sisters

Rose Marburg is born probably in 1950, though the story is light on dates—by 1980 she is a university professor with a well-established position and apparently is respected. She is the narrator and one of the principle protagonists of the story. Rose is the daughter of Theo and Suky Marburg and the granddaughter of Leo Marburg. Rose grows up at the family winery in Hammondsport, New York, near the shore of Keuka Lake. Rose has a younger sister, Bianca, who is one year younger. Both sisters are named after aspects of wine. Rose's mother Suky dies when Rose is only ten years old. After her mother's death, her father becomes focused on the winery business and thus the girls grow up without much parental influence. They become wild; the exact nature of their wildness is not described in detail, but based on their later lives, it probably involved the usual teenage problems of promiscuous sex, binge drinking, and the illicit use of various drugs.

Rose and her sister are both quite intelligent and do well in school. Rose graduates with degrees in biochemistry and proves successful as a professor at a university, running a biochemistry lab. Rose remains somewhat close to her sister throughout her adult life, though the closeness appears to be a little lopsided and overemphasized in Rose's estimation. Bianca does not seem as interested in keeping in contact as does Rose. As an adult, Rose is not adverse to using hallucinogenic drugs, marijuana, and binge drinking, though she seldom does these things. When the sisters' father dies, they meet, but only lightly participate in his memorial services, instead leaving the details to his few friends. Afterward they share a sort of mystical bonding experience where they believe they contact their mother from beyond the grave to discuss their father's life. After this, Rose predictably returns to her life at the university, though she does start a relationship. Just as predictably, Bianca pursues a Bohemian lifestyle by posing nude for her lover-artist.

Dr. Lauchlin Grant appears in Ship Fever

Dr. Lauchlin Grant is a youngish man of privilege, born to a very wealthy family, and educated in contemporaneous medical trends in Paris. He is born in 1820 and raised in Quebec. His father is absent the city for unknown reasons, apparently for an extended period of time. Lauchlin is in charge of the estate but ignores it almost entirely. He has a strong romantic yearning for Mrs. Susannah Rowley, his childhood friend. He feels himself inadequate for her for reasons unspecified. Lauchlin is said to be pale-skinned and red-headed; otherwise, his physical description indicates he is of normal height, weight, and build. Women apparently do not find him physically overly attractive. He has a keen intellect and an excellent medical training. He has spent a year or so in Quebec as a private physician, but his practice is not doing well. Lauchlin is invited to become a physician at the quarantine station on Grosse Isle during a typhus outbreak among Irish



immigrants. He accepts the position, though he finds it, at first, to be quite distasteful. Over the next several weeks, he keeps a nearly daily journal and offers medical assistance to the sick. His opinions change markedly during his service. Lauchlin saves one young woman—Nora Kynd—and then recruits her as a nursing assistant at the station. Lauchlin eventually contracts typhus and dies at the station itself.

Mrs. Susannah Rowley appears in Ship Fever

Mrs. Susannah Rowley grew up as a childhood friend with Lauchlin Grant and probably was born in 1820. Her family's social situation is not described in the novella, but she probably comes from a privileged family as her marriage to Arthur Adam Rowley, a wealthy and influential newspaperman, does not excite undue attention. Susannah finds Lauchlin somewhat irritating in his refusal to grow up, but still holds him in high esteem as a friend. She encourages him to make more of himself. Susannah's husband spends much of his time away from home pursuing news stories. During the period of time discussed in the novella, her husband is in Ireland covering the famine of 1847. When the Irish immigrants begin to arrive in Quebec, Susannah begins to offer aid by personally visiting them and caring for them. This is highly unusual among the women of her social strata and invites criticism from them as well as from her servants. Throughout the period of the novella, Susannah is a gracious host, a patient friend, and a humanitarian. At the end of the novella, she is sick with typhus and not expected to survive.

Nora Kynd appears in Ship Fever

Nora Kynd is a poor Irish immigrant. Her parents were victims of the famine—in particular, her father was shot dead in the street for demanding work to earn money to buy food to feed his children, an early type of labor protest. Nora thereafter managed to secure passage for herself and her two younger brothers to Canada. At the time, America was not allowing immigrants from Ireland, but as part of the United Kingdom, Canada was. On the voyage to Canada, Nora became sick with typhus. The captain of the ship ordered all with "ship fever" to be confined to the hold. Nora's brothers were kept away from her. Nora was stacked with other sick people in the hold and became trapped under the corpse of victim of disease. Nora was rescued by Lauchlin Grant, who carried her ashore to the quarantine station against the orders of a senior physician. At the station, she recovered her health, though her brothers continued on to Quebec and then parts unknown. Nora never meets her brothers again. After regaining her health, Nora worked as a nursing assistant until the quarantine station closed down for the year. As the last part of her service, Nora tended Lauchlin in his final days before death from fever. Nora is outfitted in nice clothing and equipage from the stores of the dead. She travels to Quebec to communicate with Arthur Adam, and then looks toward America as her ultimate destination.



Objects/Places

Mendel's Draft Letter to Nägeli appears in The Behavior of the Hawkweeds

In *The Behavior of the Hawkweeds* Antonia, the narrator and protagonist, receives a letter as a gift from her grandfather and in turn gives the letter to her fiancé Richard. The letter was a draft of a later letter written by Gregor Mendel and addressed to Karl Wilhelm von Nägeli. Historically, Nägeli is the scientist who successfully convinced Mendel to stop his genetics work. Within the story, the letter functions as a bridge across time, linking Mendel to Richard and Tati to Antonia. As Richard has never asked Antonia about the letter's provenance, she is pleased when the young Sebastian Dunitz asks her about it.

The Apostles of Linnaeus appears in The English Pupil

The apostles of Linnaeus were a group of Linnaeus' students who carried out various biological expeditions throughout the world, all with the consent and often input of Linnaeus. Most voyages began from Sweden and most of the apostles were unmarried men, because of the dangers of traveling the world at that time period. The various apostles also widely distributed Linnaeus' taxonomic theories. The story *The English Pupil* features many of Linnaeus' apostles.

Littoral Zone appears in The Littoral Zone

A littoral zone is commonly interpreted as that near-water zone between the high-water mark, through the typical shoreline, and down to that region of the sea that is permanently submerged. The littoral zone is therefore in constant transition from one state to another. In the biological sciences, littoral zones are heavily studied and provide fairly unique environments. In the story, the littoral zone functions as an extended metaphor for the transition of the relationship of Jonathan and Ruby from affair to long-term relationship.

Swallows appears in Rare Bird

Swallows, a large group of passerine bird species, are the supposed titular object of the story *Rare Bird*. They are adapted to aerial feeding and often live near waterways. Some species nest deep in dense reeds along the water's edge. Swallows have a nearly global distribution and many species are migratory. In the story *Rare Bird*, many scientists argue about what swallows do in the winter. Most hold that Aristotle's theory is correct: swallows overwinter in a hibernating torpor underwater, in large rafts of matted



birds. A few argue that this is ridiculous and that swallows must in fact migrate. In the story, swallows act as an extended metaphor for Sarah Anne, Catherine, and other intelligent but oppressed women in society.

Soroche appears in Soroche

Soroche, or altitude sickness, is an effect on humans of high altitude. It is caused by exposure to the low partial pressure of oxygen, and usually occurs above 8,000 feet. It is often described as feeling something like the flu or a hangover. It does not affect all individuals, and those affected often recover after a few days at altitude.

Paradisaea apoda appears in Birds With No Feet

Paradisaea apoda is a magnificent bird of paradise species with remarkable plumage that is highly valued even on today's markets. Early specimens of the bird arrived in Europe with their feet removed by native taxidermists. That, coupled with their stunning plumage, convinced many that the birds never landed but instead flew around in paradise, occasionally coming near the earth. Even Carl Linnaeus believed them to be footless and named them *Paradisaea apoda*, literally footless paradise bird. In the story *Birds with no Feet*, the bird is a symbol of Carrière's struggle against anonymity.

Spinning Water appears in The Marburg Sisters

In *The Marburg Sisters*, the adult sisters hold a type of mystical séance session where they believe they communicate with their dead mother and hold a lengthy conversation with her. They contact her by going out onto a lake in a boat and spinning water—creating a whirlpool with a paddle and then looking down into the "hole" in the water. The spinning water somehow convinces them they are speaking through the hole to their mother.

The White Dog appears in The Marburg Sisters

Theo Marburg's old age was shared with two dogs who lived with him and slept in his bed. In the story, the dogs become symbols of the Marburg sister's parents, and the white dog represents their father Theo. After Theo's death, the two dogs vanish but the white dog reappears, just as their mother had vanished, or died, in their youth but their father had persisted. Rose Marburg finds great comfort in recovering the dog through the action of her lover-to-be Harry, her father's lawyer.

Ship Fever appears in Ship Fever

Ship fever is a disease—commonly known as typhus—that appears in the story of the same name. Typhus is one of several closely-related diseases caused by bacterial



infection. It is passed by lice and is highly contagious when conditions are right. The disease flourishes when lice infestation flourishes, and cramped, filthy conditions as found in ship's holds are particularly favorable to the disease. Attention to hygiene and good food and clean water usually prevent the disease from breaking out.

Grosse Isle appears in Ship Fever

Grosse Isle is an actual island in the St. Lawrence River east of Quebec. During the period of time considered by the story Ship Fever, the island was used as a quarantine depot predominantly to house Irish immigrants escaping the Great Irish Famine, about 1845-49. About three thousand Irish died on the island, mostly of typhus. Today, the island is known as the Irish Memorial National Historic Site of Canada.



Themes

Biology

Most of the stories in the collection feature a strong biology theme. *The Behavior of the Hawkweeds* discusses Mendel and his genetics work, and one of the main characters is a biology instructor. *The English Pupil* discusses the last few days of Linnaeus's life and contains much information about many of his students. *The Littoral Zone* begins with a biology retreat and the two protagonists are biology professors. *Rare Bird* discusses taxonomy and ecology and the two female protagonists have strong biology educations and backgrounds. *Birds With No Feet* discusses Wallace and the protagonist gathers biological specimens for a living. In *The Marburg Sisters*, the two sisters are biochemists, one a successful professor at a university. And in *Ship Fever* the setting is a quarantine station during a time of epidemic—not biology perhaps, but the closely related field of medicine. These biological themes and famous biologists tie the stories in the collection together and give them a common texture and tone. Biology is one of the recurrent themes of the collection, and the most-obvious theme common among most of the stories.

Estrangement

Many of the stories in the collection feature estrangement as a common theme. In *The Behavior of the Hawkweeds*, the protagonist's marriage begins to fall apart as she tentatively seeks an extra-marital affair; she also recalls with sadness the loss of her grandfather. *The Littoral Zone* discusses an extra-marital affair that leads to the dissolution of two families, replaced by a new union that never quite congeals. In *Rare Bird*, the protagonist is estranged from her brother and society's strictures and sets out on a new life to avoid further unhappiness. In *Soroche*, the protagonist becomes estranged from her own sister over money and feels the loss of her stepchildren. In *Birds With No Feet*, the protagonist leaves his family and returns only to find a country at war. *The Marburg Sisters* presents two sisters who have lost their parents and whose relationship seems to wander ever farther afield even as they continue to value it highly. Finally, in *Ship Fever*, the protagonist yearns for a woman he cannot have and in the end they both succumb to a fever, one leaving behind a close friend and the other leaving behind a devoted husband. Estrangement and failing human relationships are a defining theme of most of the stories in the collection.

Societal Upheaval

Many of the stories in the collection focus on times of social upheaval—and this is especially true with the eponymous novella *Ship Fever*. In *The Behavior of the Hawkweeds*, the protagonist's grandfather is an immigrant who has fled a period of social unrest in Europe. *Rare Bird* features protagonists who are unable to achieve their



potential because of societal strictures and mores—they flee to America where such things are undergoing rapid evolution. *Birds With No Feet* features a protagonist who returns to America to find not his family but a country embroiled in Civil War. *The Marburg Sisters* features sisters who come from a period of social unrest in the United States and pursue Bohemian lives. Finally, *Ship Fever* focuses tightly on immigrant epidemics caused by the Irish famine of 1847. While not all of the stories are set in times of social unrest, many are and this recurrent theme suggests that even when times are difficult individuals can rise to their potential if they so desire.



Style

Point of View

Most of the stories are related from the third-person, omniscient point of view typical of short stories. This point of view is appropriate for the types of fiction provided, especially for the novella *Ship Fever*. In these stories, the omniscient narrator is unnamed, completely reliable, and entirely effaced. *The Behavior of the Hawkweeds* is related in the first person point of view; here the narrator is reliable but does provide supposed thoughts and motivations of other characters. In this story, the narrator is the protagonist and central character in the fiction. *Rare Bird* begins with a moment of meta-fictional narrative intrusion as the narrator instructs the reader to "Imagine an April evening in 1762" (p. 59), but otherwise it is fairly traditional. The narrative intrusion gives the story a very intimate feeling as if it is a secret conversation between friends. *The Marburg Sisters* features the most complex narrative voice in the book—here most of the story is related from the first person plural point of view, and only later in the story does it become clear that the narrator is one of the two sisters. This narrative strategy gives the two sisters an unusually—and perhaps unwarranted—closeness within the story; it also suggests the narrator to be somehow more reliable than may be the actual case.

Setting

Most of the stories are set in the distant past, and the nature of settings varies tremendously from story to story. None of the stories features a particularly difficult setting, as the setting is specified and described in straightforward terms. *The English Pupil* features one of the most restricted settings—a particular homestead of Linnaeus, and furthermore limited to just a room or two in the house. *Birds With No Feet* features the most-expansive setting as the protagonist wanders the world in search of biological specimens. In all cases, the settings are well established and appropriate to the fiction presented; none of the settings clash or seem unreasonable, while in many cases the setting takes on a significant role within the story, such as occurs in the novella *Ship Fever*. In *The Littoral Zone*, the setting informs the title of the story and also serves as an extended metaphor of the action of the narrative. The collection features very definitive, appropriate, and strong settings.

Language and Meaning

The stories are presented in fairly straightforward English, written at a college level. Punctuation, grammar, and constructions are all typical. The language used should provide no special barrier to comprehension for an average reader. Most of the stories do contain a large amount of biological terminology that may be unfamiliar to average readers. These terms, concepts, and phrases are all used correctly and add a particular texture and tone to the stories which is quite enjoyable. The technical language does



not intrude into the stories, nor does it have any artificial feeling to it. Instead, it is woven into the fabric of the stories in such a way that it feels natural and organic. Many of the stories depend upon knowledge of historical persons, places, and events—none of these is so obscure as to defy casual research. This historical basis for many of the stories adds an enjoyable atmosphere and second layer of meaning to many of the narratives. In *The Marburg Sisters*, a section of the story is related in dialogue, a sort of question-and-answer segment, where typical dialogue punctuation is not utilized. Instead, italic-faced font is used to separate one speaker from the others and the effect is quite distinctive. In *Ship Fever*, much of the middle segment of the story is purported to be diary entries of the protagonist; here the language varies in the voice of the protagonist, but again the language is typical.

Structure

Most of the stories are presented in a very straightforward structure that enhances meaning and poses no barrier to comprehension. Notable exceptions include *The Marburg Sisters*, where a first-person plural point of view is used throughout much of the story, giving a peculiar feel and leading to some atypical narrative construction. This is handled exceptionally well, however, and does not feel awkward or strained. Another notable exception to typical structure is *Ship Fever*, where portions of the narrative are presented as letters from one character to another, and other portions of the narrative are drawn from the protagonist's diary. These elements are not entirely uncommon in fiction and they flow well and seem organic to the story. Many of the stories feature quite complex chronologies, such that events are related out of chronological order and careful reading is required to ascertain an exact sequence of events. Also, many of the stories feature chronologies that span multiple generations; again, these usually are not related in a straightforward chronology and demand close reading. All of the chronologies are internally consistent, however, which is particularly rewarding to a devoted reader.



Quotes

"But Tati saw the worst in what was there. He saw that fat hand on my arm and those eyes fixed on my childish chest. He had a small pruning knife in his hand. When he called my name and I dropped the pot, Leininger clamped down on my arm. As I was tearing myself away, Tati flew over and jabbed his knife into the back of Leininger's hand."

p. 17

"'Nêmecky!' he shouted. 'Prase!'"

pp. 16-17

"Nomenclature is a mnemonic art."

p. 41

"They never reproach each other. When the tension builds in the house and the silence becomes overwhelming, one or the other will say, 'Do you remember...?' and then launch into one of the myths on which they have founded their lives. But there is one story they never tell each other, because they can't bear to talk about what they have lost. This is the one about the evening that has shaped their life together."

p. 55

"There's another reason, as well, why she holds her tongue on this night. Lately, since Christopher has started courting Miss Juliet Colden, he's become critical of Sarah Anne's manners. She does not dress as elegantly as Juliet, or comport herself with such decorum. She's forward when she ought to be retiring, he has said, and disputatious when she should be agreeable. He's spoken to her several times already: 'You should wear your learning modestly,' he lectures."

p. 61

"Jemmy gave FitzRoy an otter skin and Darwin a pair of spearheads. Then he returned to his canoe and paddled away. When he reached the shore he lit a bonfire. The last sign Darwin saw of him was the long and wistful column of smoke outlined against the horizon."

p. 94

"There was no breeze that night. The sea, lit by the full moon, shone smooth and silver; the Southern Cross turned above the ship and below it squid slipped invisibly through the depths. Between sky and sea lay Alec Carrière, sprawled like a starfish in his hammock and imagining how the treasures packed in the holds were about to change his life."

p. 103

"Were we really speaking with Suky? Was Suky really speaking with us? Bianca says yes, absolutely. I say yes, sort of, maybe."

p. 148



"At Arranmore, in County Donegal, the streets swarm with famished men begging for work on the roads. At Louisburgh, in County Mayo, the local newspaper reports between ten and twenty deaths a day, and I myself saw bodies lying unburied, for want of anyone to dig a grave. In a hut that had been quiet for many days we found on the mud floor four frozen corpses, partly eaten by rats. That same day, a dispensary doctor told me he'd seen a woman drag from her hovel the corpse of her naked daughter. She tried to cover the body with stones."

p. 159

"June 8, 1847. Muggy and hot. Dr. Douglas is a good man, but nothing he does makes more than a dent in this situation. There are more than 12,000 people on this island now, many without shelter and almost all short of food. Dr. Douglas has applied to the government for a detachment of troops to be stationed here, to preserve order. Buchanan, the chief emigration officers, had obtained some tents from the army. These are not much comfort during the rain and hot weather. My feet are swollen and the skin is peeling between my toes."

p. 189

"She did not pull away from him. Rather she leaned into him slightly, so that their hips touched, and their shoulders and their upper arms. They stood there for a long time, gazing out at the garden as a current of warmth flowed between those few connections. How starved he'd been for the slightest human touch! 'I'm sorry,' he said simply. 'I spoke badly. But if you knew how much you mean to me...'"

p. 219

"It was fate, which could not be defeated. Fate was starvation and fever back home, and humiliation and fever here, and in neither case could fate be fought but only tricked a bit."

p. 226

"Outside birds were speaking. Lauchlin was aware that he could no longer move his legs, that his spirit and his body were coming unglued from the feet up, like a pair of black-paper silhouettes separating."

p. 238

"'I should have,' Annie said. 'I don't know what got into me.' She thought about the vomiting and the delirium, the inability of the doctor to ease Mrs. Rowley's pain, her own fear and terror during the two weeks before Arthur Adam's arrival, when Mrs. Rowley had cried out in the night and there was no one to help but her. About Arthur Adam, who for all the good he might have done with his articles, had not arrived home in time. Now his wife didn't recognize him. 'It's a hard sickness. You know. What was it like, on that island?'"

p. 252

"'Wouldn't we all,' Annie said. 'Didn't we all of us think that was what we were doing, leaving our homes for here?' She put down her saucer as Nora rose and grasped her satchel. 'You're leaving already?'"

'I am,' Nora said."
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Topics for Discussion

Discuss Mendelian genetics and explain why hawkweeds are not a good experimental organism for genetics research while pea plants are a good experimental organism for genetics research.

Is *The English Pupil* a short story? Does it have narrative arc, characterization, and plot elements typical of short fiction? If you would not call it a short story, what might you call it?

The Littoral Zone is an intertidal zone extending from somewhere near the permanent water mark to some distance inland from the shore. In the story *The Littoral Zone*, a couple moves from an extra-marital affair, through divorces, to courtship and marriage. Describe the extended metaphor of a littoral zone to the narrative arc of the story; why is this metaphor so compelling within the story of the two biologists?

Aristotle taught that swallows spent the winters underwater in torpor. Today this idea seems foolish. Examine your own beliefs of the natural world—what ideas do you have that may, in the future, seem foolish? Do they seem foolish to you now? Does the fact that Aristotle believed swallows overwinter underwater make him a fool? Why or why not?

In *Soroche*, Zaga derives great pleasure from giving her money away. Yet she does not give her money to her family or even necessarily to those who ordinarily would be called "needy". Instead, she gives her money to well-organized institutions such as art museums. Why do you think she gave her money to these types of organizations? Why didn't she give any money to her sister?

The story *Birds with no Feet* seems to suggest that some people become famous through chance, while others remain in obscurity through chance. That is, desire, energy, devotion, and education have little to do with success. Do you ascribe to this notion? Why or why not? Discuss.

The Marburg Sisters is related from the first-person plural point of view. Discuss how this narrative technique influences the development of the story. Do the two sisters seem closer in relationship than they actually are, simply because through the early portions of the narrative they are presented as "we" instead of as "I" and "she"? Who is the actual narrator in the story? Why is this significant?

Describe the symptoms of ship fever. Is the disease usually fatal, or do most people recover? What aspects of the immigration process accounts for such high incidents of ship fever? How do you think the process could have been changed to reduce the mortality and suffering of the immigrants?



In the story *Ship Fever*, assume that Lauchlin and Mrs. Rowley survived their respective fevers. Do you think there is any chance that Lauchlin's love for Mrs. Rowley would have been reciprocated? Why or why not?

In the story *Ship Fever*, Arthur Adam travels to Ireland and writes newspaper articles about the suffering there. The articles appear in the Canadian press and, presumably, influence public opinion about the crisis. Do you believe that media reporters have an ethical or moral responsibility to cover difficult topics in an attempt to make a difference in the world? Do you think they can actually make a difference in the world? Discuss.

Many of the stories feature biological themes. Does this make you more (or less) interested in studying biology? Why?

Many of the stories feature fictionalized representations of historic persons. Do you think that this is a legitimate technique of narrative fiction? How might the fictional portrayal of a historic person change your opinion of that person's actual historicity? Discuss.