

The Settlers Study Guide

The Settlers by Vilhelm Moberg

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Plot Summary

Karl Oskar Nilsson is in the woods near his homestead in the Montana Territory when he hears the sound of an ax. He knows this means that they must have a neighbor settling on a nearby claim and goes to investigate. He finds that it is a man named Petrus Olausson who says his wife and their children will join him as soon as he has a house built. Petrus was exiled from Sweden for his religious beliefs. He is pushy, telling Karl all the things he should be doing differently, but Karl and Kristina are still glad to have neighbors. Karl and Kristina have been settled for several years along with their children. Karl works hard at their farming enterprise and over the early years he has a cow for milk, pigs for meat and the family grows almost everything else they need. Kristina cards wool for spinning and weaving from their sheep and flax.

Karl's younger brother Robert had moved to America with the family but Robert and his best friend, Arvid, leave the farm to seek their fortunes in the gold fields of California. Robert and Arvid leave without realizing that the trip will take many months. They are stalled halfway and have to spend a winter waiting for the opportunity to travel on to California. They are hired by a man who needs someone to tend his mules on the trip. They have not made it far before Arvid dies from drinking poison water. Robert's desire for the trip is ended by Arvid's death. He remains with his employer while the man dies of yellow fever and the man leaves Robert his possessions - the mules and several thousand dollars. Robert finds a Swede he'd met on the trip to America and that man offers to invest Robert's money. When Robert himself falls ill, the man returns his money in bills. Robert returns to Minnesota where he gives the money to Karl and Kristina. When Karl tries to deposit the money at the bank, he discovers that the money is worthless. He confronts Robert without realizing that Robert has also been cheated. Robert is angry and the brothers argue, ending with Karl striking Robert. Robert tells Karl that he deserved the blow, that there is nothing to forgive, but that it is time for him to leave. He leaves the house and walks for most of the day, but then sits down and dies in the forest. He is found days later and becomes the first person buried in the settlement's new cemetery.

Life goes on for Karl and Kristina. She worries about the possibility of a new pregnancy, knowing that she is not as strong as she was in her youth. Karl is also slowing down and admits that he doesn't have the energy he had as a young man newly arrived in America. Both continue to work hard and Kristina battles homesickness as if it were a tangible disease. Kristina eventually miscarries a child in her sixth month and after that, she comes to realize that she has to learn to accept her situation in life, namely that she lives in America and that she will never return to Sweden. Her attitude goes through a change and she tells Karl that she has come to realize their moving to Minnesota was predestined.



Chapters 1 through 5

Chapters 1 through 5 Summary

As the story opens with "New Axes in the Forest," Karl Oskar Nilson is working in the forest near his house when he hears the sound of another axe in the forest. This is unusual because there are few near neighbors and the Indians of the region do not cut timber. Karl finds a man named Petrus Olausson nearby working at cutting timber for his house. Karl invites Petrus home with him to meet his wife, Kristina. Karl's house is on the shores of Lake Ki-Chi-Saga though the settlers soon shorten the name to Chisaga. When Karl arrives at the house with Petrus, three of Karl's young children come running to meet him. Petrus seems embarrassed by the fact that one of them, the youngest son named Dan, has on no pants. The older boy, Johan, says that Dan tore a hole in his pants and that Kristina is mending them. Karl explains that it's been difficult keeping clothes on the youngsters who grow so quickly and picks up Dan to cover the boy's nakedness. Karl says that he's planted flax so that Kristina will have material to make new clothes in the coming winter. Kristina is delighted to have neighbors but has been cooking expecting no one except her family. She has fish soup on to cook but Karl wishes for something better to feed their guest. Kristina suggests that Karl go collect some of the turnips that have been stored in an earthen ditch but he finds them rotten. Petrus immediately begins offering advice about all aspects of the settlers' lives, including telling Karl that he should have buried the turnips in a shallower ditch, a fact that Karl knows to be untrue. Karl says that he should have dug a hole to provide air and that would have kept the turnips from rotting.

When Karl returns to the house empty handed, he finds that Kristina has begun cooking pancakes, believing that will take less time than the turnips anyway. She has some cranberries and puts together a good meal in short order. She hopes that the children won't stand at the door like hungry beggars and also hopes that there will be some left to give the children. Petrus immediately bows his head to pray and Kristina is aware that she and Karl have become less stringent about their spiritual lives. Petrus asks about their lives and Karl gives a rundown of how they managed to survive their years in America. They are now comfortable with regard to food. They have sufficient food to feed their family, which consists of Johan, Lill-Marta, Harald, and Dan.

Karl tells Petrus that his younger brother, Robert, moved to America with Karl and Kristina but that Robert had been certain he would make his fortune in the California gold fields. He had left years earlier accompanied by a childhood friend, Arvid, and the two had sent only a couple of letters home over the intervening years. Petrus calls Robert's quest foolish. As they look over the rest of Karl's homestead, Petrus is full of suggestions. He says Indian corn is the best variety for the climate and Karl listens, though it irks him that Petrus seems to have advice about every aspect of their lives. Petrus leaves with an admonition that Karl and Kristina cannot forget to take care of their spiritual needs.



In "The Whore and the Thief," the family is finishing their third winter in America. Kristina's closest friend, Ulrika Jackson, lives in the town of Stillwater but the two seldom see each other because of the difficulty in traveling. One day Kristina decides that she will take a trip to Stillwater to visit Ulrika and buy some things necessary for the family. Karl plans to stay at home with the children. Ulrika traveled to America with Kristina. During their visit, Ulrika says that her life has become much better since that move. She had been scorned by everyone in Sweden because she'd been sold as a child and had born several children out of wedlock. During her visit with Kristina, she says that her husband, minister at the Stillwater Baptist Church, had been a thief and had been jailed for his crimes before converting to Christianity. Ulrika is pregnant and is certain her child will be a son. She wants a boy who will follow in his father's footsteps and become a minister.

Kristina is self-conscious about speaking English and Ulrika goes with her to help with the shopping. When Ulrika's daughter Elin stops in to talk with Ulrika, Kristina feels self-conscious and out of place. Ulrika's husband Henry tries to talk to Kristina but they have to communicate through Ulrika and it grows "tiresome." As Kristina prepares to leave the following day, catching a ride with a lumber company ox cart, Ulrika presents her a gift of chicken with a dozen baby chicks. Ulrika says they were given to the Jacksons by a parishioner and urges that Kristina be careful with the "fragile" lives along the road home. It's a warning Kristina doesn't need and she's very careful, already imagining all the things she can cook once she has eggs.

In "Planning and Planting," Petrus finishes work on his house and is joined by his wife Judit and their three children. Kristina is immediately ill at ease with Judit and knows that they won't ever be close friends, but is still glad to have a neighbor. The families are soon joining other families in the neighborhood for a time of worship on Sundays with Petrus reading from the Bible and interpreting scripture. Kristina believes herself ignorant in the scriptural teachings but sometimes believes Petrus' interpretations to be incorrect. The name of the Nilsson's farm is Duemala in honor of Kristina's home in Sweden. Karl chose the name believing it would help allay Kristina's homesickness but it has the opposite effect. She sometimes dreams that the emigration to America never happened and is disappointed to wake and find that she is in America. One day Kristina decides that she wants to plant flowers in front of her house and goes into the store at Taylor Falls to ask for seeds. Her English is too ragged for good communication but she points to a picture of a flower and the shopkeeper provides her several packets of seeds. She chooses at random because she can't read the English words and plants the little flower garden. When the seeds finally sprout, she finds out that they are clover and other "weeds" that grow wild in the meadow near the house. She's bitterly disappointed and pulls them up, planting cabbage in their place.

In "Guests in their Own Home," Kristina is awakened one night during a torrential downpour to the sound of knocking at the door. She wakes Karl who can't believe that it is really someone out in this weather. When the knocking comes again, they hear a man's voice asking for shelter. The voice and language are Swedish which prompts Karl to open the door. There's a bedraggled man standing there and he enters, thanking them for their willingness to let him in. He says he has walked from St. Paul, that his



name is Erland Torner, and that he is a minister of the Swedish Church. Kristina is immediately happy but Karl is skeptical until Erland provides the paperwork citing his affiliation. He says that his mission is to provide religious comfort to the Swedes who have already arrived in America. Kristina asks if he will provide the sacrament for her family and Erland says he will do so for all the settlers, using Karl and Kristina's house as a place for the assembly. A date is set and the settlers from the entire area congregate on the appropriate day. Kristina is relieved that the young pastor is tolerant of the situation, does not complain when their youngest child demands Kristina's attention for a short time and doesn't miss a beat when Kristina's chicken cackles right at the door of the cabin. While they are involved in the service, Danjel Andreasson looks to the door, remembering a time in Sweden in which he had been fined for his religious teachings inside his own home and expecting the same to happen now. Kristina and the others are relieved to have had the opportunity for the sacrament. When it's finished, she says that she has been a "guest in her own home."

In "Man and Woman in the Territory," two new families arrive to settle near Karl and Kristina in mid-summer of that year. Lars Sjolín and his wife Ellida have no children but Algo Svensson and his wife Manda have five. There are others living on the other side of the lake and still more expected. Kristina is becoming better able to take care of her family because she has a reed for the loom Karl made for her and through Ulrika's contacts, she has obtained a spinning wheel.

One day Karl is working with Jonas Petter and Anders Mansson. Jonas arrived in America with Karl's group and Anders' arrived several years earlier. Jonas is famous for his ability to tell tales and he tells the story of a man who'd left Sweden because of his inability to get along with his wife. He says that the man hires a woman to take care of his house and the woman confides that she left an abusive husband behind in Sweden. The two sleep together about once a week though the woman is always guilty after, but in this way they manage to assuage their hunger for physical contact and no one is hurt by their actions. Karl immediately realizes Jonas is talking about himself and explaining a situation Karl had inadvertently seen some days earlier. He silently pledges that he will not ever tell anyone. Anders takes it as a tale to be enjoyed.

Chapters 1 through 5 Analysis

This is the third book of the series and the conversation between Petrus and Karl regarding how Karl managed to survive his early years in America is an obvious attempt by the author to provide information from the previous books to any reader who missed them. The first book covers the lives of Karl and Kristina with their family, which was then much smaller, in Sweden. Their lives were hard and it was after one of their children died of hunger that Kristina agreed to follow Karl's dream to move to America. The second book covers their arrival in America and their first year as settlers. They found their way to Minnesota too late in the year for a crop and the first winter was difficult. They built their cabin almost immediately and are still living in that house. Over the years, Karl has cleared larger fields every year.



Petrus says that he was exiled from Sweden for his religious beliefs and he touts the need for religious freedom. This isn't uncommon among the settlers. Kristina's Uncle Danjel Andreasson was also exiled. Danjel was fined for making statements in his own home and was forced from the country. In Danjel's case, the exile had the effect of making him doubt himself as a Christian. In Petrus's case, the exile has a different effect. Petrus becomes completely intolerant of anyone who believes anything other than what he teaches. He eventually tells Kristina that she must end her friendship with Ulrika because of Ulrika's faith in the Baptist denomination. When Kristina refuses, Petrus and his wife predict damnation. Kristina, while claiming to be ignorant in things related to religion, detects this as intolerance and stands her ground.

Kristina is so disappointed by the mistake with the seeds that she becomes depressed. She sees it as a result of her inability to learn the language and fit in with Americans. She says that she might as well stay at home from this point on and that she might as well give up on trying to plant the flower bed. In reality, Kristina wasn't looking for flowers for the sake of their beauty as much as she was seeking to plant some flowers that would be the same as she had in Sweden. She takes her inability to make it happen as a sign that she cannot move the things she loved from Sweden to America. This is a continuation Kristina's effort to cling to the life she had in Sweden. It is partly that she is homesick for the land and her family but it is also that she is longing for the joys and pleasures of youth.

Erland compares the move Karl and the others made to Bible stories, which is a relief to Karl. Karl recalls a conversation he'd had with a minister in Sweden who had predicted that the decision to go to America would result in ruin. That preacher had painted America as a religious wilderness in which people would fall to their spiritual ruin. While Karl seems to have paid little attention to the prediction, he now admits that the young minister's words are a comfort. It seems that Karl has continued to doubt his decision even while remembering how difficult life was in Sweden and while reassuring himself that he has been much more successful in American than he could ever have become in Sweden.



Chapters 6 through 11

Chapters 6 through 11 Summary

In "Starkodder the Ox," Karl continues to track his yearly harvests though he has no almanac in which to record them. He knows that his harvest could be multiplied faster if he had an ox to pull his plow. The lumber company has one ox that has to be shot after it breaks its front lefts and Karl agrees to buy the second ox at a greatly reduced rate of thirty dollars. He pays part and is trusted by the lumber company for the balance. Petrus finds out about the ox and buys one of his own so that he and Carl can share the two in order to break land more quickly. Karl names his ox "Starkodder" from the story of a brave Viking. About this same time Kristina discovers that she is again pregnant. She fears the situation because she was never "churched" after the birth of her last child. This pregnancy is her seventh child though one died in Sweden of hunger and Lill-Marta's twin lived only a few hours. She is tired and depressed over the discovery of her pregnancy and calculates that the child will be born in May.

One day in the fall, Karl plans to take a load of grain to be milled at Taylor Falls. There is a man there who mills so that the people no longer have to go to Stillwater for the service. Johan asks to go along. Karl says it's time Johan began to see what life is like off the farm and agrees to take the boy along. It's not until after they leave that Kristina remembers the redness of the setting sun the evening before - a sign of a storm. At the mill, they have to wait for a time because there is a customer ahead of them. When their grain is finished, Karl is suddenly concerned about the weather but hopes they can make their way home before the storm hits. The ox plods along, unwilling to hurry even as Karl switches the animal. Johan complains of the cold and Karl urges him to run alongside the load in order to stay warmer. There comes a time when the weather is deteriorating so rapidly that Karl knows they won't make it home and decides to go to Danjel's instead. As they near the house so that he knows they'll be there within a half hour or less, a tree falls and blocks the way. Karl is torn, knowing that Johan is nearing the end of his life. The boy is almost incoherent and wants only to sleep because he is so cold. In desperation, Karl kills the ox and throws the entrails aside then bundles Johan into the ox's belly. He then walks to Danjel's where he gets help to retrieve Johan. Johan survives easily inside the cavity of the animal and they arrive home the following day. When Kristina sees the ox blood on the child, she cries out but Karl reassures her that Johan is alright. The story of the situation and Karl's action quickly spreads throughout the region and Kristina worries that it's gone to Karl's head so that he feels himself to be a hero. Karl refuses to eat any of the meat from the ox, sending it on to a butcher shop in Taylor Falls. He does, however, keep the hide to use for shoe leather.

In "Ulrika in her Glory," Ulrika arrives at Kristina's house for a visit. Ulrika is nearing her date of delivery with the first child since her marriage to Henry. Ulrika says that Kristina works too hard and points out that an American husband would take some of her chores for her. Kristina says that Karl works so hard that she can't imagine having him do any



of her work. As Ulrika and Kristina are talking, Petrus arrives. He seems upset almost from the moment of being introduced to Kristina and leaves quickly. Kristina tells Ulrika that she's going to have a party at her house over the holidays and invites Karl and Kristina to attend. Ulrika says she's always wanted to have a party but knew no one would attend in Sweden where she was looked down upon. She says that she plans to present her son to the gathering. When Ulrika gives birth a few days later, she discovers that the child is a girl. Ulrika believes that she has sinned and that God has chosen to give her a daughter rather than a son because of her sinful nature.

Almost every Swede from the area attends Ulrika's party. Kristina sees Anders Mansson and realizes that they are both horribly homesick, though Anders has drowned his homesickness in liquor as often as possible. There is a man there named Njord who has begun living with an Indian woman. He is derogatory of the woman but says that he doesn't misuse or abuse her and that her life with him is better than her life would be with her own people. Another man named Thomassen who lives alone asks Kristina to come visit him sometimes. It's obvious that he's lonely for a woman's attention but Kristina tries to reassure herself that he's just lonely and had no ill intentions. During the party Ulrika presents her daughter, saying that she hopes to have a boy to present next year.

In "That Baptist Ilk," Karl and Kristina receive a letter from Karl's sister, Lydia. She asks about their brother, Robert, and Karl admits that he fears Robert is dead. Kristina says that she knows Robert won't return until he's made his fortune in the gold fields. The year 1854 begins as years past and one Sunday early in the year Petrus and his wife arrive. They tell Kristina that she is doing wrong by allowing Ulrika in the house and that she must end her friendship with the woman because of her Baptist faith. Kristina refuses and Karl stands by her. He tells Petrus that no one will tell Kristina who she can befriend and orders Petrus out of their house. After Petrus and his wife leave, Karl and Kristina discuss the fact that Petrus was punished in Sweden because of his religious beliefs but that he has no tolerance now for the beliefs of others.

In "Hemlandet Comes to the Immigrants," Kristina gives birth to a girl in May and is relieved that it isn't twins. She names the daughter Anna Evelina Ulrika and calls her Ulrika. She not only wants to honor Ulrika but she also wants to make it clear to Petrus and his wife that Ulrika will always be welcome. Claims around the Nilsson home continue to be homesteaded. Kristina notes that there are enough people in the area now to make up a good-sized Swedish village and she wonders why so many people are so willing to travel to this remote area to make new lives for themselves. Karl is among those who subscribe to a newspaper called the "Hemlandet." The paper brings in news of the outside world, including inventions such as the telegraph, threshing machine and sewing machine. There is a section in the newspaper in which people seek the locations of friends and family members and Karl places an ad in this section, hoping for news of Robert and Arvid.

Karl, now thirty, is always tired and finds that for the first time in his life a night's sleep doesn't rejuvenate him. He has built yet another house for the family - this one two story



and much larger than the cabin they'd lived in for their first winters. He'd wanted to build an even bigger house and promises Kristina that the next house he builds will be.

In "Surveying the Forest," members of the community begin meeting in Petrus's barn each Sunday for worship services. The group forms a parish and discovers that they are no longer oppressed by their government but that they are responsible for forming their own governing body for their parish. Karl is among the group's leaders and one of their first duties is to choose a spot for a cemetery near the lake.

The final chapter of the first section is "The Letter to Sweden." Karl writes to his parents, as has been his habit on Christmas each year. He explains that his life and that of his family is constantly improving, that he has taken an entire day off work in honor of Christmas, and that he thinks constantly of his family in Sweden.

Chapters 6 through 11 Analysis

Kristina wonders if Anders might have come to terms with his homesickness if he'd only found a woman and married. She doesn't explain why she thinks this to be true but it seems that she feels some comfort from Karl. Even then, Kristina's homesickness is consuming her. She dreams and prays constantly about her home in Sweden and longs for it was an emotion that is almost tangible. Karl senses it but seems to believe that if he can only provide her a better life she'll stop longing for the old life she left behind. In actuality, it's going to take Kristina's self-will to come to that acceptance and it does eventually come.

During Ulrika's party, Pastor Jackson is to give a speech in Swedish. He asks Jonas Petter to look over the speech prior to giving it and Jonas suggests that Henry leave off the final sentence. He says that the final sentence is repetition and Henry heeds the advice. The sentence, as presented to the reader, is in Swedish and the meaning is never revealed. However, it is later noted that Jonas like Ulrika must be a changed person. Jonas is one of the characters that is not fully developed for the reader and most of the aspects of this character is left to the reader's imagination. In this instance it seems possible that Jonas has changed because his life has changed. He is no longer living with the wife who made his life miserable and may have found the peace he craved.

After Petrus and his wife insist that Kristina break off her friendship with Ulrika, Kristina and Karl and both angry. Karl's anger is at least in part because he does not like the fact that Petrus is bossy and domineering. While Karl has been willing to listen to Petrus's advice, he doesn't like the fact that every comment from Petrus seems like an order. But Karl is also angry on behalf of his wife. Kristina's anger is that Petrus thinks she is a "nodding doll" with no will or mind of her own. She says that Petrus obviously thinks that she is going to be led from the Lutheran teachings by Ulrika. What is interesting here is that Kristina is constantly admitting her ignorance to herself in regard to religious matters but she is furious that someone else would decide that she has not enough backbone to stand up for what she believes to be right.



Chapters 12 through 19

Chapters 12 through 19 Summary

The first chapter in the second part of the book is "The March of the Hundred Thousand" and describes the mass movement along the California Trail. In "A Youth Who Is not Young," Karl is working one day in the field near his house when a man approaches. Karl does not initially recognize the man but soon discovers that it is Robert, returned home. He has aged incredibly. His face is sunken and scabby, most of his teeth are missing, and his skin is pocked. He is, however, dressed well, which is a point that Karl notes almost immediately. Karl is relieved that Robert is home and takes him at once to the house. Robert takes note of all the changes around the farm, including the new house. The children are shy of their uncle, not remembering him from the years he spent with the family. After Robert distributes some candy among the children, they are no longer shy but jostle Robert in an attempt to claim his attention. Kristina almost immediately asks if Arvid has also returned but Robert says only that Arvid remained on the plains. Robert goes to bed early, obviously worn out from his travels and from whatever is wrong with him. Karl tells Kristina that he does not plan to ask Robert about his luck in the gold fields.

Karl cannot stand by his resolve and the conversation soon turns to how Robert fared while he was away. Robert says that he's now wealthy and that he will have no need ever to work again. The brothers argue and Robert leaves the room, returning a few minutes later with two large bundles of money. The bills carry the name "Indiana State Bank, Bloomfield Indiana. He virtually throws the money at Kristina and Karl and tells them that he wants to make their lives better. Robert says that he had to turn the money into paper money in order to make some of his investments and hints that there's more money in a bank account. He calls what he gives Karl and Kristina "pocket money." Karl and Kristina are speechless and Robert goes to bed without giving Karl a chance to say much at all. Kristina and Karl put the money away in a large storage chest but are very aware of its presence in the house. Karl says that he'll take the money to the bank when he goes into Stillwater the following week to be sure it's an acceptable currency. There have been many warnings about fake money or money without bank backing in the newspaper and Karl checks but finds that the bank is not on the list of those to watch out for. Karl continues to be skeptical and warns Kristina not to get her hopes up, but Kristina can't help but think of all the things that could be better for her family with the four thousand dollars Robert gave them.

It is evident to Kristina that there's something seriously wrong with Robert. One morning she discovers blood on his pillow and asks if his ear is bothering him again. He says that the ear "talks to him" at night. In "But the Returned Gold Seeker Does Not Sleep," Robert lies awake at night and listens as the ear reminds him about their travels along the California Trail. In "The First Night - Robert's Ear Speaks," the ear reminds Robert that he and Arvid pay for their passage on steamships by washing dishes and helping in the kitchen. They arrive in St. Louis and Robert is able to communicate in English



though Arvid is not. They have a map but the distance seems almost insurmountable. In St. Louis they ask people for the location of the road leading to California and are told that there isn't really a road. They are also told that they can't possibly begin the journey this late in the season because there are no wagon trains headed out now. They spend a few nights at a cheap inn where men sleep many to a bed and lice is prevalent. Robert and Arvid then begin working for a man on his farm in order to live through the winter. The winter nights are bitter and they have scant shelter. One night Arvid says he wants to return to Minnesota but says he can't find his way without Robert. He pleads with Robert to return with him, even crying in his earnest desire to return, but Robert refuses and Arvid agrees to stay. The ear reminds Robert that it was during that winter in St. Louis that the ear began to leak a foul-smelling fluid. The ear also reminds Robert that his real reason for setting out was not to look for gold and that he had never had any real desire for that quest, but that he had been looking for a way to escape all masters.

In "While the Riches Lay Hidden in the House," Karl continues to examine the bills and believes them to be real. Still, things remain tense between the brothers and Robert seems ill at ease. Later, Karl tells Kristina that Robert has yet to say anything about either his experiences finding gold or of Arvid's fate. Karl says that he will talk to Robert about it, but promises Kristina that he will wait.

In "The Second Night - Robert's Ear Speaks," Robert and Arvid make plans to travel west along the California Trail. As they seek a train they might join, they find a Mexican who is looking for someone to care for his mules on the journey west. Robert assures the man, named Mario Vallejos, that they can take care of the animals though Arvid worries because neither has that kind of experience. They set out on the journey and the little group soon settles into a routine. One night Robert discovers that two of the mules have escaped after Arvid tied them. Arvid accepts responsibility for their loss. He wants to tell Mario but Robert says that Mario might fire them for the transgression. Instead, the two leave camp, hoping to find the animals before Mario rises at daybreak. They search and call but when the sun is high in the sky, they realize that they are lost. As the day passes, they become further turned around and spend the night away from the camp without food or water.

In "The Missing Gold Seeker," Karl leaves the house to take his turn working on the school house. During the day, Kristina is working at making new clothes for the family from cloth she's woven. Robert tells her that he knows Karl is suspicious of the money and that he also knows Kristina believes in him. Robert decides to go for a walk and Kristina goes to make his bed. Under the pillow she discovers a watch Arvid had always carried with him. When Karl gets home, she shows him the watch and he immediately recognizes it as Arvid's. He says that the fact that Robert has the watch can only mean that Arvid is dead. Karl is angry that Robert continues to tell only partial truths, such as his explanation that Arvid had remained on the plain rather than admitting that Arvid is dead. Karl plans to confront Robert with the watch and demand an explanation but the evening passes peacefully.

In "The Third Night - Robert's Ear Speaks," the ear tells Robert that he is the only one to hear the ear's voice. The ear goes on with the story of Robert and Arvid being lost in the



desert in search of the mules. They finally locate a stagnate pool. Arvid falls to his belly and begins to drink but Robert is repelled by the smell. Robert then finds a sign that says the water is poison and tries to get Arvid to throw it up, but Arvid refuses. The next morning, Arvid is in agony and dies during the day. Arvid has placed the watch in Robert's hand prior to dying and Robert heads out on his own.

Chapters 12 through 19 Analysis

Robert is full of stories about the gold fields, many of them horrible. He tells about a man who dies unexpectedly and at the funeral people realize that it's because he's been swallowing gold. They cut the man open and take the gold from his intestines. He tells others as well. What's interesting is that the reader will later learn that Robert never made his way all the way to the gold field.

The use of the "ear" as a means of communication is ingenious but it is also somewhat sinister. Robert had been struck by his employer while he was working on a farm in Sweden, and it was that blow that created the problem with his ear. Robert notes that the ear has always given him a great deal of trouble and that it buzzes almost constantly. It seems likely that Robert has actually become mentally unbalanced, likely because of watching his best friend's agonizing death and the guilt that he refused to take Arvid home.

Arvid and Robert find themselves in dire circumstances after their arrival in St. Louis. From there, Arvid asks Robert to return home with them. Arvid says that he does not like the life they are living and that if he's going to be a farmhand he would rather do so in Minnesota where he is surrounded by family and friends. The interesting thing is that Arvid does not really want to leave Minnesota. He is happy with his lot in life and does not hate the life of a farm hand. Robert, however, hates the life of a farmer. As the ear is talking to him, the reader learns that Robert had never really wanted to go to the gold fields in order to earn a fortune as he claimed. Robert had indicated that he believed gold to be available for anyone with the initiative to pick it up. However, as the ear "talks," the reader learns that Robert had been fleeing a life in which he was subservient to others. This seems more in keeping with his personality than do Robert's claims that he wanted to seek his fortune in California. To further back this idea, the reader of book two in the series may remember that Robert had set out with the intention that he would make only a small fortune. He feared the demands of a large fortune and it seems that even in his quest for wealth he was able to realize that managing a large amount of money would be a great deal of work.



Chapters 20 through 25

Chapters 20 through 25 Summary

In "Wildcats of Many Breeds," Karl takes out the cash Robert handed them and looks at it, realizing all the things this would mean for the family. He says that in all his time in America, what's held him back has been the lack of cash for things like oxen and farm implements. The following morning, Karl asks Robert about Arvid's watch. Arvid says he'd noticed it was gone from under his pillow. Robert still doesn't tell them of Arvid's fate but says that he knows Karl now suspects that he was responsible for Arvid's death. Robert is overtaken by a coughing spell and leaves the house, asking that Karl leave him "in peace." Karl leaves to do a day's work on the school house and Robert goes for a walk in the woods. Kristina is at work in the house when she hears the children scream and learns that a wildcat has frightened them. She orders them to stay away from the lake. Later that day, Ulrika comes for a visit. Robert returns and Kristina notes that he seems to be having a great deal of trouble hearing but she doesn't ask him about it.

In "The Fourth Night - Robert's Ear Speaks," Robert's memories go to his time on the California Trail soon after Arvid's death. Mario finds him, provides water and they remain stopped for several days while Robert recovers his strength. Robert feels empty and has little desire to go on, though he stays at Mario's side. The two men and the remaining mules arrive in St. Joseph where Mario falls ill. He has yellow fever and when he remains behind at a makeshift hospital at Spring Creek, Robert remains at his side, nursing him and easing his suffering as much as possible. Mario experiences a short period of lucidity and leaves Robert all his possessions, including his money and the mules. After Mario's death, Robert discovers that there is more than two thousand dollars in Mario's stash. Robert remains at Spring Creek, helping the woman who runs the hospital some but mainly at a loose end because he doesn't care what happens to him next.

In "The Unget-At-Able," Karl heads to Stillwater with a neighbor, Algot Svensson. While they are gone, Robert reads to Kristina from the newspaper. He finds an ad for a pressman and says that he might apply though he doesn't really answer Kristina when she points out that he needn't work. As they talk, Robert tells Kristina that he has come to accept his life and he says that death has no power over him because he's accepted it. Robert also says that he realizes now he was predestined to every event in his life and that acceptance is the only way to fully achieve peace.

In "The Fifth Night - Robert's Ear Speaks," Robert's ear reassures him that when Karl discovers that the money is real he will no longer be able to chastise Robert. Robert believes this will completely change their relationship. Robert then remembers what happened after Mario's death. He says one day a man named Fredrik Mattsson from Asarum Parish rides into town. Fredrik had been aboard the boat that brought Robert's group to America. The two recognize each other and Fredrik invites Robert to come with



him to his hotel. Fredrik lives in a settlement called Grand City. He says he owns a business called the Grand Hotel. Robert agrees to go with Fredrik. Fredrik's hotel is a small building that was once used as a potato cellar and then as a jail. He serves liquor and the place is busy every evening. Robert pitches in and does some dishes sometimes. One day Fredrik discovers that Robert has some money and he tells Robert that he should be investing that money rather than just letting it sit idle. He offers to make Robert a partner in return for two thousand dollars, promising that he'll pay back the money with interest. Robert is almost disinterested and agrees, then begins to pitch in to help more regularly. Fredrik keeps promising to hire some help for the business but never finds time to accomplish that. After some time, Robert becomes ill and Fredrik suggests that he might want to return to his family. Robert agrees and Fredrik hands him four thousand dollars. This is the money he says that he earned with his investments of Robert's two thousand dollars.

In "Wildcat Riches," Karl does not return from Stillwater by dark as expected. When he does arrive, he tells Kristina that he'd had trouble with the ox cart. He then says that he'd taken the money to the bank and that they'd told him the bank was defunct and the money worthless. Karl is furious, believing that Robert has lied again. He wants to confront Robert immediately but Kristina believes Robert might also have been cheated. Karl tries to calm down and tells Kristina that it doesn't really matter and that they'd have no less in the way of worldly goods without the money than they'd had before Robert's return. Kristina agrees with him aloud but privately admits that she suddenly feels extremely poor.

The next morning is Saturday and Karl confronts Robert as soon as Robert is awake. When Karl tells him that the money is not real, Robert can't believe it. Robert keeps saying that it's not possible that the money is fake but Karl refuses to listen. Finally Karl strikes out and hits Robert in the face. As soon as he does it, he is ashamed of his action and pleads with Robert to forgive him. Robert says there's nothing to forgive but that he can't remain here. He quickly leaves the house. Kristina pleads with Karl to follow Robert but he says he knows Robert needs time away and that nothing he does will help.

In "A Stream that Runs Toward Greater Waters," Robert wanders in the woods near the homestead, though without any real idea of where he wants to go next. He eventually finds a stream and sits with his feet in the water. He's suddenly really sure that he is back home in Sweden with his feet in the stream there. He falls asleep there and is surprised when he wakes that he no longer hears the buzzing of his bad ear. Two days later, a search party finds Robert's tracks and then discover his body. Karl makes the coffin and Robert becomes the first person buried in the settlement's cemetery.

Chapters 20 through 25 Analysis

Karl warns Kristina early on not to get her hopes up that the money is real but it's easy to see that Karl is doing just that. Karl's personality allows him to handle disappointment



better than Kristina but it's also evident that he can't quite let himself believe that the money is real, despite the fact that he does want it to be.

Robert says that he is, by nature, a person who would do whatever it took to escape work. As a child, that meant that he slipped away from work if at all possible. It was one of those efforts to escape his assigned tasks that prompted his employer to strike Robert on the side of the head, causing the problem with his hearing. Robert says that everything that followed was also predestined and that he has come to accept that. Kristina really listens to Robert when he speaks and his words, though confusing to her now, remain with her. Kristina will also eventually come to accept her life and to declare that everything was predestined, therefore out of her control and above her plane of worry. He also says that he never knows when he is lying but that he accepts that he is when others accuse him of it. It seems impossible to believe that Robert doesn't know when he's lying but it's left to the reader to interpret his words.



Chapters 26 through 36

Chapters 26 through 36 Summary

"The Queen in the Kitchen" is the first chapter in the third part of the book. Karl sees a beautiful kitchen stove called "The Prairie Queen" in the window of Newell's Hardware Store in St. Paul. The stove provides much more convenience for Kristina than her current method of cooking. Karl keeps it a secret until Christmas morning when he and the children manage to get it set up while Kristina is doing some outside chores. Kristina has given birth to another child, a boy named Frank, and the children all eat as much of the delicious Christmas dinner as they want. Kristina is fearful of another child bed, realizing that she is no longer as strong as she was as a young woman. She says that she has had a child at the breast and at least two hanging onto her skirt for all her adult life. She worries about praying that God will keep her from having another child, fearing its against His will.

In "The Year Fifty-Seven," there's a financial crisis that sweeps the country. Those who have a great deal invested in cash aspects and concerns are in trouble. Men like Karl who have no cash and little dealings in financial matters finds his life little changed. A plague of grasshoppers creates problems for the farmers but Karl's family is able to withstand the hardship because of a store of crops from the previous year. In "The Letter From Sweden," Karl learns that his father died. In "The Letter to Sweden," Karl responds, citing his sorrow at his father's passing.

In "Karl Oskar's Followers," Erland Torner announces his plan to leave the settlement. Each year the number of families in the settlement increases. A small town is established and the town is called Center City. A man named Klas Albert Persson from the same Swedish town where Karl lived arrives and opens a general store. He struggles for a short period but is soon a favorite place to shop. Women seek him out, hoping to snare the young storekeeper in marriage. Persson comes to have dinner with Karl and Kristina. Though he has been in America for several years, he has a stock of recent news and shares that information with Karl and Kristina. After he leaves, Karl tells Kristina that now Persson will write home about the wealth of the Nilsson farm and that there will be a great outbreak of jealousy among those remaining in Sweden. In Sweden, the church warden has a long list of people marked from the church roles as having left the country for the brighter promise of America.

In "A Blessed Woman's Prayer," Kristina constantly sees herself in a mirror that was a gift from Ulrika. She says that she wants to take the gift off the wall but Karl says that Ulrika will expect to see the gift displayed. Kristina says she hates to see herself and to be constantly reminded of her lost youth. Frank is by now two years old and Kristina has yet to become pregnant again. She wants to pray that she will have no more children but fears that would be against God's will. One night Kristina has a disturbing dream in which she is suddenly pregnant and delivers a child on the steps of the church. When the child is born, the man named Samuel Njord who lives with the Indian woman grabs



the child and runs away with it. Kristina is horrified by her dream and tells Karl that she can't go to church for the next service, though she doesn't tell him why. Kristina goes to her uncle, Danjel, and asks his advice on her desire to pray that she have no more children. Danjel says that anything Kristina has in her heart is already known to God and she takes this to mean that it's acceptable to pray for no more pregnancies. She goes out into the edge of the woods alone one night and prays that prayer. She feels oddly at peace afterwards.

In "Partners of America," Minnesota is accepted as a state in 1858. About this same time Karl, Kristina and their three children born in Sweden are granted citizenship at the price of one dollar each. On his citizenship papers, Karl is named "Charles Nelson" but Kristina tells him it would be "uppity" to use that name. Karl agrees. There is a movement as the newly-formed state establishes a government and drafts a constitution. Karl learns about Abraham Lincoln and casts his vote in favor of Lincoln for president. About this time, they learn that the King of Sweden has died and his son has taken over as ruler.

In "If God Doesn't Exist," Kristina discovers that she is again pregnant. She wonders how Karl will take the news. Kristina worries about her health and fears the toll this child will take on her. She also struggles with her faith and finds herself questioning God's existence. She believes that if God does exist, He has forsaken her. In "Prayer Granted," Kristina is in her sixth month and is feeling the heaviness and clumsiness typical of that stage of the pregnancy. One day she is out by the lake washing clothes when she is struck by an intense pain. She waits for it to pass but it doesn't and she sends Johan for Karl. Karl has to carry her inside and Kristina is soon in full labor. The baby is stillborn and Ulrika comes to visit, bringing medicine she says will help Kristina regain her strength. Ulrika has herself given birth to two daughters and a son. Kristina takes the miscarriage as God's way of answering her prayer that she have no more children and of her doubt in His existence.

In "To Reconcile Oneself with Fate," Kristina comes to realize that her life is as it was meant to be. She prays that God will give her a few more years so that her oldest children will be able to take care of the younger ones. She tries to explain to Karl that it doesn't matter whether she believes they were correct in moving to America because it was ordained. In "The Letter to Sweden," Karl writes his annual letter home, telling his sister that Johan is "our hired hand" and Marta is "our maid." He says that he bought a sewing machine for Kristina and that the family is doing well.

Chapters 26 through 36 Analysis

Karl notes that the stove he buys for Kristina is called the "queen" and that the stove has a bearing that is almost regal. However, he says that he has always taken control of all matters related to the outside while Kristina has reigned over the inside. He says that the stove may be called the "queen" but that the reality is that Kristina is the ruler.



Karl learns, through his letter from his sister and that his father believed he heard Karl and Robert leaving for America during his final night alive. This isn't surprising because Karl's father had not been in favor of Karl taking his family and his brother to America. The full details of that situation are not revealed in this book but it is clear that Karl went against his father's wishes in that decision.

Karl continues to be proud of his accomplishments and believes that everything he wanted and needed for his family could be his if he only worked hard enough. In most ways, he's right, though he has also paid the price for this hard work. He ages prematurely, just as Kristina does. But for Karl, it all seems worth it when he predicts that the young storekeeper will write to his family back in Sweden with news of Karl's success. While Karl is willing to accept the premature aging as a payment for his success, Kristina hates that trade. She says that she doesn't want to see herself in the mirror because she doesn't want to be reminded of how much she's aged.

It's noted that Kristina becomes at peace with herself after praying that she have no more children. It could be that she knows God has heard her and that her prayers will be answered. However, it could also be that Kristina has accepted that it is not a sin to desire that she have no more children. It's left to the reader to decide.

Kristina's sudden turn from her former level of homesickness seems to be a sign of despondency. Karl believes it has something to do with the loss of the child that was born too early. In reality, that might have something to do with it. However, Kristina argues that she has simply come to some decisions and that she now realizes that everything in her life was preordained.



Characters

Karl Oskar Nilsson

Karl and his family are settlers in America, in the Minnesota territory. He is married to Kristina and they have several children both before leaving their home country in Sweden and after their arrival in America. Karl is a hardworking man and believes that he can accomplish anything if he works at it hard enough. Toward that end, he toils to cultivate land, even while working with a hoe or borrowed farm animals. His needs, while simple, expand with his ability and his success. He is not selfish with his success and buys things that he hopes will make the lives of his wife and children better along the way. An example of this is the iron cook stove. Karl buys it because he knows how hard Kristina works to feed their family and believes the stove will make her life easier. Karl is a self-sufficient man and does not ask Kristina's opinion about their farm. He does however, grant her the same authority over things inside the house. Karl is happy to discover that he has new neighbors but is disappointed when it is evident that the new neighbor is pushy and demanding. When the neighbor confronts Kristina over her choice of friends, Karl stands behind her and orders the man from their home. Karl is intolerant of anything that he sees as weakness in others and believes his brother, Robert, is a liar and is lazy. He feels responsibility for Robert but also cannot stand that his brother is not putting his efforts toward building a farm of his own.

Robert Nilsson

Brother to Karl and brother-in-law to Kristina, Robert is younger than Karl and came with the young couple to make a new life in America. However, Robert's dreams are different and he has no desire to use his energy and sweat to build up a farm of his own in the fertile soil of Minnesota. Instead, Robert has plans to leave the fields in search of a better life. He says he believes that can be accomplished if he goes to California in search of gold. He convinces his best friend, Arvid, to accompany him to California and the boys are forced to spend a winter in St. Louis before continuing their journey. Robert watches as Arvid dies after drinking poison water and then watches his new employer die of yellow fever. Robert inherits more than two thousand dollars from his employer. He then spends a couple of years with a Swede he'd met on the journey to America but the man cheats Robert out of his money. Robert becomes ill and returns home, expecting that Karl will have to change and accept that Robert has finally been successful. But when Robert presents Karl with a large stack of bills, Karl is skeptical of their value. Robert does not realize the bills are fake but tells Kristina that he has come to accept that each step of his life has been predestined toward a specific end. He dies in the woods near the Nilsson farm and is the first to be buried in the newly-consecrated cemetery near Lake Ki-Chi-Saga.



Kristina Nilsson

Wife of Karl and sister-in-law of Robert, Kristina is constantly homesick for her life and her family in Sweden. She has given birth to a large number of children and fears her fate if she has yet another child, but she also fears that it would be a sin to wish herself barren. She eventually pleases with God to keep her from having more children and questions God's existence when she again becomes pregnant. That child is stillborn and she feels that she's been punished for having doubted. Her faith is very important to Kristina and she struggles to understand and do what's right. She is loyal to her friends and fiercely protective of her children. She works very hard and realizes that that hard work has taken a toll. She hopes that she can live long enough for her children to mature sufficiently to get along without her.

Ulrika Jackson

Kristina's best friend, Ulrika is also from Sweden. She had been sold into service as a youngster and had borne several children out of wedlock, a fact that earned her a bad reputation in Sweden. In America, she is married to a Baptist minister and has two daughters and a son. She is loyal to Kristina and does everything she can to make Kristina's life better.

Arvid

Robert's best friend, he is convinced to go with Robert to the gold fields of California. Arvid wishes to return home once their journey is stalled for the winter and pleads with Robert to accompany him to Minnesota but Robert refuses and the two go on. Arvid dies on the trip after drinking poisonous water.

Petrus Olausson

This is the man who arrives in the neighborhood with the intention of building a house so that his wife and children can join him. He is pushy and insists that Kristina break off her friendship with Ulrika, apparently fearing that Kristina will be swayed into joining the Baptist faith because Ulrika chose that path.

Erland Torner

This is the young Swedish minister who arrives at Karl and Kristina's house in the middle of a heavy rain. He comforts the family by providing the sacrament and reassures Karl that the decision to emigrate to America was not a violation of God's commandments.



Klas Albert Persson

This is the man who arrives in the area to open a general store in the newly-formed town of Center City. He is impressed at the hard work Karl has put into his farm and Karl knows that Persson will write to his family at home with news of how successful the Nilssons have become. He is single and it is noted that every available young woman wants to marry him.

Johan Nilsson

The oldest son of Karl and Kristina, he accompanies his father on a short trip to have grain ground on a fall day. When a storm blows up, the boy's life is in danger and Karl slaughters an ox, hollows out the animal's belly and puts Johan inside, protecting him from the cold until Karl could return with help.

Danjel Andreasson

Kristina's uncle, Danjel moved to America with Karl and Kristina. He was persecuted for his religious beliefs in Sweden and it is noted that while he is taking the sacrament in Karl and Kristina's home, he is nervous as if expecting that authorities will arrive to break up the religious meeting. Danjel tells Kristina that the desires of her heart are already known to God, even if she has not given voice to them. He is referring to the fact that she become barren and should not be again subjected to the rigors of giving birth.



Objects/Places

Stillwater

This is the name of the town where Ulrika and her husband live.

Stillwater Baptist Church

This is where Ulrika's husband, Pastor Jackson, is the minister.

Lake Ki-Chi-Saga

This is the Indian name for the lake where Karl and Kristina live.

Chisaga County

This is the name given by the white settlers to the area where Karl and Kristina live.

Dubemala

This is the name Karl and Kristina give their home in America, named for her parents home in Sweden.

St. Paul

This is where the minister Erland Torner was before arriving at Karl and Kristina's cabin.

Indiana State Bank

This is the bank that issued the currency that Robert has when he returns to Minnesota.

Asarum Parish

This is where Fredrik Mattsson is from.

Grand City

This is the city where Fredrik Mattsson owns a business.

The Prairie Queen

This is the name of the iron stove Karl buys for Kristina.



Themes

The Effects of Freedom

The settlers who arrive in America are accustomed to an oppressive government that allows few freedoms. Kristina recognizes the effects of this freedom when she visits her friends, Ulrika and Henry Jackson. Ulrika had been labeled "whore" in Sweden but was now married to a Baptist minister and was well regarded in the community. Ulrika was no longer browbeaten and without hope for a better tomorrow. Kristina says that she's seen others who bettered themselves once they were in America with the freedom to do with their lives as they wished. It can be argued that Karl is another example of this theme. Karl believes that he can do anything he sets out to accomplish if he only works hard enough at it. In Sweden, he was limited by the fact that his government had declared him a peasant and he would never have been able to accomplish more than they allowed. Another effect of freedom is seen in the decision to hold sacrament in the home of Karl and Kristina. That decision is made as soon as a minister is available to perform the service. Danjel and Petrus had each been reprimanded and fined in their own homes for making statements outside the accepted religious teachings. At the service at Karl's home, Danjel finds himself looking to the door to make sure that there are not officials arriving to break up the congregation. In this case, it takes time for the characters to fully accept and believe in their freedoms.

Acceptance of Fate

Kristina and Robert are examples of this theme. Both struggle with life though in different ways. Robert has always been something of a dreamer and has always looked for some alternative to physical exertion. In Kristina's case, the longing for something different is that she is homesick. Both eventually come to accept that they are in their current situations because that path was predestined for them. In Robert's case, he says that he has realized that the bad things in his life have actually been his fault. He spent most of his life feeling anger at the employer who hit him in the ear, causing a constant buzzing in that ear, pain and loss of hearing. But upon his return from his trip to the west, he tells Kristina that he's come to realize that he asked for that blow not by being a bad person but simply by being the person he is. He says that he has come to accept that every step of his life has been predestined. With that acceptance comes a peace that Robert had searched for all his life. Kristina listens to Robert's words and while she says at the time that she's confused about his meaning, she eventually comes to realize that there's wisdom in his words. With that understanding, Kristina admits that she never really had a choice in the turns of her own life either. As in the case with Robert, that knowledge and acceptance brings a peace that Kristina had longed for most of her life.



A Desire for Youth

Kristina has a mirror in her living room that was a gift from Ulrika. She says that she hates that mirror because every time she sees herself, she is reminded that's she is aging dramatically. She threatens to take the mirror down, but Karl says that Ulrika would be disappointed that her gift hadn't brought the joy she'd intended from it. Kristina points out that Ulrika's physical appearance hasn't changed as dramatically as Kristina's. While Kristina's life has been physically demanding, she is actually longing for another chance at her youth. This is not all that uncommon of women of Kristina's age, especially considering the demands that are placed on her. Kristina realizes this, at least to some degree. She says that her youth has been squandered in a place with no opportunities for fun. She recalls herself as a younger woman and wishes for an opportunity to revisit that time and place. It seems that Karl is, at least to some minor degree, another example of this theme though in a different way and for different reasons. Karl has always believed that he could have anything he wanted if he only worked at it hard enough. Toward that end, he has built three houses since his arrival in America and has built up his farm into a successful enterprise. Karl however is also forced to admit that an old injury makes it difficult to get around and that he's no longer able to greet the day with renewed energy and a desire to tackle anything that comes his way.



Style

Point of View

The story is presented in the third person from an omniscient point of view. The presentation is appropriate to the story. The perspective varies, depending on the focus of the story at that moment. For example, when the story is focused on Kristina and her desire that she have no more children, the story is presented from Kristina's perspective. There is an interesting change to the perspective after Robert's return home. Robert has an injury to one of his ears, the result of having been slapped on the side of the head by a former employer when he was younger. This injury has given him trouble for years and his ear has constantly buzzed, making it often difficult for him to hear well. After Robert's return to Karl's farm in Minnesota, Robert's ear "talks" to him. These conversations are one-sided and only Robert hears them, but the author uses them to present information to the reader about Robert's journey west and the death of his best friend, Arvid. The technique is somewhat disturbing because there's a sinister tone to the "conversations," but it is effective in presenting the information to the reader. The story is told through a combination of dialogue and narrative. The dialogue is realistic to modern times though not especially true to the language the settlers would have spoken in the book's time setting. This is acceptable because it makes the story easier to understand and follow.

Setting

The majority of the story is set in the Minnesota Territory in the mid-1800s. The setting is real and the author incorporates a great deal of American history into the story, making the story all the more believable. For example, the author uses the time around the 1850s when the issue of slavery in America was heating up as a backdrop. While the slavery question holds no real meaning to the settlers of Minnesota, the fact that the issue is being discussed in the newspapers makes the story's setting more realistic. There are adequate descriptions of both the time and the country. The author gives sufficient detail without bogging the story's action down overly much. For example, the author presents recent innovations and inventions through news Karl and Kristina garner from a newspaper. They learn about the invention of the telegraph, threshing machine and sewing machine in this manner. Robert's journey is set along the California Trail though he does not reach California. The descriptions of this aspect of the story's settings are also real as are the major events of the settings. Robert tells about the massive movement along the California Trail and these wagon trains did exist. Again, the use of real places and events lends a level of believability to the story line. The weather of the settings is an important part of the story and these are described in adequate detail. It's the severity of the Minnesota winters that makes the building of a new house important to Karl's family.



Language and Meaning

The overall tone of the story is one of hope against odds though the story of Robert's quest for gold takes on an ominous tone that hints of something foreboding. The story is written in a fairly straight-forward manner though the author's meaning regarding Robert's ear "speaking" becomes somewhat obscure. Many aspects of the story exemplify the theme of man attempting to overcome adversity. The story does not flow in chronological order. The story opens with the arrival of the first settlers to homestead near the home of Karl and Kristina Nilsson. The return of Robert, Karl's younger brother who left years earlier in search of gold, prompts a change the time and setting. At that point, the reader is taken back to the time of Robert's leaving and given the entire story of Robert's time away. This variation from chronological order is easy to follow and will not pose a difficulty for most readers. Despite the fact that the story was set in the 1800s, the language is modern English. The story contains several references to a "whore." While some readers may be offended by the use of the word, the reader should remember that the word, while derogatory, is accurately descriptive. It is not intended as a curse word but is merely used as the apt word for the situation. The book is the third of a series. It does stand as a book in its own right and a person who has not read the previous books of the series will not be confused. However, some details will seem vague and irrelevant without having read those previous books.

Structure

The book is divided into three parts. Each of these is numbered and is named. Part one is "The Foundation for Growth." Part two is "Gold and Water" and part three is "Blessed Woman." The first part has chapters one through eleven. Each is numbered with a Roman numeral and is named. The titles in the first part are New Axes Ringing in the Forest, The Whore and the Thief, Planning and Planting, Guests in their Own House, Man and Woman in the Territory, Starkodder the Ox, Ulrika in her Glory, The Baptist Ilk, Hemlandet Comes to the Immigrants, Surveying the Forest and The Letter to Sweden. Part two has chapters twelve through twenty-five. These chapters are titled The March of the Hundred Thousand, A Youth Who Is not so Young, But the Returned Gold Seeker Does Not Sleep, The First Night - Robert's Ear Speaks, While the Riches Lay Hidden in the House; The Second Night - Robert's Ear Speaks, The Missing Gold Seeker, The Third Night - Robert's Ear Speaks, Wildcats of Many Breeds, The Fourth Night - Robert's Ear Speaks, The Unget-At-Able, The Fifth Night - Robert's Ear Speaks, Wildcat Riches and A Stream that Runs Toward Greater Water. Part three has chapters twenty-six through thirty-six. These chapters are titled The Queen in the Kitchen, The Year Fifty-Seven, The Letter from Sweden, The Letter to Sweden, Karl Oskar's Followers, A Blessed Woman's Prayer, Partners of America, If God Doesn't Exist, Prayer Granted, To Reconcile Oneself with Fate and The Letter to Sweden. The book begins with a preface titled "The Land They Changed."



Quotes

"When they no longer had masters over them but could live their own lives as they wished, they became different people. When they could make their own decisions and need not obey others, they became new beings" (The Whore and the Thief, pg. 44.)

"She should have learned this much by now: it was, and remained forever, difficult to transplant the homeland in foreign soil. A person could not change countries and make a foreign place into a home overnight" (Planning and Planting, pg. 53.)

"Karl Oskar recalled his parting from Dean Brusander, who had depicted North America as a sky-high Babylon of sin and who had told him that, through his emigration, he broke the Ten Commandments. It was a comfort now to learn from another minister that their emigration was not contrary to God's will, rather it wounded as if God had planned and arranged for their move" (Guests in Their Own House, pg. 71.)

"After eating, the menfolk just lolled about, resting and breaking wind, while the wives cleaned up and waited on those lazybodies" (Ulrika in her Glory," pg. 11.)

"How stupid that we must quarrel with our neighbors because Ulrika jumped into the river and got herself baptized" (That Baptist Ilk," pg. 135.)

"The gold seekers found their way, as best they could, along different routes which had a name in common: the California Trail" (The First Night - Robert's Ear Speaks, pg. 183.)

"But now his blistered feet were well on the way to healing and he could again walk. Life had been given back to him - if not the desire to live" (The Fourth Night - Robert's Ear Speaks, pg. 256.)

"Here a ritual of Indian singing and Swedish reading was performed over a dead Mexican who would not have understood a word of it. But the Lord over life and death understands all languages equally well since he made the people who spoke them" (The Fourth Night - Robert's Ear Speaks, pg. 261.)

"His was the first grave to be dug in the cemetery on the point. Robert Nilsson was the first of the Swedes in St. Croix Valley to be buried under the silver maples" (A Stream that Runs Toward Greater Waters, pg. 317.)

"She had always had three babies who depended on her: one in her arms, and two hanging onto her skirt. This predicament had been her lot as a mother" (The Queen in the Kitchen, pg. 325.)

"This same spring, Karl Oskar and his family received their papers as American citizens. There were five of them to get such a paper - he, Kristina and the three children born in Sweden" (Partners of America, pg. 364.)



"She had doubted the Almighty - in a moment of great weakness her faith had faltered until she had doubted that God existed. She had been given her reply; she had been rebuked" (Prayer Granted, pg. 388.)



Topics for Discussion

Describe the lives of Karl Oskar and Kristina Nilsson. Are they happy with their lives? Why do you think so? Describe their families and friends. What is it about the fact that they have neighbors that is so exciting to Kristina?

Who is Robert Nilsson? Why is he not working the farm with Karl Oskar? What kind of person is he? What does he come to accept about his situation in life? What is his eventual fate?

Describe the trip undertaken by Robert and Arvid. What prompts them to take the trip? What is the result of the trip?

Who is Ulrika Jackson? What is her faith? How does that create a problem for Kristina? Who is Ulrika's husband? What does she believe when she gives birth to a girl instead of the boy she'd wanted so badly? What does that say about her personality?

Who is Petrus Olausson? Who is his wife? What task does he complete before his wife's arrival in the territory? What is the argument that Olausson have with Kristina and Karl? What is the outcome of that argument?

How does the arrival of more settlers change the lives of Karl and Kristina? Are these changes for the better? What do they learn about government? How many members of the family become American citizens and what is the cost? What is the name on Karl's citizenship papers? What does Kristina say about that?

What is Starkodder? What happens to Starkodder? What is the Prairie Queen? Where did Kristina get the mirror that hangs in her living room and what does she say about that mirror? What is the Hemlandet? What impact does it have on the lives of Karl and Kristina?

Describe how the reader comes to know about the trip undertaken by Robert and Arvid. Is this an effective literary device? Support your answer. What do you think about Robert's mental state when he arrives home? Support your answer.