

Somewhere Safe With Somebody Good Study Guide

Somewhere Safe With Somebody Good by Jan Karon

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Plot Summary

Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good, by Jan Karon, is the story of Father Timothy Kavanaugh, a retired priest who lives in the small town of Mitford, and his struggle to find purpose in his retirement years. More than that, it is also the story of Timothy's relationships with the people of Mitford and the many ways that the citizens of Mitford take care of one another.

The story begins as Timothy and his wife, Cynthia, are preparing to go to the retirement of Timothy's doctor and long-time friend, Hoppy. Cynthia worries that Timothy will become one of those retired priests who just fades away.

Hope Murphy sees Timothy and Cynthia drive by her bookstore. She's pregnant and bleeding.

Timothy goes to lunch with his friends J.C. and Mule. As they leave the restaurant, they see a limousine drive by with tinted windows. J.C. tells Timothy the Muse will be running a survey and posing a question in the next issue of the newspaper.

Dooley calls Timothy. Timothy asks Dooley about the ring his girlfriend Lace is wearing, but Dooley doesn't comment.

When Timothy reads the Muse he finds out the survey is asking who people think is the leading citizen and there is an article about whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own.

Timothy is invited to meet with the bishop about some problems at Lord's Chapel where Timothy used to preach. Timothy sees Henry Talbot, the current preacher, and thinks he looks tired and depressed.

At home, Puny tells Timothy a man in a black car with tinted windows came to see him, but she didn't get his name.

Timothy has Sammy, Kenney, and Harley over for dinner. Sammy teaches Timothy to play pool. During the lesson, Timothy makes a good shot and Sammy gets mad. He breaks his cue stick and leaves.

Timothy goes to the local salon to purchase a gift certificate and meets Shirlene. Shirlene asks Timothy to help her find a man.

Timothy goes to the book store that Hope owns. She tells him about her pregnancy and her worries that there will be no one to open the shop while she's on bed rest. Timothy volunteers to come in one day per week.

Timothy meets with the bishop and learns that Henry Talbot will be leaving Lord's Chapel amidst scandal. The bishop wants Timothy to take a temporary position there. After thinking about it and praying, Timothy realizes he does not want the job.



Sammy steals Timothy's cue stick. Timothy decides to say nothing to Sammy, especially after Sammy quietly returns it. Instead, he purchases a new stick for Sammy and resolves to just love him and show him God's grace.

Timothy starts working at the bookstore and many people come in throughout the day to see him. As the days go on, many people come in seeking his counsel or looking for a quiet place to rest.

Timothy goes to Lord's Chapel and offers to fix up the rose garden at no cost to the church. He plans to pay Sammy to help him so that Sammy will have some work to give him a sense of purpose.

Henry Talbot's wife calls Timothy in the middle of the night and tells him Henry is missing. Timothy and Dooley go looking for Henry. Henry has attempted suicide they take him to the hospital. Timothy calls the bishop to tell him about Henry. Timothy has to tell the congregation at Lord's Chapel that Henry has left. He cries as when he makes the announcement.

Timothy and Sammy begin the work on the rose garden. Sammy is defiant and angry, but Timothy remains patient with him. Timothy discovers that Sammy has a knack for landscaping design.

Sammy steals Timothy's Mustang and crashes it. Sammy is unhurt and Timothy decides not to press charges. Instead, when people ask him what he's going to do about Sammy, Timothy says he's just going to keep loving him and pray for him.

The limousine stops at the bookstore while Timothy is working. Timothy meets Kim Dorsay, a movie star, who is Irene's long-lost twin sister. She asks him to set up a way for her to meet Irene. Cynthia and Timothy arrange a meeting and Irene is shocked but happy.

Timothy takes Sammy to see the wrecked Mustang and then takes him to the hospital to do some work on the hedges there. Timothy takes Sammy in to the hospital while he meets with some of the patients there. Sammy is very upset by a boy his age who has been seriously injured. He goes to the truck and Timothy finds him sobbing and angry and questioning how God could let that happen.

Helene comes to Timothy's house and tells him that Sammy is becoming a problem and it's affecting her piano lessons. She asks Timothy to make him leave, but then agrees to give him a little more time.

Timothy decides it is time to talk to Sammy about his attitude and what he wants from life. He tells Sammy that if he chooses life, Sammy will have the help he needs and he also has God on his side.

Coot's mother dies and Timothy goes to his house in the middle of a snow storm to comfort him. The funeral takes place outside on a frigid day, but a crowd of people show up to support Coot.



Timothy continues to work at the bookstore and finds that he's feeling happier and more relaxed. Sammy has also begun to change.

Cynthia and Timothy decide to set Shirlene up with Omer Cunningham who, like Shirlene, enjoys playing scrabble.

Timothy is voted Mitford's leading citizen and receives a medal and a spray-tan package as prizes. He plans to donate the tanning package to the hospital fundraiser auction.

Sammy brings Cynthia a tiny kitten that he finds. Cynthia believes Sammy seems softer now. As Christmas approaches, Sammy suggests that he and Timothy build a cat door for the kitten as a gift to Cynthia.

Helene comes up with an idea to have a life St. Nicholas at the bookstore for Christmas. Timothy agrees to it knowing that it will boost sales. Helene wants him to play St. Nicholas, but he doesn't want to.

Cynthia suggests they put a nativity set in the bookstore window. Timothy plans to put it in increments with the Baby Jesus appearing at midnight on Christmas Eve.

Several people step up to keep the store open nights in the days before Christmas. Even Sammy volunteers to help. Omer and Shirlene meet at the store on the night the group decorates the Christmas tree. They discover they've been playing Scrabble together online.

On the night the tree and lights are to be turned on at the store, a crowd gathers around. Sammy invites the onlookers into the store for cookies and works at the cash register. When St. Nicholas finally arrives, people can't figure out who is in the costume. Timothy has recruited Coot to play the part.

Timothy asks HESSIE to write an important article for the Muse and says Cynthia will give her the details. When the article is run, it reveals that Irene has a twin sister and that both Kim and Irene have made huge donations to the children's hospital.

Dooley calls Timothy to tell him that he and Lace are engaged.

On Christmas Eve there is a huge snowstorm, but Harley shovels Timothy out so that he can go to the store to place the Baby Jesus. Timothy, Cynthia, and Sammy gather around the crèche and read lyrics from a Christmas hymn as they put the figure into the crèche.

On Christmas morning, Timothy finds the old Muse article about whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own. He believes the town has proven they do.



Chapters 1-5

Summary

Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good, by Jan Karon, is set in the town of Mitford and is the tenth book in the Mitford series. It tells the story of Father Timothy Kavanagh, who has recently retired, and his efforts to retain a purposeful life.

In Chapter One, Timothy and his wife Cynthia, an author of children's books, are preparing to attend the retirement party of their friend Dr. Hoppy Harper. Timothy worries that his tux will no longer fit well because he's gained some weight. He complains to Cynthia about going to the party, but she insists they go saying she has heard that some retired priests never leave the house.

Timothy heads upstairs to try on his tux and passes his elderly dog Barnabas who spends the majority of his time upstairs and has begun having difficulty with steps due to his age. Timothy thinks that he'll have to move Barnabas to the downstairs study soon.

Timothy stopped preaching five years ago, but he still misses it. He was forced to retire due to his diabetes. When he retired his congregation was shocked by the announcement, but eventually became indifferent and some even became angry.

Puny arrives and gives Timothy a packet of medication. Cynthia suggests they borrow a tux from Irene McGraw, whom Timothy doesn't know much about except that she is supposed to look like a certain movie star. They drive to Irene's house.

On the drive, they talk about Irene and that she is going to donate some paintings to the Children's Hospital benefit. Timothy looks at the newspaper while Cynthia goes up to Irene's house. The latest news in the Muse is that Fancy Skinner's sister, Shirlene, will be joining her at the hair salon and they will be offering spray tanning.

Cynthia returns to the car and tells him that Irene isn't home and her front door is open. Cynthia is worried that something has happened to Irene. They go into her house together and Cynthia discovers Irene's bedroom is in disarray. They decide to go do their shopping and stop back later.

Chapter Two begins with Timothy thinking about eating the ice cream they will buy at the Local. Cynthia tells him Lace will be home on break in October. Timothy muses that Dooley's break doesn't coincide with Lace's and that their colleges are far apart. Cynthia says they'll have Lace over for lunch while she's home so they can see her ring, which isn't a friendship ring, but also isn't an engagement ring.

Cynthia asks Timothy to remind her to get treats for Violet. Timothy thinks about how Violet is the biggest earner in the family since she is the subject of Cynthia's book series.



In the car, Timothy takes out a spoon to eat his ice cream and says they should go home and try to call Irene again instead of going back to Irene's house. As they drive, he thinks about how Hoppy is going to South Sudan to do charitable work while his greatest concern is eating ice cream. He realizes Hoppy's exciting future has made him worry about his own future.

Hope Murphy stands in the doorway of her shop, Happy Endings Bookstore, and sees Father Tim and Cynthia go by. She thinks about how she visited the rose garden at Lord's Chapel a few days ago and it had gone to ruin. She knows Father Tim would be disappointed because he'd planted the garden. Hope feels a trickle of blood and remembers that she's missed two doctor appointments for her pregnancy. She hasn't told anyone but her husband Scott about the baby and hasn't told Scott about the bleeding.

Helene Pringle rents the house next door from Timothy and sublets the basement apartment to Harley Welch. Dooley's younger brothers Sammy and Kenny also live with Harley. The house is quiet now, but the three men sometimes make a lot of noise. Helene claims she likes the noise because it makes the place more cheerful.

Timothy reviews his calendar and notes that he's not busy enough.

Cynthia still has been unable to reach Irene and asks Timothy if they should at least go and close her door. Timothy tries to continue reading the paper. Cynthia reminds him of the former mayor's slogan, "Mitford takes care of its own." They go back to Irene's house and go inside. Timothy notices paintings that Irene has done of a young girl. Joe Joe comes in thinking they are robbers. Timothy faints.

In Chapter Three, Puny arrives and teases Timothy about fainting. Puny reveals that Irene left in a hurry because her daughter was having a baby.

Timothy meets Mule Skinner and J.C. for lunch. They have a comical discussion about Mule wanting to order two children's plates. Timothy gets irritated with Mule and J.C. and wonders why he still eats with them. The new owner of the restaurant, Wanda Basinger, comes over and introduces herself. She says she fired the last waitress for being nice to the customers. Mule refuses to order after being teased, so Timothy orders two children's plates for him.

As the men leave the restaurant they see the black limo drive by and wonder who is in it. J.C. mentions rumors at Lord's Chapel and Timothy says he stays out of parish business. J.C. says there will be a big story in the next Muse. He says they are posing a philosophical question and also taking a survey about Mitford's leading citizen.

Timothy drives his Mustang and notices a strange sound. He and Cynthia have been thinking about getting rid of the car. He stops into a nursing facility to see Louella Baxter Marshall, who is being taken care of out of funds left by Miss Sadie, who raised her. Louella opens her eyes and he tells her a secret he's been keeping; he has a brother named Henry whose mother is the Peggy, the black woman who was his nanny.



After leaving Louella's room, Timothy hopes to see Pauline, Dooley's birth mother. She is a recovering alcoholic and deserted all of children except Pooh when Sammy was six. Pauline has since become a believer, married Buck Leeper, and is healing. When Timothy sees Pauline she asks about Sammy and Timothy tells her he is hurting, but that Kenny is doing well.

Chapter Four begins with Timothy sitting on the floor by his dog and saying a prayer. His dog looks at him and he knows it's okay that he's moved Barnabas downstairs.

Dooley calls Timothy and asks about Hoppy's retirement party. Timothy mentions he saw Lace at the party and that she denied the ring was an engagement ring. Dooley is silent on the matter.

Timothy arrives at Dr. Wilson's office. Wilson asks if Timothy has been experiencing any depression lately and he says he hasn't. Dr. Wilson checks his weight. The nurse hands him a prescription on his way out that instructs him to run three times a week.

Timothy and Cynthia lay on the couch together and talk. Timothy has been sleeping downstairs by his dog and Cynthia says she will, too. They say a prayer together and Cynthia suggests they write love letters to one another.

Timothy lays awake and prays for the people in his life. He thinks about writing a letter to Cynthia and what his inspiration will be. As he prays, he falls asleep thinking, "Camelopardalis."

Timothy wakes in the morning and thinks about going for a run and what route he'll take. He sits down exhausted from just thinking about it. When he goes for a run he sees the limo again.

Esther Cunningham sees Father Tim out for a run and waves. She's been feeling tired. Esther had been the mayor of Mitford for almost twenty years. She now believes that Mitford no longer takes care of its own. She sees trash blowing around and a bag has been stuck on the awing of a shop since August. She thinks about all that's been going wrong in Mitford and the trouble at Lord's Chapel.

Hessie Mayhew and Lois Burton see Father Tim jog by. Hessie jots something in a notebook and Lois asks her about it. She says it's a household hint and Lois says she loves the Household Hints in the Muse. Hessie is upset that Vanita Bentley now writes about half of the hints.

Timothy continues on his run and sees a sign welcoming Shirlene to town. He runs by the Collar Button man and they talk about the mysterious limo seen in Mitford.

Coot Hendrick sits outside the bookstore and sees Father Tim run by. Father Tim asks after his mother and Coot says he heard Father Tim fainted.

Timothy and Cynthia sit comfortably in their living room. Cynthia is reading, but Timothy is distracted. He points out a rash on his neck and that his eye is scratchy. She asks him



what's really wrong and he says he feels useless. Cynthia tells Timothy he always wants to do more and that he really wants God's job. Timothy suggests he could get started on building a new studio for Cynthia. She suggests instead that he work on raising money for the Children's Hospital.

Chapter Five starts with Timothy reading the *Muse*. He reads a story posing the question of whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own aloud to Cynthia. The article closes by asking readers if they think Mitford still takes care of its own and whom they believe the town's leading citizen is.

Emma Newland, Timothy's former secretary, arrives. Timothy offers her a few hours of work. Timothy gives her instructions on how to handle his appointments and phone calls. Emma opens a letter from the new bishop that requests a meeting with Timothy regarding a problem in the diocese.

Coot returns home excited to tell his mother that his name was in the paper for answering the question about whether Mitford still takes care of its own. His mother asks him to read the article, though she knows he can't read, however he makes something up as he pretends to read. He includes details like Esther Bolick bringing an Orange Marmalade Cake, which the town refers to as an OMC, and the church people bringing them food at Thanksgiving. Coot offers to make his mother dinner but there's very little food in the house, so he bakes an onion for her.

Timothy worries about the letter from the bishop. Harley, Sammy, and Kenny return home. Sammy says he won't go back to school and is being defiant. Helene admonishes them for Sammy's bad language and Kenny and Harley apologize. Helene tells them there's roasted chicken waiting in their oven for them.

Analysis

Many of the characters, themes, and plot lines of *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good* are introduced in this first section of the novel. Among the characters introduced is the main character, Father Timothy Kavanaugh. As the protagonist, Timothy's character is central to the novel and he is involved in each of the major plot lines and themes. At the start of the book, Timothy is quite different from the man he will be by the end of the book. In this section, Timothy is portrayed as being somewhat unhealthy. He has gained some weight and his tuxedo no longer fits. When Puny arrives, it's revealed that Timothy is also having some gastrointestinal issues. He visits Dr. Wilson who advises him to begin running to get some exercise. Timothy is diabetic and has a difficult time turning down sweets. In fact, he loves nothing more than to sit down with a pint of ice cream. His wife, Cynthia, monitors his eating habits for him, since he seems unable to do so himself. His visit to Dr. Wilson reveals that he has nearly died in the past as a result of having eaten sugary foods. In addition, he has suffered from bouts of severe depression.



Timothy comes across as a bit of a grumpy old codger. He complains about having to try his tuxedo on to go to his good friend Hoppy's retirement party. In fact, he claims he doesn't want to go to the party at all, which seems odd considering Hoppy saved his life twice and the two are close. He is easily irritated by people he calls friends as is illustrated in his lunch at the café with J.C. and Mule. By the end of lunch, he's wondering why he even bothers to eat with them anymore.

Chief among Timothy's issues at the outset of the novel is that he feels useless. He retired from preaching five years ago and he feels like his life no longer has any purpose. Part of the reason he does not want to go to Hoppy's retirement party is that he knows Hoppy has big plans for the future. Hoppy will be going overseas to provide medical services as part of a charity organization. Timothy, on the other hand, has no plans beyond general day-to-day living. Cynthia is aware of Timothy's feelings and his lack of purpose, so she urges him to go to the party even though he doesn't want to. She tells him she's heard of priests who retire and just fade away and she's worried this will happen to Timothy.

While Timothy might be unhappy with himself, the citizens of Mitford don't feel that way at all. In fact, J.C. tells Timothy that someone has mentioned Timothy as the leading citizen of Mitford. Timothy's reaction to this revelation shows that he is a humble man as he asks J.C. not to publish that information in the newspaper. Clearly the town has great respect for the retired priest. In introducing Hope Murphy's character, the author shows that Timothy isn't just respected, but he is also truly loved. Hope thinks about how much his friendship has meant to her. She is sad that the rose garden Timothy worked so hard on has gone to ruin because she knows he will be disappointed by that. Hope also reveals Timothy to be an intelligent man who loves to read since she recalls a conversation they'd once had about books.

This initial section of the novel also introduces Timothy's wife, Cynthia, who is another of the novel's central characters since Timothy's life revolves around her and the love they share. Cynthia is a level-headed woman with a creative spirit. She takes care of Timothy in a way he seems incapable of caring for himself. She recognizes that he has a tendency to eat the wrong things and take on too much responsibility. Throughout the novel, Cynthia will prove to be Timothy's greatest supporter as well as his voice of reason.

The author introduces readers to Timothy's dog, Barnabas, a great, shaggy black dog. Barnabas is quite old and has difficulty navigating the steps. His favorite place to sleep is in the upstairs of the house, but Timothy knows that it's time to move him down to the main floor so that he won't have to struggle with the steps anymore. Barnabas is Timothy's companion and the one that Timothy seeks out when he needs a quiet moment. Barnabas symbolizes two things for Timothy. First, Barnabas is a symbol of Timothy's own advancing age. Barnabas has grown old and although Timothy can see this, he has difficulty accepting that Barnabas's age means that the dog will have to endure some changes in his life, like moving downstairs. Timothy struggles with necessary changes in his life due to retirement in the same way. Second, Barnabas symbolizes Timothy's connection with God. When Timothy wishes to connect with God



through prayer, he often sits with Barnabas to do so. The dog's calm demeanor seems to remind him of God's presence.

The town of Mitford, which is, in a way, a character unto its own is also introduced. The author cleverly begins the reader's acquaintance with the town by taking Timothy on a run through Mitford. As Timothy runs, the author describes the town and the people he sees along the way. The first impression of Mitford is that it is small and friendly. People wave or chat as Timothy runs by. Mitford seems to be the quintessential American small town.

In addition to introducing the town, the author uses Timothy's run to introduce a few other characters who are important to the novel. One of these is Esther Cunningham who was once the mayor of Mitford. Esther is retired now and believes that Mitford has changed since she ran the town. The author mentions that she's been feeling tired, which foreshadows Esther having a stroke later in the novel. She once believed that Mitford took care of its own, but now she sees trash in the streets and she worries about something rumored to be happening at Lord's Chapel. Her worries become two of the major plot lines of the novel.

Also introduced during Timothy's run is Coot Hendrick, a poor, illiterate man with a kind heart. Though he can't read, he can recognize his name and he is excited to see it in the newspaper. In fact, the mention makes him so happy that he can't wait to tell his mother about it. Coot is the caretaker for his elderly mother, despite the fact that she's often mean-spirited and yells that she wants to die and he should just let her. He feeds her out of the meager means of their cupboards, sometimes simply baking an onion for her supper because it's all they have. Coot symbolizes the needs of the downtrodden in Mitford, and ultimately, the needs of the poor in America. The author uses Coot to show the good people can do when they help others. Coot, despite is poor upbringing and economic circumstances, is proven to be a good person who has something to contribute to society. In helping Coot, the people of Mitford are lifted up, as well.

The major themes introduced in this section of the novel are purpose, taking care of others, faith, love, and humor. The theme of purpose is mainly shown in Timothy's struggle to figure out what he's supposed to be doing in this new phase of his life. He believes that the people of Mitford no longer have any use for him since he's not a preacher anymore. Timothy recalls their reaction to his retirement as being one of indifference and even anger, which reinforces his belief that they don't need him. Although he wants to be doing something, Timothy seems unsure of what exactly it is he should be doing. He looks at his calendar and sees that he has been invited to lots of meetings and has many phone calls to return, but he doesn't want to do any of that. In fact, he hires Emma to contact people and turn them down. Yet, he complains that he hasn't got anything to do and, to mitigate his boredom, he suggests to Cynthia that he build her a new studio. His lack of purpose also leads Timothy to complain about many things, but do nothing. For example, he complains to Cynthia about his health, yet he does very little to help himself to feel better. Although he does eventually go for a run, it's clear his heart isn't in it and it probably won't be a very common occurrence.



The theme is also evident in Esther Cunningham's feelings about her own retirement. Physically, she feels old and tired. She's bored and her husband knows it, so he plans a vacation for them. Esther feels like the town of Mitford has declined since she was mayor and, as the novel goes on, she will even consider running for office once again.

The theme of taking care of others is introduced through the article in the newspaper about whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own, as Esther's mayoral campaign slogan once suggested. Although the author has already show several examples of the people of Mitford taking care of others, such as Puny bringing Timothy medicine for his gastrointestinal problems and Cynthia taking care of Timothy, the article really marks the beginning of the use of this theme. Esther represents the opposing view to the theme, since she believes that Mitford, in fact, no longer does take care of its own. She points to the garbage blowing through the street as evidence. However, the author has already shown many reasons to believe that the town still cares for its people. The fact that the townspeople take care of Coot and his mother by bringing them food is one of those reasons. In addition, Helene, a quiet and studious piano teacher, sublets her basement to Harley, Kenny, and Sammy, a group of often loud and sometimes crass men, is another.

The theme of faith is introduced through Timothy's frequent use of prayer. Timothy and Cynthia lie on the couch and pray aloud together. Then, when he cannot sleep, Timothy prays for all of the people in his life, and as he does, inspiration for a love letter to Cynthia comes to him as he falls asleep. This inspiration through prayer suggests that the author believes prayer can relax a person, as evidenced by Timothy finally being able to sleep, and allow them to free their minds. It might also suggest a divine intervention through prayer in that, perhaps, God provided Timothy with the idea of using the Camelopardalis as inspiration for his letter. Camelopardalis, while being the name of a constellation, is also another name for the giraffe, which is sometimes depicted in art as being the animal that Rebecca rode into Canaan on for her marriage to Jacob in the Bible.

The theme of faith is also evident in the way that Timothy sits down to pray with Barnabas shortly after having moved him from his place upstairs. After praying, he looks into Barnabas's eyes and sees that the move was okay, suggesting that through prayer Timothy has found some acceptance of this necessary change.

Faith is also shown in the story of Dooley's mother, Pauline. Pauline is a recovering alcoholic who neglected and abandoned her children. Now, having found God, Pauline is leading a clean life, holding down a job, and seeking reconciliation with her children.

The theme of love is introduced through Timothy and Cynthia. Their deep love for one another is obvious in the way they speak to one another and in the way they take care of one another, though at this stage in the book the author mainly shows the way Cynthia cares for Timothy. Cynthia badgers Timothy about going to Hoppy's party because she loves him and she is worried about him. She knows he is feeling blue and that a night out among friends will do him some good. Later, when Timothy buys ice cream at the store, he knows that Cynthia will stop him from eating the whole container.



Though he'd like to eat all of it, he knows that Cynthia loves him and stops him because she doesn't want him to experience any diabetic complications due to the sugar in the ice cream, so he doesn't resent her for limiting the amount he eats. Then, when Timothy struggles with moving Barnabas downstairs and sleeps on the couch to keep him company, Cynthia joins him in spite of the fact that the two of them are sharing one couch and can't possibly be as comfortable as they would be in the bed. But, Cynthia loves Timothy and knows that it's hard for him to see his dog growing old, so she supports him as he adjusts to the change. Cynthia's love for Timothy leads her to ask him to write love letters again. They agree to write one another one letter per week.

The theme of love is not limited to romantic love. Instead, love is also shown through several other characters. There is a deep and profound love present between Timothy and Barnabas. Timothy cherishes his time with Barnabas and spends a great deal of time with him. If he did not love Barnabas, he wouldn't hesitate to move him from the upstairs since it will make getting him outside more convenient. However, Timothy does love Barnabas and he worries that the dog will be unhappy when he's moved from his customary spot. This leads to Timothy's and Cynthia's nights on the couch to be with the dog while he gets used to being downstairs at night. The love between the two is also evident in that Timothy is able to look into the dog's eyes and see that the move downstairs was all right. This indicates that Timothy knows and loves his dog so well that he can sense the dog's feelings.

Love is also shown through the relationship between Coot and his mother. Although Mrs. Hendrick is a mean old woman, Coot loves her. He pretends to read to her when she wants to know more about the newspaper article. Though Mrs. Hendrick knows that Coot cannot read, she says nothing and instead asks him to keep reading. Coot worries over his mother and tries to very hard to take care of her despite their lack of money and food. He makes a meal for her out of whatever he can find in the cupboards, even if it's just a single onion.

The author also introduces the motif of humor. The use of humor as a motif not only entertains the reader, but also indicates that the author knows that life and the goings on of a small town can be, at times, absurdly humorous. The Muse, the town's small newspaper, is a great source of humor. The articles are often riddled with typos and notes that are meant for the editor, but haven't been removed. One article contains a repeated typo that makes "Father Tim" into "Father Time." In addition to the many errors, the style of the articles is unlike anything one might encounter in larger newspapers. It's very loose and casual, using words like "biggie" and frequent words and phrases in all capital letters. The Muse doesn't so much report news as it does gossip. In fact, when Timothy faints at Irene's house, the Muse makes mention of the incident, which causes Timothy great embarrassment since he can hardly go anywhere without someone mentioning it. The big news in the initial copy of the Muse that the author includes in the novel is that the salon is getting a spray tan booth and the café has added a children's menu, both items that would never make the paper anywhere but in a small town.



Another example of humor occurs when Timothy meets his friends for lunch. The author ties the humor in the lunch scene to the article in which the Muse mentions that there's a new children's menu by having one of the characters decide to order two children's plates instead of one regular meal. Mule wants to see if the new menu is any good, so instead of ordering an adult meal of macaroni and cheese with a grilled cheese sandwich, he decides to order two children's plates so that he can still have a full sandwich even though it will cost him more. The conversation continues to spiral into more absurdity as the men look over the rest of the menu and discuss the merits of salad and vegetable plates. In the midst of all of this, Wanda wryly informs them that she fired the old waitress for being nice to the customers.

Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good contains a large number of plots that tie together to make it one cohesive story. This section of the novel initiates some of those plots. One of the major story lines revolves around Hope's bookstore. That plot begins when pregnant Hope is standing in her store and feels a trickle of blood. This small mention leads readers to wonder what is wrong with Hope and draws them into Hope's life. This detail begins the plot in which Hope will be unable to run her bookstore, which causes Timothy to volunteer to help out. In turn, other people come forward and offer their help. This plot line becomes a part of the overall theme of purpose since it will be where Timothy finds some purpose in his life.

Another plot that begins in this initial section is Irene McGraw's story. The reader learns that Irene is a painter and a widow. When Timothy and Cynthia go to Irene's house to investigate the open door, Timothy notices paintings that Irene has done of a young girl with a minuscule reflection of the subject's image in her eyes. This detail is a clever foreshadowing of Irene's eventual discovery that she has a twin sister. There is also mention that Irene looks remarkably like a movie star whose name Timothy can never remember. To add to the mystery of this plot, a black limo is seen zipping about town, but no one knows who is inside.

The plot line involving Henry Talbot is also briefly introduced. There are rumors circulating around something going on at Lord's Parish. When Timothy is asked what he knows, he responds that he tries to stay out of parish business since he's retired. However, the bishop sends Timothy a letter requesting to meet with him, so he knows there is something going on.

Finally, the author begins the story of Dooley and Lace. Dooley has given his girlfriend, Lace, a ring, but insists it is not an engagement ring. He is currently in college and plans to go to veterinary school afterward, so he believes it's too soon to get engaged. Dooley's and Lace's college schedules don't seem to coincide and they are miles apart, leaving the reader wondering if the two will stay together or be forced to call the relationship off.

The author also introduces a few symbols. In addition to Barnabas and Coot, Violet also serves as a symbol. Violet is Cynthia's cat around whom her children's book series centers. Violet, as Timothy notes, is the chief money earner in the family and they are reticent to upset her by moving Barnabas downstairs. Violet symbolizes the security of



living life just the way it currently is and avoiding changes. Timothy is reluctant to make life changes that could disrupt the security and certainty of what each day will bring, just as he is reluctant to disrupt Violet by placing the dog in her space.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Timothy complain that he's not busy enough, but then asks Emma to turn down or avoid meetings?

Discussion Question 2

What is Coot like? What part of society do he and his mother represent?

Discussion Question 3

What examples of humor are in this section of the novel? Why does the author use humor? How does it move the story ahead or further describe characters?

Vocabulary

culprit, indifference, arcane, horde, juxtaposition, cleric, contemporary, regimen, slapdash, lingering, tethered, interceding, immunodeficiency, decimated, prolong, literary, beguiling



Chapters 6-10

Summary

Chapter 6 begins with Timothy preparing for a run and worrying about being a laughingstock after having fainted. He stops in at the bakery to drop off an order and discovers a letter from Cynthia in his pocket. Cynthia's letter recalls the times in her life when she wished to be "somewhere safe with somebody good" and gives thanks to God for her life with Timothy. He offers to pray for Winnie and Thomas as they rush about getting the bakery ready for the day.

Timothy continues his run. He thinks about stopping at Esther's to inquire about an OMC. He also realizes he's having difficulty writing a letter to Henry even though as a boy he prayed for a brother for years. He believes Henry is a gift from God.

Timothy notices trash lying around near Lord's Chapel and considers picking it up, but then wonders what he'll do with it once he has. He picks up a plastic bag and begins to fill it.

Timothy sees the limo drive swiftly by heading down the mountain.

He sits on a bench by Lord's Chapel and Father Talbot comes out. He thinks Talbot looks a bit exhausted and depressed. Talbot asks if they can get together and Timothy suggests lunch at the tea shop. Talbot turns away and walks inside. Timothy is now sure he's depressed and suffering.

Timothy arrives at Esther Bolick's house and requests that she make an OMC for him. She says he'll have to order the cake from the bakery since she made a deal with Winnie to allow the bakery to use her recipe as long as they promise to never change it. She asks Timothy if he thinks Mitford still takes care of its own. He offers to pray for her and she accepts saying Father Talbot never offers.

When he returns home Puny tells him a man in a black car with tinted windows came to see him. She says she didn't get his name. Puny then tells him that Mr. Skinner left a message to meet at the tea shop at noon. He thinks J.C. will also show up for lunch. He thinks the town has dismissed the article in the Muse since no one mentioned it to him. He says a prayer and forgives J.C. before going to tell Cynthia about Esther's news.

At the tea shop, J.C. says he can tell that Timothy didn't like the article. Mule suggests they work on renaming the tea shop. The men have a humorous discussion about possible names. They decide on a name and then present it to Wanda. Mule suggests she give them free lunch for five days in exchange for the name.

Timothy goes home and sees Harley who has gotten false teeth. Sammy arrives with his pool cue. He goes to light a cigarette and Timothy tells him he's not allowed to smoke there and also admonishes him for cussing. After dinner, Sammy gives Timothy



a pool lesson. Timothy accidentally makes a good shot that leaves Sammy set up badly for his next shot. Sammy gets angry and smacks his pool cue on the edge of the table, breaking it. He leaves abruptly.

Harley and Timothy talk about the boys after Sammy leaves. Harley says Kenny is doing well, but Sammy is always trying to start a fight. Harley insists, though, that Sammy will eventually be alright. Helene lingers to talk to Timothy about Sammy. She wonders what she can do to help and Timothy tells her they need to keep praying and trust things will turn out fine. After everyone leaves, Timothy sits with Barnabas and prays.

Cynthia and Timothy talk about Sammy. She says that pool is Sammy's identity and losing to Timothy shows how easily he could lose it. She says Sammy wanted to teach Timothy as a way of proving that he has something to offer.

In Chapter Seven, Cynthia suggests that they buy Esther a gift certificate to get her hair colored while there's a special at A Cut Above. Timothy says he'll pick it up and stop in at the bookstore.

Timothy goes to the salon. His marching band ringtone sounds and he answers a call from Dooley. Dooley has heard about Sammy's outburst and asks what they can do to help Sammy. Timothy tells him to keep praying.

Timothy goes into the salon where he's introduced to Fancy's sister Shirlene. She shows him the spray tan booth. He tries to tell the women he needs a gift certificate but they chatter on and on. Shirlene asks Timothy where the single men are in Mitford.

Timothy goes into Happy Endings. Hope is teary and tells him that she's been told she has to go on bed rest. She is concerned about the bookstore since she can't afford to pay anyone to keep it open. She begs Timothy not to tell anyone about her condition. Timothy tells her he'll come in on Thursdays and run the store.

Timothy stops at Lew's and Lew tells him some information he discovered about the limo they've been seeing. He shows Timothy a glasses case with the initials "KD" on it.

Timothy returns home. Cynthia tells him the bishop left a message for him again and would like to see him on Monday. He then tells Cynthia about working at the bookstore and realizes he's excited about it.

Hope closes up the store and thinks about how she'll need to find someone else to come in for at least one other day. She is worried about her pregnancy and not even prayer can keep her from being afraid.

Timothy and Cynthia go out for dinner and he hands her the letter he wrote to her. They toast to Miss Sadie. Cynthia says she hates retirement and wrinkle creams and age spots. Timothy tells her they aren't age spots, they're freckles and they laugh.



Chapter Eight opens with Timothy thinking about how beautiful Mitford is and that they don't need to travel to find beauty.

Timothy goes to meet with Jack Martin, the bishop. They spend a few minutes talking about Timothy's marriage to Cynthia at a late age and his decision to settle in Mitford. The topic turns to Timothy's health and his reason for retiring.

The bishop tells him that he believes Timothy and Cynthia are good role models and then reveals that Father Talbot is divorcing his wife, whom he cheated on, and leaving the church. The bishop says there are other issues as well, but he won't go into them. The Bishop is allowing Father Talbot to speak to his congregation one last time to apologize before he leaves. He asks Timothy to act as vicar until they can find someone permanent. Timothy says he needs to talk to Cynthia about it. The bishop prays for Timothy and then advises him that if he accepts, he could be at Lord's Chapel for a year or more.

Timothy tells Cynthia about the bishop's request. She asks him what he wants to do and he says he doesn't know. She says it will be difficult for her to watch him exhaust himself, but she's with him in whatever decision he makes.

In Chapter Nine, Timothy prays before going to bed and lays wishing for an easy way out of the decision he has to make regarding the bishop's request. In the morning he again prays and asks God for help in making his decision. Timothy then calls Hoppy and tells him about the situation. He then walks to Hoppy's house and thinks about Sammy as he walks. He is certain Sammy is not hopeless.

At Hoppy's house, Timothy inquires about Hope's condition. Hoppy tells Timothy that Hope's placenta is blocking the birth canal and the condition can be life threatening for both Hope and the baby. Hoppy then tells Timothy that he believes that if Timothy sticks to his diet and exercise regimen, he could take the job at Lord's Chapel. He then cautions Timothy against trying to do everything without help.

Timothy goes home and checks his schedule. It's another quiet day and he wonders what it would be like to go back to being busy. He decides to make his decision by Thursday. He checks his calendar and sees that he is to be at Happy Endings on Thursday, so thinks he should change the decision day to Friday. He then decides he can't put the decision off but also has to be at the bookstore because he doesn't want to disappoint Hope or his dog, so he sets his mind to call the bishop and to be at the bookstore on Thursday.

Timothy calls Jeb to discuss the condition of his Mustang and learns that it will cost more to fix the car than it is worth. He hasn't bought a new car in a long time, so decides to ask Dooley for help.

Puny arrives with her twins, Timmy and Tommy, and says that Joe Joe is the new police chief. She then informs Timothy that his cue stick is missing. He's taken aback and asks Puny not to mention it to Cynthia.



Timothy walks to the restaurant and as he passes Happy Endings he sees a sign informing patrons the store will be open Wednesdays and Thursdays until further notice. Someone has written “Pray for Hope” on the sign. At the café men are hanging the new sign and both greet Timothy and ask him to pray for them before he goes in. Hessie Mayhew is there taking pictures for the paper. She wonders who came up with the “wacko” new name for the café and Timothy tells her that her boss did. Inside, Timothy notices that Mule has gotten a spray tan and thinks he looks ridiculous. J.C., Timothy, and Wanda tease Mule about being tan in the middle of winter.

As they leave the café, J.C. tells him he’ll like the next feature in the paper.

Dooley calls and they discuss the Mustang and what Timothy wants to purchase to replace it.

Cynthia tells Timothy that Irene has decided to donate some paintings for the hospital auction. The paintings are portraits and they speculate about whether or not they are self-portraits of Irene as a girl. Irene says she needs to let them go, but Cynthia thinks they seem very personal to Irene.

Esther Cunningham drives home from the hair salon and thinks she’s glad she’s gotten her hair done before her meeting with Andrew Gregory and has created a mental list of people who were still doing great things at an advanced age.

Timothy thinks about Sammy and wonders how he got in to take the cue. He decides that what Sammy needs is some help and hard, satisfying work. He resolves to have Sammy work on the Lord’s Chapel rose garden. Timothy mulls over all of the other work that needs to be done at the church. As he sits, he realizes he can’t visualize himself back in the pulpit, so he prays.

Timothy calls Dooley and tells him he’s been asked to come back to Lord’s Chapel. Dooley asks why Timothy would want to do that and then says he’ll pray. When Timothy hangs up, he realizes he doesn’t want to go back to Lord’s Chapel at all.

Chapter Ten begins with Timothy reading quotes that have been taped to the window at Happy Endings. It seems like a sort of community billboard. As he prepares the shop for the day, he realizes how relieved he feels about having made a decision about Lord’s Chapel. He feels like it wasn’t his decision at all, but God’s. He calls the bishop who takes the news well.

Esther Bolick enters the shop with her hair done and sporting a spray tan. She asks what Timothy thinks and he tells her he likes it and that she looks younger. She presents Timothy with an OMC as a thank you for the salon gift certificate. The cake is from the bakery and Timothy pronounces it not as good as Esther’s.

An article in the Muse written by Vanita suggests that the late Sadie Baxter should be recognized as Mitford’s leading citizen because she contributed so much to the community. The article says a plaque in Sadie’s memory will be written by Timothy. The



article tabulates the votes received for leading citizen, which names Timothy as having received the most votes.

J.C. comes in the store and asks Timothy what he thinks of the article in the paper. Timothy asks why no one told him he was writing the plaque. Timothy convinces J.C. to purchase a book.

Winnie arrives at the store, but says she's not there to buy a book, just to take a break from the busy bakery. Timothy tells her to sit in the poetry section because it's quiet.

Andrew, the mayor, arrives and tells Timothy that Esther Cunningham came to see him and wanted to help him with running the town. Andrew says he wouldn't be surprised if Esther decided to run for mayor again. He then asks Timothy to be grand marshal of the Independence Day parade and says he'll be driving Sadie's car.

Coot arrives at the bookstore and is elated that his name was in the paper. Timothy can see he's moved by being mentioned two weeks in a row. Coot asks what it meant when the paper said he was a "town fixture." Timothy gets the dictionary and reads Coot the definition of fixture. He then shows Coot that his name is in the dictionary, too, and that a coot is a bird. Timothy wonders how one could teach an adult to read.

At the end of the day, Timothy totals up the sales and thinks about the many people who came in to purchase books that day. He's pleased with the total and calls Hope to report. Hope is very happy.

Coot shows his mother that his name is in the dictionary and that she named him after a duck. Coot places the dictionary on the mantle where he can see it.

Timothy tells Harley his cue stick is missing. Harley is worried about Sammy, too. Timothy says he's going to talk to Sammy, but that there will be no accusations about the cue.

Timothy goes into his study and sees that his cue stick has been returned. He calls Harley, but Sammy answers so he just tells Sammy that he called to say they miss seeing him.

Timothy sits down at his computer and thinks about how God is a God of Second Chances and then orders something from an online store.

On Friday morning, Puny tells Timothy his cue stick is back.

Analysis

Though Sammy is mentioned in the first section of the novel, it is in this section that the author gives readers a real look at how troubled Sammy truly is. Sammy cusses, spits, and has a bad temper. Harley informs Timothy that he's having trouble with Sammy



always trying to start fights. Sammy's only redeeming quality at this point seems to be the fact that he is an exceptional pool player.

Unfortunately, even playing pool gets Sammy into trouble. Timothy agrees to a pool lesson knowing that it will give him an opportunity to spend some time with Sammy. However, when Timothy unwittingly makes a great shot, Sammy becomes unreasonable angry. So angry, in fact, that he smashes his pool cue against the table and breaks it. Then, he storms out. Later, Sammy sneaks into Timothy's house and steals a pool cue from Timothy so that he can continue to play. Of course, the cue is later returned indicating that Sammy has some good in him and is not beyond redemption.

The pool lesson outburst is startling and might seem a strange reaction to Sammy's student doing well, but Cynthia explains Sammy's behavior when she says that she believes Sammy is angry because being a good pool player is his identity and it's the one thing he can contribute to their makeshift family. Sammy can teach Timothy to play pool and he believes that's all he can do, so when Timothy does well, Sammy feels like he has nothing to contribute at all. His identity and purpose are gone. Timothy has a deep desire to help Sammy the way he once helped Dooley.

The author uses Sammy to further explore the theme of purpose. Through Sammy, Timothy begins to develop some sense of purpose since helping Sammy gives him something to do. And, since Timothy believes that Sammy will benefit from doing some hard but satisfying work, it's clear that he realizes that Sammy needs a sense of purpose other than playing pool to help him find his way.

Other characters also exhibit a lack of purpose in this section. Esther Bolick has given up baking her famous OMC and has sold the recipe to the bakery. Timothy notices that Esther seems lost and attributes this to the death of her husband. Though she is undoubtedly saddened by the loss, losing her purpose as the provider of OMCs for the town probably doesn't help her outlook on life. In fact, like Esther Cunningham, Esther Bolick also wonders if the town still takes care of its own.

Esther Cunningham has lost her sense of purpose since she is no longer the mayor of Mitford. In an attempt to recapture her purpose, she's scheduled a meeting with the current mayor to discuss how she can help him to do his job.

The author also continues to examine purpose by looking at Timothy's battle to determine what it is he really wants to be doing now that he's retired. The bishop writes to Timothy and requests a meeting, which makes Timothy uneasy. He has some sense that this letter will draw him into the rumors that are surrounding Lord's Chapel and Father Talbot, so he worries about what he might be asked to do. When the bishop asks him to take a temporary position at Lord's Chapel, Timothy seriously considers the offer. He wonders if what he's been looking for is a way to recapture his old life and old sense of purpose. Timothy, of course, seeks the counsel of his level-headed wife and even goes so far as to talk to Hoppy about whether or not his health could handle the challenge. Ultimately, though, Timothy realizes that being a preacher again isn't what he's looking for at all.



When Hope confides in Timothy that she is having problems with her pregnancy and won't be able to run the store, Timothy offers to open the store for her one day per week on a volunteer basis. After doing so, Timothy feels a sense of excitement that he has not shown toward anything but ice cream since the start of the book. The author hints that perhaps Timothy's purpose lies outside of traditional ministry and that the bookstore may be the key to that purpose. This is confirmed by the way Timothy has a knack for convincing those who enter the store just to talk to also purchase books.

The theme of purpose ties into the theme of faith since Timothy's decision about whether or not to accept the bishop's offer of a position at Lord's Chapel involves a great deal of prayer. Before parting, the bishop prays for Timothy and the decision he must make. That night Timothy prays before going to bed. He lays in bed wishing for an easy way out of the situation. Timothy's sleepless night and petition for an easy answer may call to mind for some readers Jesus' petition to God during his sleepless night in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knows he is about to face crucifixion and prays for the cup to pass from him. In other words, he prays that God might give him an easy way out of the adversity he faces just as Timothy prays for an easy way out of his own adversity.

When Timothy finally does come to a decision, it's as though his choice comes out of the blue. During a phone conversation, Dooley asks Timothy why he would want to take the position. Timothy abruptly realizes that he doesn't want to at all. The realization comes so quickly that Timothy attributes it to divine intervention and believes he's received his answer from God. His decision is affirmed when the bishop takes the news well and says he'll find another preacher to bring in.

Timothy's faith is also evident in the way he feels about his brother, Henry. He recognizes that as a child he had often prayed for a brother, and now God has answered that prayer in an unexpected way. Timothy sees Henry as a gift from God, and yet he struggles with his faith as he worries about what others will think when they learn that his father had an affair with his nanny. By introducing Timothy's worries, the author acknowledges that even someone like Timothy can sometimes doubt God. This idea is furthered in Hope's admission to herself that she is afraid for her pregnancy and, though she believes in God, not even prayer will help her quell her fears. Though Hope may doubt the power of prayer, others in Mitford clearly don't since someone affixes a sign to the door of the bookstore instructing people to "pray for Hope." The interesting thing is that Hope hasn't told anyone about her condition. The author might be suggesting that the town needs to pray for hope as a thing and not Hope as a person.

Timothy's faith will play a big part in the way he intends to help Sammy. He reminds those in Sammy's life often that Sammy needs their prayers. After the outburst at the pool table, Timothy sits with Barnabas to pray. Since Barnabas symbolizes a connection to God, Timothy's sitting with him to pray over this matter suggests that it's a particularly important prayer and one for which Timothy seeks out a clearer connection to God's ear. When Sammy returns the stolen pool cue, Timothy reminds himself that God is a God of Second Chances, which leads him to give Sammy a second chance by purchasing a new cue for him.



The theme of taking care of others is shown through Timothy's care for Sammy, but the author also explores the theme in a number of other ways. For example, in seeing that Esther Bolick is feeling blue, Cynthia suggests that they give her a gift certificate to get her hair colored. Though Timothy doesn't relish the thought of going into Fancy's shop, he agrees that it's a good idea and says he'll get the certificate. Their gift is given out of a true desire to lift up another person since there's no other reason for giving, such as a birthday or other special occasion.

The theme is again revisited when Timothy tells Hope he'll open the store for her once a week while she's on bedrest. Hope does not ask for his help, he simply offers it. In offering his help, Timothy feels a tingle of excitement and a step is taken in his quest for purpose. As he works at the bookstore, Timothy encounters another opportunity to help someone when Coot comes in and asks for the definition of the word. Timothy uses Coot's question as a means to get out the dictionary and read to Coot from it. Timothy knows that Coot cannot read and he wonders how an adult might be taught to read. This brief scene foreshadows Timothy eventually finding someone to teach Coot to read.

In another scene, as Timothy runs through the town he notices the trash lying around, leading him to help the town by picking up some of the garbage. This scene alludes to the author's previous mention of Esther Cunningham's disgust with the way the town has gone downhill. Esther is particularly bothered by plastic bags, so an element of humor is added when Timothy picks up the very thing that Esther despises to collect the rest of the garbage.

Humor as a motif is most obvious in the scene in which Timothy meets Shirlene for the first time. Shirlene is a big woman who dresses in brightly colored caftans. Shirlene and Fancy practically pounce on the poor man and begin to chatter incessantly as he tries to place a simple order for a gift certificate. As Shirlene and Fancy chatter on at Timothy, he repeatedly tries to get them to sell him a gift certificate. Much to Timothy's chagrin, the conversation turns to Timothy's own hair and the women try to convince him that he needs a trim, which he knows since it's been mentioned by both Cynthia and Puny. Finally, Shirlene asks Timothy to help her find a man, an odd request to make of a priest. By this time, Timothy is so flustered by the conversation that he starts to feel a tick in his eyelid and he cannot get out of the salon fast enough.

This humorous encounter allows the author not only to introduce Shirlene, but also to lay the groundwork for Shirlene's eventual romance with Omer, which Timothy helps to facilitate. The scene also sets Shirlene's spray tan booth up as a symbol for advancement. Though the spray tan seems a bit ridiculous and new-fangled in a town like Mitford, it isn't long before many of the townspeople embrace the new booth and are sporting tans in the middle of winter. Of course, Timothy never does quite embrace technical advancements since he struggles with even the simplest modern technology, like adjusting the ringtone on his phone, which bleats a loud marching band tune every time Dooley calls.



Another example of the humor motif occurs when Timothy runs into Hessie outside the newly renamed Feel Good Café. Hessie is photographing the new sign, an act that become humorous in itself since she can't quite get the look she wants for the picture due to the workmen blocking the sign. But, the funniest part of the scene is when Hessie asks Timothy who came up with the "wacko" new name and he informs her that her boss, J.C., thought of it.

The Muse continues to add humor to the book in that Timothy reads an article about a plaque that is to be created to honor the leading citizen and learns that he will be writing the inscription for the plaque.

The theme of love is again present through several different characters. In Harley, the author presents the love of father-figure in an unconventional family setting. Harley is not the biological father of Kenny and Sammy, yet they live with him and he watches out for them in the same way a father would. He seems proud of Kenny and informs Timothy that Kenny is doing well and is on the right track. However, like a loving father, he worries about the way Sammy has been behaving and discusses his behavior with Timothy. Though Sammy is undoubtedly difficult to live with, Harley has high hopes for him and is certain that with time Sammy will turn out fine.

Helene, too, is a part of the unconventional family of Harley, Sammy, and Kenny. Though she is technically their landlady, she obviously loves the three men in spite of their rough demeanors. Helene is an educated, quiet woman who gives piano lessons, yet she says she loves the noise of the men living downstairs and she loves them, too. Helene exhibits her love by the way she asks Timothy what she can do to help Sammy.

The author also shows the theme of love through Timothy's relationship with Barnabas. Timothy loves the dog and sees him as a trusted friend. He takes Barnabas with him on outings as often as possible. In fact, when he thinks about meeting with the bishop to give him an answer, he almost cancels his day at the bookstore. However, he loves Barnabas and decides that he cannot disappoint the dog by not taking him to the bookstore on that day, so he resolves to work at the bookstore and talk to the bishop all in the same day.

Timothy and Cynthia, of course, continue to be the author's primary source of material for the theme of love. The two begin writing love letters to one another and Cynthia's letter is a touching exhibit of the deep love that exists between the couple. Cynthia sees Timothy as her safe place in life. She loves his kindness and generosity and truly believes he is God's gift to her.

Timothy clearly feels the same way, as he shows in the way he takes writing a letter to Cynthia very seriously. His love for her is also obvious in his conversation with the bishop, who tells Timothy they are a good example of a strong marriage. Timothy tells the bishop that he didn't even really know who he was until he met Cynthia and she had told him what she saw in him. In another scene, Timothy and Cynthia go out for dinner and Cynthia complains about her age spots, but Timothy says he cannot see any age



spots, only freckles. He doesn't see her as a woman who is getting older, but as a woman that he loves and finds beautiful.

In this section the author continues the suspenseful mystery of the black limo seen around town. The gas station attendant finds an expensive looking glasses case on the ground after the limo leaves the station. The case has the initials "KD" on it, which leads to some speculation about who might be in the limo. Then, Puny tells Timothy that a car with dark windows stopped at the house and a man came to the door looking for him. The car Puny describes is obviously the black limo, which leaves the reader wondering what the person in the limo might have to do with Timothy.

There's also some mystery surrounding the paintings that Irene has decided to donate for the hospital auction. Neither Cynthia nor Timothy know who the little girl in the paintings is. They speculate that the girl could be Irene as a child. Irene seems to have an unusual connection to the paintings, but still says she needs to let them go. Cynthia, however, can see how personal those particular paintings are to Irene. The author builds a sense of intrigue around the paintings and hints that there may be something more to them than simply being pictures of Irene as a child. These portraits will prove to be a foreshadowing of Irene's eventual meeting with her twin, whom she's never met, yet seems to have longed for all her life.

Henry Talbot's plotline is advanced in this section through the bishop's revelation to Timothy that Talbot will be leaving Lord's Chapel amidst the scandal of having been unfaithful to his wife and through Timothy's brief encounter with Talbot. Prior to meeting with the bishop, Timothy sees Talbot and realizes the man has changed quite a bit since he arrived in Mitford looking healthy and athletic. Now, the man looks tired and depressed. This scene provides the reader with clues about what Timothy will hear when he meets with the bishop and learns about Talbot's scandalous situation. The bishop is allowing Talbot one last chance to speak with the congregation since Talbot wants to apologize to them for what he's done. The bishop invites Timothy to be present on that day since he believes Timothy can help with the difficult news and transition. This invitation will lead to a significant scene later in the novel.

The author also advances the minor plot of Timothy's need for letting go of his old Mustang and purchasing a new car, for which he enlists Dooley's help. The mechanic informs Timothy that the car simply isn't worth fixing, so Timothy calls Dooley and asks him for help in picking out a new car. Timothy's Mustang symbolizes the changes that come with old age. Timothy has driven the flashy little car for years. Having such a sporty car undoubtedly made him feel younger. However, like Timothy, the car has gotten old and it is time for a change.

Also of significance is that this section of the book is the section from which the author draws the title of the book. Cynthia mentions in her letter to Timothy that as a child she longed to be "somewhere safe with somebody good." She goes on to say that through her life with Timothy, God has answered her prayer. She finally feels safe and Timothy is undoubtedly someone good. This will prove to be true not only of Cynthia's life with



Timothy, but also of Sammy's place in life by the close of the book, and indeed the lives of all of the people of Mitford.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author frequently mention Barnabas? What might he represent? What role does he play in Timothy's life?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Sammy take the cue stick and why did he return it?

Discussion Question 3

What makes Timothy decide not to take the job at Lord's Chapel? Why does he say it wasn't really his decision, but God's?

Vocabulary

diffused, haste, pitiable, plumb, sexton, twaddle, incredulous, formality, balletic, arrhythmic, gouged, eschewed, disaffected, infidelity, injunction, dumbfounded



Chapters 11-15

Summary

Chapter Eleven begins with Timothy in the bookstore writing his second love letter to Cynthia. Timothy goes to the rectory basement where Sammy and Kenny live. Sammy is not home. Kenny tells him he knows that Harley told him about the stolen cue and Timothy says that Sammy returned it. Kenny acknowledges that Sammy had the worst childhood of any of the siblings in their family. He says Sammy felt terrible about breaking the cue and also tells Timothy that he knows Sammy hasn't found God yet.

Timothy returns home and realizes he cannot find the letter he wrote to Cynthia, which he considered one of his best ever. Later that day Timothy asks Cynthia if they can stop writing letters. She agrees and says she'll wait until his latest letter is found to hear the things he wrote in it.

As Chapter Twelve begins, Timothy is trying to unlock the bookstore door, but the lock is giving him trouble. Abe and Coot arrive as does J.C.'s wife Adele, who teases him about continuing his criminal activities. More people arrive as Timothy continues to try to get the lock to work. The door finally opens and Timothy goes in feeling relieved to be out of the crowd.

J.C. comes in and shows Timothy the front page article about Adele's promotion to Captain to take Joe Joe's place since he has been promoted to Chief. Timothy says that Joe Joe should have been featured on the front page and J.C. says Joe Joe is on the inside front page.

Cynthia calls and tells Timothy he now has 65 votes for leading citizen and that Coot has received another vote as well. Cynthia tells him a long box was delivered to the house. He's glad the cue he ordered has arrived.

Emma Newland arrives sporting a spray tan and reminds Timothy that she still has Tuesdays open for him. Timothy encourages Emma to buy a book, but she says she doesn't have time to read so he tells her to buy a book for her granddaughter. Emma settles on two of Cynthia's books.

Later, Irene McGraw comes in and Timothy apologizes for the uproar he and Cynthia caused by going into her house when she was gone. She says it's alright and she's glad they were looking out for her. She says she's there to buy books for her grandchildren. Two hours later she's still there and looking relaxed. Timothy invites her to share the sandwich Cynthia packed for his lunch. She accepts and they chat over lunch. Irene mentions that she was raised by her aunt because her mother died when she was born. Irene then helps him set up the display window for the October sale. She buys 21 books before leaving. Timothy calls Hope to report that they made over \$499 dollars in sales that day and he found some change in a chair cushion to put them over the \$500 mark.



Timothy goes home and opens the cue stick he ordered. He talks to Cynthia and tells her that he's just going to love Sammy. Cynthia tells him that might be the hard way, but Timothy says he just wants to offer Sammy unconditional love and show him some of God's grace. Cynthia prays for Timothy's efforts to help Sammy. Cynthia tells Timothy she'll package up some homemade soup for him to take to Harley, Kenny, and Sammy since they have the flu.

Timothy finds Harley feeling very sick and prays for him. He then goes to Sammy's room and offers him soup, which he refuses. Timothy looks at Sammy and just wants to tell him that he's loved. Instead he gives Sammy the cue and leaves.

Mary Talbot calls Timothy and asks him to pray for her husband. He says he is and will continue to pray for them both.

Dooley arrives that night and invites Timothy to go car shopping.

In Chapter Thirteen, Timothy and Dooley are out for a run when HESSIE sees them out her window. She notices that Dooley has grown up and Father Timothy looks relaxed.

Dooley and Timothy go to the Feel-Good for lunch. Dooley says that no one understands why Timothy gave Sammy the new cue and that Sammy thinks it might be a joke or a trick. Timothy thinks that grace rarely makes sense and simply says that Sammy needs a stick if he's going to play pool. Dooley wonders if they're giving Sammy the right message by giving him things when he's acting out, but Timothy says they are for now.

The conversation turns to Kenny and his desire to go back to Oregon to be with his adoptive parents. Dooley says he's talked to Kenny about going to college. Kenny plans to go to college in Oregon and Timothy says he'll help Dooley pay for Kenny's expenses.

Timothy goes to talk with Bill Swanson about the work that needs to be done around the church yard. Timothy tells Bill that he and a couple of helpers will do the work for free. On his way home, Timothy sees a flyer urging the business owners of Mitford to take care of their properties and keep them clean. It's signed from the office of the mayor.

Timothy finds Cynthia sitting with her eyes closed and asks her how she's doing as he rubs her feet. She says her eyes are bothering her and he suggests new glasses. Cynthia says she thinks it's beyond that and she may need surgery. Cynthia reminds him to get a haircut.

Mary Talbot calls at 1:00 a.m. and tells Timothy that her husband is missing. Timothy wakes Dooley and they go to look for him. They go to the trails behind the hospital. As they walk along the dark trails they find vomit and Timothy realizes it smells of alcohol. They hear a noise and discover Henry Talbot who is speaking incoherently. Dooley and Timothy take Henry to the hospital. Timothy prays for Henry as they carry him out.



Later, Wilson informs Timothy that Henry took a mixture of pills in an attempt to kill himself. Timothy asks Wilson to keep the situation quiet. Henry is taken to another facility by helicopter.

In Chapter Fourteen, Timothy calls the bishop to tell him about Henry. They agree to meet a little earlier than planned, but at the last minute the bishop is unable to make it. Timothy is forced to address the congregation and tell them about Henry on his own. He weeps as he tells the congregation that Henry has left, but does not give them the details of Henry's situation. He cries for Henry, for clergy who have suffered, for the congregation, and for himself.

As Chapter Fifteen begins, Timothy is reading letters from members of the church reacting to his weeping at the pulpit and he finds that the letters are accepting of his emotional display. He spends Monday resting and recovering. He decides to cut his own hair. Afterward, Puny asks what he's done to himself.

Hope wakes up and hears Scott praying for her. She cries, but does not open her eyes. Scott assures her that everything will be all right because God and Father Timothy had promised it would be. Hope feels a sense of shame at her body's betrayal, her inability to feel hopeful, and her powerlessness.

Timothy and Sammy begin work on the landscaping at Lord's Chapel. Sammy is defiant and tells Timothy he's not Sammy's boss. Timothy says that's true because God is Sammy's boss. Sammy questions why they would fix up an area that no one uses. Timothy says people will use it if they fix it up and he shares his vision for the space with Sammy. Sammy's defiant attitude continues throughout the morning and tries Timothy's patience.

Timothy runs into Shirlene at the store and she tells him that she's decided to try online dating.

Timothy arrives at home and tells Cynthia that Avis gave him a free sample of fresh pasta and says it's proof that Mitford takes care of its own. Cynthia asks how the day went and he says he didn't kill Sammy. He says he's doing his best, but perhaps humans aren't capable of dispensing true grace, only mock grace. Cynthia tells him she'd rather have mock grace than no grace at all.

On Wednesday Timothy and Sammy return to work at the church. Timothy asks Sammy what he thinks the space needs and discovers Sammy has a knack for landscape design.

On Thursday Timothy works at the bookstore. It's a slow morning and he reads the paper. Vanita has written an article about how Mitford takes care of its own.

Vanita comes into the store and tells Timothy she's the person who gave Coot nine anonymous votes for leading citizen because she thought him getting just one vote was a mean joke. She says she had to confess that to someone other than her husband. She also tells him that the plaque he's supposed to write is due the next day.



Timothy writes the plaque dedication to Miss Sadie. He knows she wouldn't want him to list her gifts and so he lists only the museum and Hope House and then says that she gave most freely of herself.

Puny's twins come to the store to wait for their father to pick them up because their usual ride home from school wasn't available.

Scott calls and asks Timothy to visit Hope because she's having a very difficult day. He says he'll be there as soon as he closes up for the day. Esther Bolick comes in with an OMC for Hope and Scott. She says she broke the law and made it herself. Esther says she's not there to talk about Talbot like everyone else because she's keeping her opinion to herself, but she says what she thinks anyway.

Timothy visits Hope and serves her communion. He gives her the OMC and tells her Esther cares and is praying for her and so are many others. She says the attention is embarrassing and that people have their own things to pray about and shouldn't worry about hers. Timothy explains that prayer is healing for the people who pray as well as for the recipient of the prayers. Together they pray for all of the people who are praying for Hope.

That night Timothy realizes the Mustang is missing from his house. He calls Harley and asks if Sammy is there and then tells him the Mustang is gone. Late that night Joe Joe arrives at Timothy's house to tell him that Sammy has totaled the Mustang, but that Sammy is okay. Sammy had told Joe Joe that he didn't care if he killed himself, but Joe Joe says he was wearing his seat belt. Timothy says he doesn't want to press charges.

Analysis

The theme of love is examined in this section of the novel through the way that Timothy expresses love for those in his life. He and Cynthia continue to write love letters to one another. When Timothy's letter is lost before he can give it to Cynthia, he's distraught because he believes it's one of the best things he's ever written. The loss of the letter leads him to ask Cynthia if they can just stop writing letters. Cynthia can see her husband is disappointed by the loss of the letter and that he currently has a lot of things to worry about, so she says they can stop. The author does not mean Timothy's request to stop writing as showing a lack of love for Cynthia, but rather to illustrate that Cynthia's love is so great that she understands when Timothy cannot write anymore.

The request to stop writing also shows that Timothy's life has gotten busier and points to growth in his character. Timothy is no longer bored and spending his time complaining about minor ailments as he did in the first section of the novel. Instead, he is excited to be working at the bookstore and has set his mind to finding a way to boost Hope's sales. Timothy convinces Emma to purchase a book for her grandchild when she says she doesn't have time to read. She ends up buying two books. When Irene comes in, she purchases 21 books before leaving the store. Her purchase is the result of Timothy



allowing her to take all the time she wants in the quiet of the store to sit with books spread around her as she chooses books for her grandchildren.

Hessie notices the change in Timothy when she sees him run by and notes that he appears more relaxed. Timothy has started to find some purpose in working at the bookstore, but hasn't yet discovered that his purpose lies beyond the simple day-to-day operations of the store. However, the author has begun building the foundation of Timothy's discovery of purpose through the many characters who come into the store while Timothy is there. These characters are seeking the solace of a quiet place as one would in a church, looking for advice from the retired priest, or hoping for a willing ear to listen when they are troubled.

The theme of love is further tied to the theme of purpose in that Timothy has found some sense of purpose in finding a way to help Sammy to change. Timothy has decided that the way to accomplish this change is through showing Sammy unconditional love. He tells Cynthia about his plan to change Sammy just by loving him and Cynthia points out that might be the most difficult path to take. Indeed, Timothy finds this to be true when he spends a day working with Sammy and his patience is severely tried by Sammy's defiant nature before the end of the day. However, Timothy is sure his method will work and he expresses this to Dooley when they discuss Sammy over lunch. Sammy doesn't yet understand how love works and he believes that Timothy replacing the cue he broke must be some kind of trick. Dooley questions whether giving Sammy the cue was the right thing to do since it seems like a reward for bad behavior. Timothy, though, sees it as a way of giving Sammy a second chance and showing him some grace.

Timothy's love for people is perhaps on display to its full potential when he stands in front of the congregation at Lord's Chapel to announce Henry Talbot's leaving and weeps openly as he speaks. This scene is a pivotal point in the book for Timothy's character as it marks a great change in him. Timothy has always feared showing such great emotion in front of a congregation, so he has kept a part of himself closed off from others to avoid such a scene. In the wake of the emotional scene, the people of Mitford rally around Timothy and send him notes and leave phone messages expressing their approval of his tears. This event will serve as a means of drawing Timothy closer to the people around him and deepen their connection to one another.

The people's response to Timothy's tears might be viewed as an act of extending grace. This section examines grace as a specific facet of the theme of faith. Timothy hopes to create a change in Sammy not only through unconditional love, but also by showing him some of God's grace. Grace isn't something a person earns, it's something that is freely given and Timothy wants to show Sammy that no matter how badly he acts he will always be the recipient of that grace. Timothy extends grace to Sammy by purchasing a new cue for him when he breaks his old one and by remaining patient with him as they work together in the rose garden. When Sammy tells Timothy that he's not the boss, rather than becoming angry and telling Sammy that he has to do what Timothy says, Timothy tells Sammy that he is correct, because God is the boss.



Cynthia and Timothy have a discussion about grace that allows the author to more fully examine the idea of grace. Timothy acknowledges that showing grace is really difficult and speculates that perhaps humans aren't even capable of actually showing true grace the way that God does. Instead, he says that humans are only capable of "mock grace." This suggests that Timothy believes people can only go through the actions of showing grace, but it's never going to be the true grace of God. Cynthia, in keeping with her level-headed and upbeat nature, tells Timothy she'd rather receive mock grace than no grace at all. Her statement encourages Timothy to just keep trying with Sammy.

The author also continues to explore prayer as a part of the faith theme. There are several examples in which characters offer prayers for one another. Cynthia prays for Timothy's efforts to help Sammy, Timothy prays for Harley when he's ill, Scott prays for Hope, and Timothy prays for Henry Talbot. Probably the most important use of prayer in the exploration of the theme of faith is the discussion that Timothy has with Hope about prayer. Hope is embarrassed by the way the town has been showing her such great care and by all of the prayers that have been said for her. She knows the people of Mitford have their own concerns to pray about. Timothy explains to her that prayer is good for both the person receiving the prayers and the people saying the prayers. Praying is healing and allows people to do something in a situation where there is nothing else to be done. Timothy indicates that in praying for Hope, the people of Mitford are also healing themselves because prayer will make them feel better.

Hope's continued struggle with her own faith adds to the facet of the theme of faith in which the author shows that people sometimes struggle to believe. Hope cries when she hears Scott praying for her. She feels like her body is a prison for the baby and she has difficulty believing that things will turn out all right. Scott reminds her that everything will be fine because God and Father Tim have promised they will be. However, Hope's discussion with Timothy indicates she still isn't sure she believes.

The theme of taking care of others is exhibited in this section in a number of different ways. The prayers that people say for Hope is just one of the many ways that the people of Mitford take care of their own. Cynthia makes soup for Harley, Kenny, and Sammy when they are sick with the flu. The people of Mitford send Timothy notes and messages saying it is okay for him to cry. Avis gives Timothy a free sample of pasta, which Timothy tells Cynthia is proof that Mitford takes care of its own. The people of Mitford send letters to the Muse at Vanita's request telling about the ways they take care of their neighbors. Marcie volunteers to open the store one day each week. Timothy watches Puny's children at the bookstore while they wait for their father to pick them up. The fact that Puny knew her children could safely wait at the bookstore with Timothy without even having to ask is proof that people in Mitford know they can count on one another for help when it's needed.

In keeping with the theme of taking care of others, Esther Bolick bakes an OMC for Hope. Esther has sold the recipe and isn't supposed to be making the elaborate cakes anymore. However, the cakes symbolize Esther's way of taking care of others as well as her purpose. She is an older woman, so her way of being useful is to make cakes to



cheer people when they are going through difficult times or to help people celebrate when the occasion calls for it.

Vanita “anonymously” cares for Coot by giving him nine votes in the leading citizen competition. She tells Timothy she thinks the one vote Coot had gotten was meant as a cruel joke. Since she knows that Coot will be thrilled by receiving votes, she decides to vote for him herself. In true Vanita fashion, though, she can’t quite keep the secret to herself and feels like she has to tell someone, so she tells Timothy because he’s a priest and he can keep a secret.

Timothy’s writing of the inscription for the plaque also illustrates Mitford taking care of its own. Timothy write the dedication to Miss Sadie who is a symbol of taking care of others. During her life, Miss Sadie helped start the Hope House and the museum and was always giving to others. She left Dooley a great deal of money so that he could go to college and she saw to it that Louella would be cared for into her old age.

The theme of humor is shown not only in Vanita’s little confession to Timothy, but in several other ways as well. The scene in which Timothy attempts to unlock the tricky lock of the bookstore is meant to add humor to the story. A crowd gathers around Timothy as he tries to get the key to work. People call out advice to him and make jokes about him continuing his criminal career, alluding to his being found in Irene’s house when she was gone. The number of people that gather around and watch Timothy indicates that it takes him quite a bit of time to get the door open.

While working at the store, Timothy has a number of humorous encounters with various people. When Esther Bolick comes in to give Timothy the cake for Hope she insists she’s not there to talk about Henry Talbot the way she supposes everyone else is. She claims she can keep her opinion to herself, but she goes on to give Timothy her unsolicited opinion anyway. Vanita’s visit also includes a bit of humor when she informs him the plaque inscription he is to write is due the next day, a fact that Timothy was previously unaware of.

The author also makes repeated mentions of the state of Timothy’s shaggy hair. People continue to remind Timothy that he needs a haircut. When he finally gets a day to himself, he decides to cut his own hair. The results are less than desirable though since immediately after he does it, Puny asks him what happened to his hair.

Timothy has another funny and uncomfortable encounter with Shirlene who informs him she is turning to online dating because Timothy has failed to help her find a man.

The Muse continues to provide a source of humor. J.C. shows Timothy a front page article announcing his wife, Adele’s, promotion to police captain. The story is ridiculous as Timothy politely points out since Joe Joe’s promotion to police chief is of greater importance and should be the front page story because Joe Joe’s position is the higher one. J.C. doesn’t seem to get this and says Joe Joe’s story is on the next page. The author continues to insert snippets of the paper into the story as Timothy reads the paper, showing the silly household hints and the unusual way the stories are written.



Another bit of humor the author includes is a flyer that Timothy spots asking the business owners of Mitford to clean up their shops. The flyer is signed from the mayor. The reader knows, however, that the flyer was likely the work of Esther Cunningham who has been on a bit of a rant about the way Mitford has gone downhill and the businesses don't keep things looking neat and tidy anymore. Whether Esther wrote the flyer herself or simply bullied the mayor into doing it himself is not revealed, but it's clear Esther had a hand in its creation.

The theme of purpose is illustrated through Timothy's determination to help Sammy change. Cynthia previously pointed out to him that Sammy's life lacks purpose, which leads Timothy to talk to Bill about restoring the rose garden, a project that he can get Sammy to do with him. Timothy tells Bill that the project will cost the church nothing, which means that Timothy is purchasing the supplies and paying Sammy and Harley out of his own pocket. The restoration of the rose garden symbolizes the change in Sammy. Sammy wonders why anyone would want to use the garden and Timothy points out to him that once they've fixed it, people will use it. The same might be said of Sammy. Timothy knows that if Sammy can change his attitude and his life, he will also be able to find meaningful work and build relationships with other people. As they work on the project, Timothy gives Sammy the opportunity to express his thoughts on the project and discovers that Sammy is really quite good at landscaping, indicating that working in landscaping is a possible path for Sammy's future. This possibility will be further reinforced later in the book when Sammy is excited by Timothy's invitation to go to a nursery to pick out plants and Sammy's purchase of a gardening book.

Also of note in this section is the advancement of three major plotlines through significant events and discussions. Talbot's plotline takes a major leap forward and reaches its climax when he attempts suicide. Mary Talbot calls Timothy late at night and tells him her husband is missing. Timothy and Dooley go out looking for Talbot and find him at the trails behind the hospital. Timothy's feeling that Talbot is there seems to be some sort of divine intervention since there's been nothing prior to this event that suggests Talbot would have gone to the paths except that he was once a runner like Timothy. Talbot's attempted suicide makes him unable to speak with the congregation as he had planned and the job falls into Timothy's lap when the bishop can't make it. With Talbot's hospitalization he is, for the time being, removed from the story, as he is no longer in Mitford. However, the author has not yet concluded his plotline as the resolution of his situation has not yet been reached.

Sammy's plot is also advanced when Timothy invites him to work on the rose garden. Sammy has not yet begun to change for the better, but this new work will be an important step. The author works toward the climax of Sammy's story when Timothy notices his Mustang is gone from his yard. When Timothy calls Harley and finds out Sammy isn't home, the reader knows that Sammy has taken the Mustang. Sammy crashes the Mustang and claims he doesn't care if he lives or dies. This crash will lead to the climax of Sammy's story in the next section of the novel as Timothy deals with the aftermath of the crash.



Irene's plotline is advanced through her visit to the bookstore. While she is there, she and Timothy strike up a conversation in which she tells Timothy that she was raised by her aunt because her mother died. This bit of information will be important as her plotline continues and the true events of her childhood are revealed. Irene's visit to the store is the start of a friendship between Timothy and Irene that will eventually deepen and expand to include Cynthia and Irene's twin. There seems to be an immediate warmth between Timothy and Irene and Irene even stays to help Timothy set up the display window for the next month's sale.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Henry Talbot attempt suicide? Why does Timothy cry as he tells the congregation that Henry is leaving?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Hope feeling ashamed of herself? Why is she embarrassed to have people praying for her? What lesson does Timothy teach her about prayer?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sammy take the Mustang? What does the fact that he wore his seat belt reveal about Sammy? Why doesn't Timothy press charges?

Vocabulary

zealous, deployed, eccentric, contemplative, inlaid, crucial, innocuous, virtues, refurbishing, infinitesimal, addled, harrowing, caftan, authorized



Chapters 16-20

Summary

Chapter Sixteen begins with Timothy preparing the store for the day. Dooley calls and asks what Timothy plans to do about Sammy and the car. Timothy says he's not going to do anything and asks Dooley to keep praying.

Hessie enters the store and tells Timothy she needs to talk. She is worried that she's becoming forgetful. Timothy reassures her by telling her stories about his own forgetfulness. She then goes on to tell Timothy that she's angry at Vanita. She says Vanita isn't a good writer and isn't very smart and yet she gets all the good stories. Timothy brings over a box of Kleenex when she begins to cry and thinks that he hasn't really retired at all.

Bill Swanson calls to say he heard the Mustang had been wrecked and asks if Timothy is all right. He also tells Timothy the parish is going to get behind him in the fundraiser for the hospital and that he's happy with the progress on the church gardens.

Winnie comes in to take a break. A man comes in and asks Timothy to come outside to meet someone who is waiting in the car. When he goes to the car, he sees Irene McGraw in it, but then realizes it's not her. She introduces herself as Kim Dorsay. She tells Timothy she and Irene are twins who were separated when their mother died at their birth. She says she has always had a yearning, but didn't know she had a sister until recently. Kim says she read about Timothy in the *Muse* and thought he might be able to help introduce her to her sister since she feels she can't just show up at Irene's door.

Timothy goes back into the store and Winnie tells him a professor came in and was angry about a book Timothy had given his son.

Timothy calls Cynthia and tells her that Irene has a twin sister and it is Kim Dorsay, the film star. Cynthia says that Kim must be the little girl in the paintings.

The professor comes in to return the book Timothy gave his son. Timothy remembers giving a book to Hastings McCurdy. The professor is angry because there are notes about God in the margins of the book and he doesn't believe in God. He asks Timothy not to speak about God to Hastings again, but can't promise to stay quiet about God. The professor asks about the collar Timothy wears and he says he is a priest and the collar reminds people there's somewhere to run if they need to. The professor says it seems like a cliché to wear the collar when he's not preaching, but Timothy says it's who he is.

Timothy is tired and sits talking to Barnabas. He has a lot of tasks to accomplish, but feels like he just needs a break.



Cynthia comes in and tells Timothy that she spoke to Irene and Irene said that she can see them Sunday after church. Cynthia told Irene there was someone they would like her to meet, but didn't tell her that it is her sister. Cynthia says she's nervous and Timothy quotes a piece of scripture to calm them both.

At home, Timothy calls Hope to report the day's total. Hope offers to pray for him because he sounds tired.

Harley arrives home asks what Timothy is going to do about Sammy. Timothy says he isn't going to do anything. He asks Harley if Sammy could use some cash and then tells him to be sure Sammy is ready. They are going to go to Lew's to see the car and then they will go to the hospital to work on the hedges. Harley offers to help with hedges and Timothy declines saying he wants some time alone with Sammy and that it will be Sammy's punishment for the car. He reflects on the situation and realizes he's furious.

Timothy meets J.C. and Mule for breakfast at the Feel Good. They engage in some humorous conversation about spray tans and the menu items. Omer comes in and joins them. J.C. says he heard that Omer's sister-in-law might be running for mayor. Omer says it's a rumor and J.C. says he might run an article on it. Mule asks how he can write a story based on a rumor and then angrily says he should be writing about the spray tan booth because that would help boost Fancy's business.

Timothy takes Sammy to see the car and on the way there asks about Sammy telling the chief he didn't care if he lived or died. Timothy lists the people who do care. Lew says the accident was a close call and Sammy says it was nothing. Lew reminds him that God is good, but he shouldn't expect to get more chances like that.

After trimming the hospital hedges, Timothy asks Sammy to come into the hospital with him. They stop at the nurse's station and Timothy asks who he can see today. The nurse says a seventeen-year-old boy came in in bad condition. Sammy says he won't go, but he follows anyway. When they reach the emergency room, Sammy sees the boy, turns, and runs away.

When Timothy goes back to the truck, Sammy is very upset and angry. He yells at Timothy that God must be some God if he would do something like that to someone. He asks Timothy if everything he says about God is just lies. He cries uncontrollably and storms away.

Timothy sits for a moment gathering his thoughts. He feels like it's impossible for him to show Sammy grace. He knows there is even some feelings of repulsion for Sammy that he has to rid himself of. He understands that he has to work with what they have and that by working on the garden, he and Sammy are helping to create a space for the human spirit to find rest. He drives up beside Sammy and Sammy gets in.

In Chapter Eighteen, Cynthia wonders how to tell Irene about her sister. Timothy and Cynthia pray together.



Timothy takes Kim into Happy Endings to spend some time with her before Irene arrives. They talk for a minute about Kim's life and then Timothy offers to pray for her before Irene arrives. She doesn't think God could have much interest in her, but Timothy assures her that he does and they pray. Irene enters and both Kim and Irene are astonished at seeing one another.

That night Helene calls and asks to have a private conversation. Timothy invites her over. Helene says she feels like God is calling her to give a day to the book store. Then, she turns the subject to Sammy. Sammy's language and bad habits are affecting her piano lessons and she'd like him to leave, but she worries about hurting Harley. Timothy asks for a little more time and Helene agrees.

Timothy discusses the situation with Cynthia who says she doesn't want Sammy to live with them, but she will support Timothy in whatever decision he makes. Timothy takes Barnabas outside and sits with him.

The next morning Harley calls to tell Timothy that Sammy wants to work later because it's cold. Timothy says to tell Sammy to get out of bed and be there at seven-thirty. Harley says Sammy still won't get up and Timothy asks him to remind Sammy that he could still press charges.

Coot cleans the store and then shows Timothy he's learning to read.

Esther Cunningham arrives and says she thinking about running for mayor again.

Cynthia calls and tells Timothy he now has 174 votes for leading citizen. She also tells him that Sammy brought her a kitten that needed a new home. Sammy seems different to her and he was very gentle with the kitten. He even remembered to bring a litter box for the kitten, whom Cynthia has named Truman. And, she says that she has another surprise in the form of someone he'll be glad to see. Father Brad arrives at the store and the two greet one another warmly.

Chapter Nineteen begins with snow falling. Lace arrives at the bookstore. She says if she and Dooley get married she'd like to work at his practice with him, but wonders if that would be enough. She is an art major and loves it, but doesn't feel she could make a career as an artist, so she feels she should learn to be a good wife instead. Timothy tells her she can be both an artist and a good wife and that God will use her artistic talents for good. Lace feels overwhelmed by the future. Timothy tells her it may be too soon to try to figure the future out, but assures her that God has a plan for her.

Timothy asks to see Lace's ring and she says it's a friendship ring, but it's clear she'd rather it was an engagement ring. Timothy says he can see Lace loves Dooley, but he thinks that he wishes love was enough because it takes much more to make a relationship work.

Later, an older couple comes into the store to talk to Timothy about possibly moving from their church in Wesley to Lord's Chapel. Ralph says he heard that the preacher at Lord's Chapel bawled in front of the congregation at Lord's Chapel and that might be too



liberal for them. After they leave, Timothy realizes he has his scarf around his neck and the couple couldn't see his collar, which makes him laugh.

Timothy sees Kim go by in the limo. Kim and Irene have spent the last four days together and even invited Timothy and Cynthia to join them for dinner one night. At the end of the dinner, Timothy felt like he and Cynthia had gained two sisters.

Miss Mooney arrives and gives Timothy an update on Hastings who is saving for another book. They also talk about how quickly Coot is learning to read.

Father Brad comes in and Timothy asks how he likes Mitford. They talk about dogs and the idea of starting a youth group. They offer to pray for one another and Timothy hugs Brad before he leaves.

Hope calls and tells Timothy she's doing fine, but has to stay in bed, which gives her too much time to think. She says her Mitford family is treating her well and she's thankful. She is worried about where she'll stay in Charlotte in the month before the baby comes. She asks for prayers. She then tells Timothy that Scott got a nice raise and she'd like to do something kind for someone, so she wants to hire Coot to work at the store 12 hours a week doing anything that Timothy sets him to do. She says it will give Coot a chance to be around books, which he loves.

Timothy arrives home and sees that the house is set up to watch a movie. Puny tries to show him how to use the DVD player, which he has difficulty with.

Chapter Twenty begins on Saturday, which Timothy reflects used to be so stressful, but today he is happy and likes the liberty of the day.

Timothy opens the Bible randomly and reads scripture about how there is a right time for everything. He knows it's time for him to speak, but wonders if it will work. He decides to speak from the heart and then calls Sammy and invites him to go buy a tree.

Lace presents Cynthia with a portrait she painted of Dooley wearing a shirt that reads, "Love is an act of endless forgiveness." They hang the portrait over the mantle.

Timothy and Sammy talk in Harley's truck as they go to buy a tree. Sammy says Dooley has changed so much that he doesn't even sound like himself anymore. Sammy says he doesn't want to be like anyone but himself. Timothy reminds Sammy that Dooley hasn't had an easy life either and that although Miss Sadie gave Dooley money for his education, it's Dooley that is doing the hard work to succeed. Timothy then tells Sammy that he hopes Sammy is listening because he's about to lose his place at Helene's. He says Sammy can't have the things he wants and be dead. If Sammy chooses life, Timothy will see to it he has the help he needs. He says Sammy has talent, help, and he has God, who is always on Sammy's side.

Coot is trying to get his mother to eat because she hasn't eaten in three days. She refuses food, but asks Coot to read to her. He goes to the kitchen and when he returns, his mother is dead.



Coot's neighbor calls Timothy and tells him that Coot's mother died and Coot is asking for him. She says she knows the roads are bad and understands if Timothy can't come. He calls Esther Cunningham to ask for a favor and Esther says she will get right on it. A plow arrives to pick Timothy up and takes him to Coot's house.

Timothy finds Coot devastated. The neighbor says that Coot's mother wasn't one of her patients, she just stopped in to help them from time to time. Timothy says she must be an angel and she says she owes God. Timothy sits with Coot and provides him comfort.

The funeral for Coot's mother is planned and people drop food off at Timothy's house for Coot. Timothy is making a ham.

Timothy picks Coot up for the funeral so he doesn't have to drive by himself. On the way, he tells Coot that Hope wants to hire him. Coot doesn't respond for a minute and then says he was thinking he'd have to talk to his mother about it. Then he says he'll do it. Twenty-seven people attend the graveside service in the cold.

After the service, people gather at Timothy's house. As they all hold hands to say a blessing Timothy realizes he is crying and this time it's for the living and how good it is to be living together.

Analysis

This section sees the climax of two plot lines: Sammy's story and Irene's story. Sammy's story reaches its climax when he steals and crashes Timothy's beloved mustang. The author wraps the major themes of love, faith, taking care of others, and purpose into this climax. When the police deliver Sammy to Timothy's house following the crash, Timothy does not press charges against Sammy. This is an example of his love for Sammy. Timothy is asked over and over by different people what he intends to do about Sammy after the crash and he repeatedly says he isn't going to do anything; he's just going to keep loving Sammy.

Upon examining his own feelings on the situation, Timothy realizes that he is actually quite furious at Sammy and even feels somewhat repulsed by the boy and his disgusting habits. However, Timothy intends to continue showing Sammy God's grace and thinks the repulsion is something he has to work on in himself rather than in Sammy. Timothy prays about the situation and asks others to pray as well.

Timothy uses his goal of giving Sammy a sense of purpose to arrange some time alone with him so that he can impress upon Sammy the seriousness of his situation. Though Sammy has expressed a wish to die, Timothy doesn't believe this to be true since Sammy had his seatbelt on at the time of the crash. Timothy knows that Sammy can always use to earn some cash, so he takes the boy to the hospital to trim the hedges. On the way, Timothy stops to get some things out of the car, which allows Sammy to have another look at the condition of the car. Timothy seems to hope that Sammy will realize just how close he came to dying. The author uses the character of Lew to impart some words on the theme of faith while they look at the wrecked car. Lew tells Sammy



that although God is good, he shouldn't expect more second chances like that. This statement reminds the reader of Timothy's thoughts about giving Sammy a second chance. It appears the author is suggesting that God, too, has given Sammy a second chance now.

While Sammy does not react to the wrecked car, he does have a strong reaction to seeing another boy who has been seriously injured. While Timothy cannot possibly have known this particular boy would be at the hospital, he takes Sammy into the hospital to see others who are suffering and the good they can do just by taking the time to care. The author manipulates the scene to have a larger impact by making the injured boy about the same age as Sammy so that both Sammy and the reader can imagine Sammy lying in the hospital bed. The event is a catalyst to Sammy's eventual change and his anger at God for the boy's condition is the climactic event of Sammy's story arch. Sammy's anger at God indicates that he has at least begun to think about the possibility of the existence of God since it would be difficult to be angry at someone who does not exist. Also, Timothy believes that Sammy has finally felt a sense of compassion for someone else.

The author indicates that the event has had some effect on Sammy by showing a softening of his hard demeanor. Sammy finds a kitten and recognizes that it needs someone to take care of it, so he brings it to Cynthia. The kitten not only shows that Sammy is capable of feeling compassion for another living creature, it might also be seen as a gift to Cynthia since Sammy knows she likes cats. This indicates that Sammy has developed some warm feelings for Cynthia and Timothy, though he isn't able to verbally express them. The giving of the kitten also shows that Sammy has developed a sense of responsibility since he remembers to bring Cynthia everything the kitten will need in its new home.

The theme of faith again comes into play in Sammy's plot line when Timothy picks up the Bible and opens it to a random piece of scripture, the text is about there being a time for everything. After reading the scripture, Timothy decides it is time for him to have a talk with Sammy. During the talk, Timothy tells Sammy that he has to make a decision about how he wants his life to play out. He can either choose to die or he can choose to live and accept the love and help of those around him. Timothy also tells him that God is on Sammy's side and always will be. The author closes the scene without indicating the choice Sammy has made, which encourages readers to continue on to find out what will happen to Sammy.

The other plot line that reaches its climax is Irene's story. To this point, the author has been building a sense of mystery and suspense around Irene and her paintings and the mysterious limo that has been seen around town. The climax of Irene's story involves the revelation of the passenger in the limo and the link to Irene's paintings. When a man comes to see Timothy at the bookstore and tells him that someone in the car wants to see him, Timothy at first takes the woman to be Irene. In fact, the woman is the movie star Kim Dorsay, which reminds the reader that at the beginning of the book the author included the detail that Irene was supposed to look like a movie star, but Timothy could never remember the star's name. Had the author revealed the name of the star at that



time, the reader might have guessed that Irene was somehow related to her when the eyeglass case with the initials K.D. on it was found. However, the author has preserved the mystery to allow for a more dramatic impact when the story reaches its climax.

The author uses the theme of purpose when Timothy is tasked with facilitating the meeting between Irene and Kim. Kim has read about the retired priest in the paper and somehow knows that he is the right person to help her. It would seem that Timothy's purpose as a minister to the people of Mitford is obvious even in the poorly constructed articles of the Muse.

After learning about the twins, Timothy leans on the support of his loving wife by telling her what he's found out and asking her to help him. Cynthia immediately recognizes the connection between Irene's paintings and Kim. She sees that Irene has been painting the longings of her heart, longings for her lost sister.

When the two sisters finally meet, the theme of love is evident in that they form an immediate connection that goes beyond their biological makeup. They begin spending a great deal of time together and even invite Timothy and Cynthia to join them for dinner one evening and Kim sends flowers as a thank you. Timothy and Cynthia grow to love the two women as well and the author remarks that at the end of the dinner, Kim and Irene feel like they've become a part of Timothy's and Cynthia's family.

Aside from the use of some of the themes in the building of the climax of these two plot lines, the author continues to explore them in other ways. The theme of love is shown again the relationship between Timothy and Barnabas. Again, when he is troubled, Timothy seeks the company of his dog. For example, after Timothy has a run-in with Hastings' father, he feels drained and sits and talks with the dog, whom he knows has the capacity to raise his spirits. Barnabas travels to the bookstore with Timothy each time he works there, which is a testament to Timothy's love for him. Surely it would be easier to leave the old dog behind rather than to walk him slowly to the store and tend to him through the day, but Timothy loves the dog so these issues are never even brought up.

Dooley's and Lace's relationship is also used to exhibit the theme of love in this section. Lace comes to talk to Timothy about where her relationship with Dooley is going. She loves Dooley and wants the ring he gave her to be an engagement ring. Lace also reveals in this section that she and Dooley still see a therapist together to try to overcome things from their past that affect the way they treat one another today. This indicates that the two love one another enough to really want to make things work even though it is sometimes hard.

When Lace presents Timothy and Cynthia with a portrait she's done of Dooley, she shows not only her love for the couple in giving them a gift she knows they'll cherish, but also her love for Dooley since she's lovingly represented him in the portrait. The words on the shirt Dooley wears in the picture read, "Love is an act of endless forgiveness." These words show Timothy and Cynthia that Lace and Dooley truly understand what it means to be in a loving relationship.



Lace's conversation with Timothy also serves as a part of the theme of purpose since Lace seeks Timothy's advice about her future with Dooley. Not only does Timothy fulfill his purpose by being a source of guidance for someone, but the conversation itself is about Lace finding her purpose. Lace says that she wants to pursue a career in art, but she also wants to help Dooley in his veterinary practice. However, Lace doesn't think that working in the practice will fulfill her true purpose in life. She tells Timothy that she thinks she cannot earn a living as an artist, so she thinks she should just learn to be a good wife instead. Timothy tells her that God will use her talent to help her fulfill her purpose and that there's no reason she can't be both a good wife and have a career.

Timothy has finally begun to realize that his purpose is still to minister to the people of Mitford. This is evident when Hessie enters the store upset about having ended a story about children's art with a line about gardening, which makes her think she's losing her mind. Timothy adeptly relieves her anxiety by telling her stories about his own forgetfulness. His easy manner allows Hessie to open up about what is really bothering her, which is the fact that Vanita has been getting all of the good stories at the paper. Hessie even refers to what she has to talk to Timothy about as a "confession." As he listens to Hessie and comforts her when she cries, Timothy feels as though he never really retired. This thought indicates that he can see that he is still an important part of Mitford and people still rely on him.

This section also sees Esther Cunningham still seeking her own purpose. She announces that she is going to run for mayor again, which comes as no surprise since the author has been hinting that Esther has been unhappy with the way things are going in Mitford since she left office.

Esther's announcement ties into the humor motif since speculation about her intentions to run are the source of a humorous conversation with J.C. who asks Omer, Esther's brother-in-law, about the rumors surrounding Esther. When Omer says Esther hasn't said anything about it so it must be a rumor, J.C. says he's going to run an article anyway. Mule challenges him about the ridiculousness of writing a story based on a rumor and then angrily brings up that the new spray tan booth hasn't been getting enough attention.

The humor motif is further evident in other conversations that take place at the Feel Good, aptly named since the author often sets the more humorous scenes of the book there. For example, Mule tries to get J.C. and Timothy to go to A Cut Above for a spray tan and J.C. tells Timothy that Mule gets ten percent for every "geezer" he drags into the store for a spray tan so they can leave the store looking like George Hamilton, an actor known for being overly tanned. As this conversation concludes, Timothy notices a sign hanging in the shop that's been worded in a rather unfortunate manner as it lets patrons know how to obtain the bathroom key after eating a breakfast of huevos rancheros. Mule then complains about Wanda serving foods they can't even pronounce.

Another source of humor is a scene in which a couple comes to the bookstore and talk to Timothy about the possibility of changing churches. The conversation starts out serious, but ends on a humorous note when the couple say they heard that the priest at



Lord's Chapel cried in front of the congregation and that might just be too liberal for them. Timothy is a bit stunned by the comment, but when they leave he realizes they felt free to say such a thing because he's wearing a scarf that hides his collar, a fact that leaves Timothy laughing.

Timothy's inability to handle technology is again on display in a way that allows the author to continue the humor motif. A showing of one of Kim's movies is planned at Timothy's house. When he arrives home, Puny tries to teach him to use the DVD player. When she shows him the "on" and "play" buttons in quick succession, Timothy tells her to slow down as though he's thoroughly confused already. When she shows him the "pause" button, he resolves never to use it.

The theme of faith is explored beyond Sammy's storyline through a conversation that Timothy has with Hastings' father who is angry that Timothy gave Hastings a book in which he'd written notes about God in the margins. The Professor is an atheist and resents the idea that someone might be trying to plant thoughts about the existence of God in his son's head. He admonishes Timothy and instructs him not to speak about God anymore. He even questions Timothy wearing his priest's collar in the bookstore. Timothy accepts the criticism graciously and tells the man that while he will refrain from speaking to Hastings about God, he cannot stop speaking about God. He also says that his collar is a part of who he is and he will continue wearing it. This conversation illustrates the way that Timothy's faith is an ingrained part of him. The Christian religion was founded upon telling people about Jesus since the disciples went out into the world after the death of Christ and told people about what Jesus had done. Timothy, in keeping with his commissioning as a priest, has committed himself to continue spreading the word and refuses to stop doing so.

The theme of faith is also continued through showing various characters praying. For example, when Timothy calls Hope she notes that he seems tired, so she offers to pray with him. Timothy, of course, continues to pray for and with others, including Kim who is nervous about meeting her sister. When Timothy offers to pray with her, Kim says she's not sure God has much interest in her, but Timothy tells her that's not true. This brief conversation is in keeping with the author presenting characters who struggle with their faith as a part of the theme.

The author includes references to scripture in instances where Timothy seeks advice or solace through the Bible. When Timothy opened the Bible and felt urged to talk to Sammy, the scripture that the author references is from Ecclesiastes 3, which begins "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens" (New International Version, NIV). This is an extremely popular bit of scripture that most Christians will be familiar with and that is likely to be familiar even to readers who are not well-versed in the Bible, which allows the author to tie the story directly to Biblical teachings, thus giving it greater weight.

When Timothy and Cynthia are nervous about introducing Irene and Kim, Timothy quotes a passage from the Bible that is taken from Timothy 1:7. The scripture serves to remind them both that God will give them the courage to face the situation.



The theme of taking care of others is most thoroughly evident in this section in the death of Coot's mother. The town bands together to support Coot during this time of grief. On the night of his mother's death, Coot's neighbor stays with Coot to care for him and calls Timothy when Coot asks for the help. Though the weather is terrible, Timothy resolves to find a way to get to Coot. Esther Cunningham does her part in taking care of Coot when she helps Timothy to arrange for a plow to transport Timothy to Coot's house.

When it comes time for the funeral, many people bring food, including Esther's OMC, to Timothy's house and a crowd shows up to stand outside in the frigid weather for the graveside service. Timothy himself drives to Coot's house to pick him up for the funeral so that he won't have to drive alone. The actions of the people of Mitford are indicative of the theme of taking care of others because Coot's mother was not a nice person who had friends. Instead, the people show up to care for Coot. After the funeral, a group of people gather at Timothy's house to share in a meal and spend some time with Coot. As Timothy offers a prayer before the meal, he begins to cry out of love for the people who have gathered around Coot.

The theme of taking care of others is presented in other ways in this section. After seeing the ruined Mustang, Bill calls Timothy to make sure he's okay, which is his way of making sure Timothy isn't in need of something. Hope tells Timothy to hire Coot for twelve hours a week with no specific job duties assigned except whatever Timothy can give him to do. She does this in response to Scott having received a raise. She says she wants to do something good for someone else. She takes care of Coot by providing him a paying job and giving him an opportunity to be around books, which Miss Mooney has been teaching him to read. Helene also comes forward to volunteer one day per week at the store.

In addition to the plot climaxes and evidence of the themes present in this section, of note is the way in which the author continues to move the town of Mitford into the future. This section sees the introduction of Father Brad who will be taking over at Lord's Chapel. Brad seems to be a younger version of Timothy, right down to the mixed-breed dog that he loves. Readers might expect this to cause Timothy some trepidation at being replaced, but instead Timothy embraces the future, quite literally since he and Brad hug before parting. By introducing a new priest to the mix who seems to be a good man and a perfect fit for the town that he already thinks is perfect, the author indicates that as Timothy moves into this new phase of his life, Mitford will continue to be in good hands.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Hope decide to hire Coot to work at the bookstore? How is this an example of Mitford taking care of its own?



Discussion Question 2

Why do so many people come to the funeral of Coot's mother? How does this make Timothy feel?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Timothy feel it's time to talk to Sammy? What changes have Timothy and Cynthia already seen in Sammy? What evidence is there of Sammy beginning to change?

Vocabulary

distraught, contribution, rouse, clarified, weeping, hygiene, radical, albeit, phenomenon, debris, pursue, solemn, ballistic, consoling, bereaved, awry, amenities, aromas



Chapters 21-25

Summary

Chapter Twenty-one begins with Timothy adding still another quote to the corkboard at the bookstore. Vanita comes into the shop sporting a new spray tan. She says they'll be wrapping up the vote for leading citizen in a week and Timothy is in the lead. He tells her he's not the leading citizen and doesn't wish to be. Vanita asks why not and says the winner will get a free spray tan. He asks if he could hand the title to someone else. Vanita is hurt that Timothy doesn't like the contest and she leaves. He runs after her to apologize and says he'd be honored. She turns and hugs him. He once again feels pressured by public life.

Timothy reads the paper and finds it ridiculous. He vows to subscribe to the Charlotte Observer on Monday.

Timothy goes to the Feel Good to talk to Wanda about holding a prayer breakfast there. She asks if they're going to pray right out in the open because they don't have a back room. He says they don't need a back room and they will pray where people can see them. Wanda says she'll think about it and get back to him. Omer comes in and joins Timothy. Timothy asks if he'll be flying today and Omer says he won't because he's going to be playing online Scrabble.

When he returns to the bookstore, Timothy finds himself whistling which is something he never does. He finds a note from Marcie that there are mice in the store. He calls the hardware store and asks for a humane trap. He's told they don't have humane mouse traps so he says he'll get back to them. He calls Coot into the room.

Esther Cunningham gets into her car and heads to town. As she's driving into town she notices the same plastic bag still hanging from the awning of the Wool Shop. She decides that when she's mayor again she will outlaw plastic bags. She begins to cough and looks in the mirror to see her face is blotchy. Her heart is pounding and she feels hot, so she pulls over.

The fire chief tells Timothy he found Esther Cunningham slumped over her steering wheel and called the ambulance. The hospital has asked Timothy to come. When he arrives at the hospital Esther asks him to get the plastic bag off the awning at the Wool Shop.

Cynthia tells Timothy she's been diagnosed with a macular hole. The treatment for the condition will require her to lie facedown for two weeks. Timothy makes her dinner and runs a bath for her.

Later, Cynthia tells Timothy that Irene has decided not to go to Florida for the winter and has invited Cynthia to paint with her. Timothy tells Cynthia that Esther had a stroke and also has pneumonia. As Timothy was leaving the hospital, the charge nurse caught him



to say that Esther wanted to make certain the big bag of candy she'd bought makes it to Joe Joe's swearing-in because she wants the children to have it.

Dooley comes home and comments that Sammy seems different. He says that Sammy didn't try to pick a fight and Harley and Kenny report that he's doing better.

In Chapter Twenty-one Timothy and Cynthia talk about setting Omer and Shirlene up on a date. They plan to tell Omer that they'd like him to meet someone who also likes playing Scrabble. Timothy says they should introduce them over lunch at the Feel Good. Cynthia says she'll join him.

Timothy calls Harley and asks him to take a ladder to the Wool Shop to remove the plastic bag.

Miss Mooney arrives at the bookstore and tells Timothy she'll be at the store at three o'clock for Coot's reading lesson. She reports that Coot is eager and hardworking. She asks if Timothy might help her by reading to Coot occasionally. He says he will. She says it will help if Timothy can ask Coot to teach him something in return.

Abe arrives to purchase a book followed by Winnie who comes with donuts. Timothy passes. Winnie asks where Coot is and Timothy tells her he's buying supplies. Shirlene comes in and takes a donut. Winnie tells her the one with sprinkles is for Coot. Shirlene has come in to ask for Timothy's advice on getting a dog. The four of them have a humorous conversation on the merits and demerits of dogs and cats. Timothy offers Shirlene books on dog breeds and then invites her to meet Omer over lunch.

Dooley, Sammy, Pooh, and Jessie come in. Sammy tells Timothy he took the plastic bag down.

Dooley tells Timothy that he talked to the trust people and found out that after he pays for college and buys a practice there won't be much of his trust left. He says there's no way he and Lace can get married until after vet school. Dooley says he sometimes feels like Timothy and Cynthia want him and Lace to marry sooner, but Timothy assures him that's not the case. As they talk, Timothy hears Sammy, Pooh, and Jessie laughing and thinks it's a good sound.

Sammy comes to the counter with a book about gardening and buys it. Dooley sends his siblings out for ice cream. Then he asks Timothy what he's going to do about Helene's ultimatum. Timothy says he doesn't know but they have to keep praying.

The talk then turns to the prospect of Timothy buying a truck. Dooley suggests that Timothy buy his truck because it's more than he needs. He says he wants to get himself a smaller truck he saw in Wesley. Timothy agrees to take it for a test drive and invites Coot along. Coot has been upstairs stuffing mouse holes with rags soaked in peppermint oil, which is a trick they read about in the Household Hints in the Muse.

Timothy, Coot, Barnabas, and Dooley and his siblings all drive the truck around town with country music playing loudly and laughing all the while. Back at the store Timothy



agrees to buy the truck. He puts his arm around Sammy and says they need it to finish their rose garden and build the stone wall.

Timothy calls to check on Hope and Scott reports that she's bleeding again. He asks Timothy to keep praying. Scott also tells Timothy that they are having a girl but had waited to tell Timothy because they were afraid.

Coot and Miss Mooney sit in the Poetry section working on his reading lesson. A woman calls to tell him that Professor McCurdy's son Hastings is in the hospital and they think he has meningitis. She asks him to pray for Hastings. She also asks if he might come to the hospital and then tells him she's the professor's wife and he's away.

Timothy arrives at the hospital and meets Sharon McCurdy, who is clearly uncomfortable being around clergy. He sits by Hastings' bed and prays. She asks him if prayer is enough and he tells her he believes it is.

Later, Timothy thinks about how busy he's been with hospital admissions and a funeral. He looks through his email and finds a message from Scott reporting that Wilson has said Hope and the baby are doing fine.

The chapter ends with Hope thinking about why she felt distant from her baby. She realizes that she'd felt guilty about her body being a trap and that she'd feared the worst, which had caused her to miss months of joy. She resolves to choose happiness.

In Chapter Twenty-three Timothy and Sammy are working at the church. They take a break and Sammy abruptly thanks Timothy. When Timothy asks what for, Sammy responds, "Everything."

Helene calls Timothy from the bookstore and suggests they use the window in December as a display for a live Saint Nicholas. Timothy likes the idea.

That night, Cynthia sends Timothy to Coot's house with a container of hot macaroni and cheese.

Hastings has been discharged from the hospital and Timothy thinks he must come up with the perfect book for him.

Timothy looks at the latest copy of the *Muse* and the front page has a picture of him test driving Dooley's truck. With it is an article reporting Timothy as the winner of the leading citizen contest. There's also a picture of him from twenty years ago and he's quoted though he never spoke to Vanita. The *Muse* also has an article about Esther Cunningham's return home, including a vintage photo of Esther with a beehive hairdo. Timothy calls Vanita and asks her about the quote and she says J.C. spoke for him. He tells her to keep up the good works and then decides he just can't read the Hint.

Timothy goes to Fancy's shop and asks Shirlene about transferring the spray tan prize. She says it's not transferrable, but if Omer turns out to be cute, it might be.



Vanita brings Timothy the medal for being Mitford's leading citizen. Several other people stop in to congratulate him as well. Esther Bolick arrives with an OMC for Esther Cunningham and complains that sick people are working her to death. Timothy tells her baking OMCs is her life mission and she lifts their spirits by doing it.

That night Puny comes to Timothy's house to congratulate him. She brings a bowl of potato salad for Esther Cunningham. When she leaves Timothy decides to walk to the Cunningham house. Cynthia gives him some truffles for Esther.

Timothy spends some time talking with Esther about her health and the news around town. He tells her the plastic bag has been taken down and she asks him why he bothers with such things. She says that since her stroke she realizes she was never running the town, it was running her and she's done. Timothy says he's heard that before and then asks her to ride in the parade with her. She says she will.

Timothy and Cynthia attend the swearing-in. There's a table full of food, but Timothy can't have any of it because his blood sugar is elevated. Timothy sees Buck there and they talk about Sammy. Timothy suggests Buck take Sammy with him to his construction site because Sammy is curious and seems to know a lot about the way things work.

On Sunday afternoon, Timothy looks outside to see Sammy sitting on his top step holding Truman and talking to the kitten. He goes upstairs to suggest to Cynthia that they have Sammy, Kenny, and Harley over for burgers and a game of pool.

Timothy shows Sammy how to grill the burgers. Later, Sammy, Kenny, and Harley play pool. Timothy listens to their laughter from another room and knows Sammy is doing something he loves with people he trusts.

Hope and Scott mull over names for the baby. They go over several names and reflect that a child is such a miracle that it's hard to label the mystery with a name.

Chapter Twenty-four begins with Timothy, Sammy, and Harley working on the rose garden. They are satisfied by the work they've done, but it's time to stop until spring. Timothy thinks about finding a project for Sammy and Harley to do during the winter months to earn some income.

Timothy goes to the Feel Good and asks Wanda if she's decided about the prayer breakfast. She says she's still thinking. She says preachers don't usually tip well and asks why they can't just use a church. He says churches don't serve breakfast. This makes Wanda laugh and she agrees to let them have the prayer breakfast at the Feel Good.

Omer comes in and Timothy asks him to meet Shirlene. Omer says he's not very good with women and declines the offer. Timothy realizes he'll have to ask for Cynthia's help in this. Cynthia tells him to leave the matter of Omer and Shirlene alone for a while. Timothy asks if Cynthia will ever be done with her book and if she's ever considered retiring because her work is so consuming. She agrees that it is, but wonders why one



would do work that isn't consuming. He says she's worse than he is and she never wants to go anywhere. Before they go to sleep, Timothy prays aloud.

Timothy thinks about how he doesn't want to slow down for the winter. He thinks about the hospital trail and that he could begin organizing that project right away. He thinks about how he can go about improving the trails with Sammy's and Harleys help. He knows he'll have to fund the project himself, but he's running out of money.

Violet still hasn't warmed up to Truman, but Barnabas seems to love the kitten. Truman is active, so Cynthia suggests some toys to burn off his excess energy. Sammy suggests a cat door and then says he and Timothy could build one.

Timothy continues to look for the lost love letter to no avail. Helene comes over and says working at the bookstore has revitalized her and now she wishes to do something more. She tells him that Sammy can stay as long as he minds the rules, which she details to Timothy.

The next morning Timothy asks Cynthia for two thousand dollars to continue working on his projects with Sammy and Harley. She tells him she'll give him four thousand.

Chapter Twenty-five begins in the second week of November. The weather is warm and pleasant, leaving people wondering if there will be snow for Christmas. Hamp Floyd, locally known for his ability to predict Christmas snows, has declared there will be over a foot of snow for Christmas.

Timothy wonders if he really wants to take on the task of having a live Saint Nicholas at the bookstore. He comes to the conclusion that he must because it could greatly boost sales.

Helene stops by and tries to convince Timothy that he should play Saint Nicholas, but he refuses.

Henry Talbot enters the store looking thinner and bald. He greets Timothy and says he's running the gauntlet. He's been spat at, called names, and shunned. He's in town to pack his things and leave. They talk about Henry's attempted suicide and God's part in it all. Henry feels like he's betrayed God and doesn't know how to truly belong to him. Timothy advises him that it's never too late. He thanks Timothy for saving his life and tells him that his wife has completely left him and it makes him feel like he's been left without a shield. He feels like everyone is against him, but Timothy assures Henry that he is not against him. Timothy talks to him about his own struggles with being a priest and says he prays for Henry and believes many in town do as well. When Henry says he wants what Timothy has, Timothy tells him he can have it by petitioning God through prayer.



Analysis

The most significant event in this section of the novel is the change the author shows in Sammy following his talk with Timothy. Dooley notices the change and comments on it to Timothy saying that he can see that Sammy is nicer and less prone to fighting. Harley and Kenny also say that Sammy seems to be doing better. Timothy himself is most struck by Sammy's change when he looks outside to see Sammy sitting on his steps holding Truman and talking to him. Sammy seems to have developed a sense of compassion and is making an effort at treating those around him in a better manner. The author underlines this change by noting the sound of Sammy's laughter mingled with the laughter of his siblings as he plays pool or spends time in the bookstore. During the truck test drive, Sammy sits in the back of the truck with Pooh and Jessie wearing a grin on his face as they tool about town. Sammy is no longer the angry youth he was. In fact, Sammy is so changed that the author resolves a portion of his plot line when Helene calls Timothy to tell him that she has decided that Sammy does not have to move out.

The author reminds the reader that Sammy's change is not only because of the love of the people surrounding Sammy, but also because of the newly found purpose in his life. This is accomplished by the scene in which Sammy brings a book on gardening up to the counter of the bookstore and purchases it with his own money. This indicates that the subject has become important enough to Sammy that he wants to learn more about it.

Sammy isn't the only one who has changed. Timothy, too, has changed in that he's become happier and more relaxed. The author shows that he is taking better care of himself when Timothy passes on the donuts that Winnie brings in and doesn't eat the unhealthy foods at Joe Joe's swearing in. In fact, skipping the treats doesn't even seem to be difficult for Timothy since he simply declines the food and moves on without further thought. This is a big change from the man who couldn't even wait to get home before eating the ice cream he bought at the store when the book began. Timothy is certainly more relaxed than the man who complained about little things and grew irritated with his friends. Now, he finds himself whistling and looking forward to working in the bookstore and with Sammy in the rose garden. When mice are discovered in the bookstore, rather than being terribly irritated by nuisance, Timothy resolves to find a way to humanely rid the store of the rodents.

Timothy's and Cynthia's friendship with Irene has continued to evolve as well. Irene enjoys spending time with Cynthia, so she invites her fellow artist to come and paint at her house as they prepare for the hospital auction. This friendship will continue to be important in the next section as Irene will lean on Cynthia and Timothy to help her make an important announcement to the town of Mitford.

The author also continues to explore the themes of the novel. The theme of taking care of others is especially important as the author begins to wrap up the big question of whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own. Esther Cunningham, who has to this



point believed that Mitford does not take care of its own, is the recipient of some of that care when she is hospitalized. The author previously hinted that Esther has been feeling tired. The scene in which Esther becomes ill is written from her perspective so that the reader gets a feeling of suspense as Esther pulls to the side of the road and slumps over her steering wheel. Esther calls Timothy to her side. The author initially leads the reader to believe that Timothy is being called to pray for Esther, but when he arrives at the hospital, all Esther wants is to make certain the candy she bought gets distributed to the children and that someone finally takes the plastic bag off the store awning in town. The scene is at once humorous and endearing as Esther's requests seem silly and minor, and yet she just wants to make sure that Mitford is being taken care of. Timothy does his part in taking care of Mitford not only by visiting Esther when she needs him, but also by making certain the bag does indeed get taken down and the candy is distributed. Esther is also on the receiving end of Mitford's care when the town learns of her illness. Esther Bolick delivers an OMC and Puny brings a bowl of potato salad.

Coot, too, is on the receiving end of the citizens of Mitford's care through the giving of food. Cynthia sends Timothy out carrying a container of warm macaroni and cheese to take to Coot. When Winnie brings donuts to the bookstore, she asks where Coot is. When she learns he's not there, Winnie tells everyone to leave the donut with sprinkles for Coot because she knows that is his favorite kind.

In addition to being given food, Coot is also being taken care of by Miss Mooney, who continues to teach Coot to read. She asks Timothy to help Coot by reading with him as well and suggests that if Coot can teach Timothy something, that will help Coot as well. Miss Mooney recognizes that being able to teach someone will help Coot to feel like he, too, has something to offer.

The theme of love continues to be explored through the relationship between Dooley and Lace. Dooley shows himself to be a mature young man in that he has thought through what it will take to be married to Lace and start his veterinary practice. He tells Timothy that he can't possibly marry Lace until after he's completed veterinary school. He feels like Cynthia and Timothy would like him to get married sooner, but he is worried about the money he needs to do the things he knows are necessary for his career. Though he is young, Dooley seems to have a very mature view of love and marriage. This is probably due in part to the role model he has had in Timothy, but may also be influenced by the rough upbringing he had prior to his life with Timothy. Perhaps he is seeking not to repeat the mistakes of his birth parents.

The love between Cynthia and Timothy is also further explored. Cynthia learns that she will have to have eye surgery, which clearly worries Timothy. Upon learning the news, he draws a bath for Cynthia and cooks dinner so that she can rest. Though Cynthia and Timothy are dealing with concerns of old age, their love still has a ring of youthfulness to it. This is evident in the way that Timothy is excited by the prospect of Cynthia joining him at the Feel Good for lunch. Their conversation regarding money for the hospital trails processes is light and teasing with Cynthia showing her love for her husband and his ambitions by offering to double the amount of money he has requested.



Fatherly love is also displayed in this section of the novel. Timothy has been considering a new truck since the beginning of the book. This section sees him making a decision that may be more about his love for Dooley than about the truck itself. Dooley has decided that his truck is too large for his current needs, so he asks Timothy if he will consider buying the truck so that Dooley can get something smaller. While it's true that Timothy can make use of the truck for landscaping projects with Sammy, he probably doesn't really need a large truck, especially since Harley works with them and they generally use his truck for hauling supplies. However, Timothy agrees to buy the truck because it will help Dooley, and at the same time he shows Sammy love by putting his arm around the boy and saying they need the truck to build the rock wall Sammy suggested for the rose garden. Sammy has clearly begun to accept Timothy's love since it's doubtful he would have allowed Timothy to put an arm around him at the beginning of the novel.

The purchasing of Dooley's truck plays into the theme of purpose as well since it will allow Timothy and Sammy to continue to pursue Sammy's sense of purpose as a landscaper. In addition to landscaping, the author reveals that Sammy is quite handy at building things. He offers to build a cat door with Timothy for Cynthia when Cynthia notes that Truman is really active and needs to be able to come and go as he pleases. Timothy makes note of Sammy's abilities to Buck and suggests that Buck might take him to one of his construction sites since Sammy seems eager to learn.

Timothy's search for his purpose takes an interesting turn when he urges Cynthia to retire. His suggestion comes out of his love for her and concern about her health, but it still seems odd since he has been actively resisting retirement himself. This brief discussion allows the author to make a point about people finding work that they are passionate about. Timothy says that Cynthia's work is consuming and Cynthia wonders why anyone would want to do work that is not consuming. In other words, Cynthia is passionate about her work just as Timothy was about his work as a preacher and still is about ministering to people and finding ways to be useful.

This idea of doing something one is passionate about continues into a discussion that Timothy has with Esther Bolick about her OMCs. Esther makes an OMC for Esther Cunningham. When she brings it to Timothy to deliver, she complains that sick people are working her to death. Timothy, however, knows that she really loves making the OMCs so he jovially tells her that the cakes are her life mission and she's lifting the spirits of those who receive the cakes.

Timothy continues to develop his new purpose in life by trying to arrange for a prayer breakfast for the clergy of Mitford. He also continues to visit people at the hospital, including Esther Cunningham. And, he has decided to begin a new landscaping project to rehabilitate the trails behind the hospital that he has enjoyed running on. The trails are overgrown and could use some care, so Timothy decides that he'll hire Sammy to do the project with him, thus helping Sammy to further hone his skills and develop his purpose. At one point, Timothy realizes that he's actually quite busy again and thinks that between hospital visits and funerals, he's practically working full-time again.



Esther Cunningham is still determined to fulfill what she believes is her purpose. Even though she's been hospitalized, she wants to make certain the plastic bag is taken down. In fact, prior to her stroke, she'd made up her mind that when she is elected mayor again, she'll outlaw plastic bags.

The author creates another opportunity to discuss the theme of faith when Hastings is hospitalized while his atheist father is out of town. Hastings' mother calls Timothy asking for prayers and a hospital visit. When Timothy goes to the hospital, he learns that Hastings has meningitis and there's a chance he'll lose some memory. He sits beside the bed and prays for the boy. Hastings' mother asks him if he really thinks that prayer is enough to heal the boy. Timothy tells her he believes it is. This scene opens a dialogue with the skeptical mother that will be continued in the next section of the book and will allow the author to provide readers with instruction about how to pray.

The inclusion of prayer as part of the faith theme is also evident in Timothy's approaching Wanda about holding a prayer breakfast at the Feel Good. Wanda is hesitant about allowing the breakfast because she isn't comfortable with the idea of people praying in the open where others can see them. She worries that the people in attendance at the breakfast might create a scene with people waving their hands and being overcome by the spirit. Timothy assures her that won't happen, but they do intend to pray where people can see. Wanda isn't ready to accept this idea yet, so she tells Timothy she'll think about it. The author may be including this scene as a means of implying that prayer isn't something people of faith should feel they have to hide and to suggest that public prayer is a good thing rather than something to be embarrassed about.

The author also provides evidence in this section that suggests prayer does work. The people of Mitford have been praying for Hope since finding out about her difficult pregnancy. Hope has indicated that prayer couldn't quell her fears and has even been embarrassed by the idea of so many people praying for her. In this section, Hope begins to have a change of heart. Scott reveals to Timothy that the couple is having a girl, a fact they had not shared previously because they had been afraid. Scott's telling Timothy the gender of the baby suggests that the couple is letting go of some of their fear. However, he asks Timothy to keep praying because Hope is bleeding again. Timothy says he will and later Scott calls to report that Hope has seen the doctor and she and the baby are fine. In a scene written from Hope's perspective, the author shares Hope's feelings and thoughts about her pregnancy. Hope realizes that by allowing herself to live in fear and guilt over the pregnancy has robbed her of its joys. She makes the decision that for the remainder of her pregnancy she will choose happiness and enjoy the baby growing inside her. The couple is finally able to move forward and begin to think about a name for the baby. They are awed by the task of naming a miracle, which indicates that they now feel the baby is a gift from God rather than a medical condition to worry about. The ability to move forward with joy suggests that prayer has had an effect on Hope's emotional state as well as on her physical state.

Also within the theme of Faith is a discussion between Timothy and Henry Talbot. Henry returns to Mitford to pack before leaving for good. He comes into the store to thank



Timothy. He is pale and gaunt, but seems thankful to be alive. His visit to Mitford has been difficult, as many people have been unwelcoming and he's endured ridicule and been shunned. Henry talks to Timothy about how he can move on. He feels like he's betrayed God and that everyone is against him. When Henry says he wants what Timothy has, meaning his faith and his relationship with God, Timothy assures him he can have it through prayer. Henry represents people who go through a difficult time in their lives and lose their faith. Through the discussion with Timothy, the author suggests that faith can be regained and one of the things necessary to regain faith is prayer.

While the theme of faith becomes somewhat more serious in this section, the author tempers it with the continued use of the humor motif. Timothy's dialogue with Wanda about the prayer breakfast is meant to be humorous while also indicating that public prayer isn't something to be embarrassed about. Wanda's reaction to the idea of people praying in the open and her worry about people being overcome by the spirit is funny. When Timothy approaches her again about her decision on the breakfast, Wanda tells him she's hesitant because preachers are notoriously bad tippers. She is finally convinced to allow the breakfast at the café when Timothy makes a joke about churches not serving breakfast and gets the stoic Wanda to break into laughter.

Even Timothy's visit to the gravely ill Esther Cunningham is handled with humor. Esther's unexpected requests about the plastic bag and the candy are meant to be funny while showing Esther's determination. The nurse recognizes what a force Esther is by running after Timothy to remind him of one more point that Esther has brought up so that Esther won't be angry. Later, when Esther is released and Timothy visits her at her home. He tells Esther the bag has been taken down and she wonders why he'd bother with such a trivial thing. After swearing that she's done with being so involved in the town, Esther jumps at the chance to ride with Timothy in a parade.

The Muse again runs articles that Timothy finds cringe-worthy. In fact, they're so bad that after reading the Muse, he resolves to subscribe to a different paper. When Timothy wins the leading citizen contest the Muse runs a picture of a much younger Timothy. The picture they run of Esther Cunningham upon announcing her release from the hospital is so old that Esther has a beehive hairdo in the picture. Timothy finds this laughable, but is even more surprised to see that in reference to a picture of him test driving Dooley's truck he's been quoted even though he never spoke with Vanita. Timothy handles the fabricated quote with good humor, though, since he simply tells Vanita to "keep up the good work" after asking her where the quote came from.

Another humorous scene occurs when Shirlene comes into the shop to ask Timothy for advice about getting a dog. The conversation between Timothy, Shirlene, Winnie, and Abe about the merits and demerits of dogs is truly outrageous. Winnie suggests that Shirlene get a dog that will bark, but not yap, and one that can sleep with her. But, she then goes on to say that dogs are always begging, which Barnabas proves by sitting at Winnie's feet and staring at the donut box she's brought in. Winnie then says she has goldfish. Abe suggests a Golden Retriever, but then goes on to say that a Golden will get old and have hip problems. He then says that a cat wouldn't go to the salon with



Shirlene if it knew she wanted it to go. Timothy becomes exasperated by the conversation and ends it by begging someone to just buy a book.

Shirlene again injects some humor when Timothy asks her about the possibility of transferring his spray tan package so that it can be a prize for the hospital auction. She tells him that right now it's not transferrable, but if Omer turns out to be cute she'll consider transferring the certificate.

Also of importance in this section of the book is the introduction of the Christmas sub plot that the author eventually wraps the book up with. As Christmas draws near, Helene suggests that they have a live Saint Nicholas at the store to attract customers. Timothy isn't sure he wants to undertake such a project and is absolutely certain he doesn't want to play the part, but he agrees because he's determined to raise Hope's profits. The idea is merely introduced in this section, but will reach its climax and serve to wrap up the remaining plot lines in the final section.

Discussion Question 1

What purpose does the author's frequent mention of articles in the Muse serve?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Wanda reluctant to allow a prayer breakfast at the Feel Good? Why does she finally give in to Timothy's request?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author conclude Henry Talbot's plotline? How has Henry changed? What advice does Timothy give him?

Vocabulary

deceased, notion, humane, impairment, retractable, inventory, gentiles, liberty, scholar, abating, dismal, debacle, vintage, successor, provender, hunker, utterly, malnourished, truant, scorn



Chapters 26-30

Summary

Chapter Twenty-six begins with Timothy visiting Louella to invite her to his house for Thanksgiving dinner. She declines and asks that he bring Dooley up for a visit.

Cynthia tells Timothy to go to the Collar Button man to be measured. When he arrives to be measured the Collar Button man tells him that Cynthia wants him to have a nice suit.

Timothy arrives at the bookstore. Shirlene arrives and asks Timothy his opinion on a particular breed of dog. Omer comes in walking his dog, Patsy, and Shirlene says that Patsy is exactly the kind of dog she's looking for. Omer gives Timothy a bag of potatoes and leaves. Shirlene asks Timothy who that was and says he was adorable. Timothy thanks her for letting him transfer his spray tan prize. He's going to donate it for the hospital auction.

In Chapter Twenty-seven Timothy writes a letter to his brother. He tells him that Dooley and Lace have both returned to school. Then he thinks about having seen Dooley and Lace in an embrace and realizing how truly in love they are. He feels like it was a gift to see that.

Helene again asks Timothy to play Saint Nicholas. She continues to badger him and says she has even found someone to make a costume.

Esther Cunningham calls and is upset. She asks why the Christmas parade occurred before Thanksgiving. Timothy says he doesn't know, but suspects the council is working toward slipping the parade in near Halloween. She says she's going to talk to the council and also asks about the candy thrown in the parade. She says her great grandchildren didn't get a single piece.

Timothy is counting up the day's sales when Helene returns to again try to convince him to play Saint Nicholas. He still doesn't agree to her plan, but admits to himself that she's been successful in at least making him feel the pressures of Christmas approaching quickly. He calls Hope and then posts a sign asking for people to apply at the store as Christmas help. Cynthia sees the sign and tells him to take it down; she'll help out at the store.

As Timothy arrives home he thinks about how he asked clergy in Charlotte to help in find a place for Hope in the month before she is to deliver the baby and a call came in offering her the use of a carriage house. His phone rings and it's Helene offering to work Saturdays at the bookstore. He realizes he forgot to take down the help wanted sign and he's getting the help he asked for.

That night, Cynthia suggests they put a nativity scene in one of the windows at the bookstore.



Helene teaches Coot to wrap gifts and write the store name on stickers for the packages. Timothy is surprised by the way Helene has been coming out of her shell.

Helene and Marcie call a meeting and suggest that they have Saint Nicholas there on Saturdays since those will be the busiest days. Timothy suggests they make the costume one size fits all. They ask who will get the beard for the costume and everyone looks at Timothy. He doesn't respond.

On Friday, Timothy learns that Helene drove down the mountain to get a beard. Word gets out around town that the shops are preparing for Christmas with free cookies and donut holes and that the bookstore is putting on some kind of show.

Coot goes to Timothy's house and cleans up the nativity scene for the store window. The pieces will be placed in the window in increments as Christmas draws closer. Harley helps Timothy and Cynthia take the set to the store and they set up the window at night when there's no one in town to see them. When they step outside to see it, Harley asks where the Baby Jesus is. Timothy says he'll arrive on Christmas morning. Harley says people will be looking for Jesus and Timothy tells him that's the point.

That Saturday the nativity scene draws the desired attention and many people stop into the store to buy books. Shirlene stops in and asks when she'll get to meet Omer. Timothy says he isn't sure and Shirlene complains that she'll never meet anyone.

Helene is still worrying about finding a beard. Helene tells Timothy that she just found out the costume can be made from scraps and she'll donate her mother's old fur for the trim. She assures Timothy he'll look wonderful. He wonders when she'll let the idea of him being Saint Nicholas go.

Vanita stops in and comments on the nativity scene, wondering where Jesus is. She asks what the plan is for the other store window and he says it's a surprise. She's thrilled and says she's going to do a story on it.

After church on Sunday, Timothy and Cynthia notice a plastic bag hanging from the doorknob at the bookstore. They stop and discover the bag is full of dusty white beards. He takes the bag to Helene's and leaves it hanging on her doorknob.

Kenny sees Timothy leaving Helene's and stops him. He says he'll be leaving the day after Christmas. Kenny thanks Timothy for helping Sammy and says that Sammy really likes him. Timothy tells Kenny he can call anytime if he ever needs anything.

Timothy takes communion and a pasta dish to Hope and Scott. They say a prayer of thanks for the carriage house and for Hope's sister who will be coming to help. Scott tells him they've decided to name the baby Grace.

In Chapter Twenty-eight the people of Mitford are watching the bookstore waiting to see who will appear in the chair in the window, when the nativity scene will change, and if the bookstore tree will appear in the upper window of the store as it has in the past. Timothy watches the sales closely hoping they'll increase a great deal.



Timothy gets out the tree stand and ornaments and says he, Sammy, and Harley will get the finest tree they can find. Marcie, Helene, and Shirley plan to come in after hours to decorate the tree. Timothy calls Cynthia and asks her to join them and says that Sammy and Harley will be there, too. When Cynthia finds out Shirlene will be there, she suggests that Timothy invite Omer.

As the tree is set up in the store, Omer and Shirlene sit in the poetry section and talk. The talk turns to scrabble and Omer describes the game he played online the night before. Shirlene realizes she was the person he was playing with and tells him.

While the group decorates the tree, Timothy suggests they stay open Friday and Saturday nights until Christmas. Coot, Cynthia, and Sammy say they will help. They decide not to plug the tree in until Saturday night at dusk.

They have a huge crowd of customers on Friday night. People continue to stop in out of curiosity, asking about the nativity scene and the chair. Timothy sends Sammy to purchase cookies from Winnie. Coot and Cynthia are busy with the free gift wrapping.

On Saturday, Timothy says they'll go across the street to see the tree lit at five-thirty. Sammy says he'll light the tree and so does Coot. Timothy says no, they'll all go across the street and the tree will be taken care of.

Hope and Scott and Esther Cunningham call to say they plan to drive by the store to see it all lit up. Timothy suggests to Esther that she tell her grandchildren to come and that there will be cookies afterward.

Helene arrives with the costume and Sammy asks who is going to play Saint Nicholas. Helene says Timothy will. Timothy takes the costume upstairs and asks for a little privacy.

The store is very busy around the time of the tree lighting and people are waiting for Saint Nicholas to arrive. Saint Nicholas comes down the stairs and the crowd gasps. They see familiar eyes above the beard. Saint Nicholas walks through the store to his spot at the window saying only "bless you" to the people he passes and giving candy to the children. One boy notes that Saint Nicholas has no teeth.

Helene spots Timothy continuing to wait on customers and is surprised to see him. The store is extremely busy and Timothy feels overwhelmed by the chaos of it all. Miss Mooney asks who is playing Saint Nicholas. Timothy says it's just someone having a little "fun that is funny."

Timothy recruits Pooh and Jessie to light the tree. A crowd gathers across the street as the time approaches. A countdown begins and on Timothy's signal, the store lights up in spectacular fashion. The people wish one another a Merry Christmas and Sammy invites everyone into the store for cookies.

Chapter Twenty-nine begins on Sunday evening with Sammy and Kenny playing pool at Timothy's house and laughing. Timothy and Cynthia sit by the fireplace and talk about a



story to be run in the Muse. They don't specify what the article is about. They agree that Hessie must write the article and then they pray.

Cynthia and Timothy discuss their Christmas plans. Harley will be having Christmas dinner with Helene, which causes them to speculate on a relationship between the two.

On Monday, Timothy stops by the bakery and discovers that Winnie has gotten a spray tan. Winnie tells him that there's an illness going around town and Vanita had to go to the emergency room.

Timothy calls Hessie and invites her to meet with him at Happy Endings. She comes and they talk about the article. Hessie is nervous but knows that with Vanita ill, this is her chance. She says she's forgiven Vanita. Hessie is certain that she can complete the article by morning and that it will make J.C. change the whole front page.

Timothy reads the letters they've received with their Christmas cards. There is even a card from Henry Talbot, who is now in New Mexico. He asks Timothy to mail him a prayer that he'd mentioned praying when he was ordained.

Esther Cunningham sits in her chair and notices that her husband has begun to look old. She asks for the Muse and he says he hasn't had time to pick it up. She asks what he's been doing and Ray says he's been taking care of her. He details all of the things he's been doing at her request. Ray falls asleep in the chair, so Esther gets up to get her own paper. She looks at it and wakes Ray up to see it, too.

Esther Bolick asks Winnie if she's seen the paper. Winnie says she did and that three million dollars has been raised for the hospital. Kim bought Irene's paintings for 1.5 million dollars. Irene then gave another 1.5 million to match Kim's funds.

Puny congratulates Timothy on the money received for the hospital, then hands him the lost love letter for Cynthia. It had dropped under Timothy's desk.

Timothy gets Sammy and tells him to come to the bookstore for a paying job. Sammy tells Timothy that Buck is going to try to find Sammy a job. On the way to the store, Timothy runs into an old acquaintance who asks Timothy if Sammy is his boy and Timothy says he is and introduces him. Then they stop at the shoe store so Timothy can buy shoes for Sammy.

Dooley comes into the store and gives Timothy a bag of gifts and says he and Lace will be at Timothy's tomorrow. Dooley thanks Timothy for all he's done.

Timothy excitedly wraps a gift for Coot feeling as though God is near. He signs it from Coot's friends at Happy Endings.

Timothy knows he needs to get moving on the trail project and realizes he needs some help. He calls Emma and asks her if she can work four hours a week on Tuesdays. She's thrilled and accepts.



Hastings' mother, Sharon, stops in to thank Timothy for praying for Hastings and says her son is completely fine. She asks if it's just a coincidence that Timothy prayed and Hastings is better. Timothy says he doesn't have confidence in coincidences, but he does have confidence in God. Sharon says she doesn't like that she can't see God and asks how someone would go about praying if they aren't even sure they believe. Timothy suggests she just says what's in her heart. Timothy says he'll pray for her and she asks him to pray right now, so he takes her to the poetry section and prays for her. By the time he finishes, Sharon is weeping and says that maybe she has just a tiny bit of faith. Timothy tells her that God will make it enough.

Timothy walks home in the falling snow thinking about Hope telling him that sales were up twenty-seven percent over last year. He's grateful for a dream fulfilled.

In Chapter Thirty the snow is still falling and there's more than seven inches on the ground. Timothy steps outside to make a path for Barnabas in the snow. When he comes in Cynthia says they're going. Harley calls and says not to worry, he'll have them shoveled out in plenty of time.

Cynthia sets up a table in the study for the two of them to have dinner and presents Timothy with her gift to him. He asks if it's what he was measured for and Cynthia says it is. He goes into the bedroom and tries on a new tuxedo that fits him perfectly. He wears the tuxedo while they have champagne by the fire. Timothy reads the letter Puny found out loud to Cynthia. They enjoy chocolate and coffee so they can stay awake for their journey to the manger.

Dooley calls and tells Timothy that he and Lace are engaged. When they hang up, Timothy tells Cynthia and they are overjoyed. Cynthia immediately begins talking about planning an engagement party. As Cynthia and Timothy are about to leave to meet Sammy and go to the store, Lace calls. Timothy hands the phone to Cynthia. After the call, Cynthia reports that Dooley and Lace are happy, but don't want an engagement party just yet and would prefer they not tell anyone yet, either.

Timothy, Cynthia, and Sammy go to the store and move the figures closer to the stable. Finally, they place the Baby Jesus in the crèche. Together they quote the lyrics of a song with Sammy reading his part off a piece of paper. They look up to see a family watching them.

When they return home, Timothy sits down to write a letter to Henry Talbot with the prayer Henry requested. The prayer is one accepting Jesus as his savior.

The snow continues through the night and the town sleeps under a blanket of snow while Christmas music plays from the Town Hall loudspeaker system. Coot sits in his little house reading again his Christmas book, which is by Dr. Seuss. He pretends he's reading to his mother. He thinks that what he likes best about books is the way they take you into other people's lives right from your own home.

As Timothy builds a fire on Christmas morning he comes across an old copy of the Muse with the article about whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own. He believes



the town has answered that they do. Timothy looks up at the picture of Dooley above the mantle and believes he is their hope for the future. He quietly says, "Take it from here, buddy."

Analysis

This final section of the book continues to explore the themes the author has discussed throughout the novel while also drawing the plot lines to satisfying conclusions. The theme of love serves to conclude the stories of Omer and Shirlene, Dooley and Lace, and, in part, Sammy.

Omer and Shirlene finally meet when a group of people gathers to decorate the Christmas tree at the book store. When Shirlene hears about the decorating of the tree, she offers to come and help, so Timothy invites Omer to attend as well. Prior to this, Shirlene had seen Omer and his dog, so she strikes up a conversation with Omer by asking how his dog is. In a funny twist, the author reveals that Omer and Shirlene actually know one another already since they've been playing Scrabble online together under their screen names. This fulfills two instances of foreshadowing. In the first, the author had indicated that Shirlene was turning to online dating to find a man and in the second Omer had told Timothy about a particularly tough online Scrabble opponent. The two seem to really like one another and spend the evening sitting in the store's poetry section talking, so the author concludes their story by indicating they will begin a relationship.

Dooley and Lace have been contemplating an engagement with Lace feeling ready, though slightly overwhelmed, and Dooley being hesitant because of his practical nature and plans for the future. However, Dooley can stand it no longer and his love for Lace leads him to finally ask her to marry him regardless of how the future might play out. He calls Timothy ecstatic about the news and Lace calls Cynthia. The author indicates the two are still a little hesitant, though, since Lace asks Cynthia not to plan an engagement party just yet and to keep the news a secret for now. This is one of several hints that the author may plan to continue the series through Dooley.

The theme of love also serves to conclude Sammy's plot line in part. Sammy has been seeking, as the title suggests, Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good. He seems to have found that place through Timothy, Cynthia, and his brothers. Timothy claims Sammy as one of his boys when he runs into an acquaintance who asks if Sammy is his boy. Without hesitation, Timothy says he is. He then takes Sammy to buy new shoes, just as a father would do for his son. Sammy has also clearly developed an affection for Timothy since he doesn't resist Timothy's claiming him and Timothy notes that Sammy has placed a present for him under the Christmas tree. Sammy also seems to feel more at ease with his siblings since there are more mentions in this section of Timothy hearing Sammy's laughter mixed with that of his siblings as they spend time together.

The love between Cynthia and Timothy continues to be evident in this section. Cynthia's gift of a tuxedo created to fit Timothy as he is today reminds the reader of the opening



scene of the book in which Timothy was complaining about having to wear a tuxedo and that his didn't fit. When Cynthia gives Timothy a tuxedo that has been measured and sewn to fit him just as he is today suggests that Cynthia loves him the way he is now and doesn't need him to lose weight or make any other changes. Timothy's reaction is telling of his love for Cynthia as well as the change he's undergone. Timothy is thrilled to receive the tuxedo and changes into it without complaint or hesitation, which would not have been his reaction at the beginning of the book.

The letter Timothy wrote to Cynthia early on is found and Timothy reads it aloud to Cynthia. The words are simple, but they express his love for her by saying that Cynthia embodies an entire family for him, meaning that she is his everything. In the letter, he congratulates her on how effortless she makes loving him seem. He vows to continue looking for ways to tell her how grateful he is that she's chosen to spend her life with him.

Fatherly love is again discussed through the relationship between Dooley and Timothy and also through Kenny and Timothy. Dooley takes the time to thank Timothy for everything he's done without specifying just what he's thanking Timothy for. This indicates that he knows Timothy has done a great deal for both him and his brothers and Dooley is grateful for his life with his adoptive father. Timothy also has a touching conversation with Kenny as Kenny is preparing to move to live with the couple who raised him. Kenny, too, is thankful for all Timothy has done. Timothy expresses how proud he is of Kenny and that he will always be available should Kenny ever need him.

The author also includes the possibility of a new love beginning between Harley and Helene. Throughout the novel there have been small mentions of improvements Harley has been making, such as getting new teeth. As the book draws to a close, Timothy and Cynthia talk about the fact that Harley and Helene plan to have Christmas dinner together and they speculate that the two might be starting a relationship. This mention of the possibility of a new relationship allows the author to draw the storyline into future books in the series.

The theme of purpose plays an important part in wrapping up some of the plot lines as well. Sammy's story is also concluded by continuing to show the way having a sense of purpose has changed him. Far from being the surly young man he was at the beginning of the book, he is now excited by the prospect of helping at the bookstore, so much so that he volunteers to allow everyone else to go across the street to watch the tree lighting while he stays inside to turn the lights on. His offer shows that he's no longer thinking only of himself, but wants others to experience the joy of the tree lighting. Timothy, of course, wants Sammy to see the lighting for himself so he makes other arrangements. When the tree is lit, Sammy is just as joyful as the rest of the crowd and calls out to invite everyone into the store for cookies. This invitation is not one he would have extended at the beginning of the book. In addition to helping with the Christmas preparations, Buck also plans to hire Sammy to work with him in construction. Sammy is obviously excited about the new job since he tells Timothy about it.



Timothy's quest for purpose is concluded in this section when his dream of boosting sales at the bookstore is fulfilled. Though he is a bit hesitant about the work involved in having a live Saint Nicholas at the store, he's glad the effort pays off with a 27% increase in sales. While his time at the bookstore might be drawing to a close with Hope's sister coming to town to help out, Timothy now knows his purpose as he moves forward. He begins planning the renovation of the hospital trails and even hires Emma to help him organize the project, thus allowing Emma to fulfill her purpose as well.

The bookstore hasn't helped only Timothy to find his purpose; it has also been important in helping Coot to find a place to fit in. Timothy confirms Coot's importance to the store and to the town by asking him to play the part of Saint Nicholas. He knows that Coot will enjoy the role and trusts him to do it well. The author keeps the identity of the character who will play Saint Nicholas a secret until the scene in which Saint Nicholas comes down the stairs in full costume. In fact, she suggests that Timothy has given in to Helene's constant badgering when he takes the costume upstairs and asks for some privacy. The author never specifically states that Coot is in the costume which indicates that perhaps the customers don't really know who it is, but she lets the reader know definitively that it's Coot by making mention of a child noticing Saint Nicholas's lack of teeth and Timothy's comment that the person playing Saint Nicholas is someone having some "fun that is funny," which is a line from a Dr. Seuss book that Coot used earlier in the novel.

Esther Cunningham does not give up on her purpose of running the town even as the book draws to a close. She is clearly too passionate about Mitford to ever truly retire. Instead, she calls Timothy and complains about the timing of the Christmas parade and the lack of candy for the children. The conversation turns humorous when Timothy states that the town might be trying to move the Christmas parade closer to Halloween.

The humor motif is also evident in a conversation between Esther Cunningham and her husband, Ray. Esther complains about little things that Ray hasn't done and wonders what he's been doing all day. Ray patiently explains that he's been taking care of her and running the many errands she's requested, and then he promptly falls asleep in his chair.

Shirlene brings more humor as she appears in the middle of winter wearing a brightly colored caftan with a tropical print in spite of the cold weathers. The mention of her caftan leads her to talk about having hot flashes. When she sees Omer and comments to Timothy on how attractive he is, Timothy responds by thanking her for letting him transfer his spray tan certificate. This response is in reference to Shirlene's earlier refusal to transfer the certificate unless Omer turned out to be cute. In addition, Shirlene seems to have convinced nearly everyone in town to use her spray tan booth as characters are constantly popping up sporting dark tans in the middle of Mitford's cold and snowy winter, including Winnie and Omer.

The preparations for Christmas are also a source of humor. Timothy is the target of some heavy-handed attempts to convince him to play Saint Nicholas even though he's said that he won't do it since the plan was brought up. When there is a meeting about



the costume and the need for a beard is brought up, everyone immediately looks to Timothy who remains stony-faced. Shirlene pulls out her phone and attempts to order a beard online, but they're sold out. Her use of technology causes everyone to stop and wonder what she's doing as though they are completely out of touch with current technology. When beards show up at the store in a bag hanging from the door, they are accompanied by funny anonymous notes about being grateful for having a place to get rid of the beards. The beards are terribly old and dusty, so Timothy sneaks to Helene's door and leaves the bag hanging there. He quickly retreats from the door so that Helene can't refuse them.

The beards really are just one more way that the citizens of Mitford take care of their own, and so the scene plays into the theme of taking care of others. There are several other examples as well. Timothy's desire to donate the tanning certificate to the hospital auction is his way of taking care of Mitford through helping with the fundraiser. He also continues to take care of Hope by finding her a place close to Charlotte to stay as the baby's birth approaches. He also takes her communion and a hot meal.

Many other people take care of Hope and Mitford as they prepare the store for Christmas. Coot cleans up the nativity scene that Cynthia suggests they put in the window. Cynthia, Shirlene, Helene, Sammy, and Winnie all help out at the store with free gift wrapping and ringing up sales so that the store can stay open later. This not only helps Hope in terms of sales, but also gives the people of Mitford the opportunity to shop a bit later than they normally would. When snow nearly prevents Timothy, Cynthia, and Sammy from getting to the store on Christmas Eve to place the Baby Jesus in the nativity scene, Harley assures Timothy he'll have them shoveled out in time.

Indeed, the question of whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own is unequivocally answered in this final section of the book. Timothy finds the original article as he's preparing a fire and reflects on the many things the people of Mitford do for one another. He decides that although Mitford may have faltered somewhat, the town has definitely shown they take care of their own.

This final section of the novel continues to explore the theme of faith as Christmas approaches. When Cynthia suggest that the nativity scene be placed in the store's window, Timothy decides to place the figures so that they are further away from the crèche and not have the Baby Jesus appear until Christmas morning. This isn't just a tactic to create buzz around the store and boost sales, it's also a statement of faith. The Christian tradition of Advent that immediately precedes Christmas and ends of Christmas morning is a time of waiting for Christ to appear. In keeping with that tradition, Timothy wants people to wait and to be looking for Jesus. He is evidently successful as a family stands watching them at midnight while they place the baby in the manger. The scene in which the baby is placed is significant in that it shows Sammy as having become more open to finding faith and God. He willingly takes the snowy walk to the bookstore at midnight so that he can be part of the event and even joins Cynthia and Timothy in reading the poem "Love Came Down at Christmas," by Christine Rossetti, which is also a hymn commonly sung in Christian churches during the Christmas season.



The author has a final word on prayer as Hastings's mother comes to the store to tell Timothy that Hastings has recovered completely. She wonders if his recovery after Timothy's prayers is just a coincidence. Timothy tells her he has confidence that God played a part. When she expresses a desire to learn how to pray, Timothy tells her to just say what is in her heart. Through this scene, the author may be attempting to provide readers with some instruction on how to pray. Then, when Timothy says he'll pray for her she asks for him to pray with her right now. When she cries and tells him that perhaps she has a little faith, he tells her that God will make her faith enough. This scene suggests that Hastings's mother has had a change of heart and the faith she once had has been rekindled.

Prayer is also important in the conclusion of Henry Talbot's story. Timothy receives a letter from Henry saying that he is now in New Mexico and asking for the prayer that Timothy mentioned praying when he became a priest. Timothy writes Henry a letter including the words of the prayer, which is a prayer accepting Jesus as his savior. Henry's request for the prayer indicates that he is now ready to recommit himself to his faith and leaves the reader feeling that Henry will be all right.

Hope's story is concluded when she chooses a name for her baby. The theme of faith is shown in that the name she chooses is Grace. The name signifies Hope's feeling that God has extended extraordinary grace to her through her pregnancy. Though it's been difficult, the people of Mitford have shown her grace by caring for her and God has brought her through.

Also of note in this section of the novel is the conclusion of Irene's story. The author wraps up the story by finally giving Hessie a chance to write a truly newsworthy article for the Muse. Timothy recruits her to report that Irene and Kim have made enormous donations to the hospital, thus making the fundraiser a complete success. However, the biggest news in the story is really that Irene has a twin. Not only does the story serve to acknowledge their fantastic gifts to Mitford, but it also introduces them to the town as twins.

The author concludes the novel with a scene in which Timothy entrusts the future to his son, Dooley. Timothy stands looking at the old article about Mitford taking care of its own and looking at Dooley's portrait. When he says "take it from here," he is suggesting that the future belongs to Dooley and it's now time for Timothy to take a step back as Dooley comes into adulthood. In concluding the novel in this manner, the author also makes a suggestion about the future of the book series itself; it seems that if the series continues it may continue with Dooley as the central character.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Timothy choose Coot to play Saint Nicholas?



Discussion Question 2

What conclusion does Timothy come to about whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own? What are some of the things that have happened that make him believe this?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author end the novel with Timothy looking at the picture of Dooley? What might this mean for the future of the series?

Vocabulary

successor, bespoke, azure, aviator, unwittingly, horde, albeit, conviction, diffused, studious, careened, abide, operative, conglomeration, specimen, gratification, concocted, attentive, agape, caveat



Characters

Father Timothy Kavanaugh

Father Timothy Kavanaugh is a priest who retired from Lord's Parish in Mitford largely due to his struggle with diabetes, which has been life-threatening at times.

Unfortunately, Timothy has a bit of a sweet tooth and loves nothing more than to sit quietly and eat a pint of ice cream. However, his wife, Cynthia, closely monitors his eating habits and prevents him from overdoing it in order to protect his health.

Timothy is a beloved part of the town of Mitford and, in many ways, misses his work as a priest. However, when Timothy is offered a temporary position at Lord's Parish, he finds that he doesn't really want his old life with its hectic schedule and too much responsibility back, and so he turns it down.

In spite of turning down the position at Lord's Parish, Timothy struggles with how to be useful and maintain a purpose in this new phase of his life. It seems like everything around him is reminding him that he is old and getting older. His Mustang breaks down beyond repair and he's forced to admit that he must purchase a new car, a task for which he enlists the help of his adopted son Dooley. And, his beloved dog Barnabas is no longer able to make the trek up and down the stairs in the house and so must be moved permanently to the lower level of the house.

When Hope Murphy is bed-ridden because of complications in her pregnancy, Timothy finds some purpose in running her bookstore, Happy Endings. At first he agrees to open the shop just one day per week, but finds he truly loves working there and the happiness it brings Hope. He soon begins to work there more often and even finds other town residents to volunteer their time at the shop.

Timothy also makes himself useful in the lives of Dooley's brothers, Sammy and Kenny. While Kenny seems to be on track with his life, Sammy is troubled and hasn't found his niche yet. Timothy reminds others to continue to pray for Sammy. He recognizes Sammy's need to contribute something to the world and so finds him worthwhile work doing some landscaping and other projects around Lord's Chapel, which has fallen into some disrepair in Timothy's absence.

Another way in which Timothy makes himself useful to the people of Mitford is by his dedication to praying for them. Timothy frequently prays as he goes to sleep at night, and on sleepless nights he prays his way around the town, thinking of each house and the people in them. The townspeople recognize Timothy's dedication and often request him to pray for themselves or others.

In spite of his desire to be helpful, Timothy is a humble man who doesn't like a lot of attention. He is embarrassed by the idea that he might be voted Mitford's leading citizen when it's suggested in the local paper, the Muse.



Timothy also struggles with his new relationship with a brother he never knew he had. His brother, Henry, is the half African-American son of his father and his nanny. While Timothy is glad to have a brother, he worries that Henry's existence places a stain on the memory of his mother since his father obviously cheated on her. Timothy keeps his brother a secret and often wonders what the people of Mitford would think if they knew about him. However, Timothy finally does tell one elderly woman, Louella Baxter Marshall, and finds that he feels much better after he does.

Cynthia Kavanaugh

Cynthia Kavanaugh is the wife of Father Timothy Kavanaugh, whom he married when he was in his forties. Cynthia is the author and illustrator of a series of children's books about a cat named Violet. She loves Timothy unconditionally and frets over his health. She monitors his eating habits to prevent him from becoming ill due to his diabetes. When Timothy is asked to come out of retirement to take a temporary position at Lord's Chapel, she worries that it may be too much for him, but tells him she will support him no matter what decision he makes.

It is Cynthia who first recognizes Sammy's need to feel like he's contributing something to society. She sees this when Sammy loses his temper and breaks a pool cue because Timothy makes an excellent shot in the midst of the lesson Sammy is giving him. Cynthia knows that Sammy's outburst is the result of his worry that if Timothy doesn't need Sammy to teach him to play pool, Sammy is not really needed for anything. It is this realization and explanation to Timothy that leads Timothy to find meaningful work for Sammy, which seems to make a great deal of difference in Sammy's life.

Cynthia is often the voice of reason in Timothy's life, not only in watching over his eating habits and her keen observation of Sammy's troubles, but also in counseling him on finding his own purpose in his retirement. Cynthia knows that Timothy has a tendency to take on too much and so reminds him of this and that the little things he does have meaning, too.

Dooley

Dooley is the adopted son of Timothy Kavanaugh. He is in college studying to be a veterinarian and is dating Lace. Though his relationship with Lace is serious and he has given her a ring, at the beginning of the book he is reluctant to define the ring as an engagement ring. However, by the end of the book he has asked Lace to marry him and reveals to Timothy that the ring is indeed an engagement ring.

Dooley has several younger siblings, including Sammy and Kenny, who live near Timothy. Dooley's younger siblings have also lived in precarious situations during their lives, leaving them emotionally scarred. Dooley worries about Sammy and he and Timothy frequently talk about him.



Dooley acts as Timothy's advisor in the matter of purchasing a new car. He first suggests that Timothy buy a sporty little Mini Cooper to zip around town in, but in the end helps his father to purchase a sensible pickup truck.

Sammy

Sammy is Dooley's troubled younger brother. He is hot-tempered and often tries to start fights. He is a whiz at pool and sees that as his one talent in life. When Timothy makes an excellent, but lucky, shot during a pool lesson from Sammy, Sammy becomes angry and breaks the cue that Timothy had given him. Cynthia sees Sammy's need to feel useful and shares this with Timothy, who recognizes that need and finds work for Sammy doing landscaping at Lord's Chapel. Though Sammy continuously struggles with his temper throughout the book, with Timothy's patient counseling, Sammy seems to be under control and on the right track at the close of the story.

Kenny

Kenny is one of Dooley's younger brothers. He lives with Sammy and Harley and seems to be in a good place in his life. He is planning to attend college in the near future.

Lace

Lace is Dooley's fiancé. She is attending college, though not at the same school where Dooley is studying. She and Dooley find little time to see one another because of their mismatched schedules. She is an artist and is happy when Timothy suggests she can be a good wife to Dooley and still practice her art. By the end of the book, she is engaged to Dooley.

Barnabas

Barnabas is Timothy's beloved dog. A mixed-breed, he is a huge shaggy black dog that Timothy took in as a stray. Barnabas is elderly and has troubles with stairs. As a result, Timothy must move him from his favorite place upstairs to the lower level of the house, a move Timothy struggles with since it means admitting to Barnabas's advanced age, and thus his own. Barnabas is a patient and gentle dog who often serves as Timothy's sounding board and his companion in times of trouble. Timothy sometimes sits beside his dog to pray and always takes Barnabas with him when he goes to work in Hope's bookstore. In fact, Timothy believes that if he puts off working at the bookstore, he'll disappoint Barnabas who he thinks looks forward to the job.



Violet

Violet is Cynthia's cat. She is the star of Cynthia's children's book series, though she's the fourth incarnation of the Violet in the book. Timothy knows that, as the star of the books, Violet is the greatest wage earner in the household. Violet is treated with great deference and her feelings are taken into consideration upon Barnabas's move to the lower level of the house, which is Violet's domain.

Truman

Truman is a tiny kitten that Sammy finds and brings to Cynthia to adopt. Sammy's care for the kitten represents a softening of his harsh view of life and the world.

Puny Guthrie

Puny Guthrie is Timothy's and Cynthia's housekeeper. She not only takes care of their home, but she also cares deeply for Timothy and Cynthia and they all treat one another like family. Puny often brings her twins with her to work and Timothy and Cynthia treat them like grandchildren.

Irene McGraw

Irene McGraw is a resident of Mitford about whom Cynthia becomes concerned when she goes by Irene's house and sees the door left open. It turns out that Irene simply left in a hurry because her grandchild was being born. However, the incident leads to Timothy being the talk of the town for a bit since he faints when the police show up at Irene's while he and Cynthia are investigating.

Irene later learns that she has a twin sister she never knew about who is now Kim Dorsay, the famous movie star. Timothy and Cynthia facilitate their meeting and the two women become close friends with the Kavanaughs who come to feel like they are family.

J.C. Hogan

J.C. Hogan is the editor of the Muse and Timothy's friend. The two frequently meet for lunch. J.C. is always looking for a story, so when there is secrecy around Henry Talbot's situation, he attempts to pump Timothy for information, which Timothy refuses to provide. J.C.'s paper isn't well-written, but it covers the news of small-town life and, in spite of himself, Timothy faithfully reads the Muse.



Hope Murphy

Hope Murphy is the owner of the bookstore, Happy Endings. When Hope's pregnancy puts her life and the life of her baby in danger, Timothy steps up to volunteer at the bookstore, which leads others to do so as well. Hope is fearful that her body will betray her and the pregnancy will end in tragedy, so she often seeks comfort and advice from Timothy.

When Hope's husband, Scott, gets a raise at his place of employment, Hope passes on their good fortune by hiring Coot to work at the store so that he can be around the books that he loves.

Scott Murphy

Scott Murphy is Hope's loving husband. He works at the Hope House, which was made possible through money from Miss Sadie. He calls on Timothy to visit Hope when she's feeling down to offer her comfort and prayer.

Harley Welch

Harley Welch lives downstairs from Helene Pringle with Kenny and Sammy. He acts as a father-figure to the two boys.

Helen Pringle

Helene Pringle is Timothy's French neighbor and tenant. She shares her house with Harley, Kenny, and Sammy. She is a kind woman who teaches piano and volunteers at the bookstore. She enjoys living with Harley and the boys, but when Sammy's behavior gets out of control she asks Timothy to either help Sammy to change or ask Sammy to move out.

Joe Joe Guthrie

Joe Joe Guthrie is Puny's husband. He is promoted to Chief of Police, which makes Puny very proud. When Joe Joe shows up at Irene's to investigate the strange car parked outside her house he startles Timothy and Cynthia causing Timothy to faint.

Wanda Basinger

Wanda Basinger is the owner of the Feel Good café where Timothy and his friends frequently gather for lunch. She is new to Mitford and only recently purchased the Feel Good.



Mule Skinner

Mule Skinner is one of Timothy's friends whom he meets for lunch at the Feel Good café. He is the husband of Fancy Skinner.

Omer Cunningham

Omer Cunningham is a pilot whose yellow ragwing plane is often seen zipping about the skies of Mitford. He becomes the love interest of Shirlene Hatfield when the two meet online playing Scrabble.

Louella Baxter Marshall

Louella Baxter Marshall is an elderly black woman who was raised by Miss Sadie. She now lives in a nursing home and Timothy visits her often. She is the first person outside of his family that Timothy tells about his brother, Henry.

Henry Winchester

Henry Winchester is Timothy's brother. Henry's mother, a black woman, was Timothy's nanny when he was growing up. Timothy's father had an affair with the nanny and Henry was the result. Timothy loves his brother, but struggles with telling others about him because he believes it puts a stain on the memory of his mother because his father obviously cheated on her.

Pauline Leeper

Pauline Leeper is Dooley's, Sammy's, Kenny's, Jessie's, and Pooh's birth mother. She is a recovering alcoholic who deeply regrets the harm she did to her children. She hopes that one day her children will be able to forgive her and they can have some sort of relationship again. Although Dooley will speak with her, Sammy and Kenny refuse to see her.

Buck Leeper

Buck Leeper is Pauline's current husband, but he is not the father of her children.

Jessie and Pooh

Jessie and Pooh are Dooley's two youngest siblings. They live with Pauline.



Esther Cunningham

Esther Cunningham was the long-time mayor of Mitford and is responsible for Mitford's slogan "Mitford takes care of its own!" She has difficulty letting someone else run the town and believes the condition of the town has declined since she was in office. She is considering running for office again.

Ray Cunningham

Ray Cunningham is Esther Cunningham's husband.

Hessie Mayhew

Hessie Mayhew is a columnist at the Muse. Lately Vanita has begun writing the Helpful Hints column for the paper and Hessie is hurt by this. She seeks Timothy's counsel on the matter while he is working in the bookstore.

Coot Hendrick

Coot Hendrick is a poor, illiterate man who is a fixture in Mitford. Hope hires him to work in the bookstore because she wants to do something kind for someone else. Timothy takes it upon himself to find someone to teach Coot to read. Coot loves books and is thrilled when he sees his name in the newspaper because he's received votes for Mitford's leading citizen. He gets the honor of playing Saint Nicholas at the bookstore.

Emma Newland

Emma Newland was Timothy's secretary when he was the priest at Lord's Chapel. She pesters him about becoming his secretary again on a part-time basis.

Kim Dorsay

Kim Dorsay is a movie star and the long-lost twin sister of Irene McGraw. She is the source of some mystery in Mitford when she first comes to town and her limousine is seen driving around town, but no one knows who the passenger is.

Winnie Kendall

Winnie Kendall is the owner of the local bakery. The bakery is often extremely busy, so she seeks solace in the bookstore when she is able to take a break.



Henry Talbot

Henry Talbot is the current priest at Lord's Chapel. He leaves the church amidst a scandal after having cheated on his wife. He tries to commit suicide and is found by Timothy and Dooley. The bishop asks Timothy to take Henry Talbot's place as a temporary assignment, but Timothy refuses.

Esther Bolick

Esther Bolick bakes orange marmalade cakes (OMCs) for the citizens of Mitford when they are in need of comfort. She sold her recipe to Winnie under the condition that Winnie would never change it, but she continues to bake the cakes as gifts even though she isn't supposed to.

Shirlene Hatfield

Shirlene Hatfield is Fanny's sister. She moves to Mitford at the beginning of the novel and takes a position at Fanny's salon. She brings with her a spray tan booth, which quickly becomes the talk of Mitford.

Peggy

Peggy was Timothy's nanny when he was growing up and is the mother of his illegitimate half-brother, Henry Winchester.

Jack Martin

Jack Martin is a bishop who contacts Timothy regarding Henry Talbot's situation. He asks Timothy to accept a temporary position at Lord's Chapel until a permanent replacement can be found, but Timothy turns him down.

Jeb Aderholt

Jeb Aderholt is the local mechanic who deems Timothy's Mustang as not worth fixing, thus convincing Timothy that it is time to buy a new vehicle.

Tommy and Timmy

Tommy and Timmy are Puny's second set of twins. They are toddlers and sometimes come to work at Timothy's house with Puny.



Adele Hogan

Adele Hogan is J.C. Hogan's wife and the newly promoted police captain.

Vanita Bentley

Vanita Bentley is a writer at the Muse. Her articles are puff pieces and riddled with errors. She also writes some of the Helpful Hints for the paper, which upsets Hessie who has been writing the hints for years. Vanita is responsible for the article questioning whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own.

Sassy and Sissy

Sassy and Sissy are Puny's older set of twins. They stop into the bookstore after school when Timothy is there because their usual ride from school is unavailable. They wait there with Timothy until their father comes to pick them up.

Wade Truitt

Wade Truitt is Kim Dorsay's limousine driver.

Lew Boyd

Lew Boyd is the owner of the local gas station.



Symbols and Symbolism

Barnabas

Barnabas symbolizes both Timothy's advancing age and his connection with God. In the elderly Barnabas, who has been Timothy's companion for years, Timothy sees reflected his own old age. He knows that with age comes necessary changes, like moving Barnabas downstairs, but he has difficulty accepting these changes. For Timothy, acknowledging that Barnabas has grown old means that he must also acknowledge that he is older, too.

Barnabas symbolizes Timothy's connection to God in that Timothy often seeks out the quiet, calm demeanor of the old dog when he's feeling troubled and needs to pray. Barnabas's presence seems to remind Timothy that he is not alone and that God is with him.

Coot

Coot is the poorest person in the small town of Mitford. As such, he symbolizes the poor in America and the good that people can do just by being kind. Coot and his mother have very little in the way of material things and Coot is uneducated and even illiterate. Yet, the author shows that by extending simple kindnesses, like offering food and finding Coot simple jobs he can do, not only lifts up Coot, but also the person who offers help. This is indicated in the way that Hope decides to hire Coot to work at her store when her husband receives a raise. Though she is struggling with her difficult pregnancy and feelings of inadequacy, she tells Timothy she wants to help someone. Doing makes her feel better and as though she is contributing something even while she is forced to stay in bed. The author seems to be suggesting that no matter their own circumstances, everyone is capable of helping a fellow human being.

Mustang

Timothy's dilapidated old Mustang symbolizes the necessary changes that come with old age. Like Barnabas, the Mustang is yet another reminder for Timothy that he isn't young anymore. The Mustang breaks down beyond repair and the mechanic informs Timothy that it's time for him to get a new vehicle. Timothy has difficulty parting with the Mustang because it was a big part of his younger years. Having such a car probably made Timothy feel younger, and giving it up feels like he's conceding to old age. Timothy eventually settles on purchasing a sensible truck that enables him to carry on the landscaping work he's started with Sammy, which suggests that once Timothy is able to let go of his misgivings about this new stage in his life he is able to see that there is a way for him to move forward with who he is now.



Violet

Violet symbolizes the security in the sameness of everyday life. She is, as Timothy says, the chief earner in the family and he is reluctant to upset her by changing her routine through moving Barnabas to the lower level of the house where Violet spends her time. Timothy is also reluctant to change the routine of his life even though he isn't happy with the way things are going. He feels a lack of purpose, and yet he turns down meetings and suggestions that might change the way things are. Eventually, Violet accepts Barnabas's presence in her space just as Timothy accepts the presence of new opportunities and a new purpose.

Orange Marmalade Cakes (OMCs)

Esther Bolick is famous in Mitford for her elaborate Orange Marmalade Cakes. Although she has sold her recipe to the bakery and isn't supposed to be baking them anymore, she continues to make them for people in Mitford in times of need or celebration. For example, Esther bakes a cake for Hope and Scott while Hope is bed ridden. The cakes are a symbol of Esther's purpose in life and of her care for other people.

Spray Tan Booth

The spray tan booth that Shirlene puts in Fancy's shop is a symbol of a move toward the future. The booth is a new and revolutionary thing for the town of Mitford and it gets everyone buzzing. It represents the acceptance of new things, which is difficult for Timothy. Although everyone else in town is taking advantage of the spray tan booth, Timothy continues to find the booth ridiculous and never does get a spray tan.

Truman

Truman is the tiny kitten that Sammy finds and brings to Cynthia. Truman represents of a softening of Sammy's attitude and a move toward reforming his life. Cynthia notes that Sammy seems different when he brings her Truman. He seems softer and kinder. Later, as Sammy moves more toward becoming a better person he is seen sitting on the steps cuddling the kitten and playing with it, showing that he has indeed changed.

Rose Garden

The rose garden at Lord's Chapel that Timothy and Sammy work on restoring is a symbol of the way that receiving grace can change a person. As Sammy and Timothy work together to bring the garden back to its former glory, Timothy extends Sammy a bit of God's grace by remaining patient with him in spite of his terrible attitude and defiance, which eventually helps Sammy to see that he is loved unconditionally and causes a change in him.



Irene's Paintings

Irene's paintings of a young girl are a symbol of the twin sister she didn't know she had but was still longing for. In the eyes of the girl in the painting, Timothy notices that there is a reflection of the subject of the painting herself. Cynthia notices that Irene has very personal feelings about the paintings, but they are somehow disturbing to Irene who wants to be rid of them indicating that she recognizes a sense of longing that is somehow tied to the girl in the picture.

Miss Sadie

Miss Sadie is a symbol of the way that Mitford takes care of its own. During her life, Miss Sadie helped create the Hope House and did a lot of other charitable deeds. She saw to the care of her ward, Louella, even after her death so that Louella could live out her days in comfort. Sadie is ultimately chosen as Mitford's leading citizen and Timothy writes the dedication for a plaque in her honor.



Settings

Mitford

Mitford is the small town in which Timothy Kavanaugh lives and is the main setting of the novel. Mitford is a fictional town in North Carolina and has all of the hallmarks of the stereotypical small town.

The author paints the town as being lovely and peaceful. A map of the town is included in the front of the novel. Mitford contains the usual array of businesses such as a café, a bookstore, a grocery store, a gas station, and a bakery. It is within these businesses and the homes of the residents of Mitford that the action of the novel takes place.

The people of Mitford all seem to know one another and Timothy knows them all since he had been the priest at Lord's Chapel there for a number of years. The people of Mitford are as varied as one might expect them to be, but all are kind in their own way. There's very little trouble between them, and when there is trouble, it's relatively minor and ultimately solved, with the exception of Henry Talbot's scandalous exit from Lord's Chapel. And, of course, the townspeople all know quite a bit about everyone else's business. Though Timothy doesn't want anyone to know that he fainted at Irene McGraw's house when the police arrived, to his embarrassment, the entire town knows by the next day.

The gossip of the town is largely spread through the town's newspaper, the Muse. The articles in the Muse are often humorous, though it seems the paper doesn't mean them to be. They are riddled with errors and notes from the writers to the editor are often mistakenly included. Yet, the paper itself lends the town of Mitford some of the small-town quality the author intends to impart.

Happy Endings

Happy Endings is a bookstore owned by Hope Murphy. When Hope is bedridden due to complications in her pregnancy, Timothy steps forward to volunteer at the store one day per week, which leads others to also volunteer at the store as well. Due to the kind-hearted volunteers, the store is able to remain open and Hope continues to make a profit.

The store is a quaint little place with a cozy reading nook in the poetry section where customers often seek a quiet place to rest. In fact, Timothy frequently refers people to the poetry section when they are looking for a little time to themselves and it is there that Miss Mooney teaches Coot to read.

The store also has a large storefront window in which monthly displays are set up to advertise sales in which books with titles that start with the same letter as the name of the current month are on sale, such as the "O for October" sale. Since there is no sale



in December, Helene comes up with the idea to have a live Saint Nicholas sit in a chair in the window reading a book. Coot, though he's only just learning to read, is chosen to play the part of Saint Nicholas, which he considers an honor.

A great deal of the action of the novel takes place in the store since it is where Timothy comes into frequent contact with the people of Mitford. In fact, the town rallies around Hope and helps her by consciously making purchases at her store in order to help her earn an income. The first evidence of the town's support of Hope comes in the form of quotes taped to the store window and a note asking the people of Mitford to pray for Hope. The store is busy when Timothy is there and from the store he is able to continue ministering to the town as people come in requesting his help, prayers, or advice.

Wanda's Feel Good Cafe

Wanda's Feel Good Café, or the Feel Good as it's known, is the café in which Timothy frequently meets his friends Mule and J.C. for lunch. It's the site of a number of humorous conversations between the friends.

Wanda is new to Mitford having just purchased the Feel Good, which used to be called Chelsea Tea Shop, a name that Timothy and his friends find ridiculous. They suggest to Wanda that she change the name to Wanda's Feel Good Café and when she likes the name, they convince her to give them free lunches for the use of it.

Timothy eventually asks Wanda if he can hold prayer breakfasts at the café with the other clergy in town. At first, Wanda is reluctant to allow the breakfasts since she can't imagine them all praying right out in the open where everyone can see. However, when Timothy convinces her that the café is just the right place for a prayer breakfast since churches don't serve breakfast, she finally gives in and allows him to schedule the breakfasts there.

Lord's Chapel

Lord's Chapel is the Episcopalian church where Timothy once served as priest. At the opening of the novel, Henry Talbot is the priest there, but it's clear things aren't going well. Henry steps down amidst a scandal and Timothy is asked by the bishop to take a temporary position there, which he turns down. However, he is forced to announce Henry's leaving to the congregation when the bishop is unable to make it to the church on the day of the announcement.

Lord's Chapel is also the site of the rose garden that Sammy and Timothy work together to restore. Through Sammy's work with Timothy on the garden, Timothy is able to quietly help Sammy to reform his troubled life.



The Little Yellow House

The Little Yellow House is the house where Timothy and Cynthia live. It was Cynthia's house before she and Timothy married. The house has two floors and at the start of the novel, Timothy struggles with the need to move his elderly dog from his customary place on the upper floor to the lower level.

The house is a comfortable place where Timothy and Cynthia share their lives together and the news of each day. They often sit by the fireplace with the dog, Barnabas, and the cat, Violet, and relax after busy days. Cynthia's studio is also in the house, which is where she writes and illustrates her series of children's books.

Timothy and Cynthia often invite people to dinner at their house, most frequently Timothy's adopted son Dooley and his siblings, Kenny and Sammy, as well as Harley, the man who looks after Kenny and Sammy. Timothy has a pool table at the house solely for Sammy's benefit as he is very talented at the game and it's something he loves.



Themes and Motifs

Faith

Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good falls into the Christian Fiction genre, so the theme of faith permeates the entire book. The central character, Timothy Kavanaugh, is a retired priest. Being a priest is ingrained in his identity and it isn't a trait he can simply turn off. In fact, when he is confronted by Hastings' father who questions him about wearing his collar while at the bookstore, Timothy tells him it is who he is. He also tells the man that while he will refrain from speaking with Hastings about God, he will not stop talking about God. This sharing of the faith is central to Christianity in that it is the way in which the religion grew since the disciples spread the religion by travelling after the death of Jesus and telling others about Him. Timothy, as a priest, has been commissioned to go into the world and share his faith with others.

Prayer is an extremely important facet of the theme of faith in this novel. Timothy prays often by himself, with others, and for others. The author even includes the words to prayers that Timothy says rather than just saying that he prayed. Timothy believes prayer is an important part of daily life, so the author shows him praying as he goes to sleep at night and as the first thing when he wakes up in the morning. People in the town of Mitford obviously know how Timothy feels about prayer since they frequently ask him to pray for them or people in their lives. Timothy welcomes their requests and sometimes stops to pray with a person on the spot. When Hope expresses embarrassment over so many people praying for her, Timothy tells her that prayer is healing for both the recipient of the prayers and the people saying the prayers. His belief in the healing power of prayer is evident in the way he sometimes uses prayer as a calming method, even praying his way around the town as he tries to fall asleep at night.

The author also discusses grace as a part of the theme of faith. Timothy feels that one of the keys to helping Sammy is to extend some of God's grace to him. Since grace is something a person cannot earn, Timothy shows Sammy grace even when he's acting particularly badly, such as when Timothy buys him a new pool cue after Sammy breaks his in a fit of anger. Timothy and Cynthia have a discussion about grace in which Timothy says that he believes people aren't really able to show the full extent of God's grace, they can only give "mock grace." They can go through the motions of extending grace, but doing so will never be truly selfless the way God's grace is because the human giver always has some motive in mind. Cynthia reminds him that it's better to be the recipient of mock grace than no grace at all.

The author includes people who are struggling with faith or who have struggled in the past as part of this theme. When Hope learns that she has placenta previa, she has trouble having enough faith in God to trust that everything will turn out all right. Scott reminds her that God and Father Tim have made them a promise and that she shouldn't worry so much. However, Hope is frightened and thinks that even prayer can't help ease



her fear. When she finally makes the choice to leave her situation in God's hands and realizes she's missed months of the joy of pregnancy because of her lack of faith, she is able to move forward with making plans for the baby's birth and choosing a name for the unborn baby.

Sammy is also an example of a character who struggles with faith. In fact, at the beginning of the book there is no evidence that he believes in God at all. Kenny tells Timothy that he knows Sammy hasn't found God yet. Although there isn't a declaration of faith from Sammy, the author shows that he is moving in that direction as Sammy changes for the better. At one point, Sammy challenges the idea of God after seeing a badly injured boy in the hospital. His anger and the words he says indicate that he has at least been thinking about whether or not there is a God and has at least entertained the possibility that there is.

Humor

The author uses humor as a motif in *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good*. The use of humor entertains the reader while keeping the book lighthearted in spite of Timothy's difficulty finding his purpose and Sammy's troubled life. The author lets the reader know that the book will be humorous early on in the book when Timothy faints at Irene's house and gets the entire town talking about it and teasing him.

There are three primary sources of humor in the novel: The Muse, J.C. and Mule, and Shirlene. The author infuses the book with snippets from the Muse that show the quirks of a small-town. The paper is full of articles that try to pass things like a new children's menu at the café off as big news. Vanita, who writes many of the paper's articles, has an amusing writing style that includes the frequent use of words in all capital letters for emphasis and her own personal commentary and phrases one wouldn't expect to find in a newspaper. In addition, the paper is riddled with errors, such as printing Father Tim's name as Father Time, and notes the writer has written for herself or the editor that don't get removed before the paper goes to print. The household hints are also a source of humor since they are mostly useless and Timothy frequently comments on them.

J.C. and Mule provide a great deal of the book's humor when Timothy meets with them for meals at the café. Since the café has just had a change of ownership, they suggest that the café be re-named Wanda's Feel Good Café, which is humorous on its own since Wanda is a grumpy woman who hardly brings the idea of feeling good to mind. In fact, she tells Timothy, J.C., and Mule that she fired the old waitress for being nice to the customers. When Wanda agrees to the new name, J.C. and Mule haggle with her for its use to get free lunches.

While in the café, the men often engage in ridiculous conversations about what they'll have to eat. On one occasion, Mule decides to order two children's plates of macaroni and cheese and a grilled cheese sandwich so that he can still get a full sandwich. He wants to try out the new children's menu even though it would cost him less to order an adult plate that would get him the same thing. When the other men tease Mule about



wanting two children's plates, he becomes petulant and refuses to place his order. Timothy finally orders for him, and the order he places is for two children's plates.

Shirlene is a source of humor and the author sets up to portray her as such from the start. The author describes Shirlene as a big woman with a mass of black hair who wears brightly colored caftans. The various and loud prints that appear on her caftans are often included when Shirlene enters a scene. When Shirlene moves to town, she brings with her a brand new spray tan booth that gets the whole town talking. Shirlene is constantly suggesting to people that they could use a tan and people start appearing in Mitford with dark tans in spite of the fact that it's the middle of winter. Probably the most humorous aspect of Shirlene is her determination to find a man in Mitford. Immediately upon meeting Timothy, she tries to get the retired priest to set her up with some of the eligible men of the town. This seems like an awfully odd request to make of a man of the cloth. Shirlene continues to badger Timothy about helping her meet someone each time they meet, even trying to make him feel guilty by saying she's trying online dating because Timothy wouldn't help her. Eventually Shirlene runs into Omer when Omer brings Timothy some potatoes. She's immediately smitten by the man, which leads to Timothy and Cynthia trying to set up a meeting between the two. In the end, it turns out the two have already been talking online since they've been playing Scrabble together without knowing who the other player is.

Taking Care of Others

The theme of taking care of others is present from the outset of the book, but it is formally introduced when the Muse runs an article questioning whether or not the citizens of Mitford still take care of their own. When Esther Cunningham was mayor, her slogan was "Mitford takes care of its own!" but whether or not that's still true has come into question in present day Mitford. Esther believes it's no longer true because she believes she's seen a decline in the town since her days as mayor. She believes the business owners no longer takes as good of care of their shops as they used to and she points to the trash blowing about the streets as evidence of the lack of care.

In the past, the town had Miss Sadie who was the quintessential example of a person who takes care of others. She took in Louella and raised her as her own, even leaving money to ensure for Louella's care in her old age. She also was instrumental in the founding of the museum and Hope House. Miss Sadie even gave Dooley money to pay for his schooling so that he can become a veterinarian. Though Miss Sadie is dead, she is named Mitford's leading citizen and a dedication plaque is inscribed for the museum to remind everyone of the many contributions she made to the town.

While the article in the Muse does cause some people in Mitford to write into the paper providing proof of how they take care of others, the care between the people of Mitford is obvious in the many things they do for one another throughout the story. The two biggest examples of the theme of taking care of others are evident in the stories of Hope and of Coot.



When Hope's pregnancy puts her life and the life of her unborn child in danger, she's forced to remain in bed for the remainder of her pregnancy. Unfortunately, this means she will be unable to run her bookstore and the doors will have to remain closed if no help is found. When Hope talks to Timothy about her pregnancy, without being asked to he immediately volunteers to help Hope by running the store one day per week, which soon turns into two days per week. The way that Timothy takes care of Hope inspires others to also volunteer to work at the bookstore or to purchase books. Soon the profits of the store have increased over the last year's profits. In addition to helping at the bookstore, the citizens of Mitford also pray for Hope and send her small gifts, such as Esther Bolick's famous OMC.

The people of Mitford also rally around Coot. Coot is probably the poorest citizen of Mitford, so people often help him and his mother out by bringing them food. Hope also hires him at her store to perform unspecified duties simply because she wants to do something good for him and she knows he loves books in spite of the fact that he is illiterate. Timothy recruits Miss Mooney, a school teacher, to teach Coot to read and Vanita gives Coot anonymous votes for leading citizen just because she knows it will make him feel good. When Coot's mother dies, though she was not a kind person, many people come to her funeral as a means of taking care of Coot. The day of the funeral is bitterly cold and the service is held outdoors, but that doesn't stop a great number of people from gathering around Coot to support him. After the funeral, the group gathers at Timothy's house to share in a meal provided by the many people who have dropped off food at Timothy's house for Coot.

The author also uses Timothy as a means of exploring the theme of taking care of others in that he is always quick to look for ways he can help someone else. Of course, there's the literal fact that he took Dooley in when he was a boy and cared for him into adulthood and now he's trying to take care of Sammy, too. Though Sammy does not live with Timothy, Timothy still takes responsibility for helping Sammy through this difficult part of life so that he can become a better person. In taking care of Sammy and helping him find a sense of purpose, Timothy also takes care of Mitford by restoring the rose garden at Lord's Chapel so that people will have a quiet place to rest their spirits.

Purpose

Purpose is a major theme of *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good* since the story is about Timothy's search for the purpose of his life now that he is retired. Timothy has been retired from preaching at Lord's Chapel for five years and he doesn't seem to know what to do with his time when the book begins. He's grumpy, easily irritated, out of shape, and he complains a lot. He tells Cynthia that he feels useless. While Cynthia reminds him that he has a tendency to want to do too much and it's okay to rest, Timothy doesn't seem to be a person capable of resting.

The author makes it clear that Timothy's purpose is no longer to preach full-time when the bishop asks Timothy to resume his post at Lord's Chapel due to Henry Talbot's



departure. Timothy does consider the offer, but realizes that being a full-time preacher again isn't what he wants at all.

The reader begins to get a glimpse of what Timothy's true purpose might be when he begins volunteering at the bookstore. His work at the bookstore does give Timothy a way to fill his idle hours and meaningful work to do, but more than that, it also gives him the opportunity to continue to connect with the people of Mitford. When people learn that Timothy will be at the store on certain days each week, they begin coming into the store just to see him. At the bookstore, Timothy provides people with a quiet place to rest during their busy days, as is evidenced by Winnie's frequent use of the store as a place to take a break from the bustle of the bakery. Timothy also offers a willing ear to listen. Many people come to the store seeking Timothy's counsel just as they must have when he was the priest at Lord's Chapel. Hessie confesses her anger at Vanita because Vanita gets all of the good stories at the Muse, and in telling Timothy this, Hessie is able to move on and forgive Vanita. Lace stops in to talk to Timothy about her concerns for her future with Dooley.

In having so many people come into the store while Timothy is there, the author shows the reader that Timothy's new purpose in life is much the same as his old one, just in a less time-consuming capacity. Timothy discovers that he is still meant to minister to the people of Mitford and to help them in whatever ways he can.

The theme of purpose is also explored through Sammy's story. At the start of the book Sammy is angry and directionless. Cynthia points out that Sammy thinks the only thing he has to offer in life is his talent for playing pool. He has no sense of purpose. When Timothy sets his mind on helping Sammy to reform, one of the things he decides is needed is some hard work that Sammy can feel good about. Timothy recruits Sammy to help him revitalize the rose garden at Lord's Chapel and learns that Sammy has a knack for and love of landscaping and gardening. Sammy is excited by the prospect of visiting a nursery to pick out plants and even spends his own money to purchase a book about gardening. As Sammy becomes more involved in landscaping, he also develops a bond with Timothy and begins to become more involved with Mitford in general. By the end of the book, Sammy is offering to help with Christmas preparations at the bookstore and even volunteers to help when Timothy decides to keep the store open into the evening during the days before Christmas.

Love

Love, in its many forms, is a theme of *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good*. One form of love that is explored is the romantic love between couples. Timothy and Cynthia are an excellent example of what true romantic love looks like. Timothy thinks Cynthia is the most beautiful woman in town and he feels a great sense of gratitude at having found her later in his life. They are a perfect couple and often refer to themselves as bookends. When Timothy talks to Cynthia about difficult decisions he has to make, such as whether or not to take the position at Lord's Chapel, Cynthia offers him her level-headed opinion, but always assures him that she will support him no matter what he



decides. The author brings home the fact that these two characters are the perfect romantic couple through the discussion Timothy has with the bishop. The bishop tells Timothy that he believes them to be an excellent example of marriage, which he feels is a valuable asset in ministering to a congregation, especially in light of the scandal surrounding Henry Talbot having left after being unfaithful to his wife.

Lace and Dooley also represent romantic love, though in a younger form. Their relationship is only just beginning as they are both still young. Though they attend colleges that are far apart, they are determined to one day build their life together. Dooley gives Lace a ring, but he's reluctant at first to call it an engagement ring. When Timothy accidentally witnesses the young couple in a tender embrace he can see how much the two truly love one another and Timothy considers witnessing the moment to be a gift.

In revealing the theme of romantic love, the author does not ignore the fact that relationships aren't always easy and require work. She does this through the discussion that Lace has with Timothy about how she and Dooley still struggle to relate to one another because of their difficult pasts. The two still attend counseling to help them understand why they sometimes act the way they do. In fact, Lace and Dooley take up the motto "love is an endless act of forgiveness" and Lace paints a portrait of Dooley wearing a shirt with the words on it.

Love is also shown through friendships. Timothy has a deep and loving friendship with his dog, Barnabas. He often spends time just sitting with Barnabas and talking to or praying with him. He finds the gentle dog's presence to be calming. Timothy takes Barnabas with him nearly everywhere he goes despite the fact that the dog is elderly, so he walks slowly and has difficulty with steps. When Timothy begins working at the store, he always takes Barnabas with him and dresses him in snappy bandanas for the work. He refuses to disappoint the dog by canceling a day at the bookstore to meet with the bishop, even though it might be more convenient to do so.

Through the reuniting of Irene and Kim, Cynthia and Timothy develop a loving friendship with the two women. Timothy and Irene first develop a bond when Irene comes into the store looking for books for her grandchildren. Timothy allows her to spend as much time as she wants looking at books uninterrupted. When she's there at lunchtime, he offers to share his sandwich with her and the two strike up a conversation and then spend the afternoon in companionship as they set up the store's display window. Later, after Kim and Irene have met and spent some time together, they invite Timothy and Cynthia for dinner and by the time the dinner is over, Timothy and Cynthia feel like they have two new members in their family.

The love of a father is also a part of the theme of love. Although Timothy isn't Dooley's biological father, the love he has for his son is obvious each time they are together. Timothy is very proud of Dooley's accomplishments and the marching band ring of his cell phone that denotes a call from Dooley never fails to make him smile. Timothy values the opinions of his now grown son and asks Dooley to help him pick out a new vehicle.



Timothy also exhibits fatherly love toward Sammy. He is deeply concerned for the boy and determined to help him find his way in the world. Though Sammy is defiant and difficult to be around, Timothy resolves to love him no matter what. His love for Sammy helps to change the boy so that he moves away from his anger at and mistrust of people into a happier place where he is able to interact appropriately with others and even wants to be of help when he can.



Styles

Point of View

Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good is written in third person. The story is primarily told from the perspective of Timothy, but the author does occasionally jump to the perspective of one of the other characters. For example, the author reveals Hope's condition by writing a scene from Hope's perspective as she closes up her bookstore and feels a trickle of blood. Using her perspective allows the reader to see Timothy as others see him. Also, the author sometimes looks at Mitford from Esther Cunningham's point of view, which allows her to present an opposing view of whether or not Mitford still takes care of its own. Some scenes are told from Coot's perspective as well, which is important since the reader would not otherwise know the simplicity and poverty of Coot's life and, therefore, his real need for help from the townspeople.

The story is told almost entirely in present tense, except in the cases where the author uses a flashback as a character recalls an earlier event. For example, Timothy recalls having first met Henry Talbot when he came to Mitford and the scene is described in past tense. The use of present tense allows the reader to be in the moment with the characters, and in particular Timothy as he goes about his day-to-day life.

Language and Meaning

The language of Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good is appropriate to the high school reading level and above. The vocabulary is sophisticated enough to challenge readers, but not at so high a level that it will leave high school level readers feeling frustrated. The author occasionally uses French phrases in scenes involving Helene since she is French. The phrases are general explained or easy to figure out through context clues. The author also uses some terms pertinent to the church setting that may be unfamiliar to some readers.

There is a great deal of dialogue throughout the novel. Since the story is set in North Carolina, the author attempts to replicate the accent of the area through the speech patterns of the characters and the truncation of certain words. The dialect isn't difficult to decipher, but some readers may find it distracting.

The language itself is fairly consistent. The author does show Timothy to be an educated man by some of the terms he uses and the way he speaks, but he is also humble and a man used to dealing with people from all different backgrounds, so he is easy to understand.



Structure

The novel consists of thirty chapters. The chapters are denoted by the chapter number and are not titled. Each chapter is divided into a number of different scenes, which are separated by the use of three dots to show the end of one scene and the start of another. The jump between scenes can sometimes be jarring to the reader and it may take a few sentences at times to decipher who the characters in the scenes are.

There are a great number of different characters in the book that the reader needs to keep track of in order to follow the story. The inclusion of so many characters is necessary since the book is about a small town and the many people in it, however it is sometimes difficult to remember who is who and this is only exacerbated by the fact that a few characters share the same first name, such as Esther Cunningham and Esther Bolick and Henry Winchester and Henry Talbot.

The timeline of the novel is straightforward and there are not jumps backward in time, except when a character experiences a flashback within the context of a scene. The advancement in times is denoted by the author frequently including what day of the week it is at the beginning of a scene. The change of seasons is also described, which informs the reader that time has passed.



Quotes

Five years had passed since he'd departed the active priesthood, and as busy as he'd remained, the stunned sense of loss or deficit wouldn't entirely go away.

-- Narrator (One paragraph 36)

Importance: This quote reflects on Timothy's state of mind following his retirement and sets up one of the major themes of the novel, the need for a sense of purpose. Timothy struggles to figure out what he's supposed to do with his retirement years and what purpose his life now has. As the novel progresses, Timothy begins to see that even though he is retired, he still ministers to the people of Mitford and that is his purpose.

Mitford takes care of its own!

-- Timothy (Two paragraph 131)

Importance: Cynthia says this to Timothy when she is trying to convince him that they should check out Irene's house when the door is left open. Cynthia prompts Timothy to remember the former mayor's slogan, which is that Mitford takes care of its own. Taking care of others is one of the themes of the novel, which is primarily developed through the people of Mitford trying to discover if Mitford really does still take care of its own after the Muse runs an article questioning if the old slogan is still true of the town.

You have an insatiable craving to always do more, nothing is ever enough.

-- Cynthia (Four paragraph 234)

Importance: Cynthia says this to Timothy when he comes to her and tells her that he feels useless since his retirement. She reminds him that it was his inability to take a step back and not take on too much that forced him into retirement since it affected his health. Timothy has a tendency to want to help everyone and finds it difficult to refuse when he's asked to do something.

When I was recovering from the clumsy attempt to end my life and just awakening to His life, I remember asking, Please, God, let me be somewhere safe with somebody good.

-- Cynthia (Six paragraph 50)

Importance: Cynthia writes this in a love letter to Timothy. This quote is where the title of the book comes from and it encapsulates what the people of Mitford are really looking for, especially Sammy. This idea drives the plot line that involves Sammy as Timothy knows that one of the things Sammy is seeking is a place where he feels safe and where the people in his life care for him and treat him well. Other characters, such as Lace, discuss how they've overcome their difficult pasts, but still their pasts affect their current lives.

Wanting to teach you how to shoot pool was a gift, I think-a way of proving he isn't disposable, that he has something to offer.



-- Cynthia (chapter 6 paragraph 349)

Importance: Cynthia says this to Timothy after Sammy becomes angry while giving Timothy a pool lesson and breaks his stick. Cynthia identifies Sammy's chief issue in struggling to cope with his past and where he fits in today. Sammy sees his brother Dooley as being the one with money and power and Kenny as being a person with patience and wisdom, but Sammy believes his only gift is a talent for pool. When Timothy makes an especially good shot, Sammy feels a loss of identity because he isn't sure what he has to offer if not his talent for pool.

I think I never knew much about who I really am until she told me. I like her version and I'm sticking with it.

-- Timothy (Eight paragraph 25)

Importance: Timothy says this to Bishop Jack Martin when the bishop comments on married life suiting Timothy. This is an example of the theme of love that permeates the novel, specifically of the extraordinary love between Cynthia and Timothy. Timothy recognizes that Cynthia makes him whole and sees the best in him.

Course, Sammy's not prayin' for anything. He don't know th' truth.

-- Kenny (Eleven paragraph 32)

Importance: Kenny says this to Timothy. This quote illustrates Kenny's concern for his younger brother as well as the theme of prayer in that Timothy and those close to him, including Kenny, see prayer as an extremely vital part of healthy life. Kenny believes that if Sammy were to find God and pray, his life would improve just as Kenny's did.

It takes a village.

-- Timothy (Twelve paragraph 17)

Importance: Timothy says this to Adele as he attempts to unlock the door at Happy Endings, which has a notoriously tricky lock. A crowd has begun to gather around him and Timothy begins to feel embarrassed and frustrated. When Adele asks if he can help, Timothy dryly responds that it takes a village. A funny scene ensues in which more and more people gather to provide their advice on the door. This is an example of the humor the author infuses the book with.

He wept for himself, for the pain of the long years and the exquisite satisfactions of the faith, for the holiness of the mundane, for the thrashing exhaustions and the endless dyings and resurrectings that malign the soul incarnate

-- Narrator (Fourteen paragraph 33)

Importance: This quote occurs when Timothy stands in the pulpit at Lord's Chapel to tell the congregation that Henry Talbot has left and finds himself weeping. It represents the culmination of what Timothy's story arc is about. He struggles with his advanced age and the pain it brings, but also for the way that his faith still guides his life and gives him satisfaction. He also cries for the "holiness of the mundane" which is the good that one



can find in day-to-day living, even in a town as small as Mitford. The author represents this over and over when Timothy finds joy in little things like scratching his dog behind the ears, eating ice cream, and conversation with friends. He also weeps for the losses that everyone experiences and for the way that people must find a way to go on after a loss.

All the more reason to pray for you-it's a healing exercise for us as well as for you.
-- Timothy (Fifteen paragraph 334)

Importance: Timothy says this to Hope when she tells him that she feels embarrassed by the way people are caring for her and praying for her. Timothy explains to her that when people pray, it does them as much good as it does the person they are praying for. Prayer is a way that people can do something for someone they care about, which makes them feel good as well. This quote is an example of the theme of prayer.

He was not retired from his old job, not by a long shot. He had merely moved his business up the street.

-- Narrator (Sixteen paragraph 71)

Importance: This quote occurs after Timothy counsels HESSIE regarding her struggles with Vanita in her job at the Muse. It is at this point that Timothy has begun to see that his life still has a purpose and that he can still continue to minister to the people of Mitford even as a retiree who volunteers in a bookstore.

Thanks,' said Sammy, not looking up. It took a moment for this to sink in. 'What for?' 'Everything.'"

-- Sammy and Timothy (Twenty-three paragraph 4-6)

Importance: This brief conversation occurs as Sammy and Timothy are taking a break for lunch while working at Lord's Chapel. This conversation illustrates that Sammy has changed for the better and recognizes that Timothy has been instrumental in that change. At this point, Timothy knows that Sammy truly will be all right and will find his path.