

The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity Study Guide

The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity by William P. Young

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Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Young, William Paul. *The Shack: Where Tragedy Meets Eternity*. Windblown Media, June 20, 2008. Kindle.

For centuries man has grappled with the paradox presented by God's love, his forgiveness and his position within the Holy Trinity. In his novel *The Shack: Where Tragedy Meets Eternity*, William Paul Young attempts to shed some light on these paradoxes as he addresses the main theme of the novel: Where is God when tragedy strikes? Other themes in the novel include the curse of the human desire for independence, God's respect for human free will, the danger of judgement and the ways in which religion disagrees with God's true nature.

Mack Phillips began a life changing journey when he received a note in his mailbox from Papa. The note angered Mack because it invited him for a meeting at the shack, the place where Mack's daughter had been brutally killed three and a half years prior. Despite his anger, Mack is also intrigued by the note because the signature "Papa" is the same name that his wife, Nan, uses to refer to God.

Mack had never had a close relationship with God. His alcoholic father was an elder in the church the family attended but it did not keep his father from beating his mother when he was drunk. It also did not keep Mack's father from tying Mack to a tree and beating him off and on for two days after Mack told someone in the church about his father's violent tendencies. Missy's abduction and murder only caused more separation in the relationship between Mack and God.

Unable to overcome his curiosity about the letter, Mack went to the shack on the appointed weekend. He was surprised when he did discover God there. He was even more surprised to discover God was a black woman. Papa, as she called herself told Mack the whole weekend would be about breaking down preconceived notions that Mack had about God and religion. The way God might appear if he were to have a gender and human form was the first of these preconceived notions that God intended to destroy.

Throughout the weekend, Mack spent time with Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, learning about the love of God and how humans had strayed so far from the plans that God had for them. They talked about God's role in tragedy, how he was with Missy during her entire ordeal with the serial killer and how Mack needed for his own spiritual health to forgive the man who had killed Missy.

Mack learned that Missy was well in heaven and that she did not blame Mack for what had happened. Papa told Mack that Missy had even forgiven the man who hurt her so badly. During the weekend, Mack was even given the chance to reunite with his father and tell his father that he forgave him. On the last day of their weekend together Papa



led Mack down a trail into the forest and showed him where Missy's body was buried. They took the body back to the shack where they buried it.

Later that day as Mack was driving home, he was hit by a drunk driver and severely injured. He was unconscious several days and did not remember about his time with God until Willie, the only friend he had told about what he was doing, reminded Mack about the note. Willie wanted to know if Mack had really met with God and was surprised by how emotional Mack got when he posed the question. Even though Willie wanted to believe Mack's story was true, it was Nan who believed her husband without reservation after he told her the entire story of his encounter.

After Mack recovered from his injuries, he, Nan, Willie and the police officer who helped in the investigation surrounding Missy's death returned to the cabin and Mack showed them where the killer had left Missy's body. Forensic specialists were able to glean enough evidence from the cave that they not only arrested the killer but also found the bodies of the other girls he had killed. Just as Papa had promised Mack he could work great endings out of tragedies, Papa helped Mack provide closure for all of the families touched by the killer.



Foreword - Chapter 2

Summary

In the "Foreword," Willie, a friend of Mack, shares with the reader that he understands how the reader might be skeptical of Mack's story. He describes Mack as a farm boy who was raised by an overly strict father who was an elder in the church. At home, however, Mack's father was a closet drinker who beat his wife. During a youth revival, Mack had confessed that he had done nothing to help his mother when his father was beating her. The man to whom he confessed was a member of the same church as his father so Mack's father learned about his son's confession.

When Mack arrived home one day, his father was there alone. He tied Mack to a tree, beat him and preached to him in between drunken stupors for two days because Mack had told about him drinking and beating his wife. Two weeks later, when Mack recovered from the treatment, he put rat poisoning in every bottle of liquor his father had, collected a tin box containing all of his treasures, put a note under his mother's pillow and ran away from home.

He spent a good deal of his time working overseas and sending money home to his mother. He attended seminary in Australia and eventually came back to America. Back in America, he made peace with his mother and sisters, and then married Nanette "Nan" A Samuelson.

Willie describes Mack as not being the sort of man who would stand out in a crowd. Even though he likes to talk about God and creation, Willie describes Mack's relationship with God and religion as being a love hate relationship. Nan is closer to God than Mack and is the glue that holds the relationship together, according to Willie. Mack and his wife, Nan, have five children: Jon, Tyler, Josh, Katherine "Kate" and Melissa "Missy." Willie indicates that Missy is no longer alive.

Willie references a hospital stay after which he says that Mack has become more at home in his own skin and even nicer a man than he was before his stay. Seven years before this time depression, called in the novel *The Great Sadness*, entered Mack and threatened to overtake him. Willie mentions an accident but stops himself from getting ahead of himself. Willie explains that Mack had come to him wanting his help in ghostwriting his story. While Willie says that he wants to entirety of the story to be true, he cannot prove that it is and sometimes doubt it himself. Willie even provides a message from Mack for those who read the story and do not like it. He indicates the story was not written for them but for Mack's wife and children.

In Chapter 1, at which point the writing changes to the past tense and the story is told from a third person point of view, Mack took a break while working at home to check his mail. The area was gripped by an early March snowstorm and Mack had to walk carefully down his driveway to the box. Mack was delighted by the snow and enjoyed



the beauty of the trees encased in snow and ice. It was almost enough to lift The Great Sadness from his shoulders.

Inside the box was only a single envelope that bore only Mack's first name. The message on the page inside said only "Mackenzie, It's been a while. I've missed you. I'll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together. —Papa" (4). Mack was angered by the reference to the shack and even more horrified that whoever left it in his box had signed it "Papa" (4). On the way back to the house, Mack slid on the ice. In an attempt to keep himself from sliding face first into a tree, Mack tried to sit to stop his slide but instead fell, banging his head on the driveway. When he tried to stand, his head began to pound and he discovered the back of his head was bleeding.

Mack patched himself up as best he could once he got back to the house. He figured his wife, who was a nurse, could complete the doctoring when she returned home later. He still had his mind on the note he had received. When he called the post office, he learned the mailman had not even reached his house yet so the letter was not delivered through the mail system. After he got off the phone he noticed that the painkillers he had taken had made him very sleepy so he laid his head down on his desk and slept. Nan woke him up a couple of hours later when she called him on the phone. She told him that she and the kids were going to stay at her sister's house instead of trying to come home.

When Mack asked, Nan said that Kate was doing better with the family but was still not talking much. She said she had prayed to "Papa," her name for God, for help but had gotten no answers. After he got off the phone, Mack set himself up on the couch to watch his favorite show. He pulled a picture of a little girl off the end table and lay on the couch, clutching it to his chest.

In Chapter 2, when Nan came home the following day, Mack said nothing to her about the strange note he had gotten. Although the ice storm had eased the depression he called The Great Sadness that had weighed him down since Missy had disappeared. Her abduction had happened Labor Day weekend when Mack had taken his three youngest children to Wallowa State Park for a final camping trip of the year. During the trip they stopped at Multnomah Falls. After she begged him, Mack told Missy the story of the Indian princess who had jumped from the falls in order to save her tribe.

As he ate dinner with his children that night, Mack thought that he was rich in all the ways that mattered. Missy and Kate asked their father questions about the story of the Indian princess that night. Mack explained the princess had chosen to die, she did not have to die. He also tried to explain why people thought the princess's death was a legend while the death of Jesus was true. After he told them that the Great Spirit whom the Indians worshiped was probably the same God as the one they worshipped, Missy asked why God was so mean. Mack explained to her that God was not mean. Jesus had wanted to die because he loved the people and wanted to save them from their sicknesses.



Analysis

While the foreword of the novel is written from the first person point of view in the present tense, the main body of the novel switches to a third person narrator and the past tense. The foreword is written by Willie in his voice while the main body is written by Willie as a ghostwriter for Mack.

The purpose of the foreword is to allow Willie to introduce Mack, tell some of Mack's background and address the reader's skepticism about Mack's story. This foreword explains why Mack has such a bad opinion of religion and why he has trouble relating to God as a loving father. Mack did not have a loving father. His father was abusive even though he claimed to be religious.

Clearly a theme in the novel will be the separation between God and religion. While some people believe God and religion work hand in hand, this novel seeks to prove that is not always the case. For instance, Mack's father was religious. He was the elder of a church but he clearly had no idea of the nature of God or had any desire to live a life in which he practiced the love of God. Note also that when Willie discusses Mack's habits of going to church he makes a point of telling the reader that Mack not only had a love/hate relationship with God, he also had a love/hate relationship with religion.

Important objects introduced in this section are Mack's tin box, the shack, and the note signed by Papa. It is in this tin box with which Mack left home when he was only a teen. He has it even as an adult and keeps his most valuable possessions in it. Although the reader does not know the whole story of the shack, it can be assumed that it was the setting of some terrible tragedy in Mack's life. He becomes angry when the shack is mentioned in the note that he gets that was signed by Papa. When Willie mentions the shack in the first sentences of the Foreword, he clarifies it was "the shack" (xi) indicating that it has some specific and ominous meaning. The note is the basis of the story that follows.

There are a variety of suggestions in the novel that the family has been through something terrible. For instance in the "Foreword" Willie says of Missy "as we were fond of calling her. She... Well, you'll get to know some of them better in these pages" (xvi) The indication that they "were" fond of calling her Missy indicates that she is no longer alive. It can be assumed later when Mack falls asleep hugging the picture of a small girl that this girl is Missy. One of their children, Kate, is having difficulty adjusting and talking. While there is no reference made to exactly what might have happened to Kate, it is assumed perhaps it has something to do with Missy's death.

This author enjoys the use of literary techniques, particularly simile. For instance he describes Mack's eyes as losing "emotion like a tide going out, leaving dark and lifeless eyes" (xii) whenever his father is mentioned. Whenever Mack talks about religion there are sometimes words of sarcasm "like piercing darts dipped in poison from a well deep inside" (xv). The indication is that even though Mack tries to hide his frustration with and perhaps even distrust in God and religion that these sarcastic words that sometimes slip out are proof of the unhappiness he has in his soul.



In other similes, when Mack finally reaches the mailbox down the icy driveway he hugs it “like some long-lost friend” (3). When he tries to get out of his clothing his fingers and hands are described as functioning “as oversized clubs at the ends of his arms” (6). The bump on Mack’s head after he hits in on the driveway is described as “emerging like a humpback whale breaching the wild waves of his thinning hair” (6).

Personification is used in the description of how Mack’s father treated him after Mack confessed he did not help his mother when his father beat her. Mack “was beaten with a belt and Bible verses every time his dad woke from a stupor and put down his bottle” (xii). Not only was Mack physically beaten, he was also preached to by his father using Bible verses. He is described as beating Mack with these Bible verses, a description that indicates the verses had weight and form with which he could beat his son. It also indicates that Mack’s father was not preaching to him out of love but as a form of punishment. In a metaphor, Willie gives the reader hope that Mack’s life will change. He compares Mack’s life to a song in the following quote: “What happened three years ago totally changed the melody of his life, and it’s a song I can’t wait to play for you” (xvii).

One more note in this analysis is the use of the name Papa. It is the name that Mack’s wife, Nan, uses for God because she has such a close relationship with him. It is also the name signed to the bottom of the note received by Mack. Mack has to decide if the Papa referred to by the signature is God, a good connotation, or his own father, a bad connotation.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the importance of the “Foreword.” How does Willie give the reader a sense that something terrible has happened to Mack and his family without actually describing what happened? Why is the background information about Mack’s relationship with his father also significant?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the note received by Mack. From where do you think it came? Why do you think Mack gets so angry about it?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Nan’s choice to call God “Papa”? How does it define the difference between her relationship with God and Mack’s relationship with God?

Vocabulary

skeptical, presumably, ostentation, conspicuously, seminary, dialogue, peculiar, mutual, relinquish, tussle, inexorably, tyranny, purview, undulations, mutated, methodically,



dexterity, morphed, queried, cacophony, chinock, chagrined, tangibly, cloying, impotent, surreal, decimating, unabated



Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

In Chapter 3, Mack and his children enjoyed a variety of activities including fishing, mini golf and horseback riding. They made friends with the families who camped nearby. These included Vicki and Emil Ducette, and Jesse and Sarah Madison. On Monday, all three families rode the tram and hiked together. At the end of the day, Mack went to bed thinking how lucky he was. He did not know that his life would change significantly in the next twenty-four hours.

Tuesday, the day the family was to leave the camp did not start out well because Mack burned two fingers while trying to fix breakfast. Once they finally got some progress made toward packing with Mack trying to direct with burned fingers, Kate and Josh asked to go canoeing one last time. Missy was coloring at the picnic table, wearing a red sundress her father had bought her in a nearby town.

On the lake, Kate called out to his father to see how well they were doing with the canoe. Mack waved to them. When Kate raised her paddle to wave back she lost her balance and the boat tipped over. Kate came up out of the water but not Josh. Mack dove into the water and discovered that one of Josh's life jacket straps had gotten caught in the canoe and was holding him under. Because he could not get close enough to his son to get him lose, he pushed the entire canoe back over. When he got Josh breathing and back to shore, Mack believed that a crisis had been averted.

In Chapter 4, when he finally recovered from the fright of the canoe episode, Mack went back to the campsite to check on Missy. She was not there and he at first thought that the Ducettes or Madisons had taken her back to their campsite but when he questioned them, neither family knew where Missy was. Amber, one of the Ducette children was gone as well and they thought the two of them might be together. They found Amber at one of the bathhouses but Missy was not with her. Emil Ducette, who worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, put a plan in action to try to find Missy. The contacted to campground authorities and began searching the grounds. Even though he knew it was stupid to do so, Mack made promises to God about what he would do if he got Missy back as he searched.

Jeremy Bellamy, the campground's assistant manager, called everyone to his area near the entrance to the campgrounds. He had been talking to Virgil Thomas, a man camping there who believed he had seen something. A military green truck had let the campground before noon. A girl wearing a dress was inside. Virgil said it looked like she was either laughing or yelling but he could not tell which. As Mack headed toward the campground office Emil told him that the authorities had already been called.

Along with the police investigation, dogs tracked Missy's trail to a parking lot, where the trail ended, making it appear that Virgil's story was true. Mack was sent to walk through



his campsite to see if there was anything there that he did not remember being there before. At the picnic table he noticed that Missy's red crayon was missing. The officers said it had been dropped by a tree, probably in a struggle.

When Mack heard how his daughter had possibly tried to fight off the man who captured her, he was almost sick. He leaned over the picnic table and noticed a ladybug pin stuck in the coloring book. Officer Tommy Dalton told Mack they had assumed it was Missy's. It was taken into evidence and the officer told Mack they assumed the kidnapper had left it there as a message.

The officer got a call from the FBI and Mack listened as Tommy described the pin in detail to the FBI. The FBI agent, Samantha Wikowsky, was interested in the fact the pin had five dots in total as well as the serial number on the back of the pin. The agent asked Tommy if he had someplace private he could talk but Mack insisted upon being included in the discussion. Wikowsky told Tommy that she suspected the man who had taken Missy had been a serial killer the FBI had been tracking for four years. She called him the Little Ladykiller. He had kidnapped and killed four girls all under the age of ten. Mack had images of Missy being tortured as well as images of her during her life.

Mack and his family were offered a room at a hotel in the nearby town of Joseph where the police had set up a staging area. Tommy took the children to eat, leaving Mack alone. He was sitting in the hotel, crying when Nan arrived. The next day, Mack and the officers decided it would be best for Nan to go home, taking the children with her. After the FBI arrived on the scene, Special Agent Samantha Wikowsky, who asked that Mack call her Sam questioned Mack. She asked if he had seen anyone watching their family, explaining that even though the killer seemed to choose his victims at random, he did watch the child and family for a few days, looking for an ideal moment to take the child. Mack could not remember anything, nor did he remember seeing the military green truck.

At a roadblock in Imnaha two couples reported seeing a military green truck on a road near the old Nez Percé sites off National Forest 4260 in one of the more-remote areas of the National Reserve. The officers decided to begin their search that night. As Mack called Nan to tell her what was happening and then prepared to go with the officers, he prayed that God would take care of Missy.

The officers split into three groups with Mack riding with Tommy. About two hours into the search Sam's group located a hidden road when an officer's flashlight lit up a hubcap splattered with green paint. They located the truck hidden in brush nearby. In the three hours it took Mack's group to get to the road, the investigation was finished. The police dogs had followed a trail to a shack.

When Mack arrived at the scene, Sam told him that they had not found Missy but they had found something at which they needed him to look. Emil and Tommy walked, one on each side of Mack to the shack. Inside, Mack crumpled to the floor when he saw Missy's torn, bloody dress on the floor by the fireplace.



Mack was numb during the following memorial service with its small, empty coffin. The authorities never found her body. The killer left no evidence to help him be located and stopped. In the weeks that followed, Mack tried to work his way out of his grief so he could support his family. It was at this point that Kate began to separate herself from the family, becoming distant and unreachable

Three and a half years after Missy's disappearance, Mack was still haunted by the ways he believed he had failed his daughter. One of his greatest sorrows was that he had never been able to bury her body and that she was alone in the woods somewhere. After his loss, Mack became even more separated from God. He had nightmares and felt guilty about any moments in which he felt guilty.

For all of these reasons, the note he had received had been a serious issue for Mack. He wondered if it really was God sending him a message and if so, why he would want to meet at the shack. He also suspected it might be a trick by the killer to lure him away from his family. Even though he had been taught in seminary that God did not openly communicate with humans any longer, Mack still entertained the possibility the note really was from God. He felt as if someone was playing with him. Mack decided that he did want to get answers, that he was sick of God and religion. He did not know that he was going to get more than he had ever imagined.

Analysis

The purpose of these chapters is to give the readers a glimpse not only into Mack's life with his family before Missy's death but they also describe what happened to Missy and the events leading up to the tragedy. The information included in the chapters help the reader to understand what a terrible place the shack is in Mack's memory and why it would anger him to be asked to go there again.

The significance of the shack is understood after the reader completes these chapters. It is the place where it is assumed the serial killer took Missy to kill her. Because it is the site of his daughter's murder, Mack would not be very agreeable to meeting someone for a social visit there. The red dress that Missy wore on the day when she was killed is significant because it is how Missy was tied to the shack. Because Mack recognized the bloody red sundress on the floor of the shack as Missy's, the investigators were assured that it was Missy to whom the blood on the floor probably belonged and that she had been killed there.

The ladybug pin that Mack discovers in Missy's coloring book is important because it allows the investigators to link her death with a serial killer called the Little Ladykiller. The investigators know some things about this man who had killed four young girls before taking Missy's life. First, the bodies of his victims had not been found. True to his past behavior, even though the woods around the shack for days, no trace of Missy's body was ever located. The man was also careful to leave no DNA evidence in the shack or the truck that he had stolen to kidnap Missy.



Investigators are able to discern from the location of Missy's red crayon that she probably struggled with her kidnapper. Mack had noticed that crayon, which was Missy's favorite color, was missing from the box. He was sickened when the investigators said they had found the crayon near a tree where they suspected that Missy had struggled with her kidnapper as he tried to carry her away.

Mack shows the extent of his relationship with god during the investigation and after Missy's dress is found. During the investigation he prays for Missy's safety but also tries to bargain with god in order to keep Missy safe. After Missy's memorial service, Mack appears to be trying to pull himself together on his own. By sheer willpower he tries to overcome his depression in order to be present for his family. He is angry with both himself and with God. He accuses himself of not doing enough to keep Missy safe. He rails against God because he was not able to find Missy's body and give her a proper burial.

The contrast between Mack's life before Missy's death and after her death is remarkable. Although he had trouble with his faith before Missy's death, Mack's faith has completely deteriorated as a result of her murder. He went to the shack because he was angry with God and wanted answers about what had happened to him and family. Before Missy's death, Mack had believed that he was rich "in all the ways that mattered" (19). Twenty-four hours later, however, he was devastated by the loss of his daughter. He believed he was a complete failure.

After Missy's death, Mack is accompanied by depression that he refers to as The Great Sadness. The depression is personified as being a companion that accompanies Mack everywhere he goes, but is also given its own name. This act of giving his depression a name strengthens its image as a living thing, but it also demonstrates how familiar Mack has become with this depression.

Discussion Question 1

How does Missy's death affect Mack? Use examples from the book to support your answer.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss how Mack's relationship with God changes because of Missy's death.

Discussion Question 3

What is the tone of the story at this point? How does the author develop this tone?

Vocabulary

precipitous, unpretentious, entourage, veritable, smitten, explicatives, honed, methodical, pertinent, cordoned, perverted, forensics, complied, protocol, perpetrator, horrendous, proprietors, efficacy, unanimously, simultaneously, pristine, solidarity, visage, stoic, overt, cloistered



Chapter 5

Summary

In Chapter 5, Mack came to the decision that there were three possible explanations for the note he had received. First, it was really from God; second, it was a cruel joke; or three, it was a sinister note from Missy's killer. He decided to visit the shack but did not tell Nan. He reasoned that if he told her about the note, he would only cause her more pain if it turned out to be nothing.

Mack arranged to borrow Willie's Jeep for the weekend. When Willie dropped off the vehicle, Mack told Willie that he was planning on visiting the shack, and showed him the note. Willie asked if Mack really thought the note was from God. While Mack said that he was not sure what he thought, he had to find out. He told Willie that he was still confused about what had happened, he was worried about Kate, and wondered if Missy's murder was payment for what he had done to his father.

Because Mack insisted on going alone, Willie gave Mack a gun in case it was the killer luring him to the shack. Mack took it grudgingly. Willie was surprised that Mack had not told Nan about what he was doing. Before he left, Mack added his tin box to the items he had packed in the Jeep. Willie questioned Mack, asking him what he thought God looked like. Mack suggested a big, grandfather-like figure.

Mack headed out for the shack before dawn on Friday. When he parked the Jeep at the head of the trail to the shack, Mack had to force himself to go forward. He fell to his knees once to pray. He decided to return to the Jeep to get the gun Willie had given him as well as Missy's picture. When he finally arrived at the shack, he stopped and stared at it. It seemed to transform into a demonic grinning face.

He forced himself to walk up to the shack and go inside. He could still see the bloodstain where Missy was killed and apologized to her. Feeling his pent up anger, Mack began destroying everything he could inside the shack. He railed at God asking why he had let Missy be killed and why he was now messing with Mack. When he had finally exhausted himself, he lay next to the bloodstain and apologized to his daughter again. He again asked God why they could not have at least found Missy's body so that they could bury her properly. He asked God where he was and accused him of never being around when he needed him.

Mack believed he fell asleep by the bloodstain only for a few minutes when he woke. He decided that he had spent enough time at the cabin and believed that he was wasting his time. He accused God of never being there for him when he needed him before he left. Before he left, he told God he was tired of trying to find him in everything that had happened. He tore up the note he had received and let it float through his fingers on the wind.



On his way back to the Jeep, Mack felt a rush of warm air behind him. The snow around him melted and new growth began to sprout. He began smelling the scent of blooming flowers, even exotic flowers. He turned to see a log cabin had replaced the shack. Mack believed he was having a break down. Mack walked to the cabin. He heard voices coming from inside.

As he considered knocking on the door, Mack thought about how he should refer to God. He was overcome again by his anger and had just decided to bang on the door when the door was opened and a large black woman stood there. The woman wrapped Mack in a hug and swung him around like a child while saying his full name. Even though he was surprised by the way the woman greeted him, Mack found that he was happy to see her as well. It was when he smelled the scent of his mother's perfume that Mack was overcome with sorrow. Even though she encouraged him to cry, Mack held back. The woman offered to take the gun that Mack had even though he had not told her that he had a gun. When he gave it to her, she held it between two fingers as if it were dirty.

An Asian woman came up behind the black woman. She took the tears from his face and collects them in a glass bottle. He noticed it was hard for him to see the Asian woman as she seemed to shimmer. Behind her was a Middle Eastern man dressed like a carpenter. He was not handsome but his smile lit up his eyes. Mack asked if there were more of them but the three people he faced laughed and told him that there were only three of them. The man kissed Mack on both cheeks. The Asian woman looked deep into Mack's eyes. When she smiled, he felt that a large weight had lifted off his shoulders.

The black woman told Mack that he could call her Elouisa or he could call her what Nan calls her. Mack questions if the black lady is Papa and she says that she is. The man says that he is Jesus. Sarayu introduced herself as the groundskeeper. He tried to work through the knowledge he had of the trinity but could not make it fit the reality of the two women and one man he was seeing in front of him.

Mack asked which one of the three of them was God. To his surprise, the all answered that they were God.

Analysis

The shack remains an object of significance because Mack travels to it in hopes of learning about why God allowed Missy to be killed. It is physically difficult for Mack to go to the shack because it is so charged with such strong emotions. In Mack's imagination, as he looks at the shack for the first time it transforms from a regular old shack to one that wears an almost demonic grin. This demonic grin is proof of how evil Mack believes the place is.

Inside the shack, Mack again feels the sorrow and guilt as he thinks about his daughter's death. He physically takes out his anger on the shack and god as he breaks



things and yells in anger. He asks God again why he could not have at least located Missy's body so that he could bury her.

There are several things that happen in this section that the reader needs to remember because they will be significant later on in the novel. This includes Mack's anger at God for not allowing them to find Missy's body. Remember also Mack's choice not to tell Nan about the note because he feared that knowledge of this note would only upset Nan. This decision will cause Mack some grief later on in the novel.

The vegetation, weather and even the facilities transform when it is time for Mack to meet with God. Where the ground had been cold and snow covered, Mack senses the air warm and the ground thaw. When he turns, the once dilapidated shack has become a cozy cabin. The dock is solid and the vegetation trimmed and in good shape. Even the words the author uses to describe the small house changes. What was once referred to as a shack, indicating it was rundown and perhaps even inadequate for providing shelter, is called a cabin when Mack turns around to look back at it.

An aspect of the novel that may cause distress for some believers is the portrayal of God as a black woman. Even Mack is disturbed by the way God appears to him. Remember he had told Willie that he thought God would look like "a really big grandpa with a long white flowing beard, sort of like Gandalf in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings" (71). Proving that as God she is able to hear all of Mack's thoughts and discussions, Papa repeats to Mack the description he had given Willie.

The black woman's love for Mack is unmistakable. When she first sees him she "engulfed him in her arms, lifting him clear off his feet and spinning him around like a little child" (82). The woman is completely unashamed in her love of Mack. Her words to him are gracious, those of a relative, perhaps a grandmother being reunited with a grandchild she has not seen in some time. "It is so wonderful to have you here with us. My, my, my, how I do love you!" (82). She is unapologetic in her love for Mack as she declares how much she cares for him both orally and physically.

The joke shared by the three whom Mack meets in the shack when he asks if there are more of them is clearly that they make up the Holy Trinity. The trinity is composed of the God the Father, Jesus the son, and the Holy Spirit. It can be assumed in this case that the black woman is God while the man dressed as the carpenter is the son, Jesus. The Asian woman, with her hair blowing around her, is apparently the Holy Spirit.

Even though Mack was angry when he first arrived at the cabin his anger was soon replaced by feelings of love and affection. These changes in Mack's emotional state come through the physical and oral affirmations by God that he is loved, the smell of the perfume that his mother used to wear, a smell that reminds him how much his mother loved him.



Discussion Question 1

How do you feel that God is presented as a black woman? Do you think this portrayal disrespects God in any way? Why or why not? Support your answer with examples from the book.

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Mack was wrong when he decided not to let Nan know about the note from Papa? Why do you think he should have done differently?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss both Mack and Papa's reaction to the gun. Neither likes guns but for different reasons. How are their opinions of guns similar? How are they different?

Vocabulary

extenuation, plausible, impending, divulge, perplexing, hoax, sequestering, vortex, reprimanding, treacherous, vestiges, veneer, olfactory, ire, belied, breached, proprietary



Chapter 6

Summary

Papa invited Mack to come inside and talk to her while she cooked. After she had gone inside Mack asked Jesus if he was supposed to believe God was a black woman. Jesus indicates that she is the best and her timing is always perfect. He also told Mack he should not feel obligated to talk to Papa, he should go to her only if he wanted to do so.

Inside, the cabin was decorated with children's artwork. Mack followed the sound of humming to the kitchen. He admitted to the woman that calling her "Papa" was difficult for him. She suggested it was because of the failings of his father, shocking Mack because he was not used to having his father's faults talked about so openly. When the woman offered to be the Papa that Mack never had, he asks her if she could not take care of Missy, how he trust her to take care of him. Papa acknowledged the wound between them and told him that was why he was there, to help heal that rift. Mack suggested the whole thing might be easier if Papa were not wearing a dress. She explained she was not male or female. She could choose to appear either as a male or female depending on how best to show her love. At this point she indicates that she is appearing as a woman and having him call her Papa in order to distract him from the way he has been raised to think about God all of his life. She described how she could have appeared to him as a grandfather figure, as he had thought God would appear, but that it would only reinforce his religious stereotypes. She explained she most often appeared as a father because of the need she knew the world would have for good fathers.

The conversation moved on to free will as Mack asked Papa if he knew he would come. While Papa admitted that he knew Mack would come, he said that did not interfere with Mack's free will. He pointed out that Mack was free to leave, but just because Papa knew that Mack was too curious to leave, it did not limit Mack's ability to leave. She goes on to list things that inhibit Mack's freedom, like DNA, social influences, sin and his own unique way of thinking. Mack said that he did not understand what she was saying so she simplified it by telling Mack that freedom only really came through a relationship with Jesus.

Mack saw the scars on Papa's wrists and she tells Mack that they went through the pain together. Mack clarified he thought that Jesus had been abandoned by God on the cross. Papa explained that even though Jesus felt he had been abandoned, God had been there all along. Papa told Mack he had never abandoned Jesus and that he had never abandoned Mack.

Papa compared Mack's habit of living like he was unloved by God to the limitation imposed on a bird if its wings were clipped. Papa told Mack she was not like Mack, her wings could not be clipped. She explained she was not the best version of a person, as



some wanted to think of her as but that just because a person might not understand her, it did not mean that she did not want to be known.

Papa went on to describe that after Adam had made such a mess of things, the members of the trinity had spoken themselves into existence as a human being. Jesus, being God but becoming a human was like a bird choosing to live with its wings clipped. She explains that Jesus was able to perform miracles only because he was a human who lived fully in God. He was able to perform miracles because he trusted God completely with his life.

Papa also described himself as not being able to act outside love. She told him that their weekend together was about love and relationships. She asked him to rest in what little trust he might have in her. Mack apologizes to Papa for Jesus having to die, but Papa said that Jesus' death on the cross was worth the sacrifice and would have been if Jesus had died for only Mack.

Analysis

Right away the purpose of Mack's visit with God is stated. Papa tells Mack the weekend is about love and relationships. She also tells him "this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes" (94).

Love is abundant in the references to Papa's interactions with Mack. Even though Mack felt the Papa sensed his inner conflict, "she showed nothing by her expression — still open, full of life, and inviting" (91). As Papa speaks of the members of the rock band to which he is listening she indicates that even though they express their anger through their music, she still loves them. "I am especially fond of those boys, you know" (91) Papa says to Mack. Her eyes are described as being "tender" (92) eyes as she "cradled" (92) the mixing bowl. Through her eyes, Papa indicates to Mack that: "she understood what was going on inside him, and somehow he knew she cared about him more than anyone ever had" (92).

Papa's love for his children is also expressed as a parent's love for his child. Mack notices that the cabin is decorated with what looks like artwork done by children. He wonders if Papa treasures the art like a parents would treasure art created by their children. Even if the offering of art from a child was not perfect, the present would come from the heart. "Maybe that was how she valued anything that was given to her from the heart, the way children seemed to give so easily" (90). This translates to God's pleasure in accepting anything that his "children" give him from the heart.

Most shocking to Mack is that God appears to him as a black woman. Papa explains to Mack that she appeared as a woman "to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning" (94). Papa also recognizes that because of Mack's relationship with his earthly father, Mack would not respond well to God being portrayed as a man. Even though Mack knows that God technically has no gender, he still has trouble accepting what he is seeing. He asks Jesus "Am I going crazy? Am I supposed



to believe that God is a big black woman with a questionable sense of humor?” (89). Mack believes that he is going crazy because “He believed, in his head at least, that God was Spirit, neither male nor female, but in spite of that, he was embarrassed to admit to himself that all his visuals for God were very white and very male” (94). Papa said that she believed that God was most often thought of as a male, because after Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, it was believed more fathers would be needed. Therefore, she said “an emphasis on fathering is necessary because of the enormity of its absence” (95).

Papa tries to clarify a scripture that has bothered Mack especially after Missy was murdered. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (97) is the scripture, one that seems to say that God left Jesus alone while on the cross. It is painful to Mack because he believes he has been left alone in his own suffering. Papa explains that even though Jesus might have felt alone while on the cross, Papa was always with him. Papa explains to Mack that he was always with him as well.

Also surprising Mack is Papa’s statement that by himself, Jesus could not have performed any miracles. Jesus did them only through his faith in God. Papa explains to Mack, “Only as he rested in his relationship with me, and in our communion — our communion — could he express my heart and will into any given circumstance” (102). Papa explains that Jesus is the only human being who has been completely able to live in his trust in God that is why he was able to perform miracles.

The author uses an extended metaphor when he compares the bird, the blue jay, both to God and to mankind. Papa points out that if a bird chooses to limit himself by moving about only by walking he is living a life that is very limited. He says this is what Jesus chose to do when he became fully man. Papa compares a human who lives as if he is unloved to a bird with clipped wings. He is not able to live to his full potential and his life will also not be complete. In comparison, Papa says that he cannot have his wings clipped.

Discussion Question 1

Compare your idea of what God would look like if he were in human form and what is presented in the novel. Do you understand why the author chose to present him in this way? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss how the author presents Papa as being a loving God. How does he use words and description to paint a picture of a loving God?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the use of the bird as a way to describe both Jesus' decision to become human and the way a human limits himself by living as if he is unloved. Do you think the imagery works? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

marring, diatribe, incredulous, paradigms, incremental



Chapters 7 - 8

Summary

In Chapter 7, as Mack cleaned up for dinner in the bathroom, he wondered if he was going crazy. His thoughts were interrupted by a crash. There was silence and then laughter. Sarayu, Jesus and Papa were laughing because Jesus had dropped a bowl of sauce that had splattered all over the kitchen, including the front of Papa's dress and her bare feet. While Sarayu wiped the mess from the floor and counter, Jesus got a basin and wiped down Papa's dress, and then washed her feet. Mack compared the way the three interacted with each other and compares it with the way he treated people loved.

During dinner, Mack talked to Papa, Jesus and Sarayu about his children and his wife. He was fascinated by the way they asked him about his family even though he knew they already knew everything about them. Papa explained they made the choice to limit themselves and learn about his family from his viewpoint in the same way he would limit himself when coloring or playing a game with a child. She said their choice was about developing a relationship, not being superior.

After dinner Papa suggested they have a devotional. Mack prepared himself for the devotions like the ones his father once led, ones in which Mack struggled to answer questions correctly and stay awake during long prayers. Instead, Jesus took Papa's hands in his own and praised the way she had helped Mack through his pain. Mack was touched by the way love was expressed in a manner that was simple and genuine.

After Mack helped the three wash and dry the dishes, Jesus invited him to sit out on the dock to watch the stars. As they lay on their backs and looked up, Jesus admitted to Mack that he never got tired of looking at the stars. Even though he created the stars, he was always awed when he got to look at the stars from the perspective of a human.

Jesus explained to Mack that because he was in human form he was the best one of the trinity to whom humans could relate. They could see Papa and Sarayu through him. He clarifies that Sarayu is the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus. Her name means wind. Jesus went on to explain that Elouisa, the name that Papa suggested Mack call her, was a combination of "El," the name for God, and "ouisa" means "that which is truly real" (114).

Mack also asked Jesus about his physical appearance. He admitted he had expected Jesus to be more handsome. Mack had imagined Jesus as the ideal man. Jesus replied that because he was Jewish, he had inherited his family's big nose. Jesus also asked what standards he was using when he judged who was physically attractive and who was not. Mack admitted to himself that perhaps he was familiar with an idea of Jesus instead of having taken the time to get to know the real Jesus. Jesus explained that



because the Holy Spirit, Sarayu lived in Mack, he could have a relationship with him all of the time, just like they were having when they talked face to face.

When Mack began to feel his depression settle over him, he admitted to Jesus that he felt lost. Jesus sympathized with Mack's feelings of being lost but assured him that he was not lost because Jesus was not lost, Mack only felt lost.

In Chapter 8, Mack had a dream of flying that night, the sort he had not had since he had been affected by the depression he referred to as The Great Sadness. His dream of flying, however, turned into a dream of Missy, his daughter whom he chased through the rain. He felt he was being sucked down into the mud. Just before he drowned, he woke up.

Mack woke and remembered he was with three people all of whom thought they were God. He wondered if God was really there, why he did not keep Mack from having the nightmares.

In the living area, Papa asked Mack how he had slept and hinted that any dreams he had might have been his mind's way of letting out the bad things that had happened to him. They continue to discuss the nature of God when Mack asks Papa if Bruce Cockburn, the singer to whom she was listening was her favorite. She told him that she had no favorites, but was fond of all her children. She did get mad at them sometimes, just like a parent got mad at his children.

Mack next questioned Papa's lack of wrath. He indicates that the God in the Bible killed people often. Papa insinuates that she understands how his encounter with her is disorienting but that he needs to accept what is instead of what he has been conditioned over the years to think. He began to get angry, and asked again if Papa did not enjoy punishing people for their sin. Papa explained that sin was its own punishment. She said she was not there to punish sin, but to cure it.

As Mack watched the way Papa, Jesus and Sarayu interacted at breakfast he said that he was surprised because none of them acted as the head over the others. He said he had always imagined God being the leader over Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The three at first pretended to have no idea what he was talking about but then Papa admitted they were kidding. She explained their relationship consisted of unity, not authority. She said it was sin that made people believe they would not work or live together without someone being in charge. This need for laws and rules kills relationships.

Sarayu added that in a selfish world, authority could be abused to inflict harm. What they created has become very different from what they envisioned, but still they seek to work through it to try to free people from the laws and rules they have established. Although they admit to Mack that many people will use power to manipulate others, the members of the trinity would not do so.

When Mack next asked how God could allow evil to continue, God said that each situation had to be examined in its own circumstances. They could work through evil circumstances to provide a loving outcome. Ultimately, they claim that even though they



do not change human will, their plan for the earth will ultimately be achieved. Mack asked if the ultimate goal was worth the cost, to which they all answered yes.

Papa again addresses the way that Mack has founded his belief in God around lies. Lies that indicate that pain and death are evil while God is not trustworthy. She told Mack that the underlying problem in his life was that Mack did not think that God was good. Mack admitted to himself and the others that he did not really trust God but that he did not know how to change his mindset. At that, Sarayu asked Mack to help her in the garden. She indicated she needed his help for a celebration they had planned for the following day. As a final comment, Mack told Papa he still did not understand how all the pain in the world could be justified. Papa indicated their intent was not to justify the pain but to redeem it.

Analysis

A focus of this pair of chapters is Mack's doubt as he first wonders if he is crazy, and then wonders of the three people with whom he is spending his weekend are crazy. In the bathroom as he washes up for dinner the first night he is at the cabin with Papa, Mack looks in the mirror "searching for some sign of insanity in those eyes staring back at him" (106). He thought perhaps he was having a dream or a hallucination. When he woke in the morning after having spent some time looking at the stars with Jesus, Mack wondered if that had really happened. He also wondered if the person with whom he was staying was really God, why he had been allowed to have such disturbing and true to life nightmares that night about Missy's death.

Mack then addresses his doubt that the people with whom he is visiting are really the trinity because they are so different from the way he had always assumed the trinity would be. One of the problems he addresses right away about the trinity is the fact that they act in unity, not in a chain of command. He learns that God intended for humans to live in unity just like the trinity does but that humans, in their evil and sinful natures, had chosen to impose laws and rules on themselves.

Another incorrect notion that Mack has of God according to this book is that he has always believed that God was ultimately angry and untrustworthy. "You see pain and death as ultimate evils and God as the ultimate betrayer, or perhaps, at best, as fundamentally untrustworthy" (132). Papa explains to Mack that even her anger is a way of expressing love. Mack agrees with the idea that he does not trust God but points out that with all the evil in the world, he does not think the end will justify the means.

The wording in Papa's response to Mack's belief that there is no way is justify the pain in the world gives a glimpse into the mindset of God. Papa tells Mack that when it comes to sin and evil, "We're not justifying it. We are redeeming it" (133). Justification is a process of showing how something is right. To justify why Missy was murdered would be to provide an explanation showing how it had to happen, or was part of God's plan. Papa tells Mack this is not what the trinity has in mind for the evils of the world. Instead of justification, they want to redeem the evilness of the world. By saying they are



focused on redeeming these evil deeds, the members of the trinity indicate they intend to bring about good results, even from the evil of the world. Because they allow humans to have free will, the members of the trinity cannot stop or interfere with their behavior, but can try to see that good comes even out of the evil.

Mack continues to notice the loving and simple way that the members of the trinity interact with each other. He notices they do not get angry with the dish of food is dropped but instead laugh and work together to clean up the mess. Mack is surprised by their reaction to the accident and the way he might act in the same situation. “Obviously, what was truly important here was the love they had for one another and the fullness it brought them” (107). The scene in which Jesus washes the sauce he spilled from Papa’s feet is an obvious reference to the Biblical story of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet, proof that he had come as a servant, not a ruler.

When Mack confronts Jesus because he is not as attractive as Mack always thought he would be, notice that Jesus points out that Mack is responding to another preconceived notion humans have about him. Jesus points out to Mack that after all, he is Jewish and most Jews have large noses when Mack says to him “I thought you’d be the ideal man, you know, athletic and overwhelmingly good-looking” (114).

Notice the literary techniques in this section of the novel. For instance, Papa tells Mack about dreams that: “They can be a way of openin’ up the window and lettin’ the bad air out” (123). This quote compares in a metaphor the way dreams free the mind of bad thoughts to the way opening a window can clean a home of bad or smelly air. Also notice the author’s use of humor in the inclusion of the common saying “who but God knew what” (107) when Mack tries to explain with what spices the vegetables were seasoned. In most cases this saying is used to indicate something is unknown. In this case the author is saying that literally, God was the only one who knew how the food had been flavored because he was the one who had made it.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the acts of justification and redemption. Why is it important that God intends to redeem evil and not justify it?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the preconceived notions that Mack holds about God and the trinity (i.e. Jesus as the ideal man, God as an angry God, God as the leader of the trinity). Do the explanations given to counter these preconceived notions make sense? Why or why not? Give examples from the book to support your answers.



Discussion Question 3

Discuss Jesus' pleasure at seeing the stars. Do you understand how the stars might look different to Jesus as a creator and Jesus in human form? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

reverie, uproarious, nonchalantly, facilitate, excruciatingly, evocative, transcends, daft, ascend, quandary, preconceived, estranged, hierarchy, ubiquitous, paradigm, deviant, eradicate, coercion



Chapters 9 - 10

Summary

In Chapter 9, Mack was surprised when Sarayu took him to a chaotic garden full of color but lacking in order. Sarayu described the garden as a fractal, which she said she loved, but Mack muttered under his breath that it looked like a mess to him. Sarayu took the statement as a compliment. Mack followed Sarayu as she moved haphazardly through the garden cutting flowers, clipping herbs and handing them to Mack. When they had collected a large bouquet that Sarayu put inside a garden shop nearby, she told him they had one more task to complete.

Back in the garden, Sarayu stopped at a patch of ground with yellow and purple flowers growing in it. She asked him to help in clearing that plot. Mack was surprised she was asking him to help clear out such a beautiful spot but she said she had something special to plant there. She cut the flowers down to the earth while Mack collected the clippings. As they worked, Mack asked if Sarayu had also created poisonous plants and pesky bugs along with beautiful and necessary things. Sarayu criticizes Mack for judging things good and evil based on his own limited knowledge.

Sarayyu next directed Mack to help her dig up the roots of the plants as that was the only way to keep those roots from damaging what they would plant there the following day. She began talking to Mack about the Garden of Eden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When Sarayu questions Mack about how he discerned good from evil he admitted it was a pretty subjective process. Sarayu explained that when each person decided for himself what was good and evil, it was the disagreements that caused fights and wars to break out. She explained it was Adam and Eve's choice to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that tore the world apart.

Sarayyu told Mack that a human's desire for independence in the judging of good and evil was what made them judges in place of God. In order to fix this, Sarayu told Mack he had to give up his belief that he had the ability to judge what was right and wrong on his own. Mack understood what Sarayu was saying but said it would be hard for him to accept some things as good, like the death of his daughter. Sarayu criticized Mack's idea that Missy had a right to be protected. She explained that rights were a way of keeping a survivor from having to deal with a relationship. In reality, Sarayu told Mack he had no rights. Any rights he thought he might have would only make him mad when someone impeded on what he thought were his rights.

Papa came bringing lunch and Sarayu said they had just finished their work. Before he left, Mack told Sarayu that he felt strangely at home in the garden even though it still had a good deal of work left to complete. It was at that time that Sarayu decided to tell Mack that the garden was his soul, they had been working that day to make it perfect.



In Chapter 10, Mack found Jesus working on something that looked like a small coffin in his workshop. Jesus stopped work when Mack entered and said there was a place on the other side of the lake to which he wanted to take Mack to eat their lunches. Mack was surprised when Jesus did not head for a path leading around the lake but instead straight toward the dock. He was even more surprised when Jesus walked to the end of the dock past the canoes and indicated they were going to walk across the water. Mack hesitated and Jesus poked fun at him, pointing out that if Peter could do it, Mack could as well.

Mack still hesitated and Jesus pointed out to Mack that he was afraid of what he imagined might happen. He explained that when Mack imagined what might happen in the future, that Jesus was not there in the future. He was only with him in the present. Jesus continued to explain that Mack has such a good deal of fear in his life because he did not know that God was good and God loved him.

During lunch, the two talked more about human's free will and how God did not interfere with that free will. The discussion came as Jesus and Mack discussed the way that so many people were destroying the planet God had created. Even in that instance, God would not step in and stop the chaos humans were creating. Jesus explained that love was not about forcing one's will on another person. When they were finished with their lunches, Jesus told Mack that he had another appointment and directed him to follow a path to his next engagement.

Analysis

In this section, it is a literary device that is a main point of interest because it is used to tell a good portion of Chapter 9. The garden in which Mack and Sarayu work is an extended metaphor for Mack's soul. First, the garden is wild, unkept and unorganized, somewhat like Mack's soul. Although it is not in perfect order it is still a thing of beauty. It could be because the garden plot represents Mack's soul that Sarayu and the others are so tickled when Mack indicates that he believes it is beautiful. Sarayu puts Mack to work in his own soul-garden cleaning a plot of ground. She tells him they are preparing for a special planting the following day. From this plot they remove not only the visible portions of the plants above the ground, but also the hidden roots below the ground. Sarayu tells him that if they leave the roots, the beginnings of plants, that these roots will damage the fresh seeds they intend on planting. In the same way, if the entirety of evil is not removed from one's life, it will come back and choke out the good one tries to do.

This garden, of course, also brings to mind the Garden of Eden in which Adam and Eve committed the first sin and scarred forever humankind's relationship with God. It is with this in mind that Sarayu talks to Mack about how humans have gone so wrong in judging good and evil. Since each person's idea of what is good and what is evil is different, they fight with each other over their definitions.



Jesus speaks with Mack similarly about rights when Mack asks if Missy did not have the right to be protected. He said that falling back on arguing what rights a person had were a way of avoiding relationships. Rights, like one's knowledge of good and evil, were subjective and could easily cause disagreements.

The book even includes an example of walking on water, a performance that it appears no creation about Jesus would be complete without. Jesus uses this exercise as a way to teach Mack that he needs to live in the present with Jesus, not to fear his own imaginations of what might happen in the future.

Jesus continues to stress to Mack in this section that he is not able to interfere in human free will, even if he sees that humans are about to do something that will be harmful to them. "I've never taken control of your choices or forced you to do anything, even when what you were about to do was destructive or hurtful to yourself and others" (154) Jesus says to Mack as they talk about the way humans have abused the world that he created. Jesus points out that even though humans tend to refer to him as "Lord" or "King" (154) those are not really the roles that Jesus wants to fill. He points out that if he did not allow the humans free will, they would also not have the free will to decide for themselves if they wanted to love him or not.

Relationships being preferable to leadership in the kingdom of God is discussed by Jesus and Mack in the context of the relationships between the members of the Holy Trinity. Papa has already talked to Mack about the way that none of the members of the trinity act as a leader or one with more power than the others. In this section Jesus expounds on the idea of submission. "Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way" (155). Some Christians again may be offended by the use of the word submission in reference to the relationship between God and humans. While they believe humans should be submitted to God, they do not believe that God should be submissive. They perhaps misdefine the word submission in the Biblical sense. As Jesus points out, in their definition, submission is not about bowing to authority or being obedient. It is more about serving others out of respect, as Jesus says it is "about relationships of love and respect" (155).

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the lesson Jesus hoped to teach Mack about walking on the water. Do you think Mack understands what he is being taught? Why or why not? What are some of the dangers of living in the past or future more than we live in the present?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way Jesus defines submission. How does this Biblical definition clarify God's intended relationship with humanity? In what ways do Papa, Jesus and Sarayu show that they live in submission to each other? Give examples from the book to support your answer.



Discussion Question 3

How does the author use the garden to represent Mack's soul?

Vocabulary

ethereal, blatant, fractal, verdant, wafted, pungent, tandem, ravaged, autonomy, conversely, subjective, inherent, legitimately, subsiding, panorama, sentinels, plunder, consummated, perpetrated, quipped



Chapter 11

Summary

In Chapter 11, Mack walked down the path through what appeared to be the solid stone face of a mountain. In the dark he felt his depression return in the dark but believed God would not have sent him there if it was not for a good purpose. Once his eyes adjusted to the dark, he noticed a growing light and a beautiful Hispanic woman sitting at a huge desk.

The woman, who remains unnamed, asked Mack which of his children he loved the most. He describes that they are each unique in their own ways. When he thinks of each one, he uses the words of Papa to explain that he realizes he is particularly fond of each of them. She then asked if their misbehaviors ever affected the love that he had for his children. He says that it does not, that even when he is angered by their actions, he still knows they are his children and he still loves them. The judge congratulates Mack for having allowed God to help him learn how to love his children well despite the bad example of love he received from his own father.

When the judge compared the love that Mack had for his children to the love that the Father had for his, Mack was angered. The judge sensed the anger and asked if Mack believed that the Father loved his children. Mack made his point by asking if Missy was one of God's children. He said that if Missy were one of God's children, then he did not think that God loved his children very well. The judge rose from her seat and offered it to Mack. She told him that he was there not only to talk about his children but also for judgement.

Mack was confused by her statement and believed that he was there to be judged but the Judge cleared up his confusion when she told him that he was there to be the judge. He tried to say that he had no ability to judge but she insisted that statement was not true as he had already made judgements in the short time they were there together. She recounted the things on which he had passed judgement and asked what criteria he used when making his judgements. Mack was unable to come up with an answer but the Judge helped him out by telling him that in order to judge someone he first had to believe he was superior to that person.

After Mack took the place she offered in the regal chair behind the ebony desk, the Judge told Mack he was responsible for judging God and the human race. She gave him examples of the evil people in the world, including men who beat their wives and sons, as a way of engaging his anger. She next asked if a man who killed little girls should be judged. Mack yelled at her that he should be damned to hell. She asked about the one who twisted his son into the terror he became and Mack said he should be damed as well. The Judge then asked how far back they should go since humans had been broken since the beginning of time. She indicated that perhaps God was to blame, that a father as good as Mack was could judge the Father.



She asked him plainly if he did not think that God was to blame because he knew one day Missy would be tortured but he still continued with creation, and then even knowing what would happen did not stop it. When Mack agreed God was to blame, the Judge told him that since he had judged God so well, he had shown he was capable of judging the whole world. For this reason the Judge asked him to decide which two of his children would spend eternity in heaven while the other three would spend their eternity in hell.

As Mack grappled with what she was asking him to do, the Judge reminded him that he thought God should send the majority of people to hell, so he must think the same way of his own children. As the judge pushed him for a decision, Mack said that he could not decide. Finally, he fell at the Judge's feet, offering to go in his children's place. The Judge told him that in his actions, he had judged his children worthy of love, even when that love, like Jesus' love, cost him everything.

When the Judge indicated that he had learned what Papa's love was like Mack cringed because he did not think the God he encountered in Papa was the real God. He added that he did not understand how God could have loved Missy perfectly and allowed her to be murdered. When Mack thought perhaps God had hurt Missy to punish him for what he had done to his father, the Judge told him that God was not punishing anyone for what had happened in the past. Mack admitted he did not want to blame Papa for what had happened and wanted to trust her.

Mack admitted he would need help trusting Papa and he suddenly heard the sound of children's laughter. Mack noticed he could see through one of the walls of the cave and could see his children, including Missy, playing together. Missy ran to the other side of the wall where he was standing. The Judge told Mack that Missy knew he was there but could not see him. As he watched Missy she mouthed the words "It's okay" (179) and signed that she loved him. The Judge told Mack that Missy was looking at a waterfall but that she knew that her father was behind it. Mack asked if he could get a kiss and hug from Missy, the Judge told him that Missy had wanted their meeting to be handled this way with no physical interaction.

Mack asked the Judge if Missy had forgiven him for what happened to her. The Judge indicates there is nothing that he did for which Missy has to forgive him. Missy gave him an air kiss and hug before running back to the other children, who had been joined by Jesus. When the image of his children faded, the Judge sent Mack back to Jesus.

Analysis

Mack's improper way of thinking about judgement is addressed in this section of the novel. He has judged in the past to make himself feel better than others and give himself a sense of superiority. Using the idea that God loves humanity just like a parent loves his children, the Judge narrows this idea of that Mack represents God and his children represent humanity. She makes the point to Mack by giving him his own rules by which to judge, that God sends the majority of his children to hell, that God is no



more capable of dictating which of his children should be sent to hell than Mack is capable of sending any of his children to hell.

The Judge corrects Mack's improper idea of judgement when she tells him that judgement is "not about destruction, but about setting things right" (182).

Mack makes great strides when instead he asks the judge if he can go to hell on behalf of his children. This, of course, is symbolic of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross so that none of humanity is doomed to hell. The Judge also commends Mack on having learned to love his children well despite the bad example his father gave him of love.

Mack makes steps toward growing in faith when he stays in the dark of the cave even though he feels panic and believes the weight of his depression is settling in on him. "He desperately wanted to back out into the light, but in the end he believed that Jesus would not have sent him in here without a good purpose" (162). In this instance he chooses to trust that God will use the experience he will have in that dark cave to better him, not to harm him.

There is a good deal of symbolism used in this section of the novel. The darkness of the cave is the representation of evil with the light that focuses on the judge being goodness. The impending size of the desk and chair where the Judge sits is intended to impress on Mack how insignificant he is and how unworthy he is of judging anyone, especially God.

One quote stands out as an example of the use of two different literary techniques. This quote: "Like a breeze sweeping away the dust, her voice gently ushered his question out of the room" (164) uses both a simile and personification. When the Judge chooses not to answer Mack's question her voice as she answered his question with a question is described in a simile as "a breeze" (164). This same voice as well as Mack's question is later personified as it "gently ushered his question out of the room" (164).

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the idea of judgement as presented in this section of the novel with the idea you had of judgement before reading this chapter of the novel.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way the Judge manipulates Mack in order to get him to play along with her. How does she interact with him differently than Papa, Sarayu and Jesus? Use examples from the book to support your answers.



Discussion Question 3

At the end of his session with the Judge, Mack gets to see Missy. Why do you think it was at this point in Mack's journey with God and the rest of the trinity that he was allowed to see that his daughter was well in heaven? Support your answer with examples from the book.

Vocabulary

impasse, luminosity, dissipated, coalescent, visage, resonant, facades, belligerent, commendation, demeanor, intoning, incredulous, placid, coherent, assuage, heinous, vehemently, translucent, consternation, anteroom, obliterated, indelibly, nuance



Chapters 12 - 13

Summary

In Chapter 12, as Mack walked back toward the lake he realized that The Great Sadness was gone. Jesus asked him how his time with Sophia, whom he describes as the personification of God's wisdom, was. Mack described it as being both terrible and wonderful.

He does ask Jesus about Missy's time with the serial killer. He was still tormented by the idea that his daughter was alone during that time. Jesus comforted Mack by telling him that Missy was never alone during her time with the killer. He told Mack that Missy prayed for her family and was more concerned about them than herself.

After having cried on Jesus' shoulder, Mack attempted to walk across the lake but was surprised when he sunk. It was not until he turned to look back at Jesus and reminded himself that Jesus was there that he began to rise back up to the surface. Mack considered that he was beginning to believe in Jesus even if he was just taking baby steps. Jesus told him that it would take him a while to come completely out of the dark and that he would have to depend on Jesus to do so.

Mack additionally asked Jesus if he was seeing heaven when he was seeing where Missy was. Jesus said that heaven was not what people expected it to be. Instead heaven was a picture of his perfect relationship with the church. He explained the gate of the city was made of a single pearl, Jesus, because Jesus was the way into heaven. As for the church, Jesus did not believe it was made up of buildings and programs but instead people and their lives. Mack understood by this that being a part of the church was not a matter of fulfilling demands and working. Jesus admitted to Mack that he did not like the institution of religion because it could be more detrimental to people than helpful.

Jesus next told Mack that following him had nothing to do with being a Christian because even Jesus was not a Christian. He said that his followers could come from a variety of different religions, political backgrounds and professions. He indicated that his goal was not to make people Christians but to transform them into followers of Jesus. He said it did not necessarily mean that all roads led to him, but that he would go where he needed to find his children.

In Chapter 13, Mack apologized to Papa for being so hard on her and acting as her judge. He also thanked her for his chance to spend some time with Missy and added he wished that Nan could have been there for the meeting. For a moment, Mack asked if Missy were a sacrifice so that he could grow closer in faith to God but Papa stopped him by telling him that she never orchestrated tragedies.



Mack next turns to how little he understood the true nature of God. Papa agreed as she explained that people, especially in religion, tried to play God and Jesus against each other with God being the “bad cop” (203) and Jesus being the “good cop” (203). Papa said that he did not believe that guilt was an acceptable motivator because it only made a person work to conform to some outside, tangible goal while Papa was interested in changes on the inside of a person.

Papa next addressed lies and the way people often hid inside them for safety. Mack told Papa he had lied to Nan about his trip and the note because he believed it would only hurt her. Papa told Mack that was a lie. She told him Mack had not told Nan because he wanted to protect himself from the emotions that might have arisen from the letter. She adds that if he had told Nan about the note, she might have come with him. It was her decision to come or not to come but Mack had denied her that decision. To fix his lie, Papa told Mack that he needed to tell Nan about the note and what had happened during his time with the Holy Trinity.

The two again discuss the way that Papa used each person’s bad decisions to lead them to him. Papa said he did not use pain to force people to him, that love never forces. Papa explained that the world did not know what evils she might have stopped because they did not know what happened. Again, she stressed that evil came from independence. If she were to take away the consequences of people’s free will, love would have no meaning. Papa reminded Mack that people demanded their independence, and then complained when they were given what they asked for.

Mack then asked what Papa had accomplished through Jesus’s death. She said she had accomplished her plan for the world. That through his death, the world was reconciled to him. Eventually, Papa’s plan would come to fruition. Mack questions the idea of reconciliation and Papa explains it is a two-way street. While she has reconciled with the world, each human has to reconcile as well.

Analysis

Seeing Missy and knowing that she is okay changes Mack’s outlook on several points including his physical depression. When he walks back toward the lake, he realizes that his depression has lifted. He has gotten assurance that his daughter does not blame him for what happened to her. He also receives assurance from Jesus that Missy was not alone while she was with her serial killer. Mack’s breakthrough with his depression comes with the realization that Missy would be hurt if she believed that her father were allowing himself to remain in depression because of a situation over which he had no control.

Mack learns from Papa and Jesus that the institution of religion does not always reflect what they had intended. “As well-intentioned as it might be, you know that religious machinery can chew up people!” Jesus said with a bite of his own. “An awful lot of what is done in my name has nothing to do with me and is often, even if unintentional, very contrary to my purposes” (193-194). Jesus says very plainly that he does not like the



way that religion can be used to abuse people and degrade them for their faults. Jesus goes on to explain to Mack that a good deal of what goes on behind church doors is often contrary to the message that Jesus wants to send to people. While talking to Papa later, Mack and Papa discuss the way religious leaders try to make God the punisher while Jesus is the one with a loving attitude. “When they want people to do what they think is right, they need a stern God. When they need forgiveness, they run to Jesus” (203), Papa says. Papa argues that in reality the three entities of the trinity have the same loving properties.

One aspect of this section that may troublesome Christians comes when Jesus says that he is not interested in making people Christians. It may not be that the author is belittling salvation, but that he is stressing the idea that Jesus is not interested in making people Christians in title only. He wants a relationship with each person, not for them just to bear a title to keep from going to hell.

Although Mack’s faith in God and trust in him is growing, he still sinks when he tries to start the walk back across the water on his own. This is a lesson for Mack to wait for God in everything and not step out in advance. It is not until Jesus begins to walk with Mack that he rises back up to the surface. Even in his determination to prove his faith, Mack learned that no matter of human determination could prove to Jesus that he had that faith.

Mack’s decision not to tell Nana about the note is addressed in this section. Papa waits until Mack indicates that he wishes his wife were there before he tells him that she could have been if Mack had been truthful. Papa told Mack he had lied to himself when he said he was saving Nan from pain when he did not show her the note. He said Mack was instead saving himself from the pain of the emotions that Nan might have after he showed her the note. By lying, Mack had taken away Nana’s ability to make her own choice about the note and whether or not she wanted to go to the shack with Mack.

Jesus is symbolized as a pearl in this section of the novel. He calls himself the single pearl that makes up the gates allowing entrance into heaven. This appears to prove the belief that Jesus is the only way to salvation and entrance into heaven. A person must enter heaven through Jesus, literally, as he is described in this section. Also note that Jesus points out to Mack that pearls are an important image because they were created through pain. An oyster creates a pearl as a way to stop the pain when an irritant gets into its shell. It was only through Jesus’ pain on the cross that he became this perfect pearl through which people could enter into heaven.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Papa’s revelation that Mack’s decision to not tell Nan about the note was done to protect Mack more than it was to protect Nan. Do you agree? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that both Papa and Jesus are so critical of religion? Do you agree with their comments about organized religion? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the idea that Jesus is not a Christian. Why do you think he says that he is not interested in making Christians?

Vocabulary

perplexed, personification, transparency, visage, futile, arrogant, hypothetical, obscured, tenacious, delusions, pinnacle, reconciled



Chapters 14 - 15

Summary

In Chapter 14, after talking to Papa, Mack took one of the canoes out onto the lake. He was thinking about how best to reach Kate when he was surprised by Sarayu's sudden appearance in the prow of the boat. She explained she had been sent to invite him back to the house for supper. As they make their way across the lake, Mack admitted that he was unsure how to go back to his old life, but learn to still pay attention to the Holy Trinity without their voices talking directly to him.

They discuss Papa's assertion that Mack was afraid of emotions. Sarayu described emotion as the "colors of the soul" (214) and told Mack they were neither good nor bad, they just existed. Emotions, however, were often powered by a person's perception of what was happening. If a person's perception of what was happening was wrong, they would probably respond to it with an improper emotion. Mack commented that living in tune with his emotions was more difficult than just following the rules set forth in the Bible. Sarayu explains that the Bible is not a rule book, but instead offers a picture of Jesus.

During dinner, Mack tried to stay focused on the conversation but he found his mind wandering to how he would handle his life once he got back. He finally voiced his question and was surprised when Papa and Jesus looked at Sarayu. She explained that when he asked what he was supposed to do when he got back to his life it was as if he were putting rule following over a relationship with them. She explained to Mack that even the Ten Commandments were not given as a list of rules to follow but a way to show humans how unlikely it was that they could ever successfully live up to God's expectations. Once Jesus came and sacrificed himself, Sarayu tells Mack that the rules were overcome by Jesus' sacrifice.

As the discussion continued, Sarayu explained that the rules gave people the belief that they could live independently by following the rules and could also make people believe they had the right to judge others and feel superior to them. The discussion became literary as Sarayu told Mack that she preferred verbs to nouns. She explained verbs were "alive, dynamic, ever active, and moving" (223), just like she was. She went on to say that people had a tendency to take verbs and turn them into nouns, words Sarayu considered dead. The nouns were the rules, dead and without grace; while the verbs represented the ability for grace to intercede. She explained that religion depended on the laws to control people so that it could survive.

On the topic of expectations, Mack asked if Papa did not expect people to put her first in their lives. Papa told Mack he should not look at putting God first in his life as a pyramid where God got the biggest chunk of time but should instead look at it like a mobile where God is the center of the mobile and everything that Mack does revolves around God.



Because Mack was getting overwhelmed, the three decided it was time for fun. Sarayu gave him her gift, she touched his eyes, healing them so that he could see what Papa, Jesus and Sarayu saw.

In Chapter 15, when Mack opened his eyes, he was sitting on a hill. The sky was moonless and Mack was entranced by the dance of the stars and comets. As he watched the forest, he saw an army of God's children walking toward him. They were all brilliant with light. Mack found himself standing in the center of these children who were obviously excited by some sense of anticipation. Another ring, this one made of adults, formed outside the ring of children. Mack noticed one of the adults seemed to be having difficulty as he was shooting off different colors of lights in a sporadic pattern. Sarayu explained to Mack that adult was having trouble holding in what he was feeling.

Sarayyu pointed out to Mack that he could respond to the man who was having so much trouble trying to hold in his feelings through his own colors. When Mack asked why the man appeared to be focused on them, Sarayu told him that he was focused on Mack. She told him that man was his father. Mack ran toward the man and called out to him. His father could not even look at Mack so Mack called out to him that he was sorry and that he loved him. They confessed and forgave one another.

Analysis

Emotion as color is a metaphor that is extended across both these chapters. When Mack and Sarayu discuss Mack's fear of emotion, Sarayu explains to him that there are no good and bad emotions, but that when fueled by an incorrect perception, an emotion is often expressed improperly. She describes emotions as the "colors of the soul" (214). She explains this is why when Mack's life was dominated by The Great Sadness that he felt as if the colors of the world had diminished. Later when Sarayu touches Mack's eyes, he is able to see the colors of emotion.

Verbs and nouns are also used as metaphors to help Mack understand the difference in living by the law and living in grace. Sarayu explains that nouns, like rules, are fixed. They give no room for grace. Laws make people feel belittled and under pressure to perform. Verbs, on the other hand, are words of motion. These verbs, like grace keep a person from getting stagnant trying to live by the letter of the law.

The mobile as a description of how God wants to be included in the lives of his children is also a metaphor to help Mack determine the way in which God wants to be involved in his life. God does not want his children to struggle with the decision of how much time they should spend with God or how much work will fulfill God's requirements, he wants to be the center of every relationship and activity in his children's lives.

Just as Mack experienced healing when he got to see Missy, he was similarly healed when he got to reunite with his father. His father was so ashamed of what he had done to his son that he was not even able to look at him in the face. Mack has to initiate the



process of forgiveness by reaching out to his father to offer his own love and forgiveness first.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way the author uses the idea of nouns and verbs to visualize the differences in a life dominated by rules and a life dominated by love. Do you think this works? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why was it so important for Mack to be able to forgive his father and be forgiven by him? What affect does this forgiveness have on his life going forward?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the image of the mobile as a visual aid to the way that God wants to be included in a believer's life. Does this image work? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

perturbed, conspicuously, banter, alleviate, empower, emphatically, volatile, myriads, instigator, euphoric, coherence, pandemonium, celestial



Chapters 16 - 17

Summary

In Chapter 16 when Papa woke Mack the following morning, Papa appeared as a man. He told Mack that he would need the support of a man and father for what they were going to do that day. After Mack dressed, he met Papa and Jesus in the kitchen. Sarayu carried in what looked like an elongated sleeping bag. She said it was a gift for later that day. Jesus indicated he had a gift for Mack that he would give when he and Papa arrived home later.

They gathered the supplies they would need and Papa took Mack to the beginning of a trail where he pointed out a tree with a red arc marked on it. As they continued to walk, Papa continued pointing out red arcs on trees and boulders as they passed. After almost two hours of walking, Papa told Mack that they had almost reached their destination.

When they rested in a field of boulders, Papa told Mack that he wanted to take away some more of the darkness that kept Mack from seeing things correctly. He explained that what they were doing that day would help to bring closure, not only to him but also to other people. He told Mack that he needed to let go of what he was holding inside. Mack did so, asking Papa how he could forgive the man who killed Missy. He said that he did not want God to redeem the man, he wanted him to go to hell. When Mack indicated that he could not forget what the man had done, Papa told him forgiveness was not about forgetting, it was about deciding to not try to get revenge for a crime. Papa told Mack that forgiving the person who hurt Missy was more about Mack than it was about the criminal. Papa hoped that Mack would take on the understanding that there is more power in love and forgiveness than in hate. He added strongly that forgiveness did not create a relationship and that Mack was not required to pretend that Missy's death never happened. When Mack asked how Missy would feel if he were to forgive the man who killed her, Papa told Mack that Missy had already forgiven him.

After Mack declared his forgiveness for the man, Papa told him it was not absolute but that he might have to forgive that man again and again for days on end to begin to really feel forgiveness. When they stood, Mack turned to walk back to the shack but Papa told him they were not finished there. Papa said they were going to take care of something that Mack had asked him to do for him. They were going to get Missy's body.

They continued following the signs of the red arcs until they reached a small pile of boulders, one of which bore the red arc symbol. Papa told Mack there was a cave hidden there in which they would find Missy's body. Once they uncovered the cave Mack lifted the body from the rock on which it had been placed and put it into Sarayu's gift, a wrapping filled with flowers and spices. Before they left, Mack noticed that Papa put the rock with the red arc on it back over the opening of the cave.



In Chapter 17, back at the cabin Mack learned that Jesus had been working of a coffin for Missy. It was carved with images of the favorite memories from the girl's life. After Missy was placed inside the coffin they carried it out to the spot that Mack had helped Sarayu prepared in the garden. After Missy's body was buried, Sarayu poured a few drops from the bottle of tears she had collected. Where these tears fell, beautiful flowers burst forth.

Back at the cabin, Papa told Mack he had a choice to make. He could remain with them or he could go back to Nan and his family. Because Papa told him that as much as Missy wanted to be with her father, she did not mind waiting, Mack decides to go back to his life with his family.

Having decided to go back, Mack is told by Sarayu that Kate believed it was her fault that Missy had been taken and killed. As soon as Sarayu said it, it made sense to Mack that Kate would believe it was her fault since she had caused the canoe to overturn when she raised her paddle, the commotion that covered Missy's abduction. He realized he had to go back, for Kate if nothing else. Although Jesus offered Mack his tin box of treasures, Mack said he did not think he needed it anymore since all of his treasures were hidden in the Holy Trinity now.

After Mack prepared to go, he found a steaming cup of coffee in the living room. Everyone else was gone. He drank the warm beverage and began to feel sleepy. When he woke, he was lying on the floor of the shack, next to the bloodstain. He walked back to Willie's Jeep and drive to the town of Joseph. He thought about checking in with Tommy but decided against it.

Driving through town, Mack pulled forward when a light turned green and was hit by a driver who ran the red light from the opposite direction. The Jeep was destroyed and Mack was taken by helicopter to Emanuel Hospital in Portland.

Analysis

Mack's last and final challenge presented to him by Papa in this section is the challenge to begin the process of forgiving the man who killed Missy. Mack's words hold very clearly his hate for the man as he cannot hold back his curse words as he says to Papa "how can I ever forgive that son of a bitch who killed my Missy?" (246). Just as he has with other issues of pertaining to his nature, God teaches Mack about the true nature of forgiveness. It does not mean that Mack has to forget what the man did or even initiate a relationship with him. In fact, God tells Mack that forgiveness is more about Mack than it is about Missy's killer. By forgiving that man, Mack will give up his need for revenge and the hold the killer has over his life.

Missy's killer getting his just punishment for what he did is another focus of Mack's discussion with Papa. Notice Mack's distress when he learns that Papa wants to redeem this evil man just like he wants to redeem Mack. Papa lays out the foundation for the forgiveness of sin. "In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me,



but only some choose relationship” (247). Papa has already forgiven this man for killing his children, one of whom was Missy. Although Mack is distressed by the idea that this man who caused him so much pain is God’s child just as much as Missy was, he has to accept that evil touched that man to turn him into the sort of person who would hurt little girls. To see it from the reverse side, Mack may not think it fair that God forgave the killer, but when it comes to Mack’s sins, would Mack want those forgiven or would he want to be judged fairly for each of his failings? After all, Mack is perhaps guilty of his father’s murder. Should he not be judged in the same way he expects Missy’s killer to be judged?

Notice that Papa changes his appearance to best help Mack in this particular situation. Instead of a black woman Papa is a man, older than Mack. He explains he is appearing as an older man because Mack will need a father figure to help him through what they are going to do that day. Later as the two wrestle with Mack’s forgiveness of Missy’s killer and then dig her body out of the cave behind the rocks, the reader can understand why the physical and emotional strength of a man was needed instead of the motherly love of a female.

In keeping with their promise to allow Mack free will, they give him the choice to remain with them or go back to his family. They tell him that if he chooses to stay with them, he will see Missy later that day. Mack reasons that he needs to go back to his family. As he is driving home, he is seriously injured in a car wreck. It is assumed that if he had chosen to stay with God and the other members of the Holy Trinity he would have been killed in the wreck.

Remember in this section how Papa tells Mack that what they will be doing that day will help others, like ripples on a lake after a rock is thrown in. Remember also the way that Papa carefully places the rock with the red mark back over the mouth of the cave from which they took Missy’s body. These things will be important in the end of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the nature of forgiveness as indicated in this section of the novel.

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Papa leads Mack to the grave where Missy’s body is buried? Why is this so important to Mack?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the importance of the way that Papa appears to Mack in this section of the novel. Why does his appearance change? Why is this necessary?

Vocabulary

elongated, mulled, moot, traverse, indwells, vestige, ascending, transfixed, overt, pylons



Chapter 18

Summary

In Chapter 18, Mack woke slowly hearing squeals of excitement whenever he squeezed someone's hand or opened his eyes. At first he was not sure where he was or what had happened to him. He finally learned he had been unconscious for nearly four days after a bad car wreck. There were bits and pieces of his drive to Joseph that he remembered. He saw images of Papa, Jesus, Sarayu and the judge in his dreams.

About a week after the wreck, Willie came to see him. He told Mack that Nan was mad at him for letting him borrow his Jeep to drive to the shack. Mack asked why he had been at the shack and Willie mentioned the note. It was this mention that made Mack remember what had happened. Everything came back so powerfully that Mack started crying and Willie apologized, asking what he had said that was wrong. Mack finally composed himself to the point that he could tell Willie that God was there. He even said God had sent a message along for Willie, that he was especially fond of him. Willie fought for emotion for a while before he told Willie he had to go.

Mack finally had an opportunity to tell Nan what had happened to him over the weekend though Nan told him the car wreck was not Sunday night but Friday night. She at first seemed to think what had happened was just a result of the car wreck and neurological damage but soon understood what happened had deeply impacted her husband. She followed through with his request to arrange some time for them to be alone with Kate. He noticed that when he told her he wanted to talk about Missy that her face went dark. She pulled back her hand and asked her father why they wanted to talk about Missy. He told her that what happened to Missy was not her fault, and that no one blamed her for what had happened. Kate ran away, overwhelmed by emotion but when Mack woke later he found her curled up next to him asleep. Nan told him that she believed his story.

A month after he was discharged from the hospital, Mack, along with Nan, called Tommy to see if he would go back into the woods near the shack with them. Tommy agreed to do so. Following the red arcs, Mack led Tommy, Nan and Willie through the woods on a two-hour hike until they reached the cave where Missy's body was located. It was only because Papa had left the rock with the red mark facing outward that Mack was able to find the spot where Missy was buried. When Tommy understood what was hidden there he told them they needed to get a forensics squad to open the cave.

Two weeks after experts searched through the evidence they found in the cave they were able to identify and arrest the Little Ladykiller. Using what they had learned at Missy's grave they were also able to find the bodies of the other girls he had killed.

In the After Words, the point of view returns to Willie's voice and the tense returns to the present tense. Willie says that while some may question Mack's story, Mack swears that it is true. Meanwhile, Willie indicates that his entire life has been changed by the story



Mack has told him. Mack has been changed as well. He loves more deeply and forgives more easily. Willie explains it as if he is living his childhood again.

Willie indicates that Mack is testifying at the Little Ladykiller's trial as Willie is writing his story. Although Mack has tried to schedule a visit with the man, his requests have been denied. Mack plans to continue trying.

Willie says he thinks that Mack and Nan still go to visit the shack. Willie suspects that Mack puts his feet in the water beside the dock, just to see if he is still able to walk on the water.

Analysis

When Mack regains consciousness from his wreck, he first does not remember what happened to him. He has images of Papa, Jesus, Missy and Sarayu but is unable to connect them. It is when Willie mentions the note that Mack got in his mailbox that Mack clearly remembers the details of his weekend.

It is no surprise that Nan, who always had a close relationship with God, believes her husband's story of his weekend with Papa is true. At first she thought he had just had a dream while he was unconscious but after Mack is able to correctly address what was bothering Kate so badly she believes him without reservation.

Willie, on the other hand, has his doubts. He wants to believe that Mack really spent time with God and the members of the Holy Trinity but cannot bring his faith to stretch that far. Regardless, he honors Mack's story enough that he agrees to help write it.

Remember that when Papa and Mack removed Missy's body from its makeshift grave, Papa carefully reset the rock with the red mark on it over the mouth of the cave. It is not until Mack, Tommy, Nan and Willie later go to find that particular cave that Mack realizes that Papa was thinking in advance when he reset the rock the way he did. It is only because Mack is able to recognize this rock that he is able to locate the hidden grave.

Also remember that Papa told Mack what they were doing when they recovered Missy's body would bring closure to many other families. When Mack is able to locate Missy's grave, and show Tommy and the forensics agents the marks the killer left for himself so he could find Missy's grave again, they were able to use that information to find the graves of the other little girls the man had killed. Additionally, enough DNA evidence was found in the grave so that the killer could be arrested and sent to trial.

Discussion Question 1

Does it surprise you that Mack is trying to meet with the man who killed Missy? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Do you think Mack's experience with God and the members of the Holy Spirit was real or was it a dream? Support your answer with examples from the book. Also, does it matter if it was a dream? Does it make the experience any less life changing?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Kate's response to her father's insistence that Missy's death was not her fault. Can you understand why Kate might have blamed herself?

Vocabulary

conjured, alleviated, salvaged, veracity, adamant, rendered, contrive



Characters

Mackenzie “Mack” Allen Phillips

Mackenzie “Mack” Allen Phillips is the main character of this novel. He is the husband of Nan and father of Jon, Tyler, Josh, Kate and Missy. Phillips struggles with his faith and belief in God especially after the abduction and murder of Missy, his youngest daughter.

Even though he attended seminary as a young man, Mack never had a trusting relationship with God. When he was a child, Mack’s father abused alcohol. When he was drunk he beat his wife. To make matters worse, Mack’s father was an elder at the church the family attended. When Mack, at thirteen, admitted to one of the member of the church that he did nothing to help his mother when his father was drunk and beat her that church member told Mack’s father what Mack had said. As a result his father punished him by tying him to a tree, and then beating him and lecturing him for two days.

When Mack healed enough from his beating that he could walk again he left home. Before he went, he put rat poisoning in all of his father’s bottles of liquor. It is assumed the poison killed him. Mack sent his time overseas where he worked and sent money back to support his family. During this time, Mack went to seminary in Australia.

When he returned home to the United States, Mack and met his wife, Nan. They had five children together. During their married lives, Mack was impressed by Nan’s closeness to God but he continued with his distant relationship with God and religion. One day during a Labor Day camping trip Mack’s life was changed when his youngest daughter was abducted and killed.

Three and a half years after her disappearance, Mack suffers with depression he calls The Great Sadness because of his loss. He has drifted even further from God and religion. One day he receives in his mailbox a note signed from “Papa” asking Mack to meet him at the shack. Mack is both angered by the letter and curious about it. He is angry because he assumes the shack to which the writer of the letter refers is the one where Missy’s bloody dress was found. He is curious because the letter is signed by Papa. Papa is the name that Nan uses to refer to God. Mack’s curiosity gets the best of him and he goes to the shack where he meets God and the other members of the Holy Trinity. During the weekend they lead Mack through exercises where they help him strengthen his relationship with God and help him understand in what ways his thinking about God is incorrect. At the end of his experience, God shows Papa where Missy’s body is located.

Leaving the shack to return home, Mack is seriously injured when he is hit by a drunk driver. Even though he had thought he was returning home on Sunday, his wife tells him it was Friday night when he was hit. Mack believes his experience with the Holy Trinity



was real even though it is suggested that it might have been a dream he had while unconscious as a result of the wreck.

Regardless, once Mack recovers from his injuries he is able to show the authorities where Missy's body was hidden. This find leads to the arrest of the man who killed her. Mack is also able to help his other daughter, Kate, recover from her fear that her family believed Missy's death was her fault. Also as a result of his experience with the Holy Trinity, real or dreamed, Mack develops a closer relationship with God.

Nannette “Nan” A. Samuelson

Nannette “Nan” A. Samuelson is Mack's wife. She is the mother of Jon, Tyler, Josh, Kate and Missy. Unlike her husband, Nan has a very close relationship with God. This close relationship is evidenced by her habit of calling God “Papa,” a nickname that connotes love and familiarity.

Nan is not a character of focus in the novel. She is not on the camping trip with her husband and children when Missy was abducted because she had to take classes for continuing education for her job as a nurse. Believing that the note will only upset Nan, Mack does not tell Nan about it nor does he tell her about his plans to visit the shack.

Katherine “Kate” Phillips

Katherine “Kate” Phillips is the oldest daughter of Mack and Nan. Because she lifts her paddle to wave at her father while she and her brother Josh are canoeing that the canoe overbalances and Josh almost drowns. Because the serial killer uses the commotion caused by the capsized canoe to kidnap Missy, Kate believes that her sister's abduction and death is her fault. She thinks that the other family members believe she was at fault for Missy's death as well. It is not until after Mack's weekend with Papa and the other members of the Holy Trinity that he recognizes Kate's troubles come from her fear that Missy's death was her fault. Mack works with Kate to help her understand she was not at fault for her sister's death.

Officer Tommy Dalton

Officer Tommy Dalton is one of the officers from the local law enforcement agency who first responds to the campgrounds when Missy's abduction is reported. Because the officer becomes so close to Mack and his family during the search for Missy and investigation into her disappearance that they call him simply Tommy. Tommy is particularly invested in the case because he has a young daughter of his own.

After Mack recovers from his wreck, Tommy agrees to escort him back into the woods near the shack to locate Missy's body. Tommy goes along with his friend not really believing that they will find the body but once he sees that Mack is following a well marked path just like Mack had described to him, Tommy becomes convinced.



Emil Ducette

Emil Ducette is a member of a family that camps near the Phillips family during their Labor Day weekend outing. Because he is an agent for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement, Emil is particularly helpful in arranging a search for Missy at the campground when she is first discovered missing.

Emil and Mack became particularly close so Emil's boss allows him to take time off to be with Mack during the investigation of Missy's disappearance and search for her. Emil is one of the men who goes with Mack into the shack when he is called to identify Missy's dress.

Papa aka Elouisa

Papa aka Elouisa is the character who represents God in this novel. She appears in two different physical forms. She first appears as a large black woman because she knows that Mack would not react as well to a male version of God. Later, when Mack and Papa make the trip up the mountain trail to find Missy's body Papa takes on the appearance of a male. Papa is the one in charge of the cooking and cleaning at the shack. Even in appearance as a male, Papa is the one who fixes breakfast for Mack before they leave to find Missy.

Jesus

Jesus is the son of God, the character in this novel who represents Jesus appears as a carpenter. Jesus is described as being often involved in woodworking projects. For Missy and Mack, Jesus makes a coffin depicting the important scenes in Missy's life.

Because Jesus was once a human, Mack feels most close to him. He does question why Jesus is not more attractive. He admits he always imagined that Jesus would be the perfect male specimen, attractive and athletic. Jesus pretends to be offended because Mack indicates that he is ugly.

Sophia

Sophia is the judge in the novel whom Mack encounters in Chapter 11. Jesus describes her as the personification of God's wisdom. She is a beautiful, tall Hispanic woman. Mack describes her as being beauty in itself. He says her laughter is like the sound a rainbow might make.

Sophia is the one who confronts Mack about judgement and judging people. She tells him that he had to choose two of his children to damn to hell, a decision he declares he is unable to make. She challenges Mack to sit in the place of God and decide who should be damned to hell, like the man who killed Missy.



Josh Phillips

Josh Phillips is the middle Phillips child. He is the only one of the boys who goes with his father and sisters on the Labor Day camping trip. Josh is significant in the novel because he and Kate go canoeing together just before the family leaves the campground to go home. The canoe is accidentally flipped and Josh is caught underneath by a strap on his life jacket. It is during the commotion during which Mack saves his son from drowning that Missy is abducted.

Willie

Willie is Mack's best friend and ghost writer of the novel. He writes both the Foreword and After Word from his own point of view.

During the course of Mack's story Willie is the friend from whom Mack borrows the Jeep so that he can make the trip to the shack despite the snow that is on the ground. When Willie learns what Mack is going to do, he offers to go with him but Mack feels the trip is one he needs to make alone. Willie is the only one whom Mack tells about the note.

Sarayu

Sarayu is the character who represents the Holy Spirit in this novel. She is described as being a character who is difficult to focus one's eyes on because of her shimmery nature. She sometimes expands and contracts as she talks to Mack about his spiritual challenges. Sarayu is the gardener at the shack. This job is fitting since the garden in which she and Mack work one day as they talk is said to be a representation of Mack's soul.

The Little Ladykiller

The Little Ladykiller is the nickname the FBI has given to the serial killer who kidnapped and killed Missy. He is known for his habit of leaving ladybug pins at the sites of his murders. After Missy's body was found, three and a half years after her death, there was enough evidence gathered from that area that the Little Ladykiller was arrested.

The Ducettes

The Ducettes are a family also staying at the same campground as the Phillips on Labor Day weekend. Mack and his children befriend the Ducettes and even spend a day sightseeing together. The Ducettes includes parents Emil and Vicki, and children Amber, Emmy and J.J.



Special Agent Samantha “Sam” Wikowsky

Special Agent Samantha “Sam” Wikowsky is the lead FBI agent who works Missy’s abduction and murder. She is the one who questions Mack about the child’s disappearance.

The Madisons

The Madisons are a family that Mack and his children befriend at the campground. They include Jesse and his wife Sarah. The Madisons joined Mack and his children and the Ducettes for sightseeing one day.

Jeremy Bellamy

Jeremy Bellamy is the assistant manager of the Wallowa Lake State Park Campground. He is the one who helps organize a search of the campgrounds when Missy is first discovered missing.

Melissa “Missy” Anne Phillips

Melissa “Missy” Anne Phillips was the youngest of the Phillips children. During a Labor Day camping outing, she was abducted and murdered by a serial killer. Missy was six when she died.

Virgil Thomas

Virgil Thomas is the camper who saw the man in the military green pickup truck leaving the campsite with a girl he assumed was Missy in his truck.

Jon and Tyler Phillips

Jon and Tyler Phillips are the oldest of the Phillips children. Because they are grown children, they are not with the family on the camping trip.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Shack

The shack where Missy's bloody dress is found is a symbol of death and the reality of evil. Later, after Mack meets with Papa and the other members of the Holy Spirit there is becomes a symbol of hope and revival.

Letter Signed by Papa

This letter signed by Papa represents an invitation from God even though Mack doubts its validity. The letter angers Mack because it invites him to meet Papa at the shack, the place where it was assumed that Missy was killed. It intrigues him because it is signed Papa, the name by which Nan calls God.

A Photo Frame Holding a Picture of a Little Girl

This photo frame with its picture of Missy represents the young girl. Mack often holds this frame to his chest as if he were hugging the child.

A Little Red Sundress Embroidered with Wildflowers

This sundress that Missy was wearing when she was abducted represents her. It is when Mack sees this dress laying on the floor of the shack it indicates that the child was probably killed there.

A Red Crayon

This red crayon, dropped by a tree, is a symbol that Missy struggled with the man who tried to abducted her.

A Ladybug Pin

This ladybug pin left in Missy's coloring book is a symbol that she was taken by the serial killer the Little Ladykiller.

Mack's Tin Box

Mack's tin box and its contents symbolize the things that are important to him.

The Gun

This gun represents violence. Willie gives Mack this gun because he is afraid that Mack might be walking into an ambush by the man who killed his daughter. When he arrives at the shack with the gun, Papa takes it from him, acting as if it is a dirty item.

The Coffin

This coffin, made by Jesus for Missy, represents the important events in Missy's life with the carvings around the sides of it.

Pearls

These jewels represent a great sacrifice because a pearl is created through pain. Jesus calls himself the pearl that stands as the gate of heaven.



Settings

The Shack

The shack is the place where Missy's blood soaked dress was found. It is believed this is where she was killed. When Mack gets a note in his mailbox three and a half years after Missy's death, it appears to be from God asking Mack to meet him at the shack where Missy was killed. The shack becomes a place where Mack meets with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit for a weekend of healing.

Mack's House on Wildcat Road

Mack's house on Wildcat Road is the place to which the note from Papa asking him to meet him at the shack is delivered.

Wallowa Lake State Park in Northeastern Oregon

Wallowa Lake State Park is the place where Mack takes Missy, Kate and Josh for a camping trip during Labor Day. The killer kidnaps Missy from the site where they had been staying.

The Garden

This garden, located near the shack, represents Mack and the condition of his soul. It is in this garden that Sarayu has Mack help him clean out a section of ground to be used to bury Missy's body.

A Cave

This cave, located in the vicinity of the shack, is where the killer hid Missy's body. During his time with God, Mack is shown the red arcs that the killer left to lead him back to the cave where Missy's body was buried. In real life, after Mack has recovered from his accident, he helps law enforcement officers locate these arcs so that Missy's body can be buried in real life.

Emanuel Hospital

Emanuel Hospital is the hospital to which Mack is taken after his car wreck.



Themes and Motifs

Where is God When Tragedy Strikes?

Through his time with Papa, Mack learns that although God does not orchestrate tragedy, he can make good come out of that tragedy and that he never leaves his followers in the midst of their pain. Mack never had a close relationship with God but when his youngest daughter, Missy, was kidnapped and killed, Mack's distance turned to anger. He believed that God had abandoned Missy and that he had allowed, or even planned for her to be killed. It is not until Mack understands the true nature of God that he is able to accept that God was not responsible for Missy's death.

One of the aspects of God that allows evil in the world is God's respect for the free will that he has given his children. Even when he sees that they are going to do something that would harm themselves or others he does not interfere. In fact, he says to Mack the only way he could have stopped Missy's death was to not ever have created the world in the first place.

One of Mack's sources of hurt when he considered Missy's time with her captor is that she was alone. When Mack voices this concern to Jesus, Jesus says to him: "Mack, she was never alone. I never left her; we never left her, not for one instant" (186). Jesus tells Mack not only was Missy not alone in her suffering, but Mack also was not alone. God and the Holy Trinity stayed with them throughout their suffering. This shows that God does not turn his back on those who are suffering. He is always with them.

Mack additionally suggests at one point that perhaps Missy's death was a punishment for what he had done to his father. "She was innocent. She didn't do anything to deserve that" (176) Mack says to Sarayu at one point. As he continues with his opinion that Missy's death was a punishment, he asks perhaps if she died because of what he had done to his father, as a way to punish Mack for his actions. Sarayu says Missy's death was not planned by God to punish anyone but instead points back to free will and human independence from God as the roots of evil. "You demanded your independence, and now you are angry with the One who loved you enough to give it to you" (176) Sarayu explains to Mack as she says the same people who want to live their lives without God have no trouble blaming him when bad things happen.

In one of Mack's final attempts to understand God's place in Missy's death he suggests that God intended for her to die so that Mack could be drawn closer to God. Papa explains to him: "Don't ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I needed it to accomplish my purposes" (202). In essence, she is telling Mack that even though good things can come out of tragedies, she would not cause these tragedies in order to bring about the good, even if that was the way she operated.



The Danger of Judgement

Objects, words, and even emotions can take on unintended connotations when humans try to judge them with their limited knowledge, Mack learns through the course of his visit with Papa. One of the most striking scenes in the novel is the one in which Sophia accuses Mack of judging God. Not only does Mack learn he is wrong in the way he has judged God, he is also wrong in his judgement of other

When Mack blames God for Missy's death, he shows that he does not understand God as he really is. Papa tells Mack that she does not intentionally orchestrate tragedy or desire to put any of her children in a situation where they will be hurt. By blaming God for what happened, Mack also insinuates that God is able to manipulate the choices that his children make. It is made clear to Mack that God respects the free will his had given his children and will not meddle in their decisions.

One of the dangers of judgement that Sarayu discusses with Mack is the habit of humans to categorize things as being good or evil without really knowing what these terms even really mean. She explains that it is by judging things as good and evil that causes wars and disagreements when one group decides something is good while another decides that the same thing is evil. In Sarayu's definition, evil is the absence of good. "Both evil and darkness can be understood only in relation to light and good; they do not have any actual existence" (144).

Emotions can also be labeled incorrectly based on the judgement of humans. After Mack learns that he is afraid of emotions he decides to talk to Sarayu about emotions. Sarayu tells Mack that emotions "are neither bad nor good; they just exist" (214). This statement goes against the human belief that happiness is good while sadness is bad. Sarayu describes emotions as being the "colors of the soul" (214). She does tell him that emotions can be wrong if a human's perception to an occurrence is wrong. "If your perception is wrong, your emotional response will be false" (214).

Teachings That Seem Anti-Establishment or Opposite Religious Tradition

While this books seeks to teach about the true nature of God, it holds a message that is very negative in terms of organized religion. One thing that Papa tells Mack right away is that their weekend will be about challenging his religious conditioning. Mack is confronted regularly with ideas that do not match up with what he was taught in seminary. In fact, even God and Jesus appear unhappy with the direction in which organized religion has taken the nature of God.

Right away, Papa tells Mack that his intention for the weekend is for them to overcome some of the religious stereotypes that he has learned all of his life. "This weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes" (94) Papa tells Mack when he is surprised right away by the way she appears in physical form.



One of the first attacks that Mack faces to his religious conditioning is the human form that God chooses to take for their original meeting. In their first meeting, Papa, or God, appears to Mack as a black woman. Papa explains to Mack that he is neither male nor female and that he can take any form he desires. As Mack considers the stereotypes of God, “he was embarrassed to admit to himself that all his visuals for God were very white and very male” (94).

Papa’s act of contacting Mack through a written letter is one of the first things that surprises Mack. In seminary and through religious training, it was believed that God no longer communicated with his people through things like letters. “It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners’ access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book” (62). Later, Mack learns that the intention of the Bible is not a rulebook but should serve as a picture of Jesus.

When Mack and Jesus discuss organized religion, it should be noted that Jesus talks “with a bite of his own” (194). He is critical of the way that religion can often leave people more damaged than they were when they became their association with that religion. Jesus also tells Mack that even though some people are well intentioned, the things that they do in his name is “very contrary to my purposes” (194).

Sarayu additionally talks to Mack about how religion is often about having the right answers. “There are a lot of smart people who are able to say a lot of right things from their brains because they have been told what the right answers are, but they don’t know me at all” (216). Instead of teaching people the right answers, Sarayu and the others are interested in teaching people how to live in Jesus.

Papa also has her own complaints about the way the church portrays God and Jesus. She and Mack both agree that the church makes God seem stern while Jesus is considered loving. Papa explains it in this way “They still play us off like good cop/ bad cop most of the time, especially the religious folk” (203). Papa does not like this way of portraying God and the father because they are actually parts of the same entity. One is no more stern or loving than the other.

God’s Gift of Free Will

Free will is a gift from God allowing humans to make their own choices even if it means that they will make the wrong choice and sometimes even hurt others. Papa tells Mack that he chooses not to interfere with humans’ free will. One of the main reasons for this is that it would negate love. No one would come to God because they loved him but instead because they had no choice. Unfortunately, free will also allows humans to make mistakes and perform evil deeds that often hurt themselves and others.

Free will is one of the issues that Papa and Mack address right away. Papa tells Mack that he knew that he would come to the cabin. When Mack asks if he is free to leave the cabin, Papa tells Mack that she is not interested in having prisoners. Mack questions



that if Papa knew he would be there and also knew that he would not leave, if he really had any choice in the matter. Papa responds: “Just because I know you’re too curious to go, does that reduce your freedom to leave?” (96).

Later that first night at the cabin, Mack asks Jesus what he is supposed to do. “You’re not supposed to do anything. You’re free to do whatever you like” (89) Jesus says to Mack. He encourages Mack not to do what he feels obligated to do but what he feels he needs to do. Jesus’ encouragement to Mack to do what he wanted to do is a sign that Jesus truly does honor his gift of free will.

Along the theme of free will comes the humans’ desires for independence. “All evil flows from independence, and independence is your choice. If I were to simply revoke all the choices of independence, the world as you know it would cease to exist and love would have no meaning” (207) Papa tells Mack during a conversation. If God had not allowed this independence through free will, he would be controlling decisions for mankind including whether or not they chose to have a relationship with Jesus. Papa points out that even after he gave people the independence that they desired, they often got angry with God because the things they did caused harm and hurt. “You demanded your independence, and now you are angry with the One who loved you enough to give it to you” (176).

A final choice that God and the others give Mack is the choice to stay with Missy or to go back to his family. Even at the end of their time together, God does not automatically assume that Mack wants to go back to his life as it was. Mack is given the opportunity to stay with God and continue learning. It can be assumed that if Mack had decided he wanted to stay with Missy that he would have died in the car wreck he had on the way home.

Comparison of God’s Relationship with Humanity to a Parent’s Relationship with His Children

In order to help Mack understand the nature of God, the members of the trinity illustrate their lessons with examples of parents and children. The most striking of these is the Judge’s demand that Mack choose some of his children to send to hell. Many other parallels are drawn throughout the book between the love of God for humanity and the love of a father for his children.

In his scene with Sophia, after Sophia has decided that Mack believes that he is worthy of judging God, she decides to set him to task by having him judge some people much closer to his heart. “So then, Mackenzie, may I ask which of your children you love the most?” (165) she asks him as she sets him up to ask him which of his children he thinks deserve to be sent to hell. She gives Mack this challenge because the way he feels when he believes that he has to send some of his children is the same way God feels about sending his followers to hell. When Mack asks if he can go to hell instead of his children, Sophia tells him that he has chosen the way of love.



Inside the cabin on the first day, Mack notices that the living area is decorated by art work that looks like it was created by children. This art gives Mack pause as he has to wonder why it is there and if God treasures it the same way Mack treasured his young children's art work. "He wondered if this woman treasured each of these pieces, as any parent who loves her children would" (90). Again, Mack is able to connect with Papa because they are both parents.

During a discussion about children, Mack asks Papa if he ever gets mad at his children. Though there are some distinct differences between Papa's anger and Mack's anger, Papa admits that she does get mad at her children. "There is a lot to be mad about in the mess my kids have made and in the mess they're in. I don't like a lot of the choices they make, but that anger — especially for me — is an expression of love all the same. I love the ones I am angry with just as much as those I'm not" (123-124). Just like any other parent, Papa loves her children even when she is angry with them.

A final example of the way that Papa relates to all of mankind as children comes in the scene before Papa, as a man, takes Mack to retrieve Missy's body. He confronts Mack about his need to forgive the man who hurt Missy. Papa must tell Mack that just like he and Missy are God's children and are loved by God, so is the man who killed Missy. When Mack struggles with the idea of forgiving Missy's killer, Papa says to him: "But he too is my son. I want to redeem him" (247). The idea is that just like human parents would go to any length to help a child who has wandered, so would God. Even though this man has killed five of Papa's other children, Papa still loves him and desires to redeem him.



Styles

Point of View

The majority of this story is told from the point of view of a third person narrator from the past tense. Because Willie shares the process by which the book was written in the “Foreword” the reader knows that it is Willie who acts of the narrator. He acts as the ghostwriter of Mack’s story at Mack’s request. The only parts of the novel that are exceptions to the use of the third person point of view are the “Foreword” and the “After Word.” These sections of the novel are written from Willie’s first person point of view in the present tense.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is important because it shows how improperly language in a particular instance can be misunderstood. Papa and the other members of the trinity stress to Mack that without complete knowledge, humans have no way to properly judge what is good and what is evil. The meanings of these words are subjective based on what the user believes they mean.

In the sections of the novel about Missy’s disappearance and the investigation into her death, there is some law enforcement language and investigation terms. For instance when Tommy describes the ladybug pin to the FBI Special Agent he is careful to use exact detail. “There are two black dots on the left side of the body as you look down from above... with the head at the top” (45). Later when he describes the engraving on the backside of the pin he not only calls out the letters but also uses words to ensure that the FBI agent is understanding what he is saying. “Umm... C... K... 1-4-6, I believe; yeah, Charlie, Kilo, 1, 4, 6” (46).

There is only one instance in which a character is really distinguished by his language. This character is Papa as he appears as the black lady. This lady not only uses the stereotypical speech patterns of an older black lady but also uses some sayings one might expect to come from someone like her. For instance, “Well, Mackenzie, don’t just stand there gawkin’ with your mouth open like your pants are full” (88) Papa says to Mack as he stands watching her in the kitchen. In her description of the band to which she is listening when Mack walks into the kitchen behind Papa she says: “These kids ain’t saying anything I haven’t heard before; they’re just full of vinegar and fizz” (91).

Structure

The plot of the story is developed in a unique way since the bulk of the “story” is told in the first four chapters of the book. The action rises through the kidnapping of Missy and climaxes with the discovery that she had been killed. The climax stays through Mack’s discovery that it really was God who sent him the note and invited him to visit with him



at the shack. Through this point there is exposition as Mack and Papa or the other members of the trinity talk about the reality of God. The falling action comes as Mack recovers in the hospital from his injuries after the car wreck. The novel's denouement comes when Mack is able to share with Tommy, Nan and Willie where Missy's body is buried. From this unearthing, enough DNA evidence is found to arrest Missy's killer and put him on trial for the deaths of all five little girls that he killed.



Quotes

Papa was Nan's favorite name for God, and it expressed her delight in the intimate friendship she had with him."

-- Narrator (Chapter 1: A Confluence of Paths)

Importance: The quote explains why it was so disturbing that the note that Mack received in his mailbox was so disturbing to him. The signature "Papa" indicates the letter might have been from God since it was a familiar name the family, especially Nan, used for God. The nickname for father indicates a very close and personal relationship with one's father, a relationship that Nan believed she had with God.

Shortly after the summer that Missy vanished, The Great Sadness had draped itself around Mack's shoulders like some invisible but almost tangibly heavy quilt."

-- Narrator (Chapter 2: The Gathering Dark)

Importance: Mack calls the depression that surrounded him after Missy's abduction and murder The Great Sadness. The author uses a simile to compare Mack's depression to a heavy quilt that weighted him down as he went through his life.

He was a rich man, he thought to himself, in all the ways that mattered."

-- Narrator (Chapter 2: The Gathering Dark)

Importance: One night during his camping trip with Missy, Kate and Josh, Mack thought that he had everything that he wanted from life. Even though he was not monetarily rich, Mack thought that he was rich in love and happiness.

Well, the Great Spirit makes the princess jump off the cliff and makes Jesus die on a cross. That seems pretty mean to me."

-- Missy (Chapter 2: The Gathering Dark)

Importance: After hearing the legend of the Indian princess who had to sacrifice herself to save the warriors of her tribe, Missy connects the legend with the story of Jesus. She asks her father why God was so mean that he would make people die to save others. Mack tried to explain to Missy that God did not make the princess nor Jesus die, they chose to do so out of love.

He was content, at rest, and full of peace. Mack did not know it then, but within twenty-four hours his prayers would change drastically."

-- Narrator (Chapter 2: The Gathering Dark)

Importance: This sentence foreshadows the coming tragedy in Mack's life. It comes just before the day that Missy is abducted.

Well, the bad news — and I am not saying that this is the case here — but guys who leave something like this usually have a purpose in leaving it, and it usually means that



they have done this before.”

-- Officer Tommy Dalton (Chapter 4: The Great Sadness)

Importance: Tommy tries to explain to Mack what the ladybug pin that the killer left in Missy’s coloring book might mean in terms of the investigation of her disappearance. He says that if it is the mark of a serial killer, it might given them some insight into where he might take Missy or what his plans might be for her.

Mack immediately saw what he had come to identify and, turning, crumpled into the arms of his two friends and began to weep uncontrollably. On the floor by the fireplace lay Missy’s torn and blood-soaked red dress.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 4: The Great Sadness)

Importance: Although Missy’s body was never found, it is assumed when Mack identifies the dress she had been wearing when she was taken that she was killed by the man who took her. Mack realizes for the first time when he sees the bloody dress that it is a good chance that his daughter is no longer alive.

Although no one involved was left unmarked by the tragedy, Kate seemed to have been affected the most, disappearing into a shell, like a turtle protecting its soft underbelly from anything potentially dangerous.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 4: The Great Sadness)

Importance: While all of the people in Mack’s family and all those who knew Missy suffered when they learned of her death, it was Kate who took her sister’s death exceptionally hard.

The tragedy had also increased the rift in Mack’s own relationship with God, but he ignored this growing sense of separation.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 4: The Great Sadness)

Importance: Because of his father, who was a member of the church but also an alcoholic who beat his wife, Mack already did not have a good relationship with God. Missy’s death makes this division in the relationship even worse.

It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners’ access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 4: The Great Sadness)

Importance: As Mack considers the note that he found in his mailbox, he wonders if it were really a message from God. In his seminary lessons, he learned that God did not communicate with people through speech or writing any longer. It was believed the only way he communicated with people was through the pages of the Bible.

It was either from God, as absurd as that sounded; a cruel joke; or something more sinister from Missy’s killer.”



-- Narrator (Chapter 5: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner)

Importance: In this quote, Mack indicates that there are three possible sources from which the note, asking for Mack to meet him at the shack and signed by Papa, might have come.

Of course I've thought of that. Part of me won't be disappointed if it is. I have a score to settle with him,' he said grimly and paused."

-- Mack (Chapter 5: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner)

Importance: When Willie suggests that perhaps the note was written by the man who kidnapped Missy, Mack indicates that he almost wishes the killer would be there so that he could settle a score with him.

Perhaps this was what it was like to experience a complete psychotic breakdown."

-- Narrator (Chapter 5: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner)

Importance: As Mack watches the snow disappear with a warm breeze, the flowers burst into bloom and the shack replaced with a neat cabin, he believes that perhaps he is truly going crazy.

If you couldn't take care of Missy, how can I trust you to take care of me?"

-- Mack (Chapter 6: A Piece of π)

Importance: During his first discussion with Papa, Mack expresses his concern that because God allowed Missy to be killed, God was not as capable of taking care of creation as he thought that he was.

For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me 'Papa' is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning."

-- Papa (Chapter 6: A Piece of π)

Importance: Papa, God, explains to Mack why he chose to appear to him as a large, black woman. Papa says it was not only because he felt that Mack would relate better to a woman because he had such a bad experience with his earthly father, but also because it would challenge the ideas that Mack had grown up believing about God and religion.

Just because I know you're too curious to go, does that reduce your freedom to leave?"

-- Papa (Chapter 6: A Piece of π)

Importance: When Mack questions Papa about his freedom, Papa explains how his knowledge of what Mack will do does not limit Mack's freedom to choose another option. He just knows him well enough that he already knows in advance what choice Mack will make.



He is just the first to do it to the uttermost — the first to absolutely trust my life within him, the first to believe in my love and my goodness without regard for appearance or consequence.”

-- Papa (Chapter 6: A Piece of π)

Importance: Papa explains to Mack that it was because Jesus lived his life fully grounded in his faith in God that he was able to do miracles. Papa says that if Jesus had not had his faith grounded in God, he would not have been able to do miracles.

Humans have a great capacity for declaring something good or evil, without truly knowing.”

-- Sarayu (Chapter 9: A Long Time Ago, In A Garden Far, Far Away)

Importance: Sarayu explains to Mack that because humans do not understand the difference between good and evil, they often judge these qualities incorrectly. She describes good as being things that are in the light while evil is without light. Things humans can see as evil, sometimes are actually good, she tells him.

Sarayu stepped toward him until she had invaded his personal space. ‘And well you should, Mackenzie, because this garden is your soul. This mess is you!’”

-- Sarayu (Chapter 9: A Long Time Ago, In A Garden Far, Far Away)

Importance: After he and Sarayu have worked on clearing a spot in the garden, Sarayu tells him that he feels comfortable in that particular garden because it represents his soul.

So many believe that it is love that grows, but it is the knowing that grows and love simply expands to contain it.”

-- Sophia (Chapter 11: Here Come da Judge)

Importance: Sophia offers a different explanation of the way love changes the longer two people know one another. She suggests that it is the knowledge of the other person that grows, not necessarily the amount of love a person feels.

Isn't that your just complaint, Mackenzie? That God has failed you, that he failed Missy? That before the creation, God knew that one day your Missy would be brutalized, and still he created? And then he allowed that twisted soul to snatch her from your loving arms when he had the power to stop him. Isn't God to blame, Mackenzie?”

-- Sophia (Chapter 11: Here Come da Judge)

Importance: The Judge manipulates Mack into admitting that he believes God is to blame for Missy's death. Although it may seem cruel for Sophia to push Mack to this point, it is only when he has reached this point and admitted out loud that he blames God for what happened to Missy that he can begin learning about God's real intentions.

Mack, just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don't ever assume that my using something means I caused



it or that I needed it to accomplish my purposes.”
-- Papa (Chapter 13: A Meeting of Hearts)

Importance: Papa explains that although she can work so that good can come out of even the most terrible of tragedies she does not do her work by causing evil to come into the lives of anyone. Even though she might use these situations to create good, it does not mean that she has to have them in order to do her job.

The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules. It is a picture of Jesus. While words may tell you what God is like and even what he may want from you, you cannot do any of it on your own.”
-- Sarayu (Chapter 14: Verbs and Other Freedoms)

Importance: As Mack's schooling in his new relationship with God continues, Sarayu explains to him the purpose of the Bible. She describes it as a picture of Jesus, not a rule book.

Rather than the top of a pyramid, I want to be the center of a mobile, where everything in your life — your friends, family, occupation, thoughts, activities — is connected to me but moves with the wind, in and out and back and forth, in an incredible dance of being.”
-- Papa (Chapter 14: Verbs and Other Freedoms)

Importance: Papa explains to Mack that she does not have to be at the top of everything in Mack's life but instead want him to imagine her as the center of a mobile where everything he does in his life circulates around her. God wants to be part of every bit of Mack's life, not just his church activities or devotional times, but everything.

The one having so much trouble containing himself — that one — is your father.”
-- Sarayu (Chapter 15: A Festival of Friends)

Importance: During the gathering of angels, it is obvious that one of the angels is having trouble containing his emotions. Mack notices that that particular angel also seems obsessed with them. Sarayu finally lets Mack know that the angel having trouble with his emotions is Mack's father.

Today we are on a healing trail to bring closure to this part of your journey — not just for you, but for others as well.”
-- Papa (Chapter 16: A Morning of Sorrows)

Importance: Papa tells Mack how the work they are doing on the day they find Missy's body will not only help Mack, but will also help bring closure to others as well.

Forgiveness is not about forgetting, Mack. It is about letting go of another person's throat.”
-- Papa (Chapter 16: A Morning of Sorrows)



Importance: Papa shares with Mack the true nature of forgiveness, that it is about giving up one's desire for revenge, but not necessarily forgetting what happened.