

The Tie That Binds: A Novel Study Guide

The Tie That Binds: A Novel by Kent Haruf

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Plot Summary

As the story opens, Sanderson Roscoe is inside a corral working with cattle when a man who is dressed in yellow pants arrives. Sandy notes that the man can't figure out how to open the gate and climbs over, though his weight is not good for the gate. The man then tells Sandy that he's from the Denver Post and he's come to ask some questions about Edith Goodnough. Sandy notes that the reporter knows about the barking dog and the chicken feed and that he, Sandy, had tried to keep the firefighters from entering the Goodnough home on the night it burned. He then says that there was much more of the story they didn't get right, and that he wasn't about to tell them anything. He was willing, however, to tell the story as one friend to another over a cup of coffee. The story, Sandy says, goes something like this.

Ada and Roy Goodnough arrive in Colorado as homesteaders and take up a section near the one being farmed by an old woman and her six-year-old son, John Roscoe - Sandy's father. Roy is downright mean and strict and it's John's mother, Hannah Roscoe, who helps Ada deliver two children, a daughter named Edith and a son named Lyman. Life for the family is hard with Roy refusing to spend money on anything that isn't absolutely necessary. Ada dies when Edith is just seventeen and Roy informs her that she's now to take on her mother's duties. One year, John is helping with harvest when Roy gets wire tangled in the equipment and his yelling spooks the horses so that they jerk ahead, catching Roy in the machinery and grinding both hands to nubs. With one finger intact, he is able to button his shirts but is mostly dependent on Lyman and Edith and that dependency weighs on the two. Then John asks Edith to marry him. She realizes she can't leave her father but Roy, fearing that she might, rigs an axe over a rafter and chops off his remaining finger.

John eventually marries a widow named Leona and they have a son, Sanderson, who spends lots of time with Edith. Then Pearl Harbor happens and Lyman, with plans to join the military, leaves home. At forty-one he isn't accepted into the service but spends the next twenty years roaming the country, regularly sending Edith postcards and cash on Christmas. Roy dies and Edith goes on living in the farm house, now alone, with only Lyman's occasional postcards.

Sandy marries a young woman named Mavis and Lyman returns. The four - Sandy, Mavis, Lyman and Edith - often play cards or go dancing together. They are returning from the county fair when Lyman runs into a bridge and the unborn son of Mavis and Sandy is killed in the wreck. Lyman never drives again and begins to be childish. Mavis and Sandy's next child, a daughter named Rena, seems to be able to reach him but then Sandy learns that Lyman has become violent on occasion. Edith says she can't see any options available other than to go on caring for Lyman.

One night Mavis sees flames coming from the Goodnough farm and Sandy rushes there, instructing Mavis to call the fire department. He finds the doors locked - an unusual occurrence - then sees Edith in a chair in the house, and she holds up her hand to him. He understands that this is her choice, but the fire department arrives quickly.

Sandy tries to keep them from entering the house but they rescue Edith. Lyman dies of smoke inhalation.

Over time, it's discovered that Edith had tied their old dog in the shed with food and water within reach though the animal is typically allowed inside. She'd also put a fifty-pound bag of feed out for the chickens. With those signs of planning, it seemed obvious that Edith had set the fire on purpose and a Denver Post reporter begins poking into the story. Sandy notes that after that, the local sheriff posts a guard at the door to Edith's hospital room, and he seems to be waiting for the old woman - who is more than eighty years old - to recover so that she can be arrested for the murder of her brother.

Chapters One through Three

Chapters One through Three Summary

As chapter one opens, Sanderson Roscoe is inside a corral working with cattle when a man who is dressed in yellow pants arrives. Sandy notes that the man can't figure out how to open the gate and climbs over, though his weight is not good for the gate. The man then tells Sandy that he's from the Denver Post and that he's come to ask some questions about Edith Goodnough. He mispronounces the name and Sandy makes the point of correcting him, saying that if he's going to come sticking his nose in someone else's business he could at least know how to say their name correctly. The man takes a little spiral notebook from his back pocket and makes a few notes, and Sandy says that once the reporter has that notebook in hand, he begins to act sure of himself. At one point, a cow slings up mud as she runs off and a blob of cow manure lands on the man's shirt. He flicks it off with a pencil and asks to go somewhere else to talk, but Sandy declines, saying he has work to do. The reporter asks why Sandy was trying to fight off the firefighters who arrived at the house the night Lyman died and asks Sandy if he believes "it was deliberate." Sandy orders the young reporter off his land and tears the man's notebook page out, crushing it into the cow manure on the ground as the man leaves.

Sandy admits that the Denver Post managed to get some of the facts of the story of Lyman and Edith Goodnough's story correct, and that they managed to lay it out on a page so that it was an eye-catching story, but he says there was plenty more that wasn't correct or that they simply left out. Sandy refuses to tell the reporter anything at all but says that the man got more information from Bud Sealy, the sheriff, and others who offered bits and pieces of the story. Sandy says that he would never give any information to the Denver Post, but that if someone wants to just sit down over a cup of coffee on a Sunday afternoon, he'd be willing to tell the story.

Sandy begins chapter two by saying that some of the story he is about to relate are facts that he knows to be true while others are things he believes to be true. He says that Roy Goodnough married Ada Twamley in Iowa and that Roy probably saw flyers advertising the opportunity to homestead in Colorado. He packs up Ada and they travel to Colorado. By then, Roy is already showing signs of the mean person he'll eventually become. He is a hard worker and a skilled farmer and builder and hates being dependent on anyone for anything. Roy chooses a homestead near a section that's claimed by Hannah Roscoe and her young son - John Roscoe - and Sandy says he believes Roy chooses that section believing that the woman and little boy won't last and that he'll be able to purchase that land for a pittance.

But John Roscoe, just six when the Goodnoughs take up residence nearby, works hard and does make a go of the farm. Roy puts in the crops as his first order of business on arrival, leaving Ada to live under a lean-to near the wagon for awhile and then building a decent home with lumber brought in by wagon. Ada carries water from the Roscoe's



well and one day John Roscoe's mother invites Ada in for a bath. She accepts, saying that she can't let Roy know, and this seems to cement the friendship of the two women. When Ada is in labor for three days, she insists that Mrs. Roscoe come, and Roy reluctantly goes to get the old woman. Ada gives birth to a girl, Edith. Two years later, Ada gives birth to a son, Lyman, and this time Roy goes to get the old woman as soon as the labor begins.

Edith and Lyman attend school briefly but are usually needed at home to do work Roy wants done so neither finish eighth grade. Sandy notes that in photos, Lyman and Edith seem to be growing up, while Ada seems to shrink. She becomes sick in 1914 and Hannah Roscoe comes to sit with her on a particular afternoon. At dinner, Roy - seeming indifferent to the fact that his wife lay upstairs dying - berates Lyman for not having mentioned that a particular cow was going dry. Ada rouses briefly, insists that her body not be buried in Colorado but be returned home, and dies. Edith can't keep the promise because Roy won't allow it and Ada is buried in the local cemetery. After her mother's death, Roy tells Edith, seventeen, that she now has to replace her mother.

In chapter two, Roy Goodnough's attitude about harvest time is made clear. While the harvest should be the culmination of the year's labor, Roy hates the fact that he, Edith and Lyman can't manage to get the harvest in alone. It requires help and John Roscoe is the one who helps them at this time of year. A particular day during the harvest begins with Roy berating Lyman for having not covered the milk the day before and having lost the lids to the milk containers. He hurries Edith and Lyman, saying that John is probably already waiting on them. Roy gripes about several other things, including that John is not wearing a shirt and seems intent on having "fried" skin, though Edith says John's Indian heritage means he won't sunburn. Lyman cusses as he works, hating his role in the farm chores.

They stop for lunch and Lyman takes the horses for a drink, taking a few minutes to wet his own head for the cooling effect. After eating the meal Edith prepares, she, Lyman and John lie down to rest for a few minutes. They return to the fields in the afternoon and at a particular point where barbed wire has recently been replaced, the cutting machine gets tangled in wire and they are forced to stop. Roy is angry at the fact that the wire was in the way and cusses the "kid," meaning John. John, however, is twenty-five and no child and knows that it could very well have been Roy's wire because Roy never purchased new machinery. Roy would rather tie up equipment than to spend the few cents for a new bolt to replace a broken one. In any case, Roy begins tugging at the wire and cussing loudly. The horses, tired from the day's work, are edgy. When the offending wire breaks abruptly, Roy bangs his head and yells "goddamn," which the horses seem to believe is "giddup," and they take off. Roy's hands are in the equipment and the blades are sharp. In a matter of seconds, his hands look like hamburger and he has only one finger remaining.

He has some additional injuries as well - a cut across the forehead and another on the leg. Edith yells for John to come help and John sends Lyman for his truck. When Lyman gets back, they get Roy inside but he refuses to go until they've recovered his fingers. They can find only two fingers and a thumb and Edith carries them in a handkerchief



with her on the trip to town. They find Dr. Packer who says all he can do is trim the edges off the mangled digits and sew strips of hide back over the stumps. Roy almost dies but doesn't, though he's now completely dependent on someone else to care for him. In this way, Edith and Lyman are also trapped because of his dependence on them.

Chapters One through Three Analysis

It's during this first chapter that the reader begins to get a look at the kind of man Sanderson "Sandy" Roscoe really is. He believes in standing up for himself and for those he cares about, and it's obvious that he cares deeply for Edith Goodnough.

The opening chapter includes some hints about the story to come, including that Sandy is expecting Rena Pickett and Mavis home soon. It will later be revealed that Mavis is his wife and Rena Pickett is his daughter. He'll also mention that the man from the Denver Post knew about the barking dog and the chicken feed, though he also doesn't explain that until much later. The reader will eventually learn that Edith Goodnough tied up the old dog that generally slept in her kitchen, leaving him outside on the night the house burned down. She also hauled a fifty-pound bag of chicken feed into the henhouse so the chickens would have food enough to last until someone could remember to feed them. These two actions, according to the reporter from the Denver Post, indicated that Edith had deliberately set fire to the house, an action that caused the death of her brother, Lyman.

Sandy doesn't elaborate on the fact that Roy Goodnough tells Edith that she has to replace her mother after Ada dies when Edith is seventeen. With facts that are revealed later, it seems possible though not probable that Roy meant in bed as well as doing the chores and keeping house. Sandy will eventually discover that as adults, Edith and Lyman are sleeping in the same bed.

It seems inevitable that Edith and John Roscoe should become close because he's virtually the only man with whom she comes into contact. It's also inevitable that Edith would be dedicated to her father so that she refuses to leave him. In fact, the loyalty is one of the traits John Roscoe admires about her.

Chapters Four though Six

Chapters Four though Six Summary

In chapter four, Sandy says that Edith and Lyman simply had no opportunities to escape the life Roy Goodnough had set for them. Edith continues all her duties - cooking, cleaning, gardening and bringing in wood - and now is responsible for the milking. Lyman continues working on the farm, and Sandy says there's nothing unusual in that because all farm families work hard. What's different in Lyman's case is that Roy dictates Lyman's every move, eliminating any opportunity Lyman might have to make a decision on his own. Roy also constantly berates Lyman.

Things go along that way for several years. One summer, as John Roscoe is working with Edith and Lyman on the farm, Edith and John begin seeing each other. They sometimes go out in the evening and Roy, for whatever reason, allows it as long as they take Lyman along. They become very close and even have sex together one night, Edith having asked Lyman to go on toward home on foot to give them a little time together. One night, John asks Edith to marry him, and she worries over her decision, fearing leaving Lyman alone with their father and acknowledging that her father depended on her for almost everything. John says that Lyman can come with her.

When Edith and Lyman get home that night, Roy orders her to stop seeing John. She doesn't tell him of her decision but comes to realize that she can't, in good conscience, leave Roy to fend for himself and that she'll turn down John's proposal. Later that next afternoon, Roy goes out to the barn and rigs up an axe on a rope over a rafter so that it will fall onto a block of wood below and chops off his one remaining finger, meaning that he now can't even button his own shirt. He walks inside and drops the finger into the bowl where she's snapping beans. She is angry and tells him that he could have saved himself the trouble. She washes his hand with alcohol and tells him he should go see Doc Parker but refuses to go with him. She then cries and Sandy notes that after that moment there were only two other times she cried, and neither was when her father died.

In chapter five, Sandy notes that some twenty years pass without anything of note happening to the Goodnoughs, though during that time his father's life began to change. John initially wants to kill Roy for making Edith's life so miserable. When Edith makes it clear she can't marry him, John begins to pour all his daytime hours into work and all his nighttime hours into drinking. He gets into a great many fights during that time as well. Then he meets Leona Turner Newcomb, a young widow, her husband having hanged himself some five years earlier. John and Leona are married in 1925, five years after the death of her first husband, and Sandy is born in 1928, a surprise because Leona and her first husband had had no children and she believed she couldn't become pregnant.

By the time Sandy is about six, he is a frequent visitor to the Goodnough home, though his mother never visits and Roy no longer allows John on the place at all. Once Sandy



mentions that he hasn't any gum and that he likes gum, prompting Edith to begin keeping gum in her apron pocket for him. She teaches him to blow a bubble and he willingly helps with chores he would hate at his own home. One day, Sandy and John are outside Wandorf's Hardware store when they encounter Wenzel Gerdt who tells them that Lyman had come into the Holt Tavern a few days earlier, a rare occasion because Lyman was seldom off the farm. He drank several beers, won several hands of poker and loved up on a woman before realizing the late hour and rushing out. Sandy says that Wenzel believed Lyman might have suddenly had to go pee, but that he believes Lyman knew he was going to be chastised by his father and that the later it was, the greater the argument would be when he got home. In chapter six, Sandy notes that Lyman's brief evening at the Holt Tavern was, at the very least, a "trial run" at freedom and that Lyman, now a grown man of forty-one years, was probably acting and feeling like a teenager, including the idea that the chastising and hangover were worth the night on the town.

In December of 1941, Pearl Harbor is bombed and it's the catalyst that sends Lyman from home. Sandy says that it's the somber expression on his father's face that made the greatest impact of what Pearl Harbor really meant. A "couple of nights" later, Sandy wakes to a pounding on the door and discovers that it's Lyman, asking for a ride to town to catch the train. John agrees to take him, which makes Leona angry. When Sandy asks to go along, John says yes and overrides Leona when she says no. John and Sandy take him into town where they have to wait for almost an hour for the train to arrive. Lyman says he plans to join the military and has a single metal suitcase with him. Sandy recalls that Lyman looks cold and scared when the train finally arrives and that it's the last anyone sees of him for almost twenty years.

Lyman, at forty-two, isn't accepted by the armed forces but does take a job with an airplane factory in Los Angeles, saves money and lives frugally, purchases a new Pontiac whenever he grows tired of the color of his current car, sends money home to Edith every Christmas, and moves often. He always sends postcards to Edith and she saves them religiously as she continues living her life of misery in Holt with her stump-armed father.

That first spring after Lyman leaves, Edith is still doing all her work and caring for her father. Then one day, John and Sandy are driving down the road when John yells for Sandy to stop the truck. He is in the eighth grade that spring and sits with his father to watch while Edith drives the tractor with the old man strapped to the back of it so he can yell directions. Edith flashes John a look that says, "It's okay," but John is angry that she's being forced into this kind of labor. They go home and John tells Sandy that Sandy's going to have to go over and drive the tractor. John himself wants to but knows Roy won't allow him on the place. Sandy vows to do the work and is waiting the next morning when it's time for the work to begin. Roy orders him to start the tractor and maneuver it around a bit before allowing him to drive, and then agrees only when Edith walks off and leaves them to the work.

Sandy is relieved to return to school where he doesn't have to deal with Roy. By the following spring the scene is repeated, only this time John stands in front of the tractor,



forcing Edith to stop, and Roy hits John. John finally hits back and knocks out Roy. He carries the old man home and then drives to town where he buys some liquor. He and Sandy drive out to a dirt road and John tells Sandy the story of his courtship with Edith and all the rest. Sandy admits that he also gets a little drunk.

Chapters Four through Six Analysis

Sandy likens the situation facing Edith and Lyman to that of being caught in quicksand so deeply that turning the head reveals only more of the same. It's an interesting analogy because the farm - mostly sand - is how Edith and Lyman live but their father is what ties them to the farm. It's also interesting that Sandy lays to rest any idea that milking is an easy, clean job. He says one of the worst parts is that the cow's tail almost always has manure and urine caked it in and that when the cow flicks that tail it often lands in the face of the person milking.

Sandy notes that Lyman "didn't need much, you understand, but he sure as hell did need something." He seems to be saying that Lyman might have been able to stay on the farm, working his life away like many farmers did, if he'd only had some say in what was to be done or even when or how. Unlike other young farmers who poured their sweat into their farms, Lyman isn't allowed to make even minor decisions, such as where to stack the hay.

Sandy says that his mother had been the "young widow Newcomb" for about five years when she met John Roscoe. Leona had discovered her husband's body in the cellar of their home where he'd hanged himself hours earlier. While Sandy says she hadn't talked about it, he seems to know that there was something about spiders being on or around the body when she discovered it, and that the horror of that discovery had made the entire incident worse. Sandy says that he believes his mother selected John Roscoe as her second husband because she believed that he wouldn't be the kind of man to hang himself in a basement.

Sandy's description of his mother isn't flattering. He notes that she has a "polished and perfumed surface," but that she's "all ice" underneath. He also says that she knows how to get whatever it is that she wants and that she wanted - for whatever reason - John Roscoe. He also notes that her first husband had obviously been the reason she'd had no children but that he doesn't believe that to be the reason the man hanged himself, but that, "Knowing my mother, I believe there must have been a few other reasons."

When Lyman arrives at the Roscoe house in the middle of the night on his way out of town, Leona refers to him as "that man," which seems to make John angry. He tells her that "that man" has a name and seems to point out that she is being a snob, but she either doesn't understand or doesn't care, or - more likely - doesn't believe she's wrong. John says that Lyman is going to town because he's suddenly discovered that he "has a backbone," indicating his own belief that Lyman is doing the best thing. Leona tells John then that it should be Edith's job to drive Lyman into town and John grows angrier. He tells her that she is not to talk about Edith at all and this seems to spark a greater level

of hurt and frustration on both sides. This is the first indication that Leona knows of John's unrequited love for Edith, though it must have been common knowledge before she selected John as her husband. While it's easy to see John's side of this, it's also easy to see that Leona would naturally be reluctant to have anything to do with the Goodnoughs because of that love.

Chapters Seven and Eight

Chapters Seven and Eight Summary

Chapter seven begins with Sandy saying that his father kept trying to change things in order to make them fair. He arranges for Charlie Best, a neighbor, to lease the Goodnough land, knowing that Roy would never allow John to lease it. After Roy's death, Edith would lease the land to Sandy, but for now the Roscoes don't farm Goodnough land. Sandy graduates high school in 1946 and goes off to college at Fort Collins. After his fourth year of college, Sandy returns home without his diploma but is "about half willing" to return for another try at chemistry in order to get his degree. On June eleventh, Sandy and John are riding the fields rounding up cattle when John dies of a heart attack. Sandy cries in the pasture for some time, fans flies from his father's face for some more time, and finally loads him up and takes him home where Doc Schmidt confirms that John died of a heart attack.

There's an immediate clash between Sandy and Leona over where John is to be buried; she insists he's to be buried in town but loses the argument. Sandy remains behind to shovel the dirt into his father's grave and is kept company by Edith while his mother returns to the house to drink tea with her friends. Edith tells Sandy then that John had asked her to marry him and asks Sandy to understand why she couldn't. Sandy says he understands but doesn't like it and holds her hand as she cries some more.

In chapter eight, Sandy, now twenty-two, is home for good and handling the daily operation of the farm his father had built. He and his mother clash often, finally having a huge fight when, in 1952, she announces that she's going to marry Wilbur Cox. Sandy says he can't help thinking that she had waited five years after her first husband's death to marry John and was now ready to marry again after only two, and that thought makes him angry. He relents "a little," stands for his mother at the wedding, and sells off some land to pay for a new house for the couple. In October of that same year, Edith calls on Sandy to help her make funeral arrangements for Roy who died in his sleep.

Sandy says that he is not proud of the next ten years. He drinks a lot, spends a lot of time at bars, and spends a lot of money. He has a live-in farm hand named Clevis Stouffer who is living the same life and it's Clevis who decides that they should have a young girl move in with them to take care of the house. Twyla Thompson moves in, spending nights with Clevis and cleaning house for them. Sandy says they continue to party a lot and the money continues to roll out. On top of that, some of the work is going undone. Then Sandy begins sleeping with Twyla. He says he initially tries to justify it in his mind but then just accepts it as a fact. He sends Clevis out to run errands and he and Twyla slip off to bed. Then one night the three return home from a party, and Twyla says she has a joke to tell them. She says she's pregnant and she doesn't know which is the father.

For Sandy, it's a wakeup call and the next morning he discovers that Clevis has taken his pickup and gone to Portland, Oregon. Twyla says she wanted to go with him, but he hadn't asked her to. Sandy takes Twyla to a Holiday Inn in Denver and sets out to sell off some land. It takes several weeks but when he returns to her, he gives her fifteen-thousand dollars and puts her on a plane to Oregon. Sandy says he never heard from her again.

For Edith, the years pass with little to mark the passage. Lyman doesn't return for Roy's funeral nor does he return immediately after. He continues to send postcards and money. Then in 1961, Edith invites Sandy for dinner and Sandy discovers that Lyman, dressed to the hilt, is home.

Chapters Seven and Eight Analysis

Sandy's reaction to his mother's decision to remarry isn't particularly unique, but in Sandy's mind there are some extenuating circumstances. He says that two years after his father's death, when Leona makes her announcement that she plans to marry Wilbur Cox, Sandy can still hear his father's voice in everything he does. It's true that Leona has waited only two years, but those two years were probably much longer for her than they were for Sandy because her relationship with John had deteriorated over the years so that they had little in common. At one point, Sandy accuses her of having chosen to spend time with her church group and small circle of friends instead of her husband and son, but Leona says that decision was made jointly with John. From Leona's point of view, John had had little time for Leona. It's not clear whether she'd thought she could mold him into what she expected or if she was really so far off in her expectations of John, but the two seemed to have been very incompatible.

Another point that seems to anger Sandy about his mother's remarrying is the choice of man. While John Roscoe had been a rancher and farmer who was strong and physical, Wilbur Cox is an insurance salesman. Sandy points out that Wilbur has a way of shaking hands so that he uses both of his hands in a handshake, and that action seems to epitomize Wilbur's lack of strength in Sandy's mind.

Sandy's attitudes about Lyman are almost as harsh as his attitude about his mother. Sandy notes that Lyman sends Edith postcards with some short note that indicates where he is and that he's well, but nothing of substance in all the years he is gone. After Roy's death, Edith puts the post cards all around the walls of her house, picture side in so that the messages show. She also doesn't spend any of the money Lyman sends but says she is keeping it for when he returns. It angers Sandy that Lyman could be so careless with Edith's feelings and that he should continue to roam the country while Edith remained at the farm in Colorado. When Lyman returns, Sandy remains angry at him though he notes that Edith is delighted to have him home and therefore tries to be happy for her rather than angry at Lyman. When Lyman tells Sandy that the one thing he's missed is some particular dish of Edith's, Sandy snaps at him that Lyman should tell Edith that.

Chapter Nine

Chapter Nine Summary

When Lyman arrives home, Edith is delighted and chapter nine begins with Sandy recapping the details of that first dinner and saying the happiness goes on for only six brief years. That night, Lyman sits in the living room and brings out his suitcases. He has souvenirs, mainly for Edith, from many of the places he'd lived and gives Sandy a shoehorn from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Edith continues to point out specific post cards to Lyman, asking him to tell her the stories of what happened there. Then Edith shows Lyman the money he'd sent that she'd saved. With that money, the two have the means to have "a second childhood," though Sandy notes that they didn't really have a first.

Lyman doesn't return to working the farm, always dresses in slacks and a tie, and anytime either of them has a desire to go somewhere, they do. They also do some work on the old farmhouse, including purchasing a dishwasher for Edith. Sandy continues to date Mavis Pickett until in 1963, she says it's time to marry. She demands that Sandy make the request formally to her father and he does so, though he initially teases that he could just send a post card. Sandy says that he sometimes wishes she had more of a sense of humor and that she believes he is too bullheaded, but that "it's worked out."

Mavis is a nurse and continues to work after her marriage to Sandy. Often, Mavis, Sandy, Edith and Lyman gather at one house or the other for a game of Rook or go to the American Legion on a Saturday night for a few drinks and some dancing. In 1967, Mavis is eight months pregnant. Sandy worries that, at thirty-three, Mavis is too old to be pregnant for the first time, but Mavis is happy and seems healthy. It's August and time for the Holt County Fair. Sandy wants to stay home so Mavis can rest; Sandy has plans to go in to see the rodeo later in the day, but Mavis wants to go for the parade and spend the day. Sandy, Mavis, and Edith ride with Lyman in his car.

The four spend the day together, watching the parade then having lunch together at the fairgrounds. Later, Sandy helps with the rodeo though he doesn't participate. When the rodeo is over, he has trouble finding the others and when he does locate them, Mavis and Edith are teasing Lyman, having won all the spending money he had with him during the rodeo and refusing to give him back enough money for a beer until he admits that their method of selecting winners is superior to his own. Edith and Mavis then insist that they remain at the fair to spend all of Lyman's money. At the end of the evening, they ride the Ferris Wheel and Sandy notes that Lyman and Edith, sitting together in a car, could have been an elderly couple out for an evening.

They are all very tired at the end of the evening when they start for home. Lyman is driving and Sandy and Mavis are in the back seat. When they reach Five Mile Bridge, Sandy wakes abruptly as they bounce off the guard rails and flip over. There's no water, but the car is upside-down and Sandy can smell gas. He pulls Mavis from the wreckage though she begs him not to move her. Fearing fire, he is as careful as can be, but pulls

her from the car as someone else reaches the scene and rushes down to help. Edith has a broken arm and Sandy next pulls her from the wreckage. Lyman is alive but unconscious when Sandy pulls him out. They get a ride to the hospital and are there when Mavis delivers her stillborn son. Sandy sees the child and notes that he is black and blue both from the wreck and from the forceps used to help the delivery along. Mavis insists that she hold the boy and Sandy fears she won't be able - or willing - to give the body back, but she says her good-bye and gives up the child.

Edith and Mavis recover and go home. The baby is buried and Edith tells Sandy that she was looking forward to having him come visit her as Sandy had done as a child. Sandy notes that, meanwhile, Lyman is beginning his descent into childhood.

Chapter Nine Analysis

The story teller continues to drop in stories such as would be common knowledge for those who lived in the area at the time. It's one of these stories that Sandy tells as he's explaining about Five Mile Bridge. He says that there have been other accidents at that place and then tells the story of Buster and Barry Wellright. The two are apparently the source of several stories in the area as evidenced by Sandy's statement that one was missing an ear, "but that's another story." The particular story Sandy does tell involves Barry and Buster headed home one night after drinking a lot and one waking to discover that the truck was driving down the ditch. When he wakes his brother, saying to get the truck back on the road, there erupts an argument over which is driving. The argument is never solved and the two crash into the end of the bridge. While the story has nothing to do with the accident to come, it is a clever literary technique in that it takes the reader on a quick side tracked story that is entertaining prior to providing the details of the death of Sandy and Mavis's unborn son.

The relationship between the Roscoes and Goodnoughs is solid, and it would have to be for them to all remain friends after the horrible accident that claimed the life of Mavis's unborn child. Shortly after having buried the child, Mavis notes that she's worried about Edith. In fact, Edith must have been hurting horribly because of the loss of the child and of the role her beloved brother played in that situation.



Chapters Ten and Eleven

Chapters Ten and Eleven Summary

Sandy notes that Lyman's descent into childhood begins with the accident but that it takes ten years for it to become complete. Lyman remains in the hospital three months and Sandy brings him home from the hospital. The Pontiac is totaled and Sandy takes Lyman for a couple of trips to the car dealership to shop for a new car. On one of those, Lyman gets behind the wheel and almost hits some school children walking across the street. Lyman tells Sandy to take the wheel and when Sandy urges him to go on, Lyman refuses, saying that he doesn't want to drive anymore. At that point, Edith might have taken over the driving duties but doesn't because she knows it would hurt Lyman to sit in the passenger seat while she drives. This means the two are completely dependent on Sandy and Mavis to take them everywhere they need to go.

For awhile, the Goodnoughs continue to go with Sandy and Mavis to the American Legion now and then. Then one night, a car salesman meets Lyman at the American Legion tries to sell him a car. Lyman retreats to Sandy's car and refuses to come out, so they all go home and the Goodnoughs never go anywhere again except to the grocery store and the doctor. When Lyman's physician dies, he never again goes to the doctor either.

Then Sandy and Mavis have a daughter in 1969, Rena Pickett Roscoe. The parents are overly cautious during Mavis's pregnancy which Sandy says makes for a long nine months, but the result is a child who steals the hearts of all who know her. Her grandmother, Sandy's mother, is taken with the child as well. By the time Rena is able to go to visit Edith alone, Lyman has become very childlike. He is petulant and has temper tantrums. Lyman has ordered train schedules and other travel information from around the country. He now spends his days planning trips that he'll never take. Rena becomes his counterpart, spending hours in the parlor with him. She draws and colors tickets while he plans their connections and layovers to reach some particular point. While Lyman and Rena play together, Lyman is relatively calm and it takes a load off Edith.

One day Edith calls on Sandy to help rearrange some furniture so they can close off the upstairs. Sandy approves, saying that the stairs are too much for Edith at this point and that this is better for her. It's when he goes upstairs to move the dressers for her that he discovers that there is only one bed. Sandy says that if Edith and Lyman have found some comfort in "warming their feet under the same old-fashioned patchwork quilt like they had when they were kids before this century ever began - well, that was their business, because when you know people all your life you try to understand how it is for them." He goes on to say that anything that can't be understood must just be accepted.

One day, Sandy is working on some equipment he is housing in the Goodnough's shed when Edith calls him inside. Rena is crying and Edith is holding her and Sandy discovers that Lyman had grown angry at not being able to figure out a particular route



and struck the old dog that had recently taken up residence at the Goodnough home. When Rena objected, Lyman became angrier and Sandy figures out that Lyman must sometimes become violent with Edith as well. As Sandy and Rena prepare to leave, Edith assures Sandy that he doesn't hurt her much.

In chapter eleven, Sandy notes that it was "sometime between March and December" that Edith apparently comes to the conclusion that she has to take some action. On a particular day, Edith makes her preparations. She gets Lyman up very early so that he'll want to sleep earlier in the evening. They have breakfast together, and Edith provides Lyman a couple of Geographic magazines to look at. Later in the day, Mavis calls from the store, asking Edith if she needs anything. Edith says she needs cream and then goes to the sink and pours out the cream she has. When Edith and Rena come by, Edith whips cream and they share the pumpkin pie Edith has prepared for Lyman's dinner.

Later in the day, Edith takes the dog, Nancy, to the shed and ties her up with food and water nearby. Edith then drags a bag of chicken feed to the chicken shed. Edith notes that the food will be sufficient to keep the chickens alive until someone can think to feed them. She allows Lyman to go to sleep early, which he needs because of the early morning rising. He goes to bed in his shirt, pants and tie, and Edith leaves him that way. She then sets fire to the house and sits down inside to wait to die.

That evening, Sandy is about to go to bed when Mavis looks outside because their dog is barking. She sees the flames and brings Sandy's attention to it. He rushes toward the Goodnoughs, yelling at Mavis to call for the fire department. He arrives at the house and finds the doors locked - an unusual circumstance. He is about to break in a window when he sees Edith, sitting in the house. She holds up her hand and Sandy sees it. With that, he realizes that she's set the fire on purpose and that this is her decision. He backs away, but the fire department arrives quickly. Sandy tries to stop them from entering the house, but Bud Sealy puts him in a patrol car while the firemen break into the house and carry Edith and Lyman out. Lyman dies later and Edith begins recovering in the hospital.

When the details of the fire become known, a reporter from the Denver Post comes to realize that Edith had tied up the dog away from the house and had provided a large amount of feed for the chickens - indications that she had intentionally set the fire. Sandy, Mavis and Rena visit Edith in the hospital and after a few days of questions by the reporter, Bud Sealy posts a guard outside her door.

Sandy completes the story by saying that he's told about all he knows. He, Mavis and Rena continue to visit Edith regularly and that she, at eighty-three, could be facing charges for the murder of her brother, Lyman Goodnough.

Chapters Ten and Eleven Analysis

It's interesting to note that the sense of fairness and affection that was exhibited by John Roscoe's mother, then by John and later by Sandy and Mavis, is now exhibited by the young Rena. When Lyman becomes angry and hits the Goodnough's dog, Rena is outraged. She can't fathom the act of hurting an animal and objects to Lyman's action. Later, after she's calmed down, she finds excuses for Lyman. She says that he's probably just tired and that he'll feel better tomorrow.

Edith has planned all the details of the day she planned to kill herself and Lyman with one exception - she hasn't figured a way to spend some time with Mavis and Rena. When Mavis calls from the grocery store, she says that Rena wanted to know if Edith needed something from town. In fact, Edith doesn't need anything but she tells Mavis that she needs cream. Then she pours out the cream that she has on hand so that she can use the cream Mavis brings her.

Edith is a strong person. It's this strength that allows her to take the action she does and make her plans to kill herself and Lyman while remaining - at least on the surface - cheerful during her visit with Mavis and Rena.

Characters

Sanderson Roscoe

The narrator. Sanderson, also called "Sandy" by some, is born and raised on the farm down the road from where the Goodnoughs live. He is the son of John Roscoe, who was in love with Edith Goodnough, but who married someone else after Edith refused to leave her father and brother on the farm. Sandy is raised to be honest and respectful. He gives up an entire summer one year to help Edith's father plow land so Edith did not have to run the tractor on top of all the other chores she tends.

Sandy believes in a person's right to live his or her life as he or she sees fit. It's for this reason that he fights off the rescue personnel who arrive first at the home of Edith Goodnough when the house is on fire and the reason he doesn't say anything or judge them when he discovers that Edith and Lyman were sharing a bed as adults.

Edith Goodnough

Edith is born and raised in Holt, Colorado, to Ada and Roy Goodnough. She is a strong woman and is determined to make the best of any situation she is faced with. Additionally, she has a strong sense of loyalty and would never do anything other than what is required of her. She is the older of two children and is seventeen when her mother dies. At that point, Edith becomes responsible for all the duties of a mother of a household. She cooks, cleans, and works a vegetable garden. Edith is at her father's side when he catches his hand in a piece of farm equipment. After that, she spends her time not only doing her other chores but doing thousands of simple things for her father, such as cutting up his meat. When Edith meets and falls in love with John Roscoe, she is torn over the decision she faces but comes to realize she can't possibly move away and leave her father.

Edith remains with her father until his death and then lives alone until Lyman returns. With the return of her brother, Edith has a few short years of happiness and then is saddled with an old man who is as cranky and unpredictable as a child. She doesn't shirk that duty either and eventually comes to believe that killing them both is the only option open to her.

Roy Goodnough

Edith and Lyman's father. He is a hard man who is hateful and mean. It's noted that he didn't allow the children to finish school because he considered that kind of knowledge a waste of time. It's also noted that on the day his wife lay dying in an upstairs bedroom, he was eating dinner and berating Lyman for having not told him that one of the cows was going dry. Roy accidentally chews his hands to nubs in a farming accident and later purposely chops off the one finger that survived that initial accident.



Lyman Goodnough

Edith's younger brother. Lyman remains at the farm, doing whatever his father tells him, until he is in his forties. Then he leaves home and doesn't return for twenty years though he sends Edith postcards from all the places he lives and money every Christmas. Lyman is driving when he has an accident that costs the life of Sandy and Mavis's unborn son. He never recovers mentally and eventually becomes impossible for Edith to manage. He dies in a fire she sets deliberately; his death prompts the possibility of murder charges against Edith.

John Roscoe

Sandy's father and the husband of Leona, John is a child of only six years old when the Goodnoughs arrives in Colorado. The two families farm adjacent sections of land, and John helps the Goodnoughs during harvest time. John falls in love with Edith and asks her to marry him. When she refuses, saying she can't bring herself to leave her father and brother, John goes wild for a while, spending too much time in bars. He later marries Leona but never gets over his love for Edith.

Rena Pickett

Sandy and Mavis Roscoe's daughter. Rena often plays with Lyman, creating the tickets for their imaginary trips to various places. Rena loves Edith and it's clear that Edith's life is touched in a positive way by Rena. Sandy notes that even his mother, Leona, loves the little girl.

Mavis Pickett

Sandy Roscoe's wife. Mavis and Sandy go together for several years before marrying. She has Sandy ask her father for permission for them to marry and Sandy notes that this is typical of Mavis, in that she wants things done correctly. Mavis gives birth to a dead child, a son, after being involved in an accident with Lyman and Edith.

Bud Sealy

The sheriff in the county where Sanderson Roscoe and Edith Goodnough live as neighbors. Bud Sealy had been a member of the same football team as Sandy, so the two were acquainted with each other prior to Bud Sealy's becoming a lawman. Sandy believes that Bud would never have considered charging Edith with Lyman's murder if it hadn't been for the reporter who snooped around, asking questions and implying that Edith started the fire that took Lyman's life.

Leona Turner Newcomb Roscoe Cox

Sandy Roscoe's mother. She is a young widow when she meets John Roscoe and seems to choose him as her second husband. Sandy says it's because she doesn't believe John Roscoe is the kind of person who would hang himself. When John dies of a heart attack, she remains widowed for two years but then announces her plans to remarry, which earns Sandy's anger.

Hannah Roscoe

John Roscoe's mother. Hannah lives alone with her young son when the Goodnoughs arrive in Colorado. When Ada Goodnough has trouble giving birth to Edith, it's Hannah Roscoe who helps with the delivery. Hannah also helps with Lyman's birth and then stays with Ada on the afternoon she dies.



Objects/Places

Holt, Colorado

The place where the Goodnoughs and Roscoes live as neighbors.

The Denver Post

The newspaper where the young reporter works who is sent to look into rumors that Edith Goodnough murdered her brother.

Iowa

Where Roy and Ada Goodnough lived before homesteading in Colorado.

Leon Shields Place

Where John Roscoe and others gather to drink during the prohibition years.

The Methodist Episcopal Church

The church Leona Roscoe attends.

Wandorf's Hardward

Where Wenzel Gerdts tells John and Sandy the story of Lyman putting in an appearance at the Holt Tavern.

Fort Collins, Colorado

Where Sandy attends college.

Portland, Oregon

Where Clevis says he is going after he leaves Sandy's home.

Holt County Fair

Where Sandy, Mavis, Lyman and Edith spend the afternoon before the death of Mavis's unborn son.

Five Mile Bridge

Where Lyman has the accident that claims the life of Sandy and Mavis's unborn son.

Themes

Loyalty

There's little doubt that loyalty is a major theme of this story, which is first exhibited with Sandy Roscoe refuses to give any information to the reporter from the Denver Post. Not only does Sandy refuse information, he snatches a sheet of paper from the young reporter's notebook and grinds it into the cow manure underfoot. Sandy also says that the reporter should at least learn to say the name, "Goodnough," correctly. To explain this loyalty, Sandy goes back many years to a time when his father, John Roscoe, was six and the Goodnoughs arrived in Colorado as homesteaders. Over the years, John and Edith Goodnough become close, fall in love and endure hardships together though they never marry. Sandy says that when he considers that his father loved Edith Goodnough, he can't help having feelings for her as well.

Sandy isn't the only person to exhibit such loyalty. Edith also is loyal to those she loves and to those for whom she feels responsible. That loyalty on her part transcends everything, including her own happiness and - it seems - reason. Even when Sandy learns that Lyman, in his childish rages, hits her, Edith can't imagine doing anything other than continuing to care for him and so she does. Sandy notes that she cares for him with a love that can't be explained but would have to be seen to be fully understood.

Responsibility

Edith is the epitome of a responsible person. She takes on responsibilities which she shouldn't be required to handle. The first of these comes when she is a child in the home of Roy and Ada Goodnough. Edith goes to school, but only briefly, and Sandy notes that it seems to bother her that she doesn't finish school. Sandy notes that Edith doesn't have the opportunities some others have to escape those responsibilities.

The next major responsibilities are cast her way because of circumstances beyond her control. She is helping in the fields when her father's hands are completely destroyed in a machinery accident. Despite the fact that she later has an opportunity to marry John Roscoe, she refuses the offer and remains home where she feels she is responsible for her father. When Lyman leaves home, Edith still remains, holding to that perceived responsibility. When, more than twenty years later, Lyman returns, Edith is elated. Then, just six years after that, Lyman has an accident and when he becomes completely childish, Edith is saddled with yet another responsibility.

There are other kinds of responsibilities. John Roscoe feels a sense of responsibility for Edith, even after she turns down his proposal of marriage, and it's John who sends Sandy to help with the crop so Edith won't have to drive the tractor.

The Need to Love and Be Loved

While there's no doubt that there was some love in Edith's life, it seems likely that there wasn't enough to make up for all the bad things she endured. John Roscoe loved her and wanted to marry her, but Edith felt that her responsibility for her father outweighed everything and refused to leave that responsibility to anyone else. Years later, Edith found a different kind of love in Sandy, then in Mavis and Rena Pickett. Edith's obvious love for them is seen in her desire to spend a little time on that last day with Mavis and Rena. When she can't imagine how to arrange it, fate arranges it for her and she later tells Sandy how delighted she was for the opportunity to tell one small lie in return for having the chance to share pumpkin pie with Rena and Mavis.

An important aspect of this theme is the discovery Sandy makes when Edith calls on him to help her move some furniture. There he finds that Edith and Lyman have obviously been sharing a bed. Sandy says that it seems likely that Edith and Lyman had found some comfort in that arrangement and says that it's not up to him to judge. Prior to that discovery, Sandy had watched Lyman and Edith on a Ferris wheel at the Holt County Fair and had noted they looked like a couple. The love Edith obviously feels for Lyman seems returned by Lyman though probably not to the same degree as Edith's love.

Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the perspective of Sandy Roscoe. Sandy serves more as narrator than participant in the early chapters because he tells of events that happened before his birth. He admits that he knows some of the details and that he only believes others to be true. The method of presentation is effective for several reasons. One is that there is a more personal connection to the story than if it were simply presented in some voice other than Sandy's. Sandy's voice also lends an air of continuity to the story.

The story is limited to some degree but is not as limited as would normally be required of a first-person novel. For example, Sandy says early in the story that he will include some facts that he only believes to be true. One of those is that Roy Goodnough would likely have seen flyers advertising the homesteading opportunities in Colorado and that he would have taken Ada there before she had the opportunity to leave him and return home to her mother. There are many other details like this, that Sandy could not possibly have known for sure, but he presents them in such a way that the details seem reasonable.

Setting

The setting is Holt, Colorado, in a period ranging from before 1900 to sometime in the 1970s. Holt does not exist in reality, but the description of the town, both during the days of Colorado homesteads and the 1960s when the story is reaching its climax, are typical of small towns in that area and believable. There are sufficient details to make the story believable. For example, the Goodnough's home is described as having been built by Roy's own hands soon after their arrival in Colorado. Then, after Lyman's return, Lyman and Edith work on some updates for the house. While those are not described in great detail, there are sufficient items to make the settings real.

Language and Meaning

The story is written in a fairly straight forward style, though some readers may have trouble with some specific aspects of the writing. For example, Sandy tends to tell some things that aren't necessarily relevant. In one case, Sandy is telling of the situation that leads to the accident in which his unborn son is killed. Before getting to that story, Sandy tells the story of two men, Buster and Barry, who are driving along the same stretch of road and have a similar accident.

The general tone of the story is hopeful, though there are many sections of hopelessness. Edith, Lyman and Ada spend many years under the control of a mean man, Roy Goodnough. Roy's actions, including his decision to cut off his one remaining

finger, are selfish and hateful. Some readers may find the hopelessness disturbing and may find the horrible details disturbing.

Structure

The book is divided into eleven chapters of varying lengths with chapter nine being the longest. The chapters each cover roughly one event. For example, the first chapter tells the story of a Denver Post reporter arriving on the farm of Sanderson Roscoe and of Roscoe ordering the man off his property. The structure of the story is such that Sandy Roscoe serves as a narrator and "tells" the story of Edith Goodnough and her family. The first chapter offers several teasers to the remainder of the story. Sandy notes that the reporter knows that there was a barking dog and some chicken feed involved in the situation and that he, Sandy, was there the night the Goodnough house burned. He also mentions that it's too early for Rena Pickett and Mavis to return, though it will be some time before the reader learns who those characters are.

Quotes

"So he's starting to talk that way now, like he's sure of himself , because with that spiral notebook and that pencil in his hands he's forgotten he's standing on top of cow manure inside a work corral where, thirty feet away from him, some fresh-doctored cows are still on his side of the fence, and they would just as soon run through him as have to look at him any longer." Chapter 1, Page 9

"The horses were high-strung, nervous, jittery now with his yelling at them and with his sawing at the lines. Besides, they were used to being stared by his yelling, and they couldn't anyway distinguish his giddup from his goddamn. And it was goddamn he yelled. Goddamn it, to hell." Chapter 3, Page 44

"A town the size of Holt, with no more than a mere thousand rural types living here in 1925, had to be a waste of her particular talents, because my mother also knew how to get what she wanted. Behind that polished, perfumed surface, she was all ice and frozen stuff, which she would allow to melt a little bit if and when she saw something she wanted." Chapter 5, Page 82

"The old man seemed no different, though. He seemed to have only one gear in his makeup - a kind of full-speed-ahead crazy." Chapter 6, Page 119

"We were out there in that native pasture, and it was all finished by the time I found him." Chapter 7, Page 135

"During all that period of brainless pell-mell drift, the only solid base I had was Edith Goodnough." Chapter 8, Page 154

Hell, I don't know - it was like he imagined himself to be some modern form of Marco Polo come back from the farthest reaches of Outer Mongolia with spoils to prove it. He had treasures for us, for the farm-stuck cocklebur home folks." Chapter 9, Page 167

"Gasoline was cheap, his Pontiac was new. On an urge, then, usually Edith's, they would shut the back porch door and leave, see themselves some new sight, and then come back tired but satisfied, and the next day, Lyman would hand wax his green car while Edith finished unpacking and fed the chickens and began to listen for the next urge to take her, tell her what it wanted her to see." Chapter 9, Page 171

"We buried the box, which seemed only half as big as a peach crate - it weighed nothing - buried it beside the little boy's grandfather and great-grandmother." Chapter 9, Page 200

"A half mile east of us Edith had pain and Lyman to contend with. Lyman was becoming a child." Chapter 9, Page 201



"Of course all that time Edith was still taking care of him. With patience and kindness and yes, love, too. Only you'd have to have seen it for yourself. I don't know how to tell you about it." Chapter 10, Page 227

"It seemed fitting to me. There would be at least that much distance - the width of his mother's grave - between him and the old stump-armed man that Lyman had spend a good fourth of his life running away from. I figured Lyman would appreciate the head start, in case he ever had to run again." Chapter 11, Page 243

Topics for Discussion

What is the method used for telling this story? Who is the narrator? Is it effective? Why or why not?

Who do you consider the main character? Why? Name three of the most important secondary characters and explain their roles and importance to the story.

What are the events that keep Edith Goodnough from leaving the farm? What is it about Edith's character that keeps her there? Which is stronger, circumstances or her character? Support your answer.

What are the chain of events that occur during the day of the fire at the Goodnough house? Which of those events come to be used as a reason to charge Edith with the murder of her brother?

What is the relationship between Edith and Lyman? Support your answer.

Who is Leona? Mavis? Barry and Buster? What is the family relationship between John, Sandy, Rena and Hannah? Between Edith, Lyman, Ada and Roy?

What is the situation that brings John Roscoe and Edith together? Why is Edith allowed to go out with John? When and why does the relationship end?