

The Sportswriter Study Guide

The Sportswriter by Richard Ford

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Contents

The Sportswriter Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter 1.....	6
Chapters 2 and 3.....	7
Chapter 4.....	9
Chapter 5.....	11
Chapters 6 and 7.....	13
Chapter 8.....	15
Chapter 9.....	17
Chapter 10.....	19
Chapters 11 and 12.....	21
Chapter 13 and The End.....	23
Characters.....	24
Objects/Places.....	28
Social Sensitivity.....	30
Techniques.....	31
Themes.....	32
Style.....	35
Quotes.....	37
Adaptations.....	39
Key Questions.....	40
Topics for Discussion.....	41
Literary Precedents.....	42

[Related Titles.....43](#)

[Copyright Information.....44](#)

Plot Summary

The Sportswriter by Richard Ford is an introspective novel about a sportswriter who has found himself at a crossroads in his life with no clear idea of which fork to take. Frank Bascombe lost his son to Reye's Syndrome. Frank fell into a sort of dream state after this event, leading him to a rash of behaviors that left his marriage in ruins. Now Frank is alone, lost within his own grief. The Sportswriter is a novel of one man's struggle to survive the mundane of daily life after tragedy that will leave its readers inspired.

Frank Bascombe is a divorced father of three. Frank's eldest son died several years ago from Reye's Syndrome. Frank has been in a dreamlike state ever since the death of his son. Frank began having affairs, searching to be a part of something that has nothing to do with his life or his loss. Upon finding letters Frank has hidden from a woman he met during this period, Frank's wife became convinced he no longer wanted to be a part of her life, to confide in her, that she filed for divorce. Now Frank's ex-wife lives across town, working as a pro at a local golf course, going on with her life in a way Frank cannot.

Frank takes his new girlfriend, Vicki, to Detroit. In Detroit, Frank is to interview a football player who is wheelchair-bound after a boating accident. Frank wants to make this trip special for Vicki because he hopes to make her a permanent part of his future. However, things turn bad when Frank is caught going through Vicki's bag in the middle of the night. Vicki says that she forgives him, but some trust has been lost and they are unable to get back the carefree atmosphere they enjoyed before.

Frank goes to do his interview and finds instead of a man full of courage and hope, a man who is bitter and filled with anger. Frank wants to feel pity for this man, but feels that if he does allow himself to feel pity for the football player it will lead to regret for his own losses. Frank leaves the interview somewhat depressed, only to find Vicki also depressed. Vicki has been reading a self-help book that leaves her convinced that she and Frank are not meant to be. Frank tries to cheer her up by taking her to the Botanical Gardens, but the weather has turned cold and snowy, taking the fun out of the trip. Vicki suggests they fly home early and Frank agrees.

When Frank returns to his home, he finds a friend from a divorced men's group he is a member of waiting for him. This man, Walter, confessed to Frank a few days before that he had a sexual encounter with a man. Now Walter appears to be suffering from an identity crisis. Frank attempts to be supportive, but when Walter tries to kiss him, Frank kicks him out of his house. The next day, Frank tries to call Walter several times, but fails to get an answer.

Frank drives to Vicki's father's home for Easter dinner. Frank finds Vicki cold and unhappy. Frank believes she wants to end their relationship so he tries to keep her distracted so she cannot. Vicki tells Frank that she saw his ex-wife making out with Frank's personal physician, watching closely his reaction as she tells him this news. Frank is upset by the news, unhappy with the idea of his wife with another man.

Frank meets Vicki's father and brother. Frank hits it off with Vicki's father, but finds her brother moody and unfriendly. After dinner, Frank gets a phone call from his ex-wife and learns that Walter has committed suicide. Frank tells Vicki he must return home. Vicki walks him out to his car and tells him that she does not think they should see each other anymore. Frank tries to force Vicki into his car so they can continue to discuss the situation. Vicki punches Frank in the mouth to force him to let her go. Frank gets the message and leaves.

Frank goes to the police and receives a copy of the suicide note. Frank then goes to Walter's apartment with his ex-wife to explore the death scene. Frank becomes amorous toward his ex-wife, a situation that makes her angry. Frank then goes to the train station rather than return home. When a woman Frank thinks might be Walter's sister approaches him, he jumps onto a train. Frank goes to his office in the city where he meets a young intern whom he takes to dinner.

In Walter's suicide note, he asks Frank to find an illegitimate daughter in Florida and explain Walter's death to her. Frank goes to Florida and quickly learns that Walter lied. However, Frank finds peace in Florida and elects to stay.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Sportswriter by Richard Ford is an introspective novel about a sportswriter who has found himself at a crossroads in his life with no clear idea of which fork to take. Frank Bascombe lost his son to Reye's Syndrome. Frank fell into a sort of dream state after this event, leading him to a rash of behaviors that left his marriage in ruins. Now Frank is alone, lost within his own grief. The Sportswriter is a novel of one man's struggle to survive the mundane of daily life after tragedy that will leave its readers inspired.

Frank Bascombe is waiting for his wife in a cemetery in the pre-dawn hours. Today is his son's birthday. It has become a ritual for Frank and his wife to meet at their son's grave on his birthday. While Frank waits, he thinks about his wife, who is now his ex-wife. X has gotten on with her life since their divorce, working as a golf pro at a local golf course and dating the rich men who use her services. Frank wonders if X will ever get married again. In fact, when she arrives this is one of the things they discuss. X seems to think marriage is something she can live without in her life now. X is happy in her life, taking care of herself and their surviving two children. Frank, too, has gone one with his life to a certain degree. Frank has been dating a young nurse whom he has plans to take to Detroit that very day.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Frank is a lonely man who is still clearly in love with his ex-wife. Frank speaks with her as though she is a close friend rather than his ex-wife, thinking of her with a great deal of affection. In fact, as Frank is speaking with his ex-wife about her plans to remarry, he thinks that he might want to marry her himself. Frank has accepted that their divorce was his fault and acknowledges to the reader that he is still in love with her. However, Frank has gone on with his life and is dating someone new.

This chapter introduces the main characters as well as the biggest conflict in Frank's life at this point. Frank's ex-wife is a smart, self-sufficient woman who has left Frank with a large void in his life. Frank misses the life of a married man, but he also misses his wife and their children. The death of their son has taken a large toll on this couple, perhaps leading them to the divorce that has left them each alone at this point in their lives despite the remaining affection between them. This first chapter presents the darkness and grief in Frank's life that he will spend the remainder of the book attempting to deal with.

Chapters 2 and 3

Chapters 2 and 3 Summary

After his meeting with his wife, Frank returns home to prepare for his trip. Through his morning routine, Frank thinks about his unremarkable past. Frank is an only child who attended military school after the death of his father. Frank attended the University of Michigan for a short time before enlisting in the Marines. Due to a pancreatic illness, Frank never went to Vietnam and was discharged without seeing any combat. Frank returned to the University of Michigan, wrote a book of short stories, and met his ex-wife for the second time at a book signing. Frank and his wife settled in New York, but moved to New Jersey while Frank was working on his second book. However, Frank lost interest in writing his second novel and soon took a job as a sportswriter.

Frank makes a couple of phone calls before leaving to pick up Vicki. Frank is flying to Detroit in order to interview a football player who was injured in a boating accident and has been confined to a wheelchair ever since. Frank hopes to do a human interest article about the football player's strength of character. The football player has become a motivational speaker for his former team and plans to attend law school. After the phone calls, Frank goes to Vicki's condo and finds her waiting for him in her car. Vicki is nervous about this trip. Vicki was married once before and the relationship ended badly, so she is wary of being hurt again. Frank reassures her the best he can as they begin the drive to the airport.

At the airport, Vicki insists on buying flight insurance while Frank waits in line to check in. While Frank is alone, his doctor appears out of nowhere. The doctor is on his way to visit his mother. Frank dislikes his doctor as a person, but trusts his medical opinion. Frank wishes that his doctor had not seen him, but he is polite and speaks to him for a few minutes. Frank is glad that Vicki is not with him because he knows that the doctor is a womanizer and would most likely hit on her. However, when Vicki returns, Frank sees that she can handle herself. In fact, Vicki clearly knows all about his womanizing ways and handles him almost effortlessly.

Chapters 2 and 3 Analysis

Frank thinks that his childhood and recent past are mundane, normal. Frank tells his readers how he grew up an only child and attended military school before going to college. Frank tells his readers that these experiences were normal and mundane, thus uninteresting to his current situation. Frank also talks about an illness that ended his military career before it could begin. What is important in this historical information about Frank is his writing career. Frank is a sportswriter, but he began as a fiction writer. Frank wrote a book of short stories that did very well. Later Frank took an advance for a novel, but soon found that he had written all the fiction he was interested in writing.

Frank quit work on this novel and took a job as a sportswriter, which is the same job he holds today.

Frank is on his way to Detroit in order to interview an injured football player. Frank is taking his new girlfriend with him. When Frank runs into someone he knows in the airport, he is embarrassed to be caught with his girlfriend. However, Frank is quickly won over when the girlfriend proves she can defend herself against this man who is something of a womanizer. Frank clearly enjoys this girl, Vicki, though the reader can see how Frank compares this woman to his ex-wife in his mind and worries over every word, every bit of body language he reads from this woman.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

On the plane, Vicki befriends the stewardesses. As Frank watches her talk to these ladies, he remembers the night before when he had an uncomfortable conversation with a friend. Ever since becoming divorced, Frank has been spending time with a group of men who call themselves the Divorced Men Club. The day before, this group went on a fishing trip together. Frank passed a pleasant day relaxing on the boat and planning to surprise Vicki that night with a dinner out. However, at the end of the day one of the men, Walter, stopped Frank and asked to have a drink with him. Frank reluctantly agreed. In the bar, Walter fumbled around, talking about athletics, women, and the past. Then Walter announced that he had allowed a man to pick him up in a bar a few nights before and that he had gone back to a hotel with him. Walter waits to see if Frank will be shocked, but Frank does not judge this man, knowing as he does how devastated his divorce left him and how depressed he has been for months.

Afterward, Frank is running too late to see Vicki, so he drives around for a while, stopping outside his palm reader's for a moment, but afraid to go inside because it is after hours. Frank then drives through town, eventually finding himself parked outside his ex-wife's house. Frank thinks about knocking so he can tuck his children into bed, but decides not to when he sees a strange car parked outside. Frank sits there watching the house when the door suddenly opens and Frank's ten-year-old son, Paul, comes out. Paul has a homing pigeon that he lets go before coming over to speak to his father. Paul tells Frank that he is sending the pigeon to see his brother Ralph. Frank and Paul discuss Ralph for a few minutes, wondering where he is and if the pigeon can reach him quickly. Finally, Paul invites Frank inside, but Frank makes an excuse and drives away.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Frank seems lost in his life, with little direction. It is like a quiet despair, a theme of the book, that Frank himself is not clearly aware of. In comparison, Frank has a conversation with a fellow divorcee who is also struggling with the depression and despair of divorce. This friend, Walter, was surprised by the end of his marriage, so as a result has been in a deep depression until recently. For some reason, Walter has been drawn to Frank more than the other Divorce Men Club members. Frank finds this uncomfortable, perhaps because he sees too much of himself in Walter. When Walter tells Frank that he spent the night with another man, Frank is not disgusted or even surprised. This seems to tell the reader that either Frank is a very open-minded person or he is still so lost in his own despair that he cannot make himself care about the actions of others.

Frank then drives around for a while, visiting important places in his life which are summed up by the town he lives in and palm reader he visits once a week. Finally,

Frank stops outside his wife's house, looking for some comfort and normalcy. However, there is a strange car parked outside and Frank is afraid it is one of his wife's male friends. Frank stays outside, watching the house until his son appears in the doorway. Paul has come out to let one of his homing pigeons go. Frank watches, hoping his son will not see him, but he does. Frank and Paul spend a few minutes talking about Ralph and death. Frank then asks his son to lie for him so his ex-wife will not know that he was sitting there watching the house. This speaks of Frank's desire to be a part of his family again, but his equally strong desire to allow his wife to go on with her life without him.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Vicki and Frank land in Detroit to find it in the middle of a winter storm despite the fact that it is Easter weekend. Vicki and Frank go to their hotel, checking out the sights as they pass them from the airport shuttle. At the hotel, Vicki tells Frank how happy she is to be here with him. In their room, Vicki settles in a chair by the window with a glass of champagne while Frank makes some phone calls. Frank calls the football player to let him know he has arrived, then calls his ex-father-in-law. Frank and his father-in-law are still friends despite the divorce. They speak for a while about X and sports, as well as a few other things. Frank becomes annoyed with his father-in-law when he suggests that Vicki is just a fling and Frank should never consider marrying a woman like her, despite the fact that his father-in-law has not yet met Vicki.

When Frank hangs up the phone, he and Vicki make love. During this time, Frank tells Vicki he loves her. Frank has told a lot of women since the death of his son that he loved them, trying to make himself a part of their lives in a way he felt he was not a part of his own family anymore. Frank had a lot of affairs before the end of his marriage, looking for something he could not find. In the end, Frank realized he was not finding what he needed and went back to his wife.

Afterward, Frank has trouble sleeping. Frank turns on the television and then finds himself looking through Vicki's bag for a cigarette. Frank continues to look through her bag, finding her wallet and seeing a photo in it he believes to be of her ex-husband. Vicki wakes and catches Frank in the act. Vicki is angry with Frank, accusing him of lying to her when he said he loved her and would like to marry her. Vicki then tells him that the photo is not her ex-husband, but a step-brother she never really knew.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Frank calls his father-in-law when he and Vicki arrive in Detroit. They quickly move from pleasant small talk to an argument over Vicki. Frank's father-in-law has no way of knowing anything about Vicki, but assumes her to be a fling, a rebound relationship. Although the reader thinks he might be right, Frank is upset about this assumption. Frank has already suggested he might be interested in marrying Vicki, so this is bad timing for him. However, Frank does not end the phone call on bad terms, he actually expresses his love for his father-in-law before hanging up, though he does not believe he said it before his father-in-law hung up.

Frank tells Vicki he loves her, something he finds difficult to do, but something he needs to do in order to keep her happy. Frank has said these words to a lot of women, looking to be a part of something bigger than himself, but always found he could not stay, he could not fully commit. Now Frank has trouble sleeping and finds himself going through



Vicki's bag. Vicki wakes up and catches him, thinking that he is doing this either to steal or to see if she is hiding some sort of secret. In truth, Frank was only curious and wanted to see a photo of Vicki's ex-husband. When Frank finds a photo he believes to be her ex, he finds himself filled with jealousy. Vicki tells him later that the photo is a step-brother who died. Frank is relieved, but now worried that Vicki will end their relationship because of his indiscretion.



Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

Frank wakes early and goes to his meeting with the football player. On the way there, Frank thinks about the woman who was the key to ending his marriage. This woman was not someone he slept with, but a bored housewife with whom he spent an evening speaking with. After their meeting, he kept in touch with this woman, sending letters back and forth. It was finding these letters after a break-in that caused his ex-wife to make the decision to end their marriage.

The meeting does not go well. The football player announces that he will no longer be motivating his former teammates. The player does still plan to go to law school, but does not expect big things of it. The man is depressed and Frank can clearly see that he is full of rage for what has happened to him. This makes Frank's human interest story difficult to write and makes him want to feel pity for the man, though he resists this desire.

Frank returns to the hotel to find Vicki depressed. Frank thinks it is because of what he did the night before, but it turns out that Vicki has been reading a self-help book that has left her pessimistic about her future. The weather does not help the situation, either. It has begun to snow again, so their plans to see the city are derailed. Finally, they decide to go to the airport and try to get on a stand-by flight.

Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

Frank reveals why his marriage ended. Ironically, the end was not due to a woman he was intimate with, but a woman he felt he could share his confidences with. Frank's ex-wife finally realized that there was something broken in their marriage when she discovered Frank could not share his feelings with her but could with this other woman. Frank's ex-wife could not continue in a marriage with a man who could not share himself with her.

Frank's interview with the football player again speaks of the theme of quiet despair. The football player is a man who spent eleven years playing professional football, only to have it all taken away from him in an instant. The football player is full of anger and despair, wishing he could have the use of his legs back so that he can go back to the gridiron. The interview goes badly and Frank finds himself unable to extract any of the hope and good feeling he had wanted to write about in his article. Frank wants to feel sorry for this man, but keeps himself from doing it because he knows it will only increase his own depression.

Vicki is depressed when Frank returns to the hotel. Frank does all he can to cheer her up, desperate to keep her happy in his life. Vicki is a new direction, a new start, and he does not want to lose that. Eventually Vicki cheers up, but neither of them can get up

the enthusiasm to explore Detroit in the snow storm, so they decide to return to New Jersey early.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

When Frank arrives home, he finds Walter waiting for him. Frank tries to tell Walter on several occasions that he is tired and would like to be alone, but Walter ignores this plea. Walter needs to talk. Walter begins with small talk, but soon he is talking about his encounter with his male lover once again. Walter explains how he met this man when he went to cash in some bonds for a client. Walter found the man so friendly and comforting that he allowed himself to be picked up. Now Walter is at a loss for what this might mean about him and his future. Frank, feeling as though he has no other choice, offers to let Walter stay the night on the couch. Walter is touched by this, using it as an excuse to give Frank a key to his house, but is too restless to sleep. Walter says he would like to drive around for a time. Before he leaves, however, Walter attempts to give Frank a kiss for his kindness. Frank pushes Walter away and tells him he does not want to be kissed. Walter apologizes and leaves.

After Walter leaves, Frank thinks about a time about a year after Ralph died. Frank had become obsessed with catalogs and would order catalogs of every kind. One morning, while looking at a catalog for a clothing chain based in a town near Berkshire College, Frank sees a woman he believes he knows. Frank goes to the town and visits the post office to inquire about this woman. Frank learns that she is the woman he thought she was and that she lives nearby. Frank goes to visit this woman and finds a woman living a normal life, like the one he once thought he had. This visit makes Frank feel better about his life, despite the disintegration of his own marriage at the time.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Walter is a lost man. The reader watches him try to explain his feelings regarding his sexual encounter with another man and feels as though Walter has lost his own identity. Walter's confusion shows the depths of his despair, touching on the theme of quiet despair. Then when Walter tries to kiss Frank, the reader feels as though this action explains why Walter keeps coming back to Frank even though Frank does not go out of his way to be friendly to Walter, nor does he really consider Walter his friend. Walter clearly does consider Frank his friend and perhaps hopes that he and Frank might have a future that is larger and deeper than friendship. When Frank turns down Walter's advances, the reader is left wondering how this will effect Walter, who appears to be in a fragile emotional state.

When Walter is gone, Frank remembers a time when he went to see an old college girlfriend whom he saw in a catalog. Frank goes to this meeting at a time when his marriage is slowly falling apart, but has not ended yet. Frank finds his ex-girlfriend living a completely normal life that leaves Frank with hope. Frank sees normality, knows that it still exists, and is left with the idea that he might be able to achieve it himself someday.

Frank's reaction to this ex-girlfriend helps in explaining why Frank spent so much time trying to insinuate himself into the lives of women he would pick up on planes and in bars. Frank wants normal, a life like his own before Ralph died.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Frank wakes the next morning and listens to the early morning sounds of Easter. Frank thinks of Ralph and how much he would like to spend the day with him while listening to a woman grieving in the cemetery behind his house. After a time, Frank goes out into the yard to do some yard work. While there, he runs into his neighbor. Frank's neighbors are a kind older couple with whom Frank has always had a friendly acquaintanceship. Frank's neighbor talks to him about second marriages, sharing with him how her current marriage is a second marriage and has proven to be wildly successful. Then the neighbor invites Frank to have dinner with her and her husband one day, even though she knows Frank will not come.

Frank goes back into the house and tries to call X in order to wish her and the children a happy holiday. When they do not answer, Frank calls Walter but also does not receive a response. Frank then prepares for his dinner at the home of Vicki's father. While doing this, Frank thinks of the time when he taught a course at Berkshire College. Frank took the job for reasons that are still unclear to him. Frank got a call out of the blue from the dean who knew him through his published book of short stories. X was against it from the beginning, but Frank insisted on taking the position. When Frank arrived, he found the other professors very accommodating, treating him as one of their own despite his job as a sportswriter, which they found to be a simple pastime until Frank felt ready to begin his serious writing again.

X came to see Frank only one time while he was teaching at Berkshire. X begged Frank to come home with her and the children. Frank refused, saying that he was enjoying the teaching even though in truth he hated it. X left and refused to ever return. During the rest of the semester, Frank lived with a fellow professor named Selma. Selma was in the relationship for fun, not interested in having a commitment with Frank. Selma was determined to marry a rich man who could allow her to live in the style she was hoping to become accustomed. The relationship ended the same way it began, quietly, but Frank would always remember the conversations they had as some of the most enjoyable of his life.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Frank wakes, goes out into his yard, and has a conversation with his neighbor. It is Easter, a time of new beginnings, but Frank is thinking about the past and still grieving for his son. Frank would give anything to have Ralph back for this one day. Frank also misses his family. Frank tries to call them, but receives no answer. Frank imagines what they are doing and this makes him increasingly unhappy. Frank also calls Walter, but again receives no answer. Walter's refusal to answer the phone reminds the reader of

his fragile emotional state the day before and leaves the reader wondering what Walter might be up to on this holiday morning.

Frank thinks about the time when he worked at Berkshire College. Frank took the job for reasons he still cannot fathom, except perhaps because it would mean getting out of the mundane and into something new. X was unhappy with the idea and refused to go and refused to visit. Frank brushed this off and moved a fellow professor into his campus housing with him. The love affair was nothing but an affair, but Frank remembers the conversations as some of the best of his life. The reader wonders if Frank remembers this now because he is nostalgic for another time in his life or if perhaps he might have contact with this woman again. It bears remembering for whatever conclusion the reader comes to.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Frank begins the long drive to the home of Vicki's father. On the way he stops at a small sports bar that was founded by a professional ball player. Frank speaks to the current owner and learns that the football player was murdered in the parking lot, leaving the bar to her, his second wife. Frank then continues on, arriving at the home of Vicki's father a half hour late. Vicki greets him at the door, but she is not as warm as he would have liked, causing Frank to fear she is unhappy with him. Frank is introduced to Lynette, Vicki's stepmother, and quickly learns that Vicki and Lynette do not get along together. Vicki and Frank sit on the couch to watch television, but Vicki is restless and claims to need to speak to Frank about their relationship. Instead, Frank suggests they go out on the front lawn and play croquet.

While Vicki is looking for the croquet mallets, Frank meets her brother Cade. Cade wants to be a cop and that is clear in every part of his demeanor. Frank finds him single-minded and unfriendly. Finally, Vicki comes and they play croquet for a time. When it becomes clear Frank is not going to win, he suggests they quit. Frank and Vicki sit on the front steps. Vicki tells Frank that she has something to tell him about his doctor, the same the met in the airport. Vicki says that she has seen Frank's ex-wife pick the doctor up outside the hospital's emergency room and that they shared a kiss. Frank is shocked by this idea and Vicki is upset by his reaction, convinced it means he is still in love with his ex-wife.

Frank and Vicki return to the house where Frank meets her father, Wade. Wade takes Frank into the basement where he is rebuilding an old car. Frank and Wade talk for a while about marriage, love, and loss. Wade suffered the same sort of depression Frank is experiencing when his wife died of cancer. However, Wade came out the other side and now has a nice life. Frank is envious of Wade. Frank also feels friendly with Wade and is happy with this budding new friendship.

Lynette calls them up to dinner. Frank finds the dinner overcooked, but eats seconds in order to please Lynette. Conversation centers around sports and Frank finds himself expressing opinions he does not really hold in order to please Wade and Cade. However, the conversation grows heated when Cade says some things that offend Lynette. Cade storms out of the room and Wade follows. Lynette goes into the kitchen to begin the dishes. Frank and Vicki are left alone. Vicki is clearly unhappy again. When Frank asks what is going on, she confesses that she has just realized that they have nothing in common. Vicki accuses Frank of lying to her about wanting to commit to her. Frank gets down on his knees and proposes. Before Vicki can answer, Wade calls down to Frank and tells him he has a phone call.

Frank takes the call. It is X and she tells him that the police have called. Walter has committed suicide, leaving a note addressed to Frank. Frank needs to go to the police

station and identify the body. Frank goes down and tells Vicki. Vicki walks him to his car. Vicki tells Frank that she thinks they should end their relationship. Frank wants to talk about it some more. Frank grabs Vicki's arm to make her get into the car so they can talk about it on the way back to town. Vicki punches Frank in the mouth and tells him to leave.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Frank makes the drive out to the home of Vicki's father for Easter dinner. On the way, he stops in a bar. Frank hears a story of the death of a football player and it seems to cast a dark shadow over the rest of the day. When Frank arrives, Vicki is clearly unhappy. Frank is afraid she wants to break up with him. Frank does not want this. In fact, Frank is fantasizing about becoming such good friends with her father that they will become each other's one to call in an emergency.

Frank tries to distract Vicki by taking her out to play croquet. Instead of distracting her, Vicki finds herself telling Frank a story about his ex-wife and his personal physician. Frank finds this story shocking and is unable to hide his reaction from Vicki, which only makes her even more unhappy. However, Frank then meets her father and finds him to be everything he had hoped he would be. Frank and Wade hit it off immediately and Frank sees in Wade a person who has gone through the same darkness Frank is now going through and has come out the other end a happy man. This gives Frank hope.

Dinner ends poorly, ending with Frank on his knees attempting to make up with Vicki. They are interrupted by a call from X, who tells Frank that Walter is dead. Frank is shaken by this news and decides to rush back to town in order to take care of this unpleasant business. Vicki tries to end their relationship on the way to the car, but Frank attempts to make her travel with him in order to discuss this some more. Vicki punches Frank for becoming physical with him. Frank finds this amusing, despite the humiliation of the situation. Frank leaves, accepting his fate without the anger the reader might think would be appropriate to the situation.

Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

On the way home, Frank begins to think about Selma. Frank decides to pull off the highway and call her. Frank uses a phone booth next to a drive-in burger place where he can see a man in his car yelling at the carhop. Frank talks to Selma, suggesting he come up and visit her some time, but Selma turns him down. While Frank is speaking to Selma, the man in the car backs up violently, sending a shopping cart crashing into the phone booth. The glass panel shatters across Frank's legs. The carhop comes over to see if Frank is okay. Frank says he is until the carhop points out that his knee is bleeding. Frank sits in his car and the carhop brings him a rootbeer float to help him feel better. Frank and the carhop talk for a little while before Frank decides he feels well enough to go home.

Frank goes home, listens to his messages, and changes before going to the police station. At the police station, Frank is giving a copy of the suicide note, which he folds up and puts in his pocket. Frank is told he does not have to identify the body because they have contacted a family member in Ohio. Frank asks if it would be alright if he goes over to Walter's apartment and is told it is fine as long as he does not touch anything. Frank then suggests to the detective that he join the Divorce Men's Club and is turned down.

When Frank goes outside, he finds X waiting for him. Frank asks her about her relationship with his personal physician and learns it is platonic. Then X tells him how sorry she is about the death of Walter. Frank tells her they were not close friends. Frank tells her he wants to go to Walter's apartment and she agrees to go with him. They meet there and Frank lets them in with the key Walter gave him. X immediately finds the whole thing uncomfortable and wants to leave. Frank is fascinated, however. Frank finds his book by Walter's bedside and wants to take it, but is afraid the detective will find out. Frank returns to the living room and flirts with X, suggesting they have sex. X does not find this amusing and turns to leave, running into the apartment complex manager. The manager insists they leave. Out in the parking lot, Frank asks X if he can go home with her and is turned down. X is upset with him for making the whole situation worse with his sexual suggestions. X leaves and Frank finds himself driving alone around town. Frank eventually ends up at the train station, finding some comfort in watching people come and go. When a woman approaches him, Frank is afraid she might be Walter's sister, so he dodges her by boarding the train.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Frank stops to call Selma on the way home because he feels the need for a friendly voice and hers is the first he thinks of. Frank gets ahold of her, but finds her unwilling to rekindle their relationship, which he knew in the back of his mind. While talking to her,

Frank is injured when the glass of the phone booth is broken. Frank meets a kind carhop who takes care of him until he feels up to leaving. At home, Frank treats his cut and cleans up before going to the police station to deal with Walter's death.

Frank does not have to identify Walter's body. Frank does get a copy of the suicide note. Frank then finds X waiting for him outside. X's appearance suggests that she is always the one who has been there when Frank needs someone, he simply did not realize it when it was important. Frank knows it now and welcomes her presence. Frank asks her about Vicki's story and learns that Vicki lied. Frank does not know why, but the reader might suspect Vicki was setting a trap to see how much Frank still cared for his ex-wife. Vicki apparently learned something she did not want to learn, if the reader can trust her reaction later that day.

Frank and X go over to Walter's apartment because Frank feels the need to see it. While there, Frank suggests they make love. X is horrified by the suggestion and this kills any sympathy she might have felt for him. Frank is now alone, wandering town. Frank ends up at the train station where he finds himself boarding a train for New York City, despite the fact that he normally does not like to be in New York after dark.

Chapter 13 and The End

Chapter 13 and The End Summary

Frank reads Walter's letter on the train. In it Walter claims to have an illegitimate daughter whom he wants Frank to track down in order to explain his death. Frank then travels on to his office in New York. Frank sticks his head in on a meeting about the NFL draft before going on to his desk. A few minutes later, a pretty young intern comes over. The intern has always wanted to meet Frank and plies him with flattering remarks. Frank ends up asking her to dinner.

Several months later, Frank is in Florida. Frank has gone to Florida to find Walter's daughter but quickly comes to the conclusion that Walter lied. However, the investigation has brought Frank to a place where he has found a measure of happiness. Frank has bought a condo in Florida and plans to stay indefinitely. Frank is still dating the intern he met Easter night, but does not plan anything more permanent than visiting one another over the holidays. Frank believes he has finally stopped grieving for Ralph and that has given him some peace.

Chapter 13 and The End Analysis

Frank has barely accepted the end of his relationship with Vicki and is still reeling from X's rebuff when he makes a date with another girl. At first it seems that Frank is returning to his old ways, but when the reader sees that Frank has gone to Florida to find Walter's daughter, this opinion shifts. Frank seems to have grown up some. Frank is still seeing the intern, but does not have plans to become a part of her life the way he obsessively attempted to do with other women in the past. This seems to show the reader some growth on Frank's part.

Frank has read that Walter wants him to find a daughter and he fulfills the promise, despite the fact that he and Walter were never really that close. The daughter proves to be a lie, but the search gets Frank out of New Jersey and the poisonous cycle of grief that has left him miserable. Walter has given Frank the gift of hope, a gift that Frank was unable to give Walter in his darkest hour. The reader has hope as well, hope that Frank has found his way out of grief and will continue to live his life in a healthy and happy way.

Characters

Frank Bascombe

Frank Bascombe is a sportswriter. Frank's son, Ralph, died a few years before and he then was divorced from his wife. These events have changed the way Frank views the world and himself. Frank admits that his divorce is largely his fault. After the death of his son, Frank had numerous affairs, hoping to be able to define himself by these women for a short time in order to forget his own trouble for a while. By doing this, Frank stopped sharing his feelings and thoughts with his wife and began sharing them with other women. When Frank's wife discovered this behavior, she left him.

Frank is now dating a nurse with whom he hopes to define a new life for himself. Vicki is a young southern woman who has recently divorced her first husband. Frank finds her entertaining and sexy, though the reader can see almost immediately that they have little in common. Frank often lies about his opinions in order to please Vicki. It is no shock to the reader when Vicki sees through this and breaks up with Frank, but Frank seems to have not seen it coming and gets thrown by her reaction.

Frank has a friend whom he is not close to but with whom he spends some time as a counselor of sorts. When this friend dies, Frank is forced to see the similarities between their situations and the damage he has done to his own life as a reaction to the same depression that was a prominent influence in his friend's death. Walter's death changes the way Frank behaves and helps Frank save his own life.

X

X is Frank's ex-wife. Frank never refers to X by her given name throughout the novel, continuing to call her X even when he considers his affection for her and his desire to reenter her life. Frank is still in love with his wife and feels bad for his behavior that led to their divorce. X is thriving on her own, having made a success for herself in her chosen career and living the kind of life she has always wanted. This situation makes Frank both proud and feeling as though it is evidence of his inability to be a good husband and provider.

X is a golf pro at the local country club. X has custody of the couple's remaining two children and owns a small house in a housing development near where Frank still lives in their family home. X is friendly with Frank, though she refuses to discuss her romantic life with him. When Walter dies, X goes out of her way to help him out, even agreeing to go to Walter's apartment with him. When Frank suggests that they make love, X becomes angry and leaves the situation, telling Frank that he ruined what was a show of friendship on her part.

Ralph

Ralph is Frank's oldest child. Ralph contracted Reye's Syndrome and became very ill. While in the hospital, Ralph became delirious and would often say odd things that made him appear more mature than his years. Frank stayed at Ralph's side during his illness, often finding humor in the situation despite the gravity. When Ralph died, it was quiet and unmarked until a nurse came in to tell Frank and X. Afterward, Frank went home and watched a ball game. Frank has never forgotten the terrible time of his life and continues to grieve for his son, allowing his grief to cause him to act in heartless ways, eventually ending his marriage.

Vicki

Vicki is a divorced nurse that Frank has begun dating. Vicki is young and behaves somewhat naively, even though Frank knows that she has seen horrible things in her career and therefore could not be nearly as innocent as she implies. When Frank and Vicki go to Detroit together, Frank wants to show her a good time so that she might consider sharing the rest of her life with him. However, the weekend gets off on the wrong foot when Vicki catches Frank going through her purse. Later, Vicki reads a chapter in a self-help book that makes her feel that she and Frank could never be happy together.

After their trip to Detroit, Frank spends Easter with Vicki and her family. Vicki is unhappy to see Frank and Frank has begun to think that Vicki wants to break up with him. Vicki tells Frank that his ex-wife is having an affair with his doctor, a story that is later proven to be a lie. However, Frank's reaction to the story causes Vicki to become more convinced that they are not meant to be together. At dinner, Frank talks sports with Vicki's father and brother. The conversation becomes heated and Vicki's brother ends up leaving the room. This is the final straw for Vicki, who tells Frank they have nothing in common and should not see each other any more.

Walter

Walter is a member of the Divorced Men's Club. Frank and Walter hit it off and become friendly. However, their conversations make Frank somewhat uncomfortable, so he half-heartedly tries to avoid them. Walter is persistent, though, and Frank soon finds himself having a drink with Walter. Over drinks, Walter confesses to Frank that he has had a one night stand with another man. Frank does not react as Walter is afraid he will. Frank is not disgusted, but finds the situation one that does not directly affect him and therefore he has no opinion. Walter takes this reaction as supportive.

When Frank returns from Detroit, he finds Walter at his house. Walter talks to him again about his night with this other man. Walter then tries to kiss Frank. Frank pushes him away and tells him he does not want to be kissed. Walter quickly leaves. The next day, Frank goes to have dinner with Vicki and her family. Late in the afternoon, Frank



receives a phone call and learns that Walter has died. In a suicide note, Walter says that he could find no hope in his own life, no definition. Also in this note, Walter confesses to an illegitimate child and asks Frank to find her. When Frank makes this attempt, he finds himself in Florida, happy, and decides to stay.

Herb

Herb is a football player who was injured in a boating accident and has been confined to a wheelchair ever since. Frank goes to interview Herb, hoping to do a human interest story about a football player who has become a motivation for his ex-teammates despite his injuries. However, when Frank arrives, he finds an angry man who has given up his attempts to pretend to be supportive. Herb wants the use of his legs back and he wants to be able to play football again. Herb does not know how to handle his anger and it has become a depression that colors his view of the world. Frank can see this and wants to feel sorry for him, but knows if he does he will have to feel sorry for himself, so he attempts to avoid this trap.

Wade

Wade is Vicki's father. Wade was a young man when his wife died of cancer. Wade found himself lost in despair when this happened, unable to find a direction in his life. Wade decided to quit his lucrative job and move to New Jersey to take a job that paid much less. Wade then met a woman much younger than himself, whom he soon married because her religious beliefs kept her from consummating the relationship without the commitment of marriage. Now Wade is living in a nice house, working a job that is mundane but fulfilling. Wade is living the dream that Frank wants to find for himself. However, Frank soon realizes he is going about it in the wrong way and begins to realize that he needs to be happy in himself before he can be happy in a relationship.

Selma Jassim

Selma Jassim is a woman with whom Frank lived with while teaching for a semester at Berkshire College. Selma is an Arab woman who is teaching college just until she can meet and marry a rich man who will provide her with the life she feels she deserves. Frank and Selma's relationship is uncomplicated, simply a sexual relationship with no strings attached. Frank enjoys speaking with Selma and often has long discussion with her over many different topics, from literature to politics. Their relationship ends as simply as it began and neither attempted to contact each other again. However, after leaving Wade's house after his fight with Vicki, Frank feels the desire to hear Selma's voice. Frank calls Selma from a phone booth and asks to come see her, but Selma tells him she does not believe this is a good idea. They end the call on friendly terms.



Peggy Connover

Peggy Connover is a woman Frank met on a plane not long after Ralph died. Peggy is middle-aged and frumpy, not the kind of woman Frank would normally pick up. However, they have such a good conversation that Frank agrees to take this woman to dinner after they land. Peggy has run away from her husband and four children, determined to become a poet. Peggy is outgoing, funny, and highly entertaining to Frank, who agrees to take her to his room after dinner for drinks. Frank and Peggy spend the evening together in casual conversation. Finally, Peggy tells Frank that she had intended to sleep with him, but has decided she would rather remain friends. Frank and Peggy spend the night together, but do not have an intimate encounter. Later, Frank receives long letters from Peggy, talking about her family and other mundane things. It is an innocent situation. However, when X finds these letters after a break-in at their home, she feels they are proof not of her husband's infidelity, but of his inability to confide in X and his ability to confide in complete strangers. It is this revelation that leads to X filing for divorce.

Paul and Clarissa

Paul and Clarissa are Frank and X's surviving children. Paul is ten and highly intelligent. Paul keeps homing pigeons and Frank catches him one night sending one of these pigeons to heaven in order to report to Ralph on the events that have taken place to his family since his death. Frank finds this proof of emotional stability on his son's part. Clarissa is a bit younger and more youthful. Clarissa is not aware of the tensions going on around her and is growing up to be a beautiful young woman. Frank finds a great deal of comfort in his children and enjoys spending time with them. However, it is necessary for Frank to get away from New Jersey in order to heal from Ralph's death. When Frank does this, he loses some contact with his children. However, Frank consoles himself with the idea that he is a better father now that he has overcome his emotional difficulties.



Objects/Places

Cemetery

The book opens in a cemetery where Frank is waiting for his ex-wife on the morning of their deceased son's birthday.

Catalogs

After Ralph's death, Frank finds himself obsessed with reading and ordering products from various catalogs.

Deep Sea Fishing

Frank and the members of the Divorce Men's Club go deep sea fishing the day Walter tells Frank about his encounter with another man.

Croquet

Frank and Vicki play croquet so that Frank can put off the inevitable. Frank is afraid Vicki is about to break up with him.

Phone Booth

Frank is injured when a phone booth he is standing in is hit by a shopping cart, shattering the glass.

Suicide Note

When Walter kills himself he leaves a suicide note for Frank.

August

The August is a local bar in Haddam, where Frank often meets with the members of the Divorce Men's Club.

Police Station

Frank goes to the police station in order to retrieve Walter's suicide note and finds himself inviting the detective to join the Divorce Men's Club.



Divorce Men's Club

The Divorce Men's Club is an informal group of divorced men from Haddam who get together once a month to blow off some steam.

Detroit Michigan

Frank and Vicki visit Detroit, Michigan in a combination holiday and business trip. Detroit is where Frank interviews the injured football player, Herb.

Gotham

Gotham is a nickname for New York City where Frank works for a sports magazine.

Haddam, New Jersey

Haddam, New Jersey is the suburban New Jersey town where Frank has lived from many years.

Florida

Frank travels to Florida to fulfill a promise to his friend Walter and finds himself staying.

Social Sensitivity

Ford writes realistically about late-twentieth-century American society and the alienation and inertia that many people feel. Frank Bascombe is not the only character in the novel to feel disconnected and disconsolate; he is simply the most obvious.

The importance of occupation in defining oneself is also a central idea in the novel. In a country where one's status and self-worth may be largely determined by what one does, Frank is constantly asking himself whether what he does is good enough, at the same time that his occupation shapes his entire worldview. Through Frank's occupation, Ford also comments on the importance that sport has come to assume in American society and the way it has become a metaphor for our lives.

Techniques

The Sportswriter is a first-person narrative told by a former novelist with a gift for language and a tendency to philosophize. It is a book that deeply exposes us to the thoughts and feelings of its narrator and in a sense induces us to try to see the world through his eyes, even if the experience forces us at last to pull back from that viewpoint and consider what Frank has told us. The book takes place over the span of only three days, so Ford pays close attention to the moment-by-moment details of Frank's life and to the memories his experience brings to the surface. Although the book is set during an Easter weekend, it is an ironic tale of rebirth—or by the most optimistic reading, a tale of minor rebirth—and the holiday is primarily a secular one as described in the novel.

Themes

Quiet Despair

Quiet despair is a major theme of this novel. The novel is about a man who has lost his son and his family in a short period of time. This man is desperate to be a part of a family again in order to hide from himself and to end the need to explore his own faults and shortcomings. This man, Frank Bascombe, lives in a state of quiet despair, desperate to find a direction in his life through the life of someone else. However, the woman he chooses to do this with decides that she does not want to spend the rest of her life with him.

At the same time, Frank makes friends with a man whose wife left him suddenly for another man. This friend, Walter, did not know his marriage was in danger and lives in a state of shock. One night, Walter meets another man with whom he has a great deal in common and whose company he finds pleasure in. These two men go to a bar, and before long they find themselves going to a hotel. This experience, instead of giving Walter a direction and pleasure in his life, leaves him confused and frightened. Walter goes to Frank for help, but instead of offering help, Frank sends him away when Walter attempts to explore a sexual relationship. The next day, Walter, in the depths of despair, takes his own life.

Despair is a lack of hope. Both these men have lost the direction in their lives and as such have lost the definition by which they always defined themselves. Frank deals with it by trying to define himself through other people, particularly women. Walter does not deal with it and in the end is so desperate that he chooses to end his life. Their despair is quiet, held inside where no one else is aware of how terrible they feel. It is this reason that quiet despair is a major theme of the novel.

Divorce

Divorce is a theme of this novel because a great number of the main characters are divorced. To Frank Bascombe, divorce has meant tearing him away from what defined him as a person. Frank was a part of something important, a part of a life that was bigger and better than his alone. Frank is now alone, without a direction in life, unsure of who he is without his wife. Frank spends a great deal of time trying to define himself through the lives of the women he spends time with. The last woman he chooses, Vicki, breaks up with him and leaves him lost at a vulnerable time.

Walter too is divorced. Unlike Frank, Walter did not see the end of his marriage coming. Walter is deeply depressed because of his divorce. Walter tries to redefine himself through a relationship with another man, but this only leaves Walter more confused and depressed. Eventually, Walter places his affections in the wrong place and ends up taking his own life. Vicki, too, is divorced. However, Vicki did not define herself through

her marriage. Instead, Vicki left her marriage full of anger toward men, including her father, who married a woman much younger than himself. Frank suspects that Vicki is still in love with her ex-husband and imagines she will eventually get remarried to him.

Divorce is a theme of this novel because it is a reality in the lives of all its main characters. Divorce affects each character differently, but it is a motivator that propels the plot in many different ways. For Frank, it is a loss of identity. For Walter, it is a shock and a redefinition of his sexual orientation. For Vicki, it is simply proof that men are not as superior as women. Despite these different views, divorce changes the lives of each of these characters, making divorce a theme of the novel.

Death and Grief

The novel begins with Frank visiting the grave of his oldest child Ralph. Ralph died a few years before from Reyes Syndrome. Frank's life has been profoundly touched by this death, causing him to act in ways he might not have done before. Frank looks for a new life, a new identity, in the arms of many different women. It is not that Frank is unhappy with his wife, it is just that he needs to be defined without the talisman of being the father of a dead child. Frank's ex-wife reminds Frank too much of that terrible time, sending him into the arms of other women, looking for inclusion in a life that does not speak of death and grief.

Frank comes to realize that his grief is responsible for his behaviors, though it is long after his divorce that he finally sees this. Frank has lost his identity and wants to be a part of something else, something bigger than himself, in order to overcome the past. When Frank fails to do this, he begins to find a way to deal with himself. After the death of his friend, Walter, Frank identifies his despair and makes a new beginning for himself. Frank becomes comfortable with the man he is and stops trying to penetrate the lives of others to define himself. Through the death of his son and his grief for his son, Frank finds himself, making this a theme of the novel.

Significant Topics

Ford returns to the same themes over and over—the connections are difficult to make, good intentions do not always lead to happiness, and happiness may not in fact be easy to attain. Frank Bascombe is in many ways a typical American male who finds it difficult to express his feelings and fears the intimacy—and possible pain—that such disclosure might bring. So after a life of missteps and heartbreaks, he seals himself off and holds himself somewhat aloof from the rest of the world, a state he calls "dreaminess" and that others refer to in more derogatory terms.

Frank is essentially a good man who does not consciously want to harm others, although he often does. He cares about his ex-wife, about his girlfriend Vicki Arcenault, and about his remaining children, but he cannot seem to act toward them in any way that brings him happiness, and often he alienates people further despite his best intentions. His insulation is in a sense a selfishness, a refusal to share himself, and at

the end of the novel we are meant to ask: Has he grown to the point where he can take chances or is he still holding himself aloof from the possibility of big changes and big decisions? While he seems content, he does not seem to be happy, and Frank's experience suggests that happiness may be elusive, especially for those who are not open to the risks that form a natural part of life.

The elusiveness of happiness is also emphasized in the book by the randomness of the events described in it. Herb Wallagher, the ex-football player paralyzed in a waterskiing accident; young Ralph Bascombe, who dies of Reye's disease at age nine; a shopping cart that shatters the glass in a phone booth Frank is using; Walter Lockett's suicide—all underscore the idea that life is arbitrary and tragic, and to love fully and unreservedly requires great skill. But to live as Frank does, closed off and self-absorbed, is a tragic way to try to stay safe, and he is contrasted with two women—his ex-wife and Vicki Arcenault—who have faced heartbreak and have begun to live again.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is the first person. The book is written through the voice of Frank Bascombe, a sportswriter who lost his son in the past few years and then was divorced. Frank tells his story in a way that gives the reader a feeling as though they are reading a private diary, or having a face to face discussion with a man who is in a great deal of pain. Frank tells his story while going through the mundane actions of his normal life, interviewing athletes, spending time with his children and his new girlfriend, and dealing with the struggle of these normal actions while fighting a deep depression.

The point of view of this novel is important because the novel is such an introspective story that it would make little sense if it was written in another point of view. The novel is not action driven, is not even about the action within the plot. The novel is about the feelings of this man as he goes about his daily life, just like anyone else. If the novel was written in the second or third person point of view, the reader would not be able to make sense of the story and would be left wondering what the point was to the narration as a whole.

Setting

The setting of this novel is New Jersey. Frank lives close to New York, but finds New York scary and uncomfortable. Instead, Frank finds New Jersey comfortable and laid back, a comfortable situation for himself and for his children. Frank feels at peace in New Jersey. In fact, Frank spends a great deal of time describing the small town mentality of the place where he lives, how everyone knows everyone else and how little crime there is. Frank lives in a place that he makes the reader feel is a modern day Mayberry. Later, however, Haddam takes on a sinister feel to Frank. After the death of Walter, Frank can no longer see the Mayberry quality of his home town and soon begins to feel as though the perfect atmosphere is fake and dangerous.

The setting of this novel is important because it is a contrast to the turmoil taking place inside of the main character. The setting is peaceful, friendly. Frank, however, is full of darkness, depressed over the death of his child and the end of his marriage. Frank is like a black cloud on a clear day. If the setting were darker, it might take away some of the impact of the darkness taking place inside of Frank as a character. Later, when Frank begins to lose his despair and gain some hope, the town begins to take on a more sinister air. The setting has changed to show the change in Frank. It is for these reasons that the setting works for this novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is precise English that at times is more complicated than necessary. It is not written in a simple language, but at times tends toward a highly educated, complicated prose. The words imply a highly educated writer who uses language to express his ideas in a colorful and intelligent way, using words for the sake of words. The language can slow down the reader's progress within the novel, making the novel more difficult to read than other more simplistic novels.

The language of this novel works for the narration because the narrator is a writer who uses words in his everyday life to make his living. Frank is well educated and this comes through clearly in his prose. However, the language can be difficult for the reader, making the novel difficult to read at times. The reader may struggle to get through the chapters, but the reader who appreciates words will find this novel exciting and colorful, an experience rather than a pastime.

Structure

The novel is divided into fourteen chapters and a final section entitled The End. Each chapter is about twenty to thirty pages long, following a linear story that is filled with many flashbacks. The narrator speaks directly to the reader at times, describing what he is doing and why at many points. The narration is told mostly in exposition with some dialogue sprinkled throughout the scenes that take place in the present time. Much of the novel takes place in the narrator's mind, expressing his memories, his thoughts, and his emotions.

The novel's plot is singular and linear. The book begins on Ralph's birthday, introducing the death of the narrator's son and his broken marriage. The book then follows the narrator through his daily activities over the next few days as he finds himself at a crossroads. There is a new woman in Frank's life, but his heart remains with his family. Frank wants to be a part of a family, wants to be married again, but finds himself unable to commit to this idea fully. Later, when this woman breaks up with Frank, he is momentarily lost, but soon comes to realize he does not need a woman to define who he is as Frank. Frank comes out the other end of his grief for his son and the quiet despair that has ruled his life.

Quotes

"My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter." Chap. 1, p. 3

"I wrote half of a short novel soon after we moved here from New York and then put it in the drawer, where it has been ever since, and from which I don't expect to retrieve it unless something I cannot now imagine happens." Chap. 1, p. 3

"I hear the bells of St. Leo the Great chime six o'clock, and for some reason I have a feeling I won't see her for a long time, that something is over and something begun, though I cannot tell you for the life of me what those somethings might be." Chap. 1, p. 23

"All we really want is to get to the point where the past can explain nothing about us and we can get on with life. Whose history can ever reveal very much. In my view Americans put too much emphasis on their pasts as a way of defining themselves, which can be death-dealing."
Chap. 2, p. 24

"It must happen to thousands of people that a late calling is missed, with everything afterwards done halfway—a sense of accomplishment stillborn." Chap. 2, p. 44

"And if I could make the moment last—lost in the anticipation of a safe trip, a fatal crash, a howling success, a grinding bitter failure—I would, and never leave this airport, never gain on or rejoin myself, and never know what's to come, the way you always have to know, though it's only the same, the same you waiting." Chap. 3, p. 73

"Detroit, city of lost industrial dreams, floats out around us like a mirage of some sane and glaciated life." Chap. 5, p. 115

"Pity, in other words, for himself, and as justly earned as a game ball. Only I do not want to feel it and won't. It is too close to regret to play fast and loose with. And the only thing worse than terrible regret is unearned terrible regret. And for that reason I will not bend to it, will, in fact, go on to the bottom with my own ship." Chap. 6, p. 164

"And I am left alone in my Malibu, staring at the glossy moon as if it were all of mystery and anticipation, all the things we are happy to leave and happier yet to see come toward us new again." Chap. 7, p. 179

"What I found, of course, when I got my feet under me was that I had about as much business teaching in college as a duck has riding a bicycle, since what was true was that in spite of my very best efforts I had nothing to teach." Chap. 9, p. 217

"And for a sudden moment my mind simply ceases—which isn't even so unusual, and there are times when nothing else will help." Chap. 10, p. 259

"Is life itself an illness or a syndrome? Who knows? We've all felt that way, I'm confident, since there's no way that could feel what hundreds of millions of other citizens haven't."
The End, p. 375

Adaptations

Ford read the first chapter of the novel for an audio version of his work produced by the American Audio Prose Library in 1986, and his voice is so completely the voice of Frank Bascombe that it could become impossible to read the novel—or indeed, anything else by Ford—without his calm, kind voice seeming to provide narration.

Key Questions

Ford's work has been said to be a powerful reflection of American life, although it often takes a bleak view of the possibilities for happiness in the modern world. General topics that might be considered for discussions of Ford's work are the strengths and culpable nature of his heroes, his views on the difficulty of relationships, and the accuracy with which he portrays everyday life and the psychological states of his characters.

1. Is Frank Bascombe an admirable character? Why or why not?
2. Why does Frank not refer to his ex-wife by name in the novel? Is there some psychological reason that might account for this? Is there a symbolic reason?
3. Does the novel have a conventional antagonist or villain? If not, what provides conflict?
4. Does Ford indicate why Frank behaves as he does? What psychological reasons might there be for the behavior and mind-set of his character?
5. What does *The Sportswriter* reveal to us about the society it depicts? Do you think Ford has accurately depicted contemporary America?
6. Some critics complain that Ford's women are not as fully developed as his male characters. How do you feel about Ford's depiction of Vicki and her role in the story? Is she realistic?
7. How does Ford use dialogue and dialect to bring his characters to life?
8. How does Ford incorporate Frank's occupation into the novel? In what thematic ways is sportswriting important?

What does the occupation tell us about Frank's character?
9. How is the character of Walter Lockett important to the story?
10. What do you think will happen to Frank at the conclusion of the novel? Do you believe he has changed in any significant ways? How?

Topics for Discussion

How does Ralph's death affect Frank's life? Can all of Frank's problems be traced back to Ralph's death? What about the end of Frank's marriage? What caused the marriage to fail? Was it Frank's affairs or was it his refusal to share his emotions with his wife? What is the difference? Why is this distinction important to the theme of the novel?

Why does Frank have multiple affairs? What does Frank mean when he says that he attempted to immerse himself in the lives of these women? Why does Frank do this? Why is Frank unhappy with his own life, the definition he has of himself?

What does Frank hope to get out of his relationship with Vicki? Why does this relationship go sour? What does Frank do to change Vicki's mind about him? Why does Frank want to be friends with Vicki's father and brother? How does that affect Frank's relationship with Vicki?

Why does Walter tell Frank about his night with Warren? Why does Frank react the way he does? Are Walter and Frank friends? How does Frank feel about Walter? How does Frank feel about Walter's night with Warren? How does this affect Frank's relationship with Vicki?

Why does Walter kill himself? Is Walter in love with Frank? Do you think Frank turning Walter down is a direct link to Walter taking his life? Why or why not? Should Frank feel guilty? Does he? Why does Frank go to Walter's apartment? How does this affect him?

Why does Frank want to remarry his ex-wife? Is Frank still in love with his ex-wife? Or is Frank in love with the normalcy of marriage? Why is this? What do you think would have happened if Frank had rekindled his relationship with his ex-wife? Would it have worked better the second time? Why or why not?

In the end Frank moves to Florida. Why does Frank do this? Is it Walter's death that has changed Frank's outlook? Is it his new relationship? Or is it a change in location? Is Frank happy now? Why does he mention that he believes he has finally finished grieving for Ralph? Do you think his grief for Ralph has been the basis for all of Frank's trouble? Is so, why does he deny this in the beginning of the novel?

Literary Precedents

In its story of a decent man who is confronted by a world beyond his ken and who retreats into himself, Ford is drawing from many predecessors. Henry David Thoreau is a forefather of Frank Bascombe, and his *Walden* (1854) describes beautifully the lives of quiet desperation that Frank exemplifies.

Another significant American predecessor is Ernest Hemingway, who in his short stories—particularly those featuring the character Nick Adams—and in his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1927; please see separate entry) roams similar terrain. Hemingway's heroes are often men much put upon by life and trying to forge connections in a hostile world. Like John Updike, whose Harry Angstrom in the "Rabbit" novels is also considered a prototypical modern American male character, Ford has returned to his narrator at several different stages in his life to assess his current situation.

The most important literary forebear, however, is Walker Percy, acknowledged by Ford as a tremendous influence on his style and worldview. *The Sportsivriter* might even be seen as a contemporary retelling of Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961; please see separate entry); the similarity of title is only the most obvious connection between the works.

Binx Boiling, the title character of Percy's novel, also seeks meaning or forgetfulness through contact with women, and *The Moviegoer* takes place against the backdrop of Lent and Mardi Gras, although it makes greater symbolic use of the religious trappings of the season than does *The Sportsivriter*.

Related Titles

The sequel to *The Sportswriter* is *Independence Day*, a novel that finds Frank Bascombe plying a new trade—realtor—and wrestling with a new set of problems: a girlfriend to whom he finds it difficult to make a commitment; his son Paul, who may be emotionally disturbed; and his relationship to his ex-wife Ann. Like *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day* takes place in and around Haddam, New Jersey, a fictional suburb similar to Princeton, over a symbolic holiday weekend—in this case, as might be inferred from the title, July Fourth—and follows Frank through a particularly challenging three days that lead him toward greater engagement with life.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994