

Swamplandia! Study Guide

Swamplandia! by Karen Russell

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Contents

Swamplandia! Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter One: The Beginning of the End.....	5
Chapter Two: The Advent of the World of Darkness.....	8
Chapter Three: Osceola K. Bigtree in Love.....	12
Chapter Four: Ava the Champion.....	14
Chapter Five: Prodigal Kiwi.....	16
Chapter Six: Kiwi's Exile in the World of Darkness.....	19
Chapter Seven: The Dredge Appears.....	21
Chapter Eight: Kiwi's Debt Increases.....	23
Chapter Nine: The Dredgeman's Revelation.....	24
Chapter Ten: Kiwi Climbs the Ladder.....	28
Chapter Eleven: Ava Goes to the Underworld.....	30
Chapter Twelve: Kiwi Goes to Night School.....	32
Chapter Thirteen: Welcome to Stiltsville.....	33
Chapter Fourteen: The Drowning Chain.....	35
Chapter Fifteen: Help Arrives, Then Departs.....	37
Chapter Sixteen: Kiwi Bigtree, World Hero.....	39
Chapter Seventeen: Ava's Eclipse.....	42
Chapter Eighteen: Kiwi Rolls the Dice.....	44
Chapter Nineteen: The Silently Screaming World.....	46
Chapter Twenty: Out to Sea.....	48
Chapter Twenty-One: Mana Weeds.....	50
Chapter Twenty-Two: Kiwi Takes to the Skies.....	52

Chapter Twenty-Three: The End Begins.....	54
Characters.....	57
Symbols and Symbolism.....	61
Settings.....	63
Themes and Motifs.....	66
Styles.....	70
Quotes.....	71

Plot Summary

Set against a backdrop of unbelievable and sometimes ludicrous situations, “Swamplandia!” by Karen Russell demonstrates how quickly and unexpectedly life can spin out of control. The young narrator Ava Bigtree warns the reader from the beginning that her family was headed for a fall. She doesn’t, however, tell her readers how close the family came to a disaster before they reconnected with each other.

The way the individual members of the family dealt with the death of Hilola Bigtree from ovarian cancer was the starting point from which the other problems faced by the family members grew. Sam “Chief” Bigtree threw himself into his work and tried to pretend the problems around him didn’t exist. The problems he ignored included Ossie’s new obsession with talking to ghosts and the amount of debt the family owed. He concentrated only on finding a way to make his family’s amusement park Swamplandia! lucrative.

Meanwhile, Ossie met the ghost of a 17-year-old dredgeman who died on a dredge that mysteriously appeared near the family’s island. She spent a good deal of time with this “boyfriend” and accepted his suggestion that they elope. Ava, Ossie’s younger sister, found the note from her sister telling her about her plans to elope with the ghost. At that point, Ava and the Bird Man, a strange man who had come to the island uninvited to take care of buzzards, were alone on the island. The Chief had gone on an extended trip to the mainland to meet with investors. Kiwi had taken a job on the mainland to help pay his family’s bills.

The Bird Man convinced Ava to go with him to the underworld where Ava believed Ossie had gone to elope with Louis. During their trip Ava noticed the once friendly Bird Man began to act stranger and stranger. After they finally arrived on the island Ava believed was the underworld the Bird Man raped her. Ava finally ran away from the man but realized she had perhaps put herself into more danger because she had no water and did not know where she was.

Through a stroke of luck, Kiwi had been allowed to register in flight school at the amusement park where he was working. He happened to spot Ossie waving for help while he was on a test flight with his instructor. Soon after some hunters who had heard Ava screaming when she was with the Bird Man alerted park services that they believed a girl was in trouble. A ranger with park services found Ava and reunited her with her family. Once they were together, the family members realized that they would have to give up their island home and move to the mainland in order to make a living.

Chapter One: The Beginning of the End

Summary

Ava Bigtree begins her story of the fall of her family's alligator-themed amusement park with a description of her mother's Swimming with the Seths act. The family lived on and operated Swamplandia! an alligator-themed amusement park on a 100-acre island off Florida's southwest coast. Although they had no Indian heritage, the father of the family advertised them as a "tribe" in promotional material. Ava thought of how the description of Indian was particularly not suited to her sister Osceola who had pale skin and white hair.

The park offered shows every day and was known for its cheap beer prices but there were some enemies to the park which included the melaleuca tree as well as the Florida suburbs. Ava felt her family had always won their fights with nature and the economy until her mother got sick with cancer and died. Tourists began leaving the park because they could no longer see Hilola's show, the headliner. Also that year Grandpa Sawtooth had gone to live in a retirement community after he bit a tourist.

Ten months after her mother's death, Ava saw a television advertisement for The World of Darkness a new amusement park that offered things that Swamplandia! could not. A few weeks after that park opened, the ferry that generally brought tourists to Swamplandia! did not arrive. Ava tried to talk to her dad about the missing ferry but her father would only say the ferry operator had called to say there were no passengers. Ava visited the alligators and thought about how her mother had been teaching her how to wrestle the beasts. She wondered if they would ever do another show. They did continue to do shows even though they didn't sell out. Their father pretended like the disappearance of the families who used to visit was just a fluke and the their lives would return to normal.

Analysis

The first thing to notice is the foreshadowing in the novel. Right from the beginning the reader knows that the amusement park Swamplandia! will cease to exist and the family will have to move to the mainland. Even the title of the chapter The Beginning of the End lets the reader know that the story will not end well. Notice also that Ava believed her family was near the middle of the end when her mother died. She didn't know at the point how much more difficult life would be for her family after her mother died.

The lifestyle of the family as described in the novel seems so out of the ordinary that it is at first difficult to take the story seriously. Despite its backdrop of people with outrageous names, Kiwi Bigtree and Grandpa Sawtooth to name a few; strange talents, wrestling and swimming with alligators; a fake heritage, they pretend to be indians; and unusual amusement parks, an alligator park and one based on hell the novel tells a very serious

story. The serious part of the story starts when Hilola, the mother and wife of the family, dies of cancer. As Ava indicates in the novel it was with Hilola's death that the end of the Swamplandia! story began.

Because this is story about the fall of a business, the details of the business is included as a theme in the story. Ava describes Swamplandia! as being a not terribly sophisticated theme park. They had old fashioned speakers and a six foot wooden stage on stilts. Even though they had no Indian heritage their father promoted them as the Bigtree tribe. He referred to himself as the Chief and dressed in Indian garb for the shows. Hilola's Swimming with the Seths act was the headlining show. All members of the family wrestled with the alligators. On Thursdays the show consisted of live chickens being fed to the alligators. One of their biggest draws besides their shows was their cheap beer. Even after the families stopped coming to the park people still came for the beer. Even though she was only 13 and didn't know much about the business model, even Ava knew that their park depended on the families for its livelihood. Along with Hilola's death, the park had another enemy in the form of the World of Darkness, a new amusement park. One of the benefits that park enjoyed as compared to Swamplandia! was that the World of Darkness was located on the mainland while people who wanted to visit Swamplandia! had to take a nearly 40 minute ferry ride to get there.

Religion is also a theme in the novel even though it is a more allegorical one. This theme is only touched upon in this section as Ava mentioned that Swamplandia! observed no Christian holidays. Notice also that the new amusement park was called the World of Darkness. It had a hell related theme. The author's play on the idea of hell, religion and the World of Darkness will become more clear as the novel progresses.

Another theme that is addressed is that of grief and the way the family dealt with grief. Ava notes that she was furious when her mother got sick. The doctors were not able to give her a reason why her mother got so sick. The Chief's reaction to his wife's death was to do nothing. Ava was upset with him because he did nothing to alert the tourists that Hilola was no longer alive. The family had to deal with the unhappy tourists when they arrived at Swamplandia! to see the show. Although some tourists tried to show sympathy to Ava she believed they wanted to hear that Hilola had been killed by an alligator. Ava believed they seemed disappointed when the learned she had died of cancer. Notice also that Ava compared her mother's death to a dive into the gator pit. Ava noted that her mother never surfaced from this pad.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way that Sam Bigtree promoted his business. Do you think his business plan was sound? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think of the absurd way that the Bigtrees made their living? What tone does this lend to the novel?



Discussion Question 3

How does the family seem to be handling the death of Hilola? How do the tourists make their pain worse?

Vocabulary

innovation, dredged, livid, ubiquitous, incremental, perimeter, primordial, daguerreotypes, menace, oblivious, beget, synonymous, lodestar, banal, flaccid, conciliation, imbricating, vestige, scrim, whimsical, macabre, recalcitrant, anachronism, melodramatic, reticent

Chapter Two: The Advent of the World of Darkness

Summary

With fewer and fewer guests on the island, Ava and the other Bigtree children had free time on their hands. It was during this time that Ossie began to change. She'd found the spell book "The Spiritist's Telegraph" in the library boat and began reading it. Ossie would not let Ava read the book but did allow her to flip through it. Ava remembered a portion about the underworld and asked her father about it. He told her there was no such place as the underworld or even heaven or hell. That those ideas were all fairy tales. Ava tried to explain it was a book for witches but her father didn't take her concern seriously. Ava and her sister had begun playing with an Ouija board, trying to contact their mother.

Ava next explains that she and her siblings were homeschooled. Kiwi claimed to be the valedictorian of their class while Ava was the salutatorian. Kiwi planned to go to college and was studying for the SAT. He enjoyed the free time as he'd always preferred to study over dealing with the alligators. Although Ossie had never been much of a scholar, she now studied "The Spiritist's Telegraph" the way Kiwi studied for his college prep test.

The family gave Ossie a pitiful party for her sixteenth birthday. In the description of the party Ava included an aside describing how her family came to live on and own Swamplandia! They were isolated on the island and Ava sensed Ossie must be lonely. When the party was over Ossie told her father she'd be back in a little while. Ava noticed she was wearing makeup and looked pretty. Her father told her he wanted to have a tribal meeting but Ossie said she wanted to walk and should be allowed to since it was her birthday.

After she left the Chief announced they had a new enemy to fight. Ava thought to herself how she'd been working on her own plan to save Swamplandia! The new enemy to which her father referred was the World of Darkness. He was suggesting they adapt their own amusement park to a place called Carnival Darwinism. As Kiwi made a sarcastic remark, his father wrote down how much they'd earned during the month of March and how much outstanding debt they had. Kiwi knew the debt figure was nowhere close to being right. Kiwi suggested they could sell equipment to pay off their debt and then live on the mainland. The Chief became angry with the idea of selling the park. He told Kiwi they would not abandon his mother's dream.

That night Ossie did not come in until very late. Ava noticed she was covered in leaves and looked like she'd been in a gator pit. The next morning she read the obituary section of the paper. When the Chief asked his children what was wrong at breakfast,

Ava told him Ossie was talking to dead people. He said it was a stage she was going through. Kiwi commented on the similarity to the stages of cancer.

Analysis

The theme of business is developed in this section of the novel as the history of Swamplandia! is described in this section. The business was built by Ernest Schedrach aka Grandpa Sawtooth who bought the property sight unseen from Bowles and Beaver Co. Land Lottery after he lost job at the Archer Road Paper Mill. It was said that he changed his name to Bigtree to avoid creditors. Note the reasons that Grandpa Sawtooth wanted out of his job was because he was also tired of pitiful wages and the bad health effects of his job. This business theme is continued as the different members of the family develop their own plans to save the park. Ava wanted to take her mother's place as the star alligator wrestler in order to save the park. The Chief thought they had become complacent and that they should evolve the park in order to compete with the World of Darkness. He called that amusement park their main predator. Kiwi pointed out to his father the overwhelming amount of bills the family had. He suggested to his father they they sell some equipment, or even the entire park, in order to pay their debts.

When Kiwi suggested to his father that they sell the park in order to pay their debts, the Chief became angry. His response to Kiwi's suggestion leads into the theme of grief as it is addressed in this section of the novel. The Chief equated the theme park with his wife. He told Kiwi it had been her dream to live on the island and keep the park running. His grief made him unwilling to consider the idea that the family might have to close or sell the park. To him closing the park or losing their home would cause him the same pain he'd felt when he lost his wife.

Also in the theme of grief, notice that the Chief put all of his energy into working on the park even though they did not have any tourists. In his pain he buried himself in his work and did not pay the attention he should have to his children. For this reason when Ava and Kiwi both voiced their concern to their father about Ossie's interest in the occult he did nothing. He told them only that he believed it was just a hobby and that there was nothing he could do about her new interest.

When the Chief talked with Ava about Ossie's new interest their discussion added to the theme of religion in the novel. Ava tried to tell her father about the underworld, a place that Ossie's book indicated was neither heaven nor hell. Her father's answer gives the reader a clear idea of the family's stance on religion. The Chief told Ava that the idea of the underworld was the same as an ancient fairy tale. He also told her that the ideas of heaven and hell were Christian fantasies. This statement indicates that the family was not religious. Yet, the Chief ironically told his children that their new predator was the World of Darkness, an amusement park based on the rings of hell. As the story develops it will be more and more ironic how the World of Darkness i.e. evil will seek his family as its prey.



The title of this chapter The Advent of the World of Darkness is significant in the theme of religion. In the Christian religion the celebration of Advent is a celebration of the waiting for and welcoming of Jesus. In this case the author uses the term to describe the waiting for the beginning of the World of Darkness. This can be taken to mean the members of the Bigtree family were waiting to see how the amusement park would affect their family and the family business. In a more allegorical sense the title refers to Ossie's beginning steps into the world of the occult and her acts of dabbling in witch craft and evil.

Notice also the oddness of the Bigtree children. They are homeschooled and have very little interaction with the mainland or people from the mainland with the exception of the tourists. On the island, Kiwi was viewed by his family as strange because he enjoyed studying and dreamed of going to college. He had already voiced his opinion that he believed the family should sell the park and move to the mainland. Ava notes how she often watched Ossie on the ferry docks trying to talk to the boys who came from the mainland. She would play music for the boys but the boys from the mainland made fun of her because the music to which she listened was from the time of Eisenhower's presidency. Notice also that Ava mentioned that the events sung about in the song, like corn and car accidents, were exotic to the Bigtree children.

A final theme introduced in this section of the novel is that of ghosts. In her free time Ossie began reading the spell book "The Spiritist's Telegraph" and believed she could communicate with ghosts. Even though both Ava and Kiwi voiced their concerns about Ossie's new interest to their father, he chose to do nothing to discourage Ossie or address what will develop into a bigger problem as the story progresses.

Discussion Question 1

How were the Bigtree children raised differently from other children?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss religion as it has been discussed thus far in the novel. How does the author use the name of the new amusement park World of Darkness as part of the religious theme?

Discussion Question 3

Why did the Chief not consider that closing the park was a possibility?

Vocabulary

bibliophile, anatomical, akimbo, conflagration, defaulted, echolocation, incredulity, bellicose, transmuted, purloined, vestigial, functionary, conjugate, aura, homage, sentinels, precedent, hydrocephalic, complacent, beveled, exhume, fractal

Chapter Three: Osceola K. Bigtree in Love

Summary

Ossie began talking to people she referred to as her boyfriends using the Ouija board. Soon Ossie would no longer let Ava sit in on her sessions. Ossie would leave their room at night saying she was going to meet her boyfriends. She made Ava promise not to tell their father. One day on the way to the Gator Pit to practice her mother's moves, Ava noticed her sister hunched over at one of the picnic tables. Ava screamed three times before Ossie woke up. Ava accused her of playing a trick on her but Ossie said she had been holding a séance. Ossie didn't come home at all that night. Ava found her in the stands at the Gator Pit the following morning. Kiwi said Ossie needed medicine and perhaps a psychiatrist. He approached his father about Ossie's problems. The Chief told them they needed to do something to distract her. He asked Kiwi and Ava what they wanted him to do about Ossie. He claimed she was only boy crazy.

Because her father made things with Ossie appear to be normal, Ava was angry and felt she should be ashamed of herself. She began to be angry with her father. Meanwhile, Ossie had explained to Ava that she couldn't lose a ghost to death. Ava's father continued to dedicate Saturday's to Ava's training. He also dedicated himself to cleaning away and destroying trash.

Analysis

The themes of grief and ghosts are combined in this section of the novel. It seems that Ossie's interest in ghosts and dating these ghosts is tied up in her grieving process. For instance, Ossie told Ava that she didn't have to worry about her ghost boyfriends dying. Ava recognized her sister was worried she was going to lose someone else to death. Ava and Kiwi tried to talk to their father once more about Ossie's obsession with ghosts. He suggested his children should find something else for Ossie to do in order to distract her.

Also in the theme of grief Ava noted how her father's reaction to their mother's death made her feel both shamed and angry. She was angry with her father for not taking the things happening in his family more seriously. She felt bad because she did recognize the problems. Note that the Chief should have paid more attention to Ava and Kiwi's concern about Ossie and her condition. Even Kiwi recognized that Ossie's problems called for medicine and a counselor. The Chief believed Ossie was only boy crazy.

In this section even Ava struggled with strange reactions from the way her family was reacting to her mother's death. She was afraid of Ossie's ghosts and began knocking on things as a way to protect herself from these ghosts. Ava also found ways that she



could believe in her mother's continued existence on the island without technically believing in ghosts. Because the family had no religious persuasions, that was the only option Ava had to believe in that allowed her mother to continue to exist. In Ava's mind ghosts were scary and she didn't want to associate her mother with a scary ghost. Instead she chose to believe her mother lived on in the things located on the island.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the Chief continued to treat Ossie's association with ghosts in such a non interested way? Did Ossie's siblings have a better grasp of what was happening with their sister than their father did?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Ava's suspension of her beliefs so that she could allow herself to believe her mother still existed without technically believing in ghosts.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Ava's feelings of guilt and shame. Are these feelings typical for a child who has lost a parent?

Vocabulary

spectral, aptitudes, permutation, pugilists, desiccated, impassively, plummeted, lascivious, elephantine, punctilious, perimeter, impunity, pyre, detritus

Chapter Four: Ava the Champion

Summary

When Ava received a letter in the mail she told her father it was about a contest she wanted to enter to win money. She planned to donate any money she won to her father's new project. Ava planned to enter and win the same competition that her mother had won before she'd married Ava's father. She remembered once Kiwi had told her that their mother had married their father too young. When Ava told their parents they laughed at the idea. The night before their tenth wedding anniversary their mother had made Ava and Ossie go to the Bigtree museum with her and made them promise they would wait until they were thirty to get married. Ava still didn't understand what her mother had meant.

Ava had decided that if she could win the contest, her fame would bring people to Swamplandia! She had written a letter requesting information about the competition. About the same time, Ava saw a red Seth hatch in Swamplandia!'s incubator. Even though Ava thought the alligator could save their park, Ava was afraid she'd jinx the creature and cause it to die if she told her family about it too soon. Even though all the other alligators born in that hatching died the same week, Ava's alligator survived. She hid the red alligator in a fish tank behind a shed.

They visited their grandfather several weeks later. Ava thought she might tell him about the alligator. One of the employees gave the Chief the head of the Seth of Seths that he had hung in grandpa's room. She said he'd been afraid of it. The Chief made the children wait outside while he talked to their grandfather. Fifteen minutes later the Chief left his father's room. He was angry. He said he'd needed to ask his father for advice. When Kiwi made fun of his father, he warned Kiwi not to talk like that again. Ava later thought that was their last normal day as a family on Swamplandia!

Analysis

Ava finally reveals her plan to save the park as she narrates this section of the novel. She believed she could enter and win the same competition that her mother won in 1971. Her mother had been the national champion as awarded by the American Association of Alligator Wrestlers. Ava also grew excited when she saw the red alligator hatch. She believed this unusually colored creature could be a draw for the park. Even as Ava cared for this alligator, her superstitions spread to the creature. She believed if she told anyone about it that the alligator would die or disappear.

Also in this section of the novel the reader gets a little more information about Ava's mother. Ava mentions a time when she and her mother were talking about marriage while pinning up laundry to dry. She points out that while they were pinning up the laundry they were buffeted by the winds of a category two hurricane that was headed

toward their island. Ava uses this example to show that her mother was a little crazy. Of course if one takes into consideration that Hilola wrestled alligators on a regular basis that would also be proof that they were a little crazy. Additionally, Ava said her mother was often forgetful as well.

Interesting in this section is the description of the retirement community to which Grandpa Sawtooth was sent to live after he bit a tourist. The idea of having a retirement community on a moored houseboat seems ludicrous. As Ava describes the residents in their Easter egg colored pajamas it only makes the idea seem even more unbelievable. Again, against the backdrop of a situation that seems unbelievable, the author presents another sad situation with which the family must deal. Although Grandpa Sawtooth was not dead, he was also not the same person who had founded Swamplandia! or who had fought with the alligators. There was grief as the family learned Grandpa was afraid of the head of the Seth of Seths that he had killed. The nurses asked the family to take it home with them because it upset Grandpa so much. Also bad for the Chief was that he tried to get his father to give him advice on what to do about the floundering business. Because the Chief was angry when he left his father, it is fair to assume that the Chief did not get the advice he wanted.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the idea of the retirement community in which Grandpa Sawtooth was sent to live. Why do you think the author paired such serious topics in settings and situations that seem unbelievable and sometimes even ludicrous?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Ava's love for her red alligator. Why do you think this creature was so important to her?

Discussion Question 3

At the conclusion of the chapter, Ava makes a statement that this was the last time her family was together on Swamplandia! How does this statement affect the tone of the novel?

Vocabulary

erudite, ursine, perennial, candidly, nautical, herpetological, pigmentation, usurped, perfunctory, limpid, carafe, undulating

Chapter Five: Prodigal Kiwi

Summary

Back at Swamplandia! Ava grabbed Kiwi's arm and realized how much weight and muscle mass he'd lost since their mother's death. The loss had made a physical change in him, she realized. She thought maybe they could work on building one another up, perhaps by practicing a brother and sister routine. She asked him to come to the museum with her so she could show him that their mother's wedding dress was missing from the display. She believed Ossie had taken it. Kiwi instead was worried about how much money they actually owed. Even though Ava believed they could, Kiwi knew they couldn't compete with the World of Darkness. Kiwi tried to convince her that it would be best if they did not stay on the island, that when she got older she wouldn't want to stay on the island. Ava, however, equated Swamplandia! with home and family. When Ava told Kiwi their mother would hate it if they left the island Kiwi reminded her that their mother wasn't around anymore. Although Ava didn't believe in ghosts like Ossie did, the island and everything on it kept the memory of her mother close. Ava told her brother that she thought Ossie did have powers. She described Ossie's moaning and twitching in bed. Kiwi recognized his sister was probably masturbating but told Ava only that Ossie was probably having a good dream when she was acting that way.

The next morning, Kiwi was gone. He'd left a note in the kitchen. He said he was going to get a job and would send money back to them as soon as he could. The Chief was smiling when he told Ava and Ossie that Kiwi had taken \$300 from his wallet before he'd left. Ossie believed their brother would be back that night. Ava believed the Chief was handling Kiwi's disappearance okay until she noticed he was chewing an orange peel and all. She wanted him to act like his old self. As Ava was watching a documentary on Elizabeth II her father began talking to her. He told her he was going to go on a jaunt, his term for an extended stay on the mainland for fundraising purposes. He said Gus Waddell would help with the alligators. He told Ava he'd be working getting new investors to get their Carnival Darwinism project up and running.

Analysis

The title of this chapter is significant as it is a reference to religion. Kiwi represents the prodigal son of a story from the Christian Bible. Like that son Kiwi has taken money from his father and gone out into the world believing that his life on the outside will be better than what he had at home. Unlike the prodigal son, however, prodigal Kiwi left home with the intention of working and sending money back to his family with the goal of helping save the family's home.

Shortly after Kiwi left, the Chief decided it was time for him to go on one of his fundraising trips to the mainland. His timing seems incredibly bad as Kiwi was gone and Ossie was communicating with ghosts so Ava would be left to basically fend for herself.



He seemed confident that she could handle the island as long as Gus Waddell, the ferry captain, agreed to help her as needed. There had been no tourists to visit Swamplandia! in a week so the Chief decided to suspend their shows until he returned.

The family members continue to struggle with their grief in this section of the novel. Ava noticed Kiwi's shrunken arms. She saw this as a physical, outward symbol of his grief. When Ava showed her brother that Ossie had gone so far as to steal their mother's wedding dress from its place in the Bigtree museum, Kiwi voiced his anger at his father. Even though Ava couldn't agree with Kiwi that she hated their father for the way he was turning a blind eye to their troubles, she did agree that her father wasn't doing all that he should be doing. "Oh, why aren't you trying? I thought in his direction. Why aren't you doing anything? Try. Pay attention. Be the Chief again," Ava tried to tell her father telepathically after Kiwi left. Notice that Ava had fooled herself into believing the Chief's fake smile and believing he was taking Kiwi's departure okay until she saw him chewing an orange peel and all.

When Kiwi discussed with Ava the possibility they could make a new life for themselves of the mainland Ava did not take his suggestion well. She did not want to leave because her home and the place where her mother lived symbolized her mother to her. Ava was also afraid of disappearing into the crowd on the mainland. Remember Ava was only 13 at this time. Kiwi was older at 17. He told Ava that she did not want to turn 17 on the island, a statement that Ava was not yet able to understand.

In the theme of ghosts, Kiwi does make a statement about Ossie's possessions that gives the reader another view of her activity. Kiwi suggested that by communicating with spirits Ossie had found a way to get off the island without ever leaving her bedroom. When Ava described the "possessions" that Ossie had at night in their bedroom Kiwi recognized Ossie was probably masturbating and told Ava those dreams were probably good ones.

Discussion Question 1

What is your opinion of the Chief's decision to leave his daughters alone on the island? Do you think there was an option to leaving them there alone that the Chief should have considered?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Ossie stole her mother's wedding dress from the museum? What does this theft indicate?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Kiwi suggest to Ava that they leave the island? Do you think he really intended to take his sister with him?

Vocabulary

cessation, vise, choreograph, traitor, erroneously, luxuriated, pantomiming, vileness, masochists, absolved, insuperable, preclude, penury, insolvency, antidote, jaunty, indigenous

Chapter Six: Kiwi's Exile in the World of Darkness

Summary

Kiwi sat in the parking lot of the World of Darkness and watched Vijay smoke marijuana. His fellow workers at the amusement park called him Margaret Mead or variations of the name because they'd found one of her books in Kiwi's locker. Kiwi was being paid \$5.75 an hour as a janitor at the amusement park. For a while Kiwi was in charge of vacuuming the front hall but had messed up that job when he broke the vacuum cleaner by running over his own shoelaces with it. Vijay told Kiwi to just tell Carl about the accident, that he wouldn't get fired. Kiwi didn't get fired but he got put in charge of cleaning the bathroom. He lived in the staff dormitories in the basement of the park. As Kiwi went about his demeaning tasks, he promised himself that the job was not a permanent one.

Vijay was the only person in the World who seemed to really take an interest in Kiwi. He defended Kiwi but at the same time told him he needed to lay off on talking about going to Harvard or any of his other aspirations. The others at the World taught him in an unfriendly way what he could and couldn't say to others. He tried not to think about his home and family. He tried to convince himself that what he was doing was helping them. Meanwhile, he was researching the college application process and had contacted the high school about enrolling in the fall. He'd drawn up a plan for addressing Swamplandia!'s debt and wanted to get a doctor to help Ossie.

Analysis

The religious references continue in the novel as Kiwi began his job in the World of Darkness, or hell. The working conditions that Kiwi encountered reminds the reader of the reasons why Grandpa Sawtooth wanted to start his own business. Kiwi was paid the lowest salary possible and forced to do the most unappealing tasks available. Interesting is that although the theme park was supposed to be representative of hell, which is generally thought of as being a hot place, Kiwi was cold because the air conditioners were kept at such a low temperature that it was always freezing inside the indoor park.

The park was apparently also a hell to the people in charge of overseeing the young workers who staffed it. Note that Kiwi's employer says to him: "Oh, it makes perfect sense that Hell is staffed by teenagers! If there is a hell, I know it's a NASA space station manned by monkeys your age" (p. 90). Notice also the difference in the business model followed by the World of Darkness as opposed to Swamplandia! The managers at the World of Darkness had originally planned to have immigrants work at the park and had even built dorms for that purpose. It is indicated in the novel the plan was held



up by red tape, which probably means it was illegal. At Swamplandia! although Kiwi justified his theft of the money from his father because he'd never gotten paid for the services he provided, he did get room and board at no charge.

When Kiwi began working at the World of Darkness, he realized it wasn't as easy as he thought it was going to be to fit in with the people who lived on the mainland. Luckily he was befriended by Vijay who seemed to show a true affection for the new boy. Kiwi learned during his first few weeks of work that he didn't need to refer to himself as a genius or talk about his aspirations which included going to Harvard. He also learned he should not quote literature to his coworkers because when he had done so he had gotten tagged as a sexual predator by the girls with whom he worked while the guys decided he was homosexual.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Kiwi's introduction to the "real world." How does his job at the World of Darkness differ from his jobs at Swamplandia!?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the author chose to call the theme park the World of Darkness? How is this name significant to the theme of religion in the story?

Discussion Question 3

How does Kiwi justify his act of stealing money from his father? In what ways does he hope any money sent back to his family will be used? What does this say about him?

Vocabulary

prudish, emasculating, conceded, insidious, disconcerted, ostensibly, lewd, anonymous, epoch, intuition, ally, penance, decipherable, enigmatic, ruminate, pantheon, deferential, masticated, aberration, protectorate, pulchritude, calumny, exonerate, incendiary, embryonic, numinous, fusillades, convivial, sycophancy, misogynist

Chapter Seven: The Dredge Appears

Summary

Back at Swamplandia! the girls did as they pleased without Kiwi or the Chief there. One day while cutting down melaleuca samplings the girls spotted an old dredging boat on the bank of their island. Ava tells how the melaleuca had been introduced to the island by the Army Corps of Engineers in an effort to drain the islands. The melaleucas had taken over the islands. When the sisters reached the boat, they saw it was a dredge like those used in the dredge and drain campaign from 1886-1942. Ava noticed there were buzzards everywhere. They went into the cabin of the boat which was full of moths. Ava's mind kept telling her the boat was haunted. Among the items on board was a WPA jacket, a work shirt and a bucket with the initials L.T. on it. Ossie sat on the floor with her Ouija board and tried to contact ghosts. Ava made fun of her. Ossie had put the work shirt in her duffel. Ava continued to look at a map with the initials L.T. in the left-hand corner. Ava called her sister over and they wondered together why the map just stopped with nothing at the bottom. There was a locked hatch they couldn't open. When the boat shifted a yellow liquid came from the hatch and Ava noticed a death smell. Ossie asked Ava for a key they'd found so she could try to open the hatch but Ava wouldn't give it to her. Ava begged her sister to hurry with what she was doing so they could leave. Ossie finally told Ava she was finished and that they had better go.

Later, Ava had asked Ossie if she was lonely on the island and if she had ever wanted to go to the mainland. They remembered the time they'd spent on the mainland to wait out a hurricane. Ossie told Ava she didn't think they'd do well if they lived on the mainland permanently.

A few days later Ava heard Ossie sneak out at 1 a.m. She didn't return until 5 a.m. Ava noticed how beautiful she looked. Ava made fun of Ossie's belief she had a ghost as a boyfriend. Ossie told Ava she just didn't understand. After Ava continued to harass her Ossie finally told her that her boyfriend was a dredgeman from Iowa. A few days later Ava found Ossie eating cauliflower in the kitchen as if she were starving. She was wearing the work shirt they'd found on the dredge. Ava wondered where her real sister had gone. When Ava mentioned to her sister that their father had said she was just lovesick Ossie seemed angry and said it wasn't like that. She said the every time her ghost left her she was afraid he wouldn't come back. Ava ate with her sister but, looking back, wondered if she should have done more. Ossie let it slip that her boyfriend's name was Louis but wouldn't tell her anything else.

Analysis

Ava and Ossie's discovery of an antique dredge boat near their island seems to be a major turning point in the novel. It is as if Ossie's fascination has taken a turn into a truly dark place. Later in the chapter Ava reports that Ossie had begun wearing the work shirt



that they found on the dredge. She also noticed her sister had a insatiable appetite and was eating everything she could get her hands on. Notice that Ava ate with her sister in order to give her a sense of camaraderie but later wondered if there was something more she should have done.

This section contains information about the swamp and its history. When Ava and Ossie spotted the dredge, they had been cutting down melaleuca saplings they found growing on the island. The trees were not native to the area, they had been planted by the Army Corp of Engineers for the purpose of drying up the swampland. At the time they'd believed those trees would suck the swamps dry. All they did, however, was take over the swamps and cause the native vegetation to die. Remember Ava's mention of the four pilots of the apocalypse who supposedly planted the melaleuca seeds using salt and pepper shakers. This will be significant later on in the novel. Notice also the play on the religious term the four horsemen of the apocalypse. These horsemen are said to usher in the end of the world. In a allegorical sense, the four pilots of the apocalypse ushered in the end of the swamp and its natural vegetation by introducing a species of tree not native to the area.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how the author uses wording and descriptions to enhance the eeriness of the girls' exploration of the dredge?

Discussion Question 2

What signs indicate to you that the ghost that Ossie communicates with on the dredge is a more serious communication than the ones in which she has participated so far?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ava includes the memory of her mother in the hospital in this section of the novel? Why is this mention significant to the development of the story?

Vocabulary

impenetrable, hegemony, dereliction, insignia, ossified, belaying, autonomic, retrospect, denuded, diurnal, invocation

Chapter Eight: Kiwi's Debt Increases

Summary

Kiwi waited in line at the payroll office at the World of Darkness. He watched as tourists boarded the ride and began their descent. Once inside the payroll office he told the payroll manager there must have been a mistake because his check stub said he owed the World more than \$182 after working there three weeks. Scott, the payroll clerk began adding up all the expenses: food, dorm rent, uniform, city and state taxes, retirement. After all the deductions were explained, Kiwi left the office disappointed he hadn't made any money to sent to his family.

Analysis

The major idea discussed here is Kiwi's continued education into life in the real world. He hadn't realized how difficult it would be for him to make money or how much money would be withheld from his paycheck for things like uniforms, food and taxes. Again, Kiwi's problem is presented in an overstated way, he actually owes his workplace nearly \$183 after working for three 60-hour weeks, so that it seems humorous instead of like just another day. Also adding to the levity of the situation is the fact the payroll officer mistook Kiwi for a woman.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how the author uses overstatement and sarcasm to make her material seem less weighty.

Discussion Question 2

What statement does this chapter of the novel make about working people and the companies for whom they work?

Discussion Question 3

How does Kiwi handle the payroll officer's suggestion that he looks like a female?

Vocabulary

queued, expedient, apex, nostalgic, saturnine, indubitably, vestigial, morass, gesticulating,

Chapter Nine: The Dredgeman's Revelation

Summary

When the Chief called to see how things were going, Ava told him everything was fine. Ossie barely spoke to Ava and had asked her not to follow her around spying on her. Ava finally bugged Ossie to the point she shared her boyfriend's story with her. The ghost's name was Louis Thanksgiving. He was 17, an employee of the Model Land Company. Louis had told his fellow workers only he had been born dead. His mother had died of a ruptured uterus. The doctor believed the baby was stillborn but had been surprised when the baby began to cry. He was adopted by Frederick K. Auschenbliss, a dairy farmer who treated him badly. Louis escaped as soon as possible and headed for Florida. In Titusville he signed a six-month contract with the Civilian Conservation Corps. His first job was surveying the woods around Ocala. Even though the conditions were terrible with mosquitoes, crowing, heat and stink, Louis was happy. He had friends for the first time in his life.

His second contract was with the Model Land Company. The members of his first crew didn't sign up for this project and tried to warn Louis away from it. Although his work partners again were miserable with the bugs and heat, Louis was happy despite the hard work. About a month into that job Louis had a day off and had spent the morning playing solitaire. He heard a roar and saw flames coming from the engine room of the dredge. He saw two men head for the engine room and believed he should follow. He touched his face and realized he was bleeding. He felt tired and could see out of only one eye. One of the workers screamed that Gideon needed a hospital. Louis found the scalded man laying on the floor of the engine room. He guessed his lungs had been scalded by steam.

Other crewmen were running around putting out small fires. Hector came to tell Louis something and screamed when he saw Louis' face. The assembled crew did not know what had caused the explosion. Hector suggested it was Gideon's fault. As they watched, buzzards began to congregate. The birds took Gideon. When they finally started talking again, the crew agreed they'd never seen a bird do that before. Louis noticed the buzzards were returning. There were hundreds of them. As he watched them he thought he would be the next to be carried off. He was right.

Ossie made Ava promise not to tell anyone. When Ava made a joke that there was no one to tell, she noticed Ossie was laughing but that her eyes were filling with tears. She remembered the same type of expression on her father's face at the hospital. Later, Ossie showed Ava on a map that Louis had given her the entrance to the underworld. Ava recognized the location as what they called the Eye of the Needle. The girls' grandfather had been there. He had taken a picture of the channel cut between two

islands made by the Indians of shells. Ava was excited when Ossie spoke of the underworld. She thought they might find their mother down there.

Gus had visited. Ava told him all was well as she wished he would leave. The next day she found a half dead alligator in their pit. The next time Gus came to bring mail Ava received a response from Loomis University telling her they were unable to find the contest in which her mother had participated. They didn't believe it actually ever existed. Ava ripped it up. She tried to write a letter to Kiwi in which she told him about Ossie and her new boyfriend. Alone in the house, Ava left on the television news all the time. She'd searched the park for Ossie but couldn't find her. She broke their mother's bottle of perfume and worried briefly that Ossie would be mad at her. It was noon the following day before Ossie returned home. She stayed out all night Wednesday and Thursday as well. On Friday Ava found a note rolled up in the screen door. It was from The Bird Man requesting payment for his services. Ava tried to talk to Ossie about what they should do about the note but Ossie wouldn't acknowledge it required any action on their part. She had Ava helping her gather flowers for her spells. As they worked, Ava believed she'd seen a man's face in the cabin of the dredge. Ossie told Ava she had to go. She asked Ava not to wait there for her. When Ossie turned back to wave at Ava, Ava noticed how old her sister's face looked.

Ava waited for Ossie in the rain for a short time. When she looked up, she saw a pair of shoes in the trees. She followed the boots with her flashlight to the man's face. The man said he was getting the last of Ava's birds. She recognized what he was, a gypsy bird man who traveled around catching birds and relocating them for a charge to a place where he could get paid to collect them again. He said he'd be leaving in the morning. Ava invited him to stay the night in their house. She took the man's hand on their walk back to the house believing they were friends. When the Bird Man asked, Ava put on a show for him, even climbing the diving board to dive like her mother had during her shows. The man told her the show was great. She showed him the red alligator. He spent the night in Kiwi's room. Ossie was still gone when Ava woke the next morning. Ava searched for her and was able to find only a note in the Last Ditch telling her that she and Louis were getting married. Ava began to panic when she saw that the dredge was gone.

Analysis

Conditions on the island built to the point they are ripe for disaster. Ossie believed she was dating the ghost of a teenaged dredge worker. She disappeared for hours at a time leaving Ava alone. She made Ava promise not to tell what she'd told her about Louis. Ava's breaking point came when she found a note written by Ossie telling her that she was going to elope with the ghost. Ava's fear was more real because the dredge on which Ossie had met Louis was gone. At this point there was no one for Ava to tell about her troubles except a strange man who claimed to have come to the island to get rid of the buzzards. Note that these were the same buzzards that had come with the dredge.



The situation for the girls became more scary even though they didn't realize it when they discovered they were not alone on the island. Ossie tried to pass off the note from the so called "Bird Man" but Ava seemed to take it more seriously. She was concerned the man would come to her for payment and she would have nothing to give him. She also wondered how he'd gotten to their island because no ferries had run that day. Note also that after Ava fell from the tree where she had climbed to get a flower for Ossie she believed she saw a person inside the dredge.

Also of importance in this section of the novel is Ava's meeting with the Bird Man. To set her up for her unusual reaction to this man take into consideration that Ava has probably never been taught the danger that strangers can bring because she lived on an island that few people could reach. Additionally, the family members were surrounded by strangers all day in the form of tourists but none of these tourists, with the exception of a few unruly drunks, had even caused any problems. Ava has also just watched her sister go by herself to get onto an abandoned dredge where she believed her boyfriend, a ghost, was going to meet her. Ava was frightened for her sister and did not know what to do for her. Besides Ossie, Ava was alone on the island. When Ava first discovered the Bird Man, he was friendly. Ava desperately needed a friend. He let her hold his hand on the walk back to the house and encouraged her to show off her alligator wrestling moves for him.

Although Ava does not see the Bird Man's strangeness right away, there are some signs that begin to pop up that he might be a predator looking for more than just birds. The first sign that the Bird Man is up to no good is his refusal to give Ava any details about himself.

There are several themes that are expanded in this section of the novel. Religious references continue to be peppered throughout the story. For instance Louis recognized that Gid's ability to stand after he'd been burned so badly by steam from the boiler was a bad miracle. The other crewmen who worked alongside Louis described the swamp as the "shadow of the valley — only full of mosquitoes!" (p. 138). The workers were making a reference to the valley of death mentioned in the Christian Bible. Also, while all his fellow workers were miserable during their job Louis' face was described as looking like that of a man at church because he was so peaceful even in the atmosphere so many others found similar to hell.

Combining the idea of ghosts and religion, Ossie shared with Ava that Louis had shown her a map that showed the route to the underworld. Ava recognized the shell mounds that Ossie pointed out as the Eye of the Needle, an Indian landmark to which their grandfather had once gone to fish. It is important to remember that in this section of the novel Ossie told Ava that she was the only living person who knew that spot was an opening to hell. In the theme of ghosts, Ava began to fear even her sister because she was afraid her sister might have a ghost living inside her. The fear was more real because Ossie had told her the story of Louis. Even though Ava knew Ossie could have searched the obituaries for information about her other "lovers" she knew there was no way Ossie could have found any information about Louis through research. Ava was

convinced because Ossie was able to tell the story in a way that was convincing and suspenseful.

In the theme of business, Ava's hopes were dashed when she received a letter from a Florida college telling her that they could find no information about the contest her mother won or the corporation that sponsored it. Ava did, however, continue to train her red alligator believing that this animal could be the answer to the park's financial troubles.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think the Bird Man and Ossie's ghost were somehow related? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think it means that the college to which Ava had written for information about the alligator wrestling contest her mother had won could find nothing about the contest?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ava took to the Bird Man so quickly? Give reasons to support your answer.

Vocabulary

bulbous, derelict, symmetrical, tandem, wimpled, surname, sediment, melodramatic, emaciated, allayed, evanescent, olfactory, feculence, taciturn, avarice, pestilential, ventriloquy, indefatigably, saboteur, ruminant, volutes, archipelagos, precocious, epiphyte, pidgin

Chapter Ten: Kiwi Climbs the Ladder

Summary

Kiwi worried that he needed to get another job because he was making so little money at the World of Darkness. As he talked to Vijay about his opportunities during a rooftop break, he saw a seaplane land on the moat that surrounded the World. Vijay told him it was a new ride. Vijay commented those pilots made a good deal of money and that the World of Darkness had its own flight school. Kiwi fought his fear and went to talk to Carl about the school. Carl refused as Kiwi had broken the vacuum cleaner. He instead suggested they train Kiwi on the lifeguard chair and see how that went.

Analysis

In this section of the novel Kiwi showed signs that he was still grieving for his mother. He couldn't afford to wash his clothes at the laundromat so he was instead washing them with shampoo at work but wasn't doing a good job of getting them clean. Despite his laundry frustration, Kiwi refused to let Vijay take his clothes home to Vijay's mother. Kiwi indicated he did not want someone else's mother doting on him. It almost seemed as if he thought he would be unfaithful to his own mother if he let another mother try to take care of him.

Notice also in this section that the new ride at the World of Darkness is called the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse. The Four Pilots of the Apocalypse were mentioned in the previous chapter as Ava discussed how the melaleuca trees had come to take over the swamp vegetation. Since the theme of the amusement park is the underworld and hell, the idea of the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse, an allusion to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, fits neatly into the theme.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Carl was being fair when he refused to allow Kiwi to train as a pilot?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Kiwi did not want Vijay's mother doing his laundry?

Discussion Question 3

What did the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse do? Why were they considered to be so bad for the swamp islands?

Vocabulary

malevolent, nave, doting, furtive, abutted, sacerdotal, allusion, vanquished, clairvoyant, paroxysm, torpid, parabola, achromatic, disquisition, magnanimously

Chapter Eleven: Ava Goes to the Underworld

Summary

Ava took the note back to her house where the Bird Man was making breakfast. She handed him the note and asked him to read it. Ava supposed Ossie could have figured out how to hook a motor up to the dredge in order to get it moved, she could have even gotten the equipment she would have needed from the museum. Ava told the Bird Man she didn't believe Ossie had any help besides that from Louis. She told the Bird Man she believed the ghost was taking Ossie to the underworld and described where they would probably be going.

Instead of telling Ava her sister was crazy, the Bird Man told her that there was an underworld. He told her she'd need a guide to get there. He told her she could call the mainlanders but was afraid they wouldn't believe her. He suggested even that if they found Ossie they might remove her from the family because of her unstable actions. When Ava said she wouldn't mention any of the real story as to why her sister had run away, the Bird Man told her that if Ossie had already crossed over, they wouldn't be able to find her at all. Ava suggested they could go. He tried to discourage her but then began making plans. Ava wrote a note to her father and took the telephone off the hook. Ava decided to take the red seth with her. The Bird Man told her that if they were to see anyone she was to tell them she was his cousin and they were out on a fishing trip. As they began their trip Ava babbled about her sister and the Bird Man asked her questions. When she recognized the cigarettes the Bird Man was smoking, Ava mentioned they were her father's brand. The Bird Man said he'd taken them from their house. When Ava began looking she noticed other things he had taken as well including beer, a fishing knife and lures. The man told Ava he hadn't intended to make that trip again.

Analysis

In this section of the novel the reader begins to notice more signs that the Bird Man may not be the nice man that Ava believes him to be. First, he scavenged the museum and found a coffee grinder without asking permission. He used the things he found in the Bigtree kitchen as if he owned them instead of as if he were a guest. The Bird Man questioned Ava drawing all of the information he needed out of Ava to get out of her what he needed to know. Even though he pretended to be discouraging Ava from making the trip to the underworld with him he also discouraged her from calling in outside help. He told her that park services would have difficulty finding Ossie if she were just lost in the swamp and would never be able to find her if she had already made it to the Underworld. He also worked on her fear of losing her sister by telling her that if



she told park services that her sister was eloping with a ghost they wouldn't believe her and would probably take Ossie away because of her mental disorder.

Notice that Ava decided to take the red alligator with her. She also believed the Bird Man was having her pack way too much for a trip to the underworld and wondered how long the trip might take. Notice that before they begin their trip, the Bird Man warned Ava not to talk with the people they might meet on the way to the underworld. This is a strange request as it makes it seem as if he wanted to make sure that Ava did not talk to anyone, almost as if he didn't want anyone to know what he was up to.

Discussion Question 1

Are you suspicious of the Bird Man? Do you think his intentions are honest? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think that Ossie had someone, besides Louis, help her with the dredge? Who do you think that person might have been?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the Bird Man's reaction to Ossie's letter.

Vocabulary

aphorism, balletically, reconstituting, complicity, translucent, levitated, ethereal

Chapter Twelve: Kiwi Goes to Night School

Summary

Vijay drove Kiwi to his first session of GED school. He and the other students were given a diagnostic test. He scored a 38/100. He was put in remedial algebra and English II. Vijay was late to pick up Kiwi. He and the girls he had seduced went to watch a movie while Kiwi went to his room to study.

Analysis

In this section of the novel Kiwi began his pursuit of his dreams by going to night school. Notice also in the World of Darkness jingle included in this section there is a reference to Jonah surviving being swallowed by the leviathan, or whale. This is an allusion to another Biblical story in which a man was swallowed by a whale and lived through it experience. It is apparently this story on which the leviathan ride at the World of Darkness is based. A final thing to note in this section is the contempt that Kiwi first felt when he saw the Russian lady with her outdated books. After a while, however, he realized that the outdated books he'd studied on the Library Boat were no better than the ones with which she had come to the class.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Kiwi's opinion of the girls that Vijay had seduced and were riding in the backseat of Vijay's car.

Discussion Question 2

Consider the similarities between Kiwi and the Russian woman in the night school class.

Discussion Question 3

How do the students in the night class react to Kiwi's claim that he wanted to go to college? Why does it seem that all the people he met belittled him?

Vocabulary

philanthropic, annulling, vernal, parsimonious, cognition, bauxite, pensive

Chapter Thirteen: Welcome to Stiltsville

Summary

Ava and the Bird Man continued their journey into the swamp. Deep inside Ava hoped they wouldn't find Ossie right away because the Bird Man had been the first adult to really pay attention to her besides her father, mother and grandfather. They spent the night in an abandoned town called Stiltsville. As they ate dinner Ava asked the Bird Man if he had another name by which she could call him. He told her he didn't have another name anymore. Later that night he listened attentively while Ava told him the story of Louis Thanksgiving. When he asked her what the dredgeman's revelation meant she thought to herself that it meant that death was a theft, a crime but told the Bird Man she didn't know what it meant. Before they went to sleep, Ava sat looking out. She told the Bird Man she was praying. Her mother's family had been religious but hadn't passed religion on to the children. Ava had once thought of the word God as a spell breaker. Now she associated the deity with her mother.

The next morning Ava thought the Bird Man looked stranger than he ever had. His eyes had a vacant look. He claimed to have talked to fisherman who saw a strange boat two miles west of them.

Analysis

It is in this chapter that Ava indicates why she was drawn to the Bird Man. She describes him as being the first adult besides her family members who had paid attention to her. It appears that the attention of her family members was one of the things that Ava had been missing since her mother died. The group of people with whom she could interact had grown consistently smaller since her grandfather had been sent to live in the retirement community. After that her mother had died. Although she was still bodily on the island with Ava Ossie had been too preoccupied with her ghosts for months to pay any attention to Ava. Her father was distracted with his grief and then chose to leave the island himself on what he called a trip to find new investors for the park. Kiwi had left the island to get a job. At this point anyone who would pay attention to Ava must have seemed like a friend to her. Despite how worried Ava was about her sister, she admitted to herself that she hoped they would not find Ossie right away so she enjoy more of the Bird Man's attention.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the town of Stiltsville. Why was it abandoned?



Discussion Question 2

On the second day of their trip the Bird Man told Ava he'd talked to a fisherman who had seen a strange boat. Do you think he had really talked to anyone? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How did the Bird Man use Ava's desire for attention against her?

Vocabulary

dinghy, indecipherable, gluttoned, translucent, osmosis

Chapter Fourteen: The Drowning Chain

Summary

Kiwi was happy because he had just mailed a little more than \$147 back to Swamplandia! He'd gotten a check mark plus for his essay in school and he'd passed the CPR class. He was working his last few shifts before beginning his job as a lifeguard. On Monday Dale Bonilla oriented Kiwi to his new job at the Lake of Fire. Because the lake was dyed deep red, it was hard to see anyone underwater. Dale advised Kiwi to watch the feet. During his lunch break Kiwi went to the payroll office and learned his father had not cashed the checks that he'd forwarded to him. He called the bank where his father's debts were handled but wasn't allowed to get any information because he was not a signer on the account.

One day while at his lifeguarding duties, Kiwi saw a woman flailing in the deep end of the pool. He assumed she'd gotten stuck in an open drain and jumped from his platform more because he wanted to stop hearing the screams of the crowd. He grabbed her and felt her kicking to the surface of the pool, even making eye contact with him underwater but when they reached the surface, she went limp. He pulled her to the pool deck and was about to start rescue breaths when he realized she was breathing on her own. When the girl's eyes flew open, the crowd cheered for Kiwi.

Analysis

Notice in this section of the novel the reference the author makes to the Biblical story of Jonah and the whale. The leviathan ride at the World of Darkness seems to be loosely based on the Biblical story of Jonah, the man who was swallowed by a whale and stayed in the whale's belly for three days. When Kiwi thought of the time he had left to work as a janitor in the leviathan he thought: "One Friday, one Saturday, one Sunday — more or less what the original Jonah of biblical fame had done" (p. 226).

Again the ludicrousness of the situation in which Kiwi found himself. He's been assigned as a lifeguard at the Lake of Fire, obviously a reference to Hell. In order to recreate this lake the owners dyed the water a deep dark red. The lifeguard in charge of the lake can't see beyond the surface of the water. Notice also the strange circumstances of Kiwi "saving" Emily. Even he noticed that she was alert after he jumped in after her but appeared to lose consciousness again after they got to the surface.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Kiwi's new job at the World of Darkness. Was his job as lifeguard better or worse than that of janitor? Why?



Discussion Question 2

Do you think the circumstances under which Kiwi “saved” Emily were strange? Why or why not? Do you think Emily was only pretending to be in trouble?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Kiwi not go after Emily when he first thought she was in trouble? What prompted him to jump?

Vocabulary

placid, guttural, masochism, rapturous, stupefaction, tenebrous, cryptic, delusional, forestall, itinerate, monochrome

Chapter Fifteen: Help Arrives, Then Departs

Summary

Ava and the Bird Man continued to travel. She worried he was angry with her. During lunch Ava talked about how her sister had been named after Seminole chieftain. The Bird Man seemed to be getting tired of Ava's talking and her questions. At one point, however, he noticed a scrape on Ava's knee and put medicine on it. Afterward, Ava blurted out that she loved him. Trying to make him understand, Ava told him about her mother's show and how it was a model of love for her. The Bird Man said he'd seen posters of her mother. He commented that Ava was pretty, like her mother had been.

Late that afternoon the Bird Man ordered Ava to lie flat in the boat when he heard the outboard motor of a Park Services boat. Ava recognized Whip Jeters, the man on board. The Bird Man threatened Ava as he waved at Whip. Ava noticed the change in his face as he spoke to Whip. Whip recognized Ava and asked if the Bird Man was really her cousin as he had said he was. Ava confirmed the Bird Man's story. Still, Whip asked her to join him on his boat for a while. Ava realized when she was on Whip's boat that she was in control, she could get Whip to take her home, but she also knew that wouldn't help Ossie. She did ask Whip if he had seen an old dredge. He had not. It began to rain. When Whip transferred Ava back to the Bird Man's boat he told her to be safe.

Analysis

Things continue to get stranger during Ava's trip with the Bird Man. When they meet up with the ranger from park services the Bird Man tried to hide Ava from the ranger but Ava didn't cooperate with him. Even though Ava must have thought something fishy was going on with the Bird Man because he was acting so strangely she didn't choose to stay with the ranger even when she had the opportunity. At this point she still had faith the man could help her save her sister. He'd put enough doubt in her mind about the abilities of the rangers that she considered the Bird Man to be a better asset than a man she'd known all her life.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think the park ranger was suspicious at all about Ava's situation? Why did he not remove her from the Bird Man at that point?

Discussion Question 2

What clues did the Bird Man give through his behavior that showed he was up to no good?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how you might have viewed the situation if you had come across it as a park ranger. What might you have done?

Vocabulary

figment, filial, endemic, coquetry, strident, charisma, intermittently, estuaries, exogenous, portage, articulate, egalitarian, avuncular, defection, genial, deviate, nonchalant, juggernaut, rueful, portend, paradox

Chapter Sixteen: Kiwi Bigtree, World Hero

Summary

After the amusement park closed, a television crew prepped Kiwi for an interview. Somebody told him the story might even run on the front page of the mainland newspaper. They took pictures of Kiwi and Emily Barton together. When he was questioned about his name, Kiwi told the reporters he was related to the Bigtrees of Swamplanida! The reporter didn't seem interested but Kiwi thought he might be able to help his family if their park was mentioned in the article.

After the interview Kiwi and his friends went to party. They happened to go to the same bar that Emily Barton had gone to. Kiwi got wasted. Later that night he lost his virginity to Emily in her car. The next morning when he read the newspaper article about himself, Kiwi was disappointed that all the reporter had chosen to say about Swamplandia! was that Kiwi had been raised on an alligator farm. After Emily called Kiwi an angel on television Kiwi became known as "Hell's Angel." After that more tourists came to the World of Darkness. They asked Kiwi if he believed in angels. He always told them no. The company's CEO Tom Barrett had also decided he wanted Kiwi as a pilot. Kiwi had his intake interview for the pilot training program that afternoon.

Two weeks after Kiwi had "saved" Emily, he took a bus to the ferry dock. He saw a sign announcing the ferry service had been suspended. He realized he couldn't get home even if he wanted to do so. His fame was wearing off. A week later he got permission to leave work early to get his medical certificate for flight school. The flight school teacher was named Denny Pelkins. He had to go through forty hours in a plane with Pelkins plus twenty hours in ground school. Kiwi worried Swamplandia! might go into foreclosure before he could finish the school.

A few days later Kiwi walked to a convenience store with a payphone and tried to call home. He got only a busy signal. He continued to call until the owner made him leave. He got the feeling something was wrong at his home. A few more days after that Pelkins took Kiwi to look at a seaplane and explain how the different parts worked. They went to Pelkins' house where Kiwi took a test. Pelkins' wife irritated Kiwi. Kiwi believed the suburb in which the Pelkins lived was a new sort of hell. That night in the World of Darkness he rode the Leviathan ride for the first time. He wondered what he was doing there, why he didn't just go home.

Analysis

In the theme of business and saving Swamplandia!, Kiwi decided it might be through his heroism he could get crowds back to Swamplandia! He told the reporters all about how



he had grown up on Swamplandia! and why he was working at the World of Darkness. He told the reporters that Swamplandia! was a better value, perhaps a bad move if he wanted to keep his job. Kiwi, however, was interested only in saving his home. His loyalties lay there, not in the World of Darkness.

Notice also the museum imagery that Kiwi uses when he refers to the way his saving of Emily broke through a glass case like an ax. He saw his life the way it was carefully displayed at the Bigtree museum. He'd always felt he hadn't done anything that would make his parents proud of him. He'd never felt worthy of calling himself a Bigtree. In one moment, he not only did something he felt would make his mother proud, he also destroyed the feminine "Margaret Mead" persona he'd been hiding behind at the World of Darkness.

Notice in this section of the novel Kiwi's odd reaction when he saw Carl Jenkins alone at the pool table. Although he hadn't liked the man he was suddenly able to connect with him. Because of his odd upbringing, Kiwi felt he had more in common with the lonely Carl than he did with the new hero he'd suddenly become. Along this same line, notice that Kiwi's new identity as a hero has made him more popular with at least one woman. He lost his virginity to Emily Barton that night.

The theme of religion is also expanded in this section of the novel. Kiwi was scornful of the people who rushed up to him wanting to believe he was an angel. "Are you religious?' Lost Souls asked him" (p. 273). In the context of a theme park based on the idea that a trip to hell would be fun, the tourists, aptly named Lost Souls question Kiwi about his own religious beliefs. He was deemed "Hell's Angel" by the people even though he told them he wasn't a religious person.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the statement that Kiwi made to the reporters that he had saved his own life. What do you think he meant by this?

Discussion Question 2

The reporters in this section are portrayed as not being terribly intelligent. Why do you think the author choose to portray them in this way?

Discussion Question 3

Why were the reporters more interested in Emily's story, or lack thereof, than what Kiwi was trying to tell them?

Vocabulary

ebullient, intonations, apropos, lexical, volitionally, timorous, epiphany, rucked, eponymous, auspicious, inexorable, credulous, malingerer, winnowed, cacophonous, aural, regale, expedite, epithet, benign, animate, spatial, turgor

Chapter Seventeen: Ava's Eclipse

Summary

The Bird Man scolded Ava for almost messing up their chance to save her sister. Ava was beginning to think she'd made a mistake by coming with him. He asked her if she wanted to go back. When she said she did the Bird Man fussed at her because he'd been working two days to get them as close as they were. The Bird Man convinced her to go on by telling her a story of two teens who'd gotten stuck in the swamp. They hadn't been found by Park Services for 14 days. By that time one of the teens had died of a diabetic episode. He reminded her that Ossie might not even be in the real world any longer. Ava agreed to go on with him but noticed the Bird Man seemed agitated. Soon, they reached the eye. On the way through, Ava noticed Ossie's hair ribbon caught in one of the walls of shells. She reached up and grabbed it without the Bird Man noticing what she had. He was angry with her for moving so quickly.

As they moved into what Ava thought was the underworld the Bird Man seemed more jumpy than ever. Ava thought she saw someone on one of the islands and got angry when the Bird Man wouldn't let her stop to check it out. She began yelling for her sister. The Bird Man hit her to make her hush. He reminded her that she had to trust him. It was dusk when Ava heard people singing and realized someone was listening to a radio. The Bird Man warned Ava that the men she could see were dead. He promised Ava they'd get to the underworld by midnight. Her common sense told Ava the men were alive and she hollered for them. She was trying to get the alligator in her pocket so she could jump from the skiff when the Bird Man caught her. When the men didn't come the Bird Man let her go but had a look of disgust in his eyes. They pulled the skiff up to land. The Bird Man asked if she was okay. As the Bird Man relieved himself, Ava wondered who he really was. Before he got back to her, Ava grabbed his whistle but was unable to make it make any noise.

When he saw what she had tried to do, the Bird Man was angry. Ava sensed something had changed. He led her deeper onto the island. She accused him of lying to her. He pouted and said they were having an adventure. He promised they could even continue to pretend to look for her sister. When he looked at her again, Ava realized she didn't know why his face had ever appeared friendly.

Analysis

It is in this chapter of the novel that the reader's opinion of the Bird Man goes from the idea that might be friendly and really trying to help Ava to the knowledge that he was a predator all along. The tone of the novel seems to completely change. The reader knows in this chapter that even though other situations in the novel have seemed ludicrous and unbelievable the one in which Ava has found herself is truly dangerous. The first clue that the Bird Man wasn't interested in finding Ossie came when they saw



what appeared to be a person in the woods but the Bird Man refused to let Ava go and see if it really was her sister. Next, when the two came across the hunters, the Bird Man got angry with Ava when she called out to them. He tried to convince her they were dead but at this point Ava had begun to slip out from under his spell. She no longer believed he was really trying to help her even though she still wanted to believe his intentions were good. It was after Ava tried to call for help using the Bird Man's bird call that he finally gave her the information she needed to know for sure he wasn't trying to help her find Ossie. His words "we can even keep looking for your sister if you want" (p. 309) let both Ava and the reader know that the Bird Man never knew where to find Ossie and had no intention of helping Ava, only wanted to get her far enough away from civilization that he didn't risk putting himself in danger.

In the paragraphs leading up the Ava's realization that the Bird Man had not intended to help her at all, the author is still making the reader believe it was Ossie who was in real trouble instead of Ava. When Ava spotted Ossie's hair ribbon stuck on one of the shell mounds the author indicated that Ava only thought the ribbon was a sign that Ossie might have left for her. The author indicates in the same paragraph that Ava never thought there might be some other, darker reason that the ribbon was there. Note Ava's realization that her situation was perhaps more dire than her sister's as she thought to herself she wished her sister would find her.

Discussion Question 1

At what point did you realize that the Bird Man was, indeed, a predator? What clues led you to this realization?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of Ossie's hair ribbon.

Discussion Question 3

Why did Ava argue with the Bird Man about the hunters she heard and saw being alive? How did he try to convince her they were more dangerous than he?

Vocabulary

putzing, pallid, portage, defunct, tourniquet, assiduous, preternaturally, florid, equilibrium, amalgam

Chapter Eighteen: Kiwi Rolls the Dice

Summary

Kiwi and his friends made a trip to Pa-Hay-Okee Gaming. After they'd finished the all you can eat buffet, Kiwi recognized the man who was making announcements for the beauty pageant as his father. Kiwi realized it was through this job that his father was raising money for his family. He realized all his father's jaunts had probably been to work in the casino or places like it to earn money. After the pageant was finished Kiwi watched as a man he supposed was his dad's boss began yelling at him for something. Kiwi expected his father to take the man out but was surprised when he sat calmly and took the criticism. He counted out the money he had in his pocket and sent it with one of the beauty pageant girls to give to his father. He knew his father would know it was from him because he'd accidentally called him the Chief. He found his friends and demanded they leave. Before he got out of the casino Kiwi believed his father had seen him and locked eyes with him.

Analysis

In the theme of religion, even the casino had a past life as a religious house of worship. Before it was a casino, the building had housed a Catholic Church. For this reason many people referred to it as Jesus in the Temple Casino.

Most significant in this chapter is the different opinion that Kiwi got of his father. He'd left the island angry with his father because he believed his father wasn't doing enough to try to save their home. Kiwi had believed his idea to go to the mainland for work had been unique to him. When he saw his father working the microphone at the casino, he realized that his father had perhaps been bluffing with his talk about Carnival Darwinism. His father might have been trying to put a good face on their problems so as not to worry the children who were already dealing with the loss of their mother.

In this chapter Kiwi also saw his father being degraded by his boss the same way Kiwi felt degraded by his boss at the World of Darkness. Kiwi expected his usually feisty father to fight back but instead the Chief bit his tongue and cowed to his employer. Kiwi was both in awe of this new view of his father and disturbed by it.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of Kiwi's realization that his father was working at a casino to earn money instead of talking to investors.

Discussion Question 2

How does the man that Kiwi saw at the casino differ from the Chief he knew at home?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Kiwi not want the Chief to see him?

Vocabulary

periphery, contemptuous, catatonic, insuperable, scintillated, assimilated, belied, confabulators, prodigious, atrophied, pristine, hieroglyphs, nautical

Chapter Nineteen: The Silently Screaming World

Summary

Ava remembered a 1950's nature show she and her siblings had watched called "The Silently Screaming World." The Bird Man put down a green tarp and told her to lie down. Ava realized what was about to happen but still didn't move. Ava felt pain when the Bird Man got inside her. While he was still on top of her, Ava begged to go back. Later, she followed him back to the skiff. Her stomach and crotch hurt. She compared what had happened to her to Ossie's possessions. She decided she wouldn't tell anyone about what had happened. The Bird Man yelled at her to come to him. When she didn't come right away he turned his anger into a fake smile. As the man told her he needed her help she also heard her mother's voice telling her the Bird Man was just another man. Her mother's voice advised her that she should run. She threw the red seth at the man and ran. She kept running for what she thought was miles before she slowed down. She chided herself, telling herself that was the stupidest thing she'd ever done. She thought she was walking east and repeated multiplication tables and poems to keep herself going. Suddenly she was so thirsty she could think of nothing but getting something to drink but there was no clean water. She'd given up on Ossie at that point. She believed the Bird Man had killed her alligator. At daybreak Ava began drinking the dirty water. She was having trouble thinking. She did remember how to use her shoelaces as a compass and waited till the lace pointed to the southwest. As she continued to walk, the forest around Ava began to change.

Analysis

It is in this chapter of the novel that the Bird Man finally revealed his real intentions for Ava. He took her into the island's growth and raped her. As tough as Ava proposed to be the reader would never guess that it would be she who would wind up in this situation. In fact Ava can't seem to believe her own actions as she allowed the Bird Man to do what he wanted with her without fighting back. Ava seemed disappointed in herself as she'd always tried to distinguish herself from the tourist girls who weren't brave. As she realized what she'd allowed the Bird Man to do to her without fighting back, she believed she had acted like a tourist girl instead of like herself. Of all the things that Ossie had described to her about her possessions and her boyfriends, Ava knew that her sister didn't know the physical and emotional pain of being raped. Ava decided she wouldn't tell anyone what happened to her because she was so ashamed of herself.

Notice that it was not until Ava heard the voice of her mother deep down inside her telling her the Bird Man was just a man that Ava gathered the courage she needed to run away from him. In doing so, she sacrificed the red alligator, the one she believed

might have the ability to save the park, to save herself. When she first saw this alligator hatch, Ava knew it was special, but never dreamed what its purpose in life would be.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of the video that Ava describes at the beginning of this chapter.

Discussion Question 2

Although Ava had always thought of herself as a warrior, why do you think she didn't fight against the Bird Man?

Discussion Question 3

In what way did Ava's red alligator save her?

Vocabulary

altruist, immutable, cataclysms, coup, sanguine, pretentious, hyperbole, meridian, prognostications, crampons, stagnant, hoax, carnage

Chapter Twenty: Out to Sea

Summary

Kiwi imagined what it might be like when he saw his father next. He hoped his father would be proud of him. He continued to try to call home. His concern increased when he got only a busy signal. Instead of going to see his father, Kiwi went to see his grandfather. He found him on the deck outside the central cabin of the retirement home. He asked his grandfather if he knew his father was working at a casino. Kiwi questioned his grandfather about his father's job but doesn't get any answers. He told his grandfather that Hilola had died. When he didn't get any reaction he told him he was working for the competitor, the World of Darkness. Grandpa only criticized him for yelling at him and said he was going inside. Kiwi summarized the problems the family was having. His grandfather spat in his face and then hit him. His grandfather tried to choke him and Kiwi began to fight back. He grabbed his grandfather's throat. A voice told him that he was squeezing too hard. Kiwi let go. After the fight, the EMT gave grandpa a clean bill of health but scolded Kiwi, telling him that he could have killed the old man.

Back at the World of Darkness Kiwi returned to his dorm to find Leo and Vijay in his room. They were laughing because they'd put up a pornographic poster in his closet. Kiwi played along until he saw what they had done to the poster of his mother. The poster was ripped in half and shredded in places. Kiwi lied to his friends and told them he was fine.

Analysis

Kiwi made a bad decision in deciding to go to see his grandfather. He tried to get his grandfather to understand how the family was falling apart but his grandfather's mind was too far gone to understand what Kiwi was trying to tell him. He only picked up on the anger in Kiwi's tone and actions. He responded in kind and the two had a fight. In the end it appeared Kiwi took the brunt of the abuse but he was still chided by the EMT for engaging in a fist fight with such an old man. Note that Kiwi also told the nurses and EMT's that he had started the fight even though it had been his grandfather who had thrown the first punch. Kiwi was demonstrating his maturity by taking responsibility for the fight and not allowing his grandfather to get in trouble.

Significant also is the way that Kiwi reacted when he saw what his friends had done to the poster of his mother. They were not aware that Hilola was his mother and Kiwi knew this. Although he was hurt by what they had done to the image of her, Kiwi chose not to lash out at them. He had learned to control his anger.



Discussion Question 1

What purpose do you think that Kiwi hoped his visit with his grandfather would serve?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the feelings that must have gone through Kiwi's head when he saw what his friends had done to the poster of his mother. Why did he not get angry with them?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Kiwi learned how to control his anger in this section of the novel?

Vocabulary

oedipal, conjecture, infantile, antagonism, epithet

Chapter Twenty-One: Mana Weeds

Summary

Ava oriented herself by walking toward two palm trees she could see at the edge of the saw grass. She finally saw a house. The structure turned out to be dilapidated and abandoned. She noticed a creek and was headed for it when she saw a clothesline with clothes hanging from it. She realized it must be the work of Mama Weeds. Mama Weeds was the ghost of a black laundry woman said to have been killed because she killed an alligator. Ava jumped when she saw a WPA jacket that she recognized. She also saw Louis's work shirt and Ossie's purple skirt. Ava was pulling these clothes from the line when a woman came from around the house asking what she was doing. Ava realized she was wearing a dress that had belonged to Hilola. Ava's eyes met the woman and all she saw was landscapes. Clouds blew from one eye to the other. When the woman talked to Ava her voice had a false kindness like the Bird Man's. Ava tore a piece from her mother's dress and ran with the clothes she had taken from the line.

As Ava continued to walk she saw evidence the Bird Man had been there including black feathers and an empty plastic bottle. Ava tried to tell herself it wasn't him. She continued to walk. She repeated the dredgeman's story to herself. Suddenly she saw grass ended and Ava saw an alligator hole.

Analysis

The theme of ghosts is expanded in this section of the novel. Ava comes face-to-face with a ghost who had been a fixture in a local legend. This woman was said to have been killed by her neighbors because she shot an alligator that was going after her dog. Instead of cutting up the gator for meat or allowing someone to sell the skin, the woman had just let the animal rot. The woman was said to have been a laundress. Ava recognized her because of the laundry filling the clotheslines. The reader has to wonder if Ava was really seeing a ghost or if the woman was a figment of her imagination. Proof that Mama Weeds and her clothes did exist can be seen in the physical clothes that Ava collected from the line. The clothes included Ossie's skirt, the WPA jacket and Louis's work shirt.

It is interesting that Mama Weeds was wearing a dress that Ava recognized as her mother's. It was almost as if Ava was so badly needing a sign from her mother that she hallucinated a mix between her mother and who her mother might be if she were a ghost. Ava tore part of the dress from Mama Weeds as if to pull her mother out of death's grasp.

Consider Ava's thought to herself that the Bird Man had at least been truthful in his claim that he could take her to hell. She believed that after what he had done to her, she didn't think there was any place she could have been in that would have worse. Notice



at this point that Ava's thirst had become so ferocious that it has developed its own personality. The author personifies this feeling of thirst by stating that: "Thirst dragged me by my neck to the bottom creek" (p. 359).

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that Ava really saw the ghost of Mama Weeds or was she hallucinating? Support your answer with examples from the book.

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Ossie and Louis' clothes were among those on Mama Weeds' clothesline?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the dangers that Ava faced alone in the swamp. Was she safer with the Bird Man?

Vocabulary

potable, musculature, incensed, cognition, lore, pragmatic

Chapter Twenty-Two: Kiwi Takes to the Skies

Summary

Vijay and Kiwi ate at the Burger Burger before Kiwi's test flight. As he looked at the people around him at the Burger Burger he realized that Mama Weeds wasn't the only witch that existed. He also wondered how his sisters would ever survive in Loomis County. Vijay tried to persuade Kiwi to eat but Kiwi was afraid he'd throw up in the plane.

In the plane, Dennis let Kiwi take charge of the controls. Once he was in the air his nausea disappeared. They flew over two Calusa shell middens and Kiwi noticed a woman waving for help. He landed the plane, surprised his instructor allowed it. Once he was out of the plane he realized the woman was calling his name. It was Ossie.

After she had drank all the water they had on board the plane, Ossie, who was wearing her mother's wedding dress, told Kiwi that Louis left her. The ghost had showed her how to rig an outboard motor to the dredge. They'd had an accident and she'd lost a bag containing her clothes, food and water overboard. She'd driven it until she'd reached the mounds. The ghost had left her at the altar she said but all Kiwi could see was a piece of rope hanging from a tree. When Denny asked what was going on, Kiwi gave him a short version of the story. Denny told her it would be okay then began talking on the radio. Ossie asked Kiwi if he had talked to Ava.

Analysis

Interesting in this section is that Kiwi made mention of Mama Weeds, the ghost with whom Ava had just met. He mentioned that since he had been on the mainland he knew that witches, like the woman mentioned in the legend of Mama Weeds, existed everywhere. It was almost as if Kiwi was realizing the mainland just a larger version of the island, that his life really hadn't changed that much since he'd been away from Swamplandia! He realized how odd his sisters were compared to the people on the mainland. He wondered how his sisters could ever survive in the world off the island.

Significant in this section is that Kiwi saved another life when he spotted Ossie on the bank. The reader learns how Mama Weeds came to have Ossie's clothes. Ossie told Kiwi she'd lost a bag overboard that had all her clothes in it. The only thing she had left to wear was the wedding dress. It makes the reader wonder what Ossie was wearing when she lost the bag of clothes overboard leaving her with only the wedding dress to wear. She told Kiwi that Louis had jilted her and left her at the altar.



Disturbing is the noose that Kiwi saw hanging from a tree on the bank of the island. He didn't ask Ossie about the noose but wondered if that was the way Ossie would have "married" Louis.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Kiwi's new belief that Mama Weeds was not the only witch in the world. Why was his reference to Mama Weeds significant?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think was the purpose of the noose?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Ossie really learned how to drive the dredge from a ghost? Do you think she was deceived in some way?

Vocabulary

crenellated, unduly, ominous, posthumous, pusillanimous

Chapter Twenty-Three: The End Begins

Summary

Ava was examining the alligator hole when she heard the Bird Man call her name. She knew he'd spotted her because he was running in her direction. She held her nose and jumped into the gator hole. She found a hole in the cave and swam through. She was having trouble swimming with all the clothing she had with her. As she looked back at the clothing she saw the alligator. It had grabbed hold of her calf. She used a move her mother had taught her to get free of the gator. She reached the surface of the water and realized she'd let go of the clothes.

She hid from the Bird Man for an hour. When she saw no sign of him she figured he hadn't followed her. She had only a shallow wound on her calf. When she started walking again Ava began to hear bits of human conversation. She saw a ranger's uniform and called out.

Ava learned she'd been right in assuming the hunters she'd seen on the island were alive. They had heard her screaming and had notified Park Services. The ranger took her to meet these men. They'd been going to a camp to hunt alligators for the past 15 years and had never seen another person there. The ranger returned and asked Ava if she was related to Ossie who had been picked up five miles from where Ava had been found.

Ava met Kiwi, Ossie and the Pelkins at the ferry dock. The Pelkins took the children in their car to the Bowl-A-Bed Hotel. Ava watched the changes on her brother and sister's faces as they got closer to town. As she rode, Ava thought it was her mother who had taken the clothes away from her in the gator pit so she could swim to safety. She understood what Ossie had meant about her possessions. Ava told her sister that she believed her. During the car ride Kiwi had also told Ava the park was going into foreclosure. They would lose their home and have to live on the mainland but that it would be okay. When they were finally reunited with their father, it felt like the family was whole again. Ava's father wasn't angry with her. He told her they'd go to Swamplandia! the following day to set things straight.

Looking back on her experience, Ava said she doesn't believe in ghosts. She also wondered if what had happened with the Bird Man had happened because she had wanted it to happen. She and Ossie had started going to public school. Ossie saw a psychiatrist and was put on medicine that kept her drugged. Eventually Ava thought her sister learned to cope with her oddness. Ava wished that she had showed someone the red seth and wished she knew if it was still alive. In the end, she came to the realization that the show had to go on just as her father had always told her.



Analysis

The story climaxes with Ava's encounter with the alligator. She found herself caught between the dangers associated with the Bird Man and the dangers of a strange alligator. She fought alligators before and even swam with the alligators before but they were always alligators who were accustomed to people. In this case she faced a completely wild alligator. She chose to fight the alligator instead of taking her chances with the Bird Man.

Looking back on her experience, Ava believed she had encountered her mother's spirit while she was trying to save herself from the alligator. She drew upon the knowledge that her mother had shared with her during their training sessions in order to get out of the alligator's grip. Symbolically Ava believed it was her mother who pulled the clothes from her hands so that she could swim to the surface. Ava had been hanging onto those clothes because they were symbolic of the people she loved. She believed that if she let go of these clothes, even to save herself, she would lose the people she loved.

Notice also the struggles that Ossie and Ava faced when they did move to the mainland. It appeared that Ava never told anyone about her encounter with the Bird Man or the fact that he raped her. She lived in fear that he was still looking for her. Ossie, on the other hand, got treatment for what was believed to be a mental illness. Interesting is the author's choice of the use of the word "occult" as a verb to describe how Ossie learned to exist at her school. Of course Ossie was dabbling in the occult while she was talking to the ghosts now the word occult works to describe the way that Ossie seemed to put up a screen to block or hide how different she was from the other students at her school.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Ava was able to tell Ossie that she believed what Ossie had told her about possessions?

Discussion Question 2

How did Ava come to a new understanding of her mother during her experience in the alligator's pit?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Ava ever told her family about what the Bird Man did to her? Why or why not?



Vocabulary

turbid, aperture, primordial, perusal, buoyancy, filament, prehensile, epoch, foreboding, credulous, articulable, irrefutable

Characters

Ava Bigtree

Ava Bigtree is the youngest daughter of Sam and Hilola Bigtree. She was the sister of Kiwi and Osceola. She was the main character and narrator of a good deal of the novel. Ava was the Bigtree sibling that most wanted to carry on her parents' amusement park. She enjoyed working with the alligators and aspired to win the same alligator wrestling contest her mother had won as a teenager. She believed if she could win the competition she could take over her mother's spot as headliner for the amusement park and bring the park back to its former popularity. After Kiwi got a job on the mainland and the Chief went to find investors for the park Ava was basically left alone on the island with her sister, Ossie. The two girls happened to see a dredge that had floated up to their island. While exploring the dredge Ossie communicated with a 17-year-old dredgeman who had been killed while working on the dredge. She began "dating" the ghost. One morning Ava discovered Ossie had left a note for her saying she was eloping with her boyfriend.

To find her sister Ava set off to travel to the underworld with a strange man who had appeared on the island about the same time as the dredge. The Bird Man told Ava he could take her to the underworld and help her locate her sister. After traveling with the man for two days Ava ran away from him after he raped her. Alone in the swamp Ava came face-to-face with Mama Weeds, a ghost who was swamp legend. Ava got away from Mama Weeds only to walk back into the Bird Man's path. To escape this man Ava jumped into a hole inhabited by an alligator. The alligator clamped onto her leg but Ava used the techniques her mother had taught her to get away. Not long after she surfaced, Ava was saved by a ranger from park services and reunited with her family.

Kiwi Bigtree

Kiwi Bigtree was the oldest son of Hilola and Sam Bigtree. He had always been considered a wimp by his family because he would often get scared while fighting the alligators. Sometimes his fear made him scream. He was more interested in studying and attending Harvard than dealing with the gators. After he began to understand how much debt his family was in Kiwi got a job at the World of Darkness, a competing amusement park. Kiwi learned the basics of business and how truly difficult it was to make a living in the real world. Kiwi was trying to earn money so he could send it back to his father to help pay the family's debts. Through a twist of fate Kiwi saved Emily Barrett, the daughter of Tom Barrett who was the CEO of the Carpathian Corporation, from drowning. Kiwi earned the nickname "Hell's Angel" and was allowed to enroll in the flight school at the World of Darkness. It was during a test ride to earn his pilot's license that he happened to spot Ossie waving for help.



Chief Bigtree

Sam “Chief” Bigtree is the father of Ava, Kiwi and Osceola Bigtree. He was the husband of Hilola Bigtree. He tried to keep Swamplandia! the amusement park his father had begun open despite mounting bills and competition from other theme parks. He was hurt when his wife of more than 15 years, Hilola, died of ovarian cancer. He could not come to grips with her death and did not help his children through their grief. Even though he knew the problems his daughter, Osceola, was having the Chief believed there was nothing he could do to help her. Instead, he went to the mainland, leaving Ava and Osceola alone on the island, in order to work in a casino to earn money to pay the family’s debts.

Ernest Schedrach aka Sawtooth Bigtree

Ernest Schedrach was the grandfather of Ava, Osceola and Kiwi and the father of Sam Bigtree. Ernest bought the island that became Swamplandia! sight unseen after he lost his job at the Archer Road Pulp Mill. He changed his name to Sawtooth Bigtree because it was said he owed the sawmill owner a good deal of money. In the time period this novel covers Sawtooth had been sent to live in a retirement community. He had begun not only getting lost on the island but had also bitten a tourist. The Chief, Sawtooth’s son, went to his father for advice at the retirement center and came away from his visit angry. Kiwi tried to confront his grandfather as well with what was happening to his family and wound up getting into a fist fight with the crotchety old man.

Osceola “Ossie” Bigtree

Osceola “Ossie” Bigtree was the oldest daughter of Sam and Hilola Bigtree. After the tourists stopped coming to Swamplandia! Osceola spent her free time studying “The Spiritist’s Telegraph,” a spell book. She first involved Ava in her séances. The two tried to contact their mother using an Ouija board. Soon, Ossie began holding her séances alone. She told Ava she was having “dates” with dead people. After the two found an ancient dredge on the channel near their island Ossie “met” Louis Thanksgiving a man she said had died on the boat. She left a note for Ava saying that she and Louis were eloping. This note caused Ava to go with the Bird Man so that she could try to find her sister.

Bird Man

The Bird Man was a man who persuaded Ava to go with him using the promise that he could take her to the underworld and help her find her sister. After they reached the place that the Bird Man told Ava the underworld began he got angry with her when she called out to some hunters for help. He took her into the woods and raped her. Ava ran away from him but he tracked her until he found her at the alligator hole. Ava continued to be afraid of the Bird Man but he did not appear again in the course of the novel.



Vijay Montañez

Vijay Montañez was Kiwi's only real friend at the World of Darkness. He helped his friend orient himself to life on the mainland and also gave him rides to his night classes. Kiwi was with Vijay when he saw his father working at the casino. Vijay smoked marijuana and often was high at work. Although Vijay was a little bit of a loser, he was a true friend to Kiwi.

Mama Weeds aka Midnight Drouet

Mama Weeds was a ghost rumored to inhabit one of the islands of the swamp. She was a black woman who would wash and repair clothes for the other residents of the island. She was killed because she had shot an alligator that was trying to get her dog. The other residents were angered because she let the body of the alligator go to waste and made no money off it.

Hilola Jane Bigtree

Hilola Jane Owens Bigtree was the mother of Ava, Osceola and Kiwi Bigtree. She was the wife of Sam Bigtree. She died when she was 36 of ovarian cancer. Hilola and her Swimming with the Seths routine was the main act that drew people to Swamplandia! When Hilola died, people stopped visiting the island.

Gus Waddell

Gus Waddell was the captain of the ferryboat that brought tourists to Swamplandia! When the Chief went to the mainland for his jaunt, he asked Gus to keep an eye on Ava and Osceola. When Gus did visit, Ava lied to him about how things were going on the island.

Carl Jenks

Carl Jenks was Kiwi's boss at the World of Darkness. Carl seemed to enjoy belittling Kiwi. His treatment of Kiwi came back to haunt him when Kiwi saved Emily Barrett and was allowed to enter the World of Darkness' flight school. Kiwi enjoyed the feeling that Carl was jealous of him because of his luck.

Dennis "Denny" Pelkins

Dennis "Denny" Pelkins was the flight instructor in charge of teaching Kiwi how to fly a seaplane for the World of Darkness. Denny and Kiwi were taking a check ride when Kiwi spotted the woman, who turned out to be his sister, waving for help from an island in the swamp.

Louis Thanksgiving Auschenbliss

Louis Thanksgiving Auschenbliss was the ghost of the man that Ossie was dating. She believed the ghost wanted to elope with her. Ossie told Ava that Louis was a 17 year old who had been killed on a dredge boat and his body carried off by buzzards.

Scott

Scott was the payroll officer at the World of Darkness. Kiwi went to him for help understanding why his first payroll check was for a negative amount. Later Scott told Carl Jenkins that Kiwi didn't understand numbers and couldn't do basic arithmetic.

Whip Jeters

Whip Jeters was the park ranger who first saw Ava and the Bird Man together in the swamp. He recognized Ava but did not insist that she come with him because both Ava and the man stuck to the story that they were cousins on a fishing trip.

Emily Barton

Emily Barton was the only grandchild of Tom Barrett who was the CEO of the Carpathian Corporation. It was Emily whom Kiwi saved from drowning. Later that day Kiwi met Emily at a bar. He lost his virginity to her in her car.

Symbols and Symbolism

“The Spiritist’s Telegraph”

“The Spiritist’s Telegraph” is the book that Ossie found at the Library Boat and began reading in her spare time. It symbolizes the beginning of her act of dabbling in the occult.

Heart-Shaped Bottle of Perfume

This heart-shaped bottle of perfume belonged to Ossie and Ava’s mother. The scent reminded them of their mother and they used it instead of washing their clothes rationing it so it would last longer. One day when she had been left alone by Ossie Ava intentionally dropped the bottle and broke it her way of voicing her anger with Ossie. The bottle of perfume was a symbol of the girls’ mother.

Purple Turban

Ossie made a purple turban for herself with a gold star on it to wear when she was performing her séances. The turban was a symbol of the spiritual power that Ossie believed she had.

The Red Alligator

Ava saw this red alligator hatch from its egg and believed the creature would be one of the things that would help to save Swamplandia! The alligator did turn out to be a symbol of salvation but not in the way Ava had originally thought. Ava threw the alligator at the Bird Man to distract him when she finally realized she needed to get away from him.

Seth of Seths Skull

The skull of the Seth of Seths was a symbol of how much Grandpa Sawtooth had deteriorated in his old age. Grandpa had killed this alligator when he was a young man. The Chief had it hung in his father’s room at the retirement home because he thought it would be a source of pride for him. Instead, the nurse told the Chief it seemed to scare Grandpa. She sent it home with the Chief in a trash bag.

Mom's Wedding Dress

The dress that Hilola Bigtree wore on her wedding day was a symbol of her and her relationship with her family. The dress was displayed in the Bigtree Museum as a symbol of Hilola and Sam's wedding day. When she began "dating" Louis Ossie stole the dress. It was what she was wearing when Kiwi found her on the island.

A Dredge

The dredge that Ava and Ossie found on their island was a symbol of the darkness that was about to invade their lives. This dredge brought the ghost that Ossie believed wanted to marry her. When she ran away, Ava was convinced by the Bird Man that it was in her best interests to go with him to find her sister. The dredge also symbolized the swamp's past as the landscape had been changed and formed by boats such as the one located by Ava and Ossie.

Buzzards

The buzzards are a symbol of death. The story that Ossie told Ava about Louis included the buzzards as they flocked to the dredge to carry off first the body of Gideon, and then that of Louis. When Ava was traveling with the Bird Man, he told her that the buzzards were their compass, leading them to the place they wanted to go.

A Purple Ribbon

Ava found this purple ribbon, one that Ossie had used to tie her hair, caught on the shells at the opening of the Eye of the Needle. Ava grabbed this ribbon without the Bird Man noticing and tied it around her wrist as a symbol of her sister.

Kiwi's Poster

Kiwi kept a poster which featured his mother displayed in his closet in the dorm at the World of Darkness. This poster was a physical reminder of his mother. When his friends tore the poster trying to put up another one, Kiwi believed they had destroyed his mother even though he didn't say anything to his friends about his pain.

A Bundle of Clothes

When Ava was trying to swim from the alligator, she made a bundle of the clothes she stole from Mama Weeds' clotheslines. These clothes, which included Louis' WPA jacket, his work shirt, Ossie's purple skirt and a piece of Hilola's dress, represented to Ava the members of her family who had worn the clothes. She was afraid if she let go of the clothes, even to save her own life, she would lose those that she loved.

Settings

Swamplandia!

Swamplandia! was the name of the alligator-themed amusement park built on one of the Ten Thousand Islands southwest of Florida by Sam Bigtree's father. Sam and Hilola Bigtree raised their family on this island. A good deal of the action of the novel takes place on the island of Swamplandia!

The Gator Pit

The Gator Pit was the name for the alligator pit in Swamplandia! ringed by a stadium with seats for 265 tourists. It was at the Gator Pit that Hilola performed her Swimming with the Seths act.

Loomis

Loomis was the name of the Florida town closest to Swamplandia! Kiwi went to Loomis to get a job when he realized the real financial situation of his family. While in Loomis Kiwi learned his father had also been working in Loomis to earn extra money for years. After Ava and Ossie were rescued and the family reunited, the entire family moved to Loomis.

World of Darkness

The World of Darkness was described by the Chief as the major threat to Swamplandia! It was a hell-themed amusement park that opened in Loomis about the same time as Hilola's death. Kiwi felt like he was being a traitor when he went to the World of Darkness to get a job so he could earn money to help save Swamplandia! The use of the World of Darkness imagery is ironic as it turned out that the world of darkness, or evil, almost caused both Ava and Ossie to be badly hurt when they went in search of ghosts and the underworld.

The Library Boat

The library boat was a boat that had once made rounds to the different islands until the man who operated it died. Even though the boat no longer made rounds, the boat and the books on board survived. Kiwi, Ava and Ossie made trips to this boat for reading material in their free time. It was on this boat that Ossie discovered "The Spiritist's Telegraph."

The Underworld

Louis told Ossie that the opening to the underworld was located between two Calusa shell mounds known by those who lived on the islands as the Eye of the Needle. In her note Ossie told Ava that she was going to the underworld to elope with Louis. After reading the note, the Bird Man gave Ava the impression that he could take her to the underworld and help her find her sister.

Out to Sea Retirement Community

It was at the Out to Sea Retirement Community that the Chief took his father, Grandpa Sawtree after the older man began getting lost on Swamplandia! and biting tourists. This retirement community was on an old houseboat moored in a harbor.

The Last Ditch

The Last Ditch was the place on the island of Swamplandia! where Ava and Ossie first saw the dredge. It was at this same place on the island that Ava found the note Ossie had left for her telling her that she was going to elope with Louis her ghost boyfriend.

Stiltsville

Stiltsville was an abandoned town on one of the Ten Thousand Islands. It was in a house in this town that Ava and the Bird Man spent the first night of their journey to the underworld.

The Lake of Fire

The Lake of Fire was a blood red pool in the World of Darkness that tourists had to pay extra to visit. Kiwi was promoted to lifeguard at the Lake of Fire instead of being allowed to enroll in the flight school. It was at this pool that Kiwi was deemed a hero when he saved Emily Barrett from drowning.

Pa-Hay-Okee Gaming

Pa-Hay-Okee Gaming was the casino in which Kiwi discovered his father was working in order to make money to keep Swamplandia! alive. Ironically, the casino also has religious overtones like most of the novel. Some people called it Jesus in the Temple Casino as the building had once housed a Catholic Church.

Bowl-A-Bed Hotel

The Bowl-A-Bed Hotel is the mainland hotel where the Bigtree family stayed during a hurricane. It is this same hotel where the Bigtree children were united with the father after Ava and Osceola were rescued from the swamp.

Themes and Motifs

Grief

Grief is a major theme in this novel. The story of the trouble at Swamplandia! began when Hilola Bigtree died of ovarian cancer. From that point things went progressively worse and worse, like a domino effect. A good deal of the tragedy in the novel is caused by the way the characters deal with their grief.

The character who had the biggest impact on the events on Swamplandia! because of the way he chose to deal with her grief was the Chief. The Chief was Hilola's husband. While it is understandable that he would grieve for his wife, he seemed to retreat from life. He threw himself into his work and paid attention only to the physical labor that needed to be done on the island. Even though Kiwi and Ava told him that Ossie was dabbling in the occult, the Chief passed it off as a hobby and said there was nothing he could do about it. Had the Chief taken Ossie's problem seriously he could have gotten her some help from the beginning. She might never have tried to elope with a ghost, and Ava might never have been raped by the Bird Man. Instead, the Chief physically disappeared from his children by going to the mainland to earn extra money leaving them alone on the island.

As it has already been mentioned, Ossie dealt with her grief by trying to contact ghosts. She'd found a book teaching her about the occult on the Library Boat. She and Ava first made a game of it by trying to contact their mother. When Ossie began contacting the ghosts of dead men claiming they were her boyfriends, she withdrew from Ava more and more. She told Ava she dated the ghosts because they were already dead. She didn't have to worry about losing one of them. Although Ossie didn't connect her fear of losing a boyfriend to the fact they'd lost their mother to death, Ava was able to read between the lines. Ossie's obsession with the occult led her to believe that one of her ghosts had proposed to her. It was because she went off alone on the dredge that Ava had to turn to the Bird Man for help in finding her sister.

Although her struggle with her grief wasn't as obvious as her father and Ossie's, Ava also missed her mother. Her troubles came when she tried to fix in her mind exactly where her mother was. The family wasn't religious, so they didn't believe in heaven or hell. In the same token Ava didn't want to believe her mother was a ghost because she interpreted ghosts as scary creatures. In the end, Ava realized her mother's presence was inside her in the things that her mother had taught her. Ava's grief and the loneliness she felt when the other members of the family retreated away from her contributed to her attraction to the Bird Man, a man who turned out to be a sexual predator.

Like his father, Kiwi dealt with his grief in a hands-on manner. He decided since he didn't see that his father was doing anything to save the family's amusement park he

needed to take things into his own hands. He got a job on the mainland where he soon learned that it was harder to make a living than he'd originally thought.

Business

Incorporated into this novel about grief and loss is the idea that loss of a business can be just as sad as the loss of a family member. Business models are explored as the Chief tried to find ways to update his park. Business practices are also discussed when Kiwi got a job at a competing amusement park and realized how much better his family's park had been.

The reader knows from the beginning of the novel that the Bigtree family would lose its home and business. Because of medical bills and a lack of tourists the park was no longer making enough money to support itself. There seemed to be two major reasons why the park lost its tourists. The first was no one's fault. When Hilola Bigtree died Swamplandia! lost its signature act. Tourists complained when they arrived at the theme park and learned there was no Hilola. The second factor that led to the park's downfall was a new amusement park that was built on the Florida mainland. Tourists could come and go as they pleased from the World of Darkness. They did not have to wait for a ferry to take them to or from the park.

When the Chief first realized his business was in trouble, he wanted to try to compete with the World of Darkness. His son, Kiwi, thought this idea was irrational as there was no way they could raise the money they needed to compete on that level. Instead of trying to beat the competition, Kiwi decided to join them. He got a job at the World of Darkness. Once he began working there he began seeing differences in the way his family's park was run and the way World of Darkness was run. World of Darkness focused on paying its employees the lowest possible salaries. The company had even tried to import workers from foreign countries in an attempt to save money. At Swamplandia! all of the workers were family members. At the World of Darkness, Kiwi felt demeaned by many of the tasks he had been asked to do. He also felt the divide between the leaders and the workers because the leaders, those who had office jobs, treated the workers badly. Kiwi had never experienced this at his family's park.

A final thing to consider about business is the sadness that one must feel when one admitted they had to close their family's business. Grandpa Sawtooth had bought the island after he'd lost his job at a sawmill. Note that Grandpa had been looking for better working conditions. He did not want to return to labor under another person where he had to put up with conditions that were hazardous or unpleasant. He was looking for a better way of life for his family and thought he'd found it on the swampy island. Although his dream stayed alive for a while, it didn't last forever. By the time the Chief went to his father for advice about the business, Grandpa Sawtooth's mental status was so deteriorated he could not help his son.

Religion

Religion and religious allusions make up an important theme in the novel. Note first that the Bigtree family is not religious. As the Chief instructed them, they believed that the Christian story was a fairytale.

Even though they weren't religious, there is a good deal of good versus evil going on in the novel. The most obvious allusion is the idea that the World of Darkness was the major enemy of the Bigtree family. This idea of evil whether it comes in the form of ghosts, witches or the Bird Man working against good continues to be repeated in the novel.

Recognition of good and evil is another idea introduced in this theme of religion. For instance, one wouldn't think a theme park that represented hell would be a place that would draw a crowd. In this story it does. While the tourists see "hell" as a fun place to visit, the workers see it for what it is - aptly named. Similarly, when Ava was first approached by an evil person, the Bird Man, she thought he was good. He turned out, however, to be the worst kind of evil.

Also in the novel the author makes a variety of references to Biblical stories. The leviathan at the World of Darkness, for example, is based on the Biblical story of Jonah and the Whale. The new seaplane ride at the World of Darkness is called the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse, a play on the Biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Oddness

The oddness of the Bigtree family is one of the themes significant in the novel. The family was a family of loners. They had inhabited the island since Grandpa Sawtooth moved there after he lost his job at a sawmill. Ava's father, who called himself the Chief, had lived on the island since he was born. Hilola, however, had been raised on the mainland. Ava understood that it had been Hilola's dream to move to the island with her husband and help him with Swamplandia!

Ava and her siblings had been raised entirely on the island. The only time they remembered being off the island was when they took cover at a mainland hotel when a hurricane was on its way. The siblings did not even attend public school. They were instead homeschooled. For this reason, Kiwi, Ossie and Ava were very odd compared to the teens who lived on the Florida mainland. Both Ossie and Ava did not like the idea of living on the mainland. Kiwi, however, went willingly. He did, however, have a difficult time adjusting to life in the real world. He had only one close friend. His other coworkers made fun of him and complained that he was sexually harassing them.

After Ava and Ossie moved to the mainland they, too, had trouble orienting to their new homes and schools. Many of Ava's problems seemed to be associated with her encounter with the Bird Man. Ossie, on the other hand, was put on medications to control the mental issues Ossie had. Ava indicated these medicines only made her

sister drugged. She wasn't sure if the medications really helped Ossie or not or if she just learned how to cope with her oddness.

Ghosts

Ghosts, and the question of whether or not ghosts exist, are a major theme in this novel. After their mother died both Ava and Ossie became obsessed with ghosts. Ava became obsessed with finding some way to hold onto her mother's memory without thinking she was a ghost. Ossie, on the other hand, tried to communicate with ghosts and actually believed she was dating a ghost.

The overriding idea of ghosts in the novel involves Ossie and the ghosts she believed she was dating. After tourists stopped visiting Swamplandia! Ossie started studying the book *The Spiritist's Telegraph* and using an Ouija board. She told Ava she was communicating with ghosts. After the girls found a dredge near their island Ossie believed she met the ghost of a man, Louis, who had worked and died on the boat. Her claim to Ava that she was going to elope with Louis initiated Ava's trip to the underworld with the Bird Man.

Another idea about ghosts discussed in the novel is the idea that ghosts were not the form that people could take once they were dead. Ava struggled with the idea that her mother was a ghost, an apparition that scared her. Ava instead decided that her mother actually existed in all of the structures and items of nature found on the island. After Ava successfully got away from the alligator in whose hole she jumped in order to get away from the Bird Man she realized that her mother actually lived on in the knowledge that she had imparted to her daughters.

Styles

Point of View

This story is told from the first person point of view of 13-year-old Ava Bigtree. The reader knows Ava is narrating the story because she refers to herself as “I” and “me” as she narrates. Ava narrates the story after the events of which she speaks have already occurred. The reader can tell this because Ava describes in the opening chapter how the amusement park and her family fell. She already knew that her family would fall apart and that they would lose their land and their home. Because Ava narrates the story from a point in the future, she is able to tell not only her own story but also the story of her brother and his life while he worked at the World of Darkness hoping to be able to send money back to his family.

Language and Meaning

What is most interesting about the language used in this novel is the author’s habit of pairing almost ludicrous settings and circumstances with serious situations. For instance, the competition for Swamplandia! was an amusement park called the World of Darkness with a ride patterned after the Biblical story of Jonah who spent three days in the belly of a whale along with blood red pools depicting hell. The author uses this amusement park to play on the idea of the park and Kiwi’s job working in the park as hell on Earth.

The author also uses many colorful smilies in the novel. For instance when Ava considered telling a secret to Ossie she decided against it because “Ossie was like an aquarium when it came to other people’s secrets” (p. 58). When Ava talked about the melaleuca trees she described them as a “haywire fertility, like a body making cancer” (p. 97). This description was particularly significant since Hilola died of cancer. To compare the trees that were killing to swamps to the cancer that killed Hilola connects Hilola to the swamps even more completely.

Structure

This 400-page novel is divided into 23 chapters. Each chapter is titled with a chapter number as well as a brief headline that gives a 10-word or less description of the information included in the chapter. Although the events of the novel occur in a linear timeline the narrator, Ava, describes them from a point in time after they have happened and the family has moved back to the mainland. The majority of the novel is told through exposition with only scattered patches of dialogue. Chapters One through Five focus on the family as a whole. Beginning with Chapter Six the focus of the chapters alternate between focusing on Kiwi and his story in the World of Darkness and focusing on Ava and her story back on the island.

Quotes

And then our mom got sick, sicker than a person should ever be allowed to get. I was twelve when she got her diagnosis and I was furious.”

-- narrator (Chapter One: The Beginning of the End paragraph 16)

Importance: In this quote, Ava describes her mother’s illness. It was her mother’s illness and death that marked the beginning of the end of Swamplandia!

It was only after Swamplandia!’ s fall that time folded into a story with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. If you’re short on time, that would be the two-word version of our story: we fell.”

-- Narrator (Chapter One: The Beginning of the End paragraph 17)

Importance: Ava lets her reader know that there was more than just her mother’s illness and death that contributed to the fall of Swamplandia! She also indicates that looking back on what happened, the events that led to the fall had a natural progression but could be shortened to the idea that they family and its amusement park fell.

This is the secret a wrestler exploits to beat her adversaries — if you can get your Seth’s jaws shut up in your fist, it is next to impossible for the creature to open them again.”

-- Narrator (Chapter One: The Beginning of the End paragraph 55)

Importance: Along with telling the story of the end of her family’s amusement park, Ava also shares with her reader interesting facts about the alligators with which her family worked. In this quote she shares that all of an alligator’s strength is concentrated in closing its jaws. Once the jaws are closed, the muscles that open the jaws are very weak and the animal can be easily restrained.

That’s how my sister’s metamorphosis started to happen, I think — inside that white cocoon.”

-- Narrator (Chapter Two: The Advent of the World of Darkness paragraph 3)

Importance: Ava blamed the lack of tourists and Ossie’s discovery of a book of spells in the Library Boat for her sister’s developing interest in the occult.

I shook my head. I had been working on my plan to save Swamplandia! but I didn’t want to talk about it yet; I worried that I would jinx it, or that my brother would kill it dead with one joke. It had to stay in my head for now.”

-- Narrator (Chapter Two: The Advent of the World of Darkness paragraph 71)

Importance: Although she didn’t tell anyone, Ava was developing her own plan to save Swamplandia! Notice Ava’s fear that she would jinx her plan if she told anyone about it. At several points in the novel Ava notes that she had a superstitious nature.

Sometimes while wandering around the park I'd still catch myself praying in an automatic way, like a sneeze, that my dead mom's blood test results would come back okay."

-- Narrator (Chapter Three: Osceola K. Bigtree in Love paragraph 19)

Importance: Although she didn't technically believe in God and was not schooled in religion Ava still caught herself praying at times. Notice that she describes her prayers as being automatic, like a sneeze, almost as if were something she couldn't control but something that was natural.

No rot, she was saying, no fruit. You couldn't lose a ghost to death."

-- Narrator (Chapter Three: Osceola K. Bigtree in Love paragraph 55)

Importance: Osceola told Ava that she liked dealing with the dead because she didn't have to worry about her new friends or lovers dying. The statement speaks to Ossie's fear caused by her mother's death and her fear that she will lose another loved one to death.

My still-secret plan was to enter and win the same national championship that Miss Hilola Bigtree swept before she was a mother or even a newlywed, when she was eighteen years old and had first started dating my father."

-- Narrator (Chapter Four: Ava the Champion paragraph 10)

Importance: In this quote Ava shares with her reader that she planned to win the same championship that her mother had and become the headlining act at her family's theme park in order to help save it.

But my new superstition didn't care to hear about the earlier failure. It told me, If you tell anyone about the red alligator, she will die or disappear."

-- Narrator (Chapter Four: Ava the Champion paragraph 37)

Importance: Ava continued to nurse her superstitions as she worried that if she told anyone about the red alligator she had seen hatch it would cause the alligator to die.

I remember it now as a turning point, one of our last 'normal' days as a family together, and maybe the last time that we assembled as a tribe on Swamplandia!, although at the time I just wanted to get home to pee and watch TV."

-- Narrator (Chapter Four: Ava the Champion paragraph 63)

Importance: Although Ava didn't realize it until later she notes that it was after the family's visit to their grandfather at his retirement community that they were together as a family for the last time on Swamplandia!

But it had mattered to Kiwi; the changes on our island had robbed my brother of actual matter, had changed him in a way that I could touch."

-- Narrator (Chapter Five: Prodigal Kiwi paragraph 1)

Importance: Ava noticed the way that the family's lack of working with their alligators was causing Kiwi's arm muscles to shrink. It was the first physical sign that Ava saw of the effect of her mother's death on the family.

But in fact I was like Ossie, in this one regard: I was consumed by a helpless, often furious love for a ghost. Every rock on the island, every swaying tree branch or dirty dish in our house was like a word in a sentence that I could read about my mother."
-- Narrator (Chapter Five: Prodigal Kiwi paragraph 31)

Importance: Ava compared her love for her mother, and the memories of her mother that she encountered in all of the things on the island, to Ossie's love for her ghosts.

I thought you were a professor emeritus. Ohkaaay, so let's review — you broke the vacuum. What is this, your first week? Your third week. Terrific. Keep up the good work, Bigtree."
-- Carl Jenks (Chapter Six: Kiwi's Exile in the World of Darkness paragraph 31)

Importance: Kiwi's friend Vijay told him that Carl would not fire him for breaking the vacuum. Carl did, however, use his sarcastic personality to belittle Kiwi.

This theft had been easy to justify: as an investment, or an early draw on his inheritance, or as his salary for years of unpaid tribal labor."
-- Narrator (Chapter Six: Kiwi's Exile in the World of Darkness paragraph 66)

Importance: While Kiwi's father was angry that his son had stolen money from him Kiwi believed that the theft was justified as he had never been paid for the work he'd done at Swamplandia! He figured also that he would be able to pay the money back to his father.

If you were a swamp kid, you were weaned on the story of the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse, these men who had flown over the swamp in tiny Cessnas and sprinkled melaleuca seeds out of restaurant salt and pepper shakers. Exotic invasives, the 'strangler species' threatened our family long before the World of Darkness."
-- Narrator (Chapter Seven: The Dredge Appears paragraph 4)

Importance: The four pilots of the apocalypse were the people who introduced the invasive melaleuca trees to the swamps in southwest Florida. The name of the pilots plays on the Biblical idea of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse who usher in the end of the world.

Something flashed inside the dredge cabin — half a man's face. His nose and neck and lips were plume-thin. Then he disappeared into the glare on the porthole."
-- Narrator (Chapter Nine: The Dredgeman's Revelation paragraph 70)

Importance: While Ava and Ossie were collecting flowers for Ossie's spells, Ava believed she had seen a man inside the cabin of the dredge.

His parents, his grandfather, his sisters, the alligators, his own deep tissues — everybody had him figured for a coward, but Kiwi wouldn't catch on until he heard his own scream."

-- Narrator (Chapter Ten: Kiwi Climbs the Ladder paragraph 66)

Importance: In his family it was believed that Kiwi was a coward. Kiwi didn't completely recognize his own cowardice until he screamed during the alligator routines. Interestingly, it was Kiwi who turned out to be the hero of the family at the end of the novel.

The Bird Man explained to me that mainland authorities remove children from their families — that this was not uncommon. If the family or the child was deemed 'unstable'."

-- Narrator (Chapter Eleven: Ava Goes to the Underworld paragraph 66)

Importance: The Bird Man warned Ava that if she were to tell Park Services that her sister had run away into the swamp to elope with a ghost it was likely they would take Ossie away. This was one of the things that he told her in order to play on her fear and keep her from notifying any one else that Ossie was missing.

Death is a theft, a crime, a cry in the sky, that's what the story means to me, Bird Man."

-- Narrator (Chapter Thirteen: Welcome to Stiltsville paragraph 52)

Importance: Ava believed the dredgeman's story was a story of how unfair death was. It had been unfair to her mother and to Louis. When he asked, however, Ava didn't tell the Bird Man what she believed the story meant.

With all of their technology it was fourteen days before they found Mr. Michael Taylor, half-looney with his dead acquaintance in his arms."

-- The Bird Man (Chapter Seventeen: Ava's Eclipse paragraph 20)

Importance: When Ava told the Bird Man she wanted to turn back and let the authorities take over the search for her sister, he told her the story of these two teens who were not found for fourteen days by the authorities. The story was intended to break Ava's faith in the authorities' abilities to locate Ossie, especially if she was in the underworld as Ava believed she was.

Probably if I had waited even a few seconds longer to glance at the sky, I wouldn't have seen her ribbon: a flag of purple snagged amid the toothy piles of whelk."

-- Narrator (Chapter Seventeen: Ava's Eclipse paragraph 40)

Importance: Ava spotted Ossie's purple ribbon caught in the shell islands at the entrance to the eye of the needle. It was a sign to her that Ossie had come that way.

Even these odd gestures were familiar to Kiwi, because the man in question was his father. Chief Bigtree, disguised as an employee of the casino."

-- Narrator (Chapter Eighteen: Kiwi Rolls the Dice paragraph 30)



Importance: To his surprise, Kiwi recognized his father as an employee at a casino that he and his friends visited. Kiwi wondered if that was the first time the Chief had worked at the casino or if he had been doing it all along to help the family supplement the income from the amusement park.

When you are a kid, you don't know yet that a secret, like an animal, can evolve. Like an animal, a secret can develop a self-preserving intelligence."

-- Narrator (Chapter Nineteen: The Silently Screaming World paragraph 15)

Importance: Ava decided after the Bird Man raped her that she would not tell anyone about what had happened to her. She didn't know at the time what affect that decision would have on her.

Ossie was dead, I was almost sure now. I felt pretty solidly that I was going to die out here. I toweled my eyes and kept walking."

-- Narrator (Chapter Nineteen: The Silently Screaming World paragraph 32)

Importance: Ava didn't have a positive frame of mind about her situation or her sister's situation as she walked through the unfamiliar swamps.

I saw the dredge hung up on rocks and my sister's body inside it, as quiet as a sleeper, her purple skirt draped over the railing. I saw the red Seth floating belly-up on a nameless slough. Every time I heard a stick snap I knew it was the Bird Man. Fear kept making itself inside me."

-- Narrator (Chapter Nineteen: The Silently Screaming World paragraph 53)

Importance: As she walked through the swamp Ava struggled with her thoughts because her mind kept showing her the worst possible outcomes to the situation in which she found herself.

Kiwi thought back to his first weeks, when insults had been impossible for him. One time he'd called Deemer a troglodyte but his delivery had been tentative and way, way too slow, as if the insult were a fork tenderly entering a steak. Now he could tell any man in the World to go fuck himself with a baseball bat. Progress was being made, he guessed."

-- Narrator (Chapter Twenty: Out to Sea paragraph 20)

Importance: Kiwi realized with the time he'd spent at the World of Darkness he was already learning how to smart off to people just like his co-workers did. Kiwi was not sure if that was really progress or not.

Mom's dead. Our park is bankrupt. Your son works in a casino now. Ossie went batshit this summer, and I'm pretty sure she thinks she's having sex with ghosts. Ava is alone with her on the island. Do you like that?"

-- Kiwi (Chapter Twenty: Out to Sea paragraph 71)



Importance: Kiwi said these words to his grandfather just before his grandfather spat on him and then hit him. Kiwi was trying to get his grandfather to understand the difficulties the family was having but his grandfather's mind seemed to be too far gone to comprehend what Kiwi was saying to him. He only picked up on Kiwi's anger and responded in kind.

Kiwi elbowed past them and tried to shut the closet door with a growl of laughter. Then he saw what they had done to the poster of his mother."

-- Narrator (Chapter Twenty: Out to Sea paragraph 98)

Importance: Kiwi at first played along with his friends joke when they put up a pornographic poster up in his closet in the dormitory. He became truly angry when he saw how they had torn the poster of his mother that had once hung in the place where they'd put the pornographic picture. He tried to hide his anger and did not tell Vijay the poster that had been taken down was of his mother.

In a way, he'd made good on his promise to me, our bargain, because I couldn't imagine a hell that would be worse than this place where he'd left me."

-- Narrator (Chapter Twenty-one: Mama Weeds paragraph 2)

Importance: Ava realized that the Bird Man had kept his promise to take her to the underworld, as she couldn't imagine hell being any worse than the place he'd taken her to.

The shirt beside it had checks running in a canary net over the fabric; the last time I saw this garment, Osceola had been wearing it in our kitchen. Initials were sewn in cursive on the pocket — L.T.— in fat raspberry thread."

-- Narrator (Chapter Twenty-one: Mama Weeds paragraph 27)

Importance: Ava recognized some of the clothes that she found pinned to the clothesline in Mama Weeds' yard. Among those pieces of clothing was a work shirt that had belonged to Louis. Ava had seen Ossie wearing that shirt.

It was too delicate for her, with its short puffed sleeves and its color, a faded yellow with tiny heart-shaped white flowers. My mother used to wear a dress like that, with a very similar look. No, I thought with a slow and brain-penetrating chill, she used to wear this dress. I was certain now that I was staring at Mama Weeds."

-- Narrator (Chapter Twenty-one: Mama Weeds paragraph 29)

Importance: It was when Ava saw that the black woman she found in the swamp was wearing a dress that had belonged to Ava's mother that she knew for sure that it was Mama Weeds that she was seeing.

There was a story that traveled around the islands about a woman named Mama Weeds. A swamp witch. But now Kiwi saw that there were witches everywhere in the world."

-- Narrator (Chapter Twenty-two: Kiwi Takes to the Skies paragraph 11)

Importance: In his section of the novel Kiwi thought about the same witch with whom his sister had an encounter during the previous section of the novel. Since he had been living in the mainland, he realized that one encountered witches in one's day-to-day life.

I know that I am a pretty biased interpreter of the events that led to my escape, but I believe I met my mother there, in the final instant. Not her ghost but some vaster portion of her, her self boundlessly recharged beneath the water."

-- Narrator (Chapter Twenty-three: The End Begins paragraph 38)

Importance: As Ava thought back over her experience in the alligator pit she believed that she had drawn upon the knowledge that her mother had imparted to her. It was this part of her mother, the knowledge, that lived on.

When my father stepped forward it didn't matter that we were nowhere near our island. All of us, the four of us — the five of us if you counted Mom inside us — we were home. We were a family again, a love that made the roomiest privacy that I have ever occupied."

-- Narrator (Chapter Twenty-three: The End Begins paragraph 49)

Importance: Once her family was back together Ava realized that it didn't matter where they lived, as long as they were together.