

The Sweet Hereafter Study Guide

The Sweet Hereafter by Russell Banks

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.

Contents

The Sweet Hereafter Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1 - Dolores Driscoll.....	6
Chapter 2 - Billy Ansel.....	9
Chapter 3 - Mitchell Stephens, Esquire.....	11
Chapter 4 - Nicholle Burnell.....	14
Chapter 5 - Dolores Driscoll.....	17
Characters.....	19
Objects/Places.....	25
Themes.....	27
Style.....	29
Quotes.....	31
Topics for Discussion.....	33

Plot Summary

The Sweet Hereafter is a novel by Russell Banks exploring the community reaction to a school bus accident that kills fourteen children. Written from four perspectives, the book shows how a common event effects lives differently and on a varying scale. Narration is provided by Dolores Driscoll, the driver of the ill-fated school bus; Billy Ansel, a pillar of the community who loses his twin children in the crash; Mitchell Stephens, a New York City attorney who descends on Sam Dent to build a negligence lawsuit; and Nichole Burnell, a fourteen-year-old beauty who survives the crash but is disabled. Covering seven months of grief and recovery, *The Sweet Hereafter* addresses complex issues in a simplistic, heart-rending fashion.

Dolores Driscoll has been a school bus driver for the community of Sam Dent for over twenty years. On the morning of January 27, 1990, she wakes before the sun to subzero temperatures and wonders if it will snow. Her husband, Abbott Driscoll, watches from his wheelchair as Dolores gets ready to begin her day. Abbott has been confined to a wheelchair since suffering a stroke several years prior and Dolores is their sole provider. She adores her husband and is especially fond of his sense of humor and logical perception of life's events. Dolores heads out to her barn to start the bus she keeps in her barn, insisting on maintaining it herself. It starts immediately despite the cold weather, and she begins her morning route.

The first stop is outside the home of the Lamston children. Dolores sympathizes with the children she calls "field-mouse poor" and knows their home life is a rough one. Her next stop is to pick up adopted eleven-year-old Bear Otto. Dolores likes Bear's enthusiasm and is fond of his parents, though some residents view them as "hippies." Dolores makes several more pickups, including twins Jessica and Mason Ansel and learning-disabled Sean Walker. When Sean gets on the bus, he is visibly frightened and wants to stay home with his mother. Along with eighth-grade beauty Nichole Burnell, Dolores convinces Sean to take a seat and he relaxes, visibly. Dolores drives to the poorest section of town, The Flats, and picks up several children wearing hand-me-down winter clothing before heading back toward the school. Near the flats, Dolores hits the brakes to avoid hitting a stray dog and though there was never any danger, she feels frightened. Billy Ansel, the father of the twins, drives behind the bus in his pickup truck and waves to his children and the others in the back seats. This is a daily ritual for Billy on his way to work. Snow begins to fall more heavily and Dolores is watchfully cautious as she starts on a difficult stretch of Bartlett Hill Road. Through the snowy haze, Dolores believes she sees another dog and swerves. The bus careens off the side of the road, over an embankment and into an abandoned sandpit full of icy water.

Billy Ansel is the only eyewitness to the crash. He pulls over, calls for emergency help and immediately begins pulling children from the icy water. Even after it is confirmed his own children are dead, Billy continues in the recovery efforts, not wanting to go home and face his tragic reality. Billy is no stranger to untimely death, as he lost his wife to cancer four years earlier and is a veteran of the Vietnam War. The death of his children, however, drives him into alcoholism and isolation. His three-year affair with the married

Risa Walker ends when the two feel awkward around each other following the deaths of the children.

New York City attorney Mitchell Stephens reads about the tragedy in the newspaper and decides to make a trip to Sam Dent and gauge any possible interest in filing negligence lawsuits. He checks into the Bide-A-Wile motel, owned by Sean Walker's parents Risa and Wendell, and gleans information from the Walkers about victims' families. Mitchell gets the Walkers and Bear Otto's parents, Wanda and Hartley, to agree to have him as their attorney. He decides to seek out Nichole Burnell's parents too since he believes there is money in Nichole's pain and suffering. Since Billy Ansel is the only eyewitness who can confirm Dolores was driving the legal speed limit, Mitchell deliberately angers Billy to drive him away from the idea of joining in a lawsuit.

Mitchell has his own family problems, as his drug-addicted daughter Zoe contacts him at the motel in Sam Dent. He is used to Zoe calling when she is desperate for money and is curt when speaking with her. Zoe antagonizes her father before telling him she has just found out she is HIV positive. She says that she needs \$1,000 and though Mitchell questions her honesty, he agrees to meet with her and give her the cash.

After over a month in the hospital, Nichole Burnell is discharged to go home. A spinal cord injury prevents her from feeling her legs, though she is still able to move them with help. The town's favorite babysitter, Nichole had been crowned Harvest Queen just a few months before the school bus crash. When she returns home, Nichole faces a new existence that includes a lot of time alone in her room as she continues her studies from her bedroom. The one good thing to come from the accident is that Nichole is no longer a target for her father's sexual abuse. Though Nichole keeps the secret to herself, she finds ways to remind her father she has not forgotten the abuse and she plans to torment him by wielding the upper hand and not letting him forget it either.

Nichole's parents tell her they have hired Mitch Stephens as the family attorney and they would like Nichole to testify about her pain and suffering. Nichole is angry at the ungrateful selfish attitude of her parents and their callous disregard about the fact her life was spared but she agrees to give a deposition after talking with Mitchell Stephens. Billy Ansel comes over to the Burnell house one evening, angry he is being subpoenaed as a witness in the Mitchell's lawsuit. Nichole overhears him telling her parents how hurtful his testimony will be to him and her parents refuse to budge from their opinion that the lawsuit should proceed.

At the deposition, Nichole plays up the stark contrast between her life before the accident and her current state. With her father and Mitchell Stephens in the room, Nichole answers all of the opposing counsel's questions honestly. When they begin to question her about the accident, Nichole comments she is suddenly remembering a lot more about that day than she had recalled initially. She states for the record that she saw Dolores' speedometer and it was registering nearly twenty miles over the legal speed limit just before the crash. With one statement, Nichole effectively ends all of the pending lawsuits relating to the school bus crash and crushes her father's dream of receiving a multi-million dollar settlement.



Word spread through Sam Dent that Dolores Driscoll is to blame for the crash that happened nearly seven months earlier. Billy Ansel is relieved, calling Nichole Burnell the “town hero.” Dolores is unaware of the new developments and takes Abbott to the county fair to see the demolition derby. She is surprised at the snubs by locals she and Abbott receive, believing most people would have stopped blaming her by now. Billy Ansel helps Dolores carry Abbott’s wheelchair up the grandstand steps and tells the Driscolls what Nichole told the lawyers. Dolores feels a surge of relief the town finally has closure and a place to put their collective blame, even though she knows Nichole lied. She and Abbott watch two rounds of the demolition derby, including a round featuring her old station wagon Boomer, and afterward the two head home.

Chapter 1 - Dolores Driscoll

Summary

Dolores Driscoll is a bus driver in Sam Dent, New York and has been for over twenty years. She maintains her 50-seat school bus herself and enjoys getting up early every morning to pick up the kids of her town and take them to school. Her husband Abbott is an invalid who suffered from a stroke many years earlier. Though Abbott has a small range of motion and speaks slowly, Dolores finds her husband interesting and does not complain about his disability. When Dolores' story begins, she is getting ready to begin her bus route on January 27, 1990. According to her thermometer it is seventeen degrees below zero. Dolores declares it's too cold to snow but her husband, speaking in his usual slow way, replies it's never too cold to snow. Dolores explains she takes pride in maintaining the school bus herself and she has never missed a day of work for maintenance issues. Despite the extremely cold weather, the bus starts up immediately. Dolores is ready to begin picking up the school kids in her bus, named "Shoe" because she tells the kids she feels like the Old Woman who Lived in a Shoe when she drives it.

Dolores' first stop is to pick up the three Lamston kids. She says t...hey are never on time to meet the bus, but she doesn't mind because she just pours herself her second cup of coffee and waits. As she waits, Dolores often thinks about her grown sons, Reginald and William. On this particular morning, she feels especially estranged from her children who are busy with the struggles of their own lives. The Lamstons finally make their way to the bus, wearing hand-me-down snowsuits and winter wear. Dolores describes the Lamstons as being "field mouse poor," with an alcoholic and abusive father. Though she tries to make conversation with them, the Lamston kids keep to themselves and treat Dolores as an outsider. Most days Dolores enjoys the silence as she drives to her next stop but on this morning, she feels compelled to get a rise out of one of the children. She asks the oldest, Harold, a question and sharply asks if he heard her. He tells her to leave them alone and Dolores realizes she has upset the little girl, Sheila, and apologizes.

The next stop is to pick up eleven-year-old Bear Otto. Dolores admits she enjoys seeing Bear, who is an enthusiastic and kind boy. Bear was adopted by Hartley and Wanda Otto, a "hippie" couple who are model citizens. Just three years after taking Bear in, the Ottos are pregnant with a biological child too, though they had been told conception was impossible. Dolores makes three close stops next to pick up a total of seven children – the Hamiltons, the Prescotts and the Walkers. These families live on land once owned by Dolores and her husband, which they sold when they needed the money for Abbott's medical bills. Dolores says she is happy they sold the land to locals, people who used it to build homes and start families, and added she isn't especially fond of outsiders who use her community as a vacation spot. After the three close stops, Dolores drives past her own house on the way to the next stop and honks at her husband, who is listening to a radio talk show. Dolores can tell it will snow soon and by the time she drives her afternoon route, she will need to put chains on the tires of the school bus.



Dolores continues her route on Bartlett Hill Road and picks up over twenty more kids. She explains on her bus, there are three rules: No radios, no physical fighting and no throwing things. If riders get in a fight on her bus, both parties have to get out and walk the rest of the way to school. Dolores explains she has these rules in place for safety. She also keeps a notebook in the bus to take down license plates of drivers who speed past the bus when it is stopped to pick up kids.

Dolores stops at the Bide-A-Wile motel to pick up Sean Walker, a ten-year-old boy who is a bit slow but protected by the other kids anyway. Sean usually marches right to his seat on the bus but on this day seems nervous and clings to his mother, Risa Walker. An eighth-grade girl takes Sean on her lap and tries to calm him. A red Saab comes speeding around the school bus and nearly hits Risa as she crosses back to the motel and Sean jumps up in fear. Dolores tries to calm him and the bus continues on. The next stop is at Billy Ansel's house to pick up his nine-year-old identical twins, Jessica and Mason. Billy leaves his house immediately after the twins board the bus and follows behind the bus in his pickup truck until he reaches the turnoff for work at the Sunoco garage that he owns. Dolores likes Billy's company and knows that the kids, especially the ones in the back, like Billy being there too.

The last of Dolores' stops are in an area called the Flats, which is the poorest area in town. The children come from shacks and most are products of inbreeding. Dolores feels sympathy toward the children that will have a difficult time ever escaping their quality of life for something better. As Dolores heads for the school, she sees an image in the street that she thinks is a reddish dog. She does not get a close look at what the object actually is and presses her foot on the brakes which causes the bus to swerve. She says the last thing she remembers are the bodies of the children flying through the air as the bus careens off the side of the road and lands hard on the ground.

Analysis

Dolores Driscoll provides the background information on the people directly involved in the school bus crash: the driver and the riders. Her narration gives readers a glimpse into the final moments of fourteen kids' lives. The observation Dolores makes about the families of the riders provides insight into the true extent of loss that will be felt as a result of the bus accident. Readers get to know the characters that will soon be dead and an estimation of how far the impact will reach.

Dolores herself is a first-rate bus driver. She takes pride in maintaining her bus and being punctual. In addition, Dolores genuinely cares about the kids, their home lives and her responsibility for their safety. Despite her best intentions, Dolores ignores omens and her intuition on the day of the accident. The first stray dog she sees frightens her, though she comments she isn't sure why, and she has an urge to pull over that she ignores. Sean Walker's bizarre fear puzzles Dolores but she ignores that scenario as well in an attempt to get the kids to school on time. By the time the accident occurs, Dolores has missed all of her opportunities to stop the bus and cannot avoid what happens next.

Vocabulary

erring, distaff, temperament, invalid, grimace, estranged, commiserating, aloof, Abenaki, sanguine, Adirondack, colonial, shabby, foreclosure, competent, undue, pecking orders, parceled, banished, lollygagging, gauzy, exile, plucky, mirage, suspended

Chapter 2 - Billy Ansel

Summary

Billy Ansel is a widower who also loses his twin nine-year-olds in the bus accident. He is a Vietnam veteran who owns the Sunoco gas station and repair shop in Sam Dent. Billy is the only eyewitness to the accident, because he was driving right behind the bus when it went off the road. He explains the bus careened off the road and plunged into a sandpit filled with icy water. Billy called the emergency services and helped in the rescue and recovery effort, an act he says was selfish in nature because it kept him from facing his own tragic loss. Just before the bus went off the road, Billy says he was thinking about having sex with Risa Walker – a married woman with whom Billy had been sleeping for three years. Risa lost her only son Sean in the bus accident and the affair ended after the tragedy as their relationship's dynamic changed.

Billy uses flashbacks to explain his feelings on the day of the accident. He discusses the death of his wife Lydia due to cancer and how he packed up all of her clothing and put it in the garage before she died. Billy describes a family vacation to Jamaica that he, Lydia and the kids took when the twins were four years old. He talks about how high on marijuana he and Lydia got on the trip and recalls they left the grocery store without Jessica, delving him into morbid thoughts on the long drive back to retrieve her. Billy says that less than a year after that trip, Lydia was dead.

He explains when his wife died, he lost his desire for sex for about a year. He was so busy trying to get the kids off to school and keep his business operating correctly he had no time or energy to think about sex. Eventually he started to have sexual dreams and fantasies and of all the women in Sam Dent, he fantasized most about Risa Walker. Billy says it was Risa's subtle sexuality that made him want her. Knowing she is married, and to someone Billy considers a friend, made Billy feel especially guilty about his yearnings. He tried to hit on Risa awkwardly for some time before she finally propositioned him. Billy says he was grateful Risa took the initiative because he is normally a quiet, passive person. The two claimed to be in love during the affair, but in hindsight, Billy thinks that was untrue.

Four days after the bus accident, Billy decides to venture out of his house for the first time. He drives to his Sunoco shop – the place where the totaled school bus had been towed. He parks his pickup truck and leaves it running with its headlights on. Billy examines the bus for several minutes, wishing he could be back on it in the minutes before the accident to hear all of the children's voices. As Billy walks back to his car, a tall man approaches him. The man is Mitchell Stephens, an attorney who says Billy should join a class-action lawsuit he is coordinating between the other families of dead children. Billy turns Mitchell down flatly, threatening to assault him if he doesn't go away. Mitchell gives Billy his card in case he changes his mind.



Billy drives to the motel where he and Risa used to meet and goes to the usual room for their rendezvous. Risa is there, sitting in the dark and looking out the window. The two talk about the tragedy as if they are strangers. Billy tells Risa about the attorney and she implies she and her husband are planning to join in the lawsuit. She also says she knew something like the accident was going to happen – she could tell something terrible was going to happen for the past several months. Billy is turned off by this attitude and leaves the motel room without any physical interaction with Risa. Billy says he and Risa never met alone again.

Analysis

Billy provides two important viewpoints to the school bus tragedy: that of an eyewitness and also as a parent. As an eyewitness, Billy fills in the story where Dolores left off and tells readers where the bus landed and that it was submerged in water. Billy is the person who calls for emergency help and is first on the scene for rescue and recovery. Even after he knows his own children are dead, Billy stays and helps, an act he admits was selfish though other people found it courageous. Important details of the aftermath of the accident are described for readers through Billy's firsthand explanation.

No stranger to tragedy, Billy's grief for his two deceased children overlaps with other moments of sadness in his life. Billy describes how his time in Vietnam and loss of his wife to cancer prepared him for the death of his kids, making him more of a believer in death than in life. He is able to convey how the loss of children, to parents and the community as a whole, is a unique kind of loss. Billy says the death of children is "unnatural" and when a community loses its children, it "loses its meaning." His closed off life, devoid of hope and reeling from grief, represents what the town of Sam Dent feels collectively.

Billy addresses the phenomenon of everyone in town wanting someone to blame. He says some people blame Dolores, some blame the weather, some wonder if the state of New York is to blame and the religious people say God wanted to take the children home to Heaven. Because of Billy's close association with death, particularly the death of his wife and his time in Vietnam, he sees no reason to place blame on anyone or anything. He says instead life is not the guarantee – death is. There is no reason to try to explain tragedy or blame it on something because it is inevitable and there is no way to reverse – or avoid - it.

Vocabulary

mind-numbing, precariousness, illicit, sordid, respites, motifs, abundance, ganja, extracted, sullen, molasses, oblique, flaxen, haughty, insurmountable, interloper, crevasse, chromosomal, glandular, provocative, reticent, akimbo, glib, virtuous, objectified, abject, gulag, purgatory, leviathans, bulbous, apparition, negligence

Chapter 3 - Mitchell Stephens, Esquire

Summary

Mitchell Stephens is a New York City lawyer from a large firm who has made a good living from representing plaintiffs in negligence suits. Mitchell says he is such a lawyer because he is a naturally angry person, not because he is greedy. The emotional rush Mitchell gets from trying, and winning, cases and an overwhelming feeling of having reached some level of good are what keep him in his business. After reading about the Sam Dent school bus accident in the newspaper, he drives up to the town to find families to join together for a negligence lawsuit.

Mitchell checks into the Bide-A-Wile motel because it is closest to the town and the accident site. Risa Walker checks him in and does not mention her own son, Sean, died in the accident. When Mitchell comes down to the front desk to find something to eat that evening, he finds Wendell Walker sitting speechless in his chair, with an empty expression. Mitchell recognizes the look as one that a parent who loses a child possesses and tries to provide a few words of sympathy. Wendell asks Mitchell if he is a good attorney and when Mitchell confirms he is “one of the best” Wendell says he and his wife would like to talk to him about the accident. Mitchell goes into the residence portion of the motel and talks for over an hour with Risa and Wendell about the option for suing for negligence. He also takes the opportunity to learn more about the other families involved, Dolores Driscoll and the history of the scene of the accident. The Walkers sign a contingency form with Mitchell.

Based on his conversation with the Walkers, Mitchell decides to court Hartley and Wanda Otto next. The next morning, Mitchell drives to the Otto home – a half-dome, strangely constructed home with wooden furniture. With Hartley Otto in the kitchen, Mitchell sells Wanda, the angriest of the couple, on the idea of joining the negligence lawsuit with the Walkers. While Mitchell knows the Walkers signed simply because they liked the idea of the money, he can see the Ottos feel that they have a duty to their unborn child to find the parties responsible for the accident.

Mitchell then visits the site of the accident. He notices the guard rails where the bus went off the road appear to be new and installed properly. The sandpit is far from the road and Mitchell concludes the bus would have had to have been going very fast to crash into the icy pool. He wonders if Dolores was speeding and realizes if she was, any other negligence claims will be thrown out. Mitchell hopes he can get Dolores to testify she was going the legal limit or under it, and also knows he can further his case if he can get Billy Ansel to confirm it. In order for Billy to testify, he cannot be part of the negligence lawsuit or any other suit associated with the event.

Mitchell determines the best way to turn Billy off from joining a lawsuit is to approach him and make him angry about the idea. In the evening, Mitchell drives to Billy's home but decides against approaching him that night when he sees Billy sitting forlornly at the

kitchen table with a bottle of booze. Mitchell drives to the Sunoco garage instead and decides to snap some pictures of the school bus. He notes that it looks in relatively good shape, minus some broken windows. He returns to his car and sees a pickup truck pulling up to the scene. It is Billy Ansel. Mitchell turns off his headlights and watches Billy stare down the bus for a few minutes. Mitchell gets out of his car and pretends to be recruiting Billy for the group negligence lawsuit. Billy is angry, as Mitchell predicted, and drives away. Mitchell is convinced Billy will not decide to join any other lawsuits and will therefore make a strong witness for Mitchell's case.

Mitchell decides there is no sense in going after Dolores for negligence because she is a respected member of the community who provides for her crippled husband. She also has no money to try to win and Mitchell knows a jury will not find her liable. Instead, Mitchell hopes he can use Dolores as a witness to strengthen his negligence case and even wonders if he could prove Dolores had significant trauma from the incident and win some compensation for her. Though Mitchell has avoided most of the children's funerals, he attends one at the Catholic Church in hopes of getting a chance to speak to Dolores. He catches her in the parking lot of the church as she leaves and tells her he has the answer to whether she is guilty or not. His words grab Dolores' attention and she listens as Mitchell lays out how he can clear her name and even win a negligence lawsuit on her behalf. Dolores asks Mitchell to come to her house and talk to her husband, who is very logical, about the lawsuit. She says if he agrees it is the right thing to do, she will do it. If he thinks it is a bad idea, then she will not move forward.

Mitchell arrives at the Driscoll house and is "creeped out" by Abbott. He runs his ideas past Abbott and Dolores translates Abbott's answers. In the end, Abbott tells Mitchell the law cannot clear Dolores' name; only the people of Sam Dent, Abbott says, can decide whether she is negligent and whether or not they can forgive her either way. Mitchell leaves the Driscoll's home feeling relieved, more than defeated, and concludes Abbott would have made a good lawyer if he had been in better health.

Upon returning to the motel, Mitchell receives a phone message from his daughter, Zoe. She had called Mitchell earlier in the day from a pay phone but the two were cut off and Mitchell had no number with which to call her back. Zoe and Mitchell have a strained relationship, due mainly to Zoe's drug and alcohol problems. Mitchell knows that when Zoe calls, it is because she needs money and he admits he usually breaks down and gives it to her after she tells him her sob stories. Now divorced from Zoe's mother Klara, Mitchell recalls a trip the three of them took to the Outer Banks in North Carolina when Zoe was two years old. Zoe was bitten by baby black widow spiders and the drive to the nearest hospital was forty-five minutes. Over the phone, the doctor told Mitchell to have a small knife handy in case he needed to perform an emergency tracheotomy. Though Mitchell never needed to cut into his daughter's throat, he had been prepared to.

When he calls Zoe back, she sounds high. Mitchell asks her what she wants and Zoe responds she has big news. After bantering for a bit, Zoe tells her father that she has HIV. Mitchell tells her he will give her money and he would also like for her to get tested again by one of his doctors. Zoe is both angry and not surprised her father doesn't believe her and the two agree to meet that evening at Mitchell's place to discuss it

further. Zoe says she will not bother coming unless her father has \$1,000 waiting for her.

Analysis

Mitchell Stephens is a man on a mission. He is angry at things that have happened in his own life and pours all of his emotion into winning negligence cases for other people. Though he says he does not take the cases for financial gain, it's clear to readers he must do it partly for that reason since he is contracted for one-third of the financial judgment awarded to the victims. Mitchell's pursuit of money, however, does not appear to be rooted in greed. He simply likes taking home a big "kill," undoubtedly related to his anger issues. Mitchell is not blinded by fortune but he does not seek out negligence cases in a completely unselfish state of mind.

Mitchell's manipulation of people's emotions is what helps him remain a successful lawyer; it is also a trait he despises in his daughter, Zoe. Mitchell has seen enough tragedies to know how to read the face and demeanor of victims' families and use his analyses to his advantage. Similarly, Zoe has been through the stages of addiction and mooching money off her parents enough to know what tactics work in her favor. While Mitchell believes his use of manipulation is at least for a better good, both father and daughter use their wiles without apology or shame.

In a dramatic attempt to get Dolores Driscoll to sign Mitchell as her lawyer, he tells her he can tell her if she is guilty or not. He also promises to clear her name legally among the people in Sam Dent. Zoe makes a parallel dramatic statement, but to her father: she tells him she is HIV positive. In the case with Dolores, Mitchell's drastic words get him a meeting at her house with her husband. In Zoe's case, her desperate claim gets her what she wants – money from her father.

Vocabulary

litigators, banshees, pragmatic, dilapidated, sustenance, flippant, cinder, comatose, Episcopalians, impunity, macrobiotic, articulate, contingency, sinew, tracheotomy, lassitude, cistern, madras, fission, ambivalence

Chapter 4 - Nicholle Burnell

Summary

Nichole Burnell is a fourteen-year-old girl who survives the school bus accident but suffers a spinal cord injury causing her to have no feeling in her legs and to need a wheelchair. Mitchell Stephens would like to use Nichole's testimony to show the jury how her life has changed for the worse because of the accident. Before her injury, Nichole was a beautiful eighth grader, a smart girl who had been voted the Harvest Queen. After the accident, Nichole confines herself to her room at home and refuses to go to her classroom, doing all of her schoolwork from home and avoiding old friends. Nichole carries a secret: her father used to sexually abuse her regularly before the accident. Now that she is wheelchair bound, her father avoids touching her at all and Nichole feels empowered with a new vigor to exact psychological revenge on her father.

The day Nichole returns from the hospital her parents show her the adjustments they have made to the house. Her father has built a wheelchair ramp and also turned a porch area into a window-lined bedroom for her. Nichole's old room that she shared with her six-year-old sister Jennie is upstairs and off limits to Nichole now. Though she wishes she could return to her old room with Jennie, Nichole likes her new room and the privacy the lock on her door provides. She notices a brand new Mac computer on her desk, a gift her parents say came from a lawyer named Mitchell Stephens. Nichole demands to know why a lawyer would give her a computer and her parents confess they have retained Mitchell to represent the family. Nichole is outraged the parents of a child who lived through the accident would think they needed compensation. Her parents explain the medical bills for Nichole's care alone make it necessary for them to seek financial reparations. Nichole is still leery of the whole idea but agrees to meet with Mitchell Stephens.

When Mitchell arrives at the house, Nichole is surprised to realize she actually likes him. He asks her father to leave the room, pulls a chair right next to her wheelchair and looks her directly in the eye when he talks. Mitchell seems to have an answer for every doubt in Nichole's mind about being part of the lawsuit and lets her speak openly about her guilt. Nichole also points out she does not remember anything about the actual accident but Mitchell tells her answering questions about how her life has changed will be enough. In the end, Nichole agrees to give a deposition and just tell the truth.

One night before her deposition, Billy Ansel comes over to the house to talk to Nichole's parents. Nichole would like to see Billy, especially since she used to babysit the twins so often, but she isn't sure she can face him since she is alive and they are dead. From her room, she eavesdrops on the conversation of the three adults. Billy asks her parents to drop their lawsuit. He says that, because of it, he is being subpoenaed to testify. The Burnells argue a few minutes of Billy's time can provide a lot of help to the other families and Billy says if he testifies once, all of the other lawyers for other lawsuits will subpoena him, too. Billy says the whole town has gone crazy with legal matters and



Sam Dent has become a place of hate. He leaves angrily, but not before asking how Nichole is doing and showing concern for her recovery. Billy's arguments ring true with Nichole and she thinks of a plan on how to stop all the lawsuits from going to trial.

The school year ends and Nichole is named salutatorian of her eighth grade class. Though her parents and teachers encourage her to give a speech, Nichole refuses and receives her diploma in the mail. She babysits her siblings in the summer months, allowing her two younger brothers to wander free and spending long afternoons reading and playing with her younger sister Jennie. Late in the summer, Nichole's father tells her the deposition is scheduled for the next morning. He is tentative and asks Nichole's permission to come into her room and to drive her to the courthouse the next morning. She agrees to go.

In the meeting room at the courthouse, Nichole is asked questions by the opposing set of lawyers. A stenographer, Mitchell Stephens, and her father are also in the room. Nichole answers honestly as the questions start very broad and move to more personal in nature. She knows describing herself before her injury makes the case for Mitchell Stephens even stronger but she speaks honestly, as she has said she would. When the opposing lawyers get to the details of the accident, Nichole says she is suddenly remembering more details now that she is talking about it. She describes the strange way Sean Walker acted on the bus and the dog in the road that Dolores swerved to hit. When the lawyers ask about the moments before the accident, Nichole says she was scared because Dolores was speeding; doing seventy-two miles per hour though the speed limit is fifty-five. Nichole reiterates she is sure the speedometer said seventy-two because it is big and she looked to see how fast Dolores was actually driving. The lawyers ask a few more questions and Mitchell does not follow up, knowing Nichole's honesty has just lost him any chance of winning the negligence lawsuit. Despite this, Mitchell seems impressed with Nichole, telling her she would be a great poker player.

On the drive home, Nichole and her father sit in silence. He is clearly shaken that the lawsuit, and the money he had anticipated, has gone out the window but knows better than to express his frustrations to Nichole. Instead he asks her if she would like to grab some ice cream on the way home. Nichole sheds her now-normal snarky attitude, for she knows she has won a great victory, and agrees to the ice cream. She asks her father if Dolores will get in trouble because of what she said and he says no one will want to sue Dolores because she is "one of us." They pass the fairgrounds and Nichole says she wants to go to the fair the following week and socialize. A pained expression rests on her father's face and Nichole concludes he will never be able to smile again – which is the revenge she had sought.

Analysis

Nichole Burnell provides the perspective of a victim of the school bus accident. Though she is not killed, she is permanently disabled at the age of fourteen and her promising future is stunted. She considers herself lucky but carries guilt at the same time. Nichole cannot face Billy Ansel when he comes to the house to talk with her parents because

she is alive, and his twin children are dead. The “maternal” instinct Dolores mentions Nichole having in Chapter One comes into play during Nichole’s narration; Nichole feels somewhat responsible for the bus accident and does not want to be around the victims’ families.

The accident plays a positive role in Nichole’s life, however, because it ends the cycle of sexual abuse she has been suffering at the hand of her father. Surviving the accident and dealing with the new constraints on her life puts everything, including the past abuse, in perspective for Nichole. She is no longer afraid of her father and flexes the power of the shared secret in order to torment him. When she sees how wrapped up her parents are in the money and attention they will receive from the lawsuit, Nichole comes up with a plan for revenge against her father. With a few simple words, Nichole robs her father of his hope, just like he robbed her of her innocence.

Vocabulary

metabolism, meager, deposition, subpoena, daft, stenographer, atrophying, midway, somberly

Chapter 5 - Dolores Driscoll

Summary

On the final day of the county fair, Dolores decides to make her first social appearance since the kids' funerals in February. She says every year since she and Abbott got married, they always go to the county fair. Abbott especially likes the demolition derby, even more so since suffering his stroke. Dolores likes to walk the livestock barns because the smells, warmth and animals remind her of her childhood. On this day, Dolores and Abbott wait out an afternoon storm and arrive at the fair just minutes before the demolition derby is about to begin. They rush to the grandstand and Dolores is surprised at the cold shoulder they appear to be receiving from everyone. She thought that by now, people would have moved on a bit as she had.

At past fairs, a few young men usually volunteer to carry Abbott's wheelchair to the top of the grandstand, the only spot he can see the demolition derby clearly. When Dolores and Abbott arrive at the steps up the grandstand, no one comes to their aid. Dolores decides she will have to carry her husband, in his wheelchair, herself. After a few steps, Dolores hears a familiar voice and turns to see Billy Ansel and his young date, Stacey Gale. Billy seems overly excited to see Dolores and she gauges by the brown bag in his hand that he is drunk. The four climb to the very top, get Abbott situated and then take their seats. Dolores is excited because Jim Gagne, a guy who works at Billy's shop, bought her old station wagon "Boomer" to enter in the derby.

A commotion near the bottom of the grandstand draws Dolores' attention. Groups of people part and begin to applaud as Nichole Burnell and her family enter the grandstand. Billy comments Nichole is a town hero because she single-handedly stopped everyone from suing everyone else. The cars rev their engines as the first race gets ready to begin and over the noise Dolores asks how Nichole did that. Billy looks uncomfortable and mumbles something about how Nichole would not testify the way the New York attorney hoped she would.

The first round of the derby begins and Abbott seems interested in hearing more about Nichole's testimony. Billy tries to avoid Abbott but at the end of the first derby round, tells the Driscolls Nichole said Dolores was driving seventy-two miles an hour just before the bus accident. Billy feels badly he is the person to give them the bad news, but Dolores feels relieved Nichole lied about her speed. As she sits in the stands, Dolores feels a weight lifted from her shoulders.

In the next round of the derby, Abbott notices that Dolores' old station wagon, Boomer, is on the track. It is painted all black, with the word "Boomer" written on the roof of the car. Though the other two cars gang up on Boomer and the old ride gets stuck in the mud a few times, Boomer wins the round. The excitement of the action brings the entire crowd to its feet, cheering Boomer to victory. Dolores lets herself enjoy the round and then tells Abbott they need to leave. This time, several people help Dolores lower her

husband and his wheelchair to the ground. As she drives her husband home, Dolores feels peaceful. She sees the eyes of animals watching her in the dark and drives home safely.

Analysis

The demolition derby represents the destruction the school bus accident caused in Sam Dent. Just like all of the people watching the demolition derby are collectively affected by what is happening on the track, the entire community of Sam Dent was affected by the school bus accident. Particularly people like Dolores Driscoll and Billy Ansel had a larger life change due to the accident than citizens with no direct involvement, but every person in Sam Dent was impacted by the tragedy on Bartlett Hill Road in some way. Just as the community grieved together, it cheers together during the demolition derby. A return to normalcy, or what is the new normalcy, is signaled by the headlining event at the county fair.

Dolores seeks out an answer to whether she is to blame for the deaths and injuries on her school bus throughout the book. The general consensus is that Dolores is innocent and Dolores almost wishes she would be condemned by the citizens of Sam Dent to ease her own conscience. When she finds out people in the town do not blame her for the accident, she is happy. Though it seems Nichole Burnell was lying when she says Dolores was driving over the speed limit, Dolores is thankful the people of Sam Dent now have a place to focus their grief.

Vocabulary

leverage, albatross, trivial, illumination, sufficiently, memorialized

Characters

Dolores Driscoll

Dolores is a woman in her fifties who drives a school bus for the town of Sam Dent. She is a tall woman with red hair who began driving kids to school when her sons were young. What began as a courtesy of picking up neighboring kids turned into over twenty years of being an official driver for the school system. Her latest bus, named “Shoe,” is a fifty-five seat vehicle she insists on keeping in her barn and maintaining herself. Dolores prides herself on never missing a day of work due to mechanical issues with the bus.

Her husband Abbott is confined to a wheelchair, following a stroke six years earlier. Dolores finds his disability endearing and praises the logic and intelligence of her invalid husband. She describes them both as being non-religious but attending church for social reasons. The entire community seems to respect and admire Dolores for her hard work and financial support of her husband.

The morning of the school bus accident, Dolores drives with extra caution because of the sub-zero temperatures and lightly falling snow. She describes herself as being a “careful” person who takes no shortcuts in life and those traits are in full force as she picks up her load of school kids. She believes she sees an animal on the road and swerves to avoid hitting it, sending the bus careening off the road and into an icy body of water. For the rest of the book, Dolores struggles with whether she was the cause of fourteen deaths or if there is another explanation. When she discovers the town believes it was her speeding that caused the school bus accident, Dolores feels relieved everyone can find closure by putting the blame on her.

Billy Ansel

Billy is a Vietnam veteran who owns a Sunoco car repair shop in Sam Dent. He is in his late 30s and described as being handsome, athletic and sexy by other characters. Billy is a respected member of the community and only hires men who are Vietnam veterans to his staff at the shop. His nine-year-old twins die in the school bus accident. Billy is the only eyewitness to the tragedy because he is driving his pickup truck behind the bus, waving to the kids in the back, including his own. Having lost his wife Lydia to cancer a few years earlier, Billy is no stranger to grief. When his wife died, the balancing act of caring for his children while running his repair shop kept him going. Losing his children pushes Billy into alcoholism and despair.

Billy narrates a chapter of the book in which he says he no longer has faith in life and that the only guarantee is death. He explains the effect the school bus accident has on the entire community, saying a town that loses its children loses its meaning. In the chapter, Billy talks about the three-year affair he had with Risa Walker, a married

woman who also loses a child in the school bus accident. Her understated sexuality is what draws Billy to Risa and they meet in a room of the motel she owns with her husband to make love. Billy explains that after losing his wife, it is easier for him to have a relationship with an unattainable woman. The affair is broken off following the school bus accident and Billy starts dating younger women who like to drink.

Mitchell Stephens

Mitchell is a 55-year-old negligence attorney from New York City who goes to Sam Dent to sign up clients for a lawsuit. He is described as being tall and having blue eyes and curly gray hair. Though he is not sure who exactly is to blame, Mitchell believes the “deep pockets” of the insurance owned by the school board, county and state will be good compensation for the people of Sam Dent who suffered because of the school bus accident. Mitchell says he represents negligence lawsuits because he is naturally an angry person, not because he is greedy, though he expects one-third of whatever settlement is reached in the courts. Mitchell knows how to read, and manipulate, people’s emotions to his advantage and does it to the Walkers, the Ottos, Billy Ansel and Nichole Burnell.

Mitchell’s own life is turbulent and he says he has “lost” a child, though his daughter Zoe is still alive. She is lost to drugs and alcohol and calls her father only when she needs money. His ex-wife Klara and he do their best to save their daughter but every tactic and form of rehab has failed. While he is in Sam Dent, Mitchell hears from Zoe who tells him she has HIV and needs money. Despite the tough love Mitchell has shown toward Zoe in the past, he is overcome with sympathy toward his daughter and agrees to meet her and give her the cash.

Nichole Burnell

Nichole is a fourteen-year-old town beauty who is the oldest of five children. She is known as the town’s favorite babysitter with a maternal instinct. In school, she receives high grades, is a cheerleader and is crowned the Harvest Queen. Though she appears to be a “golden” child to outsiders, Nichole carries a dark secret: she is being sexually abused by her father.

Nichole suffers a spinal cord injury during the school bus accident. The injury confines Nichole to a wheelchair and she begins doing her schoolwork from home as a result. She spends her days alone in her room, watching television and working on her computer. Nichole is especially close to her six-year-old sister Jennie and the two become even closer following the accident. Despite the physical and emotional toll the injury has on Nichole, she is actually more confident and happy because the cycle of sexual abuse has ceased.

When Nichole discovers her parents are part of a negligence lawsuit, she is furious because she does not see what grounds they have for complaint since she is alive. After meeting with attorney Mitchell Stephens and being treated respectfully by him,

Nichole agrees to give a deposition on what happened on the day of the accident and how her life has changed for the worse since her injury. Nichole figures it can't hurt just to tell the truth. She changes her mind, however, when Billy Ansel begs her parents to drop the lawsuit because of the hurt it will cause him to have to be a witness. On the day of the deposition, Nichole lies and says she saw the speedometer in the bus and that Dolores was doing almost twenty miles over the legal limit. She knows all of the lawsuits will be dropped if the driver is to blame and no one will bother to sue Dolores. The information is especially hurtful to Nichole's father who was excited about the millions of dollars in settlement money he was anticipating.

Abbott Driscoll

Abbott is the husband of the school bus driver, Dolores Driscoll, and is confined to a wheelchair because of a stroke he suffered. Before his disability, Abbott was a carpenter. Unlike many invalids, Abbott does not like to watch television, preferring public talk radio instead. His speech is impaired but understood clearly by his wife who adores him. Abbott says little but when he speaks, it is generally a profound statement about life.

Risa Walker

Risa is an attractive woman who undersells her good looks with oversized clothing and tired eyes. She is the co-owner of the Bide-A-Wile Motel in Sam Dent with her husband Wendell. Risa tries to fix up the run-down motel and finds good things to say about everyone in town. Her son Sean suffers from an unnamed disability and Risa's worry about his wellbeing ages her. Risa initiates a three-year affair with Billy Ansel that the two carry out in a room at the motel, after Risa's husband has gone to bed. Risa feels no love for her husband Wendell and after their son dies in the school bus accident, she files for divorce.

Wendell Walker

Wendell is a heavyset middle age man with little motivation in life. While his wife Risa tries to fix up their money-pit motel, Wendell prefers just to sit in the front office and watch television. He channels all his love into his son, Sean, and becomes bitter toward other people in town after the school bus accident. Wendell is unaware his wife Risa is having an affair with his friend, Billy Ansel, and speaks highly of Billy when the attorney asks about him.

Sean Walker

Sean is the ten-year-old son of Risa and Wendell Walker who is considered "slow" in comparison to other children his age. He is one of the fourteen kids that dies in the school bus accident. The kids at his school are protective of Sean and many admire him



because of his skill with video games. On the morning of the school bus accident, Sean senses danger and tells his mother he wants to stay home with her. Though Sean is clearly troubled, his mother and the bus driver talk him into taking his seat.

Jessica and Mason Ansel

Jessica and Mason are the nine-year-old twins of Billy Ansel. They are both killed in the school bus accident. Though they are younger than other kids, the Ansel twins are allowed to sit at the back of the bus so they can wave to their dad who drives his pickup truck behind the bus every day.

Lydia Ansel

Lydia is Billy's wife who died from cancer four years before the school bus accident. She did the accounting for her husband's business and when she died, Billy was left with the responsibility of two small children and extra work. Billy describes his wife as being small in stature and his high school sweetheart.

Reginald Driscoll

Reginald is Dolores and Abbott Driscoll's oldest son who is mentioned in the book. He lives in a nearby town and is married when the book begins but by the end of the book, Reginald is separated from his wife. Dolores calls him a bit of a "momma's boy" who offers for his parents to live with him for selfish reasons.

William Driscoll

William is the youngest son of Dolores and Abbott Driscoll. Dolores mentions William had sounded strange since coming back from a tour of duty in Panama, though he was uninjured.

Kyle Lamston

Kyle is the father of three of the children killed in school bus accident. He is described by Dolores Driscoll, though he never makes an appearance in the book. Kyle represents a common citizen of Sam Dent. In high school, he was athletic, good looking and smart but got involved in drinking at an early age. Kyle got his girlfriend (and then wife) Doreen pregnant at a young age and his alcoholism grew, along with resentment toward Doreen. His only skill is painting houses. Dolores says the family is on welfare and food stamps, relying on charity for everything else.

Harold, Jesse and Sheila Lamston

The three Lamston kids are the first stop Dolores makes with her school bus. All three are killed in the school bus accident. Dolores is uncomfortable with the Lamston kids' revulsion to outsiders of their family but she also feels sympathy toward them because she knows their father is an abusive alcoholic. She describes them as being "field mouse poor" and living in a trailer.

Bear Otto

Bear is an adopted, energetic eleven-year-old boy that gets on at Dolores' second school bus stop. He is killed in the school bus accident. Bear is stocky in build, with long coal black hair and he is of Abenaki Indian heritage. His jovial attitude made him a favorite of adults and his peers alike. Bear saw Billy Ansel as a hero and wanted to join the Marines after high school. Dolores describes Bear as being "one of those rare children that brings out the best in people."

Wanda Otto

Wanda is an attractive "hippie" of the community. Along with her husband Hartley, Wanda is considered to be a model citizen though there are rumors that the couple smokes marijuana. Her exotic dark hair and short skirts garner the nickname "Beatnik Queen" by the mechanics at Billy Ansel's shop and she uses profanity freely. Believing she is unable to have children, Wanda and her husband adopt Bear from Vermont. When the school bus accident occurs, Wanda is several months pregnant and the whole family is excitedly anticipating the new baby.

Hartley Otto

Hartley is a furniture maker who wears his hair in a long braid and is considered a "hippie," along with his wife Wanda. When his adopted son Bear is killed in the school bus accident, Hartley is more passive than his wife, apparently silently grieving.

Zoe Stephens

Zoe is attorney Mitchell Stephen's only child and a drug addict. She uses manipulation to get money out of her parents. Mitchell at time was very fond of his daughter but tells readers he has already lost Zoe to addiction. Zoe calls the motel in Sam Dent and tells Mitchell she is HIV positive and needs money.

Jimbo Gagne

Jimbo is a mechanic from Billy Ansel's shop who buys Dolores' old station wagon "Boomer" for one dollar. He paints it black, tinkers with the engine and paints "Boomer" on the roof of the vehicle for the county fair's demolition derby. He is the first person to go out to Dolores' house after the accident and goes out of his way to make Dolores feel like she is still part of the community.

Objects/Places

Sam Dent

Sam Dent is a fictional small town in upstate New York located on the road to popular ski and winter sport tourist spots. The town is named after its pioneering founder and the residents of Sam Dent are poor and impoverished.

Adirondack Park

Adirondack Park is located in northeast New York and is largest park in the U.S. It is a popular place for skiing and known for its birch trees and beautiful scenery. The towns scattered throughout Adirondack Park house families suffering from poverty, alcoholism and inbreeding.

Bartlett Hill Road

Bartlett Hill Road is the main road where Dolores drives her school bus in Sam Dent. It is steep in places and full of dangerous curves, especially in inclement weather. The school bus accident occurs just off of Bartlett Hill Road.

The Flats

The Flats are the poorest area of Sam Dent. Dolores picks up several kids from that area for school and feel pity for them because she knows they are sentenced to a life of poverty. Many of the children from the Flats are products of inbreeding.

Shoe, the Bus

Shoe is the name that Dolores gives to her fifty-seat school bus and encourages the kids to call it that too. She says she came up with the name because when she is driving with a full bus of kids, she feels like the Old Woman who Lived in a Shoe. Shoe is the bus involved in the tragic accident.

Boomer

Boomer is Dolores' old station wagon in which she drove local kids to school. At 168,000 miles, Dolores retires Boomer to her backyard. Jimbo Gagne buys Boomer from Dolores for one dollar and breathes new life into it by entering Boomer into a demolition derby.

Demolition Derby

The headlining event of the county fair is the demolition derby. Everyone, or nearly everyone, from Sam Dent attends the car-smashing event to cheer on their favorite cars.

Tourists

Sam Dent is a thoroughfare for wealthy tourists from New York City who are driving to expensive vacation spots in the Adirondacks. Dolores mentions many of the tourists speed and do not stop for the school bus. Mitchell mentions the painful disconnect that exists between the impoverished people of Sam Dent and the tourists who spend extra money in the area.

Alcohol

Alcohol is the drug of choice for many of the residents of Sam Dent. Many use heavy amounts of alcohol to escape the struggles of their everyday life. Billy Ansel retreats to alcoholism following the death of his twins in the school bus accident and it transforms his once quiet and passive personality.

Poverty

The residents of Sam Dent are generally living in poverty. Dolores Driscoll owns her land through inheritance but is forced to make other ends meet by driving a school bus and sorting mail in the summers. The children of Sam Dent will have a difficult time escaping poverty and the cycle will continue.

Wheelchairs

Two prominent characters in the book are confined to wheelchairs – Abbott Driscoll and Nichole Burnell. The wheelchairs seem to provide both with more confidence than their peers and each is unafraid to speak their mind.

Themes

Community Grief

The book explores how grief is approached when a community is presented with a large-scale tragedy like the school bus accident. Immediate families are affected, of course, but the collective group of Sam Dent citizens is impacted and as a result, the area will never be the same. Billy Ansel explains that “a town that loses its children loses its meaning” and Sam Dent indeed becomes a different place – one many try to escape by moving away or abusing alcohol. Sam Dent becomes a community of two eras: the town before the accident and the town struggling to find new meaning after the tragedy.

Just as the community grieves together, it also searches for answers together. The residents try to compensate their heartbreak with group lawsuits or reassure each other the accident is God’s will. The demolition derby marks a point of healing for the community, as word spreads Dolores Driscoll is to blame for the accident and Nichole makes her first public appearance in a wheelchair. Everyone – the person responsible for fourteen deaths, the pretty wheelchair-bound girl, the Vietnam vet who lost his twins, and the rest of the spectators out for a night of revelry – cheers in one voice as the cars chase each other in the night.

Death of Children

The unique heartbreak that accompanies the death of children is explored in this book. Multiplying that tragedy fourteen times in a small, poverty-stricken community enhances the scale of emptiness. Billy Ansel sums up why the deaths of children are especially difficult to cope with when he says, “what has happened is so wickedly unnatural, so profoundly against the necessary order of things, that we cannot accept it.” The mere concept of children dying before their parents or grandparents is a backward one and cannot be reconciled with human thought. Billy adds, “It’s almost beyond belief or comprehension that children should die before adults.”

Despite childhood death being a backward thought, the book shows it is a concept parents prepare themselves to cope with long before it actually happens. For Billy Ansel, he first faced the thought when he accidentally left his four-year-old daughter at a grocery store in Jamaica. In the twenty minute drive back to the store, Billy entertains thoughts that his daughter has been kidnapped, sold into slavery or murdered. He makes peace with losing her before he arrives and finds her safe and slightly annoyed with her father.

Mitchell Stephens also faces the prospect of his daughter’s death when she is a two-year-old. On vacation in North Carolina, Mitchell’s daughter Zoe is bitten by baby black widow spiders and the closest hospital is forty-five minutes away. Mitchell holds a sharp



blade on his lap for the drive, prepared to attempt an emergency tracheotomy if his daughter should stop breathing. Holding her in his lap, Mitchell decides if he must cut into her throat, he will. If she dies as a result, he is prepared to live with it and know that he tried to save her. When Mitchell learns his now-grown daughter has HIV, the impact is cushioned because he has already imagined her death and also feels he has lost her to drug use anyway. The author explores the idea that parents mentally prepare for the loss of their children, even if they never admit it aloud.

Relationship Between Addiction and Desperation

Substance abuse and the way life events increase that abuse is a theme the author highlights. Billy Ansel is a casual drinker before the death of his children, choosing to stay relatively sober in order to fulfill his obligations as a single parent and respected businessman. Not only does Billy choose to live a clean life, but he encourages other Vietnam veterans to follow his lead by giving them jobs and insisting that his community respect the war heroes. After his children have died, Billy retreats into alcoholism. He loses all hope for his life, believing death is the only guarantee. With no family to come home to, Billy becomes the very image he has fought so hard against: a lonely, unhappy, drunk man.

Zoe Stephens shows how drug addiction can turn you into a desperate person. Despite coming from a family with money (which contrasts the substance abusers of Sam Dent), Zoe has found herself living the life of an indigent as a result of her addiction. She calls her parents when she needs money and is willing to say anything to get them to give it to her. It is unclear if she is lying to her father about having HIV because a lie of that magnitude is not below Zoe's standards when she is desperate for money to score more drugs.

Other characters in the book are mentioned as substance abusers, most specifically Kyle Lamston. Introduced to alcohol at a young age, Kyle relies more heavily on the drug as things in his life get worse. He is unsure how to support his growing family, so he drinks. Kyle's heavy drinking causes him to lose work, however, and delve deeper into alcoholism. His level of drinking is directly related to his desperation – as one rises, so does the other.

Style

Point of View

The book is written from four different points of view, providing four different perspectives on the impact of one central event. Dolores Driscoll is the narrator of the first chapter of the book. She is the driver behind the wheel of the school bus that crashes into an icy body of water, killing fourteen of the kids on board and injuring others. Dolores' narration shapes the picture of what happened in the final moments before the accident. She returns as the narrator of the fifth and final chapter, narrating a scene nearly seven months following the accident – a scene in which she finally finds some closure.

Billy Ansel is a highly regarded citizen of Sam Dent who loses his twin children in the school bus accident. He is the narrator of the second chapter. Though Billy addresses grief on a personal level, he also emphasizes the widespread feeling of grief felt collectively by the town of Sam Dent. Negligence lawyer Mitchell Stephens narrates the third chapter and gives an outsider's perspective on the people of Sam Dent. Mitchell's role in the book is that of an observer, seeing the characters as they are after the accident, not before.

Nichole Burnell narrates the fourth chapter and she is a survivor of the school bus accident, though disabled in the incident. Though she is a child, Nichole ends up doing the most mature and bold thing of the book by lying about how rapidly Dolores was driving, thus ending several lawsuits in the town. By using four perspectives to tell the same story, the author shows how one event affects people differently. No recollection is any more true or right than another, just different.

Setting

The book is set in Sam Dent, a fictional city in upstate New York that is part of the Adirondack region. Sam Dent is a hilly, snowy area where it is not uncommon for temperatures to be below zero in the winter months. It's a treacherous stretch to drive, especially to outsiders, and the bus driver Dolores often finds herself putting chains on her tires. To non-residents like Mitchell Stephens, Sam Dent is beautiful in its simplicity and frightening at the same time. As Mitchell drives into the area for the first time, he is struck by the thought that if his car broke down or went off the road, there is a good chance he would die before being found.

Within Sam Dent, there are different areas of note. The downtown area is home to the only motel, Bide-A-Wile, and the popular local drinking hole, Rendez-Vous. Billy Ansel's Sunoco shop is also close by. Bartlett Hill Road is the main street connecting the different areas of Sam Dent and also the stretch where Dolores' school bus crashes. The Flats are an area known for housing the poorest tenants of Sam Dent in

haphazardly constructed shacks that are in danger of catching fire every winter from poor heating strategies. The residents often reference the closest large town, Plattsburgh, and go there for medical treatment and other services that are unavailable in Sam Dent.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in narrative language, with four different narrators. The way sentences are constructed and overall feel of the material changes depending on the speaker. Dolores narrates in a matter-of-fact, genuine way that reflects the down-to-earth personality that her community respects. Billy's narration is darker in nature, touching on the deep pain of losing a wife and children too early. His outlook on life is bleak and his language shows signs of depression.

Mitchell narrates in a manipulative way, towards the characters he interacts with and readers. For example, Mitchell tells readers that he does not care about financial gain in his negligence cases, but then he reveals part of his contingency agreement is entitlement to one-third of the court settlement. Nichole's narration uses the simplest language, yet tackles the toughest issues in the book. Using the rhetoric of a teenager, Nichole discusses the sexual abuse at the hand of her father, becoming disabled at the age of fourteen, survivor guilt, loss of childhood dreams and lying under oath.

Structure

The book is structured in five chapters of varying length, written from the perspective of four different people. The first and last chapters are narrated by school bus driver Dolores Driscoll. Grieving father Billy Ansel narrates the second chapter, and big-city negligence attorney Mitchell Stephens narrates the third. Fourteen-year-old beauty queen Nichole Burnell narrates the fourth chapter, discussing how the school bus accident and her spinal cord injury have transformed her life. The four narrators discuss the same event, but provide unique perspectives.

The main plot of the book is the school bus accident and how the community of Sam Dent is transformed as a result. Subplots include Billy's affair with Risa Walker, Dolores' care of her wheelchair-bound husband Abbott, Mitchell's relationship with his drug-addicted daughter Zoe and Nichole's struggle with sexual abuse. The peripheral events of the book affect the attitude of each narrator toward the school bus accident.

Quotes

And because you can listen to children without fear, the way you can watch puppies tumble and bite and kittens sneak up on one another and spring without worrying that they'll be hurt by it, the talk of children can be very instructive. I guess it's because they play openly at what we grownups do seriously and in secret. (Chapter 1)

I liked the way the older boys slicked their hair back in precise dips and waves, and the way the girls dolled themselves up with lipstick and eyeliner, as if they weren't already as beautiful as they would ever be again. (Chapter 1)

Obviously, you can't control everything, but you are obliged to take care of the few things you can. I'm an optimist, basically, who acts like a pessimist. On principle. Just in case. (Chapter 1)

It's a way of living with a tragedy, I guess, to claim after it happens that you saw it coming, as if somehow you had already made the necessary adjustments. (Chapter 2)

I can barely say their names without feeling the flesh of my heart turn into iron. This is not bitterness; it's what happens when you have eaten your bitterness. (Chapter 2)

Looking back, it seems I spent most of my youth cleaning up my father's mess and the rest of my life making sure that no one mistook me for him. (Chapter 2)

A town that loses its children loses its meaning. (Chapter 2)

A beautiful articulate fourteen-year-old girl in a wheelchair. She was perfect. I could hardly wait to see the other side depose her. (Chapter 3)

To them, she was both, of course, victim and cause; just as to herself she was both. Like every parent when something terrible happens to his child, Dolores was innocent, and she was guilty. (Chapter 3)

To be the mother and father of one of the kids who had survived the accident, even a kid like me, who would spend the rest of her life a cripple, and then to sue – I didn't understand that at all, and I really knew it wasn't right. Not if I was, like they said, truly lucky. (Chapter 4)

To me, my legs were worth everything then and nothing now. But to Mom and Daddy, nothing then and a couple of million dollars now. (Chapter 4)

A town needs its children, just as much and in the same ways a family does. It comes undone without them, turns a community into a windblown scattering of isolated individuals. (Chapter 5)

All of us – Nichole, I, the children who survived the accident, and the children who did not – it was as if we were the citizens of a wholly different town now, as if we were a

town of solitaires living in a sweet hereafter, and no matter how the people of Sam Dent treated us, whether they memorialized us or despised us, whether they cheered for our destruction or applauded our victory over adversity, they did it to meet their needs, not ours. (Chapter 5)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Dolores Driscoll? Explain how Dolores became a bus driver. Describe Dolores' husband Abbott. What are the names of Dolores' sons? Why does Dolores like to maintain the bus herself? What is the name of her bus? Who are the first children that Dolores picks up on her route? What are the three rules that Dolores has on the bus? Why does Dolores say kids are in awe of Sean Walker? What does Dolores believe she sees in the road, causing her to swerve?

Topic 2

Describe Billy Ansel. What is the name of Billy's deceased wife and how did she die? What are the names of Billy's twin children? How old are Billy's kids when they die? In what branch of the military did Billy serve? What war did Billy see combat time in? Who is Billy having an illicit affair with? Explain Billy's choice for a sexual partner. What illegal drug does Billy admit he used to do? How does Dolores describe Billy Ansel? How is the Billy Ansel of the final chapter different from the one described in the first chapter?

Topic 3

What does Mitchell Stephens do for a living? Describe Mitchell physically. Why does he say that he pursues negligence cases? Despite saying that he is not driven by money, what actions of Mitchell's prove differently? Which family does Mitchell get to sign on to the lawsuit first? How does Mitchell manipulate the people of Sam Dent? Why does Mitchell hope that Billy Ansel does not want to be part of the lawsuit? Describe Mitchell's relationship with his daughter Zoe. What story about Zoe's childhood does Mitchell tell in the book? Explain Mitchell's reaction to Nichole Burnell's deposition.

Topic 4

Who is Nichole Burnell? How old is she? What does Risa Walker say that Nichole was capable of doing, before the accident? Who is Nichole a regular babysitter for? On the day of the accident, what child does Nichole try to comfort? What is Nichole's dark secret? In what ways does Nichole seek revenge against her father? How does Nichole react when her parents say they have hired an attorney? How fast does Nichole say Dolores was driving the school bus before it crashed? Describe Nichole's relationship with her little sister, Jennie.

Topic 5

Describe the town of Sam Dent. In what area do the poorest residents live? Why is Billy Ansel such a respected member of the community? What is the name of the motel that the Walkers own? Where do the locals go to have a drink? What are Mitchell Stephen's first observations about Sam Dent? What event at the county fair brings out the whole town of Sam Dent? How do residents in Sam Dent feel about tourists?

Topic 6

Describe Bear Otto. Who are his parents? How does the town of Sam Dent view the Otto family? Describe Sean Walker. What business do Sean's parents own? Discuss the marriage between Sean's parents, Risa and Wendell. What is Sean's attitude just minutes before the school bus crash? Describe the Lamston children. How is their father, Kyle Lamston, described? Give examples of how the families move on from the school bus accident. Explain what Billy Ansel means when he says "a town that loses its children loses its meaning."

Topic 7

How does poverty affect the community of Sam Dent? How do most families survive? What characters use alcohol as a means of escape from reality? How does Billy's personality change as his alcohol use increases? Describe Zoe Stephens' drug addiction. Why does Mitchell Stephen say that he has already lost his daughter? What drug do Billy and Lydia Ansel partake in on their Jamaican vacation? Explain how alcoholism, drug use and poverty are related in the book.