

# **Summer of Night Study Guide**

## **Summer of Night by Dan Simmons**

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# Plot Summary

For the children of Elm Haven, Illinois, the summer of 1960 promises to be memorable. Their ancient and gloomy school, Old Central, is due to be closed forever, and the children are happy to see it go. But when Tubby Cooke disappears on the last day of school, the children watch as a sequence of events, triggered by a gruesome incident that occurred over 60 years ago, unfolds, resulting in the death of one of their own and the stirring of an ancient evil in the closing school.

After Tubby Cooke disappears on the last day of school, Mike O'Rourke, Dale and Lawrence Stewart, Kevin Grumbacher, Jim Harlen, Duane McBride, and Cordie Cooke decide to investigate the abandoned school and its bizarre staff. They split the assignment up, agreeing to each follow a member of the faculty, while Duane investigates Old Central itself. Duane uncovers that the Bell of Borgia, constructed out of the Egyptian god Osiris' Stele of Revealing and used by Pope Calixtus III and Pope Alexander VI in the early Renaissance. It was found by Mr. Ashley in Italy in 1876 and transported to Elm Haven for the founding of the new school, now called Old Central. The bell carries with it a great and terrible curse, which, once triggered, will bring about an apocalyptic event in sixty years, six months, and six days. Duane is investigating what event might have occurred around the year 1900 to trigger the events of this summer, when he is tracked down and killed by the evil forces that the bell has unleashed on the town.

Dale, Lawrence, Mike, Kevin, Jim, and Cordie must now confront the evil in the school, both to avenge their friend Duane McBride, and to save the town from the impending outbreak of evil. The children arrange a series of ambushes to thin out the ranks of the minions of the school, including many of the authority figures who once ran it. But when Lawrence is captured and taken into the school itself, the remaining children are forced to accelerate their plans and attempt to enter the school, destroy the bell, and rescue Lawrence.

Their battle with the minions of the Borgia Bell and with their former school, Old Central, turns the summer on its head, as the boys and Cordie Cooke must battle the minions of the bell to avenge Duane McBride and save the town. The boys thought when they left on the last day of school they were through with Old Central. The problem was, Old Central was not through with them.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary

### Chapter 1

Old Central school in Elm Haven, Illinois was a massive building, taking up a whole block. It was built as part of an ambitious project to provide the rural areas of Illinois with five large regional schools. Somehow only Old Central was built. Its Gothic mass was for years at odds with the tiny town of Elm Haven and Old Central's minuscule student population. Old Central served the younger students of Elm Haven until the mayor closed it in 1960.

### Chapter 2

Sixth grader Dale Stewart sits in his desk, waiting impatiently as the last few hours of the school year tick off on the clock overhead. It is June 1, 1960, and Old Central will be closing for good in a matter of hours. Among his friends at school are Mike O'Rourke, Jim Harlan, Kevin Grumbacher, Dale's brother Lawrence, Cordie Cooke, and Duane McBride.

In the basement lavatory, Tubby Cooke, Cordie's younger brother, kicks at the edges of a hole the boys had started in the bathroom wall. It collapses and reveals a passage. Tubby follows it toward a distant light. Upstairs, it is almost time to leave, when Dale and the rest of the students suddenly hear screaming coming from what seemed to be all around them. The principal, Dr. Roon, appeared to tell them that it was just the janitor Van Syke fixing the boiler. The students exit the school, and Dale notices that Cordie waits several minutes outside the school for her brother before being chased off by Van Syke.

### Chapter 3

The next night, after dinner, Dale and his brother Lawrence, along with Kevin Grumbacher, Harlan and Mike, set out on their bikes. They had named themselves the Bike Patrol when they were younger, though they no longer used the name. They race through the cornfields and lanes around Elm Haven and at Mike's urging, ride by decaying Ashley Mansion, touching the railing of the stairwell as they fly past. Dale and Lawrence are the last to head home, past Old Central, where for a moment Lawrence swears he hears whispering in the school's grounds.

### Chapter 4

That same night, Duane McBride, who had rode in with his dad to see his friends, lies in the back of his father's pickup as his old man, drunk from a stop at the tavern in Elm Haven, drives them home. His father, a failed Harvard student, with a degree in engineering, had begun to succumb to alcoholism after Duane's mother died. They stop



at another tavern, and Duane knows he, a boy of 11, will be driving his father home tonight. Duane wants to be a writer and takes copious notes. That night, he falls asleep with his headphones on, listening to the radio. He awakens to a feminine voice, with one message, "Duane, my dear, we are coming for you." He looks down and finds that the headphones are unplugged.

## Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The entire first chapter is a short introduction to Old Central, describing its long history and some of its physical characteristics. In many ways, devoting an entire chapter to the structure of the school seems wasteful, as after the first two chapters, the building does not enter into the story until the climax.

Simmons does not have a central character in the book but leans heavily on the point of view of three of the boys, Dale, Mike, and Duane. The book begins and ends in Dale's point of view, and he is the character picked to continue the work of Duane, after Duane's death. Duane is an aspiring writer, and after he is killed, Dale takes an interest in writing. Simmons does not go so far as to make the book a later writing endeavor of Dale, but it could be implied that these are his memories of events.

Simmons sets a fast pace. He takes only a few pages for the initial development of characters, then proceeds directly into the first conflict, the disappearance of Tubby Cooke. One of the techniques used to develop characters this rapidly is to tell the reader an attribute, rather than showing the reader that attribute. For instance, the reader is told right out that Mike is the leader of the boys, even though his actions throughout the rest of the book would bring the reader to that conclusion. Presenting character information up front in this manner allows Simmons to jump right into the action of the book, which proceeds almost without pause from the beginning to the end.



# Chapters 5-7

## Chapters 5-7 Summary

### Chapter 5

It is June 3rd, and the boys are playing baseball when a stench announces the passing of the rendering truck, Van Syke at the wheel, and something dead in the back. Sandra Whittaker arrives to tell them that a crowd of people including Dr. Roon and the Cordie family is over at Old Central, searching for Tubby Cordie, who supposedly ran away from home. Everyone jumps on their bikes and tears off for the school except Mike O'Rourke, who takes a few steps toward the truck, now sitting on the far side of the field. He gives Mr. Van Syke the finger and then walks toward his bike. Just then a mewling sound, much like a baby crying, gurgles out from the back of the truck. Mike jumps on his bike and heads off after his friends at top speed.

In front of Old Central, Mrs. Cordie is arguing with the town sheriff J.P. Congden and Dr. Roon. Roon insists that teachers saw her boy cross the schoolyard and leave the property on the last day of school, but Mrs. Cordie, who is trusting to the word of her daughter, is profanely contradicting them. They move the argument inside, and the boys notice two long furrows of overturned ground snaking from the building into the grounds, almost as if someone had dug a channel to lay new pipes.

### Chapter 6

The next day, Mike, Duane, Dale, Lawrence, Kevin and Jim Harlen meet at the Cave, a wide cement drainage tunnel beneath the highway out of town. Mike, the leader of the group, proposes that they follow Van Skye, Dr. Roon, and Mrs. Doubbet, the teacher, who they call Mrs. Double-Butt, to see if they can find out anything about Tubby Cordie. Duane says that he will investigate Old Central itself.

As they are talking, a trunk rumbles to a stop overhead and the stench of the Rendering truck silences them. Something is thrown into the water and the truck drives off. At first, the boys think it is a baby, but Duane, using a stick to pull the corpse up to the water, says it is not human and looks like the corpse of a small monkey.

### Chapter 7

Dale and Lawrence are walking to the weekly picture show that takes place in the center of town when they hear bats rustling in the elms around them. Both boys seem to think the bats are saying the broken consonants of their names, and they break into a run. Jim Harlen is following Double-Butt, who is oddly dressed up for a Saturday evening. He follows her to Old Central, where she enters and soon a light can be seen in her old room. Harlen decides to scale the outside of the school wall by various drainpipes and ledges to see if he can catch a glimpse of what she might be doing. Duane is at home alone, his father having gone into Peoria to drink, when a trunk stops



at the end of the farm drive. Duane arms himself with his father's .16 gauge and waits, but the truck eventually pulls away. Jim Harlen is twenty-five feet above the ground, on a ledge, peering into Mrs. Doubbet's classroom. Mrs. Doubbet is hunched over a table working on the corpse of their previous teacher, Mrs. Duggan, who died of cancer and was buried earlier that year. The corpse turns its head toward Jim and smiles, its left eye missing. Jim slips and with a cry, plunges off the ledge.

## Chapters 5-7 Analysis

The book is built around a point of irony. The boys come into conflict with an evil force involving their school. However, the entire book, with the exception of the first incident, takes place during summer vacation. Simmons uses this to shroud the school in greater mystery. Throughout the events of the story, the state of the school's interior remains unknown. At the end, this mystery is revealed to great visual effect.

In many ways, Simmons is creating a cliché. The book reads much like a B-movie, or a cult horror movie. There is something evil in a small town in America in the 1950s, and only the children can stop it. It is a genre that has been used several times, perhaps most prominently by Stephen King in his book *IT*, though King's tale of a horror that kills children is not set in the 1950s. Still, the reader will feel this is familiar territory, and Simmons heaps on the expected imagery: the sinister janitor, the corrupt, bullying justice of the peace, the redhead heartbreaker that all the boys want. Simmons does not attempt to break new ground, but rather he wishes to create an entertaining and successful example of an already-developed genre.



# Chapters 8-10

## Chapters 8-10 Summary

### Chapter 8

Mike stops by the cemetery, where Van Skye works part time as the groundskeeper. Finding no one around, Mike picks the lock on Van Skye's shed and investigates. Under a cot in the shed, he finds a tunnel, which has moist red walls, almost like an intestine. A stench emanates from the hole, and Mike decides to leave. He is walking back toward town when a figure dressed in an old soldier uniform approach, walking fast and closing the distance between them. Mike tries to hail the figure, but the soldier does not acknowledge Mike, and continues his menacing approach. Mike breaks into a run toward town.

Dale and Lawrence are preparing for bed when their father comes to tell them that Jim Harlen took a nasty fall off a ledge at Old Central and is unconscious in the hospital in nearby Oak Hill.

### Chapter 9

Duane is walking into Elm Haven on Monday with his old dog Witt, when the Rendering Truck swerves off the road toward him and nearly kills him. He curses at the truck, which he assumes is being driving by Van Syke. The truck turns around and comes after him, and Duane is forced to leap into a cornfield with Witt in his arms. The truck pursues him into the cornfield and Duane runs toward the next field, but the truck eventually gets stuck in an irrigation ditch and has to retreat. Safe on the next property, Duane discovers that the scare was too great for old Witt, who died in Duane's arms when Duane was running through the corn.

Dale and Lawrence meet up with Mike and Kevin to relate what Duane told them on the phone, and all the boys head off to the scene of the crime. When they arrive, Duane's father is standing next to the torn down fencing talking with the sheriff and the justice of the peace. Justice of the peace J. P. Congden tells Duane's father that Van Skye could not have been driving the car because the two of them were fishing together all morning. Furthermore, Congden says that the Rendering Truck had been stolen the previous night. When the sheriff asks Congden why he and Van Skye had not reported the theft, Congden responds cryptically that they were too busy to report it.

### Chapter 10

The boys meet up in Mike's chicken house and fill each other in on what they have seen. Kevin theorizes that the soldier might be wandering near the cemetery because he is buried there. That night, Mike hears movement outside in his yard and looks out to see a figure in a broad brimmed World War I helmet slink off into the cornfield.





## Chapters 8-10 Analysis

There is a moment when Mike sneaks into Van Skye's shed in the cemetery that is telltale of the kind of boy he is. While searching the room, he finds several pornographic magazines on the cot above the hole. He flips through these for a few seconds, and his body begins to react to the images. But Mike is, throughout the book, portrayed as the most responsible and grown up of the boys. His work as the head altar boy and his role as nurse to his debilitated grandmother have instilled a greater sense of responsibility and maturity upon him. He replaces the magazine even though many young men in his situation, would probably seize the opportunity to steal it. The reader is made to understand that this is not because Mike thinks that the images are disgusting or unholy, but because they are things he simply feels are unnecessary.

The name of Duane's dog, Wit, is short for Wittgenstein after the great philosopher of the early twentieth century. Duane's perspicacity is not due to innate genius, but to his tireless work, reading and writing in his journals, and to the influence of his scholarly, if unsuccessful father and uncle. His intelligence and learning in advance of his years, is similar to Mike's well-developed sense of responsibility. Later on in the story, after Duane has died, Mike intimates that he always felt a kind of kinship with Duane because they were in their own unique ways outsiders to the other boys in town.



# Chapters 11-13

## Chapters 11-13 Summary

### Chapter 11

Duane McBride walks to Oak Hill to read up on Old Central in the library. He stops at the hospital to visit Jim Harlen who just regained consciousness that morning. Jim tells Duane he has no memory of what happened to him on Saturday.

Dale takes a pair of binoculars and heads over to the poor side of town to watch the Cooke house. He sees Cordie Cooke, cradling a shotgun, walking along the railroad tracks toward town. He follows but is stopped by C. J. Congden, the justice of the peace's bullying sixteen-year-old son. C. J. pulls a gun on Dale demanding to know why he is snooping around with binoculars. He threatens to kill Dale, but Cordie reappears pointing the shotgun at C. J. and gets him to back off Dale. After C. J. is gone, Cordie gets Dale to admit that his friends are trying to figure out what happened to her brother Tubby. She says that she is planning to take the gun and confront Van Skye or Roon to find out and that none of Dale's friends had better get in her way.

### Chapter 12

In the Oak Tree library, Duane reads about the founding of Old Central and the massive fifteenth-century bell called the Borgia Bell, which the Ashley family purchased in Italy and had moved to the school. There were many accidents associated with the transport of the bell, including a fire, two plane crashes, and the foundering of the ship that carried it. Duane notices that the year 1876, the year of the founding of Old Central, is missing from the Society's annuals. When he asks the librarian where it might be, she responds that much of the material still belongs to the Ashley-Montague family.

That night, Mike is nodding off when a blast of cold air and a smell of rotting meat wake him. He takes his baseball bat down to the basement, where his debilitated grandmother stays. She has had a stroke and cannot talk, though she can sometimes answer yes or no questions with blinks. Mike feels something else is in the room, and fingernails rake across his exposed back. He swings the bat but connects with nothing.

### Chapter 13

Duane's uncle Art drives him to the library at Bradley University so Duane can find more information about Old Central. He learns the Borgia Bell was first commissioned for Pope Calixtus III in 1455. Calixtus III died before the bell arrived in Rome, but his nephew Rodrigo De Borgia, later Pope Alexander VI, inherited the bell. There were rumors that Rodrigo was an evil man, who had made a pact with the devil, and that the bell, which was the symbol of his house, was involved. When he commissioned the painter Pinturicchio to provide murals for the walls of his Torre Borgia, Pinturicchio went into the pagan catacombs of Rome for inspiration. It was said he filled the walls leading



up the tower to the belfry where the bell stood with images of the bull of Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead. On the drive home, Duane tells his uncle Art about the bell, and Art agrees to ask around town to see if anyone knows anything else about it.

## Chapters 11-13 Analysis

Duane's quickly finding the material critical to the mystery of the school seems unnatural. Simmons goes out of his way to describe Duane's ability to skim and speed read through large chunks of material at a time. Still, the reader cannot help being skeptical that half a day's work in a small town library could yield such crucial information. Again, this is a device Simmons is using to save time and get back to the action as quickly as possible. It is similar to a technique used in television and cinema, where the actors turn on a program, whether radio or television, and somehow, miraculously, they are treated to a news report that is critical to the plot of the show.

The scene between Dale, C. J. Congden, and Cordie Cooke is the most powerful in the book. The tension is palpable, and Simmons does an admirable job describing Dale's mixed emotional status, which fluctuates between fear, helplessness, and rage.



# Chapter 14-16

## Chapter 14-16 Summary

### Chapter 14

The next Saturday, at the Free Show, Duane confronts Mr. Ashley-Montague, the grandson of the man who started the Elm Haven Historical Preservation Society and who drives the projector in from Peoria for the Free Show. Duane asks him if he can see the society log of the year 1876, which was missing out of the library. Mr. Ashley-Montague seems irritated by the request and asks Duane why he needs it. Duane says he is doing a report on the Borgia Bell. Mr. Ashley-Montague heatedly tells Duane that there is no bell—that it was melted down for metal during the war. He tells Duane that the historical papers willed to him were burned.

### Chapter 15

The following morning, Sherriff Barney drives out to the McBride farm to tell Duane and his father that Art has run his car off the road and died on impact. They visit the wreck and Duane sees red paint on the driver's side of Art's blue Cadillac. Duane's father had built a machine to answer their phone and record messages. Duane finds a message from Art, from earlier that morning, saying that he found out something amazing about the bell and was driving out to tell Duane.

Duane and his father go to J. P. Congden's to look at the wreck again. When no one answers the door, they walk around back to see the wreck. The doors with the red paint Duane had pointed out are gone. They cannot find any written material or book about the bell Art might have been bringing to Duane. Congden's dog, which was inside and manages to get out, attacked them, and Duane's father is forced to kill it.

Dale and Lawrence see new furrows in the ground around the baseball diamond. One is pointing toward their house, and as they are examining it, it suddenly extends four more feet. Mike is in the basement feeding his debilitated grandmother, when a scratching and clawing sound begins on the floorboards below her bed. He shouts for help, but when his father arrives, the scratching has stopped.

### Chapter 16

Duane and his father retrieve Art's journal from his house. Duane notices an entry dated Saturday night before the accident and reads what his uncle found out about the bell. The Borgia family used the Stele of Revealing, an obelisk stolen from the Egyptian temple of Osiris, in their rites and as an intercessor between them and powerful spirits. When Alonzo de Borgia became Pope Calixtus III, the stele was melted down and the metal was used to make the bell in order to better hide the stele's function. According to legend, the bell, as an intercessor between the Borgias and Osiris, god of death, demanded regular blood sacrifices to renew its pact with its mortal beneficiaries. If



awakened fully with regular sacrifices, the stele would become the Knell of the Final Days, a harbinger of the Apocalypse foretold by the Osiris cult. Alonzo's nephew, Pope Alexander VI, tried to contain the evil of the bell by placing it in the Torre Borgia and surrounding it with grotesque symbols, but the bell eventually destroyed the family. When the first Medici pope ascended in Rome, his first command was for the bell to be melted down and buried.

Dale and Lawrence are preparing for bed, when the closet door begins to open. Dale tries to push it shut but something pushes back. He and Lawrence try to hold back whatever is pushing the door open, but they cannot. Finally they relent, jumping back onto their beds and screaming for their mother. Something black and with many legs, like an enormous smoky centipede comes out of the closet and scurries under Lawrence's bed. When their mother arrives, she finds nothing under the bed, but agrees to let them sleep in her room for the night.

## Chapter 14-16 Analysis

Because of the communications laws of 1960, the McBride's unique answering machine was required to inform callers that it was about to record their voice. Even with this step taken, Mr. McBride receives frequent harassment from the telephone company about the device. It will strike the modern reader, who is quite accustomed to answering machines and even more advanced recording media, as curious that recording a caller's voice was, in 1960, considered a breach of their privacy.

Misery is heaped upon the McBrides throughout the early events of the book. Both Duane and his father are crestfallen at Art's death. The two men, each without a wife, had with Duane formed a triumvirate of social support, based on their similar interests, intellectual abilities, and views of the world.

The story of the bell is told through excerpts quoted directly from the literature Duane is reading in the college library. The Borgia Popes are infamous for their corruption and iron-fisted rule and are often associated with Machiavelli, a philosopher and contemporary, who was equally infamous for his theories of political realism and the subversion of the individual to the health of the state.



# Chapters 17-19

## Chapters 17-19 Summary

### Chapter 17

The following morning, Mike crawls under his house to investigate the scraping he had heard. He finds a large hole, similar to the one he found in the shed at the cemetery.

Duane finds another note written by Art in the dead man's wastebasket. Aleister Crowley's *The Book of the Law* states that if the bell is activated correctly by a sacrifice, then the culminating apocalypse it brings will occur in sixty years, six months, and six days. Duane calculates that if what is happening now is the apocalypse the bell brings, then the sacrifices that activated it would have had to occur sometime around the New Year, 1900.

### Chapter 18

Duane interviews the mother of the librarian, Ms. Moon. She is 84, and Duane is hoping she remembers something about the bell. She remembers when the belfry was open and the bell would ring at the beginning and the end of each day at Old Central. When Duane asks what happened to the bell, the old woman begins to go into a gruesome story about a man being hanged for killing and eating a young girl.

### Chapter 19

Duane is at home that night, waiting for his father to return. He hears his father's truck pull up the drive and then hears the roar of the combine. Thinking his father has come home drunk and will wreck the machine, Duane chases after it. After it plows half a row of immature corn, the combine stops. When Duane reaches the machine, he finds it empty. He looks back to see his father's truck, its lights off, back out of the drive and leave. Then he spots two dark shadows in the corn circling the combine. The Rendering truck pulls into his drive and up the path. Six figures get out of the back and begin walking toward the cab. Duane starts to panic. He tries to hotwire the combine but fails and finally has to dive off into the corn to try to outrun his pursuers. They track him down, and his face is pressed into the field by a firm boot. He hears the roar of the combine start up and draw closer. The pressure from the boot relents and Duane faces the blades of the combine. He is flung up into the air and then down into the darkness.

In Elm Haven, a terrible bell begins to toll. Mike, Dale, Lawrence, Kevin and Jim are all awakened by its eerie tolling.



## Chapters 17-19 Analysis

The disappearance of Tubby Lawrence, the first attack on Duane and the death of his dog Wit, and the suspicious death of Art McBride, all have failed to make the children take their investigation completely seriously. They have, thus far, continued to play baseball and other games, swim in the watering holes, and engage in other activities common for children on summer break. The murder of Duane is the catalyzing event that finally focuses the children on their tasks. They realize there is no part of this that is a game anymore, and from here on out, they maintain a state of war against the school.

In many ways, Simmons takes a big risk by killing off Duane McBride, as he has spent a great deal of time developing Duane's character. Duane is, along with Mike and Dale, one of the central figures on which the book focuses. Fortunately, both Dale and Mike are strong enough characters to carry the rest of the book, Dale with his endearing relationship with his younger brother Lawrence, and Mike with his compellingly maturity and responsible personality.



# Chapters 20-22

## Chapters 20-22 Summary

### Chapter 20

Soon the whole town knows Duane McBride has died in a gruesome accident involving his father's combine. That evening, Mike and Dale sneak off to the McBride farm. While examining the field, they find several of the unnatural holes Mike had already found in the cemetery shed and under his house.

### Chapter 21

There follows three solid weeks of rain, leading up to the 4th of July, and the millions of acres of corn surrounding Elm Haven stretched toward the sky until it was shoulder height. A fuse has blown in the basement of the Lawrence house and the room has flooded with two feet of water because the sump pump is no longer running. Dale's mother asks him to wade over to the box and replace the fuse. Dale gets the new fuse in and turns the switch on, activating the lights and the sump pump. On the way back to the stairs, he hears the switch flick off again and he is in darkness, the water now nearing his waist. His flashlight flickering on and off, he is wading back to the box when he feels something against his leg. Shining his light into the water he sees the bloated, white body of Tubby Cooke. As Dale is peering down, Tubby suddenly opens his eyes.

### Chapter 22

Mike sees the soldier's face pressed into the basement window. His father comes running when Mike screams, but the soldier has disappeared, and his father fails to find any tracks in the dirt outside the window. Mike comes down with a fever and is in bed, delirious for days.

Jim Harlen is out riding his bike, avoiding returning to his empty home. His mother, as usual, is out with her latest boyfriend. When Jim pulls up to his house, he sees a shadow moving in the lit window of his bedroom upstairs. The shadow comes to the window and Jim recognizes the rotted features of dead Ms. Duggan. Jim remembers what happened before his fall from the ledge at Old Central. He tears away on his bike, and the Rendering Truck appears, intent on pursuit. He takes refuge at the Staffney home. He tells Dr. Staffney about the intruder in his house and the truck pursuing him. Staffney calls the constable and the three of them return with Jim to his house but find nothing missing or out of place. Jim is getting ready for bed when he notices that between his sheets is a layer of reeking slime and muck. He changes the sheets and does not tell the constable or Dr. Staffney about it.

After Tubby Cooke's corpse opens its eyes, Dale screams and drops his flashlight. His mother comes and carries him out of the basement. Mr. Sperling, the next door





neighbor, goes into the basement and returns with a drowned cat, and both he and Dale's mom assume that is what scared the boy.

## Chapters 20-22 Analysis

The Rendering Truck is used to help fix a flaw inherent in the design of the story. The children are in conflict with the school. But it is summer vacation, and they are not compelled to come into direct conflict with the school, as they would if school was in session. The Rendering Truck acts as a kind of moving representation of the school, which can appear at almost any location to threaten the children and remind the reader of the conflict.

Simmons allows the natural environment to close in on the boys. The rain and darkness keeps the boys from experiencing summer, and the days acquire an unnaturalness that speaks to the events that are occurring. Into this menacing situation comes the natural barrier of corn, growing up all around the town, walling it in, and casting more of it in shadow. The terror created is a combination of several different fears, each of which alone is unsettling to humans: the fear of darkness, the fear of the unknown or unnatural, and fear of restraint or enclosure. Simmons also uses as examples locations that children often find terrifying: the darkness under the bed, the closet, the dark covers of the basement.



# Chapters 23-25

## Chapters 23-25 Summary

### Chapter 23

While delirious with fever, Mike imagines he is conversing with Duane. Duane suggests he asks his grandmother about the soldier, since it seems intent on getting to her. Mike quizzes his grandmother, who responds in blinks. Duane finds out she knew the soldier, and he begins to go through her old papers looking for more information.

Jim Harlen fishes his dad's old revolver out of the closet and goes off in the woods to learn to shoot it. Cordie Cooke arrives with her shotgun. She tells him that Tubby has returned from the dead and is trying to harm her. She believes Mr. Roon set Tubby on her because a few days ago she managed to shoot him in the arm when he and Van Skye arrived at the Rendering Plant. Cordie says they must gather all the children who know what is going on together and must try to kill Mr. Roon and the other adults involved.

### Chapter 24

William Campbell Phillips was a bullying young teacher at Old Central when the First World War began. He enlisted right away and no one shed a tear at his departure, especially Mike's grandmother, who Phillips had been harassing with sexual advances since they were together in high school. He died of influenza and was buried in the town cemetery. Mike visits his grave and notices that the earth is freshly turned and that there are more of those suspicious holes in the ground nearby.

Mike visits the priest, Father Cavanaugh, and tells him the whole story. He convinces Father Cavanaugh to visit the cemetery with him, Mike taking a flask of holy water despite the father's protests. Mike has Father Cavanaugh bless the grave, and the two men are leaving when they notice the soldier standing in the shadows. It attacks Father Cavanaugh, spewing maggots from its mouth which burrow into the priest's skin. Mike flings his flask of holy water on it and it writhes, changing its shape, and then burrows into the ground.

### Chapter 25

The next morning the kids decide to retrieve Duane's notebooks from the McBride farm. That night, Mike and Dale set about decoding Duane's shorthand to find clues about what was happening.



## Chapters 23-25 Analysis

There are four factors that contribute to Mike's advanced maturity and sense of responsibility. He frequently acts as nurse to his invalid grandmother, who is completely paralyzed and can only communicate by blinking yes and no. His father works nights at the brewery, and thus Mike is, in the old-fashioned sense, the man of the house at night. He is the only boy in the family and is thus protective of his three sisters, two older and one younger, and his mother. Finally, he performs daily duties as the head altar boy of the nearby Catholic Church. His gift of leadership is accompanied by a strong grasp of strategic thinking. He devises the plans, ambushes, and strategies that the boys employ against their foes. When the action is intense and terrifying, Mike is the best of the boys at maintaining a cool head.

Both Mike and Dale are intrigued by Duane's notebooks. It is as if they have discovered a new side of their friend that they never knew about. This discovery is made all the more tragic by the fact that Duane is gone forever. It is ironic that, as Dale notes, Duane knew how much time and effort it would take for him to perfect the craft of writing, so he started young and was well on the way, only to have his life end so suddenly.



# Chapters 26-28

## Chapters 26-28 Summary

### Chapter 26

Mike and Dale share Duane's notes with the rest of the boys. Mrs. Moon ends up telling Duane about a series of child disappearances in the year 1900, that culminated with the finding of a young girl whose body was beheaded and partially eaten. Mr. Ashley-Montague and his son, the grandfather and father of the living Mr. Ashley-Montague, organized a group of men to seize a black vagrant and try him for the murders. They hung him from the Borgia bell. Mike goes to visit Mrs. Moon and finds her dead, a look of fright frozen on her face; her many cats are all dismembered, beheaded, and hung around her bedroom.

### Chapter 27

Dale and Jim bribe C. J. Congden to drive them to Peoria so that they can visit Mr. Ashley-Montague and ask him about the bell. Dale confronts Mr. Ashley-Montague, who tries to deny the bell's history, and the fact that his father and grandfather hanged an innocent man for the 1900 murders. Eventually, as Dale reveals details of what is now going on in Elm Haven, Mr. Ashley-Montague agrees to answer Dale's questions.

### Chapter 28

Mike interviews Wink, the town drunk, who is over seventy and remembers the hanging of the black man in 1900. He tells Mike the whole town was involved, that they hung him from the bell, which rang as the man swung back and forth on the end of the rope. For some reason, the bell kept ringing for hours later, long after they had cut the dead man down. Mink said that they convicted the vagrant because they found the slain girl's petticoats in his bedroll. But William Campbell Phillips admitted years later to Mink that Mr. Ashley Sr. had paid him to hide the petticoats in the vagrant's bedroll. The next summer, two more kids went missing, and the town knew the black man was innocent, but nothing is ever done to try to bring the real culprits to justice. When Mr. Ashley Sr. committed suicide, his son burned the house down and took his new wife and son to Peoria. Wink said that as Mr. Ashley Jr. was spreading kerosene around the house, the servants attempting to stop him said he was shouting that "they" would not get him, and that he specifically mentioned a name that Wink remembers as sounding like O'Cyrus or O'Cirrus. Mike, who has read all of Duane's notes at this point, immediately recognizes this as a reference to Osiris.

Mr. Ashley-Montague tells Dale that the black man who was suspected of the murders was tried but drowned in a bog while attempting to escape. He tells Dale that the superstitions associated with the bell are false but agrees to loan Dale the missing historical records. While he is retrieving the volume, Dale notices a copy of Crowley's



THE BOOK OF THE LAW on Mr. Ashley-Montague's shelf. The book is heavily bookmarked. Dale tucks the book in his coat and after accepting the historical volume from Mr. Ashley-Montague, leaves.

## Chapters 26-28 Analysis

The entire town is complicit in the gruesome hanging of the vagrant black man. Mrs. Moon had gone out of her way to tell Duane that her husband and brother were not part of the mob, but Wink's story contradicts her and illustrates how the entire town was ashamed of the event and attempted to bury it.

THE BOOK OF THE LAW is not a fictitious invention of Simmons, but is a real book written by Aleister Crowley in Cairo Egypt in 1904. Crowley believed that the book was dictated to him by a messenger of the Egyptian god Horus. The Stele of Revealing is a real artifact as well and was used in the elaborate funerary rights of the Egyptians and contains among other things, quotes from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. In Simmons' alternate history, the Stele is melted down at least in part to make the Borgia Bell.

Mr. Dennis Ashley-Montague is taking the same line as his father did about the Borgia Bell. After his grandfather's suicide, his father burned the house down, collected his wife and young son, and moved away to Peoria. Mr. Ashley-Montague's ultimate fate seems to suggest that there are some things that cannot be run from, and that confrontation is sometimes preferable to avoidance.



# Chapters 29-31

## Chapters 29-31 Summary

### Chapter 29

The boys hike out of town, on the pretext of camping. Mike shadows the rest at a distance, remaining out of sight. The boys set up their camp for the night, each armed with guns they scrounged from closets and bottom drawers. Mike sets up twenty yards from them as Dale, Lawrence, Kevin, and Jim get in their pup tents for the night. Mike is nodding off when three figures approach, carrying axes. They skulk up to the tents, then attack, driving their axes into the contents of the tents. Mike fires his shotgun, and suddenly gunfire erupts from other sides of the camp. The three men are injured or dead, having slashed through dummies the boys had prepared and placed in their tents, and the boys flee to a nearby, prearranged safe spot.

### Chapter 30

Father Cavanaugh, who had been feverish in bed since the night he was attacked, disappears from his bed without a trace. Mike visits the spot under the town grandstand where Wink the vagrant sleeps, but Wink is gone, and six of the all-too-familiar holes line the ground.

The next night, at Michelle Staffney's birthday party, Michelle leads Mike away into the barn, confessing that she had always liked him. They begin fumbling around on a couch in the loft. Mike looks up to see Father Cavanaugh's white, bloated face, glaring at them through the small window behind the couch, which is set into the top of the barn, twenty-five feet above the ground. He and Michelle flee the barn and rejoin the party.

### Chapter 31

Jim was the only one of them whose gun had been small enough to secret into the party. Mike finds Jim and borrows the gun, and the boys follow Mike into the alley behind the barn. No one is there, but Cordie walks up with two vicious dogs she calls Lucifer and Beelzebub. She tells them she has been lying low, staying alive. She says there is something nearby the boys must see in the old grain co-op building down the road.

The co-op is full of the bodies of animals, sheep, dogs, and cows, all hung from the ceiling so that their blood pools into a central drain which takes the blood to the landing dock for hauling away. Cordie theorizes that the men who killed Tubby and Duane are using the blood for something. One human hangs from the ceiling. It is the Justice of the Peace, J. P. Congden. His throat has been cut so his blood will run out and mix with that of the animals, but the boys can see the back of his head is missing, clearly the work of Mike's shotgun.



## Chapters 29-31 Analysis

The three men, though never explicitly identified are probably Dr. Roon, Karl Van Syke, and J. P. Congden. Of the three, only Congden is killed. The boys, Mike especially, reveal what seems to be a remarkable gift for strategy in a dire situation. But it must be remembered that they have played war games in these woods for years, though until now none of them has been real. Still, the strategies and tactics used in playing war can translate well to the act of actually war, provided the boys have the will and courage to become serious combatants. Their ambush is impressive. The boys have the foresight to construct dummies to place in the pup tents, and Mike wisely arranges their hiding spots so they can each fire into the center of the camp, without any danger of hitting an ally, but, they fail to plan the entire event out. When morning comes, they are faced with the unplanned return to the town. Between the boys and Elm Haven, Van Syke and Roon are waiting with the Rendering Truck, and only the fortuitous offer of a lift from Mike's uncle saves the boys from this trap.

There is an awkward moment in the campfire scene, which the reader witnesses from Mike's point of view. In order to make the reader believe that the boys are in the tents, Simmons seems to indicate that that is where Mike believes them to be. Later, when the reader learns that Mike knew the assailants were chopping up dummies, he may look back upon those few paragraphs in puzzlement, because Simmons gives every indication that Mike is aghast at the destruction of the tents.



# Chapters 32-34

## Chapters 32-34 Summary

### Chapter 32

Dale reads from THE BOOK OF LAW that the Stele of Revealing was made by earth and air and can be destroyed by fire and water.

Jim Harlen procures two walkie-talkies, and the boys devise a plan to destroy the rendering truck. They siphon gallons of gas out of the underground tank at the Texaco. Dale and Lawrence will play the decoys, trying to lure the truck away from the Ashley-Montague house, where it is concealed in some brush, to the grain co-op, where the other boys will be waiting in ambush.

### Chapter 33

Dale and Lawrence entice the rendering truck to chase them through town. They lure it to the grain co-op, where Mike, Kevin, and Jim are waiting on the roof with coke bottles filled with gasoline. The truck drives into the trap, and the boys pelt it with Molotov cocktails. At first, the truck attempts to bring the building down by driving into the corner beneath the boys. Mike and Kevin eventually find themselves on the ground before the burning truck, and Mike can see Van Skye in the cabin reaching behind him for a rifle. Another round of bombs convinces Van Skye to retreat, and he races out of town to the dump, the truck still in flames and the boys in hot pursuit.

Once they corner the truck in the dump, the boys throw the last of their gasoline bombs and the vehicle begins to burn in earnest. Van Skye, singed and burned, climbs out of the cabin with the rifle. But Cordie appears from behind one of the heaps of garbage nearby and sets her dogs on the janitor, who attempts to climb back in the truck. The gas tank of the truck ignites and Van Skye and one of Cordie's dogs are killed in the explosion. The boys decide to retreat through the nearby cornfield as the sound of sirens announces the approach of the fire truck. Mike glimpses human remains burning along with animal remains in the back of the truck.

### Chapter 34

That night, Father Cavanaugh comes to visit Mike. They meet on the porch, Mike armed with his shotgun and a water pistol full of holy water. Father Cavanaugh tells him that they want a truce with the boys. He evades Mike's question of who "they" are and tells Mike that the killing of Van Skye was inconsequential to them. Mike spots the soldier moving across his lawn toward his grandmother's window, and he yells at his sisters and mother to stay in the house. He refuses the truce and Father Cavanaugh attacks him. Mike forces both Father Cavanaugh and the soldier away from the house, using the water pistol, but Father Cavanaugh locks him in a bear hug and seems to be about to spew maggots on him, the way the soldier did in the cemetery. Mike reaches into his





pocket and pulls out of piece of the consecrated host which he took from church and presses it on his attacker's face. Father Cavanaugh's head explodes and his body limps out into the road where it is hit head-on by Duane McBride's father's truck.

## Chapters 32-34 Analysis

From this point on in the story, it will become more and more difficult for the reader to suspend his disbelief that the rest of the town can be so ignorant of the situation involving Old Central. That the boys are able to tap the underground tank behind the Texaco to fill up their bombs is perhaps believable, given the low level of security mentioned in the story, but the incidents that occur will become difficult to reconcile with the continued ignorance of the population of a small town, where, presumably, secrets are more difficult to keep and events hard to cover up.

Cordie's dogs, Beelzebub and Lucifer, ironically are named after figures associated with Hell. Beelzebub was a deity worshiped by the Philistines. As a competitor of the Hebrew god, Beelzebub was in Christian lore portrayed as a demon and was later incorporated into the hierarchy of demons controlling Hell. Lucifer is another name for Satan, the Devil, the Lightbringer, in Christian lore, the most perfect of God's creations, who leads the rebellion against Heaven and is cast down to become the ruler of Hell.



# Chapters 35-37

## Chapters 35-37 Summary

### Chapter 35

On Saturday, Mike is questioned extensively by the sheriff. Mike has proof and does not know who to trust, so he simply says that Father Cavanaugh had ranted incoherently and then run out in front of the truck. The sheriff and Mike's father buy his story, and soon the whole town has pieced together a farce involving J. P., Van Skye, and Father Cavanaugh that they thought explained away all the strange events of the summer. The boys do nothing to dissuade the adults. They purchase numerous squirt guns, which they load with holy water, and decide to stay in two houses, Mike sleeping at the Stewarts and Jim staying with Kevin. Since the Grumbacher and Stewart houses are in close proximity, the boys will be able to keep in touch all night via walkie-talkie.

### Chapter 36

It is 11 p.m., and Dale's mother tells the boys that their uncle's back has gone out and she must drive out to his farm to deliver some medication. After she leaves, Mike goes downstairs to lock the doors. Lawrence drops his comic on the floor between his bed and Dale's, and when he reaches to pick it up, a snow white hand reaches out from under the bed and grabs his wrist. Dale tries to hold on to his little brother, but Lawrence is dragged by the hand under his bed and into a patch of smoky darkness. The darkness disappears along with Lawrence as Mike arrives back in the room. The boys then hear screaming from the basement. They grab their guns and head downstairs.

### Chapter 37

Mike and Dale find a tunnel dug through the side of the wall in Dale's basement. Dale wants to follow the tunnel but Mike stops him. Mike says that the tunnel points directly at Old Central, and that they probably expect the boys to follow it to try to rescue Lawrence. Mike calls Kevin and Jim on the walkie-talkie and tells them to assemble and meet Dale at the gas pumps. They will have to accelerate their plan and risk going to Old Central in the darkness. Mike decides he should be the one to follow the tunnel. Dale protests but Mike overrides him.

Mr. Ashley-Montague is on the bandstand watching the last of the Free Show when someone whispers his name from below. Most of the crowd is gone as a summer storm has broken over the town and the high winds have people talking of tornadoes. Mr. Ashley-Montague is peering over the back of the grandstand into the darkness when the boards beneath him splinter and in seconds he is engulfed by a gaping maw of sharp teeth.

Jim and Dale break into the basement of Old Central and begin their search for Lawrence. Meanwhile, Kevin is across the street, filling up the reservoir of his father's



milk truck with gasoline. He is watching Old Central when he sees two new furrows appear in the playground, both eating up ground fast and heading in his direction.

## Chapters 35-37 Analysis

Again, Mike's cool head prevails when he holds Dale back and gathers the boys together to reorganize what will now have to be an acceleration of their plan to attack the school. Ironically, the kidnapping of Lawrence Stewart may have given the boys the push they needed. Duane's death had already instilled them with a sense of determination to avenge their friend, determination which had allowed them to plan and execute two successful ambushes. But Lawrence's abduction fills them with panic and anger, two emotions they use to swallow their fear of entering the school. Any qualms that they had about the attack that they were originally going to attempt in daylight on Monday morning has to be faced immediately and subdued, or Lawrence would die. Therefore their attackers ended up giving the boys what they needed most to execute their plan, courage.



# Chapters 38-40

## Chapters 38-40 Summary

### Chapter 38

Mike crawls through the tunnel for several hundred yards before one of the burrowing creatures moves to intercept him. Mike makes it flee with a combination of the holy water in his squirt gun and several shots from his squirrel gun. Dale and Jim find the basement transformed, covered in green slime and gray matter, with round tunnels branching off into the surrounding soil. Two of the burrowers circle Kevin, who is standing atop the milk truck. Cordie appears and sends her dog in after one of the borrowers. She joins Kevin on the roof of the truck.

### Chapter 39

Kevin and Cordie manage to soak their attackers in gasoline, but Kevin's lighter in his bag on the ground by the barn. The milk truck is now half filled with gasoline. Dale and Jim are ambushed in the central foyer by Dr. Roon. The belfry above them has been uncovered and Lawrence is tied to a chair on the lip of the second floor balcony, a long rope around his neck extending all the way up to the bell. The boys are forced to relinquish their weapons, and Dr. Roon drags them upstairs.

### Chapter 40

Cordie leaps from the truck and races to the street attempting to distract the burrowers. Kevin seizes on the distraction, jumping down and running to his bag, which holds his lighter and the keys to the truck. He runs back to the truck and starts it. Cordie manages to get to the street, but one of the creatures cuts her off and breaks through the surface of the road. Kevin floors the truck, running the creature over, and he and Cordie set it on fire.

Dr. Roon drags Dale and Jim to a room on the second floor, where the dead, Ms. Doubbet, Mrs. Duggan, Tubby, Van Skye, and the soldier await them. Roon tells the boys that a new age is coming, and that the master will reward them once they are in their new form. Van Syke and the soldier advance on Dale and Jim.

Mike arrives in the foyer, where he is stopped by Father Cavanaugh. Mike finds Dale's gun on the ground and uses it and his own to subdue Father Cavanaugh. Hearing screams from Dale, Mike races up the stairs and dives into the classroom.

## Chapters 38-40 Analysis

Simmons has shut off the school to the reader for almost the entire book, and now the suspense created is suddenly released as he removes the shroud and allows the reader



into a building that is no longer a school, but a hive of fetid matter which seems almost like a living organism, its heart the evil bell hanging above the main hall in the now uncovered belfry.

Simmons follows the time honored method of building to a climax, that of putting the characters in the worst possible situation, with little hope of resolve. Dale and Jim are weaponless and surrounded by enemies, and Lawrence is teetering on the very edge of a sudden and grisly death. Mike and Kevin are for the moment barred from the situation. Lawrence's predicament is of course a call back to the death of the black vagrant, who was hung from the bell in a similar fashion by most of the town in the year 1900.

Cordie, who has remained something of a loner throughout the book, again arrives in timely fashion to save Kevin. Her bravery and cool-headedness rivals Mike's, though in her case it originates from a more nihilistic attitude toward the danger.



# Chapters 41-42

## Chapters 41-42 Summary

### Chapter 41

Cordie and Kevin drive the truck directly at the front entrance of the school and both leap clear before it smashes into the stone steps, much of it flipping up and through the front door. The gasoline does not ignite, but Kevin walks closer with his gun and shoots at the tank until it explodes.

Mike's entrance causes enough of a distraction for the boys to resist their attackers. Dale ends up outside the class with Dr. Roon choking him and dangling him over the second floor banister. The school shakes as the truck smashes into the front of it, and Dr. Roon drops Dale. The explosion that follows turns the first floor into an inferno. The boys free Lawrence and clamber up the stairs toward the belfry. The inside of the bell is filled with a large sac of material that glows and pulses. Mike fires his squirrel gun into the mass, and the boys move out onto the roof of the school as the fire consumes its insides. They attach the rope Jim was carrying to the chimney just as Dr. Roon steps out from the belfry. Dale and Lawrence make it to the ground, but Mike and Jim are still on the rope when Dr. Roon starts descending after them. The fire reaches the roof, and the chimney begins to collapse inward. Mike and Jim leap the remaining fifteen feet to the ground, but Dr. Roon is pulled upward by the collapsing chimney and then down into the inferno. The boys join Cordie, who has managed to pull an unconscious Kevin away from the burning school.

As sirens approach, Mike decides they should all say that they heard someone stealing Mr. Grumbacher's truck and went out to try to stop it. They saw Dr. Roon driving the truck into the school and the school burn down.

### Chapter 42

Duane's father decides to move to Chicago to be with his sister, but Dale manages to see him before he leaves. Dale tells Mr. McBride everything that happened, and Mr. McBride gives Dale all of Duane's notebooks. Dale begins to study them, and when the boys are sitting around discussing what they want to be, Dale tells them that he wants to learn to look at the world the way Duane did and become a writer.

## Chapters 41-42 Analysis

There is both anticlimax and climax in the final battle scene. Mike's firing of his squirrel gun into the heart of the bell, effectively killing what had been growing there, is anticlimactic and it shows that for all of its power, the bell relied upon its human and undead subjects, and upon the burrowing creatures it created. The inferno that

consumes the school is certainly climactic, as is the almost pratfall-like death of its final and greatest subject, Dr. Roon.

The characters in the story are based on Dan Simmons' real life friends from childhood. Dale Stewart is Dan Simmons, and his little brother is the model for Lawrence. Mike, Kevin, and Jim are all modeled after real life friends of the author, who grew up in nearby Peoria, Illinois, in the 1960s. Though the story is fictitious, there are autobiographical elements, including what Dale reveals at the end of the book, that he intends to study Duane's notebooks and learn to become a writer.



# Characters

## Dale Stewart

Dale Stewart is modeled after the writer, Dan Simmons. Simmons paints himself modestly. Dale is not the leader of the boys nor is he the smartest. He is not quick witted, like Jim and Harlen, and the two prominent females in the story, Cordie Cooke and Michelle Staffney, show no sexual interest in him. He is the most average of the children, neither wild like his younger brother Lawrence nor prodigiously mature like Mike or Duane.

His most endearing characteristic is his protectiveness toward his younger brother Lawrence, who is reckless and impetuous, but also young enough to be vulnerable and naïve. Lawrence is frightened of the dark, and throughout the book, Dale places himself between any darkness that Lawrence encounters. He always walks into their unlit bedroom before Lawrence to pull the cord that hangs from the light in the center of the room, and he reaches across the space between the boy's beds to hold Lawrence's hand when the younger boy is frightened of the darkness under his bed or in the closet.

After Duane McBride's death, Dale studies Duane's notebooks. Duane was practicing to become a writer and wrote copious notes about people, including exercises on how to describe their characteristics. Dale is fascinated by the notebooks and by Duane's commitment to begin so young a profession he knows will take years to perfect. Dale's admiration for such dedication turns him on to the idea of becoming a writer himself.

## Mike O'Rourke

Mike O'Rourke is the leader of the group of boys consisting of Dale and Lawrence Stewart, Jim Harlen, Kevin Grumbacher, and Duane McBride. Mike is a natural leader, and his skill manifests itself in four ways. He is the most cool-headed of the boys, even in the most harrowing of situations. His mind works strategically, and he is responsible for planning each coordinated step of the boys' attack on Old Central and the minions of the bell. He is exceptionally courageous. Finally, he is the most mature of the boys, and it is this quality that truly makes him their leader.

Mike's perspicuous maturity results from the condition of his home life. His parents, while loving, are poor and his father works nights in the brewery in Peoria. This makes Mike the only male in the house at night. He is protective of his mother and three sisters. He also nurses his invalid grandmother, who sleeps in the basement and is bedridden from a stroke. His sense of responsibility has led him to the position of head altar boy at the local church, his duties taking him there most every day and even contributing to his frequent tardiness in school.

Mike's maturity has not translated to his schoolwork. He is dyslexic and has difficulty keeping up with his lessons due to his work with the church and at home. He has thus





been held back a year in school, and though he is the same age as Dale, Mike must now sit in a separate room away from his best friend while at school.

## Duane McBride

Duane McBride lives on a farm several miles from Elm Haven. His separation from the town sets him apart from the rest of the boys, who though they are friends with Duane, are somewhat ignorant of who he really is. This is evidenced by Mike and Dale's astonishment at looking through Duane's writing notebooks after he is killed. They feel as though there was a completely separate side of Duane which he kept to himself. The boys are correct that there are two sides to Duane, but they were wrong about Duane keeping the studious writer, scholar, thinker Duane to himself. This was the side of Duane that interacted with his father and his uncle Art, both astute men. Duane's father is an inventor of some ability and a failed engineer. Duane's uncle is a man of learning with a more whimsical view on life than Duane's father. Both men influence the scholar and writer in Duane, maintaining chess matches with him and talking with Duane about philosophy, politics, history, science and art.

Duane McBride's death is particularly tragic because of his tireless work to improve his writing abilities. Duane was looking to and preparing for a future that he will never experience.

## Jim Harlen

Jim Harlen is the product of a broken home. His father has been gone several years, and Jim's mother, still a young and attractive woman, spends much of her time dating men. Jim is contemptuous of every choice she makes and secretly resents the fact that losing his father has, in many ways, resulted in the loss of his mother, too, because she spends many evenings away in neighboring Oak Hill or Peoria, dating a steady stream of men.

Jim home life has instilled him with a deep cynicism, especially about women, and there are misogynistic overtones already manifesting themselves in his thoughts and actions. His mother's promiscuity and, in Jim's mind, continued unfaithfulness to Jim's father, has led to a general devaluation of all women in Jim's eyes.

Jim is the most sexually mature of the boys, at least in knowledge and vocabulary. He maintains a stash of pornography and is constantly invoking sexual phrases that Lawrence does not understand but that Dale will not let Jim explain to the younger boy. Jim is a cut up and like Lawrence is more than a little reckless.

## Kevin Grumbacher

The Grumbachers are the most affluent of Elm Haven, owing to Kevin's father's position as milk supplier to the surrounding areas. They have a washing machine, television,



and indoor plumbing, none of which Mike O'Rourke's family possesses. Kevin lives near the Stewarts, across the street from Old Central.

## **Lawrence Stewart**

Lawrence Stewart is Dale's younger brother, and he is modeled after Dan Simmons' own younger brother. Lawrence is two years younger than the other boys in the Bike Patrol, but he is athletically gifted and impetuous, both of which make up for his tender age.

## **Cordie Cooke**

Cordie Cooke lives with her family near the railroad tracks on the poorer side of Elm Haven. Cordie is uncouth and reckless, and her family's unfortunate history has tarnished her innocence and instilled her with a deeply cynical world view.

## **Michelle Staffney**

Michelle Staffney is the vivacious daughter of the town doctor. All the boys of Elm Haven desire her, but she desires only Mike O'Rourke.

## **Sheriff Barney**

Sheriff Barney is the constable of Elm Haven and is quickly overwhelmed by the series of strange and tragic events that befall his sleepy town.

## **J. P. Congden**

J. P. Congden is the sleazy Justice of the Peace, who runs racketeering scams with his partner Karl Van Syke. Both are minions of the Bell of Borgia.

## **C. J. Congden**

J. P. Congden's delinquent son is a bully and burgeoning criminal.

## **Karl Van Skye**

Seedy and lecherous, Karl Van Skye is the janitor of Old Central. During the summer vacation he does odd jobs around town including driving the rendering truck. He is a minion of the Bell of Borgia.



## **Dennis Ashley-Montague**

The grandson of the man who brought the bell from Italian to place in Old Central, Dennis Ashley-Montague was as an infant taken by his father and mother to Peoria and raised away from the mess his grandfather had created in Elm Haven.

## **Art McBride**

Duane's favorite uncle is a scholar and humorist who is killed by one of the minions of the bell after he began asking questions around town about the history of Old Central.

## **Father Cavanaugh**

Father Cavanaugh is the priest of Elm Haven Catholic Church and a friend of Mike O'Rourke's until a run in with a minion of the Bell of Borgia results in his death and appropriation by the enemy.

## **Dr. Roon**

The greatest of the living minions of the Bell of Borgia, Dr. Roon is the principal of Old Central.

## **Mrs. Duggan**

Mrs. Duggan is a minion of the Bell of Borgia who died of cancer the previous year but whose undead corpse still lurks around town in service to the Bell.

## **Ms. Doubbet**

Ms. Doubbet, known to the children of Elm Haven as Ms. "Double-butt" because of her wide posterior, is a teacher at Old Central and minion of the Bell of Borgia.

## **Tubby Cooke**

Lawrence "Tubby" Cooke is one of Cordie Cooke's younger brothers. His disappearance is the first of several suspicious events to occur at the beginning of the summer of 1960.

## The Soldier

William Campbell Phillips was a teacher at Old Central before the first World War. He was jilted by Mike's grandmother and enlisted in the army, dying in France. His undead corpse is a tireless minion of the Bell of Borgia.



# Objects/Places

## Elm Haven

The setting of Summer of Night is a rural Illinois town called Elm Haven. A town of little more than one thousand people in 1960, Elm Haven serves as a commercial touchstone for the farmers in the surrounding area. The nearest town of any size is Peoria, Illinois.

## Peoria

The closest city to Elm Haven, Peoria is the birthplace of the author, Dan Simmons. Several of Elm Haven's citizens commute to Peoria to work, including Mike's father, and Jim's mother.

## The Bell of Borgia

A bell cast from by Pope Calixtus III from metal taken from the Stele of Revealing, an Egyptian artifact consecrated to Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead. Upon the death of Calixtus III, the bell was passed on to his nephew, who became Pope Alexander VI. Evil events followed the bell throughout history. In the late 19th century, the bell was discovered by Mr. Ashley, a wealthy aristocrat who transported it back to his fledgling community, Elm Haven. The bell was placed in the belfry of the new school, which would come to be named Old Central. The bell enslaves those around it, even beyond the grave, and can be induced to bring about an Apocalyptic event by a ritual sacrifice.

## The Rendering Truck

The rendering truck is the convenient mode of transportation used by the minions of the Bell of Borgia. Because the citizens of Elm Haven expect the truck to smell of death and decay, it can be used to transport the dead minions of the bell without arousing suspicion.

## Duane McBride's notebooks

Duane McBride wants to be a writer and is never without a notebook in which he practices describing the world around him. The notebooks become valuable tools after Duane is killed. They allow Mike and Dale to learn what Duane uncovered about the Bell of Borgia, and they inspire Dale to pick up Duane's fallen mantle and become a writer himself.



## **The Free Show**

The Free Show is a free movie presented for the town by Mr. Ashley-Montague on Saturday nights in the summer.

## **THE BOOK OF LAW**

A mystical text written by Aleister Crowley in 1904, in which Crowley outlines the prophetic sermon delivered to him in secret by an agent of the Egyptian god Horus.

## **The Cave**

The Cave is a drainage pipe, more than five feet in diameter, that runs under the highway leading out of Elm Haven, and which is used by the members of the Bike Patrol as a meeting place.

## **Old Central**

Originally planned as one of five large schools spread around Illinois to serve the rural community, Old Central was built in 1876, in Elm Haven. After the school was constructed, Mr. Ashley brought the Bell of Borgia from Italy and placed it in the belfry of the school.

## **Mike's Squirrel Gun**

Used prominently by Mike O'Rourke throughout the battle with the minions of the Bell of Borgia, Mike's so-called "squirrel" gun is an illegal, sawed-off shotgun which belonged to his grandfather. The gun strikes the final blow against the bell when Mike fires it into the pulsating heart nestled in the bell.



# Themes

## Darkness

Darkness, both the fear of it and the nature of it, is an integral part of SUMMER OF NIGHT. The most important examples in the book concern Dale and Lawrence Stewart. Lawrence is afraid of the dark, and Dale must always precede him into the bedroom that they share in order to pull the cord hanging from the light in the center of the ceiling. Once the light is on, Lawrence can enter the room, but he is still scared of the closet, and the dark space underneath their beds. When one of the creatures forces its way out of the closet, it does not attack the boys, but scurries into the darkness under Lawrence's bed and disappears. Later, Lawrence is abducted by the minions of the Bell of Borgia through the hole of darkness under his bed. Dale likewise is scared of the coal niche in the basement, whose low ceiling casts it deep into shadow. When a fuse blows in the basement, it begins to flood because the sump pump that drains off water is no longer running. Dale must wade through the water in the dark, to the far side of the basement, near the coal niche, to reach the fuse box. Later, it is the coal niche through which the burrowing creatures carry Dale's younger brother Lawrence away to imprisonment in Old Central.

In the last three weeks of the story, the town of Elm Haven is plagued by constant thunderstorms, dark enough to hide the sun for days on end. The corn has now grown to shoulder height, blocking out even more light from the town. The entire town is cast into twilight during the days and deepest darkness during the nights.

## Dedication and Duane McBride's Quest to Become a Writer

Duane McBride wants to become a writer and to that end he takes copious notes on the world around him. In the notebooks that line his shelves, Duane has enumerated the characteristics of his friends, the town, his school, and the world in general. He has completed thousands of exercises on description and story. This increases the sense of tragedy that the other boys, especially Dale, feel after Duane's murder. Dale marvels at this secret side of his friend, who knew what he wanted to do with his life and, at such a young age, set off on a journey of effort and discovery that would take him years to complete. Duane's efforts prove critical to defeating the Bell of Borgia. Using his precocious reading and researching abilities, he learns about the history of Old Central and the Bell of Borgia while the other boys are still happily playing baseball. Later, after Duane is killed, Dale and Mike are able to use Duane's notebooks to reconstruct what Duane knew about the Borgia Bell and its minions.

As the story comes to a close, Dale shares with his friends his new desire to follow in Duane's footsteps and become a writer. Because the character of Dale Stewart is based



upon the author, Dan Simmons, this section of the story has a distinctly autobiographical note.

## Mike O'Rourke and Responsibility

Mike O'Rourke is perhaps the most compelling character in *SUMMER OF NIGHT*. The son of a poor brewery worker, Mike has two older sisters and one younger. His father works the night shift in Peoria, so Mike is frequently the only male in the house and is very protective of his sisters and his mother. He also acts as a nurse to his invalid grandmother, who after suffering a recent stroke, is paralyzed, and can only communicate in blinks. When the undead soldier who, in life, was spurned by Mike's grandmother, begins to stalk the old lady, Mike sleeps in a chair by her side, defending her.

Mike has for years volunteered as an altar boy at the Catholic Church now run by Father Cavanaugh. His duties take him to the church sometimes twice a day and often interfere with his schoolwork. Mike is dyslexic, and despite his maturity and strong sense of responsibility, he has been held back a grade in school because of poor performance. His teachers have been heavy-handed with him, not accepting excuses about his church duties, which often affect his punctuality in morning classes. Dyslexia, though a condition recognized and named in the late 19th century, was not well understood in 1960, and thus Mike, like many other contemporary children, had no resources and no help in his struggle with the disorder.

Mike's maturity and strategic thinking play a crucial part in the war against the Bell of Borgia. Mike devises the series of successful ambushes that the boys use to whittle down the ranks of the minions of the Bell.



# Style

## Point of View

Dan Simmons uses third person point of view throughout the story. He jumps around between the boys in the Bike Patrol, though he leans heavily on Dale, Mike, and Duane, who are the primary characters of the story. He jumps outside of this small group of narrators only once, when he relates the death of Mr. Dennis Ashley-Montague. At no time in the story does the reader get a glimpse at the mind or point of view of any of the minions of the Bell of Borgia. Likewise, no female ever wrestles the point of view away from the boys, even Cordie Cooke, who is ostensibly one of the important protagonists in the story.

The first chapter is the only part of the book told in third person omniscient. It relates some of the history of Old Central, from the founding up until its slated closing in 1960 and the beginning of the story. Because of this natural separation, Chapter 1 could easily be labeled a prologue. Though the book has no central character—Dale, Mike, and Duane share the spotlight—the reader will sense that Dale, who is modeled after Dan Simmons, is perhaps the primary character of the three. The story begins and ends in Dale's perspective.

## Setting

The book takes place largely in the small town of Elm Haven and the surrounding countryside. Duane McBride takes brief excursions to a couple of nearby towns including Peoria, the home town of the author, Dan Simmons. Elm Haven is a small cluster of commercial interests serving the surrounding farming community. In the summer, it is walled in by cornfields. Because of his childhood growing up in a small town in Illinois in the 1960s, Dan Simmons is adept at capturing the spirit of Elm Haven. The town is almost a cliché of quintessential small town America in the mid-20th century.

Action takes place in many parts of Elm Haven, including the houses of Mike O'Rourke, Dale and Lawrence Stewart, and Jim Harlen, in the streets and in the surrounding cornfields. Even though the boys wage a battle against the school, they spend almost no time there, as the story occurs during the summer vacation. The school is a massive, foreboding building, way too large for the community it serves. Its hulking presence, coupled with the events that unfold around it, make it stand out as a menacing blight in the center of the community. When the boys finally journey behind its forbidding walls, they find the school transformed into a rotting den of slime and grey, organic matter, where the burrowing creatures that serve the Bell of Borgia spawn in pods hanging from the walls and ceiling.



## Language and Meaning

The *SUMMER OF NIGHT* breaks no new ground. It is constructed as a recognizable genre. A small farming town in mid-20th century America is confronted by a force of evil which only the children of the town can stop. The story feels familiar and Dan Simmons does nothing to interrupt this familiarity. He writes in a straightforward manner, sticking to the action, and the book reads more like a cult horror movie script. The language does not stray above high school level and the chapters are short and manageable. There are no long digressions or monologues by the various narrators. The most complicated parts of the plot involve the history of Old Central and the Borgia Bell, and these are doled out to the reader in short snippets in the middle section of the book. The reader learns only what is pertinent to the story, and there is no extra lore about the Bell of Borgia or Old Central to sift through.

Despite the thrift character development and the focus on action, *Summer of Night* is a character-driven story. This is ironic considering the nonstop action of the book, but it is understandable when the reader learns that the main characters of the book are all based on real characters from Simmons' childhood. He is able to capture their essence so economically because they are not fictitious to him.

## Structure

The first chapter of the book is the only chapter told through third person omniscient perspective. It is a brief summation of the history of Old Central and its perspective separates it from the story. It can be regarded as a prologue by the reader. The rest of the chapters, with one exception, are told through the eyes of the members of the Bike Patrol, especially Mike, Duane, and Dale. The chapters are evenly spaced and are divided by pivotal events in the plot, not by changes in perspective. This is typical of writings of suspense. The end of the chapter requires the reader to continue to learn what happens next at a moment of crisis.

The story has three discernible parts. The initial section contains the introduction to the protagonists and to Old Central. The boys are suspicious of the school, but their attitude toward it is one of contempt, not alarm. The first section ends with the death of Duane McBride. In the second section, the members of the Bike Patrol begin a war against the unknown forces of the school. They gather information about what they are facing and win some initial victories. The final section concerns the war itself. The boys have learned what they are up against and plan a series of ambushes, leading up to the invasion and destruction of the school and the Bell of Borgia.



## Quotes

"No. More a sense of...foreboding? Evil? Too melodramatic. A sense of awareness to both places. That and the sound of rats scurrying in the walls. Wonder why no one else talks about the sound of the rats in Old Central."

from Duane McBride's journal, p. 31

"No mistake. A baby was crying back there in that crib of death filled with roadkill scraped off asphalt, dead dogs with their guts spilling out, bloated cattle and white-eyed horses, flattened piglets and the rotting offal of a dozen farms."

p. 41

"The glow from the pole light illuminated the turnaround and the first ten yards of driveway. Duane crouched and waited. He realized that his heart was beating faster than usual and he took deep, slow breaths until it slowed to normal."

p. 76

"Dale's breathing simply stopped. His chest was frozen. He wanted to raise his hands in front of his face, but he saw the image of the bullet passing through his palms before smashing into his mouth. Dale realized for the first time what death was: it was not walking any father on the railroad tracks, not eating dinner tonight or seeing his mom or watching Sea Hunt on TV. It wasn't even being allowed to mow the lawn next Saturday or help his dad rake the leaves come fall."

p. 146

"The Old Man pirouetted, gripped the tie rod in both hands, let the dog fly by him, and swung the metal bar upward. Duane thought he looked like a batter hitting pop flies to a distant outfielder."

p. 226

"The instant the book left his temple, Duane lifted his face from the mud. There was a great tearing at his legs, an irresistible force lifted him and turned him, pulled him toward the vortex he could feel through every fiber of his body, but for a split second, that briefest of instants, he was free—could see the stars—and he lifted his face toward them even as he was spun away into the darkness roaring below and around him."

p. 291-292

"Mike felt a terrible sense of...not just loss, although loss there was, but of imbalance. It was as if he and Duane McBride had been on a seesaw together since they were tiny kids in Mrs. Blackwood's kindergarten, and now the corresponding weight was gone, the balance destroyed."

p. 314

"The Soldier was lowering its face toward Father C.'s neck and chest. The Soldier's cheeks seemed to bulge, as if a wad of chewing tobacco were forcing its way forward,



the mouth itself elongating as if a set of dentures were wedged in front of its gums."  
p. 367

"Dale grabbed the speaker and put his face almost against the microphone grid, shouting, not even knowing if the thing had been switched off or if the listener at the other end had gone about his duties in the Emerald City. 'Listen to me, goddammit!' he shouted. 'Tell Mr. Ashley-Montague that I know all about the Borgia Bell, and about the colored guy they hung from it, and about the kids that got killed...kids back then and kids right now. Tell him...tell him that my friend's dead because of his grandfather's fucking bell and...oh, shit.' Dale ran out of steam and sat down on the hot pavement. The box did not speak again, but there was an electrical humming, a mechanical click, and the wide gate began to open."  
p. 424

"Mike knew that they were in a war as certainly as his father had known during World War II. Only there were no fronts or places of safety in this war, and the enemy owned the night."  
p. 467

"Again the rattle of stones. 'Michael, Michael...all the explanations in the world could not begin to make you understand the complexity of the situation you have stumbled into. Trying to explain would be like teaching catechism to a cat or dog.'"  
Father Cavanaugh to Mike O'Rourke, p. 519

"Nine feet of lamprey unwound from the soil and went for his legs, tendrils quivering. Kevin got the full benefit of the death-stench riding from the thing's pulsing interior, and then he swung his legs up like a trick horse-rider, hanging completely by the force of his arms, his blue jeans skidding against the curved steel tank."  
p. 560

"Kevin slammed the truck in gear and roared down the gravel drive, rolling right over the body of the thing, feeling the vibration coming up through the truck frame as if he had hit a massive telephone cable or something. Then he was out the door and pulling Cordie in while the lamprey began to unwind back into its hole like a hose on a tension reel, spraying fluid as it backed off the pavement."  
p. 572

"Dale pointed and began to scream at Mike. Above the overhang, where neither Mike nor the rapidly descending Roon could see, the roof suddenly burst into a thousand discrete points of flame—like a piece of film acetate suddenly browning, melting, and burning through, Dale thought—and the long south gable collapsed inward with a shower of sparks that filled the sky. The old chimney stood by itself for a second, a brick tower in a geyser of fire, but then toppled inward."  
p. 580



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss which aspects of the story could be considered clichés of the horror genre.

How does darkness play a role in the story. Discuss Lawrence's fear of darkness and Dale's role in protecting his younger brother.

Mike is a precociously responsible boy. Why is this so, and how does his maturity help save Elm Haven?

Duane McBride wanted to be a writer and knew that he would have to begin working early in life to become a good one. What other careers often require dedication early in life?

Dan Simmons uses childhood friends from his home town of Peoria, Illinois as the models for the characters in *Summer of Night*. Research some other examples of authors using childhood friends as character models. Does this practice always lead to sufficient depth of character?

There is no mystery to *SUMMER OF NIGHT*. The children suspect right away who is involved in the evil radiating from Old Central and are correct. Is this lack of mystery detrimental to the suspense of the story, or is the mystery of the Bell of Borgia itself enough to maintain a mood of suspense?

Discuss Jim Harlen's view toward women and sex, contrasting it with that of Mike O'Rourke.

Discuss the rendering truck's role in the plot line of the story, focusing on how Simmons uses its appearances to create suspense.