

The Signal Flame: A Novel Study Guide

The Signal Flame: A Novel by Andrew Krivak

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Plot Summary

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The Signal Flame, a novel by Andrew Krivak, focuses on family and loss. The story begins with a short vignette that places the novel's setting as just after the death of Jozef Vinich, the family patriarch. The vignette tells how Jozef immigrated from Austria-Hungary to America after World War I. Eventually, he made his own way to Dardan, Pennsylvania. As a self-made man, Jozef was well-loved and well-respected in the community. His wife, Helen, preceded Jozef in death. Jozef was especially loved and revered by his widowed daughter (Hannah) and his grandsons (Bo and Sam).

Now, with the death of Jozef and with Sam missing in action during the Vietnam War, Hannah and Bo must rely on one another to get through each day. Bo provides what comfort he can to his younger brother's fiancée, Ruth, and he urges his mother to look beyond the loss of the past.

In the past, Hannah's husband (Bexhet) was killed in a hunting accident by Ruth's father, Paul. Twenty years later, Paul is haunted by the accident. However, he still feels hatred toward Jozef for what Paul considers to be the theft of Younger family land. Though Hannah knows the death was an accident, she cannot let go of the past and harbors anger for Paul. Complicating matters is the fact that Ruth is pregnant with Sam's baby.

Bo and Father Rovnavaha, the town's priest, mediate an end to the bad feelings. Meanwhile, Bo continues to work at the lumber mill which he now owns, having purchased it from his grandfather some years before Jozef's death. Bo knows the Younger land he now owns through Jozef's will was not stolen. It was purchased fair and square from Walter, Paul's father. Walter had sold it to support his addiction to alcohol and to gambling. Jozef had allowed Walter to remain in his home on the land until Walter's death.

During a bad rainstorm that brings flooding to the valley, Ruth goes into labor. When Bo hears the call for an ambulance on the radio, he knows Ruth is in labor. He drives out after them when he learns they could not wait for medical help. He discovers their car has gone off the road and into a rapidly-flooding ravine. Bo rushes in and discovers Ruth has already given birth. However, the baby girl is dead. Ruth's father and aunt are also dead, but Bo is able to save Ruth.

Hannah and Bo decide that they will have Ruth live with them, as family is family. They all hold out hope that Sam will come home soon. Finally, Ruth realizes there never was any family feud. Slowly, Bo fixes up the old Younger house with the intent to move in one day. As the months pass, he and Ruth grow closer. Together, they take a trip to West Virginia to see Sam's old commanding officer, Burne Grayson, who first reported



Sam missing. Burne recommends putting up a grave marker for Sam. This is a sobering dose of reality for Bo and Ruth.

As time passes, Bo and Ruth realize they are attracted to one another. They take things slow with the blessings of both Hannah and Father Rovnavaha. Hannah is faithful, and she considers it all a part of God's mysterious ways. Eventually, Ruth moves into the old Younger house with Bo. A future marriage and family seem all but certain. As the novel ends, Bo and Ruth are sitting out on their porch together when they see Sam appear on the hill before them. Ruth cannot go to meet Sam, but Bo does.



Chapters 1 – 4

Summary

A brief introduction speaks of a family that understands that it has been blessed by God with the power to do hard manual labor that is fruitful. Throughout the family's history, all of the family members—except for one—have always returned home after fighting in wars.

Part 1: The Inheritors of Loss

In Chapter 1, it is early spring. Bohumir “Bo” Konar and his mother, Hannah, pray as Bo’s grandfather –Jozef Vinich –has just died. Father Tomas Rovnavaha oversees the wake. At the wake, Bo listens to the stories of the mourners about Jozef. The stories tell how he came to America just after World War I with only fifty dollars. He had been on a long journey from Kassa through Hamburg to book passage on the Mount Clay. His final destination was Dardan, a city in northeastern Pennsylvania. Once there, Jozef had begun work in the yard of the Endless Roughing Mill only to end up as co-owner. Mourners reflect on how Jozef owns two-thousand acres of beautiful land in Dardan and how he had built his own house before turning thirty. After the wake, Father Rovnavaha and the guests leave. Bo is alone, as he whispers to his grandfather asking where he has gone.

Bo’s mother had Bo in 1941 when she was 19 years old. She gave birth just before her husband left for basic training. She is now fifty. Bo reflects on how his father was killed in a hunting accident some years before and how Bo learned to hunt with his grandfather by tracking down a dog that had been going after deer.

Bo and his mother will take turns staying with Jozef’s casket through the night, possibly with Aunt Sue filling in at some point. Bo ends up spending the night. At dawn, he takes the old lab, Krasna, for a walk. They go to the barn, collect eggs, feed the animals, and head back in where Bo's mother is now cooking bacon. Bo remembers how Jozef could tell the weather from the trees in the morning and how Jozef had so carefully built the house on the land. Father Rovnavaha arrives a short time later. The priest’s family came to America when the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed. The priest had fought in World War II. Afterward, he attended college on the GI Bill, studied philosophy, and decided to enter the priesthood. Bo thinks of his own brother, Sam, who has fought in Vietnam.

A Cadillac hearse arrives for Jozef’s funeral at Saint Michael the Archangel’s Church. Father Rovnavaha, who was Jozef’s friend as well as priest, speaks about how Jozef losing his wife, Helen, many years before, hurt him deeply. However Jozef believed God’s beauty in the world could help sustain a man through loss. The priest shares a story about a day he once spent fishing with Jozef. While fishing, Rovnavaha was struck by a rattlesnake. The priest believed that he would die –but had Jozef carried him away to safety and medical help. The priest then tells the congregation that all of them are a family. He tells the mourners that “Vinich” means “vine” in Slovak. He closes by saying



that it is time to let Jozef sleep. The priest acknowledges that he will miss his good friend, Jozef.

In Chapter 2, the town of Dardan rests among three mountains where a handful of local streams help feed the Susquehanna River. Jozef came to Dardan in 1919. Now, fifty-three years later, he is being buried beside his wife in Our Lady of Sorrows, a cemetery on the hill. After the burial, Bo goes to the hardware store for a ten-by-ten pane of glass and a part for a hutch he has designed. Ruth Younger, his brother Sam's girl, is pregnant. She still wears the engagement ring Sam gave her, even though Sam has been listed as missing in action. Ruth reveals she is due in June. Bo tells Ruth they will find Sam, especially since troops are withdrawing from Vietnam. Bo remembers when Sam had confessed a few years before about his desire to be with Ruth. However, the problem was that Ruth's father was the man who had killed the father of Bo and Sam in a hunting accident.

At home, in the present, Hannah explains to Bo that Captain Kraynack will be their new liaison regarding any information about Sam. Hannah remembers what her father had told her –that finding oneself is hard, that finding oneself in war is harder, and that one must walk such a path alone. She reflects on how Sam always wanted to read or be in Jozef's wood shop, though Sam was forever restless. She recalls that Jozef believed Ruth was the second best thing to ever happen to Sam. Joining the Marines was the first.. She says that Bo looks just like his father. She mentions that the reading of the will by Bernie Lloyd will be the following day.

In Chapter 3, the novel steps back in time to when Bo was born in 1941. He was christened Bohumir Ondrej Konar, meaning God's peace to the family. Bo's father, Bexhet Konar, becomes an American citizen the same year he enlists to fight. While he is away, Jozef helps provide a manly influence to Bo, teaching him woodworking and letting him read in the library. When Bo is seven, his father returns home, and the two grow closer over the next two years. During this time, Sam is born. Then, in March 1950, Bexhet goes on his fateful hunting trip. Following his death, Jozef becomes a father-figure to Bo and Sam. He teaches them through discipline and correction. Five-five in height and lean, Jozef is strong and smart. As Bo grows, he begins to wonder about the world beyond Salamander Creek and Dardan. Despite knowing that the mill and half Jozef's land will be his one day, Bo still wants to go to college. Jozef supports him in this, and Bo attends college in Annapolis, Maryland.

While at college, Bo meets a girl named Ann Dvorak, for whom he develops feelings. In class, he defends her point of view on the idea of self-mastery. Later, Ann buys him a beer to show her thanks. Bo and Ann end up talking for hours. Ann tells him that before college she had attended an all-girls' Catholic school back in Ohio. They begin dating, and end up spending Thanksgiving together at college. Ann admits she would love to meet Bo's family, and Bo says she will. At Christmas, Bo accompanies Ann to Harrisburg to catch her bus home before heading home himself. He tells Ann that he loves her. Then, he travels to Wilkes-Barre by bus where Jozef and Sam are waiting. A letter for Bo arrives from Ann on Christmas Eve, and he writes back on December 26. Early in January, the Dean of the college notifies all students that Ann was killed on



Christmas Eve walking home from Church after being struck by a car. Heartbroken, Bo drops out of college and goes to work at the roughing mill.

In Chapter 4, the novel returns to the present in the 1970s. The household must adjust to life without Jozef, such as cleaning out his room and old things. One morning, Hannah forgets her father is dead. She goes to wake him up, only to realize what has happened. Bernie Lloyd arrives for the reading of the will. It reminds Bo of the advice his grandfather gave him after Ann's death –that death lessens and leaves one behind. Jozef believed that the only thing to be done after losing someone is the work that must be done so that who or what is left is not lost. Bo remembered promising to hold together and to go to work with Andy in the mill's tally shed with his grandfather's recommendation.

In the present, Bernie explains that Jozef's savings account will pay off any debts, and the rest will be divided three ways. Bo already owns Jozef's share of the company, having purchased it some time before. Hannah is left the majority of the land, while Bo is left twenty acres and the house up to the state game lands by Rock Mountain Road. Bo later goes over his grandfather's old ledger – which is not only a record of his expenses, but a journal of sorts. It includes his going to work at the mill and marrying Helen Posol. Bo learns the land he has inherited was acquired through Walter Younger in February, 1930, in exchange for letting Walter live his life out there.

Analysis

When the novel begins, family patriarch Jozef Vinich has just died. Readers should note at the memorial service that Father Rovnavaha notes that “vinich” is “vine” in Slovak. A vine is an important symbol in the story. Jozef left his native country for a new home in America, where he put down roots and the vines of family took hold. Jozef was the vine that anchored his family to solid ground and gave his family a solid life. Though Jozef has died just before the beginning of the novel, his presence will loom large throughout. He will appear in memories and flashbacks, but never in person in the present. Family means everything to the characters. The cultural, central emphasis of family (both in America and in the native homeland of Jozef) informs that family relationships are critical to a good life.

But, as common as is family, so too is loss to the people of Dardan. Small towns revolve around family and loss, and loss is a way of life, Krivak argues. He demonstrates this through Jozef's family, and even through Ruth's family. Jozef, the rock and patriarch of the family and pillar in the community, is gone. His death is deeply felt, especially by Bo who poignantly asks the room where his grandfather's body lies in wake, just where it is he went. If this was not enough, Hannah and Bo must deal with the missing-in-action status of Sam –something Ruth herself must also deal with. She carries his child, and links together the two families. Hannah is still reeling, decades later, from the hunting accident that took the life of her husband –and so too is Ruth's father, who blames himself and will not forgive himself for what was done. Bo himself suffered heartbreak in



college on, of all nights, Christmas Eve, when his girl was killed walking home from Church.

As readers will note, it was Jozef who became the rock upon which Bo depended, after the death of Bo's father and after the death of Ann. It was Jozef who articulated an important, thematic argument that Krivak makes through the novel, that work gives life a sense of purpose –especially in the midst of tragedy. By having a sense of purpose, people do not succumb to the sense of loss that death leaves. Death robs people of the presence of a loved one and leaves people with another presence--a sense of loss. Work is the best way to get over a loss because it gives the one experiencing the loss something to do and a purpose for continuing on with life. Jozef's advice to Bo after Ann's death serves Bo well just as it served Jozef after Helen's death.

Additionally, here is where family matters so much, and means everything as Kravik also argues: family is what Bo comes to depend on through tragedy, just as Jozef did when Helen died. Family can prove to be a great countering force to loss in addition to work. Readers should also note that Father Rovnavaha makes the sound argument through Biblical evidence that recognizing and surrendering to the beauty of the world can also help one cope with loss –as Jozef did following Helen's death. Readers should note the symbolic catching of a fish by Jozef demonstrates God's presence and approval of the philosophy: Jesus fed thousands with a few fish; the fish, as part of the natural world, is beautiful, and sustains or "feeds" Jozef life.

Discussion Question 1

Why do both Bo's family and the community feel such a sense of loss by Jozef's death? What does this have to say about Jozef's inner character?

Discussion Question 2

Loss proves to be a common, constant theme in the novel. What forms of loss have Bo's family and Ruth's family experienced? What does this demonstrate about their community and their way of life? Explain your reasoning.

Discussion Question 3

Early in the novel, Krivak lays out thematic arguments about countering loneliness. What are these arguments? Which seems to be the most effective –or must they all work in conjunction with one another? Explain your reasoning.

Vocabulary

fatigue, wake, vocation, dendritic, repast, grudges, perpetuity



Chapters 5 – 8

Summary

Part 1: The Inheritors of Loss, continued

In Chapter 5, the novel steps back in time. Jozef is seeking Helen's father's permission to marry, but Jozef is told that he must have a career first. This leads Jozef to go to work at the Cording Mill (as the Endless Roughing Mill was then known), which Jonathan Cording owns. The Crash of 1929 causes Cording to kill himself on Christmas Eve. Cording's daughter, Emma, saves the mill by asking employees to invest. Four employees, including Jozef, put in two-hundred dollars each which Emma matches with her father's insurance settlement. Under Emma's ownership, the mill is renamed and thrives. Years pass. Bo goes to work in tallies just like Jozef. Bo ends up owner of the company by 1970. Even now, in the present day, Bo continues to work hard at the mill, even doing physical labor when needed. Bo goes to work every day with Krasna. Jeff Lamoreaux, the mill supervisor, is already at work. Bo agrees to Jeff's suggestion of raising wages to keep new people on so they do not bail out after a season. Dave Cummings, the foreman, reveals to Bo that Asa Pound down in town is still upset over Jozef's death. Cummings suggests that Bo should pay Asa Pound a visit. Pound had been co-owner with Jozef.

After work, Bo goes to see the old three-story clapboard house Walter Younger had built. Bo discovers it is a well-built house in good shape, though it has been locked up for years. Some things, like water damage in the upstairs bathroom and the kitchen sink, need some work. He discovers an old silver spoon with the initials BK behind the sink, and puts it into his pocket. He and Krasna then head over to the barn. From the second floor of the barn, Bo has a tremendous view. He then hears a rifle shot, and he goes to investigate. He heads over to his mother's land and finds Paul Younger, Ruth's father, hunting out of season. Bo knows Paul fought for years with Jozef about the land rightfully belonging to the Youngers. Bo tells Paul if he wants to hunt on his mother's land, he needs to ask permission. He tells Paul to stay off his mother's land. Paul says he intends to keep hunting the land as he did when he was a boy. Then, he brings up the past by saying he never meant to kill Bo's father. Bo tells Paul he can keep hunting, but to do it alone. Paul says he will until Sam comes home. Paul guts the deer, then washes his hands of the blood in the nearby stream.

In Chapter 6, in late spring, a letter arrives from the casualty assistance officer, Captain Jack Kraynack. The letter says there has been no new information relating to Sam. Kraynack does reveal, however, that a now-retired captain in Abas, West Virginia, was on the ground the day Sam went missing, and his word has helped keep Sam in missing status. Kraynack recommends a visit. Bo will give Ruth the news.

Bo tells Hannah that she should invite Ruth up to the house. But the thought of becoming a grandmother is too much for Hannah, who wants them to stay away. The



next day, Hannah goes to see Father Rovnavaha to invite him for lunch the following day. Rovnavaha agrees and arrives the next day. Hannah explains she is reluctant to invite the Youngers into her home after Paul accidentally killed her husband years before. She knows it was an accident, but she cannot get past it. Her words cause Rovnavaha to reflect on how Paul had confessed to him that he believed his adultery with a prostitute was the sin that had guided the bullet into Bexhet. The priest had assured him this was not true and that God loves all men. In the present, Father Rovnavaha tells Hannah it is time to accept the gift Sam and Ruth have given her and Paul through a baby.

Part 2: While the Earth Remains

In Chapter 7, the summer comes along with bad flooding. Bo goes to his mill on Thursday night with food, radios, batteries, fuel, and a Mossberg twelve-gauge shotgun and shells. Ruth goes into labor that same night. She is tended to by her Aunt Mary and Paul. When Bo hears a request for assistance at 26 Holly Street on the radio, he knows Ruth must be in labor. Ruth cannot wait for help to arrive. So Paul, Aunt Mary, and Ruth leave for the hospital. Throughout town, National Guardsmen and emergency personnel are dealing with the flooding. Bo comes upon the wreck of Paul's station wagon, having plunged through a guardrail and into a ravine. Bo comforts Ruth who holds a dying baby girl in her arms. Bo baptizes the baby as best he can. Mary is dead by the time the firemen arrive. Ruth is rushed off in an ambulance. Bo attempts to save Paul, but the rising waters prevent this. Bo is hauled into a rescue boat.

In Chapter 8, Bo is taken to an emergency center at the town convent where he sleeps a few hours. Bo asks to see Ruth, and he learns she has been airlifted to the VA hospital because she is a critical case. Bo asks about the baby, but he is told there is no morgue on site. Bo is thrilled when Father Rovnavaha arrives in the stormy weather to say Friday morning mass for the Sisters at Alumnae Hall. The two hug, grateful for the safety of the other. By phone, Bo learns his mother is safe. Rovnavaha gives Bo a ride home. Bo contemplates how Jozef once told him he moved to the place in America that reminded him most of Pastvina.

After sleeping for a long time, Bo wakes up the next morning to his mother cooking breakfast. She explains someone from the Darden Post has called about Bo and that Nixon has declared Wilkes-Barre a disaster area. Bo is saddened over the baby, but Hannah assures him he did all he could. The entire town is talking about the heroic effort Bo made. Within a few days, Ruth is out of danger, though still weak. She wakes up just long enough to thank Bo, to understand she has lost her whole family, and to let Bo know she had named the baby Clare Frances.

Rovnavaha arranges a flight for himself and Bo on a US Army helicopter headed to the VA. Bo later lets Rovnhava know he baptized Clare before she died. Rovnavaha is deeply moved.



Analysis

The sense of family and of loss remains strong in this section of the novel. The community of Dardan is beset with one tragedy after another, demonstrating once again Krivak's argument that loss is central to a small town. But things do not necessarily start out this way, here. Readers should pay careful attention to the encounter Bo has with Paul on land that now belongs to Bo. Paul is still angry about the loss of his family's land to Jozef –but he harbors regret just as deep as his anger over the death of Bo's father. Bo very clearly explains that he does not consider the death anything other than an accident; essentially, he has moved on. This lays the foundation for Krivak's other important thematic argument, that eventually, one must move on from tragedy. Bo long ago accepted the accident. His decision to allow Paul to continue hunting on his land alone –until Sam comes home –leads to Paul's symbolic hand washing after gutting the deer. The blood has gone from his hands, and he has been given a kind of forgiveness by being allowed to hunt on the land again.

A greater tragedy follows with the flood. There can be comparisons made to the Biblical flood of the Old Testament, but the people of Dardan are focused more on the forgiveness of God than His wrath. They do not take the floods as a sign of God's disfavor, but merely a natural disaster that prompts them to seek to draw closer to God in their tragedy. The tragedy is especially great with Ruth, who loses her baby girl, father, and aunt to the flood. Much of the town has been damaged or destroyed. Hannah, previously reluctant to invite the Youngers over –even though she knows the hunting accident was indeed an accident –now turns her attention to Ruth. Hannah knows that Ruth has dealt with a loss with which no one should ever have to deal. How Hannah will now proceed is left to the coming chapters.

Interestingly enough, the only person who ever considers that God may be working against him for past sins is Paul. Paul, who is abrasive and not always the nicest person to be around, had long harbored the guilt over accidentally killing Bo's father. While Bo may have essentially absolved Paul of that guilt, Paul himself had long believed that his adultery –which led his wife to leave him –was to blame. He believed his sinful actions led to the death of a good and honest man, but Rovnavaha had always assured him such a thing was not true. Bo's confrontation with Paul in the woods becomes all the more important and poignant given Paul's subsequent death. Readers should note that Bo even tries to save Paul, but is unable to do so. Equally important is Paul's decision to baptize baby Clare before she dies. Baptism is important in the Catholic faith, and Paul's act is a tender, touching gift for the baby and the families. Indeed, the baby was considered to be a gift to bridge the divide between the two families.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Bo confront Paul in the woods by his house? What comes out of the conversation between Bo and Paul with respect to the hunting accident? Why does this matter so much for Bo and Paul?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Paul retain guilt over the hunting accident more than two decades later? What is his belief about sin and the accident? Does Rovnavaha agree or disagree with Paul? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Father Rovnavaha argues that the baby Ruth is carrying is a gift. What does he mean by this? Do Bo and his mother agree or disagree with the idea that the baby is a gift? Why?

Vocabulary

escarpment, casualty, testimony, improbable



Chapters 9 – 12

Summary

Part 2: While the Earth Remains, continued

In Chapter 9, the body of Mary Younger is found by two boys playing with a BB gun. The entire Younger family is buried together, and Bo has workers from the Mill come down to bear the coffins. Father Rovnavaha explains that God's covenant remains for those who remain on the Earth while the Earth remains –that the sun, harvests, and seasons will continue. With Jeff's help, Bo is able to get his old Dodge pickup running again, which has been out of commission since the flood. The summer comes on in full swing. Hannah works in the gardens. The mill continues to manage, allowing Bo to give small raises. In August, Bo goes up to see the house he has inherited. He decides to clear away the weeds and overgrowth, and turn the house into something nice. He and Hannah agree that Ruth must come and live with them, as her mother lives in Florida and as her house in Dardan has been destroyed. Meanwhile, Bo considers working up at the old Younger place, and asks his plumber friend named Matt Devlin to come and look at things. Bo also asks for the names of a good electrician, a carpenter, and anyone who can do drywall.

In Chapter 10, Bo and Father Rovnavaha head to the VA to pick up Ruth. She falls asleep on the way back. Rovnavaha talks about how the things that remain after the flood are inside each of them now –such as stories about their ancestors. This leads to a conversation about land, and Rovnavaha reminding Bo that Jozef legally purchased the land fair and square from Paul Younger. Before that, the land belonged to Patrick Kelleher, son of an Irish silversmith named Bartley Kelleher, the priest explains. This causes Bo to think of the spoon marked BK. Rovnavaha explains that Patrick arrived in New York in 1863, volunteered to join the Union Army, and fought through the rest of the Civil War with a friend who hailed from Dardan, Michael Zlodej. The priest explains that when Zlodej was killed he asked Patrick to travel to Dardan to tell his family he died with the Lord's name on his lips. Patrick agreed, and did so, falling in love with the place when he did, taking on the name Augustin Younger (August from the month and Younger from the Young Family Funeral Home he passed in Sunbury on the way up) in order to hide his Irish roots.

Rovnavaha reveals the Zlodej family took now-Augustin in, who ultimately went came to marry Klara, the twin sister of Michael, and over the years, bought acre by acre of land, becoming rich from timber. Rovnavaha explains that Augustin's son, Walter, made a fortune in beer until Prohibition destroyed him, leading to him having to sell off his family's land to try to save his business while struggling with alcoholism and gambling. The truck arrives at the Vinich house. Ruth is worried about being a problem or staying too long, but Bo reassures her she is welcome. Hannah is very warm and receiving of Ruth, and is happy to have Rovnavaha for lunch. Ruth is given Jozef's old room, the largest and brightest in the house. Ruth is overwhelmed by their kindness. Hannah also



clears the air, letting her know the hunting accident is in the past. Hannah helps Ruth bathe because Ruth is still fairly weak. Hannah promises that they will get Ruth some new clothing and make sure she is comfortable and settled in. Ruth admits she feels horrible that her family is all gone. Hannah tells her she is family, and that Sam will one day soon come home. Ruth asks about the family's history over dinner the next evening, and Hannah tells it, explaining her husband was saved as a baby by her father in Europe, only to show up at their home years later. It rains again that night.

In Chapter 11, Hannah and Ruth go to the barn for eggs. For the time being, Hannah gives Ruth some of her clothing. Hannah and Ruth then go see Virgil Kravits, a locally famous chicken farmer, to purchase from him to bring their flock up to twelve. Then, they have a picnic by the lake. They go swimming to the middle of the lake where Solace Mountain can be seen. It can only be seen from the middle of the lake because it is tucked in between surrounding mountains. Ruth explains she and Sam were set to climb it one night when he got arrested for racing. Hannah explains that raising boys is easy and tough –easy because a mother is close to them for so long, until they leave in a new direction. Hannah and Ruth visit the graves of Ruth's daughter, father, and aunt. Then, they begin visiting weekly.

In Chapter 12, as Labor Day approaches, Bo can feel autumn in the air. He and Ruth head out to gather eggs and tend to the animals. Bo goes to work; later, he works on the house. Bo sees his work on the house as an ongoing conversation with his grandfather about problems and solving them. Bo leases the land for wheat growing and continues working on the hutch he is building as he has time. Ruth has taken to wearing Sam's old flannel shirts. Bo explains to her the hutch he has built is primarily for Hannah to keep letters about Sam. Ruth is interested to learn about Bo's improvements on the old Younger house, for she has never known it. Bo offers her the chance to see it and the ledger. She agrees to do so when the house is completed. They hear Krasna barking, which never happens, and rush out to discover the chickens under attack from a hawk. As they rush to help, Ruth falls and hurts herself, unable to make a difference. She begins to cry, and Hannah helps her up to go inside. Bo takes out the hawk with a rifle.

Analysis

In this section, the author focuses on the importance of family. Family means everything, especially in the face of such loss as brought by the flood. Hannah, who was recently reluctant to have any of the Youngers in her home for a visit, now agrees with Bo that Ruth must come and live with them as her family is dead, as she has nowhere to live, and as she is now their family. Hannah warmly, graciously, and lovingly invites Ruth in and ensures Ruth knows she is a part of the family and is welcome with them. Hannah sees the only missing piece now as Sam. In the midst of such tragedy and loss between the flood, death, and Sam's missing status, family perseveres.

The burial of Ruth's family members also highlights another important theme –that the land is crucial, but not everything to family especially through God's covenant. Readers



will recall that Jozef shocked his family in the old country by leaving the land in which the family had its roots; and that he looked for similar land in America in which to settle. Jozef's family has put down roots, loving the land on which they live. Recall that Paul lamented the selling of family land to the point of anger until his dying day, believing that the land was so very crucial to a family's existence and stability. As much as this may be true, it must be remembered that something crucial does not mean it is everything. As God's promise, highlighted by Father Rovnavaha notes, the land (the Earth) will always be there, but the memories and love associated with the place are more important than the place itself. These things a person can carry with him when the land is changed or gone. Ruth's home is gone, but she carries memories and love with her when she moves in with Bo and Hannah.

Ruth, even though she does not return to work professionally, commits to working around the house and the farm. She is young, but she is courageous. She is suffering tremendously from the flood, but she puts her mind and her heart to helping out however she can. It gives her a renewed sense of purpose to know she is counted among, and depended upon, as family. Indeed, Hannah and Ruth become constant companions, and through Hannah, Ruth learns more about the past and about her family. She realizes that Hannah truly does not blame her father for the accident, despite the resentment harbored previously over the accident. In a way, Ruth taking Hannah in is a demonstration of utter forgiveness and a letting go of the past. As Kravik argues, eventually, one must move beyond tragedy. In any even greater tragedy has been found forgiveness and moving on. However, readers should carefully note the one place no one has really moved on from is Sam –and understandably so.

Discussion Question 1

Despite Hannah's earlier reservations about having the Youngers over to visit, she now agrees that Ruth must come and live with her and Bo. Why? What does Hannah hope this will achieve?

Discussion Question 2

How does Ruth deal with the aftermath of the tragedy of the flood? Why does Ruth commit herself to moving on however she can? Does this prove effective? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Hannah tells Ruth that she is now family. Why is this so? How does Ruth take to the idea that she is a part of Hannah's family? Why?

Vocabulary

covenant, horologists, evocation, provender, ominous, equivalent



Chapters 13 – 16

Summary

Part 3: As We Wait

In Chapter 13, Bo moves into the renovated house. He is planning a trip to Abas, West Virginia. He has decided to expand the mill, as orders have increased. Ruth and Hannah come to see the finished house. They are impressed. Bo has kept true to the spirit of the original design, including golds, tans, reds, and grays. He explains some of the work was done by professionals, and other work by him. They have dinner, before which Hannah prays. Sam asks Ruth if she has ever heard of a Captain Burne Grayson. Ruth reveals Sam did mention a Commander Grayson to her. He explains he will be down in West Virginia to buy a new saw for the expansion, and he will check into Grayson. Ruth decides to go with him. They pass through Maryland at Cumberland, then into West Virginia where Bo meets an old, fat man who agrees to sell his mill saw for five-hundred dollars.

In Chapter 14, Bo calls his mill to arrange for a flatbed truck to pick up the saw. He and Ruth then drive five miles down the road to Abas. At a diner, they explain to their waitress what they are doing in Abas. The waitress knows of Burne Grayson, points out the place on a map. Grayson is chopping wood when they arrive and introduce themselves. He serves them all white pine tea. Grayson refers to Sam as “old man” as Sam often spoke to an old man no one else could see. Bo reveals this to be Jozef, who often plays into such conversations. Grayson says that he met Sam on their first tour, and Grayson ended up doing a second and a third. Bo asks if they should put up a marker for Sam, or wait. Grayson suggests a marker, regardless. He explains he and Sam went in to command Combined Action Program squads, which embedded American troops in Vietnamese villages to win hearts and minds of locals.

Sam’s detachment was ambushed by the Vietcong. Sam was fighting to Grayson’s right, and Grayson looked away for a few seconds. He explains that when he looked back Sam was simply gone. Bo considers that he has never been for or against the war, while Jozef said at the time Sam enlisted that no one actually believes in war, and that reasons for standing up for what one believes in is never a reason to die. Bo remembers how struck everyone was by Sam’s decision to go back in for a second tour. Grayson goes on to explain that they survived the ambush, and he and some others went out to find Sam and the bodies of the dead, but that they could not find Sam. Grayson is hurt by this because he wanted to bring all of his boys back. Grayson goes on to say that Sam always spoke highly of Bo. Grayson says he wishes everyone could come back.

In Chapter 15, the truck breaks down so Bo and Ruth get a motel room with two beds, and call Hannah to let her know they will ride back with the flatbed truck the following day. That night, Ruth thanks Bo for bringing her down. Ruth is amazed their families are



not locked in a feud after their history. Bo says there is no reason for this. The next day, he sells the truck, believing it cannot be fixed. They get breakfast at the diner, and the waitress, Ashley, says the meal is on Burne Grayson.

That night at dinner, Bo and Ruth tell Hannah about Grayson and Sam. Hannah excuses herself and goes outside. Ruth agrees to give Bo a ride to work in the morning, for Bo no longer has a truck. Ruth kisses him on the cheek, and they smile at one another as they part ways for the night. As Bo walks home, he thinks about how Sam wanted to build a log cabin in the woods when they were younger, and how Jozef toasted their work. That night, Bo touches his cheek where Ruth kissed him.

In Chapter 16, after dropping Bo off at work, Ruth sits down to breakfast with Hannah to ask about how Hannah is feeling after the results of the trip to Grayson. Hannah says she feels like she did on the first day she found out Sam was missing. She does not know whether she will get him back dead or alive. Ruth explains it was never a matter of belief for her, because belief would not change the facts of whatever happened to Sam over in Vietnam.

In October, Bo asks to go fishing with Father Rovnavaha, since they have not seen one another since August. Bo admits he wants to be with Ruth. Rovnavaha says he and Hannah have been watching Bo and Ruth all summer, thinking it is only a matter of time. But the good priest tells Bo to take it slowly.

The first week in November, Ruth and Bo decide to go on a hike together up at Ricketts Glen soon. Bo leaves Jozef's old ledger for her to read, which she does to learn more about the history of her family, and of Bo's. Ruth finally realizes there is no feud, and that she must get on with her life. Everyone should get on. She decides to go and see Bo on Saturday. Bo tells her he wants her to come and stay with him. Ruth agrees, but says they must take it slow. Bo agrees to this. He then makes them dinner, and they light a fire and watch it on the couch.

Analysis

As noted in the previous section, the newly-formed family of Hannah, Bo, and Ruth has still not moved beyond the fate of Sam. Again, this is understandable for people to whom family means everything. The business trip to West Virginia is used by Bo as an excuse to allow him and Ruth to meet with Burne Grayson. Unfortunately, Grayson does not have any new information for them, except the account of how he noticed Sam was simply missing after looking away for a handful of seconds. Grayson's remark that the family should put up a headstone regardless is symbolic in two ways. First, it is a dose of realism in that Sam is probably dead, because Burne himself does not even really believe Sam is alive anymore. Second, even if Sam does come home, Sam will not be the same Sam anymore. The war will have changed him. In such a case, the marker would be purely symbolic, not literal. The encounter with Grayson also demonstrates that loss is inherent in small towns across America. Grayson still mourns the loss of his men and the loss of all those who will not be coming home.



The trip to West Virginia proves to be a symbolic journey as well for reasons other than coming to accept that Sam is probably dead. It is a trip that solidifies the growing bond between Bo and Sam. The idea that Sam is probably dead creates the possibility for romance between Bo and Ruth. Bo seeks out Father Rovnavaha's advice. The priest advises Bo to take the romance slowly and in due time. Ruth herself consents to a possible romance as well, but done slowly and over time. Readers should bear in mind that Bo and Ruth are clinging to one another in the aftermath of great tragedies, so old feelings will remain strong as new feelings emerge and grow.

Ruth is still dealing with accepting the fact that there is not, and never has been a family feud –just unsettled feelings. Jozef's ledger, which is a symbolic accounting more of life than of business, underscores this point to Ruth. Ruth actively commits herself to the present and to moving on with her life. At this point, the author argues forcefully that eventually you must move on from tragedy. There is hope in the future, and this is what must be sought.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Bo bring Ruth along with him to see Grayson in West Virginia? What is the trip ultimately like for them? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Bo and Ruth come to be disappointed in their visit to Grayson? What solemn and sobering reality must they face as a result of Grayson's eyewitness testimony?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Bo appeal to Father Rovnavaha for advice regarding how to proceed with Ruth? What is the good priest's advice? Why? How does Ruth respond to Bo's romantic advance? Why?

Vocabulary

tapering, equinox, audible, rapport, camaraderie, inalienable, intermittent, assuage, bereft



Chapters 17 – 18

Summary

Part 3: As We Wait, continued

In Chapter 17, Hannah, Ruth, and Krasna go to Bo's house for Thanksgiving. Father Rovnavaha and Jeff and Angie Lamoreaux also attend. Hannah watches how well Bo and Ruth move together as they prepare the meal. Hannah decides to take Krasna for a walk to the silver beech tree where her sons and others who had lived on the land carved their initials and the initials of their beloved. She then realizes Krasna has been shot by a young man hunting on her land. She runs screaming at the hunter, who is shocked. The boy runs, and Hannah throws a rock after him. Hannah returns home heartbroken and in tears to explain what has happened. Bo decides to speak with the police, while Rovnavaha and Ruth comfort Hannah. Hannah is taken by Ruth to the barn to see the body of Krasna. Krasna, she explains, was Sam's doing because Sam wanted a dog when Bo went to college. Hannah says she wished Sam could have come home to see Krasna again. The police arrive, and Hannah gives them a statement. Everyone assembled for Thanksgiving helps to bury Krasna in the orchard. "Krasna" means beautiful in Slovak. After the burial, they all eat dinner and stay up late talking.

In Chapter 18, the Christmas season comes on. Bo and Ruth find a Christmas tree for Hannah while Hannah makes them coffee. She heads to church, leaving Bo and Ruth to decorate the tree. Bo shows Ruth the finished hutch, which is Hannah's Christmas present. Ruth says she will be returning to work soon. Bo then gives his Christmas present to Hannah –the silver spoon marked with her great-great-grandfather's initials, BK. Hannah prepares a beautiful dinner, which is attended by Father Rovnavaha and the Lamoreaux. Hannah is happy to be surrounded by good, loving people whom she loves. Hannah approves of Bo and Ruth. She leaves the explanation for how their relationship came to be up to the mysterious ways of God.

In the summer, Sam returns home, appearing at the top of the hill. Fear rises in Bo. Bo goes out to meet him, while Ruth is so taken aback that she cannot go to him.

Analysis

Endings are not always happy, especially in small towns where loss is a way of life. Even with the flood and acceptance of Sam's demise now in the past, tragedy persists. The killing of Krasna seems to demonstrate to Hannah that Sam is not coming back. She had hoped Krasna would be the reason Sam returned home. Without Krasna, there is little reason for Sam to return now. Krasna is the last trace of Sam's childhood and his existence. That has now been wiped away. The death of Krasna is an especially deep blow for Hannah (especially given the eerie similarity it bares to the death of her husband). She struggles through it by clinging to her family and good friends. She



remains focused on the future. Hannah gives Ruth and Bo her blessing, but she urges them to proceed slowly and respectfully, which they do. Eventually, one must move on from tragedy.

In the midst of Bo's and Ruth's happiness, there is a twist. Sam comes home. Both Bo and Ruth, who have finally settled into life with one another and are looking toward marriage, are stunned when Sam appears on their hill. Bo might well be asking himself which would have been a greater tragedy-- for Sam to be alive or dead. Bo and Ruth have gained Sam and potentially lost their romance. Before Sam returned, they had potentially lost Sam and gained romance. It is unclear which Bo would actually prefer, but his simple "No" is telling enough. It is possible that Sam may accept the romance, or it is possible that the romance might tear the family apart. At the end of the novel, the reader is left to decide what happened after Sam's return.

Discussion Question 1

Why are Bo and Ruth stunned, rather than elated, to see Sam? Why can Ruth not bring herself to go and see Sam when he returns?

Discussion Question 2

What potential consequences of Sam's return home could there be? What do you think will be the outcome of his return home, especially for Bo and Ruth? Explain your reasoning.

Discussion Question 3

Why is the killing of Krasna so tragic for Hannah? What does this mean for her now going forward, especially with respect to Sam?

Vocabulary

fossilized, indiscernible, gregarious, surveying



Characters

Bo

Bohumir “Bo” Konar is the grandson of Jozef, the son of Hannah and Bexhet, and the older brother of Sam. In his early thirties, very intelligent and good with his hands, Bo now owns and runs the family lumber mill.

Bo is deeply saddened by the death of Jozef and the MIA status of Sam. Bo works hard to care for his family. He is committed, loyal, and deeply personable. He and Hannah welcome Ruth into their home after the tragedy of the flood. The family is attempting to right itself while still dealing with the unknown status of Sam. Bo inherits some land and the old Younger house from his grandfather. Bo spends much of the novel fixing up the house. Ultimately, Bo and Ruth enter into a tentative romance which is challenged by the surprise return of Sam. Bo is more shocked than elated to see Sam.

Hannah

Hannah Konar is the daughter of Jozef, the widow of Bexhet, and the mother of Bo and Sam. Hannah is haunted by the accidental death of her husband. She decides to focus on the family and the farm to give herself a sense of purpose. Hannah is a loyal, sweet, and patient woman whose kindness is inherited by Bo. It is Hannah who so warmly welcomes Ruth into her home after the flood, despite earlier misgivings relating to the accidental death of Bexhet. It is Hannah who later gives her blessing to Bo and Ruth.

Ruth

Ruth Younger is the daughter of Paul Younger, the fiancée of Sam, and the mother of Clare Frances. Ruth is young, beautiful, gentle, kind, and a hard worker. She erroneously believes that the Konar family hates her family after the hunting death of Bexhet. However, her romance with Sam allows her to see there never was a feud and that it is time to move on. Ultimately, Ruth develops romantic feelings for Bo, but she asks to move slowly. When Sam returns, Ruth is thrown and so shaken she cannot even approach him.

Father Rovnavaha

Father Tomas Rovnavaha is the local Catholic priest for Dardan. Devout, brilliant, and kind, he is well-loved and well-respected in the community. He has been especially close to Jozef’s family all his life. Rovnavaha is a World War II veteran who returned home, went to college, and then went into the priesthood. In the present, he helps Bo, Ruth, and their family navigate the MIA status of Sam and the tragedies that follow, such as the flood. Rovnavaha later counsels Bo and Hannah on their developing romance.



Jozef Vinich

Jozef Vinich is the widowed patriarch of the Vinich-Konar family. He dies shortly before the novel begins. A World War I veteran of Austria-Hungary, Jozef immigrated to America for a new life. He has lived up to the symbolism of his family's name by establishing family roots from which vines of life grow.

Jozef was very much a self-made man, wise in the ways of family and the heart as well as business. He was the rock on which his family depended, especially through tragedies such as Bexhet's death. Jozef was also a pillar in the community, enjoying a close friendship with Father Rovnavaha. Bo especially looked up to Jozef, and much of the novel consists of Bo's memories of Jozef.

Sam

Sam Konar is the younger brother of Bo, the fiancée of Ruth, the grandson of Jozef, and the son of Bexhet and Hannah. Sam is a restless young man who enlists in the military to fight in Vietnam because he believes it is the right thing to do. He is reported as missing in action during an ambush. Presumably, he is imprisoned. Later in the story, his family assumes that he is dead. Then, at the end of the novel, Sam's return throws Bo and Ruth off-balance.

Paul

Paul Younger is the divorced father of Ruth. Paul is a brash man who harbors deep guilt for accidentally killing Bexhet while hunting twenty-some years before the novel. Paul believes the adultery he committed, which led to the breakup of his marriage, also resulted in the payback of sin through the accidental death, forever damning him. However, Bo makes peace with Paul over the past, which matters greatly to Paul. Paul is killed not long after in the flood while trying to drive Ruth to the hospital to have her baby.

Walter

Walter Younger is the father of Paul and the grandfather of Ruth. A drunkard and gambler, Walter was still considered a decent man who simply let his flaws get the best of him. To pay his debts and keep drinking, Walter sold off his land to Jozef, which became a source of contention to Paul in later years. Walter was allowed to remain in his house on the property he sold until his death.



Burne Grayson

Burne Grayson is a retired captain in the U.S. Marines who commanded and fought alongside Sam in Vietnam. Grayson resides in West Virginia and is visited by Bo and Ruth as Grayson was the last man to see Sam alive. Grayson is deeply haunted by the war, and believes that Bo and Ruth might as well put up a grave marker for Sam.

Bexhet

Bexhet "Becks" Konar is the deceased husband of Hannah, and the father of Bo and Sam. Saved by Jozef as a baby, Bexhet later tracked down Jozef in America to thank him, and fell in love with and married Hannah. Bexhet then served in the U.S. Army World War II. After the war, in 1950, he was accidentally killed during a hunting accident by Paul Younger.



Symbols and Symbolism

Massive fish

A massive fish symbolizes God's presence and the reliance on beauty to see through sorrow. While fishing with Jozef, Father Rovnavaha considers that beauty can see a man like the recently widowed Jozef through sorrow. At that moment, Jozef caught a giant fish. There is a Biblical reference here as well, to how a handful of fish fed thousands because of Jesus. Fish, as a part of nature, are a part of beauty and sustaining of life. Therein, Jozef catching the fish is proof of God's presence and the importance of beauty in handling sorrow.

Vines

Vines represent the taking root and growing life of family. The last name of Jozef, "Vinich," is translated into English as "vine." As patriarch and progenitor of his family, such a name is highly meaningful given the family which emerges as a result of Jozef himself.

Jozef's will

Jozef's will represents the continuing tradition of family. The will passes on to his daughter and grandsons all his worldly positions, which includes some money, land, and the old Younger place. Jozef intended everything he had worked for should go to his family, since they were his life and would continue on when he was gone.

Silver spoon marked BK

The silver spoon marked with the initials BK symbolizes the continuity of the past. Bo finds the old spoon in the old Younger place when he is bequeathed it in Jozef's will, and later learns the initials stood for the Bartley Kelleher, father of Augustin Younger, formerly Patrick Kelleher. Bartley crafted the spoon as he was a silversmith. The rehabbing of the property and house as well as Bo's later romantic relationship with Ruth symbolizes the coming together of both Ruth and Bo's pasts in a new future. Bo gifts Ruth with the spoon, which marks a continuity with the past, and marks a respect for family history.

The washing of Paul's hands

Paul's washing of his hands in the stream is symbolic of Bo's forgiveness. Paul has long harbored guilt over accidentally killing Bo's father. When Bo allows Paul to continue hunting on old family land that now belongs to Bo, Paul is essentially able to let go of



the past, knowing he is forgiven. His cleaning of his hands in the stream after killing a doe –washing the blood from them –is a symbolic representation of his absolution.

Baby Clare Frances

The baby (Baby Clare Frances) symbolizes a gift from God tending toward forgiveness. The baby is the product of the love between Sam and Ruth. Despite the divide between the families, the baby serves as a common, unifying bond. Father Rovnavaha explains as much to Hannah. Tragically, it is the death of the baby that brings together the families.

Jozef's ledger

The ledger symbolizes the accounting of a life. Jozef keeps an accounting ledger all his life for the sake of records and finances. However, the ledger proves to be more of a journal than simply business. The ledger helps Bo learn about his family's past. It helps Ruth to realize there never was an actual family feud between the Konaks and the Youngers – only pain and division.

The hutch

The hutch symbolizes hope. Bo builds a hutch for his mother to store her correspondence about Sam's MIA status. The correspondence and the hutch represent hope that Sam will one day come home alive. The hutch becomes symbolic of that hope, for it holds the source of that hope inside.

Grave marker

When Bo and Ruth ask Grayson if Sam is dead, Grayson tells them to put up a marker, regardless. Either Sam is dead, or Sam might as well be dead, for the war changes men and shatters them. Sam may return home, but he will not be the same Sam as before. Grayson, however, probably believes Sam to be literally dead.

The selling of the old truck

The selling of the old truck is symbolic of Bo's accepting Sam is dead. When the truck breaks down in West Virginia after the meeting with Grayson, Bo knows the truck must be sold. The truck is representative of Bo's hope that Sam is alive, for the truck has been in the family for decades. When the truck dies and is sold, so is Bo's hope.



The death of Krasna

The death of Krasna symbolizes the realization on Hannah's part that Sam is dead. Krasna is killed illegally by a hunter on Hannah's land. Krasna dies in a way eerily similar to Bexhet. Krasna was Sam's dog, and Hannah held out the hope that Sam would come home to see his dog. With the death of Krasna, and with Krasna being the last thing Sam owned before he left, Hannah begins accepting that Sam must be dead.

The Signal Flame

The novel draws its title from the phrase "signal flame." In turn, "signal flame" is drawn from Agamemnon by Aeschylus in which news from Troy is awaited by those at home. In this novel, Vietnam is analogous to Troy. Thus, Hannah, Bo, and Ruth are looking for signs that Sam is either alive or dead. For example, Hannah interprets the tragic death of Sam's dog, Krasna, as a sign that Sam will not be returning because he is dead.

Note also that leaving a light on for someone returning home is a common occurrence. It means the family is waiting for the arrival.



Settings

Jozef's house

Jozef's house is a beautiful, large old farmhouse that he built himself for his family. Jozef's house is set on two-thousand acres of land that Jozef bought. The land is primarily forested, but it also features orchards, farmland, meadows, creeks, and streams. The land reminds Jozef of the old country. His home is truly his because he built it. The house and the majority of the land are both left to Hannah, and it is in Jozef's house that Hannah, Bo, and Ruth live for much of the novel.

The old Younger place

The old Younger place is a three-story clapboard home built by Walter Younger many years ago. The house was sold to Jozef to pay off Walter Younger's gambling debts and to fuel his alcoholism. Jozef allowed Walter to live in the house until Walter's death. Then, the house was kept locked until Bo inherited the property from Jozef. Bo works to renovate the home back to its earlier design by using colors such as oak, red, and gray. Eventually, Bo moves into the house. Later, Ruth joins him as they start their life together.

Dardan

Dardan, Pennsylvania, is a small, isolated valley town nestled by Salamander Creek among three large mountains. The valley is heavily forested. Dardan is like any typical small town with schools, gas stations, and places to shop. There is a Catholic Church and a convent. Near Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, Dardan is where Jozef and the Youngers make their home. In the story, Dardan experiences a flood, which causes its residents to turn toward God in survival.

Abas

Abas, West Virginia, is a small town visited by Bo and Ruth later in the novel. Abas is much like Dardan, mountainous and isolated. Abas is the home of Captain Burne Grayson, whom Bo and Ruth visit to see if he has any more information about Sam. The trip to Abas helps Bo and Ruth begin to accept that Sam is probably dead. The trip also marks the beginning of a romance between Both and Ruth themselves.

Vietnam

Vietnam is a country in Southeast Asia torn by civil war as the Communist North attempts to subdue and conquer a free and independent South. The United States of

America intervenes in Vietnam to help the South fight against Communism's expansion. It is in Vietnam that Sam's unit is ambushed by North Vietnamese irregular troops. After the ambush, Sam is listed as Missing in Action (MIA). Sam returns home at the end of the novel.



Themes and Motifs

Family means everything.

In *The Signal Flame*, family means everything. Family is central to life, and it proves to be the only thing sometimes upon which people can depend. Jozef Vinich forged the traditions of his family after immigrating to Dardan, Pennsylvania from Austria-Hungary.

As readers learn, the last name “Vinich” means “vine” in Slovak, and it is a fitting description of what Jozef has done. He has planted roots and grown vines of life that have taken hold of the land to thrive –which is reflective of his family. His family deeply loves him and their home. Everything Jozef does –building a home, making a small fortune, purchasing land, and preparing his will –is done for his family.

When the novel begins, Jozef has just died. His loss is deeply felt because he has been the rock to which his family has clung through the difficult times of Bexhet’s accidental death and Sam’s going missing in Vietnam. The love of family and the need to support one another keep Jozef, Bo, and Hannah going. Jozef’s death throws the family off kilter. However, Hannah and Bo take comfort in at least having one another.

When Ruth’s entire family dies in the flood, Hannah and Bo open their home and their hearts to her. Hannah pointedly tells Ruth that Ruth is family. As such, she is more than welcome to live with her and Bo. The only thing that will complete the family is Sam, and Hannah holds out hope that Sam will come home. When it seems that Sam will never return, Bo and Ruth begin their own romance. Hannah approves of the relationship because she knows that God has mysterious ways when it comes to mending families.

Though surroundings may change throughout life, love and memories are important roots that stay the same.

Though the land and its surroundings may change, the roots of the people living there remain. The beginning of the novel features a short vignette about Jozef leaving the ancestral home of his family to begin anew in America. This shocks his family, because being rooted to a piece of land means stability, security, tradition, history, and a place from which to grow. Even though Jozef is migrating to a new country, his Austrian-German roots will travel with him to America. Jozef’s new life with his family will grow from those early roots.

Jozef, heartbroken by the war in Europe, comes to America and finds a place to live, Dardan, Pennsylvania. He chooses the small, pastoral town because it resembles his home country. He builds a house and raises his family on a piece of land that increases acre by acre, year by year. The family falls in love with the land, the town, and the surrounding area. This is now home for them.



Then, their surroundings change again when a flood comes through the area and damages or destroys much of Dardan, including Ruth's house. The flood also claims numerous lives, including Ruth's daughter, father, and aunt. It is Father Rovnavaha who must remind the people of the town that the land is essential, but not everything to a human life. There are things like memories and love which carry on no matter how the Earth is changed by things like floods. The Earth will still remain no matter how it is changed.

The destruction faced by Ruth leads to her moving in with Bo and Hannah on Konak family land. There, Ruth immediately becomes a beloved and essential part of the family. Ironically, the land sold to Jozef by her grandfather will come back into Ruth's family if she and Bo marry. Bo has inherited the old Younger house and property from Jozef. Family land retains its central role in the lives of both the Konaks and the Youngers.

Loss is a way of life in small towns.

Loss is a way of life in small towns. Whether it is Dardan or Abas, small towns in the novel are frequented by loss. People either move on or die.

The novel begins shortly after the death of Jozef. Jozef's loss is deeply felt by both family and the community. The death of the family patriarch comes on the heels of his grandson Sam being reported MIA in Vietnam. A short time before Jozef's death, his wife Helen had died. Decades before, an accidental shooting death claimed Hannah's husband while he was hunting with a friend. Loss has visited the Konak family many times.

Ruth herself is no stranger to loss by the end of the novel. She grew up without a mother after her mother left her father over his adultery. Ruth is dealing with her fiancée Sam's MIA status. Then, on the night of Dardan's flood a car accident claims the life of Ruth's newborn baby girl, Ruth's father, and Ruth's Aunt Mary. Fortunately, Ruth can depend upon Bo and Hannah, who are still reeling from their own slew of losses.

Bo and Ruth journey to Abas, West Virginia, later in the novel to see Burne Grayson. They hope Grayson can shed some light on Sam's disappearance. As Grayson describes the last time he saw Sam in combat, Grayson seems to believe Sam is dead. Grayson is haunted by the loss of Sam and his other troops. He hopes that all the men killed or missing in Vietnam will be coming home soon.

Work helps people cope with loss.

Work helps people cope with loss. Having a job means having responsibilities and being needed. These aspects give purpose to one's life after losing a loved one.

After Bo loses his girlfriend in a car accident, Jozef tells his grandson that work offers purpose and helps people to cope with loss. It keeps one from being overwhelmed by



the sense of loss. Because of this, Bo places his faith in God and his family. He commits to working at the mill where he slowly recovers and makes his way through the ranks. Eventually, he buys the business itself from Jozef. Later, Bo feels a sense of purpose through his need to be there for his family in light of Helen's death, then Jozef's death, and Sam's missing-in-action status.

To help cope with the abandonment of her mother and Sam's being missing, Ruth throws herself into her job at the hardware store. It gives her a reason to keep going –as does the baby now growing inside her. To help cope with Jozef's death and to help prepare for the future, Bo also throws himself into fixing up the old Younger place. Hannah, meanwhile, continues to tend to her home, the farm, and her son. These responsibilities give her a sense of purpose amid her losses.

When Ruth's family is killed on the night of the flood, she goes to live with Bo and Hannah. She becomes a part of the family. The family takes comfort in each other, and Ruth commits to helping around the house and the farm to pull her own weight. She courageously begins to move on and give purpose to her life. She realizes she is needed by Hannah and Bo, and this helps her to begin to move on.

Eventually, everyone must must find a way to move on from tragedy.

Eventually, everyone must must find a way to move on from tragedy. For example, Ruth delves into the past by way of Jozef's ledger. The ledger helps her to begin to move beyond the loss of her entire family. Throughout most of her life, Ruth has believed that Hannah's family (except Sam) hates her because of the accidental hunting death caused by her father. While there is division and hurt, there is no actual feud. Everyone in Bo's family has already accepted the hunting accident as just that –an accident. By reading the ledger, Ruth discovers that a feud never existed. She takes it as a sign that everyone must move on in their lives.

Hannah has long harbored heartache over her dead husband. While she does not blame the Youngers, she cannot bear to have them around. Only in the midst of the tragedy of the flood and the death of Ruth's baby and immediate family does Hannah get past her feelings. Hannah invites Ruth into her home and declares that Ruth is a member of the family.

The trip that Bo and Ruth take to West Virginia to see Grayson helps them begin to move beyond the tragedy of Sam's being missing. They begin to accept what they have long feared –that Sam is dead. Ruth and Bo begin to move on together as romance blossoms between them. However, things become complicated when Sam suddenly returns home unexpectedly. At the end of the novel, how to move on is left to be resolved by the reader.

Styles

Point of View

Andrew Krivak tells his novel *The Signal Flame* from a third-person regional-omniscient point of view. The narrator, never identified, is nevertheless very intimate with the goings-on of Bo, Hannah, and Ruth. The narration gives an account of their separate, yet intertwined, stories. The stories tell everything going on with the characters as needed to advance the plot. Thus, the characters are fully explored and given great depth and dimension. Readers can relate and be sympathetic as they recognize their own loss, love, and family in the characters, plot, and setting. The novel itself is dependent upon characters, not plot. The lives of the characters give the story life.

The narrator's knowledge of events is limited just to the town of Dardan, as the narrator does not know whether or not Sam is dead, missing, or imprisoned. This adds a sense of desperation and anxiety, as the family awaits news (a signal flame) of Sam's fate.

Language and Meaning

Andrew Krivak tells his novel *The Signal Flame* in language that is gentle, poetic, and pensive. The novel examines traditional themes like family, love, and loss through the eyes of multiple people. The story is told with grace, respect, and tenderness because these are such serious, relevant, and classic themes.

Krivak treats small town America with great respect, speaking of the beauty and tragic sadness of such places. Small towns and rural America send their sons and daughters off to war more so than anywhere else.

Krivak also uses pensive language to draw relevant points from the novel that are lessons for life. Consider, for example, Jozef's carefully-considered words on how work helps one move forward in life after loss. "That's the nature of loss... You are both lessened and left behind. There's nothing to be done but the work that's been given, so the part of you that's lessened doesn't become lost as well" (51).

Another example is Hannah's pensive thoughts about her son, Sam, after the West Virginia trip. "I feel like the first day they told me he went missing. Like I didn't know which was worse. Knowing that I'd get my son back with a flag draped over him? Or, not knowing and holding on to some hope that he might still be alive" (217). Hannah has realized from the outset of Sam's MIA status that knowing that Sam is dead or knowing that he is alive is equally heartbreaking.

Structure

Andrew Krivak divides his novel *The Signal Flame* into eighteen linear, numbered chapters. Each chapter is preceded by a brief vignette. For example, the first vignette tells of Jozef's immigration to America. The last chapter concludes with a brief vignette in which Sam returns home unexpectedly.

The chapters themselves veer back and forth between the past and the present, stitching together a quilt-work of characters, events, and situations. The characters drive the story line. Their lives all tend to play out around waiting on news about Sam's fate. For example, Hannah sees the ironic shooting of Sam's dog, Krasna, as a sign that Sam will not be returning home.

The novel draws its title from waiting for the signal flame. In turn, "signal flame" is drawn from *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus in which news from Troy is awaited by those at home. In this novel, Vietnam is analogous to Troy.



Quotes

But for one.

-- Narrator (Introduction)

Importance: In an introduction, the narrator sets the stage for history and the future. The narrator speaks of a family rooted to their land with faith in God and in their own capabilities. The narrator reveals that at least one family member, however, did not remain rooted to the land. That young man was Jozef Vinich, who was ultimately bound for northeastern Pennsylvania.

Where did you go?

-- Bo (Chapter 1)

Importance: Bo is sitting alone after mourners have left the wake for Bo's deceased grandfather, Jozef. Bo whispers to Jozef, asking him where he has gone. This is a simple but symbolic scene in which the past has truly become the past. Bo acutely feels the loss of his grandfather. Bo has suddenly become the man of the house, and the future is now.

That's the nature of loss... You are both lessened and left behind. There's nothing to be done but the work that's been given, so the part of you that's lessened doesn't become lost as well.

-- Jozef (Chapter 4)

Importance: When Ann dies, Bo is heartbroken and does not want to return to college. Jozef encourages Bo to find his own place no matter where it is in life. He tells Bo that death can be costly; however, focusing on work and on matters at hand can keep Bo from losing himself entirely. Bo promises not to fall apart and decides to work at the mill.

I know it was an accident, and I can't imagine what Paul Younger must carry around with him still. Like some kind of millstone. But I carry one, too.

-- Hannah (Chapter 6)

Importance: Hannah is explaining to Father Rovnavaha why she has difficulty inviting the Youngers into her home. She explains that, although she knows the killing of her husband was an accident, she simply cannot get past the fact that Paul took away her husband. She now seeks the priest's advice on what to do and how to move on.

It's time, Hannah. It's time you thought of the gift that Sam and Ruth have given to you and Paul.

-- Father Rovnavaha (Chapter 6)

Importance: Father Rovnavaha is advising Hannah on what to do because Sam is still missing. Ruth is not far away from giving birth to Sam's child. The priest tells Hannah to



recognize the baby as a gift from God to forge peace, love, and forgiveness between the two families. It is a chance for something beautiful to come from something tragic.

Just as the covenant of God with those few who remained on the earth remained amid destruction and devastation, only the sun and what they carried had not been lost.”

-- Father Rovnavaha (Chapter 9)

Importance: The priest is overseeing the funeral of the three Younger family members who died in the flood. Father Rovnavaha reminds those assembled that God’s promise still remains. Those who have survived have only what they carry and the continuing Earth. This means that the things the survivors carry, such as love and memories, will be critical. Earth will continue to sustain them in their work of rebuilding.

I’ve dreamed of having you in my family. You and Sam. And here you are. And I know that Sam’s coming back here, too. You wait and see.

-- Hannah (Chapter 10)

Importance: When Ruth is released from the hospital, she is invited to come and live with Hannah and Bo. Ruth feels sad that her family is all gone, but Hannah reminds Ruth that she is family. She also reminds Ruth that she believes Sam will be home one day soon and that they will all be a family.

I feel like the first day they told me he went missing. Like I didn’t know which was worse. Knowing that I’d get my son back with a flag draped over him? Or not knowing and holding on to some hope that he might still be alive.

-- Hannah (Chapter 16)

Importance: After the West Virginia trip, Hannah and Ruth are discussing Sam. Hannah explains that what she has learned from Grayson makes her feel like the first day she found out Sam was missing all over again. There is no real new information –just the opening up of old wounds.

It was never a matter of belief for me.

-- Ruth (Chapter 16)

Importance: Ruth is explaining that she never believed Sam was still alive –or dead. She explains that belief cannot change what has already happened. Whatever happened to Sam in Vietnam is reality. Ruth is only annoyed that Grayson could not tell them more. By simply trying to accept reality without believing anything, Ruth has been able to handle life as best she could.

There was no feud... And that they should get on with their lives. With their life.

-- Narrator (Chapter 16)

Importance: Reading through Jozef’s old ledger, Ruth realizes that there really was not a feud between her family and Sam’s family as she had believed. The ledger indicates that everyone had sought to move on with their lives. She takes it as a lesson to do the



same in the present. She turns her focus from dwelling on Sam to spending time with Bo.

No.

-- Bo (Chapter 18)

Importance: This is Bo's response when Sam appears at the top of the hill on his farm. Sam has come home from the Vietnam War after being missing in action and presumed dead. After Bo and the family have finally accepted Sam's death, Sam has returned. Bo realizes Sam's return will throw Bo's relationship with Ruth into crisis. However, Bo is also happy to see that his brother Sam is still alive. Bo goes out to meet Sam, while Ruth cannot bring herself to do so.

And still she did not move.

-- Narrator (Chapter 18)

Importance: The narrator is explaining in simple terms the dramatic response Ruth has to seeing Sam again. While Bo moves out to meet Sam, Ruth remains in place. She is clearly torn between the life she had with Sam and the life she thought she would have with Bo. Now, Ruth must choose between the two brothers.