

# **Stone Mattress: Nine Tales Study Guide**

## **Stone Mattress: Nine Tales by Margaret Atwood**

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# Plot Summary

“Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” is a collection of nine short stories by Margaret Atwood. The stories nearly all occur in the contemporary world, and all have many themes in common with one another, including aging, death, horror, the past, and the duality of fantasy and reality. The first three stories of the collection – “Alphinland”, “Revenant”, and “Dark Lady” – form a trilogy of sorts, revolving around the same characters over a period of several years. In “Alphinland”, Constance Starr, author of the famous Alphinland fantasy series, has difficulty distinguished reality from the fantasy of her novels, and distinguishing the present from the past as she imagines her recently deceased husband, Ewan, is still with her. This causes her to reflect on the past, and a relationship with the cruel poet, Gavin.

In “Revenant”, the aged Gavin – who has married a very young, stunningly beautiful woman named Reynolds – prepares for an interview with a graduate student that his wife has arranged. Naveena, the student, wants to interview Gavin about his poetry, specifically about his decades-past relationship with Constance. This annoys Gavin, because he hates delving into the past and because he has long wondered what would have happened if he had stayed with Constance. Gavin becomes upset, and following a nap, trips, falls and suffers a fatal heart attack. In “Dark Lady”, Jorrie, a girl who once dated Gavin and served as a muse, attends his funeral. There, she makes peace with Constance while a delighted Naveena looks on. Jorrie and Constance have long blamed one another for their not ending up with Gavin.

In “Lusus Naturae”, a girl with a genetic and mental condition – where hair forms all over her body and she behaves like a cat – is seen as an embarrassment to everyone in her family, except her father who insists she is a human being. The family decides that, in order to maintain its status and the girl’s younger sister’s chances of marrying, the girl with the disorder will be “killed”. A funeral is held. Years pass. When she is seen out and about one night, a mob forms to hunt down and kill the girl, who is believed to have risen from the grave.

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom”, Sam and his wife, Gwyneth, have broken up. Gwyneth insists the marriage is over. Sam, who sells furniture and uses his business as a front for smuggling drugs, goes to bid on a storage units unclaimed by owners. One of the units Sam wins contains an old wedding cake, wedding-related items, and a dead man who appears to have been freeze-dried and wrapped in several layers of plastic. The owner of the unit belatedly shows up, begging to triple Sam’s bid and to sleep with him in exchange for silence. Sam takes her up on her offer, but instead kills her.

In “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”, Charis has a dream about a woman named Zenia, where Zenia appears as a vampire. Charis and her best friends, Tony and Roz, each had a man stolen from them by Zenia. Only Charis remains with her man, Billy, who her dog ends up attacking. It is revealed that Billy was a cruel and callous man who preyed upon women for their wealth, leading Charis and her friends to

consider that the dog is Zenia reincarnated, and that in life, Zenia sought to save them by taking away the cruel men in their lives.

In “The Dead Hand Loves You”, Jack, author of the eponymous novel that has made him famous, is forced to share his earnings with his three former roommates, who accepted shares in the story in lieu of Jack’s back rent. Jack now detests the arrangement, especially because his former roommate and lover, Irena, has led the legal charge against him. Jack prepares to murder all of his roommates the way the dead hand did in his novel, but instead learns that Irena is in love with him. Instead of killing her, he plans to propose to her.

In “Stone Mattress”, Verna takes revenge on the popular high school kid, Bob, who got her drunk, slept with her, impregnated her, and left her years before by murdering him on an Arctic cruise decades later. In “Torching the Dusties”, the elderly Wilma and Tobias barely escape their nursing home in time as leftwing protestors torch the place, killing its inhabitants in the name of making room for the young.



# Alphinland – Revenant

## Summary

Alphinland - Constance watches the freezing rain fall down while she imagines Ewan watching television. Constance finds the icy conditions beautiful, even though they are dangerous. Likewise, she dislikes the HDTV that Ewan has purchased because it shows the flaws of people in sharp detail, from pores to hairs. Two weather reporters warn people about the treacherous conditions from the winter storm. Constance says the word “Alphinland” out loud, and it is revealed that Ewan is dead of cancer. Oftentimes, she can hear his voice. She doesn’t sleep well without him, and cannot get rid of his clothing. Her sons and their wives have urged her to move into a retirement condo, but she has refused. Ewan’s voice assures Constance she is not crazy, and that she needs salt.

Using a flashlight and sprinkling ash from the fireplace, Constance begins walking to the corner store. She imagines following the ashes home, like one might in her mental idea of the fantasy Alphinland. She begins to wonder which of her characters will be associated with ash, and why. Milzreth the Red Hand might because he is a deceiver, she figures. When Constance arrives at the corner store, she learns they are out of salt. Ewan’s voice suggests cat litter instead, so Constance purchases cat litter. She also buys two candles and matches just in case power goes out. Back home, Constance puts on her husband’s old bathrobe and commits to working on Alphinland, an ongoing multiyear effort of dozens of short stories. She refuses to acknowledge him as actually being dead.

Constance recalls beginning work on Alphinland when she dated an unkind poet named Gavin who criticized her Alphinland stories as being juvenile nonsense years before. Much of Constance’s past is worked into Alphinland in some way. Gavin now has a very young wife named Reynolds and lives on the Canadian Pacific coast. Constance knows in her own younger days, she herself was radiantly beautiful, and works this into the character of Pheromonya of the Sapphire Tresses. As she works on the current story, she imagines the trail of ash through the woods. Ewan suddenly tells her to shut down the computer, which she does. Seconds later, the power goes out. She has an erotic dream about Gavin that night, which Ewan becomes jealous about the next morning. He disappears after her morning trip to the corner store. She considers that Ewan only came back to warn her about the power outage, but has now gone elsewhere. Terrified, she thinks Gavin has somehow gotten out while Ewan has been sucked in – and Constance is determined to go after him.

Revenant – Gavin Putnam’s much younger, beautiful wife Reynolds brings him to see a production of Shakespeare’s “Richard III” in the park, before which is shown a video clip of Richard’s long-lost skeleton being discovered under a parking lot just recently. Gavin is annoyed with the production, finding it horribly done. At home in Florida, Reynolds dotes on Gavin, always doing whatever she can to make him comfortable. Her bright



bubbly nature annoys Gavin, especially when she gives him nicknames according to his mood, such as Mr. Grumpy. She reminds him he has a meeting with a graduate student named Naveena from Iowa who will be writing a thesis on his poetry. Gavin knows by now that Reynolds is only with him for his fame and money. She tells him to stop complaining, which prompts Gavin to say he should have married Constance. Reynolds tells him to suck it up, that he married her instead.

Naveena arrives and sits with Gavin. Naveen is pretty, of Indian descent, and very much a fan of Gavin's work. She explains she is focusing on Gavin's riverboat years in the 1960s, when he wrote "Sonnets for My Lady". Gavin dismisses it as amateur work from when he was twenty-six. Naveena explains that it relates to her thesis about the Alphinland stories by Constance Starr. Gvain suddenly thinks Reynolds has cruelly set him up. Naveena explains she is studying symbolism, neo-representation, and world-building through studying the fantasy of Constance because it is more effectively done through fantasy fiction than realistic fiction. Gavin cannot understand what he is talking about, but knows he has been set up. Reynolds enters the room with tea, and suggests showing Gavin the film clips Naveena Dropboxed to her. The film is shown, and includes a much younger Gavin with Constance, some poet friends, and a theater stage.

Naveena speaks glowingly about Constance's work and love for Gavin. She then shows an interview in which people dressed up like Star Trek characters praise Constance and her work. They also speak about her real-life inspirations, in which Constance admits she has put an old boyfriend into her work. Naveena has whittled the potential character down to six, and wants to know which one represents Gavin. Gavin fires back by insisting that maybe he was written out altogether, or that he is based on a later character. He becomes enraged that someone is going through his private things and his old life, causing him to shout. Naveena excuses herself while Reynolds explains that Gavin "gets like that sometimes". It infuriates Gavin, who goes outside to nap on a lawn chair. Returning inside hours later, he stumbles, falls, hits his head, and has a stroke. The emergency team is late in coming. Gavin dies with thoughts of Constance on his mind.

## Analysis

"Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales" is a collection of nine short stories by Margaret Atwood. The stories nearly all occur in the contemporary world, and all have many themes in common with one another, including aging, death, horror, the past, and the duality of fantasy and reality. From the very first two stories, the theme of aging takes a central place. Constance Starr, author of the wildly famous Alphinland stories, finds herself at an advanced age, though she is still quite independent and able to care for herself. She remains committed to her work, though old age imposes its limits on her.

Meanwhile, Gavin himself feels the effects of old age, being far more unhealthy and irritable than Constance. His advanced age ultimately works against him, leading to a trip, a fall, and a fatal heart attack. His much younger wife, Reynolds, while obviously



enjoying being antagonistic toward Gavin, actually loves him. She panics to learn that the paramedics are delayed – an indignity the elderly often suffer. Such indignities will be especially dramatic and dangerous by the last story in the collection.

Both Gavin and Constance reflect on the past in their stories. The past itself becomes an important theme in the novel, as the past is something that never truly goes away. For Constance, the past is something constantly with her (note the name “Constance” and the word “constant”). She has conversations with her dead husband, whom she loved dearly and deeply feels the absence of. Gavin, meanwhile, is forced to look into the past by Naveena and Reynolds. Gavin hates the past, and hates having his private life pried into. He is especially troubled by the fact that he never took Constance more seriously, or fought to keep her. For Constance, the past is haunting and sad; for Gavin, the past is humiliating and full of regrets.

Constance’s own remembrance of the past brings to light the dual theme of fantasy and reality. Constance’s work as a writer is highly specialized in fantasy. Her Alphinland novels are pure works of fantasy into which she incorporates elements of the real world. For example, cruel people in Constance’s life end up as enemies in Alphinland. Everything Constance does in her life ends up being worked into the Alphinland stories somehow – such as the simple act of spreading ashes on the ice. Likewise, fantasy seems to consume Constance in the conversations she has with her dead husband, and in her pledge to delve into Alphinland to find him. Somewhere, the line between reality and fantasy becomes blurred to Constance, but it does not seem to too deeply affect her writing or her living in the real world.

The theme of horror is also present, though very subtle in these two stories, apparent itself through the theme of death. The death of Constance’s husband means that Constance inhabits a dark, surreal world in which reality and fantasy blend together, and in which she disappears into her own world of Alphinland. The darkness of her life – as a prospect of aging and a consequence of death – is in and of itself something of a common, daily horror that all people face. Meanwhile, the horror in Gavin’s story comes at the point that he is helpless whereas he once dominated others. Powerless against the patronizing and condescending antagonism of Reynolds, and the prying of Naveena, Gavin’s horror is one of aging and one that occurs on a daily basis. The reader can tell he wants to fight back, but instead of defending himself, he dies.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Constance seem to have difficulty discerning reality from fantasy? Does this appear to be more of a hindrance or something harmless? Explain.

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Constance mostly look so favorably upon the past, while Gavin looks so unhappily at the past? How does the past affect the present lives of both individuals?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Gavin become so annoyed by Naveena's questions about his past? Why is Gavin in turn annoyed at Reynolds for setting up the interview? How does Gavin respond to the situation at large? Why?

## Vocabulary

crystallizes, sodden, feebly, solemnifies, euphemism, communal, provenance, ironic, satirical, vigorous, impromptu, mortification, juvenile, dysfunctional, subjectivism, metonymous, impervious, rancorous, recriminations, deferentially, enumerates, tumultuous, abrades





# Dark Lady – Lustus Naturae

## Summary

Dark Lady – The elderly Marjorie (“Jorrie”) reads obituaries every morning. She now makes a social life by attending funerals with her twin brother, Martin (“Tin”). The two do almost everything together. They even know what the other may be talking about when no one else does, which annoys others. They have had a difficult childhood, dealing with a mother who stole money from them to drink following the death of their father. Jorrie and Tin often reflect on how they used to intentionally antagonize their mother because of this. While looking through the obituaries one morning, Jorrie discovers that Gavin has died. Jorrie used to be a bookkeeper for the Riverboat, so she knew Gavin and numerous other poets who spent time there. She reflects on how she inspired Gavin to write a suite of poetry called “The Dark Lady”.

She remembers being thrilled when the poetry is published in “The Dirt” magazine. She also remembers having sex with Gavin, and being caught by Constance. Jorrie also reflects on how badly Gavin felt about Constance afterwards, and remembers telling him to deal with it, after which Gavin ditched Jorrie. Jorrie remembers how Gavin’s later poems about her slammed her. In the present, Tin cautions Jorrie about going to Gavin’s funeral. Tin contends that Jorrie is jealous she never won out with Gavin in the end, and that another woman won him over. Tin reluctantly agrees to attend the funeral with Jorrie, though he is worried the entire funeral will end up being about Constance – both in terms of publicity, and in terms of Jorrie’s mindset.

The funeral service gets underway, but neither Jorrie nor Tin can see Constance. Tin can see Reynolds, however, and is amazed at how young she is. The service is marked by readings of Gavin’s poetry. Naveena gives a brief eulogy about meeting Gavin just before he died. Afterwards, refreshments are had. It is then that Jorrie sees Constance and Reynolds speaking together with Naveena about Gavin and Alphinland. Reynolds has genuinely been upset by Gavin’s death, and doesn’t want to talk about Alphinland. Meanwhile, Constance and Jorrie begin talking, both realizing that Gavin is to blame for the disharmony between them. As the women apologize to each other for the past, Naveena looks on with hungry delight.

Lusus Naturae – The narrator, a young woman, is beautiful but mentally and genetically disabled. She often mews to herself, and her entire body is covered in hair. Her family, wealth and almost part of the gentry, considers what to do about the narrator. Her mother considers it is a punishment to have given birth to such a girl, while the young woman’s grandmother considers it a curse. The young woman’s father blames it on her measles at the age of seven, after which time the doctor pronounced her a “lusus naturae”, a “freak of nature”. The young woman’s father says she is a human being, not a freak. Her sister knows no one will marry her if they found out about the young woman. The family officially tells friends and neighbors the young woman has a wasting illness. While no one in the family wants to be near the young woman, the cat does.



The family decides the young woman must die. They stage her death and a funeral, and bury a coffin full of straw into the ground. The young woman now senses her family relaxing. She begins to live by night, getting out into the world, and living as much as she can without being seen by anyone. Her grandmother and father die, after which time her mother sells the house and moves in with her now-married sister and her husband's very wealthy family. The narrator takes to pretending to be a ghost, chasing out the new occupants. She steals food by night, and drinks the blood of hens. Yet in the mirror, the narrator sees herself as a pretty, innocent young girl that she used to be. Out in the woods, she finds a young couple having sex each night. On one night, the young man falls asleep and remains behind. The narrator seeks to kiss him, but he awakens, runs to the village, and turns out a mob against the narrator. Among the mob is her sister and her sister's new family. The young narrator knows she is finished, so she wears a virginal white funeral dress, and looks forward to Heaven.

## Analysis

In the third story in the Constance-Gavin trilogy, the reader meets Jorrie, who herself had a love affair with Gavin many years before. Like Constance and Gavin, she looks back at the past in her story. But unlike Gavin and Constance, Jorrie is primarily agitated by the past. Jorrie wanted to end up with Gavin, and feels run over by Constance. For Jorrie, the past is also a cause for revenge. And death provides the means for her to do it.

Death is central to Jorrie's life. She attends funerals to keep her social life alive. Gavin's death is what brings together Jorrie and Constance in the present, but also brings to life memories of the past. At first seeking revenge, Jorrie and Constance end up making up over the past, and letting it go. This is stunning to Jorrie's brother, and serves to be a source of almost malicious delight for Naveena, who may now expand her thesis.

While death solves the problem of Jorrie's past, it does not entirely solve the problem of the narrator of "Lusus Naturae". In fact, it complicates the life of the narrator of "Lusus Naturae". Although the young woman is obviously human – so staunchly pointed out by her father – her nature, covered by hair and possessing a partly-functioning mind – compels her family to make it appear as if she has died in order to increase marital prospects for the young woman's younger sister. This, interestingly, is temporarily freeing for the young woman, who is able to more freely move about the house and the land at night.

Fantasy and reality also clash through death in "Lusus Naturae". The reader should note, however, that the burial of the empty casket – a fantasy death – is actually a harbinger for her real death. The young woman lives almost in a fantasy world, having pretended to be a monstrous ghost and then rushing through the woods at night as if no one or nothing could harm her. However, when she is seen, a mob forms to dig up the casket. When the casket is found to be empty, the mob theorizes fantastically that the young woman has risen from the grave – a fantasy, they think, horribly come true – and



head out to kill her. The theme of horror is more strongly sensed here, as the deepest fears of the villagers seem to have come to pass.

The young woman's decision to die in her virginal white dress is a statement of innocence, of misunderstanding, and of never having actually done anything wrong. Her death is twice a sacrifice to protect her family – one death in fantasy, one death in reality. The young woman does not try to protest her innocence, knowing her sister is among them and wanting to protect her sister.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does the young narrator of “Lusus Naturae” seek to sacrifice herself twice – once to a fake death, once to real death at the hands of a mob?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jorrie seek to attend Gavin's funeral in the first place? What happens instead? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does the family of the narrator in “Lusus Naturae” decide to stage her death? Do you believe their reasoning and decision to do so is appropriate? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

agile, occiput, assiduously, jettisoned, languor, alliterative, sporadically, maladroit, retaliatory, reminiscent, eddying, allusion, imperturbably, lugubriously, gentry, affliction



# The Free-Dried Groom – I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth

## Summary

The Freeze-Dried Groom – Sam and his wife, Gwyneth, have grown distant to the point where she tells him their marriage is over. Sam knows she is not joking or merely arguing, so he begins packing. He is angry and upset, knowing this was coming for a while, but still wondering what he could have done differently. As he begins to gather some of his things, Sam thinks about how just one day before, everything seemed relatively normal. As he leaves the house, he is angered by the fact that Gwyneth is so calm and is eating breakfast. A cold snap from the polar vortex means Sam's car won't start. He must ask Gwyneth for a jump from her car. Sam thinks about how they first met at the antique shop he is a partner in, and how Gwyneth was a chance for him to settle down while Sam was a chance for her to liven up her life a little.

Sam drives to his shop, Metrazzle, on Queen Street. His business partner, Ned, is sorry to hear about Sam's marriage. Ned reveals a client in a leather jacket has been in about a reproduction Directoire desk. The man has left a down payment of one hundred dollars, and a penciled address for unit 56 on Gardiner in Mississauga. Sam then tells Ned he is heading out to a storage unit auction. He wins five auctions, including for 56. Saving 56 for last, Sam begins exploring his units. One contains a hideous old wedding dress, prompting Sam to wonder who would leave a wedding dress in a storage unit, and prompting Sam to wonder where Gwyneth has kept her dress all these years. The unit is full of wedding items, including an old cake, a bed, and a dead groom wrapped in several layers of plastic, appearing to have been freeze-dried. Sam locks the unit, wanting to check 56 before he calls the police.

Just then, a woman arrives, telling him there has been a mistake and that she'll double what he paid for the unit. He realizes this woman must be the bride. He tells her he has not yet opened the unit. She explains it is full of old family items and furniture, nothing of value or interest. She offers to triple the price, and go out to dinner with Sam. Sam realizes he is having fun baiting the woman, and reminds her the unit will have to be cleared. When she leaves, Sam checks 56. It contains knock-off furniture, in which cocaine has been placed. Sam and the woman then meet at the Silver Knight Hotel, where Sam confesses to having looked inside. The woman explains her fiancée liked rough sex, and enjoyed being strangled, and that the night before the wedding, it went too far. Sam and the woman go up to a hotel room, where they begin to have rough sex. Sam then moves to kill her, realizing that nobody knows where he is.

I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth – Roz, Charis, and Tony, three middle-aged friends, take their weekly walk with Charis's black-and-white mutt, Ouida. Charis admits to having had a dream about Zenia. Charis says time is different in her dreams because nobody is really dead. Tony is a professor emeritus and likes things to be neat and



orderly, so Charis's dream confuses her. She asks about what Zenia was wearing, to which Charis explains she wore a white shroud, and that her teeth were kind of pink like a vampire. Many years before, as Charis reflects, Zenia had stolen a man from each of them, having invented stories to wheedle her way into their lives. Charis's own man, Billy, had been involved in a strange situation where all of their chickens had been killed, with Billy and Zenia blaming it on each other.

Ouida has been a gift to Charis from Tony and Roz, for the purposes of companionship and protection from her current boyfriend, Billy. Ouida does not like Billy, and neither do Tony and Roz. They fear he may harm Charis. Charis begins having visits from Zenia regularly, where she warns Charis about things, including to watch out for a person with a name that has a Y in it. Charis asks Billy about the chicken incident, during which time Ouida attacks Billy after blaming Zenia. It is believed that Ouida is Zenia reincarnated. Charis explains that perhaps Zenia was never bad like they thought, but good to begin with. She and her friends come to consider that perhaps Zenia was merely rescuing them from bad men. Roz, a lawyer, handles Billy to ensure he cannot press charges against Charis, using information from a private detective gathered against Billy indicating he is a matron-fleecer. Billy has since disappeared.

## Analysis

The theme of horror emerges front and center with these two stories. In "The Freeze-Dried Groom", Sam uncovers a horrific find at an auctioned storage unit – a dead groom. This is an horrific find in and of itself, but Sam's meeting with the bride-to-be is just as disconcerting. While she claims the fiancée's death to have been a sexual accident, Sam is not entirely convinced. This is especially true given the demise of his own marriage. Sam's anger and resentment toward his wife plays out in his decision to murder the bride-to-be, and perhaps in some form of revenge for the dead groom. Sam clearly sees himself in the dead groom, though Sam himself is something of the walking dead: the divorce has left him emotionally murdered. It will be a horrific end for the bride-to-be as it was for the groom.

In "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth", the theme of horror is more psychological than physical. Charis dreams of Zenia, a woman who once tried to steal Billy away from her, and who stole away the men in the lives of Tony and Roz as well. The horror here is that Zenia comes in Charis's dreams to deliver warnings about Billy, later to possess the dog in order to attack Billy and to save Charis. The horror is not so much the dark and cryptic warnings of Zenia, but that the dead have the ability to overpower the living.

The living in these two stories are also aging. Charis, Tony, and Roz are three women who have now reached middle-age, while Sam and his wife have been married for several years. Sam and his wife have aged radically in terms of their feelings toward one another, more so than their actual physical appearance. The attraction merited in the youth of their relationship has faded out, with Gwyneth clearly less affected by the



demise of the marriage than Sam. Sam, while no morally upstanding person himself, certainly feels aggrieved by the way time has allowed things to turn out.

The past thus becomes incredibly important to Charis and Sam as they both look back over their respective lives. Charis recalls events of years before as they relate to Zenia, Billy, Roz, and Tony. She does this in order to gain perspective on the present, and why Zenia might be visiting her in her dreams. For Sam, the recalling of the past is forced and a way of dealing with the traumatic shock of Gwyneth's call for a divorce. For Sam, even the previous twenty-four hours seem as if they occurred years before, and yet only seconds before. The past is haunting to Sam, just the way the bride-to-be is haunted by her past with her groom.

In many ways, the bride-to-be is living in a fantasy world. If it is true that the death of her husband-to-be was actually accidental, this is especially apparent in that she keeps her groom, and all of the wedding materials, in a storage unit that she visits. It is as if she is teetering on the edge of a world she will never know – the life of a married woman. That she would keep living that fantasy rather than turning herself into the police and making things right is evidence of her warped sense of reality. While the reader may dismiss dreams of Zenia, and her reincarnation into a dog as fantasy, for Charis and her friends, this is a very real thing.

## Discussion Question 1

Charis and Sam both recall the past in their respective stories. Why is this so? How does the past appear to each of them? How does their past affect their present?

## Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast fantasy and reality for Charis in “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth” and the bride-to-be in “The Freeze-Dried Groom”. How does their perception of reality and fantasy affect them and cause them to live their lives?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe Sam kills the bride-to-be?

## Vocabulary

polar vortex, begrudging, ignominiously, petulantly, segues, abject, studiously, insouciant, lechery, façade, insinuating, autophagic, intracellular, genteel, jovial



# The Dead Hand Loves You – Stone Mattress

## Summary

The Dead Hand Loves You – Jack Dace is very angry over a contract he signed when he was twenty-two and in college in the 1960s. Short on cash, into drugs, and behind three months on rent money, Jack signed a contract with three roommates in lieu of rent money. The contract stipulates that a quarter of proceeds from the novel he was then working on would go to each of them. The novel, “The Dead Hand Loves You”, became a timeless international horror classic, twice made into films and still selling phenomenally. The other roommates (Jaffrey and Rod), led by Irena, have all lawyered up to see that the contract remains in effect. Jack knows he would have never signed the contract if he wasn’t desperate and hungover.

“The Dead Hand Loves You” involves a gorgeous but cruel girl named Violet (based on Irena) who jilts her handsome fiancée William (based on Jack) for a wealthy man named Alf (based on Jaffrey). William is wounded in a duel, and dying, request his right hand be cut off and buried beside the park bench where he and Violet used to spend so much time together. William’s landlady carries out the deed, placing a crucifix over the burial. Violet does not attend the funeral. Sometime later, before Alf and Violet are to be married, a child unknowingly removes the crucifix, setting the stage for the hand’s revenge. It leaves a note of love, signed William, on Violet’s pillow. The hand is seen, causing Violet to assume it is a spider and scream. The hand goes on to copy her handwriting in her diary, describing Alf as a bad lover, and indicating an affair with the unattractive economist, Roland (based on Rod). Violet and Alf believe they have been played by Roland, leading Alf to murder Roland. Alf is killed by the hand, while Violet reaches out to the hand in love.

Jack remembers how the novel was accepted for publication quickly, and how everyone celebrated. He remembers a failed relationship with Irena restarting, and Irena beginning to dictate how he ran his life. He remembers trying to avoid the contract for a long time, until Irena actually read the novel and realized he wasn’t giving any money to Rod or Jaffrey. Following this, Jack recalls Irena breaking up with him and getting lawyers involved. In the present, a miniseries, tie-in video game, and symposium are being planned, which means more money, more sales, and more division of the profits.

Jack decides to kill his three former friends. He learns that Rod is dying of pancreatic cancer. His share is due to go to Irena. He learns from Jaffrey that Irena was actually read the book as it was being written, loved it, and loved Jack. She left him because he did not want to settle down, using the book as an excuse. Jaffrey and Irena briefly married, with the divorce settlement including Jaffrey’s share of the novel. Jaffrey reveals he thinks Irena is still in love with Jack. Jack arranges to have dinner with Irena. Irena confesses forcing the contract was never about the money, but about staying



connected. She admits she loved the book. Jack says he will be sending her a bouquet of red roses, and a proposal, the following day.

Stone Mattress – Verna Pritchard takes a vacation on which she intends to enjoy herself, rather than to kill anyone. She take a train to reach an Arctic cruise ship. On the train, she seeks out older men she can flirt with. With cosmetic surgery and exercise, she looks ten years younger even though she herself is getting older. She knows the men on the train are business and academic professionals. She looks at the name tags on the men she sees, and notes there are quite a few Bobs. She zeroes in on Bob Goreham, who some fifty years before was the most popular kid in their school, star football player, wealthy, and handsome. Verna, three years younger, remembers being in love with Bob, or at least what she thought was love at the time. She knows Bob only saw her as a sex object, and spread rumors about Verna giving it up afterwards especially when Verna ended up pregnant. She was sent away to a school for unwed mothers to have her baby. Since then she has been married several times to wealthy men with heart conditions. Verna is horrified to see that Bob does not remember her.

Verna reveals she is a very successful physiotherapist. Bob relates that his own wife has recently died, but he has happy kids and happy grandkids. It angers Verna to think he has had such a normal life. She decides to kill him during an onshore visit while on the cruise part of the journey. Verna and the others board the Resolute II. She and Bob exchange room numbers, after which Verna buys a pair of cheap gloves in the ship's gift shop. The next day, the guests of the cruise will be taken to see the world's earliest known fossilized stromatolites, essentially stone-like mattress layers of blue-green algae.

Verna decides that she will kill him while ashore looking for such stone mattresses, but also decides she will let him live he if recognizes her and apologizes to her. While ashore, Bob does recognize her from high school, and smirks. This enrages Verna, who beats him to death with a miniature stromatolite. She then takes all of his personal possessions back to the ship, including his room key, making it appear as if Bob made it back safely aboard. She will continue to move things around in his room to make it look as if Bob is still safely aboard. At the end of the voyage, the only possible conclusion will be that Bob fell overboard while trying to photograph the Northern Lights.

## Analysis

Horror continues to be a dominant theme in these two stories. Horror appears in two ways in Jack's case in the "The Dead Hand Loves You". There is horror at the most basic, fundamental level in the novel that he writes about a severed hand committing murders and seeking revenge on those who have wrong its owner; and then there is a more nuanced horror in Jack believing he has been taken advantage of by way of the contract, leading him to deciding to kill his three former roommates.

The horror in "Stone Mattress" is of a more cutthroat, graphic nature, in which Verna murders the man who once used her sexually and threw her away decades before. The





horror here is not merely in the murder, but in the setting: a violent killing is committed among the beautiful folds of Arctic nature among the oldest fossils on Earth. The oldest crime on Earth – murder – should be noted as having been committed among them. While Verna knows Bob from years before, the subtle horror is that anyone that someone meets may turn out to be a murderer.

The horrors that Jack seeks to commit, that Jack has written about in fantasy, and the murder that Verna carries out, are all directly attributable to the past. Here, the past continues to be an important and highly influential thematic aspect of the novel. Verna's past experiences with Bob – his throwing her away after using her sexually and impregnating her – in part compel Verna to kill him. Jack's most famous novel was written decades before the events in the short story, and his decision to kill his roommates over the contract comes about by the signing of that contract decades before.

As Jack and Verna both age, the past continues to eat away at them in different ways. For Jack, it is the knowledge that all of his success must be divided up into fours and paid out to his roommates. He is essentially being taxed at a 75% rate for the work he has done. As he ages, he considers this less and less fair, as his former roommates have made windfall profits for doing essentially nothing.

Verna, as she ages, recognizes that she still looks ten years younger, that she isn't the beauty she used to be anymore, but still does well compared to other women her age. She uses this youthful aged appearance to her advantage in dealing with Bob. Death is the surest way to deal with Bob. As mentioned previously, that the world's oldest crime should be committed among the world's oldest geological formations is symbolically fitting. Death seems to be the only fitting way to handle the past for Jack, his character of William, and Verna. But whereas Verna follows through with the killing, neither Jack nor William can do the same. Jack's fantasies of murder – both in his novel and in real life – do not withstand the facts of reality. William's hand embraces Violet rather than killing her, while Jack ends up proposing to Irena instead of killing her. Here, fantasy and reality blend together in the way that Jack has populated his novel with characters based on real-life counterparts, and in the way that Jack refuses to kill but rather embraces Irena.

## Discussion Question 1

How do fantasy and reality affect both the story in which Jack appears, and the story that Jack writes? How do fantasy and reality come to a head for Jack? What does this compel him to do?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Verna seek to kill Bob? Why does Jack seek to kill his roommates? What compels Verna to follow through with her murderous intent while Jack ultimately refuses to do so?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does William's hand embrace Violet instead of going through with killing her? Why does Jack decide to propose to Irena instead of killing her?

## Vocabulary

mingy, nubile, wastrel, retrospective, transgressive, illusory, tedious, immodest, idyllic, ominous, sumptuousness, voluptuousness, palpitating, impetuous, elan vitale, sycophantic, materialism, dexterity, consecrated, pragmatic, harridan, seminal, indifference, admonishes, renounce, mirth, decrepit



# Torching the Dusties

## Summary

Wilma, resident at Ambrosia Manor nursing home, has Charles Bonnet's syndrome, where she sees people that aren't there. She is aware she has this issue, and calls the people she sees "Chuckies". Wilma's condition will ultimately lead to blindness, but she still has some sight left. Wilma is being romantically pursued by the aged Tobias, a self-professed ladies' man from Hungary back in the day. Wilma and Tobias meet for breakfast each morning, and get along well together. They talk about their youths and dealing with the indignities of old age. At breakfast one morning, they see some sort of protest occurring near the front gate. The crowd of fifty people are all young, and are trying to block a linens delivery. The police arrive to see the van through. The signs being held by the protestors have babies on them, and say "Time to Go" and "Our Turn".

The news carries reports of a group called Our Turn staging attacks on nursing homes wearing baby masks, and Tobias uses the internet to learn the group insists that it is their turn, that the older generations have wrecked the planet, and that the group is socialist in nature. They want the older generation to die. The group has gotten violent in other countries, Tobias explains. The group outside the gate has since grown to over a hundred people of all colors and genders. The police are not present. No one knows why. Everyone in the nursing home is on edge. They keep together in groups for safety in numbers. Tobias and Wilma eat dinner with Jo-Anne and Noireen. Wilma is a little jealous there isn't another man in the group. Tobias explains women live longer because they are less capable of indignation and better at being humiliated. He explains that old age is, in general, one long line of indignities.

Fears about the Manor being burned down are on everyone's mind. Tobias insists on not being caught off-guard. He says he has preparations to make. In the morning, the protestors have blockaded the gate, and the police are nowhere to be found. The staff has been ordered to leave. Tobias has everyone fill up their tubs with water should electricity be cut. An accounting is made of food. The news carries word that authorities are dealing with forest fires and other serious situations, and will soon be handling the protests against the elderly. Callers into a radio show speak for or against the elderlies. One hideous person declares everyone should "torch the dusties". Wilma receives a phone call from her daughter, Alyson, who is in a panic. She tells Alyson not to trouble herself. Before leaving, Katia, a young, sweet nurse comes in to say goodbye to Wilma, saying that the staff will be forced out if they don't leave. Wilma thanks her for everything as she leaves.

With the staff gone, the nursing home comes to life. Everyone pitches in to do work as they can. The advanced care unit has been locked, and cannot be accessed. Those in advanced care will die. A group of fifteen residents seeks to leave, but are turned back. Tobias tells Wilma to prepare to hide outside until everything is over. Under the cover of night, Wilma and Tobias head outside and take shelter in the lakeside gazebo some



distance from the main building. They watch as the Leftists surge in through the front and back gates, and burn down the nursing home with all the people still inside.

## Analysis

In the final story in the collection, horror again remains a central theme. In this instance, horror is presented not in the form of monsters, but in monstrous forms by way of Leftists and injustice, in victimizers and victims, and in the inability for the victims – arguably among the most vulnerable members of society – to fight back. Horror intertwines with the theme of age. The Socialists that “torch the dusties” (with “dusties” being a callous metaphor for the aged) specifically target the elderly because they are elderly. They have no respect for age, for the past, or for human life, and so they have no problem killing the elderly because they believe it will free up more resources for their own greedy consumption. They target the elderly because they know the elderly are frail and cannot fight back.

Ironically, the younger generations calling for the death of the elderly class will one day themselves be old. Youth does not last forever. Death comes for everyone in the end. The same deaths that the younger generations are meting out with one day be meted out to them as well. They are not merely unleashing a monstrous horror on the defenseless and aged people around the world, but they are preparing their own gallows as well. This is the subtle horror of the situation. However, not all the younger generation hates the elderly. The departing staff, ordered out under threat of violence, sympathize with, love, and respect the elderly. This can be seen in Katia’s tender goodbye to Wilma.

As Wilma and the elderly residents of Ambrosia Manor hunker down and do what they can to survive while the mob outside the gates grows, she and Tobias visit the past. All they have now, at this point, are their memories. Tobias recalls being a ladies’ man back in the day, and admits to wishing he could have met Wilma many years before. Wilma herself recalls more simple things – such as being able to take care of herself, and being independent. Such simple, tender memories form the basis of the memories that Wilma and Tobias have, and remind them of everything they have lost.

Ironically, the evacuation of the retirement staff compels the elderly to return, however briefly, and under a fantasy-like atmosphere, to return to their youths. They care for themselves, handle cooking, cleaning, and encouragement on their own, and see to it that they are able to get by – at least until the final attack comes. It almost seems fantasy that generations could be pitted against one another due to age, but in reality, this is nothing unheard of. The elderly are routinely discriminated against, and some have even become antagonistic and violent toward the elderly for the very same reasons listed in the short story, all based on reality.



## Discussion Question 1

How has aging affected the residents of Ambrosia Manor? How do the lives of Wilma and Tobias differ now from in the past?

## Discussion Question 2

Why have mobs descended on Ambrosia Manor? What are their chief complaints against the elderly? Why do they seek to burn down nursing homes and kill the elderly?

## Discussion Question 3

How do Tobias and Wilma attempt to cope with aging during normal times? How do they come to cope with aging following the arrival of angry mobs beyond the gates?

## Vocabulary

archaic, protracted, innuendo, tactful, gallantry, malevolent, ostentatious, sepulchral, escrivoire, grotesquely, vivacious, blockaded, frivolous



# Characters

## Constance

Constance Starr features primarily in the story “Alphinland”, and peripherally in the stories “Revenant” and “Dark Lady”. Constance Starr is a famous and well-loved fantasy writer, noted mainly for her “Alphinland” stories and novels. Constance is reeling from the death of her husband in “Alphinland”, and fantasizes that he is still alive, speaking to her, and helping to take care of her. Constance recalls events of the past, including a very sexual relationship with famous poet Gavin Putnam from many years before. At Gavin’s funeral, she makes peace with Jorrie, with whom Constance had feuded for decades about who drove who away from Gavin.

## Gavin

Gavin Putnam is an elderly poet who features primarily in the story “Revenant”, and peripherally in the stories “Alphinland” and “Dark Lady”. Gavin is very limited in movement in his old age, and hates having to be so dependent on his much younger wife, Reynolds. He becomes aggravated by a graduate student who starts digging through his past with Constance, with the student’s focus more about Constance than his own poetry. Reynolds, who can be condescending and patronizing towards Gavin as well – their relationship is one of love and hate – further annoys Gavin, who finally storms off on his own. Upon waking up from a nap, he trips, falls, smashes his head, suffers a massive heart attack, and dies in Reynold’s arms.

## Reynolds

Reynolds is the stunningly beautiful and much, much younger wife of Gavin. She factors primarily into the story “Revenant”, and peripherally in the stories “Alphinland” and “Dark Lady”. Reynolds fell in love with Gavin based on the beauty of his writing, and ultimately moved to marry him because she knew she would find financial security with him. Their marriage has become one of love and hate. When Gavin dies unexpectedly, Reynolds is devastated. In the end, it is not the money or the fame that matter to her, but the fact that Gavin is dead.

## Jorrie

Marjorie “Jorrie” is an elderly woman who is the twin sister of Tin, and is the former lover of Gavin. She appears primarily in the story “Dark Lady”, and only marginally and unnamed in “Alphinland”. Jorrie plans her social life through attending funerals. Jorrie has had a decades-long feud with Constance over Gavin, and decides to crash Gavin’s funeral to have her revenge. But rather than causing a scene at the funeral, she makes peace with Constance.



## Unnamed narrator of "Lusus Naturae"

The unnamed narrator of "Lusus Naturae" is a young woman afflicted with a genetic and mental disorder which causes her look and act like a cat. She has momentary periods of clear thinking, while the rest of the time she exists in a cat-like fantasy world. Her family decides to stage her death, so that the marriage prospects of her younger sister will not be in jeopardy. The unnamed narrator ultimately comes to live in her old family home alone, venturing out only at night. She is seen by a local young man, who stirs up a mob against her. Hoping to protect her sister's new family, the narrator does not attempt to reveal the truth or explain herself, but accedes to being burned alive.

## Sam

Sam is the main character of the short story "The Freeze-Dried Groom". Sam runs drugs under the superficial front of a furniture shop, picking up drugs hidden in furniture in storage units that he wins at auction. Sam is embittered by news that his wife, Gwyneth, seeks a divorce the same day he wins a number of units at auction. In one such unit, Sam discovers the body of a groom. Unable to determine if the man was murdered, or died accidentally through vicious sex as described by the bride-to-be who owns the unit, he does agree to allow her to triple his bid, buy back the unit, and have sex with her in exchange for silence. In revenge for the groom and for his own divorce, Sam kills the bride.

## Charis

Charis is one of three middle-aged friends (including Tony and Roz) in the short story "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth". Charis and her friends take weekly walks, during which Charis reveals she has had dreams of Zenia, a woman who complicated all of their lives some years before by stealing their men. In the case of Charis, Zenia failed. Charis remains together with her boyfriend, Billy. Zenia appears in Charis's dreams to warn her about how dangerous Billy is, after which time Zenia possesses Charis's dog and drives Billy out. Charis and her friends come to realize that, rather than trying to harm them in the past, Zenia was trying to help them by saving them from bad relationships.

## Jack Dace

Jack Dace is a bestselling horror novelist in the short story "The Dead Hand Loves You". Jack, now middle-aged, angrily resents the contract signed when he was younger that forces him to give up 75% of his earnings from the novel "The Dead Hand Loves You" to his three former roommates, including his old lover, Irena. When Jack signed the contract, he was hungover and desperate not to be thrown out of the place he shared with them. Now, he resents them thriving on his success. Jack prepares to murder all of them, but discovers they are either already dying or they have given their shares to



Irena. Jack learns that Irena has long been in love with him, and rather than killing her, he decides to propose to her.

## Verna

Verna is a late middle-aged woman who embarks on an Arctic cruise in the story “Stone Mattress”. She is a successful physiotherapist who has had a succession of husbands, and has become wealthy through them. On the cruise, she comes across a man named Bob, who plied her with drink, slept with her, and threw her away pregnant when they were in high school. Bob does not remember Verna at first, which annoys her tremendously. She ends up murdering Bob in revenge for what he did to her, leaving his body ashore during a day away from the boat. Verna happily returns to the cruise, confident she will never be found out.

## Wilma

Wilma is a kind, elderly woman suffering from Charles Bonnett’s Syndrome in the story “Torching the Dusties”. She is a resident at Ambrosia Manor, a retirement home, where she is romantically seeing another resident, Tobias. Wilma is horrified to learn of a youth movement called “Our Turn” which seeks to kill the elderly. Wilma and Tobias rush to collect the few things they can carry which will help them survive, and escape the retirement home mere moments before the mobs burn the building to the ground.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## HDTV

An HDTV is purchased by Ewan shortly before his death in the story "Alphinland". His wife, Constance, dislikes the HDTV because it shows the physical flaws in people precisely and clearly. Nevertheless, she will not get rid of the HDTV because it is a direct link to her late husband. Likewise, she imagines Ewan is still alive, still watching television while she works on her Alphinland stories.

## Alphinland stories and novels

Alphinland stories and novels are written by Constance Starr, and feature into the short stories "Alphinland", "Revenant", and "Dark Lady". Alphinland is a fictional universe that has made Constance a famous, wealthy writer. She incorporates elements of reality, including cruel people, into her stories. She is so immersed in her stories that she imagines herself to be in Alphinland half the time. The stories are studied by the graduate student Naveena, dismissed as juvenile by Gavin, and loved by millions of readers.

## "Sonnets for my Lady"

"Sonnets for my Lady" are a suite of poems that Gavin wrote about Constance while the two were in a relationship. The poetry is beautiful, sweeping, and graceful, complimenting Constance. The poems, however, take a negative turn as Gavin and Constance break up. They are evidence of reality influencing fiction, or in this case, thinly-veiled fiction. Nevertheless, the "Sonnets for my Lady" are some of Gavin's most famous poems.

## "The Dark Lady"

"The Dark Lady" is a suite of poems written by Gavin that feature into the story "Dark Lady". They were written about Jorrie, who served as a brief muse for Gavin. Jorrie relishes in the fact that such poetry was written about her. Indeed, the title "Dark Lady" very much lives up to Jorrie's character, as she uses funerals to fill her social calendar and plans to disrupt Gavin's funeral to confront Constance.

## Empty casket

An empty casket is buried in the short story "Lusus Naturae". This is done in order to fake the death of the narrator, who, with a cat-like mental and genetic disorder, is an embarrassment to most of the members of her family. However, the empty casket



serves as an important bad omen foretelling the narrator's future death, as the empty casket is discovered by villagers who then in turn believe she is a monster risen from the grave. As a result, they burn her at the stake, leading to real death.

## Storage units

Storage units are won at auction by Sam in the short story "The Freeze-Dried Groom". The storage unit auctions are a way for Sam and his associates to move knock-off furniture for their shop, which in turn serves as a front for their drug dealing. To provide further cover, Sam intentionally tries to win other units at auction as well. It is at his most recent pickup that Sam wins a storage unit containing the corpse of a dead groom, and old wedding paraphernalia.

## The freeze-dried groom

The freeze-dried groom discovered by Sam in the storage unit he wins at auction features into the story "The Freeze-Dried Groom". The groom has been put into storage by the woman who was supposed to marry him. Sam cannot quite figure out if the bride is a murderer or truly did accidentally kill the groom during rough sex. Nevertheless, he sees himself in the groom's place in many ways – cast out, abandoned, and suffering at the hands of a woman. For these reasons in part, Sam decides to kill the bride.

## Stromatolites

Stromatolites are fossilized, stone-like mattress layers of blue-green algae. The oldest in the world, at 1.9 billion years of age, are found in the Arctic where Verna and Bob take a cruise in the short story "Stone Mattress." The stromatolites form the core of an ashore day trip, where in a hidden valley of stromatolites, Verna kills Bob with one of the fossils. It is symbolically horrific that the world's oldest crime – murder – should be committed among the oldest fossilized remains in the world – the stromatolites.

## "Our Turn"

"Our Turn" is Leftwing movement consisting largely of young and middle-aged Socialists in the short story "Torching the Dusties". "Our Turn" is a worldwide movement dedicated to killing off the elderly so that younger generations do not have to pay for them, have them siphon off medical care and medical services, and have them take up space. All around the world, "Our Turn" attacks and kills countless elderly people. A group of "Our Turn" rioters assemble at Ambrosia Manor, and attack and kill the occupants inside. Only Tobias and Wilma make it out alive before the attack.

## Signs

Signs are held by the rioters associated with “Our Turn” outside Ambrosia Manor. The rioters wear baby masks in addition to holding up the signs. The signs say things like “Our Turn” and “Time to Go”. They are cruel and callous methods of frightening the elderly before the vicious attacks. They are proof that words can incite people to kill.

## Torches

Torches are borne by the rioters in the stories “Torching the Dusties” and “Lusus Naturae”. Torches appear in both stories as symbols of destruction. In “Lusus Naturae”, torches are born by the mob that roots out and kills the narrator, using the torches to light their way and then set the narrator on fire. In “Torching the Dusties”, Leftwing rioters use torches to burn down Ambrosia Manor, killing almost every elderly person within.

## Contract

A contract for the novel “The Dead Hand Loves You” is signed by Jack Dace in the short story “The Dead Hand Loves You”, and comes to haunt him later in life. The contract is written by Jack as a way to make up for three months’ rent he owes his roommates while in college, and is signed while Jack is hungover and desperate. The contract entitles the four to an even quarter of profits from “The Dead Hand Loves You”. The contract is enforced by a lawyer, leading Jack to pay his roommates millions of dollars over the next few decades. This frustrates and angers Jack to the point he seeks to kill the three roommates.



# Settings

## Canada

Canada is northernmost North American nation in the Western Hemisphere. Situated above the United States of America geographically, Canada serves as the main setting for most of the stories in the novel. Many of the stories, such as “Alphinland”, “Dark Lady”, “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”, “The Dead Hand Lvoes You”, and “Torching the Dusties” occur in unnamed places in Canada. Other stories are given actual locations, such as “The Freeze-Dried Groom” which occurs in Mississauga, a neighboring city to Toronto, or “Stone Mattress” which occurs north of the Canadian Arctic Circle.

## Canadian Arctic

The Canadian Arctic provides the setting for the eponymous short story “Stone Mattress”. The Canadian Arctic is a place that tourists seek out for its history, culture, and natural beauty. Wilma and Bob both board the ship Resolute II in order to take the vacation. The ship brings them around to see wildlife, beautiful land and seascapes, and puts its patrons on shore in various locations to experience the land firsthand. It is while in the Canadian Arctic that Wilma runs into Bob, decides to kill him, and carries through with killing him near the stromatolite formations of the Arctic.

## Florida

Florida is the southernmost state in the United States of America, the country located geographically south of Canada. It is to Florida that Gavin and his gorgeous young wife, Reynolds, move to spend their lives. It is in Florida that Gavin’s age finally catches up with him and slows him down. It is in Florida that the short stories “Revenant” (in full) and “Dark Lady” (in part) take place. It is in Florida that Gavin ultimately dies of a heart attack, and in which his funeral is held.

## Alphinland

Alphinland is a fantasy world and universe created by Constance Starr, and referenced in the three stories “Alphinland”, “Revenant”, and “Dark Lady”. Alphinland stories and novels have made Constance famous and wealthy. Constance often intentionally confuses the real world for her fictional world of Alphinland, directly writing events and characters in Alphinland to reflect their real-life counterparts and situations. From all appearances, Alphinland seems to be a world of high fantasy, magic, wonder, epic wars, breathtaking scenery, and heart-wrenching romances.

## **Ambrosia Manor**

Ambrosia Manor is a retirement home in rural Canada in the story “Torching the Dusties”. A former landed estate that has been converted into a general assisted living and care facility with a unit for advanced care, Ambrosia is a peaceful, quiet, and beautiful place for Wilma, Tobias, and the dozens of other residents to truly enjoy their sunset years. The property is surrounded by a wall with front and back gates, manned by the staff of the facility. The Manor becomes the site of protests by Leftist rioters who ultimately break in, burn the manor house, and kill most of the residents within.



# Themes and Motifs

## Horror

Horror is an important theme in the short story collection “Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” by Margaret Atwood. Horror – that which is disturbing, frightening, unnerving, eerie, or cruel – is central to many of the stories in the collection. Horror makes overt and graphic appearances in particular stories, while it makes subtle appearances in others.

In the story “Alphinland”, horror is of a very subtle nature, merely in the darkened confusion between reality and fantasy in Constance’s life. The darkness of her life – as a prospect of aging and a consequence of death – is in and of itself something of a common, daily horror that all people face. Meanwhile, the horror that Gavin faces in “Revenant” – though similar to Constance’s – occurs in the fact that he has become relatively powerless with age. He is unable to defend himself against Naveena’s prying into his private past life, and he is unable to effectively counter Reynolds’s antagonism.

Horror in the story “Lusus Naturae” takes a traditional, broader form. Horror exists as a response to the scientifically unknown. While the narrator’s father recognizes the cat-like narrator as human, the people of the village do not. They believe she is a monster risen from the grave, and so set out to burn her at the stake. Horror in “The Freeze-Dried Groom” is more psychological and graphic, as Sam commits to killing the bride-to-be in revenge for his own divorce (he sympathizes with the dead groom), and equates the bride-to-be with his own wife. The fact that the bride-to-be has no idea what is in store for her adds to the horror.

In “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”, the fact that the dead can hold power over the living whether for good or evil purposes is horrific, because it demonstrates the lack of power the living hold over the dead. In “The Dead Hand Loves You”, horror is seen in a traditional, graphic way in the short story within the short story by way of the severed hand that seeks revenge on those who have wronged its former owner. In “Stone Mattress”, horror takes a sleeker, more deliberate approach in the plotting and executing of a murder by Verna. In “Torching the Dusties”, horror comes by way of the elderly people – including Tobias and Wilma – being powerless against angry, younger generations who will stop at nothing to kill them. The fact that the elderly are often powerless and vulnerable to begin with only adds to the horrific nature of the attacks, for the cruelty of the Leftist mob is demonstrated in their desire to kill those who cannot defend themselves.

## Death

Death is an important theme in the short story collection “Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” by Margaret Atwood. Death is the one theme that appears in every single story in



the collection. Death always takes a primary and central place in the plots of these stories, often becoming the entire plot itself.

In “Alphinland”, Constance lives with the recent death of her husband, Ewan. His death has devastated her, causing her to have imaginary conversations with her dead husband, and imagining that he is still alive, and imagining that he is now a character in her fictional world of Alphinland.

In “Revenant”, Gavin, after a frustrating and aggravating encounter with Naveena and Reynolds, takes a nap. Upon waking up, he stumbles, falls, smashes his head, and suffers a major heart attack that kills him. Gavin’s death forms the reason that Jorrie travels to Florida in “Dark Lady”. Not only does Jorrie consider Gavin’s death a chance for revenge, she also knows it fills up her social schedule, which is mainly composed of funerals. However, Gavin’s death ultimately brings Constance and Jorrie together, compelling them to make peace.

In “Lusus Naturae”, the narrator experiences two deaths. Given her cat-like appearance and cat-like mindset, she is seen as a burden to the family, and is given a sham funeral so that everyone else will believe she is dead. An empty casket is buried in her grave. This allows her a greater freedom, as everyone now believes she is dead. However, the empty casket serves as an important harbinger of the narrator’s future death, as the empty casket is discovered by villagers who believe she is a monster risen from the grave. As a result, they burn her at the stake, leading to a second, real death.

In “The Freeze Dried Groom”, Sam discovers the long-dead body of a groom in a storage unit. This ultimately, in part, compels him to kill the bride-to-be that keeps the storage unit.

In “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”, the long-dead Zenia comes back to influence the lives of Charis, Roz, and Tony, by visiting Charis in her dreams and possessing her dog.

In “The Dead Hand Loves You”, death is something plotted by Jack in revenge for the contract, though he never carries out the act of murder. In the eponymous novel, Jack fictionalizes real-life people in order to murder them.

In “Stone Mattress”, Verna not only plots murder, but carries it out when she kills Bob in revenge for the past. She arranges his death to make it appear as if he has fallen overboard while photographing the Northern Lights, when in reality, she has bashed his skull in with a stromatolite on land.

In “Torching the Dusties”, the younger generations seek to kill the older generations to free up space, money, and medicine. Wilma and Tobias narrowly escape their retirement home before it is attacked and burned down with dozens of elderly residents still inside.



## Fantasy and Reality

Fantasy and reality form an important theme in the short story collection “Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” by Margaret Atwood. Fantasy – what characters perceive, believe, or imagine to be real – and reality – what is actually real – are usually in conflict with one another. This conflict, and the blurring of fantasy and reality can sometimes lead to dangerous and deadly consequences.

In “Alphinland”, Constance lives in a surreal world that exists between fantasy and reality. She often imagines herself in Alphinland, and routinely uses events that occur to her, and situations she finds herself in, as inspiration for Alphinland stories. Constance manages to skirt the divide relatively well, but often finds it difficult to determine what is real and what is imagined – such as in the case of her husband speaking to her.

Such skirting does not do well for the narrator of “Lusus Naturae”. Freed from life with a staged death, and the moving away of her family, the young narrator takes to the house and the woods at night, living in her own world and having no contact with other human beings. When she encounters a sleeping young man, she becomes reckless and approaches him, only to have him wake up and flee. Her fantasy world and the real world collide, and result in a mob burning her to death.

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom”, fantasy and reality subtly blur as Sam seems to take revenge against the bride-to-be on behalf of the dead groom; and as Sam kills the bride-to-be in symbolic place of his own wife, Gwyneth. Likewise, the fantasy the bride-to-be has been living in the storage unit (whether or not she intentionally killed her husband-to-be) comes crashing down when the unit is discovered by Sam.

In “I Dream of Zenia With the Bright Red Teeth”, Charis and her friends have difficulty determining if Zenia’s appearances are reality or fantasy, though they ultimately decide Zenia truly has visited Charis.

In “The Dead Hand Loves You”, Jack uses the fantasy of writing to exact revenge on his roommates when he writes his novel, basing characters in the novel on them. Jack ultimately decides to kill his former roommates in real life decades later, but the reality of things – that Irena actually loves him – makes him choose reality over his fantasy ideas. He would rather have love with Irena in real life than live out a fantasy in which he kills all of his roommates. Indeed, real life in general has taken care of things for him as one roommate is dying, with his share in the novel set to go to Irena; while the other roommate’s share has already gone to Irena through a divorce.

## The Past

The past is an important theme in the short story collection “Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” by Margaret Atwood. The past – essentially what forms one’s history and life story – tremendously affects the characters of each of these short stories in some important and influential way. Often it is for the worst rather than the better. Atwood is





clear in her message that the past is consciously with one, and that the past is never truly in the past.

In “Alphinland”, Constance dwells upon the past with sadness and happiness, for the past represents better times, but also reminds her of what she has lost – her loving husband. Constance’s mind allows the past and present to exist at the same time, as she imagines her husband is still alive, is still speaking to her, and is still taking care of her. In “Revenant”, the past is a matter of anger and frustration for Gavin, because he knows he missed out on a real chance at true happiness with Constance, and because his youth has finally let him go. The past is a place to which Gavin can never return, and Gavin cannot handle getting old. In “Dark Lady”, Jorrie, still feeling jilted by Gavin for the feud between her and Constance, decides to crash Gavin’s funeral and make a scene in revenge for the past.

In “Lusus Naturae”, the story itself occurs sometime in the past – most probably in the late Eighteenth, or very early Nineteenth Century. Folklore and scientific uncertainty lead to fear at things which do not make sense, such as the narrator’s condition. Despite the narrator’s father’s contention that the narrator is indeed a human being, it is still decided that a staged funeral will be held for the young woman, allowing the family more freedom and allowing the youngest daughter a chance at marital happiness.

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom”, the past is much more recent. Sam, upon discovering his wife wants a divorce, looks sadly upon the past twenty-four hours before such a revelation was heaped upon him. The day before now seems so far away, but so very close.

In “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”, Zenia’s dream visit and possession of Charis’s dog force Charis, Roz, and Tony to reconsider the past, believing now that Zenia was trying to help them rather than harm them by stealing away their men.

In “The Dead Hand Loves You”, Jack directly confronts his past decision to sign a contract with his roommates for stakes in his book rather than rent money, something which haunts him the present as he is forced to pay them millions of dollars decades later. When he decides to track them down and kill them, he instead realizes that he and Irena are still in love with one another. In “Stone Mattress”, Venra’s encounter with Bob –who impregnated and left her at the age of fourteen many decades before –causes her to murder him in revenge. In “Torching the Dusties”, the group “Our Turn” insists the members of the older generation have already lived their lives in the past, and deserve to die in the present.

## Aging

Aging is an important theme in the short story collection “Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” by Margaret Atwood. Aging is essentially the process of getting older, how it affects someone and changes his or her life, and how it affects those around him or her.



Aging thematically influences almost all the stories in the collection, each in different ways.

In “Alphinland”, the changes that come with age are often difficult for Constance to deal with. She struggles with the recent death of her husband, Ewan, and still imagines him to be alive. She imagines that he is still speaking to her, helping to care for her, and imagines that he becomes a character in Alphinland. Aging is not a thrilling prospect for Gavin in “Revenant”. As a younger man, he was domineering and controlling; now, late in life, his days are left largely to the whims of others. He laments growing older and hates the loss of his independence. Jorrie, meanwhile, in the story “Dark Lady”, has no real problem with getting older. Indeed, she comes to see funerals as a way to fill up her social calendar. She delights in Gavin’s death and intends to crash his funeral.

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom”, aging is presented in a more psychological sense, as the distance that can come with age comes more speedily to Sam and Gwyneth, prompting Gwyneth to end her marriage to Sam. In “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”, Charis and her friends Tony and Roz are now in their middle years, and reflect on the past as it involved Zenia. Charis’s dreams cause them all to reflect on the way their lives have turned out for the better as a result of Zenia being in them. It is the clarity that comes with age.

Clarity also comes with age for Jack in “The Dead Hand Loves You”, as he discovers who he thought to be his arch enemy, Irena, has actually been in love with him for years.

In “Stone Mattress”, the aging Verna is thrilled that she still looks ten years younger than she actually is, and uses this to her advantage as she lures ill older men into marriages so that she can wait out their deaths and take their money. Verna uses age to her material and financial advantage.

In “Torching the Dusties”, the most chilling portrayal of aging is seen as the group Our Turn viciously attacks and kills the elderly, believing them to be a waste of space, money, medicine, and effort. Wilma and Tobias, targets of such hatred, are aging as gracefully as they can in Ambrosia Manor nursing home, where they socialize, engage in romances, and enjoy what remains of their twilight years. But the youth of the country will not allow this, instead torching the nursing home and burning it to the ground.

# Styles

## Point of View

Margaret Atwood tells her short story collection “Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” in the third-person limited-omniscient narrative mode, except for the story “Lusus Naturae” which is told from the first-person limited-omniscient point of view. The third person-narrative voice acts as a unifying bridge between each of the stories, as the narrator and her style of speaking are familiar to the reader even if the events of the stories are not. The story “Lusus Naturae”, occurring centuries before the other stories, is told from the point of view of the young woman who is suffering from a mental and physical cat-like affliction. This allows the reader an intimate glimpse into the very human mind and heart of the narrator, even if her physical appearance may not resemble a human being. The limited-omniscient aspect of each of the stories is designed to create a sense of suspense and drama, as readers only learn things as the characters either learn or reveal them. For example, in “The Freeze-Dried Groom”, the reader does not learn that Sam is actually a drug dealer until toward the end of the story, or that he intends to kill the bride-to-be until the closing lines of the story.

## Language and Meaning

Margaret Atwood tells her short story collection “Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least three reasons. First, the stories were all written between 2004 and 2014, a time in history when language used was casual and uncomplicated. Second, the majority of the stories (except “Lusus Naturae”) take place in the 2000s, so it is only natural and fitting that the language employed be reflective of the times in which the stories take place. Thirdly, as this is a collection of short stories, an economy of simple and straightforward language is necessary for the author to tell her stories and make her points in relatively short format.

## Structure

Margaret Atwood’s short story collection “Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales” is a collection of nine short stories written by Margaret Atwood. The first three stories in the collection, “Alphinland”, “Revenant”, and “Dark Lady”, form something of a novella taken together, as they are three different perspectives on events from the same interconnected lives that revolve around Gavin. The remaining six stories (“Lusus Naturae”, “The Freeze-Dried Groom”, “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”, “The Dead Hand Loves You”, “Stone Mattress”, and “Torching the Dusties”) stand alone. While the first three stories are united in common plot, all nine stories taken together share the theme of death. Others all share certain similar themes between them.



## Quotes

Under the streetlights it looks so beautiful: like fairy silver, thinks Constance. But then, she would think that; she's far too prone to enchantment.

-- Narrator (Alphinland paragraph 1)

**Importance:** When the story begins, Constance is looking lovingly on the freezing rain that falls. The narrator explains not only her thoughts on the rain, but that Constance has a habit of looking at the beauty in everything. It is because of this that Constance often has difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy – both in terms of how things appear to be, and how they really are; and between her writing, and the real world.

The beauty is an illusion, and also a warning: there's a dark side to beauty, as with poisonous butterflies.

-- Narrator (Alphinland paragraph 1)

**Importance:** As Constance watches the freezing rain fall, she romanticizes it along with most other things in her life. She looks only for the beauty in things even when there can be danger. The narrator provides the example of a poisonous butterfly as such. Constance's insistence on romanticizing everything, and seeing only the beauty in everything, is dangerous.

I should have married Constance.

-- Gavin (Revenant paragraph 50)

**Importance:** Gavin, now elderly, has a much younger wife who has a love-hate relationship with him. She arranges for Gavin to meet with a young graduate student named Naveena, who is writing her thesis paper on Gavin's poetry. Gavin, unkind and harsh by nature, is combative and unhappy in his old age, and is annoyed by his wife's youth and happiness. It reflects regrets, and foreshadows his own death at the end of the story, when he thinks of Constance as he dies.

The twins often revert to a previous point in their ongoing conversation, though they know better than do that if anyone else is around. It's annoying; not to them, they can pick up each other's dropped stitches, but it can make other people feel excluded.

-- Narrator (Dark Lady paragraph 54)

**Importance:** Jorrie and Tin are so close as twin brother and sister, that they are able to pick up conversations and know what the other is talking about before anyone else does. The togetherness that they share often makes others who may be visiting with them feel left out or inferior, as they cannot keep up with the twins. This demonstrates just how important Jorrie and Tin are to one another.

What could be done with me, what should be done with me? These were the same question. The possibilities were limited.

-- Narrator (Lusus Naturae paragraph 1)



**Importance:** The narrator, a young woman with a condition where hair grows all over her body and causes her to act like a cat, has periods of mental clarity where she can understand what her family is saying. She is seen as a curse, a punishment, a freak of nature, a reason for her younger sister not to marry, and so on. Even though her father explains that the narrator is a human being, the decision must still be made as how to handle the young woman.

It was decided I should die.

-- Narrator (Lusus Naturae paragraph 16)

**Importance:** The young narrator's family decides the only possible way to handle the narrator is for her to die. They do not actually kill her, but stage her death and hold a funeral for her. This allows the family greater freedom, and her younger sister to marry. However, the funeral itself actually seals the narrator's fate. When she is discovered alive years later while her casket is empty, she is thought to be a monstrous creature of the undead, at which point a mob hunts her down.

At breakfast, a disaster in itself, Gwyneth tells Sam their marriage is over.

-- Narrator (The Freeze-Dried Groom paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Sam and Gwyneth have been married for several years, but they have grown cold and indifferent to each other. Gwyneth pronounces their marriage over during a polar vortex weather pattern, setting the stage for the story. As a result, Sam takes out his frustrations on another woman who has killed her husband.

Time isn't the same in my dreams.

-- Charis (I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth paragraph 16)

**Importance:** While out for a weekly walk with her best friends Roz and Tony, Charis says she has received a dream visit from Zenia, a woman who once stole each of their men. Zenia is alive in her dreams, meaning that time is not a fixed thing. This in turn means that Zenia has the ability to deliver warnings in Charis's dreams, and to reincarnate herself in Charis's dog. This allows Zenia to attack Charis's boyfriend, Billy, and causes Charis and the others to consider that maybe Zenia had been trying to help keep them safe against bad men all along.

That's what shackled his ankles: the contract.

-- Jack (The Dead Hand Loves You paragraph 1)

**Importance:** As a college kid struggling with rent, Jack makes a deal with his three roommates in the form of a contract. A quarter of all the money he earns from his novel will go to each of them in exchange for helping to financially support him. In the novel, a dead man's hand seeks revenge on his former girlfriend, only to have the girl embrace the hand in the end. In real life, Irena, Jack's former girlfriend, who led the lawsuit against Jack for the money promised in the contract, makes amends with him at the end of the short story.



At the outset, Verna had not intended to kill anyone.”  
-- Narrator (Stone Mattress paragraph 1 )

**Importance:** Verna decides to take an Arctic cruise. On the train to the ship, she runs into a man named Bob, whom she went to high school with years before. Bob impregnated her and threw her away, causing Verna to be sent away to a home for single mothers. Verna is enraged from how Bob treated her, and even more enraged when he does not remember her. She decides now to kill Bob.

But he doesn't recognize her! He really doesn't!  
-- Narrator (Stone Mattress paragraph 20)

**Importance:** Although Verna recognizes Bob on her trip, Bob does not recognize her at first. It enrages Verna to think that he could not remember her after the trauma he put her through with getting her drunk enough to sleep with her, then throwing her away, pregnant, afterwards. It is largely because of this that Verna decides she will kill him.

...what is old age but one long string of indignities?  
-- Tobias (Torching the Dusties paragraph 114)

**Importance:** Tobias converses with Wilma and two other elderly residents at the nursing home amid a protest of young Leftists who want all the old people to die. While Tobias is speaking about how women live longer than men because they handle indignities better, and are better at handling embarrassment, his statement that old age is one long line of indignities is telling in general. As people age, they lose their independence and their usefulness, and feel as if they become a burden on others. The horrible group outside the Manor considers the aged and infirmed in the nursing home to be just such a waste – and turn violent against the elderly.