

Taft Study Guide

Taft by Ann Patchett

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Plot Summary

Taft by Ann Patchett tells the story of two Tennessee fathers: John Nickel and Levon Taft. These fathers are the head of households that are broken by pride, betrayal, and unspoken fears and hopes. The novel shows that beyond race and economic status, all families face the same challenges.

John Nickel is the manager of Muddy's Bar in Memphis. John used to be a popular local blues drummer until his girlfriend, Marion Woodmoore, became pregnant. John initially refused to marry her, but once his son Franklin was born, he became determined to win Marion back. Marion forces him to get a job - namely, bartending at Muddy's - to put her through nursing school. When she gets her degree, however, Marion takes Franklin and moves to Miami.

At the beginning of the novel, John hires a new waitress, Fay Taft, who may be too young. She, her mother and her brother Carl have moved from east Tennessee following her father Levon's death. Carl becomes a fixture at Muddy's, helping out, though he is often high. Fay, meanwhile, gets closer to John, who cannot help but become infatuated with her. One night, John saves Carl from OD'ing, and Fay propositions him.

John begins imagining the man Levon Taft was before his death. He imagines Taft working two jobs to make ends meet and dedicating himself to keeping an eye on his two children, both of whom are wild and impulsive in their own ways. In doing this, Taft overextends himself and develops heart problems which he refuses to get checked.

As John attempts to avoid becoming romantically entangled with Fay, he sleeps with Marion's younger sister Ruth. Around this time, Marion and Franklin return to Memphis for a short vacation. John becomes determined to reconnect with them, and with the help of her parents, he nearly convinces her to return. He also discovers that Carl is dealing drugs and bars him from Muddy's, though later he bails him out of jail. Fay turns eighteen and asks John to marry her, but he refuses even to answer her request.

One night, Carl shoots John in the neck trying to recover drugs John confiscated from him. John does not want the young man to go to prison, so he has Marion arrange a surreptitious visit with a doctor to tend his wound. Marion begins caring for the convalescing John, who decides to forget about Fay and focus on raising his own child.

At the end of the novel, John imagines the day Levon Taft died, and how being in the room with his dying father psychically wounded Carl. Taft kept his children safe, and in his absence, the family disintegrates. John vows not to let that happen to his own.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Taft by Ann Patchett tells the story of two Tennessee fathers: John Nickel and Levon Taft. These fathers are the head of households that are broken by pride, betrayal, and unspoken fears and hopes. The novel shows that beyond race and economic status, all families face the same challenges.

The novel begins with John Nickel working on a winter afternoon in his Memphis bar, Muddy's. Fay Taft, a young white girl from rural Tennessee, walks in and asks for a job. Cyndi, John's main waitress, is immediately dismayed, and John thinks that Fay looks young. Fay insists she is twenty, and John eventually tells her to return tomorrow around happy hour to learn the ropes. Fay reminds him of his former lover Marion, though Marion is black. Besides, he needs the help. The only other server he has Wallace, his weekend bouncer.

John explains that he manages Muddy's, though when he began working there a few years back, his job was booking the bands. John himself was once a drummer for a blues group, but he put that on hold to take care of Marion and their child Franklin. Now they have left to go to Miami, and John has accepted that he'll never drum professionally again.

Marion and John met while John was still drumming. Marion was young, about eighteen, and they immediately took to each other. John's band was not huge, but they definitely made enough money to get by. One day, Marion told John she was pregnant, but everything would be alright: they would stick together. John immediately left Marion, and she moved back in with her parents. He didn't even take her call the night she gave birth.

Only after seeing Franklin for the first time in the hospital did John realize his mistake. He went to his parents house and begged for her to come back. She made a counter-offer: he would get a real job and pay her way through nursing school, and she and Franklin would move back in with him. This was when he took the job at Muddy's. He and Marion never saw each other during this time, though they lived together. Their schedules never matched up, and John spent every free minute with Franklin. In reality, Marion and John had stopped loving each other. When she got her nursing certificate, Marion moved out. A year or so later, she took a job in Miami and left.

Now alone in Memphis, John works around the clock to keep from getting depressed. He sends cash for Franklin every month, but he is angry that Marion frequently tells him Franklin is not his son.

The night after John hires Fay, he gets a panicked call from Marion. Evidently, Franklin was playing with some local kids on the beach, and he was pushed down onto a broken



Coke bottle. The shard gashed his face by the eye. He had to get stitches, but he is alright. Marion calls all night, but John doesn't get home until three in the morning. After the call, John cannot fall asleep. Franklin's face keeps him awake. He tries to think of Fay to block out the image. He thinks of the moment on the beach when Franklin cut his face.

Chapter 1 Analysis

In chapter one, Ann Patchett provides all the exposition the reader needs. She begins by providing a portrait of John Nickel's daily life of organizing liquor bottles in his bar and wondering whether he could have made it as a drummer. Taft begins *en medias res*. That is to say, much of the defining action of the protagonist's life has already happened. Patchett briefs us on that over the course of this chapter, as well.

The central characters of this novel are John and the two women in his life: Marion and Ann Taft. Marion exists for John as a ghost, a haunted memory of a happiness that he rejected and then could not regain. Much of the first chapter concerns this process of iniquity and loss. John rejects Marion after she becomes pregnant with his child: he is determined to maintain his youth and independence. After Franklin is born, John realizes his mistake and proceed to give up his music career to be a part of Marion and Franklin's lives. By now it is too late. Marion has been wounded by him, and she uses him to become financially independent. Then, she leaves him. The reader sympathizes with John, but one also understands why Marion does what she does.

Still, the main action of chapter one is John's hiring of Fay Taft. He has little reason to do this: she is inexperienced and likely younger than the legal age. His only rational is his desire for some sort of connection. He comments in the chapter that Fay reminds him of Marion. Perhaps he considers Fay a chance to redeem himself. Indeed, after John learns of Franklin's injury, only thinking of Fay keeps him from imagining his bleeding son.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

When John gets up, he feels hung over from lack of sleep. He arrives to Muddy's in the early afternoon, and Cyndi is basically running the place herself. No one comes in for a while, and John is getting bored and depressed. He leaves Cyndi in charge and leaves to find another bar. He has a policy of never drinking from his own bar.

Memphis in winter is drab and depressing, and as John walks down the street he passes Eddie, an eight-year-old kid who does flips in the street for money. John admonishes Eddie's father for keeping him out of school. He wants to punch him, but he figures the hustler has a gun. John arrives at the Rum Boogie Café, where a curt white kid serves him, making him pay in cash. A woman - a regular at Muddy's - comes up to John and starts hitting on him. She is married, but John is certain they are about to have sex.

John and the woman leave the Rum Boogie Café and drive to his house, where they have sex. Afterward, he drives her to her car and coldly kisses her goodbye. When he gets back to Muddy's, Fay is waiting for him. Cyndi has not shown her around, so John gives her a tour. She says she's from a small town called Coalfield in East Tennessee, and John marvels that as small as Tennessee is, everyone is loyal only to his little corner of it. Fay tells John an accident brought her to Memphis. When he shows her the kitchen, Rose the cook thinks she looks too young.

When the crowd picks up, Fay starts working tables that Cyndi doesn't want. Fay makes a few mistakes up front, but she catches on quickly. Midway through the night, John tries calling Marion and Franklin picks up. He is excited to talk to him about his stitches and his friends. John can tell Franklin wants him and Marion to get back together. After they hang up, John sits for a time in his office.

When John returns to the bar, Fay introduces him to her brother Carl, a thin boy who is sitting at the bar, obviously stoned. Carl is polite and keeps his condition under wraps to the rest of the customers. John lets Fay go home early, telling her she can come back the next day. Carl seems barely able to stand as he leaves the bar.

Chapter 2 Analysis

John Nickel's connection to his son, even when the latter is hundreds of miles away, is intense. John dislikes talking to Franklin at work because he cannot bring himself to go back to the bar after they hang up. This is a poignant portrait of love, when every other duty in life seems meaningless compared to the intense love that is absent. Also in this scene in the bar office is John's offhand mention of a pistol left by the previous owner. This adds an element of danger to the setting of the novel. Clearly John works in an area that could require the use of a firearm.



In this chapter, John has a casual liaison with a patron of Muddy's. This rash decision is juxtaposed with an extended rumination on the importance of treating the bar as a place of business and not a playground. John insists that a bartender should never pour a drink from the working side of the bar, but he does not think twice about going to bed with a married woman who is a regular at the bar. This indicates that the self-destructive side of John Nickel is not completely buried.

Finally, Patchett introduces a new and important character to the novel in this chapter: Carl Taft. This small, quiet brother of Fay's is consciously and insistently polite, but John Nickel recognizes immediately that Carl is a junkie. Some buried tragedy of the Taft family has driven him to this habit.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

At the beginning of chapter three, John decides that if Franklin could visit him, he'd take weeks off work. He has plenty of workers who could manage work the bar and serve - including the improving Fay - but he does not know who he could trust with the nightly deposit.

As Fay continues to work at Muddy's, her brother Carl becomes a fixture at the bar as well. He takes to helping clear tables and deliver orders, and John is grateful that he takes care to hide his inebriation from the other customers. He notices that the young man does not have a drug of choice: he seems to do a little of everything to find an escape. One night, Carl cryptically tells John that Fay likes him.

The next night, John arrives at Muddy's to find Cyndi drunk on her shift. She blathers half-incoherently about her time in Hawaii, where she used to dance the hula at luaus. She puts on some Elvis - a man John cannot stand because of his ubiquity in Memphis - and dances a suggestive hula. Throughout the rest of the busy night, Cyndi flirts with customers and Fay notices that Carl never shows. At the end of the night, John offers to drive Fay home after dropping the deposit.

John is uncomfortable in Fay's affluent white neighborhood. He worries he could be shot for trespassing without anyone batting an eye. Fay checks her home for Carl but does not find him. She asks John to drive her around Memphis to the places where the junkies go. John tries his best to think of places. They go to the rougher neighborhoods and check a bus station.

Eventually, John and Fay return to Muddy's, where they find Carl passed out in the entrance. He is unconscious and barely breathing. John picks him up and drives Kay and him back to their house. Against his better judgment, John carries Carl to his bed. As he walks through the Taft house, he tries to imagine what the patriarch must have been like before he died. He imagines Taft was a hardworking hillbilly who made good and provided for his family.

After John returns to his car, Fay follows him. She asks him to take her back to his apartment. He refuses, and she touches his neck. This moment shakes him.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The central incident of chapter three, Carl's disappearance, is the catalyzing event of the novel. It brings Fay and John together in a much closer way than a job or a casual friendship might have. John sees the terror in Fay's eyes when she thinks Carl might be dead: she cannot stand the thought of losing someone else. Indeed, only this sympathy allows him to overcome his fear in her neighborhood.

The passage in which John enters the Taft household illustrates the lingering racial tension of Memphis, even in the later 1980s when the novel takes place. A black man in an affluent white house - even when invited - runs the risk of being shot. Fay does not understand this.

This chapter indicates that John Nickel and Fay Taft are kindred souls. They have both lost someone close to them, someone that gave them strength. This loss pervades every action of their days. When John sees this pain in Fay, it strikes him, but he cannot accept her offer at the end of the chapter. No matter the connection between them, John still runs the risk of death for getting close to a white girl. That fear keeps him at arm's length.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter four begins the next day. John is fixated on Fay Taft. Her touching his neck - trying desperately to forge a connection with him - has shaken him to his core. He reasons that her father's death has to be the galvanizing event of the family. This likely turned Carl to drugs and impelled Fay to proposition him. In reasoning this through, John continues to form a speculative picture of Taft. He imagines the house in Coalfield. He imagines young Fay coming down for a date and Taft joking with her. He imagines Taft taking his son Carl, the wrestling star, to the lumber yard.

When John arrives at Muddy's, Rose the cook tells him that Fay called. She wants him to pick her up at her house and drive her in. Rose knows something is up, but John refuses to engage her. As he is about to leave, John runs into Cyndi, who is polishing the brass on the bar. Cyndi is embarrassed from last night, and apologizes quickly. John accepts her apology and asks her if she would feel comfortable running the bar if he took some vacation time. She says she will for a raise. John agrees, but he is not sure he trusts her with the deposit cash.

After John picks Fay up, she asks him to drive her around. He does, and she hits on the idea of driving to Shiloh to check out the battlefield. John is initially resistant - Shiloh is hours away - but eventually he folds and begins driving east out of Memphis. The sun is setting by the time they reach Shiloh, and the battlefield closes at dusk. The ranger lets them in, though, warning them not to get lost.

John and Fay look at the tombstones of the fallen soldiers, and Fay says that her grandmother told her to pay special attention to every gravestone she comes across. This is how the dead stay happy. Later, Fay wants to see a statue dedicated to the war dead of Iowa. While she stands by it, John comes up to her and takes her in his arms. They do not kiss; they merely hold each other. After this, they drive back to Memphis.

On the ride back, Fay discusses her father's death. He died of heart failure, and after this, Mrs. Taft shut down emotionally. She never went back to her secretarial job. Instead, she spent all day sitting on the unfinished deck Mr. Taft was building. Meanwhile, Fay works extra hours at the Dairy Queen, and Carl takes a job at the lumberyard. Friends and associates float the family for a while, but eventually the Tafts sink into debt. At this point, Carl quits his job and begins self-medicating. Fay decides that the family will move to Memphis to live with her aunt and uncle. Fay tells John she wishes he could meet her family, and he says that cannot happen. Hours after they left, John drops Fay back off at her house, telling her he'll see her at Muddy's tomorrow.

Wallace has come in to tend bar, and John realizes he is the man to take over the deposit duties. Carl is at the bar wondering where Fay is. John says he does not know,



and Carl gets standoffish. John, just short of losing his temper, tells him he needs to straighten out.

After John goes upstairs to his office, he begins to think about Taft and his son Carl going hunting. He imagines Carl, wiry and energetic, shooting his first deer. His form isn't perfect, but it is good enough. Taft dresses the deer while Carl picks walnuts for his mother. John, imagining this scene, has lost track of time. He thinks of calling Franklin, but it is too late.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In this chapter, Patchett introduces a convention that will recur throughout the novel: John Nickel's evocation of Taft's home life. From John's vantage, Taft is the picture of paternal success. He is loved by wife and children, who he takes care of and dotes on. He imagines Taft gently chiding his adolescent daughter as she prepares for a date. He imagines Taft taking his son hunting. Fueling these fantasies is Fay's pined discussing of Taft's death and its effect on the family.

One cannot help but imagine the pain this causes John. He has lost his child, and the boy continues on without him. Taft dies, and his family collapses. What's compelling about this implicit comparison of fathers is that race is not a part of it. Taft is white; Nickel, black. They exist in different worlds of the Deep South, but their concerns are the same. They want to best for their families and suffer to provide it.

Patchett also cleverly allows the reader to hone in on the setting of Taft. She never indicates directly that it takes place in the present day. Indeed, John's concern for his safety in the Taft house implies that the setting is earlier, but the fleeting reference to Taft's VCR clearly places the time between the mid eighties and 1994, when the novel was published.

Lastly, Patchett continues the gentle dance between John and Fay. They are growing closer, but the connection is not necessarily sexual or even romantic. John calls his infatuation with Fay a thrill. He is compelled by her; he feels a commonality between them. In chapter four, this attraction culminates in a tender connection, an act of caring rather than lust.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In chapter five, John drives to the Woodmoore house to have dinner with Marion's parents. He marvels privately that these people who once despised him now love having him over for meals. On his way, John picks up a pack of cigarettes. He doesn't smoke, but he knows that Mr. Woodmoore likes to borrow cigarettes. John recalls when he went to the nursery to see Franklin for the first time and Mrs. Woodmoore grabbed him by the throat in unvarnished rage. Now, Marion's mother tells the story as a joke. These days, they do everything they can to convince Marion to take John back.

It is raining when John arrives at the Woodmoores' with flowers. Mrs. Woodmoore welcomes him in, where Marion's sister Ruth is waiting. Ruth has fallen on hard times in Detroit and moved back to Memphis to get back on her feet. Ruth is younger than Marion and has always been wilder. Once she kissed John surreptitiously when she was fourteen. Mr. Woodmoore is a tugboat captain, and in addition to Marion and Ruth, the Woodmoores have a son, Buddy, who is in the military and stationed in Germany. As the Woodmoores and John eat, Mrs. Woodmoore indicates that Marion is unhappy and may move back to Memphis. Mr. Woodmoore privately asks John to call her sometime. After dinner, Mrs. Woodmoore shows John some recent photos of Franklin that Marion has sent. Before John leaves the house, he invites Ruth to come into Muddy's sometime.

John goes to the bar after leaving the Woodmoores'. Wallace is at the bar, and John asks him if he'd be interested in learning the deposit procedures. Wallace agrees. Meanwhile, Rose is teaching Fay how to cook. Fay begins asking John about his son, whom she absently says she would have named Levon. She wonders if he is married. John is wary about answering these questions.

Taft, whose first name is Levon, cannot get overtime at the carpet factory he works at; so he works nights as a security guard at a lumber yard. The hours are long, and he spends most of his time wandering around the boards. Carl is getting better as a wrestler and is on the verge of going national. Taft wonders if his son could get a wrestling scholarship. He arrives home in the early morning and slips into bed with his wife Virginia. Fay has been coming home late; Virginia wants him to talk to her. The two make love. At breakfast, Taft admonishes Fay for getting home late. He worries his daughter does not respect Virginia. That afternoon, as Carl and Taft work on the deck, Taft begins having chest pains. Carl settles him into bed to rest, but Taft refuses to see a doctor.

Coming down from his office, John notices that Carl is becoming quite popular with his patrons. John tells Fay to keep an eye on him. Carl approaches John and apologizes for the way he responded to John the night before. He promises his drug use is under control. After he closes the bar, John calls Marion. He asks her whether she's doing



badly in Miami. She says things are rough, and she plans on coming to Memphis for Franklin's spring break. John assures her he will behave if she comes to Memphis.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The Taft sections of the novel are becoming standalone elements. The reader could assume that they are still conjecture of John's imagination. One indication of this is that elements of Taft's life are first mentioned after he hears an offhand comment from Fay or Carl. For example, Fay says she would name her son Levon; so Levon becomes Taft's first name. Later, John sees structural damage on Carl's car and formulates the story surrounding it.

Both Levon Taft and John Nickel agonize about their children, underlining a central theme of the novel: the danger a world creates for the young. Franklin cuts his head in a tussle, Fay is a bit too popular with boys, and Carl has an impulsive disposition. Raising a child means living all of their risks and failures with them. John is hurt when Franklin cuts his face. Taft cannot sleep at night, worrying about his children and their futures. Even the Woodmoores dedicate most of their time to worrying about Marion's choice to raise Franklin without John.

The chapter ends with the major turn of events that Marion is returning to Memphis, at least temporarily. John begins to analyze how he can win partial custody of his son.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

At the beginning of chapter six, John is angered by Cyndi, who is once again inebriated at work. He threatens to fire her. Just then, Faye comes in, dripping wet from the rain outside. She can only work a couple of hours before returning home for her uncle's birthday. Ruth enters the bar and begins to chat with John and needle Fay. Ruth begins reminiscing about John's drumming days, insisting that he had the stuff to be famous. John becomes annoyed by this line of conversation, but he always felt indebted to her for sticking by when the rest of the Woodmoore family hated him. Ruth eventually leaves, and John offers to drive Fay home.

Before they get in the car, Fay and John begin to kiss in the rain. He drives her to her uncle's house, and Fay tells him that her uncle runs Martin-Quick Pharmacy, where Carl works part-time. Arriving, Fay takes him around the side to look in the window with her. There he sees, her uncle, aunt, and mother. He also sees Carl in his high school wrestling shirt. John asks Fay how old she really is, and she says she will be turning eighteen in a week. John leaves her there and returns to his car. After driving away, John stops at a payphone. He calls Ruth, and - though he tells her parents he wants her to see a band at Muddy's - he tells her to meet him at his apartment. He drives there, finding her waiting for him, and they have sex.

Levon Taft dislikes visiting his in-laws in Memphis. His wife's sister Lily married a pharmacist and moved out of Coalfield. Taft feels that Lily wants Carl and Fay as surrogate children because she cannot have any, and she uses her wealth to lure them over. The Taft family goes to Memphis one weekend for a state wrestling match in which Carl will face some high-ranked competitors. That day, the Taft children go shopping in the big city, and Lily is annoyed that Carl won't eat her dinner since he is trying to keep weight. Taft thinks that he feels uncomfortable in Memphis because there are so many black people. He has black friends at home, like Tommy Lawson who lost two fingers at the factory, but he does not like being in the minority. At the match, Carl goes up against a black kid who is number two in the state. He is losing, and Taft wants the ref to call the match. He hates watching a black kid wear his son down.

Chapter 6 Analysis

In chapter six, John and Fay finally kiss each other in a passion that is marked by uncontrolled elements. Firstly, the kiss happens in torrential rain, and John regularly states that he feels he'll drown as he and Kay become entangled. Secondly, the passion between them, having been contained for so long, is uncontrollable when released. The reader cannot determine, for example, who kissed who first; it simply happened, like two magnets being drawn together. When John learns that Fay is not yet of consenting age,

he is so wound up after leaving Fay that he calls Ruth Woodmoore, a decision that will haunt him for the remainder of the novel.

Much of this chapter is also marked by references to the lingering racism of the South after the Civil Rights movement. This racism manifests itself in the tiny comments made in Martin-Quick Pharmacy. It exists in John Nickel's inability to run a tab. Most compellingly, it exists in Levon Taft, who cannot understand why it exists.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In chapter seven, John wakes up with Ruth, already regretting his decision. Ruth is naked in bed, doing her nails, and he tells her he should not have called her. She is enraged, admitting that she has like him for a long time and warning him that she will kill him if he screws with her again. After she leaves, John gets a call from Cyndi, asking him where he has been.

When John arrives back at Muddy's, he is surprised by the larger and less familiar crowd, reasoning that tourist season must be starting early. Carl is actually waiting tables with his sister and fraternizing with the new patrons. Cyndi, who has been working the bar, begins cracking wise with him. At the end of the night, Carl stays behind after the wait staff has left. He and John share a drink of Jack Daniels. Carl talks about wrestling in high school, and John talks about his brief boxing stint. Carl is sad that he will likely never wrestle competitively again, having fallen off since his father's death. Before parting ways at the end of the night, Carl convinces John to teach him how to throw a punch, intimating he may need to fight someone. That night, John cannot sleep in his rumpled bed that still smells of Ruth. He thinks about Fay.

The next day, Fay seems reticent to be in the same room as John at work, spending most of her time with Rose. At one point, John pulls her aside and apologizes for kissing her. She says she would rather he apologize for leaving her after the kiss. Hiding in his office, John calls a boy he does not remember interviewing and offers him a job. Then, he drifts to sleep.

Fay wakes him, telling him some folks are here to see him. When he goes downstairs, it is Marion and Franklin. The child has gotten big, and his wound is healing well. Cyndi and Wallace are surprised to learn that he even has a child. Marion explains that she decided to come up early and wanted to surprise him. All three go to the Woodmoore house for dinner with Marion's parents and Ruth. Franklin wants to stay with John while he's in town, but John tells him he must stay in the Woodmoore house tonight. Ruth and Marion walk him back to the car.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter seven is the first time Marion has appeared in person; prior to this, she has been either a memory or a voice over a phone. Her absence from John's world has been a sort of dull ache, a constant reminder of the life he is not living. The day covered in this chapter is a confluence of three female relationships. Ruth represents that fleeting sexual trysts that sustain him, but she is a member of his immediate social circle. Her familiarity with him will cost. Fay represents a desire for deeper fulfillment. He is attracted to her physically and emotionally: they share the same pain and fear. Marion

is not longer of romantic interest to John, but he desperately wants to be a part of Franklin's life. This becomes his central preoccupation, superseding the entreaties of the other women.

Also important in this chapter is the sudden appearance of new patrons at Muddy's. John only mentions this in passing, but it is significant. A new force has found its way into the bar, and with it comes a great potential for danger.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

John arrives back at Muddy's, where he is met by Wallace. Carl is in the bar waiting tables again, and he thanks John for the boxing lesson. Fay congratulates John on Franklin's return and asks if Marion and he are getting back together. Wallace takes John aside and gingerly tells him to be careful with the Tafts: Carl is a drug dealer. The new patrons at Muddy's are mostly his clientele, and the bar is developing a reputation. Moreover, Carl and Cyndi may be involved.

John orders Carl up to his office, where he forces the boy to empty his pockets: among the contents are Quaaludes, cocaine, and hundreds of dollars. Carl is incensed that John would take his product; he has it on advance. John tells Carl he will not turn him into the police. Carl tries unsuccessfully to punch John, who kicks him out of the bar.

Taft can never fall asleep until he hears both his children come in. This causes a problem for him with the upcoming weekend. He has worked three shifts in a row without sleep by Friday. He asks his children if they could stay in Friday night, but Fay has a date and Carl is supposed to be borrowing the car for the first time to go to the races. That night, Fay gets in on time, but Carl does not. Taft gets up and waits, fearing his son is dead. Around two, Carl returns home; he has wrecked the car. Taft worries about the money, but he is happy to see his son safe.

Franklin calls John early, asking what they are doing for the day. A short time later, Marion calls asking him to take them to dinner. At Shoney's, Marion mentions going to visit her old hospital, and John asks if she is trying to get her old job back. Marion warns him not to get Franklin's hopes up. That day, John takes his son mini-golfing and buys him some new sneakers.

Chapter 8 Analysis

In chapter eight, Wallace - the most guileless of characters in the novel - solves the mystery of the newly popular Muddy's bar: Carl Taft is using it to sell drugs. This eventuality raises the stakes for John Nickel's relationship with the Taft children. Before this moment, Carl Taft was simply a mixed-up kid putting his own life in danger with drugs; now, John and the reader understand that Carl has put everyone in danger of violence or arrest. The passage in which John kicks Carl out of Muddy's and takes his drugs, Carl transforms into a ball of impotent rage.

In this chapter, too, the reader becomes aware that Marion and Franklin's return to Memphis is a real possibility. Franklin prefers Memphis to Miami, and Marion is clearly dissatisfied with her Florida hospital. Their return would allow John the access to his son that he yearns for; it would also effectively end his relationship with Fay.



Chapter eight contains a Taft passage that illustrates the precariousness of the family finances. Carl's wrecking of the car could be enough to sink them. Still, Levon Taft remains the portrait of the dedicated father, concerned about the family solvency but relieved by their safety.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

When John arrives at Muddy's at the beginning of chapter nine, Fay is waiting for him to ask about why he kicked Carl out. John refuses to speak about it, telling her to ask Carl himself. As they talk, Ruth enters the bar. She demands a drink, which she has no intention of paying for. Ruth asks if John is sleeping with Fay. Evidently, the Woodmoores are trying to convince Marion to take John back. John insists that he does not want her back. Ruth scoffs and leaves.

Cyndi is clearly angry about the Carl situation and refuses to help John with anything tonight. Wallace comes in and discusses the situation with John. A call comes in from Carl for Fay. She is shocked to learn that her brother is in jail. She asks John to drive her to jail to post him. Not knowing exactly which jail Carl is in, John drives to the one closest to Fay's house. The officer on duty insists he cannot release Carl to anyone but his mother, but Fay pleads that she is out of town. The dubious officer asks who John is. John lies that he employs both Fay and Carl. The officer knows Muddy's, and he decides that if Fay is an adult he can release Carl to her. As it turns out, today is Fay's eighteenth birthday. The office agrees to let Carl out, but warns he must report back in a week with his mother.

Carl is indignant both that he was arrested and that John got him out. Apparently, he antagonized a bicycle cop in the zoo parking lot, and the cop found some cocaine in a cigarette pack. Carl insists to Fay that he was holding the pack for someone else. As they drop Carl off, John thinks that the kid doesn't stand a chance in the Memphis drug game.

Before returning to Muddy's, John takes Fay out for a steak dinner for her birthday. She matter-of-factly asks him if he would marry her now that she is eighteen. John insists he cannot, but she tells him to think about it before saying no. Before returning to work, Fay kisses John again.

Chapter 9 Analysis

John has dedicated much of the novel to protecting Carl: he carries him home when Carl nearly OD's, doesn't turn him in when he discovers he is dealing, and gets him out of jail. Carl has gone off the rails since Levon Taft's death, and he resists the aid of a new father figure. In this chapter, both John and the reader realize that Carl could well be doomed. He cannot handle himself as a drug dealer. He will likely end up dead or in jail.

This chapter also illustrates the folly of the Fay-John relationship. If Carl lost someone who guided him when his father died, Fay lost someone who doted on her. John is about Levon Taft's age, and he protects her and her brother. Fay wants that

permanently, so she asks him to marry her. At this moment, their connection becomes much clearer. They may share quite a bit, emotionally, but they cannot be lovers.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

At the beginning of chapter ten, Taft is talking with his mechanic about the damage done to his car. The mechanic warns him that the damage will likely come to four thousand and the insurance will simply pay him out a few hundred for a car they consider totaled. The mechanic, a friend, offers to patch up the car to running order for four hundred. Taft thanks him and accepts. The mechanic drives Taft to the site of the accident. Evidently Carl was racing another car and plowed into a guard rail. The drop on the other side of the rail likely would have killed him if he went over.

When Taft gets home, he opens a beer to calm his nerves. A knock comes at the door, and Taft opens it to discover a young black boy selling candy bars for school. He turns out to be Tommy Lawson's son, and Taft gives the boy a Coke. They sit on the steps drinking their respective beverages, talking about Tommy's health since the accident, and Taft buys four bars from the kid. Before Tommy's son leaves, Taft gives him some advice on how to sell more effectively.

When his family returns home, Taft explains his plan to put the four hundred on the Visa card and have Carl pay it off over time with a job at the lumberyard. Virginia wants to see if Lily and her husband could pay for the repair, but Taft refuses. That night, he has difficulty staying awake at his night-watch job. He drifts off and awakens when he hears noise. It is Fay, who has sneaked into the lumberyard while on a date to say hello. They talk about Carl, whom Taft tells his daughter needs to be watched closely. He also shows her around the yard until her date gets impatient and calls for her. Taft escorts his daughter to the entrance to the yard and kisses her goodbye.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter is entirely dedicated to the character of Levon Taft, and it illustrates what a dynamic character he is. Capable at once of strictness and deep affection, Taft carefully puts together a plan to fix the family car and gently explains his son's role in the plan. He understands that race plays a role in his life: he cannot help but view the world in terms of black and white faces. Still, he is able to connect with young Tommy Lawson, Jr.

The character of Levon Taft, though a creation of John Nickel's imagination, is a dynamic figure. He is proud in many ways: intractable about borrowing from family or seeing a doctor. Moreover, he has difficulty connecting with his children at times, but he loves them. In return, they would do anything for him, exemplified by Fay's decision to drop in on him at work, interrupting her date. This interruption, it turns out, will be the last time they see each other.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The next day, John Nickel has to resist the urge to tell Marion that Fay wants him to marry her. He is aware that she wants him back, and at breakfast he asks her how her visit to the hospital went. They joke about the arrangement they will have taking care of Franklin if she returns. Franklin comes to the table and tells his father that he wants to be a drummer when he grows up. John is surprised that Franklin remembers watching him drum and can play perfect time with the spoons. Marion is mortified, but John leaves the Woodmoores' glowing.

When John arrives at Muddy's, Cyndi immediately accosts him regarding Carl. She is angry, too, that John has decided against giving her more responsibility, and he invites her to quit. Fay asks him if he has put any thought into marrying her. That night, the band at Muddy's is good, and their final song quiets the entire room, even prompting Cyndi to do a sad, elegiac dance. At the end of the night, John has the new waiter Teddy walk Fay to the Rum Boogie, where Carl has taken up shop. After the bar clears, John takes Wallace upstairs to learn the deposit procedure. He is impressed by how quick Wallace is.

Suddenly, Wallace and John hear something downstairs. They head down and eventually realize it is coming from the kitchen. Carl has broken into the bar and has the pistol from John's desk. He wants his drugs back, but John tells him he flushed them. Carl shoots John in the neck. Wallace wrestles the gun away from him by breaking the boy's wrist. Fay, having returned from the Rum Boogie, breaks a window to get in to Muddy's. She puts her hands around John's neck to stop the bleeding, and he thinks she is strangling him. Wallace is about to take John to the emergency room, but John stops him. If he is treated at the hospital, the police will arrest Carl. The young man's life will be over. He wants to be taken to Marion.

In the car, Fay shakes as she holds John's neck. She mutters that if Taft had not died, none of this would have happened. When they arrive at the Woodmoore house, Ruth helps John - who is drifting in and out of consciousness - into the house. Mr. and Mrs. Woodmoore stay quiet so as not to wake Franklin. Marion takes John aside with Fay still holding his neck. The wound is too complicated for her, but John still insists on no hospital. Wallace warns him that if he dies, he will kill Carl himself. Marion begrudgingly arranges a doctor friend to tend to him. They leave Fay at the Woodmoore house.

Wallace, John, and Marion travel to the doctor's office. He is clearly annoyed to be woken early and taking part in something illegal, but he says he would do anything for Marion, his best nurse. He gives John local anesthetic and sets about mending his neck. The bullet has obliterated his jugular but spared his spine and carotid. The doctor mends the veins and neck muscles, but he has to leave his neck wound largely open to heal on its own. He wraps John and gives him a handful of prescriptions for pain and



infection. Before they leave, the doctor stops Marion and encourages her to return to Memphis.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The novel has been told in the first person, and in this chapter the point-of-view involves an unhinged perspective as John is wounded and loses blood. As he fades in and out of shock and consciousness, John cannot figure out whether Fay has been shot or is strangling him. He flashes back to Marion studying in their old apartment and Ruth on top of him as they have sex.

In chapter eleven, all the characters of the novel - the Woodmoores, Wallace, Fay, Marion - band together to save Carl. This can be infuriating to the reader, who likely has little desire to see the young man given another chance to screw up. Still, John leads the effort to save him from going to jail, where he would either be killed or broken by a life he cannot compete in.

The harrowing experience of this chapter also bond Fay and Marion to John in his moment of need. John says that Fay, literally hold his life within him, is closer to him than anyone else in the world at that moment. Marion is even more imperative to his survival. She has never met Carl Woodmoore, but she is willing to put her profession on the line so that John does not have to go to an emergency room.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

In chapter twelve, Marion and John sit in the car while Wallace collects his prescriptions from the pharmacy. They return to the Woodmoore house and find Mrs. Woodmoore asleep with Fay's head on her lap. Marion wakes them, and Wallace drives Fay back home. Marion insists on John staying at her parents' house so she can tend to him overnight. They go upstairs to Marion and Ruth's childhood room. Marion strips John down for bed and has him take one of his two pills. John falls asleep.

Taft wakes up in the afternoon. He is aggravated that he slept so long, and he wants to finish his deck. Virginia says she is off to a church rummage sale with her friend. To her surprise, Fay wants to come with her. Fay thinks maybe she could take a job at the lumberyard too; Taft thinks he should find a little project like the deck to take on with her. Taft goes to the garage where Carl is lifting weights and asks him to help finish the deck. Carl agrees, and Taft goes to the bathroom to clean up.

John wakes up in pain, and Marion gives him a painkiller.

Taft, in the bathroom, has a heart attack. He calls to Carl as he collapses to the floor. Carl holds his father, who begs him not to leave him alone. John, in his own dream, tries to tell the scared boy how to do CPR and save his father's life. Taft fades away, and Carl runs to the phone to call an ambulance but cannot since his mother unplugged the phones to avoid waking her husband. Taft dies waiting for his son to return.

John wakes up to find Marion looking at his wound. Before she can give him another painkiller, Mrs. Woodmoore enters and asks to speak with John alone. After Marion leaves, Mrs. Woodmoore tells John that Fay told her everything. She warns him that after Fay returns home, her parents will know everything. John will have to help her by never seeing her again. She tells John to go back to sleep, that they will speak again later. John does so. He wakes not knowing what time it is. Franklin is in bed with him, clinging to his father in his sleep. John realizes nothing bad can happen to Franklin if he stays with him. He decides that he will dedicate himself to raising his son.

Taft is putting a shirt over Carl's head. Carl is four; Fay, nearly five. It is a cold day, and he is taking them down to the creek near his house. Taft is concerned that Fay is telling people she is five already and that Carl runs so wild. Still, Taft knows that so long as he is around, his children will be safe.

Chapter 12 Analysis

In chapter twelve, the line between the John Nickel storyline and the Levon Taft storyline disappears. John stands in the room with young Carl as Taft dies. Both John and the reader are suddenly aware of the intense trauma this experience wreaked on



the boy. John understands that he made the right decision. The final passage of the book takes place years earlier. Carl is still wild, and Fay still claims to be older than she is. Taft is their father though. He can keep them safe.

This moment echoes John Nickel's realization that he can keep his son safe, too. This compulsion of parents to protect their children from the world is the central theme of Taft. It is at once a story of redemption and a tragedy. Taft's death leads to the decimation of his family. John Nickel, like the reader, is called upon to observe that tragedy and learn from it. He forswears all other purposes in life - drummer, business owner, lover - to be his son's father. Ann Patchett takes the reader into the narrative believing it will be a love story between John and Fay. It becomes a love story between John and Franklin.



Characters

John Nickel

John Nickel is the protagonist of the novel. Before the beginning of the narrative, he was a popular Memphis blues drummer until his girlfriend, Marion Woodmoore, became pregnant. John initially refused to marry her, but once his son Franklin was born, he became determined to win Marion back. Marion forces him to get a job - namely bartending at Muddy's - to put her through nursing school. When she gets her degree, however, Marion takes Franklin and moves to Miami.

When the novel begins, John has become the manager of Muddy's. One day, he hires a young looking girl from east Tennessee called Fay Taft. He worries that she is not of legal age, but he finds her strangely compelling. She has recently lost her father. John's life consists of working all day and night and occasionally speaking to his son on the phone. From time to time, he has the odd sexual tryst with an anonymous woman. With Fay Taft comes her brother Carl, who is constantly high.

One night Carl goes missing, and John Nickel helps Fay look for him. Eventually, they discover him passed out on the street, and John uneasily carries Carl into his uncle's house. Fay propositions John that night, and he turns her down. The next day, however, John drives with Fay to Shiloh. At the battlefield park, John holds Fay tenderly. Later, during a days-long rainstorm, John has dinner with Marion's parents and sister Ruth. Ruth has always been infatuated with John, and Mr. Woodmoore tells John that Marion may come back to Memphis. The next day, Fay kisses John and admits that she is not eighteen yet. In an attempt to avoid thinking about her, John has sex with Ruth Woodmoore.

Soon thereafter, Marion and Franklin return to John's life while on a vacation. John believes they are close to moving back. Wallace, the man John is grooming as a manager, informs him that Carl is using Muddy's to dealing drugs. John confiscates the kid's drugs and kicks him out of the bar. The next day he is arrested, and John helps Fay bail him out. It is Fay's birthday, and John takes her out to dinner. She proposes to him, and he refuses to answer her.

The next day, Carl breaks into Muddy's and shoots John in the neck while trying to get his drugs back. John goes to Marion's to be patched up in order to avoid bringing the police into it. Marion tends to him with a doctor's help. As he recuperates, John decides to dedicate himself to taking care of Franklin.

Fay Taft

Fay Taft is a young woman from Coalfield in east Tennessee who moves to Memphis with her mother and brother after her father dies suddenly. At the beginning of the novel, Fay gets a job at Muddy's waiting tables. Every evening she works, her perpetually high



brother Carl comes with her as her ride. One night, Carl disappears and John Nickel helps her search for him. After they pick him up off the street and take him home, Fay asks John to take her to his apartment. He refuses, but the next day they drive to Shiloh on a whim. At the battlefield park, Fay looks at the tombstones, and John holds her.

The next day in a rainstorm, John and Fay kiss, and Fay shows him her family through a window in her uncle's house. She admits she is only seventeen, and John leaves her. She is sore about this and the fact that John kicks her brother out of Muddy's. When Carl is arrested for possession of cocaine, Fay has to bail him out with John. It is her birthday, and at a steak dinner, she asks John to marry her. He tries to say no, but she tells him to think about it.

The next night, after Fay leaves work she cannot find Carl. She returns to Muddy's to discover that Carl has shot John in the neck and had his wrist broken. Fay holds pressure on John's wound while they travel Marion's parents' house to mend it outside of a hospital in order to save Carl his freedom. She waits for John to return from a doctor's office, and she tells Mrs. Woodmoore everything that has happened to her.

In John's imagination, Fay was always Taft's favorite, a daddy's-girl who is constantly going on dates.

Carl Taft

Carl Taft is Fay's younger brother. He was a championship wrestler before his father died suddenly. As John envisions, Carl was in the room when his father died. At the beginning of the novel, Carl and his family have recently moved to Memphis from Coalfield. Carl, unable to hold down a job or stay in school, has become an addict. He maintains his composure while high, until one night he nearly OD's and is attended by Fay and John Nickel.

Carl begins selling drugs at Muddy's bar. This brings in a lot more patrons, and Carl starts a relationship with one of the waitresses, Cyndi. When John discovers that Carl is a dealer, he confiscates his drugs and throws him out of Muddy's. The next day, Carl is arrested for carrying cocaine. The next night, he breaks into Muddy's to get his rugs back. In the process, Carl shoots John in the neck and has his wrist broken when Wallace wrestles his gun away. John does not go to a hospital so that Carl does not have to go to prison.

In John's imagination, Carl was the impetuous and foolish child of the Taft family. He wrecks the gold LeSabre the family relies on.

Levon Taft

Levon Taft is the patriarch of the Coalfield Taft family. He appears in the novel in imagined incidents from the past. He works at a carpet factory by day and as a security guard at a lumberyard at night. He is in the process of building a deck on the house with



his son Carl. Only Carl knows that Taft is having chest pains, which he refuses to have checked out by a doctor.

Taft resents his rich in-laws in Memphis. On a visit to them during one of Carl's wrestling matches, Taft decides he is uncomfortable around large numbers of black folks, though he does have a couple black friends. Taft is intensely protective of his children, and he frets on the night that Carl returns late because he has a car accident. The damage to the family car pushes them close to financial insolvency. Taft decides to arrange for Carl to get a job and has the car fixed with a credit card. While getting ready to work on the deck one day, Taft has a heart attack and dies in his son's arms.

At the end of the novel, John imagines a younger Levon Taft playing with young Fay and Carl.

Marion Woodmore

Marion Woodmore was John Nickel's girlfriend during his drumming days. When she became pregnant with his child, he left her. Only after their son Franklin was born did John make an effort to return to them. Marion agreed to move back in with him if he got a real job and paid her way through nursing school. As soon as she graduated, Marion took Franklin and left, eventually taking a job in Miami.

At the beginning of the novel, Marion has been in Miami for about six years. She talks to John by phone on occasion, as when she calls to inform him that Franklin was hurt playing on the beach. Mr. and Mrs. Woodmore believe she is unhappy in Miami and urge her to return to Memphis. She eventually comes back to Memphis with Franklin for his spring break. She has regular meals with John and checks in with her old hospital, debating whether to move back.

At the end of the novel, Marion helps to mend John's neck after he is shot by Carl Taft. She enlists the help of a doctor at her old hospital. She sleeps in the same room as the recuperating John, making sure he takes his pills at the right time.

Franklin Woodmore

Franklin Woodmore is Marion Woodmore and John Nickel's son. He is nine years old when the novel begins and living in Miami with Marion. Early in the narrative, he falls on the beach while roughhousing with some friend and gashes his head on a broken Coke bottle. He clearly wants his parents back together. Later in the plot, Franklin and Marion return to Memphis for his spring break, and he is very excited to see his father. They go miniature golfing, and Franklin tells him he wants to be a drummer when he grows up. At the end of the novel, Franklin crawls into bed with the recuperating John, and John decides he will dedicate himself to taking care of his son.



Ruth Woodmoore

Ruth Woodmoore is Marion's sister. When she was a teenager, she covertly kissed John Nickel while he was dating her sister. One night, John goes to the Woodmoore house for dinner and discovers that Ruth has returned to Memphis after falling on hard times in Detroit. Ruth begins to frequent Muddy's Bar, and one night she and John have sex. She becomes enraged when John says it was a mistake. She insinuates that she might tell Marion when she returns to town. At the end of the novel, Ruth helps John to Marion after he has been shot.

Mrs. Woodmoore

Mrs. Woodmoore is Marion and Ruth's mother. She initially hated John Nickel, even strangling him the first time he tried to visit baby Franklin in the nursery. In the narrative, she has grown fond of John and has him over for dinner regularly, at one point showing him photos of nine-year-old Franklin. She constantly tries to convince Marion to return to Memphis. At the end of the novel, Fay tells Mrs. Woodmoore everything that happened, and Mrs. Woodmoore tells John that for everyone's safety he cannot see Fay anymore.

Mr. Woodmoore

Mr. Woodmoore is Marion and Ruth's father, and young Franklin's namesake. Whenever John has dinner at the Woodmoore house, he buys a pack of cigarettes so that Mr. Woodmoore can steal some from him. Mr. Woodmoore tells John to call Marion in Miami because he thinks she misses him.

Virginia Taft

Virginia Taft is the wife of Levon Taft and the mother of Fay and Carl Taft. She spends most of her time in Coalfield looking after her overworked husband, and she worries that her children do not respect her. She is a secretary, but after her husband dies, Virginia spends her days sitting on the deck he never finished. Eventually, the family grows broke and moves to live with Virginia's sister in Memphis.

Cyndi

Cyndi is one of John Nickel's longest-serving waitresses at Muddy's. She is ill-tempered and hard-drinking and regularly antagonizes John, who nonetheless considers grooming her for management. He changes his mind, however, once she twice arrives drunk to work and begins a relationship with Carl Taft, whom she knows is selling drugs. When she is moved, Cyndi does an elegiac hula dance like the one she learned working in Hawaii.



Wallace

Wallace is a former football player who John Nickel hires as a bouncer at Muddy's Over time, it becomes clear that Wallace is personable and sharp, and John makes him a bartender. Over the course of the narrative, John grooms Wallace to become a manager. Wallace figures out that Carl is a drug dealer and assists in clearing the junkies out of the bar. Wallace wrestles the gun from Carl after he shoots John and drives the wounded John to the Woodmoores' and, later, to the doctor's office.

The Doctor

The doctor worked with Marion Woodmoore in Memphis and considers her his favorite nurse. When John Nickel is shot, Marion brings him to the doctor. The doctor is curt and sardonic, but he repairs John's jugular and neck muscles off the books and writes him prescriptions for antibiotics and painkillers. After this, the Doctor tells Marion she should return to Memphis.



Objects/Places

Muddy's

Muddy's is the bar in Memphis that John Nickel manages. He started there as a bartender and the person that arranges the live music, a job he was well-suited for because of his background as a drummer. He took the job in order to pay for Marion's night school. In time, the owner of Muddy's sold the bar to a doctor in order to move to Florida. The doctor leaves the day-to-day running of Muddy's to John. The bar is somewhat popular and has a group of regular patrons. John tells people it is named after Muddy Waters.

Shiloh

Shiloh, Tennessee is the site of one of the bloodiest of Civil War battles; it is now a national park and cemetery. John and Fay travel to Shiloh on a whim, despite the fact that it is hours outside of Memphis. They arrive at dusk, when the park normally closes, but the ranger on duty lets them in. Fay looks at several of the military graves, and she drives through the park with John. When they arrive at a statue dedicated to the fighting men of Iowa, John takes her in his arms and holds her.

The Deck

Levon Taft is working on a deck for his house when he dies. The deck is a project for him and Carl, and at one point he nearly has a heart attack carrying two-by-fours for it. He intends to finish it the day he dies. After his death, his wife Virginia spends entire days sitting on the half-finished deck, as if that will keep her close to him.

Drugs

After his father's unexpected death, Carl Taft becomes addicted to drugs. He has no particular preferred narcotic; he tends to sample many different ones. Carl can normally maintain while high, but at one point he nearly OD's. He begins selling drugs in Muddy's, but John finds out and confiscates his drugs. Later, the police arrest Carl while he is carrying cocaine. Near the end of the novel, Carl shoots John while trying to recover his drugs.

The Lumberyard

The lumberyard in Coalfield is where Levon Taft takes a second job as a night watchman to make ends meet. He generally sits in the booth watching a small television, occasionally walking amid the lumber to deter would-be intruders. When Carl



wrecks the family car, Taft gets him a job at the lumberyard to pay off the damage. Fay drops by the lumberyard the night before Taft dies to say hello to her father and to get away from her date. After Taft's death, Carl works at the lumberyard for a time, quitting when it becomes clear that the family is too far in debt.

The Gold LeSabre

The Gold LeSabre is the only car the Taft family has. When Taft lets his son drive the car to the motorcross, Carl races another car and all but totals the LeSabre. A mechanic friend of Taft's gets it back to working order for a cut rate, and Carl is charged with paying off the damage. After Taft dies, the family moves to Memphis in the LeSabre, and Carl regularly drives Fay around in it.

The Pistol

The pistol in the management office of Muddy's was left by the former owner, and John never takes it out of the drawer of his desk. At the end of the novel, Carl Taft steals the gun from John's desk and threatens him with it to get back his drugs. When John tells Carl he flushed the drugs, Carl shoots him in the neck with the pistol.

Elvis

Elvis Presley's music is ubiquitous in Memphis, Tennessee. John Nickel has no particular distaste for the music or the man, but familiarity has bred contempt in him regarding it. He hates Elvis's music being played in Muddy's and prides himself on having never visited Graceland.

Coalfield

Coalfield is a small town in east Tennessee, the hometown of the Taft family. Taft likes it because it is simple and mostly populated by whites. After his death, the family slips into debt, and Fay Taft makes the decision that they should leave town to move in with Virginia's sister.

Miami

After she graduates from nursing school, Marion Woodmoore takes Franklin and moves to Miami to take a better-paying job and to get away from John Nickel. She spends about six years there, during which she tires of the city's rudeness and is shaken when Franklin hurts himself playing with some boys. By the end of the novel, she has almost decided to return to Memphis.



Themes

The Safety of Children

The children of Ann Patchett's *Taft* are perpetually lost. At one point in the novel, John Nickel refers to Fay and Carl as lost siblings in a fairy tale. He is haunted by the image of his son Franklin on a beach in Miami, falling on broken glass and gashing his face. Mr. and Mrs. Woodmoore are constantly concerned about Marion, off in Florida and out of their protective control.

The novel is a story of parallel fathers: John Nickel and Levon Taft. These fathers love their children, but they are constantly separated from them. John's son is taken away by his mother, and Levon must work two jobs in order to make ends meet. Still, their children love and respect them. Children in the novel are more inclined to obey their fathers than their mothers. John and Taft are confident that no harm can reach their children as long as they are around.

These warm portraits of fatherhood are juxtaposed with cold and terrifying portraits of the world at large. Taft intends to protect Fay and Carl, but his heart gives out, leaving them alone. They turn to drugs and the arms of strangers. John loses his son, and though Marion is a good and loving mother, she works long hours. She is shaken by the injury Franklin sustains on the beach. She decides, it appears at the end, to return to Memphis. Patchett seems to be making a statement about the importance of parents in the protection of the young. The world is dangerous: someone must keep an eye on these lost innocents.

Race after Jim Crow

Taft takes place in the Deep South in the late 1980s, twenty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the end of separate-but-equal. Only a few fleeting references to VCR's and other late twentieth century innovations makes explicit the modern setting. The lingering racism of the South has not abated since the end of Jim Crow.

Racism is less overt in Patchett's novel. It has become institutional, subtle, but no less insidious. John Nickel cannot run a tab at a local bar, and he is told to pay in cash at a pharmacy. On the night that John picks Carl Taft off of the street, he is reticent to carry the unconscious boy back into his house in an affluent white neighborhood. If John were seen in the neighborhood at night; he could be shot, and in Memphis a judge would likely see the shooting as fully justified. Even the ubiquity of Elvis - an entertainer not shy about his racist views - highlights how little has changed in twenty years.

Patchett more explicitly discusses the ambiguous attitude of southern whites to blacks in the character of Levon Taft. Taft dislikes the prevalence of blacks in Memphis. He has black friends, but he is uncomfortable in a world in which blacks are more numerous than whites. Still, Taft analyzes his own latent racism. He does not understand, for



example, why he hates the black teenager his son wrestles but feels affection for the young black boy who sells him chocolate bars. One suspects many of these racist inclinations would have disappeared if Taft had lived past the age of forty.

Love and Duty

The relationship between John Nickel and Marion Woodmoore illustrates the difficulty that exists between two people who love each other. When John learns that Marion is pregnant, he is taken aback. Like so many individuals in their twenties, John has personal plans for his life. He intends to be a professional drummer, and even years later, Ruth says that he had the talent to make it big. This is enough to impel John to leave Marion.

The remainder of the novel is John Nickel's attempt to redeem himself following this betrayal. Upon seeing his son Franklin in the nursery for the first time, John is acutely aware of his duty as a father. He gives up drumming in order to take a steady job and put Marion through nursing school. This is not enough, it seems, for Marion to forgive him. She takes Franklin and goes to Miami.

Ann Patchett uses the characters of John and Marion to illustrate how fallible love can be when the real world is involved. Two people who are completely dedicated to each other can lose each other when money and a child are involved. Marion returns to John years later, but by this time their love has changed. John does not want her back: he simply wants to be a good father. The mutual love they share for Franklin brings them together, and Patchett indicates that this is the truest of loves one can experience.



Style

Point of View

Taft is, by and large, told from a first person point-of-view. This vantage is that of John Nickel, a former blues drummer in his thirties living in Memphis in the late 1980s. As such, the entire relation of the narrative is colored by his point-of-view, though it is a point of view that is relatively trustworthy.

Early in the novel, John discusses the rules by which he lives: always sending a check to his son, never pouring a drink from the business side of the bar. He has seen enough of the world as a touring drummer that he knows the spiral of sex and drugs that can tear a person down. The reader enters the narrative after that period of John's life is over. Now, all he ever goes is Muddy's, his apartment, and the Woodmoore house. Even when making intuitive decisions like holding Fay or calling Ruth for a tryst, John is analytical and clear. The only time that his-point-of view becomes less than exacting is after he has been shot. Losing blood and going into shock, John slips in an out of consciousness and confuses memory with reality.

Some passages of the novel are told in a sort of third person omniscient point-of-view. These are the section that tell the story of Levon Taft's last month, and they are related in John's imagination. John Nickel is the omniscient narrator. These passages are the product of conjecture and educated guesses. The first and third points-of-view come together in the final chapter when, in the midst of Taft's dying moments, John enters the scene and tries to change the course of events. Even here, in a fantastical scene, John as a narrator is perfectly precise.

Setting

The story of Taft takes place in Tennessee in the eighties and early nineties. Ann Patchett gets this across to the reader slowly and organically, indicating with tiny details about individual locations. As such, the anachronous racial attitudes of the narrative force the reader to determine the time period by process of elimination.

The specter of racial violence in the Deep South is omnipresent in Taft. The fears that pervade Fay and John's tentative courtship stem from the days of Jim Crow. Consequentially, the reader may be forgiven for thinking the story takes place in the 1950's or 1960's until John theorizes that Fay's father "bought a VCR last month" (81). This places the narrative distinctly in the late 1980's.

The main narrative - that concerning John Nickel - takes place almost entirely in Memphis in the late 1980's. The only exception to this is a brief sojourn that Fay and John take to Shiloh. Like much else in the story, this town is forever haunted by the lingering effects of death and racism. The second narrative - that concerning Levon Taft - takes place in Coalfield in eastern Tennessee. It takes place, too, about two years



before the main narrative. Still, this narrative also takes place in John's imagination. It may be completely false: John's best approximation of what that place is like based on his experiences touring with his band.

Language and Meaning

The language of Ann Patchett's novel *Taft* is decidedly conversational but precise. The prose is not florid; it is competent and functional. This reflects the life of the narrator. John Nickel is not an uneducated individual, but he is more practical than intellectual. His youth was spent drumming for bands in the bars of Memphis. He has forced himself to grow up in the last nine years, since the birth of Franklin.

As such, there is much mystery to the narrative style of *Taft*, which is not to say that the plot is without twists. Indeed, the use of workmanlike language allows Patchett to weave a poetic web that blends past and present without our realizing she is doing it. John's passages reflect a pragmatic individual trying to live a productive life despite emotional and existential turmoil. In this sense, when turmoil materializes - when he kisses Fay or when he is shot - John responds with more precise language. He tries to describe everything around him to understand not only what is happening but how he is processing it.

Just as simply worded are the Levon Taft passages of the novel. The events of these sections are explained in a recurring style. Taft enters a situation, the narrator explains his attitude toward the situation, and Taft responds accordingly. The simplicity of the language makes the final chapter, with its simultaneous narratives involving John's recovery and Taft's death, jarringly poetic. Finally, the novel ends with a flash back to Carl and Fay's childhood. This passage, like the rest of the novel, is rendered prosaically, but Patchett's decision of the image to end it with speaks volumes thematically.

Structure

Ann Patchett's *Taft* has a structure that - like most of the other stylistic elements of the novel - can best be described as deceptively simple. The novel consists of twelve chapters of anywhere between twenty and thirty pages in length. The chapters are not numbers; there are no books in the novel. Patchett's novel consists entirely of the words of the narrative.

The early chapters of the novel are, structurally, the most straightforward. They are no stylistic flourishes, and the narrative consists of four- and five-sentence paragraphs and clearly delineated dialogues. The passages of these chapters are separated by breaks only when long spans of dormancy exist, as when John goes to sleep or tends bar for hours.

Only in chapter four does a major break occur, structurally. In this chapter, Patchett interjects an extended passage in the third person dealing with Levon Taft. After this,

these separated passages appear in nearly every chapter, appearing every time John Nickel's mind begins to wander. In the final chapter of the novel, in fact, this shift happens several times, creating the sensation of two simultaneous narratives. This ends with a coda that takes place about twelve years before the beginning of the novel.



Quotes

"I took the job managing Muddy's at a time when things with Marion has come all the way around, from her doing everything to please me to me doing everything to please her."

Chap. 1, p. 8

"I tried my best to make things work with Marion, to make her settle down and stay ... She moved out just before Franklin turned two, and she took him with her."

Chap. 1, p. 15

"It was her face, though, more than the lack of jobs, that troubled me. It was a tricky face as far as age was concerned. One minute I thought she was twenty, but when I caught her from another angle she had high school written all over her."

Chap. 2, p. 44

"Carl and Fay were the brother and sister in the fairy stories, the pretty white babies holding hands in the forest."

Chap. 3, p. 54

"She didn't understand. If she was wrong, just a little wrong, if only one person saw me that would be enough. I shouldn't have been in that neighborhood."

Chap. 3, p. 73

"But when I went to touch the statue it was Fay I touched ... and I brought her head to my chest and I held her there against me."

Chap. 4, p. 95

"I just want you to call Marion. Tonight, tomorrow night, doesn't matter ... just call and let her know you're thinking of her."

Chap. 5, p. 117

"Ruth did me a favor once, right after Franklin was born. She stayed in my corner."

Chap/ 6, p. 143

"She's a good girl," he said. "I feel for her. But her brother is a scummy drug dealer."

Chap. 8, p. 189

"She was looking for someone to be her dead father ... I had Franklin and she had Carl and neither of them would be so pleased about it."

Chap. 11, p. 252

"Carl's hands were shaking. It seemed to be all he could do to even hold on to the gun ... I turned to look at Wallace and that's when Carl shot me."

Chap. 11, p. 264



"If he was alive, he wouldn't have known what to make of all this. He could never have believed what happened. But I think he understands more now that he's dead. He's smart and patient with us. He protects us. He protects all of us. I think he forgives us."
Chap. 11, p. 270

"But Taft is dead. I know. I am there with him when it happens. The last thing he thought of was of pain and it stays with him on his face. His eyes are open. He is looking for Carl to come back."
Chap. 12, p. 295

"The thing was, you had to choose. Pick one job and do it right. I was picking Franklin."
Chap. 12, p. 302



Topics for Discussion

The narrative of Taft concerns two fathers whose stories are told concurrently. As a class, discuss how the two fathers of the novel are similar and different. What sorts of challenges does each face? How does one father learn from the other?

Discuss race as it is represented in the novel. How do blacks and whites relate to one another in the narrative? What advances have occurred since the end of Jim Crow? What fears still linger in the South in the way the two races interact?

The novel has two main settings: Coalfield and Memphis. Both exist in the same state and yet are markedly different culturally. Discuss how these differences affect the characters. How do characters from Coalfield adapt to being in Memphis? What do city folk feel about eastern Tennessee?

Discuss the relationship between Fay Taft and John Nickel. What similar challenges, fears and regrets exist in both these characters' lives? Why are they drawn toward one another despite age and cultural differences? How are they something more than a merely romantic couple?

Using the character of Carl Taft as a model, discuss how a person can deteriorate following tragedy. What steps occur in Carl's descent? How does his personality change? Discuss which characters stop him from complete self-destruction and how.

Much of the novel is dedicated to John Nickel's attempt to regain his family. Discuss the duties associated with fatherhood. How does John betray those responsibilities early on? What steps does he take over the course of the narrative that redeem him?

John Nickel must give up his personal dream of drumming professionally to win back his family. Discuss dreams and how they guide us. What must a person give up for a professional goal? Conversely, what does a person often have to sacrifice to have a family? What other types of lifelong goals exist?