

Shotgun Lovesongs Study Guide

Shotgun Lovesongs by Nickolas Butler

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Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Butler, Nickolas. *Shotgun Lovesongs*. Thomas Dunne Books, March 11, 2004. Kindle.

Life in a small town can be both a blessing and a curse, the reader learns in the novel *Shotgun Lovesongs* by Nickolas Butler. The people in small towns can be both embracing and smothering, helpful and crippling. As adults, four men who grew up in a small town discover themselves trying to achieve success in careers and marriage while still trying to impress each other. The way in which the men deal with their regrets and their successes sometimes alienates them from one another. After major life changes they all struggle to reconcile their relationships and maintain their friendships.

Of the five friends, Lee is believed to be a success because he has earned worldwide fame for his music. He endeared himself to the community because the album that skyrocketed him to fame was written about Little Wing, the small town in which he and his three childhood friends — Henry, Kip, and Ronny — grew up. Henry never left Little Wing. He married his childhood sweetheart, Beth, and took over his father's dairy farm. Kip made his fortune trading commodities. He returned to Little Wing to buy the town's deteriorating feed mill and bring it back to life. The mill needed so much work that Kip has teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. Ronny was a rodeo star until he fell and hit his head while drunk. The head injury caused permanent brain damage. Ronny was no longer able to ride in the rodeo. His friends pitied him because they thought he would never have a successful life or be able to find love after his accident.

The conflicts between the men begin when Kip is married to Felicia. He invites all of his friends with the exception of Ronny. Because Lee is particularly protective of Ronny, he insists to Kip that Ronny be included. When Lee sees the amount of alcohol at the bachelor party he immediately realizes it might not have been the best idea to have Ronny included. The evening turns out successfully, however, because Ronny gets the phone numbers of both the women who worked as strippers at the party. He and one of the women, Lucy, soon begin dating. Lee and Kip's relationship is further strained when Lee and his actress girlfriend Chloe arrive at the wedding to discover that Kip has told the paparazzi they would be there. Lee is especially angry because he has been sold out to the paparazzi in his hometown, a place he treasures because he does not have to be a music star there.

Lee and Chloe get married in a fancy New York ceremony. Lee moves to New York to live with Chloe because he could not convince her to move to Little Wing. The marriage only lasts four months. Lee returns to his home in Little Wing disappointed, depressed, and feeling like a failure. In his distress he tells Henry about a one-night stand that he and Beth had before Henry and Beth were married. Even though the encounter had been during a time when Henry and Beth were not even dating, Henry is still angry and feels betrayed by both Beth and Lee because he was never told about the incident. Not only is Henry and Lee's relationship ruined, but Beth and Henry's relationship is now troubled.



Although no one had ever thought it would happen to him, Ronny gets engaged to Lucy who is pregnant with his child. Kip arranges for the two to get married in the mill and even pays all of the expenses. When Lee compliments Kip on doing a good thing for Ronny, Kip admits how far underwater he is financially with the mill. Lee later arranges to buy the mill, giving him a place to build a recording studio and music venue in Little Wing.

Henry and Lee's reconciliation is more difficult. Even though Ronny had asked Lee to apologize to Henry as a wedding gift for Lee, Le was unable to do so. It is after Ronny's wedding that Henry and Lee drink together in the VFW and finally talk out their problems. They also steal a jar of pickled eggs from the bar together, a prank that turns serious when Lee is shot in the leg after he throws an egg at a stranger's car. Because he does not want the publicity, Lee refuses to go the hospital to have to bullet removed. Instead he decides that he and Henry can remove it themselves. In the course of the pain, blood, and fight of getting the bullet out, the two men repair their relationship.



H

Summary

Each chapter in *Shotgun Lovesongs* is related from the first-person perspective of a variety of narrators. The first chapter, H, is related from Henry's perspective. The people of Lee's hometown, Little Wing, were not surprised when he became a music star. They stayed in touch with him, sending wedding invitations and such while he sent back gifts from the country in which he was touring. He always returned to the home he had made out of an old schoolhouse outside of Little Wing when he was not on tour. The songs on his albums were the songs of Little Wing town and the lives of the people there. Lee even mentioned these people sometimes in his songs.

The people of Little Wing were so important to Lee that he cut short a music tour to attend Kip's wedding. Henry, the narrator for this section, thought this decision was strange since Lee and Kip seemed least close of all the friends. Kip had just returned from Chicago where he had worked for nine years trading commodities. Back in Little Wing, Kip bought the dilapidated feed mill downtown and renovated it.

Henry next describes their friend Ronny Taylor. Ronny was an alcoholic who had spent his life riding in rodeos. One night when he was drunk he fell and hit his head hard. The sheriff arrested Ronny because he was caught urinating in public. Although the sheriff did not know, Ronny's accident had caused his brain to bleed. When he was finally taken to the hospital, Ronny already had irreparable brain damage. Henry describes him as a "slowed-down version of himself" (6).

Ronny went through detox while he was in the hospital. Because his parents had died when he was in his twenties, everyone in the town pitched in to take care of Ronny. After his accident he could not ride in the rodeo any more. He had not finished high school and had no skills. Henry learned through the grapevine that it was Lee who paid Ronny's hospital bills. Henry reasoned it was only right because Ronny had been a fan of Lee before Lee was even famous.

When they received their invitations to Kip's wedding, the friends were surprised to see that Lee would be singing at the wedding. Lee later told Henry and his wife Beth that he had agreed to sing at the wedding without thinking. He considered that perhaps he should have put more thought into the decision. During this same dinner with Henry and Beth, Lee told his friends that he was dating an actress named Chloe. He told them that he would be bringing her to the wedding. Henry briefly wondered what it would be like to have Lee's life.

Kip's bachelor party went badly because he did not invite Ronny. Lee was irate and insisted Ronny be included. Lee gave Ronny the souvenir shirt Kip had bought for all those invited to the party. When Lee saw all of the alcohol involved he realized it had been a bad idea to have Ronny there. He asked Henry to help keep an eye on Ronny.



At the golf course where the party was to be held, Kip had arranged to partner with Lee while Henry and Ronny were together. After the golfing, when Ronny saw the strippers, the other men seemed to make fun of the way he stared at them. When Lee and Kip finally arrived at the party it was nearly dusk. Lee was irate because Kip had not only made them play 36 holes but had also badly beaten Lee. Kip laughed at Lee's inability to golf well and made him count every shot. Lee commented that Kip should not have treated him that badly, especially since Lee was a superstar, making a use of his fame to which Lee rarely stooped. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Lee apologized to Henry for what he had said.

The day of Kip's wedding, Henry and Beth went to Lee's house for brunch. They picked up Ronny on the way. Lee and Chloe were smoking joints and watching a herd of deer when Henry, Beth, and Ronny pulled up in the front yard in the truck. They all sat together on the porch and smoked joints until they realized they were about to be late for the wedding. When they pulled up to the barn where the wedding would be held, they were only a few minutes late but Lee realized he had forgotten his guitar.

Their thoughts were interrupted when they noticed a group of paparazzi headed toward them. Lee was clearly furious. At the barn, Lee grabbed Kip by the necktie and cursed at Kip for inviting the photographers to his home. He told Kip he would sing one song but that after that, they would be done. Instead of singing by himself during the ceremony, Lee invited the attendees to sing with him the song I Can't Help Falling in Love with You.

Later, at the outdoor reception, Lee was again angered when a helicopter with a photographer inside hovered over the party. Ronny yelled at them to leave his friend alone. Chloe apologized and Henry sensed she was sincere. Lee moved to New York after the wedding. Several months later, he and Beth received a wedding invitation from Lee. He included four airline tickets and told them to bring Ronny and his date along.

Analysis

This story involves as its main characters four men — Lee, Ronny, Kip, and Henry — who have been friends since childhood. These friends now have careers and different lives but they find themselves back together in Little Wing, the town in which they grew up. Henry, who narrates this first section, is a farmer who has stayed in Little Wing all his life. He married his childhood friend Beth and they had two children. Although they do not have much, Henry and Beth are happy. After a debilitating brain injury, Ronny, who made his living in the rodeo, is living in Little Wing again full time.

Lee and Kip have both made their fortunes though they have done so in different ways. Lee is a musician. He is often on tour but always returns to Little Wing. He considers it his home. Kip has made his money by trading commodities. When he returns to Little Wing he buys the town's old feed mill and renovates, hoping for restaurants and shops to locate there.



Lee and Ronny have a special relationship in which Lee serves as Ronny's caretaker. Henry explains the close relationship between the two is only right since Ronny was the one who believed in Lee and his music even before Lee became famous. After Ronny's accident Lee takes Ronny under his wing. He pays all of Ronny's medical bills, and takes care of him financially.

It is Lee's affection for Ronny that causes a break in the relationship between Lee and Kip. Although they were not particularly close, Kip had asked Lee to sing at his upcoming wedding. Lee gets angry with Kip because Kip invites everyone except Ronny to the bachelor party.

Lee and Kip's relationship is not helped by the fact that Kip has paparazzi at his wedding that descend immediately on Lee and his new actress girlfriend, Chloe. Lee makes good on his promise to sing at Kip's wedding but tells him after that, he will have nothing to do with him any longer.

Lee's anger comes from the fact that he does not want publicity to follow him to his hometown of Little Wing. He comes home in order to be himself, not a rock star. By drawing the photographers to Little Wing, Kip has broken Lee's feeling of security in Little Wing.

It appears that Ronny is the only one of the friends that might never get married. Henry has already been married for quite some time. Kip marries in this section while Lee gets engaged at the end of the chapter. When Henry thinks about Ronny and his situation, he thinks: "It made me sad to think that Ronny himself might never be married" (18). Notice the author's description of the way that Ronny gets a good deal of pleasure in watching the strippers at Kip's bachelor party do their thing. Ronny leaves the evening with the phone numbers of both of these girls which foreshadows his later involvement with one of them.

Significant also in this section is Ronny's alcoholism. Before his accident, Ronny had often gotten drunk, especially after hard nights at the rodeo. As Henry says, drink became "his lover and his lullaby, his needle and his pillow" (16). It was because he was drunk that Ronny fell, causing his brain injury. During his time in the hospital, Ronny had gotten clean from alcohol. One of the things that Lee did in order to take care of his friend was taking care to keep him away from alcohol. Ronny's affection for alcohol will be important later on in the story.

There are several literary techniques included in the text of this novel. One of these techniques used by the author is oxymoron. An oxymoron is a statement that includes two contradictory terms. In this case "a cool inferno" (19) is an oxymoron. Personification is also seen in this section. Henry describes his hairline in a way that personifies it. He says that his "hairline looked almost cowardly, creeping away from my eyebrows" (30). The hairline is described as being "cowardly" and "creeping," two things an inanimate object, like a hairline, cannot do.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the relationships between the four men introduced in this section of the novel. Who is closest among the friends? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Lee consider Little Wing his home? Why does it anger him so much when Kip calls the paparazzi there?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the tone of the novel thus far. How does the author develop this tone?

Vocabulary

gilded, trinkets, fallow, deter, derelict, delineated, repose, inevitably, prodigious, belligerent, defiance, logistics, desiccated, pungent, unfathomably, diverged, incandescent, convoluted, tantamount, soliloquy, imperceptibly, diorama, paltry, belligerence, virile, embellished, eluded, pixelated, resplendent, stanchions, gloaming, absconding

L-R

Summary

In L, Lee narrates and describes the events after the wedding when the photographers drove down Lee's long driveway to his house to find him and take pictures. He chased them off with his Ithaca shotgun and then put a chain across his driveway. Apart from the paparazzi, Lee believed the weeks with Chloe at his house were some of the happiest in his life. He hoped Chloe would fall in love with Wisconsin. He enjoyed the way they could eat together at the VFW with the other townspeople treating them like everyone else. When Lee asked Chloe if she would like to live in Wisconsin, she told him she liked her life in New York. He wondered how he could explain to Chloe how much he liked Little Wing, and that it was there that he had found his voice.

In K, Kip narrates and describes climbing to the top of the mill with Henry, Ronny, and Lee. They drank and all of them except Kip smoked joints. He remembered that through the years while other buildings along the town's Main Street were demolished, someone always stepped in at the last minute and saved the old mill.

He remembered how he and his friends would look at the stars from the top of the mill. Lee and Ronny liked sunsets on the silos while Kip and Henry liked the mornings and the sunrises. He realized Lee was different from the rest of them when Lee first indicated to Kip that he could hear music in the sunsets. No matter how hard he tried, Kip could never hear anything. He remembered Lee laughing at him because he could not hear what Lee heard.

When Kip returned to Little Wing, Felicia always asked him why he had wanted to move back to that small town. He knew it was because he wanted to show his friends that he had made something of himself. When he does visit the silos, like he did with his friends, he realizes he is all alone there. He wishes he were back in bed with Felicia or even back in Chicago.

In R, Ronny narrates. He admits that he misses his life in the rodeo. He is not sure what to do with himself any longer. He is irritated by the way people treat him like he does not have any sense, particularly when they change the television to a station they think he would like when he is capable of tuning it to what he wants to watch. What Ronny wants to do is to leave Little Wing. Up until the time he met Lucy, Ronny would try to run away from town about three times a year but felt there was a strange pull that kept people coming back to Little Wing.

One day when Ronny had walked away from town it was Eddy who brought him back. They ate together in the town's one restaurant. Eddy seemed to understand Ronny was bored and suggested he could get him a job. After that day, however, Eddy never talked to Ronny about a job again or indicated he had found work for Ronny.



Analysis

Two of the couples in this novel quickly hit a glitch in their relationships when they discover they have different ideas about where they want to live. Both Kip and Lee want to return to Little Wing. Felicia moves to Little Wing with Kip but does not understand why he wants to live there. When Lee asks Chloe if she wants to live in Little Wing, she at first will not answer his question and then she tells Lee “People like you and me, Lee, we don’t live in small towns” (47). This explains why Lee moves to New York and leaves his friend Ronny behind.

Even though Lee does move to New York with Chloe he wonders how he should explain to Chloe that he loves Little Wing because it is the place where he found his voice and where he recorded the album that made him famous. In addition, Lee felt at home in Little Wing. It was a place where he felt he could be himself.

Kip, on the other hand, wanted to be in Little Wing for other reasons. He remembered Lee making fun of him when he could not hear the music in the sunsets when they sat on the silos of the mill as teens. Now, Kip wants to be able to gloat to his friends that he has made something of himself. Instead of being able to gloat, however, Kip most often finds himself alone on the silos. He wishes that he could go back to Chicago.

Another person who wants to leave Little Wing is Ronny. He admits he does not like the way people treat him even though he knows they are not trying to belittle him intentionally. “I am a man. I’m a goddamned person. And I’m restless as hell” (58). He recounts an experience in which Eddy seemed to sense his restlessness and offered to try to find him a job. After that day, however, Eddy never mentioned the job again. It is as if Eddy made the promise only to appease Ronny.

The structure of this novel becomes more clear as the story progresses. Each chapter is notated only by a single capital letter — H, K, L, R and B. These letters correspond to the name of the character who is narrating that particular part of the novel — Henry, Kip, Lee, Ronny, and Beth. Each narrator narrates his section from the first person point of view. The narration takes place in the present with the narrator looking back on the events of his life.

In this section the shotgun, Lee’s Ithaca, is an important symbol because it represents the beginning of his fame. He bought the gun as a gift for himself when his first album went platinum for the first time.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think the relationship between Lee and Chloe will work out? Why or why not? What do you think Chloe means when she says “People like you and me, Lee, we don’t live in small towns” (47)?



Discussion Question 2

Does it surprise you to learn that Ronny does not like living in Little Wing? Why or why not? In his section of narration does he present himself differently from the impression you got from Henry's description?

Discussion Question 3

What does success seem to mean to Kip? What does it mean to Lee? How are the men fundamentally different?

Vocabulary

pilfered, derelict, sporadic, brothel, scrounged, cyclopic, acquiesced, epitaphs, famished, proprietors



B

Summary

In B, Beth describes being hurt that her children did not appear to be sad when she and Henry left them with their grandparents to attend Lee's wedding. She wants to feel like they would miss her even though she is looking forward to seeing the landmarks of New York she had never seen before. She wonders how people living in a big city could grow accustomed to the buildings which surrounded them when she is still amazed by the buildings around her in Little Wing.

Kip drove Henry, Beth, Ronny, and Ronny's date, Lucy, to the airport. She was one of the strippers from Kip's bachelor party. Beth was happy not to be the only female for a change. She remembered how the people of the town had ignored Kip and Felicia for several months after his wedding. Felicia had finally thrown a fit in the grocery store when someone did not return her hello, calling the people "backwater hillbillies" (66). Henry and Beth finally invited them to dinner. When they arrived, Kip went to find Henry.

Soon after Kip left, Felicia began pouring wine. She told Beth she wanted to "tie one on tonight" (66). She voiced her concern to Beth that she could not compete with the friendship between Kip and the others. Felicia had also been put off by the attitude of the townspeople toward her. Beth apologized and Felicia shared with her that Kip had called the paparazzi to the wedding in order to get some money to help pay the bills from the mill. She admitted that he had spent so much on the building that they would be bankrupt if it were not for her job. Later, Kip and Felicia argued in the dining room. Henry asked Beth if anything was wrong. Beth suggested he rescue Kip and go to town to get more alcohol.

After they had gone to bed that night, Beth told Henry that Kip was going bankrupt on the mill. She did not tell him that Kip had taken money from the paparazzi because she wanted the town to begin to heal from that experience. She imagined that Kip might actually be able to make the town grow.

During the drive to the airport, Beth thought about how she had once been in love with Lee. She thought he had been in love with her as well.

At the airport, Kip gave Beth a small package for Lee before they boarded the plane. While Beth tried not to gawk once they landed in New York, Ronny did not attempt to disguise his amazement. At the hotel, Ronny made it clear that he and Lucy planned a romantic interlude before dinner at Chloe's that night. The concierge looked shocked when Ronny slapped Lucy's rear in the middle of the lobby. Henry invited Beth for a walk but instead Beth suggested they make love as well. They walked to the park afterwards. Even though Beth had wanted to go into some of the shops, she felt too much like a tourist.



Beth gives a short history of Lee's climb to fame as a musician. Instead of going to college or a technical school, Lee had worked with different bands, many of which were short-lived. Even though nothing was seeming to pan out for Lee, his friends insisted that the he would one day be famous.

Beth notes that after college, she and Henry had broken up for a while. At the same time, Lee had split from his band. He had been depressed and was living in a rented room near Little Wing. He had sent a letter to Beth's parents' home. She had driven home from Wabasha where she was working two jobs. She had gone to visit him at the boarding house where he lived. Lee showed her his room, and then showed her the chicken coop he had renovated to a recording studio and was working on an album. He had told her that he was laying down a track based on the sound of the fire crackling. They kissed several times during the evening. Lee was worried what they were doing was not right because Henry was his friend. He admitted to Beth that he had not wanted to come back home as a failure.

When they went back into the house where Lee was staying, Lee went to his room upstairs while Beth had gone to the room downstairs in which she was supposed to sleep. She thought about Lee sleeping above her. She dressed and prepared to leave. When she stood at the front door to put her boots on, she saw Lee at the top of the stairs. He looked at her with a smile on his face, and she went up the stairs to meet him.

Beth returns to her description of the visit to New York. The driver pointed out sights to Henry, Beth, Ronny, and Lucy as they drove. When they arrived at the building where a dinner for Lee and Chloe was to be held, the driver directed them to take the freight elevator up to the fourth floor. On the fourth floor, there were already about 150 people there. Lucy asked Ronny and Henry to go ahead, saying that she had something to ask Beth. Back on the street, Lucy told Beth she felt out of place. She did not know what she should tell people if they asked what she did for a living. Beth had not thought until that point that it would be enough for them to just be Lee's friends. Beth decided for them that if they were asked she would be either a chef or a restaurant owner while Lucy painted nude portraits.

Back at the party, Beth and Lucy were greeted by Chloe. They found Ronny near the table of food and joined Lee and Henry on the deck. They talked about the wedding, which would be nontraditional. Beth remembered at her wedding that she had briefly thought of Lee while making her vows to Henry. She felt as if she was betraying Henry at that point, and knew she could never tell him about what had happened between herself and Lee.

The next morning when Henry and Beth looked for a cafe, Beth thought of Mr. Killebrew, her eleventh grade art teacher. She remembered during one class that Henry had commented that only people in a big city would spend money on paintings. Lee had stated he thought painting was gay. Mr. Killebrew had stopped the slideshow they had been watching at the time and he stood and stared at the class. He had argued in favor of big cities. After they finished their breakfast, Beth convinced Henry to go to the art museum with her.



The wedding took place in a mansion. Beth felt out of place among the movie stars and famous persona. During the ceremony, Beth watched Chloe's face closely. She decided she did not think the marriage would last. Even during the long and passionate kiss, all Beth could think about was the fact that Chloe made her living by acting. Beth believed she was acting during the ceremony.

When the couple made its way to the table where Beth, Henry, and the others were sitting, Henry handed Lee the package that Kip had sent along. Lee opened it and discovered it was an elegantly framed picture of the mill. Lee seemed impressed but Beth noticed Chloe had a look that said that picture would never be displayed on her walls. Beth offered to take the photo home with her so it would be in Little Wing when Lee and Chloe came back. She assumed they would move back there. Lee said he would keep it with him because they had found a place in the city.

Beth suddenly felt sad. She missed home. She said to Henry that she was tired and they should go. They left Lucy and Ronny at the party. Beth was glad that Ronny had a woman just like everyone else. Outside, Henry and Beth walked for a while before Beth hailed a cab. She gave the cab driver a one hundred dollar bill and asked him to show them the sights. After driving for a short time, the cab driver stopped at the Brooklyn Bridge. He directed them to get out and look. As they looked at the bridge, they talked about memories of Mr. Killebrew and his love of the cities. When Henry told her that he had really liked Mr. Killebrew and that the teacher had tried to get him to go to college for painting, Beth was shocked to learn something new about her husband.

Later during the ride, Beth shared her belief that Lee and Chloe's marriage would not last. Henry said he felt as if Lee would not be coming back to Little Wing. He mourned because he and Lee had been friends since they were eight but Lee did not seem like himself any more.

Analysis

With Beth, Henry, Ronny, and Lucy traveling to New York for Lee's wedding, one of the focuses of this chapter is the contrast between life in New York—particularly of the rich and famous—and life in Little Wing. Although the author makes the city appear to be overwhelming for the people who attend Lee's wedding, he is also careful to note that he does not completely discourage big city living. Mr. Killebrew, the art teacher, is a character included to give the view that big cities are just as significant as small towns. He not only made sure that his class was able to travel to a big city to see art and culture, but also told them that big cities were of value because of the multitude of ideas that lived there. "‘And this is a good place,’ Killebrew said. ‘I love this town. But don't be so quick to disparage the city’" (113). His comment had come after Henry had stated that "‘Only in a big city would anyone be dumb enough to spend a lot of money on junk like that,’" (112) referring to art work.

Ronny is portrayed as the traditional country hick in the city. Not only is he awed by what he sees in the city, he is not counth enough to realize it is in bad taste to gawk so



obviously at what he sees around him. Even though he is an adult, his actions are childlike in his reaction to the wonder around him. Lucy, on the other hand, shares her fear with Beth that she will stand out and not be accepted by Lee and Chloe's friends simply because she is not famous. Her concern makes Beth aware that perhaps it will not be enough for them just to be Lee's friends, but that they need some other accreditation to be accepted by Lee's famous friends.

A potential conflict is introduced in this section of the novel when Beth describes how she and Lee had a one-night stand. It is apparent that Henry does not know about this incident. However, it is also apparent that Beth still nurses a crush on Lee because she indicates that she thought about Lee briefly at her wedding to Henry. She felt as if she were betraying Lee but could not help the brief thought. The fact that Beth still thinks about Lee and wonders what their life together might have been like will be significant later on in the novel.

Also significant about Beth's personality is the fact that she wants to try to reconcile people to one another as opposed to causing strife. This is demonstrated by the fact that she treats Felicia fairly and honestly when they finally invite Kip and Felicia to their house. Beth takes personal responsibility for causing Felicia to feel so alienated by the town. When Felicia tells Beth that Kip called the paparazzi to his wedding because he was so low on money, Beth chooses to tell Henry only part of the story because she knows it will upset him. She tells him that Kip is almost bankrupt because of the mill but does not tell him that Kip took money from the paparazzi. "I wanted things to heal, I wanted the town to start growing again," (74) Beth says of her decision to tell her husband only part of the story.

Important objects in this section include Lee's letter to Beth and Kip's wedding gift to Lee. Lee's letter to Beth is important because it represents her lifelong attraction to Lee. It was this letter that sparked off the night they had their single sexual encounter. Also significant is the picture of the mill in Little Wing that Kip gives to Lee as a wedding gift. This picture is important because the mill is an important part of Lee's hometown and also because it is a place that was important to the four boys and their friendship.

The desire for success is illustrated in this section through Lee's depression when he has to return home feeling like a failure. Even though he was struggling to find his place in the music world, the people of Little Wing insisted that he would be a star. Lee does not seem to be so sure of himself. He is depressed and disillusioned by the number of bands of which he has been a part of that have broken up. Lee remembers the way that Ronny was celebrated when he came back to Little Wing after having won a big rodeo. He wants that kind of homecoming for himself, not one where he is ashamed to be seen.

This section of the novel is filled with literary techniques that make the writing and emotion in the novel more powerful. At Lee and Chloe's wedding, for instance, Beth indicates "We took our seats like nominees at an award show in which it was very unlikely our names would be called" (115). This comparison shows how out of place Beth and the others felt among the rich and famous. When Felicia comes to visit Beth



for the first time she describes their house as looking “like a grenade had just exploded inside the living room” (68). Perhaps this simile also uses a little hyperbole, or exaggeration, to help the reader understand just how messy Beth believed her house was.

Also in reference to the way that Beth and the others treated Felicia just after the wedding: “For all of our Middlewestern niceness, I realized that we, that I, could be every bit as cold as our longest season” (83). Beth compares the way that she and others treated Felicia, a newcomer to their town, to the long, cold, dark, depressing winters the area suffered. Finally, notice also an allusion to the story of the betrayal of Jesus Christ found in the Christian Bible. The rhetorical question “Why wouldn’t we want to sell out our best friends for a few pieces of silver?” (67) refers to the way Judas told Jesus’ enemies where he was for a payment of silver. In the same manner, Kip sold Lee and Chloe’s location to the paparazzi—people whom Lee considered the enemy when they came looking for him in his hometown—for money.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way Ronny is described as behaving during the trip to New York. Why do the people there seem to be so surprised by his actions?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the significance of the picture of the mill. How do Lee and Chloe’s reactions to the picture differ? What do these different reactions perhaps mean for their relationship?

Discussion Question 3

What does it mean that Beth and Lee had a one-night stand? How does this forecast coming trouble in the story?

Vocabulary

undulations, impeccably, exuberantly, monstrosity, garishly, vernal, suave, incessant, banal, discordant, inevitably, solidarity, inhibitions, literate, tantamount, gesticulations, disparage, obtuseness, vernal, primitive, stymied



L

Summary

This chapter is related from Lee's first person point of view. When Lee pulled his U-Haul up to his driveway in Little Wing he discovered fan mail had fallen out of the mailbox and was scattered over the ground and in the ditch. He had left his house only six months prior. He had been single then. Now he was single again. He and Chloe were getting a divorce. Inside, he was happy to discover there was a single beer inside the refrigerator. He left the front door open, went to the bathroom and took a shower. He went to sleep lying in the tub.

When he woke the water had turned cold. He dressed and was shocked to discover that a coyote had found its way into his house. He stood in shock for a moment before he shooed it away. His fear made him feel alive. He realized that he loved Little Wing because it was where he made the album that made him famous; it was the place and people who believed in him.

Lee called Henry. Beth answered but he did not tell her he was getting a divorce because he was embarrassed. Lee admitted to himself that he was envious of the life that Beth and Henry had together. He also admitted he had been halfway in love with Beth his entire life. Beth questioned Lee, finally asking him if he and Chloe were okay. He admitted they were getting a divorce. When Beth put down the phone to call Henry, he wondered if he could have made Beth love him. He whispered into the phone that he loved her even as he chided himself for trying to destroy Beth and Henry's lives as well. When Henry came to the phone and asked what was going on with Lee, Lee asked him to meet him at the U-Haul lot in two hours.

Lee now changes the subject and talks about how the album Shotgun Lovesongs came out of his own feeling of complete failure. He says he did not know how he had wound up back in Little Wing after being married to Chloe and feeling like a failure again. After their honeymoon, he and Chloe had gone out to dinner one evening. Chloe had looked up from her cell phone and told him she was not sure their relationship was working out. Lee was angry and sick. He felt as if she were reciting lines in a movie. She told him she was going to spend the night at a friend's house and they could talk the next day. He took her hand and she gave him what he described as "that look" (140). He knows Chloe has realized he is just a regular guy from Wisconsin.

Going back to his discussion of his album, Lee describes how he returned to Wisconsin feeling like a failure and thinking how Kip was a success. Lee resented Kip's success even though Kip had never done anything to him. By that time Ronny had also begun to win on the rodeo circuit. People considered him a celebrity. Lee wanted to be welcomed back home the way the people of Little Wing welcomed Ronny when he came back home.



Lee's parents had divorced and left Little Wing while he was in college. For that reason he found the boarding house and lived with Bea and the Mexicans. Because he was the only musician living in the area, Lee discovered that he did not really have anyone he could share ideas with. He spent the first few days back in Little Wing walking and feeling lonely. It was while he was walking that he discovered the chicken coop. He fixed it up as a recording studio. It was one day when Bea criticized him for calling himself a musician but never playing any music that Lee began to get serious about his music again. He began writing out songs and poems in the chicken coop. He used the sound in the coop, the crackling of the fire, and the blowing of the wind as the background for his musical tracks.

One day he mailed the letter to Beth. He was indecisive and nervous. At the time, he thought that he just wanted to be close to Beth. He refuses to regret that night with Beth. Of all the women he had slept with, he admits that was the one he most remembered. Beth had left before dawn and the Mexicans had made fun of him for his guest. It was that day, however, that Lee finished his album, working nonstop. As he worked, he felt like he was pressing a shotgun to his own back, forcing himself to complete the album. He felt pressure to prove that he was not a failure. The album was cheap to produce but despite the low budget was still selling. He noted that all of the love songs on the album were about Beth.

Lee met Henry at the U-Haul lot. On the way to the grocery store, Lee explained how things had gone wrong and how Chloe was liked by too many men. They went grocery shopping and Lee bought a thousand dollars worth of beer and liquor. At first Lee told Henry to invite Beth and the kids over but when Henry realized Lee was crying at the sink, he changed his mind. Henry went to Lee and hugged him. It was at that point that Lee realized that Henry was a better man than he was. After he finished crying, Lee asked Henry not to leave him alone.

Later, sitting by the creek and sharing a joint, Lee apologized for the way he had acted. Henry asked if he had talked to Ronny. He told Lee that Ronny was not only getting married but that he and Lucy were expecting a baby. Henry admitted that he thought Lee was leaving them for good but Lee said he would never do that.

Lee did tell Henry he had something he had to tell him. Before he could stop himself, Lee told Henry about his one night stand with Beth. Henry had stood up and raised his fist over Lee, asking Lee who he was. Henry told Lee they were done and that Lee needed to stay away from his family. On his way out of the driveway Henry picked up a rock and threw it through Lee's kitchen window.

Analysis

The central conflict in the novel emerges in this chapter. In a moment of self pity, Lee feels as if he needs to tell Henry that he loves Beth and that the two of them had a sexual encounter years prior, during a period of Henry and Beth's life when they were not actively dating each other. Lee's admission angers Henry. At one point Henry even



asks Lee to stop talking but Lee seems to be on a crash course with disaster. Lee even tries to convince himself to stop talking but cannot seem to do so.

Lee may be thinking of Beth and their one night stand because he is returning to Little Wing feeling the same sort of failure that he felt when he returned to Little Wing after having been unable to make it as a musician. It was the return trip to Little Wing when he had reached out to Beth originally. He had just wanted someone near him. After they were together, however, Lee was finally able to finish the album on which he had been working. Since he admits to the reader that all of the love songs on that album were about Beth, he may think of her as his inspiration for the album that skyrocketed him to fame.

Lee returns to Little Wing feeling like a failure again because he was unable to make things work with Chloe. Not only is he getting divorced, he was married to her for only four months before things went bad. He believes Chloe has seen through his superstar image and realizes what an average person Lee really is. He has even heard rumors that she had moved on to other men even before their divorce became final.

Lee not only feels bad about his broken marriage, he also feels bad about the way he made his friends feel when he left them for New York. As he puts it "I hadn't been able to stay married for even a year. I couldn't make her love me. And to make matters worse, I'd abandoned my hometown and all my best friends to act like a big shot in New York" (135). It is almost as if Lee feels like he has sold out his friends by attempting to make Chloe happy. Notice also Lee seems unfamiliar with what love is all about since it is impossible to "make" someone happy or "make" them love in return. When Lee left for New York he believed he was doing what was best for his relationship. Chloe, however, does not seem as if she were serious about the relationship from the beginning. She seems only interested in drawing attention to herself.

Lee claims that Chloe's announcement that she no longer wanted to be married came as a surprise to him. When she first looked at him during the dinner conversation and brought up the fact she did not think their marriage was working out, Lee felt both sick and terrified. It was clear that Chloe had already made up her mind that she was leaving; there was nothing he could do about it. Although the scene is serious, the way in which Lee took Chloe's hand when he tried to convince her they could not call their marriage off yet lightens the tone. "I took her hand with more pressure than gently. I took her hand a little less firmly than if she were dangling off the side of a building" (140). The pressure with which Lee takes Chloe's hand is described as being a little more firm than gentle and a little less than firm than if he were trying to save her from falling. The reader recognizes there is a great range of firmness between those two ends of the scale.

Before Lee tells Henry about his one night stand with Beth, Henry shares with Lee that he thought Lee was gone from Little Wing for good. The reader may recall that after the wedding, Henry had confided in Beth that he feared Lee would not come back home. When Lee returns to his house and sees the chain that he put across the driveway, he indicates he had even felt when he had put that chain up that was leaving home for



good, with the chain representing distance between Lee and Little Wing. Notice in the description of his act of removing the chain that Lee describes how he “set the chain down in a shiny pile” (126). This reference to the chain being shiny indicates it had not been up long enough that it had rusted or even gotten dirty.

There is another hint given in this section that may explain why Lee feels as if he has to tell Henry about his one-night stand with Beth. At Kip’s wedding, after Chloe met Henry, Chloe had made the comment to Lee that Henry was so attractive she would be making plans to steal him from Beth if she was not in love with Lee. “I’ll say this, there were warning signs that we weren’t going to make it, me and Chloe,” (137) Lee says of the relationship. Her comment about Henry was apparently one of those signs. Not only that, the comment had to have made Lee jealous of his old friend if his fiancée was willing to say so openly she wished she could find a way to take him away from his wife. Lee may feel as if he is settling some score with Henry that Henry never even realized existed when Lee shares his own affection for Beth.

The author continues to employ literary techniques to develop tone, mood, and character in this section of the novel. Personification is used in at least one place in this section. The fan mail that is lying on the ground around Lee’s mail box is given human qualities when it is indicated that Lee had no idea “how long they’d sat in the ditch, their ink bleeding out” (125). Instead of having blood to bleed out, the letters had ink to bleed out. The act of writing songs in the cold chicken coop in the snow is described in terms of cold weather: “Songs started slow, then thawed and began to flow” (153). This compares the songs to frozen liquid, which will only thaw when exposed to heat. A simile is used to describe how Lee felt as he told Henry he should call Beth and invite her and the kids. He had no idea how tired he was but mentioned that he felt “like a very old truck whose odometer has lost track of its miles” (161).

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Lee told Henry about the one night stand between himself and Beth?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think the coyote in this section of the novel represents?

Discussion Question 3

Are you surprised that Chloe and Lee’s marriage did not last? Why or why not? Support your answer with examples from the book.

Vocabulary

galore, semaphores, viable, eccentric, quorum, discombobulated, fabrication, fetish, incoherent, vernacular, aplomb, homage, suffice, delineated



H-K

Summary

In H, Henry remembers that his father did not have any friends when Henry was a child. He knew his mother and father were busy with the dairy herd, and that his father counted on his wife and family to be his friends. He thought his father was happy, and that he was proud of him, Beth, and the children. On the other hand, though, Henry felt in his own life that there had never been a time that he had been without friends. He wondered if his father did not have friends because he did not want to open the door to opportunity. Henry remembered all of the times that Lee visited them and felt violated. He decided the best thing to do might be to be alone so he would not have to worry about having that sort of trouble again.

Henry began painting again after Lee's wedding. He painted nature scenes that consisted mostly of sky. When he finished each painting, he would burn it. There were only two that Henry decided to keep. These he took to a store and donated, telling the manager they had been given to him by a family member. He had decided to let the paintings hang in the store for a year. If no one bought them, he would buy them and burn them. One day, he went into the store to discover that one of his paintings had been sold. The manager did not know who bought it and Henry decided not to try to find out who it was.

Henry blamed himself for the shock he felt when he found out that Beth and Lee had slept together. He thought it was because he did not know Beth well enough, like his father and mother had known one another. The new knowledge about Beth makes Henry think that they do not really love one another.

In B, Beth describes meeting Felicia at the VFW. Over a pitcher of beer, Felicia announced that she and Kip were separating. Felicia said the separation was coming because Kip did not want children. She wondered why she had even come to Little Wing because her life had been a disaster since she had moved. Beth ordered them special shots because she was distraught that Felicia's marriage was ending in divorce. She also feared that her own marriage might end in divorce because Henry was as mad at her as she could ever remembering him being after he learned about the one-night stand.

Beth describes the night when Henry came home from Lee's, after he learned about the one-night stand. Beth felt she should have known what was wrong when he sat in his truck and did not come inside. When she went outside to check on him there were tears in his eyes but he would not look her in the face. He ordered her not to touch him. She begged him to tell her what was wrong but he just turned the volume up on the radio. Even though she did not know what Lee had told Henry, she knew something had come between them. She heard him come in at midnight. Four hours later she found him sleeping on the couch. When she learned what was bothering Lee so badly, Beth began



crying because she knew how badly Henry was hurt. Henry then shared with Beth that Lee had said he believed he was in love with her.

Back at the bar, Felicia said she had wondered why Kip had wanted to come back to Little Wing, if he had never fit in with the people. When Felicia told Beth she wanted a houseful of babies, Beth could not look at Felicia because she did not want her to see the shock and disbelief in her eyes.

It was when Beth realized she was losing her family that she had taken the opportunity to apologize to Henry one Saturday morning. She apologized both sexually and verbally. Henry admitted even though the one night stand had taken place before they were married, it upset him because Lee was his best friend. When Henry asked Beth if she was still in love with him, she punched him in the arm telling him at the same time that she was in love with him.

Back at the bar, Beth suggested to Felicia that she make a mistake with her birth control pills that would allow her to get pregnant. Felicia did not want to trick Kip but Beth asked her what other plan she had. Beth suggested she could go back to Chicago and raise the baby on her own.

In K, Kip sits on the top of the grain silos and remembers the days he could go driving just to get away from everything. On one of these trips he had met a farmer, Harvey Bunyan, whom he had given his card.

Kip thought he should not have come back to Little Wing, should not have brought Felicia to Little Wing, and perhaps also should not even have gotten married. He believed he was not a good person. He was good at money and good at money only. With people he was helpless. He believed the people with whom he tried to socialize believed he was being cruel.

He had thought if he bought the mill it would change things between himself and the community. The mill is renovated and bringing business to the town. Kip even had the greeting Welcome to Little Wing painted on the silos instead of putting his own name up there. He believes these are signs that he is trying to do the right thing.

He thinks about how Felicia left him because he did not want to have children. He had wanted to have everything perfect in their lives for when they got married. Even though she had told him she wanted to have children, he did not take her seriously. Since she left him, he did not know what was next for him. He was buried in debt from the mill. He thought about jumping from the mill but did not want to ruin Ronny's wedding. There was also a grand reopening of the mill scheduled for Saturday morning while the wedding would take place that evening.

Kip had noticed at Lucy's baby shower that Henry and Lee did not speak to one another. Kip had asked someone who had said it was because Chloe was sleeping around on him. It was later that day when he discovered Felicia in their bedroom crying because she did not have children.



Kip remembers the day when he was still working in his office in Chicago when his secretary told him he had a call from the man named Harvey Bunyan whom he had met at the gas station. At first Kip did not recognize the man but then remembered the farmer. He took the call. It turned out that Harvey and his wife were in town for a wedding. They wanted to know if they could meet him for lunch. Kip started to refuse but Harvey's wife, Edith, got on the phone. She said that Harvey swore that Kip looked like their son, Thomas, who had been killed in Fallujah by an IED. Although Kip did not want to do so, Edith convinced him to meet with them.

They met at a pizza place. He learned about their lives, their farm and their son. They told Kip that he not only looked like Thomas but also had some of the same mannerisms. Kip paid for the meal. When they parted, Edith gave him a hug while Harvey shook his hand and told him that he thought that he and his son could have been friends. Kip invited them to his apartment for breakfast.

Kip got cards from Harvey and Edith for years. When Felicia had asked if they should invite them to the wedding, Kip had said they did not need to do so. Shortly after the wedding, Kip had gotten a letter from Edith saying that Harvey had died. Kip felt bad that he had not invited them to the wedding and included them in his life. For this reason, and others, he did not believe that he could not be trusted as a father.

Analysis

Relationships are the focus in this section of the novel. Lee and Henry's relationship is over, Beth and Henry's relationship is damaged, Felicia is considering leaving Kip, and Kip is contemplating suicide because he does not believe he is a good person. The only people for whom a relationship seems to be working out well is Lucy and Ronny. They are getting married and are expecting a baby.

Felicia is upset with Kip because she wants children. She claims she told him from the beginning of their time together that she wanted children. He did not listen to her carefully enough and seems surprised Felicia is leaving him because he does not want kids. To make matters worse, Kip and Felicia are financially strapped because of the mill. Kip has spent so much money on the dilapidated old building in an attempt to do something good for the town and be thought well of that he has put his own family in financial jeopardy.

The beauty of having all four of the male friends narrate their sides of the story shines in this section as Kip is able to explain why he is afraid to have children. He believes that he is not good with people but instead relates well only to money. He uses as an example the relationship that once started between himself and an elderly couple who had lost their son to an IED in the war in Fallujah. They believed Kip looked like their son and adopted him as a surrogate son. They sent card and letters, and even came to visit him once. It was only after Harvey, the man in the couple, died that Kip realized he should have treated this couple better. He remembers telling Felicia they did not need to invite them to the wedding. Looking back, he thinks how it would have been a simple



thing for him to invite them and would have brought them a good deal of joy. Because he did not handle this relationship well, Kip does not believe that he can be trusted with children.

Dealing with regrets is also a focus in this section as Kip indicates he wishes he had never married Felicia, had never moved back to Little Wing, and had never bought the mill. At this point in his life, Kip's regrets do not do him any good. He has to find some way to live with the consequences of his actions. He considers suicide but has the forethought to remember Ronny and Lucy's wedding. He decides not to mess up their special day for them.

Notice the way in which Beth's section of the novel, the one in which she meets Felicia in the bar because Felicia wants to talk alternates between sections about Felicia's marriage and Beth's marriage. Beth worries that her relationship with Henry might be on the same path as Felicia and Kip's because of the one-night stand that she had with Lee.

Henry, meanwhile, wonders if his father's way of life, in which he had no male friends, was perhaps best because it kept him from having to worry that one of his friends might be messing around with his wife. Henry feels betrayed by both Lee and Beth. He worries he will never again feel comfortable having Lee in his house. Most dangerously, Henry somehow believes that Lee and Beth's one-night stand perhaps indicates that she never loved him. He worries that the basis of their relationship is faulty.

The author continues with the use of literary techniques to explore imagery in this section of the novel. For instance, Beth describes the jukebox in the VFW as being "so old it seemed almost senile" (174). On top of the mill, Kip "watched the night sky crack itself like a broken window" (193). Both of these quotes are examples of personification in which inanimate objects are given characteristics of living things. The sky is no more able to crack itself than the jukebox can become senile.

Notice the flippancy in Kip's attitude as he says: "I figure, if you're going to go bankrupt, you may as well throw a party to mark the occasion" (197). Kip is one who seems to believe things will always go badly. For instance, he seems to connect with the plastic bag he sees being blown across the parking lot while he is talking to Harvey. "A plastic shopping bag blew between us, toward a barbed-wire fence where I knew it would become entangled" (191). Kip believes the bag, at one point floating free, is destined to get tangled up in a barbed wire fence. Although he is floating free at the time, Kip believes there will come a time when he, also, will get entangled in something.

It is symbolic in this section that Joyce, the bartender, smashed the potato chips for sale at the VFW. Another example of symbolism and foreshadowing is Beth's reference to the dusty jar of pickled eggs on the shelf behind the counter. This jar will play a large role in Henry and Lee's reconciliation later in the novel.



Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Felicia and Beth's views of their relationships.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss how Henry comes to the point that he believes that Beth does not love him because of the one-night stand. Do you think that Henry's fears are justified? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Kip's consideration of committing suicide. Why does he not go through with his plan? Do you think he is really as bad a person as he thinks he is?

Vocabulary

incinerate, tectonic, oblivious, solstice, condescendingly, spartanly, troubadour, spiel, reconciliation, detonate, resonate, impudent



R-K

Summary

In R, Ronny describes how a blizzard was set to hit Little Wing, Wisconsin, on the same day as his wedding to Lucy. On Friday, the day before the wedding, Ronny and Lee had driven to Eau Claire, a nearby town, to pick up their wedding suits. On the way home, Ronny asked Lee why he and Henry were not talking. He asked if it was because Lee was moving again. Lee said that it was not. Ronny thought about how he and Lucy were moving away from Little Wing. He had not told anyone yet but Chloe had found Lucy a job with a dance company in Chicago.

Ronny told Lee all he wanted was for everyone to be friends again. Lee admitted to Ronny he had done something wrong and Ronny tried to persuade him to apologize. He told Lee that all that he wanted as a wedding gift was for Lee and Henry to make up to one another.

Arriving back in Little Wing, Ronny suggested they go to his apartment but Lee said they should just stop at the VFW. When they stopped, Ronny thought it was strange that the lights were not on. Ronny was afraid they were not open but Lee insisted they were since the door was unlocked. Once they were inside, the lights came on and balloons fell from the ceiling. Ronny was surprised because he thought no one had arranged him a bachelor party. As Lee called for those in the bar to cheer for Ronny and Lucy's wedding, Ronny felt the baby kick.

During the party, one of Ronny's old friends, who did not know Ronny was not supposed to have alcohol, handed him a shot. Ronny drank it without thinking. No one noticed what Ronny was doing. He continued to drink until he was drunk. He did not remember Lucy leaving the party or any of his friends offering to walk him home. What Ronny remembered next was being far enough away from the VFW he could not see the lights any longer. All he could see was snow. He knew that he was lost. He kept walking with his bare hands outstretched. He sang one of Lee's songs. He finally decided to lie down but tried to force himself to stay awake.

In B, Beth was immediately afraid when the phone rang in the middle of the night. It was Lucy sobbing so hard that Beth could not understand what she was saying. She handed the phone to Henry and heard him tell Lucy he would be there soon. When Beth asked what was happening, Henry told her that they could not find Ronny. As Henry prepared to go join the search, Beth felt as if she would not see Henry again. She made him take food and drink as well as warm clothes with him when he left even though he was frustrated because she was slowing him down.

Beth sat down to read some magazines Felicia had given her. She saw a picture of Lee and Chloe and thought about the way that even though she and Lee had not slept with each other again after their one encounter, they had talked on the phone several nights



afterward. Beth had slept with other men but she had not felt the same way she had felt when she slept with Lee. She wondered if she had been thinking that if she betrayed Henry's longest friendship, that she could finally be free from Henry. When Ronny had called her out of the blue one day, she assumed he wanted to go on a date with her but it turned out that he wanted her to see him in action at the rodeo.

Beth went to the rodeo and even visited with Ronny at his hotel later that evening. They had some drinks in the lobby. Ronny told her about life in the rodeo. There was a tale of how he had gotten his boots. He and his friend Clint had seen a girl being molested by a man in the restroom of a restaurant where they were working. Ronny and Clint had stopped the attack and beaten the man. Ronny kept the boots as a souvenir.

Later in his room they continued to drink. Ronny told Beth she needed to get back together with Hank. He seemed to almost be reprimanding her as he explained that sowing one's wild oats was not all it was said to be. The narration continues with Ronny telling Beth that she would regret it if she did not marry Hank because he was a good man. Beth called Henry a week after her talk with Ronny. They got married within a year. She believed Ronny was an angel because he had called her at just the right time and helped her to get her life back on track.

In L, Lee dreamed he was a golden retriever. He woke to the sound of the phone ringing and thought perhaps it was Chloe. It was Lucy telling him that they could not find Ronny. Eddy had broken down his apartment door and he was not there. Lee directed her to call the police and the highway patrol. Lee met the others gathered for the search at the mill. Lee and Eddy paired up together.

Lee remembered how Ronny had called one night during dinner. Lee had not wanted to answer because he and Chloe were actually enjoying each other's company. Ronny had told him that he was getting married. Lee compared his wedding announcements. He had not made personal calls, just mailed invitations. As he talked to Ronny, he realized the way Ronny was doing it was the way a person was supposed to announce his wedding. Ronny had also asked Lee to be his best man. Back inside the restaurant Lee had announced to Chloe that Ronny was getting married. She did not look up from her phone and then insisted on leaving right away.

Back in Little Wing, Eddy suggested they head back to the mill. Lee insisted they keep looking. They finally found Ronny in the school playground. He was singing one of Lee's songs. A larger man heard them calling for help and carried Ronny back to the mill. Horns began to blow, indicating Ronny had been found and the search was over.

In K, Kip thought about his regrets. He wished he had talked with Felicia about everything that would affect their marriage including kids and the mill. He also regretted having called the paparazzi on Lee and Chloe. He knew it had not done him any good. Kip walked into the room that had been set up for Ronny and Lucy's wedding. He thought of his own wedding and Felicia. He decided to drive to Felicia's hotel. He suggested they leave Little Wing but Felicia stressed again that she wanted a baby. Instead of tricking him, like Beth had suggested, she wanted him to commit that night.



Analysis

There is a change in the tone of the novel after Ronny and Lucy's scare right before their wedding. Those involved in the search seem to re-evaluate their own relationships. When Beth watches Henry get ready to join the search party to look for Ronny, she has fear that she will not see him again. She has been faced with a tragedy: her own friend and Lucy's fiancé is in a life or death situation. These sorts of situations can make people look at their lives and suddenly realize in what ways they are blessed.

It is during his own re-evaluations of his life after Ronny is found that Kip decides he needs to try to make things right with Felicia. He thinks back over the things that he has done that he regrets and apparently decides that he would also regret it if he let Felicia get away.

While all of his friends seem to be trying to get back to Little Wing, Ronny wants to leave. He has not told Lee or any of his other friends yet but he and Lucy will be moving to Chicago after the wedding. "It was our time to be a family, to be normal people, like everyone else" (211). Ronny believes it will be best for he and Lucy to get out of Little Wing.

Lee and Beth both think of things that Ronny has done for them and ways he has shown them that he valued their friendship. With Beth, for instance, Ronny invited her to see him ride the rodeo one night. Later on he told her that she needed to get herself straight and get back with Henry. He warned her that she would regret it if she did not. Also to be noted in this experience is how Ronny had innocent intentions but Beth suspected he was trying to have sex with her, like Lee did. Ronny laughed at her when she insinuated that was what she thought was on his mind but did not take offense. Because of the way that Ronny confronted her about her relationship, she has since then considered Ronny to be an angel.

Also thinking about the innocence of Ronny's behavior is Lee. He remembers that when Ronny called Lee to tell him about the wedding and to ask Lee if he would be his best man, Lee had almost not answered the phone. He had been having a good evening with Chloe so he almost put Ronny off. It did not take Lee long to feel like a bad friend when Ronny told him that he was getting married and that he wanted Lee to serve as his best man. Lee remembered that when he announced his wedding he did not call anyone, he only sent out notes and airplane tickets in the mail. As he considers, he thinks that Ronny has handled his own wedding announcement in a more appropriate manner, by calling those who are most important to him instead of just sending something in the mail.

Ronny again shows his compassion when he talks to Lee and tries to find out what is wrong between Lee and Henry. Ronny shows his innocence when he tells Lee that if he did something wrong, he should just apologize. In Ronny's mind, which is almost like a child's, he believes that any wrong can be made right with a simple apology. Lee believes the situation is more complicated. Note that of all the things for which Ronny could have asked Lee, things of monetary value, which he knows Lee would probably



give him, Ronny asks for reconciliation between his friends as a wedding gift. This wish shows the true desire of Ronny's heart. To him, things are not as important as people and relationships.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the meaning of Lee's dream. Why do you think he dreams he is a golden retriever? What does this perhaps symbolize in his real life?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think of Beth's suggestion to Felicia that she trick Kip into having a baby? Would this have been the right thing to do or does Felicia handle it better by making Kip agree to making a baby?

Discussion Question 3

Compare the way Ronny has treated his friends to the way they have treated him. Who do you believe is the better man? Why?

Vocabulary

kazoos, waylaid, sequestered, tenacious, consolidate



L-H

Summary

In L, Lee says that there were so many people who attended Ronny and Lucy's wedding that there was not room for them all in the mill. Despite the excitement from the prior day, Ronnie insisted on leaving the hospital by noon so the wedding could go ahead as planned.

Before the wedding, Lee held the wedding bands. He noted these rings, which had belonged to Ronny's grandparents in the past, were symbols of enduring love, unlike the ring he had gotten Chloe. The wedding was a traditional religious ceremony. Everyone danced at the reception, which was dry. Lee noticed Kip standing off to the side, looking proud of himself. Lee approached Kip, who seemed to stiffen. He invited Kip to go for a walk. Kip finally agreed. The people outside the mill nodded at Kip because he had done a good thing for the community.

When they reached the VFW, Lee realized everyone who was not at the wedding was there. Lee congratulated Kip on having done a good thing with the wedding. As he talked to his old friend, he sensed there was something different about Kip. Lee told Kip that he wanted them to be friends. Kip suggested they go back to the party. As they walked, Kip confided to Lee that he believed he might be able to keep the mill running for one more year before he would have to declare bankruptcy. Kip made it clear he was not asking for help, just stating a fact.

Back at the wedding, Lee watched as couples paired up to dance together. Lee was alone until Rachel, who introduced herself as Lucy's cousin, asked him to dance. They spent the night together but she made it clear there was no future for them when she turned down his invitation for breakfast.

The chapter H, narrated by Henry, begins with a description of the jar of pickled eggs at the VFW. Lee and Henry were sitting at the bar drinking their beers and not really sure what to say to each other. Lee finally announced to Henry he wanted to steal the jar of pickled eggs. He told Henry that he was going to help him. Henry refused, saying he was not that drunk yet.

Lee apologized to Henry. Because Henry was obviously angry, Lee asked if it would make Henry feel better if he let Henry beat him up. Henry declined saying it would not be much of a fight. Lee indicated he believed stealing the jar of eggs was a way to get their friendship reignited. He thought some sort of juvenile act in which they would share mutual solidarity was the only way they could get their friendship right.

Henry snapped at Lee, telling him he had messed up his marriage. When Henry looked at Lee he saw sadness there, that there really was nothing else he could do, and he realized they were suddenly in the real world. Lee told Henry he hoped he would find



some way to trust him again. Henry sighed because he realized he wanted Lee back in his house and his life. He told Lee how angry he was and how he felt as if Lee had taken everything he had from him.

They shared a bag of crushed chips before Lee began talking about the eggs again. Henry asked Lee questions about the relationship with Beth. He was happy only when he felt that Lee had answered him truthfully. When Lee asked how they were doing as far as repairing their friendship, Henry said it would take time.

Lee finally decided they needed a distraction in order to get the jar of eggs out of the bar. He said he had an idea and called up a song on the jukebox. He had everyone involved in a sing along when he winked at Henry, daring him to take the jar. Even though he thought what he was doing was stupid, Henry grabbed the jar and ran out with it anyway.

Lee and Henry stopped on Elm Street with the jar of eggs. Lee took off the lid and challenged Henry to throw an egg at Eddy's car. Henry would not throw at the car but Lee did. They ran when they saw a car coming. From their hiding spot, Lee threw an egg at the car. After that Henry asked Lee to let them go home but Lee picked up the jar again. He said he wanted to go sit on the railroad bridge over the county highway.

Sitting there, Henry dropped an egg from the bridge. It splattered on the pavement. Lee commented they were the last ones left in Little Wing. Henry indicated he was tied to the land but that he expected Lee to leave again. Lee said he would not leave again because he had bought the mill from Kip. He planned to set up a recording studio there and set up a theater. Henry questioned Lee's purchase. Lee said it was the right thing to do.

They watched a car headed toward them through the dark. Lee took an egg and pitched it at the car, a vehicle that neither of them recognized. The car screeched to a halt and a young black man got out. He was holding a Beretta pistol. Although the teen was obviously afraid, Henry and Lee were both afraid of his gun. When Lee called to the boy, the boy aimed in the direction of his voice and fired his gun. His first shot busted the glass jar. The contents of the jar splattered on the boy. The boy fired the pistol again, hitting Lee in the leg.

After the boy left, Henry bent over Lee. He told him that he would get him to the hospital but Lee refused to go to the hospital. He said he could not go because he did not want anyone asking questions, especially after they started it by stealing the jar of eggs to begin with. Henry got his truck and took Lee to his house. Lee was determined they could dig the bullet out themselves.

Analysis

Reconciliations begin in this section of the novel as Lee reaches out to Kip. Lee had gotten angry with Kip because Kip had neglected to include Ronny in Kip's bachelor party. As Lee realizes that Kip has put so much into Ronny's wedding, he sees proof



that Kip is trying to be a better person. Lee apologizes but it is apparent that Kip is uncomfortable with what Lee might say to him because he stiffens when Lee approaches him. Instead of being derogatory, Lee congratulates Kip on doing such a good thing for Ronny specifically, and for the community in general, by renovating the mill.

Lee is not the only one who recognizes that what Kip has done for Ronny goes above and beyond what was expected. As Lee and Kip walk toward the VFW Lee notices several men nodding in their direction. "I'll say this, when they nodded, it was clear to me that they were nodding at Kip and not so much at me. What he had done was a rare thing, a good thing. The kind of thing that I suspect has been lost in America" (244). Lee shows the goodness of his heart because he is able to acknowledge that Kip has done something good, and he is able to allow Kip to take the credit for what he has done. Lee does not try to steal the spotlight and is not jealous because the people of the town are finally recognizing that Kip is capable of goodness.

Even with the strangeness of the circumstances of Ronny's wedding, the crowd there is larger than the one that attended Kip's wedding. People came in droves despite the fact there was a blizzard the night before the wedding. What is most interesting about this crowd is that Ronny never really did anything to try to draw attention to himself, yet he seems to have wound up with the best and most loyal friends.

Early on in their pickled egg prank, there is a sign that Henry and Lee might actually reconcile their friendship. They begin getting drunk together at the bar and talk through their problem. Henry sees that Lee is being honest with him about his relationship with Beth, that is really was just one night and that Beth has always been devoted to Henry. It is after Lee gets shot that there is a sign given that Henry has forgiven Lee. In the narration it is indicated that: "I went to Lee, to my friend, bent down over him" (267). In this quote, Henry specifically refers to Lee as his friend.

Lee's good nature comes out again when he refuses to go to the hospital after he is shot in the leg. If he were to go to the hospital, Lee knows that the police would be alerted and that there would be an investigation into what happened. Lee tells Henry that he does not want an investigation begun especially since he was the one who started the whole series of events by stealing a jar of pickled eggs. Had Lee insisted on an investigation the young man with the gun, he could have gotten into serious trouble. Lee may see that the man would have left them alone had Lee not initiated the encounter by hitting his car with an egg. Lee also does not want the bad publicity for himself. He knows what a bad thing it would be for him to be known as a musician who steals and vandalizes, especially when the theft and vandalism is of such a childish nature.

There are two significant symbols included in this section of the novel. The first is the wedding bands that Ronny and Lucy will wear. Lee compares these rings, heirlooms from Ronny's grandparents, to the ring he bought for Chloe. He recognizes at that point that Chloe's ring was just a status symbol, a show of their wealth and position. Ronny



and Lucy's rings, however, were products of love. They did not cost much but they had already been treasured for a lifetime.

The second significant symbol is the jar of pickled eggs that sits behind the bar at the VFW. It is Lee's decision that he and Henry should steal this jar that sets off a prank ending in a life or death situation.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think it was a good idea for Lee to not go to the hospital for his injury? Why or why not? Do you think his reasons for not wanting to go were solid?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Kip tells Lee he is so financially strapped by the mill? Do you think he secretly hoped Lee would help him out? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of the huge outcome for Ronny and Lucy's wedding. Why do you think the author is so sure to mention that their wedding was bigger than Kip's?

Vocabulary

tepid, monstrosity, echelons, catatonics, pungent, winsome, amniotic, vernal, trajectory



R-H

Summary

In R, Ronny narrates. Because he helped his uncle Delmar find some furniture for his trailer, Delmar offered to give Ronny a tattoo, free of charge. He tattooed the name Corvus, Lee's stage name, and a crow onto Ronny's chest. Ronny wanted that name tattooed on him because he knew Lee would be famous one day.

Ronny reports that he likes Chicago. Sometimes he takes his daughter, Christina, and they ride the EI together. He enjoys his freedom, being able to ride when and where he wants with no one telling him what to do.

In B, Beth was just a teenager when Henry first brought her to the top of the feed mill. At 18-years-old, Henry had told her that he loved her. Beth thought their relationship had been worth all they had been through.

When their first child was born, Beth's uterus had ruptured. At first the doctors did not think anything was wrong but Henry insisted something was not right. The doctor, two nurses, and Beth all tried to convince him everything was okay. He was so irate the doctor threatened to call the police. An old nurse finally noticed there was something wrong with Beth and that she was bleeding too much and her face was getting pale. Beth later asked Henry how he had known something was wrong when even she did not know how badly she was hurt. Although he did not, Beth thought he could have said that he knew her better than she knew herself. She decided that was what marriage was all about.

In L, Beth and Henry's wedding is detailed from Lee's point of view. The night before the wedding they had done some serious drinking at the VFW and then had sat talking on top of the mill. Lee felt melancholy. He was happy for Henry but at the same time wondered if he has missed out on Beth. He wondered if she had ever loved him.

Lee remembered how pretty Beth looked as she walked down the aisle of the church. During the wedding ceremony, Lee imagined Beth laying on top of him even though he tried to make himself stop thinking about their lovemaking. At the reception Lee paced in the parking lot for a good while before deciding to go inside. He was happy when Ronny brought him a can of beer. Lee watched the celebration from the bar. He did participate in the dollar dance after Ronny's father criticized him for pouting.

During the dance, Beth asked Lee not to get weird because she and Henry were married. She told him that he was part of their family. Lee apologized for the night they spent together. She asked him not to talk about it again. At four in the morning after the wedding, Lee was outside Beth and Henry's hotel room. He considered knocking on the door but did not know what he should say. He also knew he would be crossing a boundary adults should not cross. He knew that all he would accomplish would be



ruining their new union. As he thought about his future he thought he would become successful through music and that he and Henry would grow apart. With his idea of a lonely future in mind, he drove back to Little Wing.

In H, Henry got Lee home and into the shower. Henry drew a bath as Lee complained about that night being the worst of his life. On a trip to the kitchen, Henry noticed his painting, the one that had sold from the store, hanging there. Henry later asked Lee about the new painting. Lee said he liked it even though Henry described it as being as ugly as sin.

Lee explained to Henry that although he had always been jealous of what Henry had, he no longer loved Beth. He believed he only told Henry what he had because he wanted Henry to understand how much he wanted what Henry had and that Beth was the best. Henry told Lee that he forgave him; he could see that Lee was sincere. The next morning Henry was woken by the sound of Lee screaming. Lee insisted they were going to take the bullet out themselves. Lee lay on the ground outside while Henry dug in the wound with a pair of pliers.

Long after the bullet had been removed, people who visited the VFW were still laughing about the story of the bullet in the Mason jar that replaced the jar of pickled eggs. People would ask Henry to tell them the story of Lee and how he had removed the bullet from Lee's leg.

Analysis

Like a couple of teenage pals, Henry and Lee bond over their prank as well as their shared pain. Just as Lee caused Henry pain when he told Henry about the one night stand, Henry causes Lee pain when he tries to remove the bullet. More than the pain they have caused one another, the reconciliation comes because Lee tells Henry what he wants to hear. Most of what Lee says is the truth. It is said with enough sincerity that Henry believes it is the truth. Lee convinces Henry that he and Beth had only one romantic encounter with one another. He also convinces him that he is no longer in love with Beth though this claim may not be really true. Lee seems to still be nursing a crush for Beth just like Beth is nursing a crush for him.

When Lee describes what he was thinking about during Henry and Beth's wedding, it is clear that at that time, he thought of Beth as more than a friend. He thinks that if Henry had known what he was thinking about during the ceremony he would not have chosen Lee as a groomsman. Lee was imagining Beth on top of him as they made love. Although Lee is not aware, the reader knows that during her wedding, Beth was thinking about Lee as well. Both were fighting to keep thoughts of each of out of their minds. Perhaps that is what adult, committed love is. It does not mean that one will never be attracted to another person, but that one must fight to keep focused on the relationship to which he has devoted himself.



Also in this section is a description of the time when Ronny got his tattoo from his uncle. He had gotten Lee's stage name on his chest because he believed Lee would be famous one day. The inclusion of this story at this particular point in the novel seems strange. Strange also is the way Ronny takes to the big city. Although he seemed a very small town oriented person, he enjoys the freedom he finds in the big city. He notes that if he does get lost, there are always plenty of people around to help him.

Just as Lee had forecast, the story of the pickle jar does turn out to be a great story. A small jar with the bullet in it replaces the jar of pickles stolen from the VFW. Henry has a good deal of fun telling this story on his friend. He describes how the two writhed around in the dirt in the gore as Henry tried to make Lee be still so he could remove the bullet.

Although the author gives an update on all of the other relationships, he does not really give a good sense of closure on Beth and Henry's relationship. It is assumed that they reconciled and eventually learned to deal with the knowledge of the one-night stand.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Lee's reaction to Beth's wedding to Beth's reaction to Lee's wedding earlier in the novel. How are they different?

Discussion Question 2

How does the removal of the bullet turn out to be a bonding experience for Henry and Lee?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author include the story of Ronny's tattoo in this section of the novel? What is its significance to this part of the novel in particular?

Vocabulary

adamant, arborvitae, dregs, levitate, predicated, jocular, cacophony, increments, emanating, copacetic, formative



Characters

Leland “Lee” Sutton

Lee Sutton is Little Wing’s golden resident. After having grown up in Little Wing, Lee made it big in the music business. He is famous. His first album, written about the town, has gone platinum. Lee is one of the five narrators in the novel.

Before Lee became a success, he had returned to Little Wing believing he was a failure. He had been a member of a variety of bands all of which had fallen apart. His parents had divorced and left Little Wing. He did not even have any place to live and wound up staying in a boarding house with a number of Mexicans.

Lee set up a recording studio in an old chicken coop. Even so, he did not make much progress until he wrote a letter to Beth, a childhood friend. She came to see him and the two had a one-night stand. It was after this that Lee was inspired enough to finish Shotgun Lovesongs, his first album. He indicates in the novel that all of the love songs on the album were about Beth.

Years later, Lee leaves Little Wing to get married to Chloe, an actress. The marriage falls apart after four months. Lee returns to Little Wing. The first time that Lee gets together with Henry to talk about what happened with Chloe, Lee cannot stop himself from telling Henry about his one-night stand with Beth.

For a good while, Henry will have nothing to do with Lee. Finally, the two are drinking in a bar. Lee offers to let Henry beat him up if it will make Henry forgive him for having a one-night stand with Beth. Lee finally persuades Henry into participating in a prank with him and helping him steal the jar of pickled eggs from the VFW.

The evening ends with Lee getting shot in the leg by a black man driving through town after Lee threw a pickled egg and broke the man’s windshield. Because he is famous, Lee does not want to go to the hospital for treatment. Instead, he had Henry remove the bullet from his leg. The two bond again through the experience.

Ronny Taylor

Ronny Taylor is one of the five narrators in the novel. Ronny is described as being attractive and having a good physique. However, Ronny is not particularly intelligent especially after an accident that caused bleeding in his brain.

Ronny did not finish high school. Instead of an education he chose to join the rodeo circuit. He was famous as a bull rider. Ronny also had an affinity for alcohol. It was while he was drunk that he fell in Little Wing and hit his head. Before it was discovered that Ronny had a brain injury, he had irreparable brain damage and was unable to ride any more.



Ronny and Lee have a special relationship because Ronny believed Lee would be famous long before Lee ever produced his first album. When Ronny was no longer able to ride in the rodeo, Lee not only paid all of Ronny's medical bills, he also pledged to support his friend the rest of his life.

Ironic about Ronny is that while all of his friends' lives are falling apart, simple and straightforward Ronny meets and dates a stripper. They get engaged and discover they are expecting a child. The citizenry of the entire town comes to support Ronny and Lucy at their wedding.

Because Ronny had always wanted to leave Little Wing, he and Lucy move to Chicago. Lucy works for a dance company while Ronny cares for their daughter.

Kip Cunningham

Kip Cunningham is one of the five narrators in the novel. He is included as one of the four friends in the novel though it does not seem that Kip was ever fully accepted in the group or in the town.

Kip made his fortune working in commodities in Chicago. He returned to Little Wing and bought the old feed mill. He renovated the mill in hopes of being accepted by the people of the town.

Kip makes his first mistake when he calls the paparazzi to his wedding because he knows Lee and his girlfriend Chloe will be there. Felicia, Kip's wife, shares with Beth that Kip had called the paparazzi because he hoped the finder's fees would help alleviate their financial troubles.

Kip reaches a low point in his life when he refuses to have children with his wife even though she had clearly told him that she wanted to have children. Felicia leaves him the day before Ronny's wedding. He considers suicide.

The night before Ronny and Lucy's wedding Kip thinks about the things in life he regrets. He decides to go visit Felicia in her hotel room. When he suggests they move away from Little Wing, Felicia tells him that she wants them to have a baby. She insists that they start that night. After the wedding, they move back to Chicago. They have a baby daughter.

Henry Brown

Henry Brown is one of the five narrators in this novel. Of the four friends, Henry is perhaps closest to Lee.

Henry is married to Beth, his high school sweetheart. They have two children. He inherited his father's farm and works as a dairy farmer. Even though Henry is a hard worker, his family struggles for money.



Although Henry does not often fight with people and is known for his peaceful way, he gets angry with Lee when he learns that Lee and Beth had a one-night stand.

Henry cuts off his relationship with Lee but Lee is determined their friendship is not finished. One day while drinking at the VFW, Lee dares Henry to help him steal a jar of pickled eggs from the counter. Henry finally gives in and runs out with the jar.

The two sit on top of a railroad bridge where Lee throws eggs at cars until one egg breaks the windshield of a black man's car. The black man shoots and hits Lee in the leg. Because he does not want to go to the hospital, Lee employs Henry to remove the bullet from his leg. It is an experience that reunites the two.

Felicia

Felicia is Kip's wife. She moves to Little Wing to live with Kip after they are married. She is able to work from home because she works as a consultant with a pharmaceutical company.

After Kip called the paparazzi to his wedding so they could get photos of Lee and Chloe, the people of the town boycotted Kip and Felicia. Felicia became angry with the townspeople and one day threw a fit in the grocery store after a person did not return her hello.

Beth and Henry called a truce by inviting Kip and Felicia to dinner. While Beth and Felicia were preparing for dinner, Felicia told Beth how much financial trouble they were in because of the work Kip was having done at the mill. She explained he had called the paparazzi in hopes that the finder's fee he would get would help out with expenses.

Even though Felicia had told Kip she wanted children before they got married, Kip balked when she told him after they were married that she was ready for kids. Felicia threatened to leave Kip if he refused to have children. Kip finally gave into Felicia's desires.

Chloe

Chloe is the movie star whom Lee marries. He had believed he would be able to convince her to live with him in Wisconsin but that was not the case. When he asked her if she would ever move there she said that famous people, like them, did not live in small towns.

Chloe ended her marriage to Lee just four months after they were married. She claimed it was not working out but Lee was not aware that there were any problems.

Later in the novel, Chloe helped Lucy get a legitimate job working with a dance company in Chicago.



Lucinda “Lucy” Barnes

Lucy is one of the strippers whom Ronny meets at Kip’s bachelor party. The two begin dating. Lucy goes with Ronny, Beth, and Henry to Lee’s wedding. It is later announced that Ronny and Lucy are getting married, and that they are expecting a baby.

Lucy is a significant character because the narrators of the novel indicate that they believed Ronny would never get married. They especially did not expect him to marry someone as attractive and kind-hearted as Lucy. It is clear she is devoted to Ronny.

After their marriage, she stops working as a stripper and gets a job working with a dance company in Chicago.

Harvey and Edith Bunyan

Kip meets Harvey Bunyan at a gas station one day while on a road trip. He gives Harvey one of his cards and is surprised to get a call a few years later requesting that Kip have lunch with Harvey and his wife, Edith.

It turns out this couple had a son who was killed in Iraq by an IED. They believe Kip looks like their son, Thomas. The two even had jobs in the same line of work.

They adopt Kip as a sort of surrogate son by sending him letters and pictures. It is after he learns of Harvey’s death that Kip wished he had been kinder to the old couple and had involved them more in their lives.

Bethany “Beth” Brown

Beth is one of the five narrators in the novel. She is Henry’s wife. At one point, before she and Henry were married, while they were broken up, she had a one-night stand with Lee, Henry’s best friend. Through the course of the novel Beth plays with the idea that she might still be in love with Lee. She wonders if Lee ever thinks about her.

Eddy Moffitt

Eddy Moffitt is a resident of Little Wing. He is the one who picked Ronny up one day when Ronny tried to leave town on foot. Eddy told Ronny he knew he was probably bored and suggested he could help him find a job. Ronny notes in one of his sections of narration that Eddy never found him a job or said anything else about it.

Delmar

Delmar is Ronny’s uncle. Delmar learned how to tattoo while in prison. He is the one who did Ronny’s tattoos of Lee’s stage name, Corvus, and the picture of the crow.



Christina

Christina is the baby daughter of Lucy and Ronny.

Alex and Eleanore Brown

Alex and Eleanore Brown are Henry and Beth's children.



Symbols and Symbolism

Polo Shirts

The polo shirts that appear in the novel symbolize friendship. Because Kip does not have a polo shirt for Ronny, it makes it obvious that he did not intend for Ronny to come to his bachelor party. This failure on Kip's side to invite Ronny to the party is part of the rift that develops between Kip and Lee.

Ithaca

This shotgun represents the beginning of Lee's fame. He bought it for himself when his album Shotgun Lovesongs earned platinum status for the first time. It is this shotgun that Lee later used to run off the photographers when they trespassed onto this property in Little Wing after Kip's wedding.

Lee's Letter to Beth

It is this letter that perhaps initiated Lee and Beth's one night stand. It symbolizes a lifelong attraction between the two despite Beth's devotion to the Henry.

Kip's Wedding Gift to Lee

This wedding gift represents not only Lee's home town of Little Wing, but most specifically the mill, where the boys went to talk, dream, and spend time with one another.

Ronny's Cowboy Boots

These boots represent Ronny's innate goodness. Ronny and his friend Clint had seen a man try to molest a teen girl in a restroom at the restaurant where they were working. The two men had stopped the attack, and then had beaten the man up. Ronny had taken the man's boots and had worn them ever since.

Ronny and Lucy's Wedding Rings

Lee thinks that these rings represent lives full of love as opposed to the ring he had bought for Chloe that was just a showy monstrosity. The wedding rings had been given to Ronny by his grandmother. Ronny's ring had been his grandfather's while Lucy's ring had only a tiny diamond, but a long history through Ronny's grandmother.



A Giant Jar of Pickled Eggs

This giant jar of pickled eggs represents the beginning of the reconciliation between Lee and Henry. It was Lee's idea to steal the eggs and the theft ultimately led to Lee being shot in the leg.

The Album Shotgun Lovesongs

This album represents not only Lee's love for his hometown but also his love for Beth. He indicates that all of the love songs on the album were written for Beth.

Henry's Painting

This painting represents a bond between Lee and Henry. Henry had put the painting for sale in a store without letting anyone know that he had painted it. He was surprised when he went into the store one day and discovered someone had bought the painting. He was even further surprised when he saw the painting hanging in Lee's Little Wing home. When Henry asked about the painting Lee said he bought it because he liked the way it looked.

The Bullet

The bullet is a symbol of the reconciliation between Lee and Henry. It is kept in a Mason jar in the VFW, where the jar of pickled eggs, the jar that initiated their adventure, once sat.



Settings

Little Wing, Wisconsin

Little Wing, Wisconsin is the small town where Kip, Henry, Ronny, Lee and Beth grew up together. It is in this town that the majority of the action of the novel takes place.

The Feed Mill

When Kip returns to town, he buys and renovates this feed mill. He saves this landmark from his childhood but goes bankrupt in the process. When Lee learns how much trouble Kip has gotten himself into financially with the mill, Lee buys it from Kip. He intends to make a recording studio and music hall. Ronny and Lucy are married at the mill.

New York

New York is the city to which Lee moves to live with Chloe. When Lee and Chloe get married, Henry and Beth, as well as Ronny and Lucy travel to New York for the wedding.

Giordano's

Giordano's is the pizza place at which Kip meets Harvey and Edith Bunyan, the couple who believes he looks like their son who was killed in the war in Fallujah.

Railroad Bridge over the County Highway

Lee and Henry are sitting on top this railroad bridge when Lee throws a pickled egg at a car, breaking its windshield. The man in the car shoots Lee in the leg.

The VFW

The VFW is the place where the people of Little Wing go to drink and socialize. It is at the VFW where Felicia meets Beth to tell her that she is leaving Kip. Ronny's bachelor party is held at the VFW. It is also from the VFW that Lee and Henry steal the jar of pickled eggs. The bullet that Harvey pulls from Lee's leg after the pickled egg adventure is later displayed at the VFW.

The Chicken Coop

It is inside this chicken coop outside Bea's boarding house that Lee records his album Shotgun Lovesongs.



Themes and Motifs

Big City versus Small Town Living

One of the issues that surfaces often in the relationships spotlighted in this novel is the differences between those who prefer to live in small towns and those who prefer to live in big cities. Each relationship has its own dynamics. The differences in preferences can cause a relationship to flounder.

Because Henry inherited his father's dairy farm, it was never a big question for he and Beth where they would live. Even though she enjoys her trip to New York for Lee's wedding, Beth soon finds herself ready to go home. She feels out of place in the city, like she would always be a tourist and never a resident.

For Chloe, there is no question where she prefers to live. Although she seems to enjoy her time in Little Wing, she tells Lee that people like them do not live in small towns. She never considers they might call that small town home. For Lee, who has always visited Little Wing to rest and recuperate, living in a big city all the time seems to take its toll on him. Although it was probably not a deciding factor in their breakup, Lee was probably never completely happy in the city, just like Chloe would never have been completely happy in the country.

Because she has a job that allows her to work from home, Felicia takes a chance and moves to Little Wing with Kip. Right away, the people of the small town make a bad impression on Felicia when they boycott her and Kip because Kip called the paparazzi to Lee's wedding. Even though Beth initiates a friendship with Felicia, Felicia never warms to Little Wing after her initial impression of the people. Again, Kip and Felicia's relationship flounders because Kip will not agree to have children with Felicia, but the place where they live seems to be a sticking point as well. Felicia, and eventually Kip, decide they will be happier in a big city.

Perhaps most surprising is the fact that small town cowboy Ronny wants to move to a big city. He believes Little Wing is too small and is even suffocating. When he marries Lucy they decide to move to Chicago where she can get a job other than working as a stripper. They leave Little Wing just after the baby is born because they know if they stay any longer it will just make it harder and harder to leave when the time comes.

The Complexity of Relationships

Through Beth and Henry's story, the reader learns how complex relationships can be—even those where the members of the couple seem to be made for one another. There are always past mistakes and thoughtless deeds that can come creeping up to throw even the most loving couple off track. In the same way, however, there are also always people who can come along and push the members of a couple back on track when they stray.



Henry and Beth grew up in Little Wing together and were high school sweethearts. They married soon after they were both out of college. Lee viewed his friends as having the perfect relationship. Although Beth and Henry were happy together, they were prone to problems just like any other couple.

It was, in fact, Lee who caused a major problem for Beth and Henry when he told Henry about the one-night stand that he and Beth had. Even though he and Beth both claim they had not thought about that night since, it is apparent they both still nurse a crush on the other. Although they could have left Henry and tried for a relationship together, Beth stays with Henry and Lee fights to reclaim his friendship with Henry.

Beth makes an interesting point about relationships when she tells the story of how she suffered a ruptured uterus during her first pregnancy. Henry had insisted something was wrong even though the nurses and doctors at first swore everything was as it should be. When he finally convinced an older nurse to look more closely, that nurse discovered the problem. Henry tells Beth that he kept insisting something was wrong because he knew her better than she knew herself. Beth decides this is the ultimate goal of marriage, to know one's partner better than he knows himself.

The Struggle for Success

Having grown up together in a small town, each of these four friends wants to be able to prove to the others that he is successful. Perhaps the only exception to this rule is Ronny, who is a success but does not flaunt it like some of the others do. Kip and Lee especially feel they need to make something of themselves in order to prove their worth.

As teens, these boys believed that if they stayed in Little Wing, they would be failures. For that reason all of them except Henry tried to make something of himself outside of that small town. Because Henry's father was a dairy farmer and Henry inherited the farm, he had a ready job for himself in Little Wing. Even though he never left that small town, Henry is a success because he has a good marriage and good friends. People know him as a good man who is willing to help anyone. In his own way, Henry is a success.

Ronny never finished high school. Instead he began riding in the rodeo. He was successful in this career and even had a large following in the rodeo circuit. After his fall and resulting brain injury, however, Ronny was not longer able to ride. Because of his disability, the people of Little Wing treated him as an orphaned boy. They feared there would never be anything else to his life. The people were surprised when Ronny met and fell in love with one of the girls who worked as a stripper at Kip's bachelor party. Lucy was devoted to Ronny and the two were married. They moved to Chicago to live and raise their baby. No one ever dreamed Ronny would have this sort of success and love in his life.

For Kip, success is a matter of proving himself. He worked in Chicago in commodities where he made good money. After several years, Kip left Chicago and moved back to



Little Wing, hoping to make a name for himself in his hometown. He had never felt that he really fit in with boys who called themselves his friends or the other townspeople. In an attempt to help out his town, Kip bought and began to rejuvenate the old feed mill. He brought new businesses and money into the town but nearly bankrupted himself in the process. All through the process of putting money and time into the feed mill Kip never got the kind of respect he wanted. It was not until he helped out Ronny by allowing Ronny and Lucy to have their wedding at the mill at no charge that people began to realize that Kip had done a good thing for the town.

Lee also dreams of returning to his hometown as a hero. The people had always believed that Lee would make it big as a musician. Although he was distressed and depressed after he struggled for years with one band after another, Lee finally got his break when he recorded songs about Little Wing, an album he called Shotgun Lovesongs.

Paths to Reconciliation

As the friends age and have different life experiences, they begin to have misunderstandings that drive them apart. Instead of letting these misunderstandings and problems ruin their friendships, the four generally find a way to rise above their problems. Kip and Lee, as well as Henry and Lee, all find ways to reconcile their relationships though one method of reconciliation is not advisable.

Problems begin with Kip and Lee when Kip neglects to invite Ronny to his bachelor party. Lee had always been particularly protective of Ronny so he is offended by Kip's attempt to leave Ronny out of the action. The relationship worsens when Kip lets the paparazzi know that Lee and Chloe will be attending his wedding. Luckily, it never gets out that Kip called the paparazzi for the finder's fees he knew he would get. It is just after Lee and his fiancée are surrounded by photographers at the wedding that Lee tells Kip they were finished as friends.

Later, during Ronny's wedding, it is Lee who tries to make things right with Kip. He sees what Kip has done for Ronny and Lucy, and how he has done it without calling any attention to himself. Because Kip has not promoted himself in any way, Lee realizes that Kip is trying to make changes. He reaches out and makes peace with Kip.

Lee and Henry's falling out is perhaps more serious. Henry storms away from Lee after Lee tells him about the one-night stand that he and Beth had before she and Henry were even married. Even when Ronny asks Lee to make his relationship with Henry right as a wedding gift to Ronny, Lee cannot bring himself to talk to Henry.

One day they meet up drinking in a bar and begin to talk. Lee convinces Henry to help him steal a jar of pickled eggs from the bar. Lee believes pulling a prank together will be the perfect cure for their relationship. The prank goes a bit further than Lee had hoped and he winds up getting shot in the leg when he hits the windshield of an out-of-town car with one of the eggs.



Lee refuses to go to the hospital and insists that he and Henry can remove the bullet themselves. They finally do manage to get the bullet out. During the course of the ordeal, they work through their differences. The bullet is kept in a Mason jar in the VFW as a reminder of their anger toward each other and what came of that anger.

Dealing with Regrets

In life, everyone has things that happen to them or things that they do of which they are not proud. In this novel, Kip and Lee are the two characters who seem to struggle most with regret. These characters handle their reaction to regret differently. Kip learns to handle his regret constructively while Lee is destructive with his regret.

Because he believes he is not a good person, there are a variety of things that Kip regrets about his life. He regrets that he married Felicia without listening to what she wanted out of marriage more closely. He regrets that he brought her to Little Wing. He regrets that he put so much money into the mill. He regrets having sold Lee and Chloe out to the paparazzi. He regrets not having been kinder to Harvey and Edith Bunyan.

The night that Felicia leaves him, Kip thinks over all of the things he had done and regretted. As he considers how he wants to be a better person and do the right thing, he decides not to leave his relationship up to chance. He goes after Felicia and makes up to her. They even begin trying to have a baby. Kip has decided not to separate from Felicia and have that be another act in his life he will later regret.

When Lee returns home after being married to Chloe only four months, Lee regrets how quickly his marriage dissolved. Although it seems he did not have much say in the matter, he blames himself and feels he is unworthy because he could not make Chloe love him.

Back in Little Wing, Lee puts his regret to disastrous use when he tells Henry about his one-night stand with Beth. It is almost as if Lee believes his friend, who has been married about ten years, is looking down on Lee because he could stay married only four months. Instead of impressing Henry, Lee's announcement ruins his friendship with Henry and almost ruins Beth and Henry's marriage.

Styles

Point of View

This story is told from the first person point of view of five different narrators. Each of these narrators tells his/her parts of the story from the first person point of view. The narrators are Henry, Beth, Kip, Lee, and Ronny. The four men have been friends since childhood. Beth grew up with the boys and was Henry's childhood sweetheart.

This use of five different narrators works well because it allows each of the main characters to tell the story from his point of view. The reader learns things about each character he would not know if each character was not allowed to tell his story. For instance, the reader knows that not only has Beth nursed a crush on Lee all of her life, but that Lee also has loved Beth and wondered what his life might have been like with her since her wedding to Henry.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is fairly typical. Even though there are five different narrators, there is no discernible difference in the language used by each of the characters. The story is told in a descriptive language that becomes almost lyrical in some places. For instance: "The whole church must have been marveling at her just as I was: the muscles of her arms, the moles on her shoulders, the veins and sinew of her throat, her white teeth, damp eyes, the helixes of brown hair, Revlon red lips" (281).

The author also uses a good deal of literary techniques like simile and personification in the descriptive passages. When Henry is trying to pull the bullet from Lee's leg, he describes the experience with a simile as being "like delivering a calf, but worse, so much worse" (303). Personification is used in the same description as the airplanes flying over the scene of Henry's attempt to pull the bullet from Lee are described as being "unsuspecting" (303) a characteristic of a living beings that the author assigns to the airplane, an inanimate object.

Structure

The plot of the novel is moderately complex as the desires of the five friends, narrators in the novel, cause conflicts in their relationships. These conflicts begin to surface when Kip does not invite Ronny to his bachelor party. It opens a gulf between Kip and Lee, the two men who were not really close friends from the beginning.

Another thread in the conflicts is introduced when the reader learns that Beth and Lee had a one-night stand before Beth and Henry were married. Henry was not aware of this relationship until Lee tells him about it after his marriage with Chloe falls apart. When Lee tells Henry about his one-night stand with Beth, the novel reaches its first



climax. It is at this point that Henry's relationship with Lee falls apart and his relationship with Beth is threatened.

Healing in the novel begins with Ronny's wedding. A climax in his story comes when he gets drunk at his bachelor party and is lost in the blizzard. Ronny represents an innocent hit by hard luck for whom everyone in the town feels sorry. They believe he does not have a chance for happiness or love because of his brain injury. His wedding to Lucy is an event of pure joy for all of the people of the community. Lee compliments Kip, who has let Ronny and Lucy have the wedding in the mill at no charge, on the good thing he did. Kip admits to Lee he is bankrupt and Lee buys the mill.

A final climax comes when Lee is shot by the young black man whose car is hit by one of the eggs that Lee throws. Lee refuses to go to the hospital and tells Henry they will remove the bullet themselves. This is not only a stressful situation, it is potentially life threatening. The reader never learns the details of the bullet being removed, only that it was a long painful process with Lee writhing in pain while Henry tried to persuade him to lie still. The denouement comes when the bullet and its final resting place in the VFW, where the jar of pickled eggs once sat, is described.



Quotes

We invited him to all of our weddings; he was famous. We addressed the invitations to his record company's skyscraper in New York City so that the gaudy, gilded envelopes could be forwarded to him on tour — in Beirut, Helsinki, Tokyo. Places beyond our ken or our limited means.”

-- Narrator (Henry) (H)

Importance: In this quote, Henry discusses how Lee had a life different from anyone else in Little Wing. He not only got to visit places they only dreamed about, he also had money they could only dream about.

I nodded, realizing that the limousine and the party had been a bad idea, that it was all a very bad idea, and now we were swept up into it; Lee had demanded that Ronny be invited, but now he saw the party as being a great danger to his friend. Lee sat rigidly, his fists clenched, jaw set.”

-- Narrator (Henry) (H)

Importance: Even though Lee had insisted that Ronny be invited to Kip's bachelor's party, he realized when he saw all of the alcohol in the limousine, he realized it was a bad idea since Ronny had so much trouble with alcohol in the past.

I had never heard him say anything like that before, had never heard him talk about money before.”

-- Narrator (Henry) (H)

Importance: Henry is surprised when Lee makes the statement that Kip should not make fun of him or try to belittle him since he has so much money. Lee apologizes as soon as the words are out of his mouth.

What was more surprising were the evenings when no one said a word to us, when the bar was dead, when we sat on our stools with perhaps one or two geezers and simply played cribbage or euchre and drank Manhattans or brandy old-fashioneds, and in those times I felt that maybe we could actually stay in Little Wing, that Chloe might come to love Wisconsin.”

-- Narrator (Lee) (L)

Importance: Although Lee loved the way he could be himself in Little Wing, he discovered that he could not make Chloe love it the way that he did.

No one here cares about anything other than your work ethic and your kindness and your competence.”

-- Narrator (Lee) (L)

Importance: In the big city, Lee felt like the people there cared about his money, job



and fame. In Little Wing, however, people cared about personality traits he thought were more important like kindness and competence.

I never knew what he was talking about, but I tried. I tried to listen, tried to hear that sunset music he was talking about. But I couldn't. I just couldn't hear it."

-- Narrator (Kip) (K)

Importance: Kip indicates that no matter how hard he tried, he could never hear the music in the sunset that Lee claimed he could hear there. Kip seems embarrassed and felt he was inferior to the others because he could not hear this music.

People like to tune the teevee to something they think I'd like, usually a documentary about nature. Or the West. Or horses. Makes me feel like I'm at a nursing home or something, some well-meaning nurse coming into my life telling me what kind of teevee to watch like I can't use a remote control myself."

-- Narrator (Ronny) (R)

Importance: The people in Ronny's life would always find a rodeo or nature show for Ronny to watch because they believed he enjoyed those shows. When he has a chance to speak for himself in his first section of narration, Ronny shares how much he dislikes this habit.

But early on in our marriage, it seemed that he shared an intimacy with those guys — with Lee, with Ronny, with the Girouxs, even with Eddy or Kip — that was enviable."

-- Narrator (Beth) (B)

Importance: When Felicia comes to Beth telling her that she is jealous of the relationship between Kip and his childhood friends, Beth remembers feeling this same jealousy in the first years of her marriage to Henry even though she had grown up the boys.

I decided not to tell Henry about the finder's fees. I wanted things to heal, I wanted the town to start growing again, and the truth was, as much as Lee had made us feel good about who we were and where we were from, we needed people like Kip — people with a different kind of vision."

-- Narrator (Beth) (B)

Importance: Because she did not want to create a further rift between her husband and Kip, Beth told Henry that Kip was having financial troubles because he had bought the mill. She did not mention that he had called to paparazzi to his wedding because of the finders fees he would earn. Although Beth appreciated Lee's kindness and love of Little Wing, she felt the town needed a business man like Kip to help the town grow.

This is my home. This is the place that first believed in me. That still believes in me. This is the place that birthed the songs on that first album."

-- Narrator (Lee) (L)



Importance: Lee claims allegiance for the town that he knows has always believed in him and was the inspiration for his first album.

When I was a kid, lying in bed, I'd hear these riffs, these words, and then I could see them, layering on top of one another, and I saw the way they were supposed to fit and gel."

-- Narrator (Lee) (L)

Importance: Lee knew he was meant to write music from the time he was child because he could imagine music and the way music tracks should work together.

And the lovesongs. They were all written for Beth."

-- Narrator (Lee) (L)

Importance: Lee admits that he never stopped nursing a crush on Beth. He wrote all of the love songs on his first album for her.

I understood then what kind of father he was, what kind of husband and man he was. I understood that he was stronger than me, better than me."

-- Narrator (Lee) (L)

Importance: It was when Henry comforted Lee after he and Chloe had broken up that Lee realized that Henry was a better person that he was.

We think the world is steady, rolling through space beneath our feet, day and night, rain and sunlight. And then, one day, you just fall off the planet and drift away, into outer space, and everything you thought was true, all the laws that bound your life before, all the rules and norms that kept things in place, that kept you in place, they're gone."

-- Narrator (Hank) (H)

Importance: Hank describes the way he felt after he learned that Beth and Lee had a one-night stand, even though their night together took place during a time when Hank and Beth were not dating, before they were even married.

I don't think I'm a good man. I'm not good to people. I know that. What I'm good at, what I understand and what I intuit, is how to make money."

-- Narrator (Kip) (K)

Importance: Kip admits that he does not consider himself a good person. He believes he is good only at making money.

Our life arranged like a vase of flowers. Beautiful and controlled."

-- Narrator (Kip) (K)

Importance: When Felicia tells Kip she wants children, Kip believes that her decision to have children conflicts directly with his desire to have a controlled and arranged life. Children do not fit into the life he had imagined for them.



Also, I wish I hadn't called the paparazzi. What good did that do me? Sure, I was able to pay a few bills, but in the meantime, every friend I had in the world decided that they'd effectively boycott my business — boycott me — for the next eight months, probably costing me about the same amount of revenue I got from selling my friend out to a bunch of gossip rags.”

-- Narrator (Kip) (K)

Importance: Kip admits that he made a mistake when he called the paparazzi to his wedding for the finders fees. It is one of the regrets that he has. He knows it was wrong not only because he lost money when the town boycotted the mill but also because it was an abuse of his friendship with Lee.

I mean, you want to fight?’ he said. ‘Is that it? ’Cause shit, I’ll let you just beat the crap outta me, if it means we can be friends again. I don’t really care.’”

-- Narrator (Henry) (H)

Importance: Lee tries to make up with Henry but cannot figure what he needs to do in order to get forgiveness.

What he could have said is, I know you better than you know yourself. / And this, I think, is what marriage is all about.”

-- Narrator (Beth) (B)

Importance: When Beth remembers the way that Henry had known something was not right after she gave birth to her first child, she thinks that one of the benefits of marriage is that Henry knew her better than she knew herself.