

Tree of Smoke Study Guide

Tree of Smoke by Denis Johnson

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Plot Summary

William "Skip" Sands is a member of the Psy Ops team of the CIA while the Americans are involved in the conflict in Vietnam. He is a young man who seems to be following in the footsteps of his uncle, Colonel Francis Xavier Sands. Colonel Sands assigns Skip the daunting task of copying and cross-referencing a huge set of index cards containing information about people, places, and events. The Colonel believes the cards represent vital intelligence that will help the Americans win the war. Skip soon realizes that the information is outdated and useless, but he continues to work on the task until Colonel Sands arranges for Skip to transfer to Vietnam.

Skip believes that he will become an important part of the war effort once he's transferred. He winds up in a remote village with hardly any contact with anyone other than his two house servants. He is living under an alias and is supposed to be compiling information about local folklore and fairy tales. Colonel Sands believes learning about the local culture will help win the war. Skip is chafing under the new assignment and does little toward actually working. He soon realizes that Colonel Sands is losing touch with reality. When Skip looks over an article that Colonel Sands claims to have authored, he knows that his uncle's career is in trouble.

Colonel Sands then comes up with a plan to use a double agent to get misinformation in the hands of the Vietcong. A Vietnamese man named Trung Than agrees to be that double agent and Colonel Sands orders Skip to use his limited knowledge of the Vietnamese language to learn everything he can about Trung. They spend only a short time together before Colonel Sands learns that the operation has been compromised. He accuses Skip of having passed information on to their superiors. Skip insists that he wasn't to blame but he's heartbroken that his uncle would think so. Trung lives in a small hotel until an assassin is sent to kill him. He escapes with his life and disappears.

Colonel Sands dies and Skip learns that he is going to take the blame for all the things that have gone wrong under his uncle's orders. Another American operative gives Skip some cash and Skip manages to disappear for several years. He begins a new life but is eventually found guilty of running guns. He and all the members of his operation are hanged.

While Skip and Colonel Sands are working on the intelligence factors of the war, there are others heavily involved in the fighting. Bill and James Houston are brothers who are members of the American military. Both are horrified by the atrocities of war. They each sporadically send money home to their mother but both wind up spending most of their pay on alcohol and women. Bill returns to the United States earlier than James. He struggles for awhile and spends some time in prison. He seems to be getting his life together by the time James returns to the U.S. Bill sees James going down the same path and is frustrated when James won't listen to reason and winds up in prison.

There are other characters who go about their lives with the Vietnam war is going on. A nurse named Kathy is widowed at an early age when her husband, a priest, is killed.



She winds up working for an organization that arranges adoptions for Vietnamese orphans. She has a brief affair with Skip and struggles with her faith for awhile.

Hao and Kim are a Vietnamese couple and Hao aligns himself with Colonel Sands. However, he soon begins feeding information to other Americans as well and the couple leave Vietnam as payment for his information. As the story comes to a close, these and other characters are trying to pull their lives back together after years of war.



1963

Summary

The first chapter is 1963. The story opens the day after President John F. Kennedy is assassinated. Seaman Apprentice William Houston, Jr., known as Bill, is in the jungle of Grande Island in the Philippines. He finds a monkey and shoots it so that it falls out of the tree, fatally injured. Bill, 18, cries as he holds the monkey until it dies. He returns to the club near the water where there are some other military people. One of them is Colonel Francis Xavier Sands. He calls out to an Asian man he calls Lucky. His name is Captain Nguyen Minh and he's a South Viet Nam Air Force captain.

Bill has been in the military for awhile. He advanced but was then demoted. He signed up for a second tour, mainly because he had the power to decide this for himself. In 1967, Bill doesn't board his ship and meets his younger brother, James Houston, at a bar in Vietnam. Bill talks a little about his experiences up to this point. He learns that James is only 17 and that he lied about his age in order to enlist.

The story then reverts to 1963. Minh is 22 and has been flying fighter jets for three years. He expects that he'll keep flying missions until he's killed. He is nicknamed Lucky. He met Colonel Sands a few days earlier and felt the Colonel was a lucky person to be near.

The second chapter is 1964. Nguyen Hao is Captain Nguyen Minh's uncle. Hao is at a funeral for Minh's brother, Thu. Thu was a monk in Saigon who burned himself alive, as a few other monks had in a protest against chaos. Thu was 20 years old at the time of his death. Hao has a meal with the Master, apparently a priest at the temple where Thu had lived. The Master asks if Minh is going to bomb his own country. Hao says that the Vietminh need to be stopped. They talk about the fact that Americans are taking a bigger role in the country's problems. The Master says an American, Colonel Sands, might be coming to the service. Hao confirms that he knows the Colonel as does Minh. They delay the service but the Colonel doesn't show by later in the day.

Colonel Sands shows up after the service is over. He and some other Americans set up a projector and show a film titled, "Years of Lightning, Day of Thunder," which covered Kennedy's presidency. No one comes to see the film and the Colonel decides to show the film anyway. Hao arrives late. He and Sands are talking with Hao's limited use of English when someone throws a grenade through the door. Colonel throws Hao to the floor and covers Hao with his own body. A young soldier throws his helmet over the grenade then covers the helmet with his body. The grenade doesn't explode and they throw it in a well.

A Vietnamese named Trung Than was the one who threw the grenade into the building. He had meant to kill the American and is horrified when he discovers that Hao is also in the room. He begins to cry a few minutes later and wonders if he would have cried less



if the grenade had actually detonated. He had only one grenade, meaning his attempt on the Colonel's life is finished for the moment.

Trung arrives at a camp of young boys who are acting as soldiers. He tells them about a farm where they can work and live away from the fighting. He tells the boys that the farm would be a better place for them but knows it's really a lie, and he hates himself for telling the lie.

Analysis

The relationship between Bill and James is chaotic and difficult. They have something of a love/hate relationship that sometimes exists between brothers. They have had a difficult childhood and apparently have different fathers. Their mother is very religious and fusses at her sons when she believes they aren't doing right. She also claims that she prays for them all the time. She seems like an ineffective character while Bill, James, and their younger brother, Burris, are headstrong and wild. Bill and James both go through a period of drinking too much and getting into serious trouble, both in the military and after being discharged.

The story begins in 1963. Just a few pages in, the story pushes ahead to 1967 for a single scene between James and Bill Houston. The story then reverts back to 1963 and the majority of the book after this point is presented in chronological order. The author's reason for presenting this future scene is not clearly explained. Bill and James become major characters in the story and it may be the author's way of making the reader aware of these two since they don't appear again for some time. It may also be that the author wants the reader to be aware that the Effects of War is a major theme in the book, as exemplified by these two characters.

Bill and James are both examples of one of the book's most important themes, The Effects of war. In the brief scene between the brothers that's set in 1967, Bill tells a young girl that he is almost finished with his tour in the Navy, and that he "came across the ocean and died." He says that he's changed during the time in Vietnam but doesn't explain how or why. The fact that Bill sees that he's changed is significant. The reader will see dramatic changes in both Bill and James, but James doesn't recognize that he's changed, even when he throws a grenade at a group of American Green Beret soldiers.

Most of the Vietnamese look at Americans as interfering where they have no right to be. Hao seems to have this same attitude, at least to some degree, before the incident with the grenade. The Colonel throws Hao to the floor, covering his body to protect him at least some from the blast that they all believe is coming. Then the soldier throws his helmet over the grenade and covers his helmet with his own body. Hao is very near the soldier and he sees in the soldier's eyes that he is not happy to do this but considers it his duty. Hao can see the soldier's eyes change when he realizes the grenade isn't going to go off. This up-close look at the Americans changes Hao's attitude, at least to some degree. He admits that they are brave and that having them fight against North Vietnam might be a good thing.



This first look at Trung Than is brief and doesn't give any real indication of the important role he's going to play in the story. Trung is working for some group from the Vietcong against the Americans but he may already be questioning his loyalty to this group. He and Hao had been schoolmates and Trung had apparently been in contact with Hao a short time before the grenade incident. He wasn't told to contact Hao and admits that he doesn't know why he did. It may be that Trung is already looking for a way to get out of his current situation. He will later become a double agent, working for the Colonel.

Discussion Question 1

Who are Bill and James Houston? Describe them and their relationship to each other.

Discussion Question 2

Describe the situation in which the Colonel and a soldier react to the grenade being tossed at them. What does Hao think about the Americans after that event?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the author gives the brief scene set in 1967, then reverts to 1963?

Vocabulary

annunciatory, palatial, transient, inert, preposterous, indoctrination, emaciated



1965

Summary

The chapter titled 1965 opens with William "Skip" Sands going on a weekly patrol with the Philippine Army. He's in Manila. They never encounter any hostiles and this patrol is no different. Skip sees his presence on the patrols as a means to being reassigned to some other location. Skip sleeps a little late the next morning, and has breakfast followed by a haircut. He has been a member of the Central Intelligence Agency for five years and believes fully in the United States and the CIA.

Skip is staying at a house occupied by several other people. The house is something of a "safe house" but Skip is wary of everything that's going on. Anders Pitchfork is reportedly an entomologist who is studying ways to eliminate malaria but Skip believes he's probably working with agents in a nearby village. There's a German visitor as well and Skip believes he's an assassin. He is later identified as Dietrich Fest.

Skip has a meeting with a Philippine officer, Major Eduardo Aguinaldo, who refers to himself as Eddie. Eddie quizzes Skip about the previous evening's patrol. Eddie asks Fest about a weapon he'd been using earlier. Fest says it is a blowgun, known as a sumpit. After Fest leaves, Eddie says that it's "significant" that the man has never introduced himself. He says Fest has met with Colonel Sands. Skip doesn't know this and wonders about their relationship. Later, Eddie gives Skip a gun as a gift and Skip learns that his uncle, Colonel Sands, is currently in Manila.

Eddie and Skip return to the house and find the Colonel waiting. He has office supplies for Skip, who is working on a project for the Colonel. Skip is copying, organizing, and cross-referencing thousands of index cards with snippets of information on them. The Colonel believes they are vital intelligence.

Skip, the Colonel, Anders, and Eddie gather for dinner. It's Anders' birthday. The Colonel points out that Anders was jumping from a plane 24 years earlier on this date, and that a few days later, Anders gave the Colonel an egg at a POW camp after the Colonel was shot down and captured.

The conversation turns to the current war, which the Colonel calls World War III. He believes it's impossible to stop Communism. Skip believes they only have to hold out until the Communists naturally fall. Skip begs the Colonel to move him to Vietnam. The Colonel asks if Skip can speak Vietnamese and Skip says he'll have to "brush up." The Colonel correctly assumes this means Skip doesn't know any of the language but says he'll learn. The Colonel says he wants Skip to go to the village of Mindanao and meet a man named Thomas Carignan. He's a padre but the Colonel believes he must be involved in smuggling guns. Skip agrees but questions the Colonel and his motives.



Thomas Carignan is a priest in a remote area. On this particular day, he is supposed to meet Mayor Emeterio D. Luis, political leader of a town called Damulog. They meet in a town called Basig where Mayor Luis says it's possible the body of a missing priest has been found. The villagers who brought the news didn't check for a ring that would have positively identified the man as the missing Seventh Day Adventist priest. Carignan agrees to go with the men to identify the body. It's a long journey and Carignan has a lot of time to think. When they arrive, Carignan knows the body is that of the missing priest, Timothy Jones.

Meanwhile, Skip is traveling to the area where Carignan lives. He stops in a small restaurant for a meal and a woman named Kathy Jones flirts with him. Skip doesn't return the gesture and she leaves abruptly. He later learns she's the wife of the missing priest. Later, she waits at a bus stop and sees Skip there. She's embarrassed about her behavior the previous evening and takes a later bus to her home in Damulog, only to discover that Skip is also staying in the village.

Kathy learns that the body found in the distant village is that of her husband. His remains are at Mayor Luis's house, waiting to be transported to his family in America. Kathy and Skip share some sort of connection that night and have sex. A few days later, she accompanies Timothy's remains to the airport and then returns to Damulog. They begin an affair that lasts as long as he's in the village.

Skip goes to visit Father Carignan. Skip is supposed to be evaluating whether Carignan is running guns. His first impression is that Carignan is too scattered to handle anything of that sort. They talk for awhile and Skip's impression doesn't change. He spends the night. The next day, Carignan holds a service then goes to the river to bathe. He notices that a foreign man is nearby, holding a tube to his lips. He feels a sting and dies before he hits the water. Sands sees the body floating down the river and has help pulling Carignan from the water. He doesn't tell anyone about the dart he removes from Carignan's neck. He could have returned to Manila immediately but remains three weeks, writing his report and spending nights with Kathy.

Analysis

The German visitor staying at the safe house with Skip is much later identified as Dietrich Fest. For the sake of clarity in this guide, he is referred to as Fest from this point. The reader of this guide should remember that his identity is not revealed in the book until much later.

The first hint of intrigue is seen in this chapter. Eddie, Skip, and Fest are having lunch together. Eddie questions Fest about a weapon he'd been practicing with earlier. Fest says it's a sumpit, or blowgun. Fest says the weapon is made of magnesium, making it strong and lightweight. Skip asks who made the weapon and notes that there's a look between Fest and Eddie, indicating that they share some piece of information that Skip doesn't know. Fest says someone in Manila made the weapon and the conversation changes from that point. It's not clear what the look between Fest and Eddie means,



especially since the information Fest shares is so vague, but it indicates that Skip is being left out of something. This level of intrigue appears repeatedly throughout the book and eventually becomes a real problem for Skip.

It's noted that Colonel Sands is now actually a civilian working for the CIA, but that he attained the rank of Colonel in the military. He is something of a legend to many people, including Skip. He was captured and held as a Prisoner of War by the Japanese. His escape was heroic. He participated in World War II before America officially became involved in the war. There are many stories revealed about his exploits over the course of the book, and they all make him into a larger-than-life character. This leads later in the book to stories that his death was not real. However, those are based on the Colonel's actions years earlier. By this point in his life, the Colonel has begun to experience problems. He is not really in touch with reality. He is a good commander but is unable to take orders from his superiors. He often works outside the chain of command and basically commits career suicide by writing an article that is borderline treason. Skip idolizes the Colonel and accepts instruction from him without question, which eventually leads to Skip's downfall as well.

As early as this chapter, Skip questions the Colonel and his motives for having Skip remain in obscure locations working on a card file that seems insignificant to the war effort. The reader should remember that Skip has held the Colonel up as a mentor, even more so because Skip's father was killed at Pearl Harbor. Skip must have reached some significant turning point in his life to question the Colonel at all. This coming of age is a theme seen in several of the characters in the book.

Kathy is a nurse and she is working with a group of women charged with helping raise the quality of healthcare in this poor region. She is the widow of Timothy Jones, a priest with the Seventh Day Advent Church, and seems to have been devoted to her religion until around the time of Timothy's death. Kathy then struggles with many aspects of her life, including her religion. This seems reasonable. She's living in a foreign country without family or close friends, and her husband is now dead. The grief and hardships she faces are enough to make anyone struggle. However, Kathy goes to an extreme over the coming years. She writes long, rambling letters to Skip about her lack of faith, often making no sense at all. She will eventually regain her footing and resume a productive life, but the journey to that end is long.

Thomas Carginan is struggling with a high level of guilt, evidenced by his thoughts during the long walk to identify Timothy Jones' remains. He seems to compare himself to Job and thinks a great deal about guilt and mortality. These thoughts are never really explained. Carginan may have been merely a tired old man who felt guilty that he had not done enough for the poor of the region. He may also have been feeling guilty because he'd had some role in running guns. The interesting thing about this is that Fest kills Carginan soon after Skip meets the priest for the first time. The Colonel claims that he doesn't know Fest and doesn't know what he's doing in the region. It's left to the reader to decide if that's true. It's not clear why Fest only goes to assassinate Carginan after Skip locates him. It may be that Fest is keeping Carginan from revealing secret information to Skip. This level of intrigue and the possibility of conspiracies are a theme



seen repeatedly in this story. Often, the reader has to decide if there's merit to them or if the drama is being escalated by people trying to look more important than they really are.

Kathy works for a group called the International Children's Relief Effort. Skip says that many people believe that's a front for the Communists. Kathy says that it's not associated with the Communists but it's also not associated with any anti-Communism groups. However, she does admit that it does more for the Communists. She doesn't explain why but this is related to the theme, Patriotism.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Thomas Carignan and what happens to him?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Skip travel to Damulog and how does he meet Kathy Jones?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the author introduces Dietrich Fest as an unnamed character at this point in the book and later reveals his identity and that he is an assassin?

Vocabulary

constabulary, gregariousness, vestiges, oracle, putrefaction, datum, curator, histrionic, vanquished, emphatically, coalesced, succulent, emissary, clandestine, auspices, linguist, heathen, flagellation, vogue, gloaming



1966

Summary

The chapter titled 1966 opens with Bill Houston on leave in Honolulu. He wanders around drinking a lot and gets into a fight. He doesn't get back aboard his ship to avoid the man he'd fought with and winds up spending time in a military jail and then doing "grunt work" such as garbage detail.

Back in America, Bill's younger brother, James, is struggling. He is still in school but hates it. The family is struggling financially on James's mother's agriculture job. James has a younger brother named Burris. One day, Bill calls and James answers. They talk about the military. That evening, James goes out with friends and winds up spending time with Stevie Dale, a girl who isn't his girlfriend. They soon begin having sex on a regular basis. James says he plans to join the military and go Vietnam. His mother says she'll sign for him to join since he isn't yet 18. The army refuses to sign him, even with a signature, and he winds up falsifying his birth certificate. James encounters an officer who says James should volunteer "for a Recon outfit" and then never volunteer for anything else.

Meanwhile, Bill Houston is on shore leave and he runs with a very rough crowd. They get into a fight and Bill doesn't report for duty when his ship leaves. He spends a week AWOL before turning himself in.

Skip Sands spends months in California, furthering his education. That includes two months at the Defense Language Institute. He returns to Manila to find that Anders Pitchfork is gone and that Eddie Aguinaldo is no longer sending out nighttime patrols. He again stays at the house in San Marcos and spends most of his time alone, except for the staff. Then the Colonel sends work that he will soon transfer to Saigon, and that he should take all the files with him. Skip gets a lengthy letter from his mother. He realizes he should have gone home for a visit while he was in America. Skip also gets a letter from Kathy Jones. Her letters are often confusing with rambling passages that indicate she's in a dark emotional state. Skip tries to answer some of them but keeps his replies very brief. He knows how he felt about her when they were together but can't define his feelings now.

James goes home while waiting to ship out to Vietnam. He spends time with his mom and with Stevie Dale. He was told what to do every minute while he was in military training and he doesn't really know what to do with himself without that instruction. He also doesn't know what to say to his mother or to Stevie Dale.

Skip meets up with a man named Rick Voss. He met Voss before and they strike up a conversation, which soon turns to talking about the Colonel. Voss asks if Skip has read an article the Colonel has submitted for publication in the CIA's magazine, "Studies in



Intelligence.” They plan to get a beer together but Skip says he has a meeting and has to pass.

Skip later goes into town and Voss finds him there. They talk. Voss says he has advanced since being under the Colonel's command because of his proximity with the Colonel. He makes it clear that the Colonel is not well regarded. Skip wonders if the Colonel is in serious trouble and whether that will mean Skip is also in trouble. Voss says the Colonel is being evaluated. Among the recent questionable decisions, the Colonel is trying to get footage of a football game. Skip asks if Voss has the film. Voss says no one is going to give the Colonel that film.

Right after Christmas, James stops seeing Stevie and spends his days watching cartoons with his younger brother, Burris. Knowing that he's soon headed into a war, he wishes he wasn't involved with Stevie. He winds up drunk at a party where one of Stevie's friends lectures him. He calls a girl a rude name and some boys hose him off. He thinks that isn't much different from how he's treated in the military.

Analysis

The situation at the home of Bill and James Houston explains at least some of their later actions. Their mother is poor and probably has little education. She works in agriculture and makes very little money at a physically demanding job. She prays a lot and the boys hate to hear her religious conversations. She is an ineffective parent and has no control over any of the boys, even when they are pre-teens. The author goes into a great deal of detail about the Houston's home but all the information comes from the perspectives of Bill and James.

There are some important relationships in the book, each impacted by the fact that the young men of the family are serving various branches of the military or other agencies. Skip Sands and his mother is one of those. He is an only child and his father died in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The loss of his father has impacted his relationship with his mother. Skip feels a great sense of responsibility to her because he is the only child and because her life seems to have literally revolved around Skip for his entire life. However, Skip chafes under that relationship. He spends more than a year in the United States and could easily have gone home to visit her during that time, but he doesn't. It's not until he's back in Manila and reads a letter from her that the idea even presents itself. When his mother dies later in the story, Skip feels a sense of relief even though he feels guilty about that.

Skip's relationship with his mother is a stark contrast to the relationships between Bill and James Houston and their mother. Their mom is a blue collar laborer and their conversations are often abrasive. Both Bill and James hate that their mother tries to tell them that they should live better lives. James notes that he's worried about his mother, mainly because she works so hard. Both pledge to regularly send money home to their mother but both fail on that front, though they do occasionally send money. These relationships are greatly impacted by the war, which is one of the book's themes.



James Houston is one of many examples of the coming-of-age theme. He joins the military when he's 17 years old by falsifying his birth certificate. He then does his time in basic training and is awaiting his orders to go to Vietnam. During that wait, he goes home to visit his family and friends. There, he discovers that he is a different person. He's been excited to be involved with Stevie Dale at first because she was the first girl to let him have sex regularly. That relationship is based on sex and when James returns home, he finds that he has nothing to say to her and that he doesn't really welcome her attention. When he goes to a party where there are other young people, James becomes rude and gets into a fight. He is no longer enamored with the young girls and realizes that he is headed to a country where he might have to fight and die. James has already matured a great deal due to his military training.

There is a large cast of characters in this book and Skip's meeting with Rick Voss seems like another of many random encounters with minor characters who don't really mean anything. However, Voss mentions the article written by Colonel Sands and seems to indicate that there's something incredible about it. The reader is given the impression that it's not incredible in a good way and that later turns out to be true. Voss doesn't tell Skip what the article is about but Skip later insists on seeing it. It turns out that Voss helped write the article and is basically responsible for the majority of it. That article becomes important to the story because it again puts the Colonel on the defensive with his superiors.

The conversation between Skip and Voss about the Colonel is an important look at an emerging problem. The Colonel is out of control, using his reputation and his brash nature to bully people into doing things for him. He has exclusive use of a helicopter and always does what he wants, even when that conflicts with his duties. Voss reveals that the Colonel is trying to use his official connections to get footage of a recent football game. The Colonel will later say he wanted to boost morale with the footage but that's not even remotely related to his job. Skip wants to ask Voss whether the Colonel's trouble is serious and whether Skip's career is going to be affected, but he doesn't. It seems likely that he doesn't want to exhibit any disloyalty to the Colonel, even at the risk of his own future. Voss says his own career has advanced because of his proximity to the Colonel, but it's not because the Colonel helped him. It seems possible that Voss has actually been helping his superiors get information about the Colonel, and that's prompted his rise in the ranks.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Skip and his mother. How does that compare to the relationship James and Bill Houston have with their mother?

Discussion Question 2

How does Skip learn that the Colonel might be in trouble? Why do you believe Skip doesn't ask Voss for more information?



Discussion Question 3

What happens to James during his time at home before shipping out to Vietnam? How has he changed and what are the effects of those changes?

Vocabulary

abasement, fatigue, itinerary, oxidizing, ruminations, myopic, congenitally, dogmatists, scrutiny, cadences, serenity, grotesquely, vastly, corruption, mausoleums, spectacle, celebratory, recipient, evolution



1967

Summary

The chapter titled 1967 opens with Nguyen Hao driving to the airport. Sergeant Jimmy Storm is with him. They pick up Skip Sands and the footlockers containing the Colonel's index card file. Hao has the impression that Storm hates Skip. They go to the CIA Psy Ops villa in the Gia Dinh Province. Hao helps unload Skip's items, including the footlockers, then goes to his own home. He's Vietnamese and lives with his wife Kim in the building where the family once had a shop. Kim is Thu's aunt and talks often of his suicide. She is also very focused on her own ailments. Hao tells her about his alliance with the Colonel. He believes they will have to leave the country if North and South Vietnam are reunited, and that the Americans can make that happen.

Kim and Hao end their conversation in laughter, which makes Hao happy because she laughs only on rare occasions. She goes to the kitchen to begin preparing a meal and thinks about her life. She doesn't think Hao is particularly smart, especially in business, but she tries not to think these "ungenerous thoughts." She returns to Hao and extracts two promises. She makes him promise that he'll keep Minh safe and that they'll someday return to Vietnam. Hao says that Minh is no longer flying fighter jets and that he acts as the Colonel's personal pilot, which is much safer for Minh.

That evening, Hao hears a gecko's warble and knows that a man named Trung has arrived. Trung is working for the Vietcong but is considering working as a double agent for the Americans. He and Hao have been talking about the situation for awhile. Trung is still not ready to completely commit but makes it clear he's close. Hao wonders about Trung's motives. Trung leaves just as dawn is breaking. He sees some young boys and remembers his own childhood, shared with Hao.

Skip meets the Colonel on January 2, his first full day in Vietnam. Skip immediately asks the Colonel if several people were working under him in Manila, including Eddie Aguinaldo and Dietrich Fest, who Skip still doesn't know by name. Skip continues his questions, making it clear that he doesn't believe the Colonel has been entirely honest with him, which obviously hurts the Colonel's feelings. He reveals that he's seen Voss and the Colonel asks about their conversation. Jimmy Storm joins them. The Colonel talks about the article he'd written. He says it needs work and Skip asks to see it. Storm asks if Skip has all the Colonel's files in his footlockers, referring to it as "the whole Tree of Smoke."

The conversation turns to tunnels in the area. The Colonel says he wants to use them against the Vietcong. The Colonel then reveals that he wants Skip to go to a remote villa and wait. Skip is angry but doesn't say so. Skip later discovers that he's been assigned a new identity. He's to pose as a Canadian named William French Benet. The Colonel promises to provide all the equipment Skip needs to continue his work on the project. Skip asks about the term, "Tree of Smoke." The Colonel gives him a vague definition



and moves on. The conversation is largely nonsense, mainly because the Colonel and Jimmy Storm are drunk. Then the Colonel says Skip's father was honorable and loved. Skip arrives at the villa to find Rick Voss is there.

James is a member of the Echo Recon unit, one of three new members. He is horrified that the seasoned soldiers make jokes about mortality. They wind up in town where they drink beer and hire some local women for sex. When they finally reach their unit, Colonel Sands is giving a pep talk, focusing around the recent football game. James and his group soon find themselves with Staff Sergeant Harmon, known as Sarge. He is angry that they took so long to return.

Sarge tells James and the other new recruits that they are based in a town called Cao Phuc and that their job is to keep the region secure. He seems rough but fair and reminds them that he takes orders from his superior officers. They learn that there are men called "Kootchy Kooties" who are responsible for clearing the enemy from tunnels around the area.

Minh and Hao drive Skip to his new base, a villa near the village of Cao Quyen, which translated to Forgotten Mountain. The villa had been owned by a doctor named Dr. Bouquet who was killed in one of the nearby caves. His possessions are still all over the house. A week after his arrival, Hao arrived with some supplies and a very dark, rambling letter from Kathy.

Skip's cover story is that he's in the area to work on his Vietnamese so that he can help translate the Bible into that language. He is really supposed to be collecting local folk tales and asks a local priest, Pere Patrice, to help with that, saying it's a hobby. Pere Patrice says his real name is Thong Nhat and he hopes that he and Skip will be friends. Later, Skip gets a letter from Eddie Aguinaldo. There's news of his plan to marry but also a warning that the Colonel needs to be careful, though he doesn't include specifics.

James continues his patrols though nothing ever happens in his region. He can hear distant fighting. He drinks a lot and admits that he lied to get in the army on his 18th birthday.

Kathy Jones works a nursing station in Sa Dec and visits the Emperor Bao Dai Orphanage where she finds deplorable conditions and no supplies.

Skip spends his time trying to translate a book and becomes certain that he's wasting his time with the Colonel's index cards. Skip meets up with the Colonel and Jimmy Storm, and Skip gets his first look at the article the Colonel wrote. It's a rambling piece of work that cites problems in information climbing up the chain of command. There is also a reference to the Tree of Smoke, which is also called a pillar of smoke or a pillar of fire. The article calls it a "sincere goal for the function of intelligence, restoring intelligence gathering as the main function of intelligence operations rather than to provide rationalizations for policy." The passage goes on to cite the dangers of "career-minded power-mad" bureaucrats and compares the Tree of Smoke to a mushroom



cloud. The Colonel then asks Skip what they should do if they had a double agent. This is the first time the subject is broached between the two men.

Trung again visits Nguyen Hao. Trung is still struggling with the idea of betraying his comrades but he says he will if the Americans will move him to America. He offers some information about an upcoming “big push” by the Vietcong.

Analysis

The political climate in Vietnam was controversial, as was the involvement of other countries, including the United States. There were many people who felt America shouldn't be involved at all. There were also Vietnamese who hated Americans and wanted them to leave Vietnam alone. Hao is an interesting character because he feels that he and his wife won't be safe once the country is reunified. He says that they'll have to leave and it seems that it's because of his political leanings. He says the Americans will help them get safely out of Vietnam and into another country. His wife, Kim, suggests they'll be safe “if the Americans win the war.” Hao says the Americans can't possibly win the war because they aren't fighting for their own land. This is true to a degree, but the political aspects of America's involvement dictated most of Army's objectives. The situation was so controversial that some people insist that the situation be called a “conflict” rather than a war.

Hao has aligned himself with the Americans because he believes he is doing the right thing to protect himself and Kim from the inevitable conflicts of Vietnam's future. He wonders, however, about Trung's motivations. Trung says that he's disillusioned with the propaganda, which has promised many things that were never delivered. Hao accepts that, but he doesn't think that's enough motivation for Trung to turn on people he'd claimed as comrades. He cites Thu's suicide and Trung says he remembers it. Hao says that Thu destroyed himself and he asks if Trung is trying to do the same thing. Trung's motivations actually seem to be solely centered around his desire to reveal the entire truth. He says that he was promised that his country and his family would be reunited in a short time, if he fought on the North's side. That hasn't happened and he seems to finally see the North's politics for what they are. This is an important look at these two characters and their motivations.

Skip's relationship with the Colonel is affected by the fact that Skip's father died at a young age, leaving Skip without a father figure in his life. He didn't really get to know his father's family until later in life and that family was greatly different from Skip's sheltered life with his mother. Skip doesn't know a lot about his father. When the Colonel is very drunk one day, he talks about Skip's father, saying that he was an honorable man and that his family loved him. The Colonel also predicts that Skip's family would have moved to the Midwest if his father had lived, because that's where Skip's mother was happiest. Skip is obviously hungry for more information about his dad. He wants to ask the Colonel to tell him more, specifically whether his father loved him. He doesn't ask, mainly because that's not the kind of relationship Skip has with the Colonel. This is an



example of one of the book's themes, which is the relationship between Skip and the Colonel, but it's also an important look at Skip's character.

The Colonel has some good ideas but he goes about them wrong, often refusing to go through proper channels or traditional means. An example of this is how he uses Skip. Skip wants to be doing something significant. He hopes that he'll be in some important position once he arrives in Vietnam. Instead, he's put in a villa in a fairly remote location and told to gather local folk tales. The Colonel believes that knowing as much as he can about the Vietnamese people will help the Americans defeat their enemy. That's sound thinking but he literally hides Skip away and never really accomplishes anything of the sort.

Discussion Question 1

Describe what you know about the Colonel at this point. Do you believe he is doing what he believes is right or merely doing what he wants?

Discussion Question 2

What do you know personally about the era of the Vietnam war? How does your personal knowledge compare with the information in this book?

Discussion Question 3

What is Skip's reaction to his new assignment? Why does he have this reaction?

Vocabulary

volubility, defunct, daubed, paunch, appreciation, intelligible, debrief, interrogation, purloined, miscellany, consternation, anthem, rhetorical, sinister, rendezvous, grandiose, impotent, facile, caprice, languid

1968

Summary

The chapter titled 1968 opens with Bill Houston, who has a fight with a fellow seaman just weeks before Bill is slated for discharge. He's released early. He's at his mother's home in Phoenix when James calls. They talk for a few minutes and Bill says Stevie has been by to visit. James says Bill shouldn't tell Stevie about the phone call. Bill finds work in the early spring.

James is on patrol when an officer commands the men to burn all the huts, called hooches. He and a new member of the unit wonder about the situation but are given no real information. Soon, there is gunfire nearby and soon after that, James and several others are involved in a heavy battle. For a time, James and a few others are separated from the main body of the Echo unit. Sergeant Harmon arrives and gathers the men together for another fight. Harmon is later seriously wounded and the men are devastated.

Kathy continues her work as a nurse. She attends a birth in which the infant dies before delivery and Kathy has to dismember the baby inside the mother in order to save the mother's life. She has heard that the defoliants being used are to cause for many of these tragic births. She then goes to a local organization trying to save monkeys. Their facility has been bombed and many of the monkeys killed. Kathy asks for some of their supplies and she's furious when the couple working there are crying over the dead and injured monkeys. She later goes to the headquarters of the World Children's Services, the organization she works for, and the director urges her to take time to take care of herself.

Several members of the Echo unit are torturing a prisoner. The Colonel, Jimmy Storm, and Skip are present. Eventually, the Colonel walks over and shoots the prisoner in the head, ending the torture. Minh watches as Skip begins laughing uncontrollably and he wonders at the reaction. Minh thinks about his life now. He's no longer in the heat of battle because he's at the Colonel's beck and call. He sometimes flies the Colonel to Mekong Delta where the Colonel keeps a secret wife.

The Colonel, Skip, Jimmy, and Hao arrive at a place where there are several bodies. Hao is to look at the bodies to be sure Trung isn't among them. The Colonel learns that there was a Vietcong offensive, just as Trung had predicted. The Colonel is thrilled that Trung's information paid off.

Later, the Colonel talks about the price of warfare. He says being in a war with someone makes them closer than family. He cites his relationship with Anders Pitchfork. He and Anders spent time together in a POW camp. The Colonel was very ill and Anders gave him an egg. The Colonel says he owes Anders a deep debt for that act.



James goes AWOL right after the battle, selling his gun to have enough money for food and beer. He visits Sergeant Harmon in the hospital and learns that Sarge was struck by a flare that did extensive damage. James is horrified and remains AWOL for about three weeks until he meets up with an officer who says he can arrange it so that James isn't punished for the absence.

Jimmy Storm and the Colonel arrive. The Colonel tells Skip about Operation Tree of Smoke in which they use a double agent. He says they are in a hypothetical stage of the operation but it's obvious he is making serious plans. The Colonel says their double agent, Trung, tossed a grenade into a building and would have killed the Colonel if the grenade hadn't been a dud. He asks Hao why Trung is turning sides and Hao says he doesn't know. The Colonel admits that bothers him. Skip considers that he could ask to go home but can't bring himself to make that a formal request.

James Houston is back with his unit and the situation is tenser than it had been. Jimmy Storm arrives and introduces himself as being from the CIA's Psy Ops. The commanding officer knows that James was AWOL and that it was "fixed" with the previous commander. The commander says that "they" will force James to do a third tour and James says he doesn't care. Meanwhile, Bill is struggling at home, often staying with his mother but preferring to be away from her where he can deal with his emotional problems without her looking on.

One day, Kathy arrives at Skip's house. Someone had told her about a Canadian – Skip's cover story. She hopes he can help her with supplies. Their meeting is chaotic and they end up in bed together. When she leaves, Skip never sees her again.

Analysis

James spends his first year of duty doing nothing dangerous. He isn't involved in any real fighting until just after he joins for a second tour. It's shortly into that tour that he's involved in the heavy battle that ends with Sergeant Harmon being seriously injured. This is a turning point for James. Up to now, he's spent his time drinking and paying local prostitutes for sex. After that fight, James and several others seem to become hardened soldiers overnight. They torture a prisoner, mainly because they are upset over Harmon's fate. Later, they become involved in various deeds that hurt others, including the rape and murder of a young Vietnamese girl. This is one of many effects of war, which is one of the book's most important themes.

The Colonel's intervention in the torturing of the prisoner is an important event because it is just one more piece of information his superiors have to use against him. He isn't military and really doesn't have any command over the men who are doing the torturing. He seems to be ending the man's suffering but it's a direct violation of the rules of war. The Colonel is completely calm in the situation. Later, Skip is upset that the situation bothers him so much.



James goes AWOL after the battle that ends with Sergeant Harmon's injuries. Sarge was literally shot with a flare and it seems likely that it was from an American flare gun. He is seriously injured and can't talk when James arrives at the hospital. James sells his military-issue weapon and spends several weeks roaming the area, drinking too much, and trying to get a grip on his emotions. He doesn't have a plan and he doesn't really have options, which is probably why he is willing to take the offer to return to his unit. Meanwhile, Bill is also struggling emotionally though he is already back in the United States. These are additional examples of the effects of war.

The Colonel talks openly, saying that things have to change if the Americans are going to be victorious. He believes a double agent is the only option to make things change. It's up to the reader to decide if he truly believes this or if he's trying to make himself more important to the war effort than he really is.

Skip is staying in a house that belonged to Dr. Bouquet, who was killed during an explosion in a local cave. By the time the plans to use Trung as a double agent are beginning to solidify, Skip has developed a relationship with the couple who clean, cook, and take care of the house for him. A stray dog shows up and he learns that they believe the dog is the reincarnated Dr. Bouquet. They all begin calling the dog Dr. Bouquet and it seems several people believe it's possible. This is an example of the local folk lore and the beliefs of the local people, and their importance on the situation.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Dr. Bouquet?

Discussion Question 2

Why does James go AWOL and why does he return to his unit?

Discussion Question 3

What is Kathy doing during the war and what challenges does she face?

Vocabulary

defoliants, monstrous, ostentatiously, eluded, incidentally, zealous, poise, grandeur, orchestration, venerable, subjugation, scintillating, besieged, hirsute, improvisation, nebulous



1969

Summary

The chapter titled 1969 opens with Hao. Three Americans arrive and take him to the Armed Forces Language School. He doesn't know why he's there. A short time later, he sees that Kim has also been brought to the building and it's obvious they want him to see her. They explain to him about a polygraph machine and how it works. They ask about Trung. Hao tries to be evasive but finds they have a great deal of information, such as Trung's full name. Hao says that he is the Colonel's friend and one of the men says that he has the wrong friends. When he arrives home, Kim is there. She says they asked her about Trung as well. Kim told them that Trung never visits their house and Hao lies, saying he told them the same thing. Hao says that the situation is ended.

Trung arrives at the villa where Skip is staying. Everyone is introduced then the Colonel asks for a moment alone with Skip. He says Skip's mother, Beatrice, has died of complications during a hysterectomy. The Colonel says Skip can go to the funeral if he wants. Skip feels that he needs to remain in Vietnam and work with Trung. Skip says he is now an orphan. The Colonel reminds him that he has family.

Hao sees that Trung is going to follow through with his promise to work for the Americans and he admits that he's somewhat surprised. Hao sees the Colonel and realizes that his feelings have changed, and that he's now somewhat afraid of the Colonel. The Colonel instructs Skip to act "as a sponge" with Trung. He says Skip is just supposed to learn as much from Trung as he can. Hao does some basic translations for Trung but wants to shout that, "I'm lying to all of you," apparently torn about his new relationship with other Americans.

Skip quickly realizes that his Vietnamese is poor. Trung's English is also poor. They each speak a little French and begin using a combination of the three languages to try to communicate. Skip begins asking Trung about his past. Trung tries to explain his reason for betraying his friends and his cause. He says he has come to realize that the propaganda was all lies and that helping the Americans makes him feel "the pain of life returning." Skip announces that he's going to have to leave for awhile. Trung asks if there's a safer place but Skip assures him that no one knows he's there.

Dietrich Fest boards a plane at Washington, D.C. Fest is from Germany and he is thinking a lot about his ailing father, who is near death. He arrives at Hong Kong and makes a zigzag path to his hotel. He then follows orders to travel to Saigon where he meets a new contact. Following instructions, he later waits at a small diner. He sees an American he knows, though not by name, and is momentarily glad that a family face will be his new contact, but the man walks on by. It's Skip but he isn't there to meet Fest and is surprised to see the German he believes killed Father Carginan. Fest's real contact arrives and says he doesn't yet know who Fest's current target is. He promises to pass along the information as soon as he knows. Fest spends some time alone, walking and



thinking about the 11 missions he's carried out. Several, including the priest, were not direct enemies of Fest's home country.

Skip meets up later with Richard Voss. He tells Voss that he'd seen "a guy I don't like" as they're leaving. Voss chooses the place for their lunch and a man named Terry Crodelle from the Regional Security Center. Crodelle almost immediately broaches the subject of the Colonel's article. Skip asks why Crodelle is so interested and says the Colonel will never finish the article for publication. Crodelle goes on to cite the Colonel's actions in Cao Phuc, saying he had basically taken command of a platoon and kept them at his beck and call without any authorization. Crodelle says that the Colonel's attitude of "trust the locals" means he has separated himself from his own chain of command. Crodelle reveals that the Colonel was recalled to Langley weeks earlier, and has ignored the command. Crodelle then asks about the Colonel's footlockers of index cards and Skip refuses to admit he has them. Skip sees a cab arrive and walks out, saying Voss and Crodelle can pay for lunch.

At the villa, the Colonel says they had to move Trung and that Skip's participation in the operation is at an end. The Colonel says his wife has filed for divorce because he's been gone so many years. They talk about Skip's lunch and Skip says he was really confused by some aspects of the conversation. He reveals that he saw Fest, though Skip still doesn't know the man's name, and the Colonel says there is something happening, cementing his idea that moving Trung was correct. The Colonel knows that someone has been feeding information up the chain of command. He suggests Skip save himself but Skip refuses. The Colonel then says he believes Skip has been giving their superiors information about the Colonel. Skip denies it but the Colonel says he isn't certain of Skip's loyalty.

Two weeks later, the Colonel is dead and Skip doesn't attend either of the memorial services for him. There are many stories about the Colonel's death, ranging from being stabbed by a prostitute to being assassinated by enemy agents. Skip hears the news from Jimmy Storm who pledges to pass on more information if he gets it. Skip then gets a letter from the pastor at his mother's church. The letter was lengthy, telling of her devotion to Skip and a recent "spiritual turning" as if she was aware she was nearing the end of her life. The letter includes a sealed envelope addressed to Skip from his mother. She writes that she's thrown away several letters because she felt they were too discouraging. This letter includes a poem by William Carlos Williams. She says the poem is very sad and that she probably won't mail this letter either. Skip also gets a letter from Kathy. She says she has to seek God's will, even though that path isn't always pleasant.

One day, Skip is looking over some of the notes in the Colonel's footlockers and he finds cards referencing the Tree of Smoke. They are Biblical references from Song of Solomon, Joel, and Exodus. They talk about the Ark and a cloudy pillar, literally a Tree of Smoke.

Six weeks pass and Skip has little to do. Information is revealed about the Colonel's life, including his childhood and his escape from the Japanese. The Colonel was one of



many prisoners held aboard a ship. If any one escaped, the others were punished ruthlessly, meaning no one tried to escape. Many of the prisoners died and the Colonel pretended to die so that the Japanese would throw his body overboard. He swam to land and that's how he managed to escape.

Eight weeks after the Colonel's death, Skip has lunch with Voss and Crodelle. Skip and Voss talk before joining Crodelle. Voss says he was the one who gave the Colonel's article up the chain of command, and he apologizes for it. Voss says Skip, because of his closeness to the Colonel, is being sent home. He says Crodelle wants Skip to undergo a polygraph relating to any information he has about events in Vietnam before he leaves the country.

They join Crodelle at his headquarters. He demands to know where the footlockers are but Skip says he doesn't know. Skip receives a list of questions they're going to ask so that he can't claim any one surprised him, skewing the results of the polygraph. He sees Hao in the building. Skip finds an opportunity and runs away.

Fest has the location and description of his target and begins watching. The target is later identified as Trung. Fest isn't happy with his instructions which are to kill Trung on a specific night at a specific time. His contacts say it's because they have already arranged for cleanup but Fest feels he is in greater danger because of these specifics. He watches Trung prior to the designated night and sees that Trung often goes out for a meal in the evening. Trung knows that he has to keep out of sight. He also knows that he's in serious trouble because of the Colonel's death.

Skip is at the villa when Jimmy Storm arrives with the mail. Storm is furious and beats Sands up seriously. They have learned that Voss's helicopter was shot down and that Voss is dead. Storm is angry that everything has gone wrong. He's angry about the Colonel's death and insists that the Colonel probably faked his death in order to work some other operation. As Storm rants, Skip suddenly realizes that Hao was the only one who could have passed on the amount of information that the Colonel's superiors have. They agree it's likely. Skip says that Hao is just trying to survive.

Fest has a key to gain entry to Trung's room. He waits until Trung leaves one evening and examines Trung's apartment. Inside the room, he knows he could simply wait for Trung to return and kill him immediately, even though his instructions are to wait. He decides he will wait until the following evening. If Trung leaves the building again, Fest plans to go into the man's room and kill him, even though that will be hours before the scheduled assassination time.

Trung is in his room the following afternoon when Jimmy Storm arrives. Storm is obviously agitated and he and Trung have some trouble communicating. Storm eventually says that Hao told him an assassin would arrive at Trung's room at 2 o'clock the following morning. Storm says he doesn't know for certain if Hao is truthful. He knows there might be a whole team of assassins arriving, and that Storm and Trung will both be killed. They make plans of how to handle the assassin once he enters Trung's room. That evening, Trung goes out as usual, saying he is very hungry. Trung wonders



if Hao has saved him or betrayed him. Trung thinks about the three years it took for him to act and realizes that hesitation has cost him dearly.

Fest waits outside and decides that he won't go in the room at all if Trung doesn't leave. When Trung leaves, Fest goes into Trung's room and finds Storm there. He's killed. Trung walks back by the hotel and sees a body. He believes, based on the color of the shirt, that it's not Storm. He keeps walking.

Skip is at the villa when Crodelle arrives. Crodelle announces that Hao and Kim are already leaving the country. The conversation rambles over the Colonel and Hao, then Skip shows Crodelle the Colonel's footlockers. Skip manages to get a gun and ties Crodelle to a chair. He then takes all the files outside and has one of the house staff members burn them. When Skip returns to the house, Crodelle reveals that someone killed Fest and that Trung is nowhere to be found. Crodelle says that the double-agent operation begun by the Colonel is going to be blamed on Skip. He says everyone will say that Skip was in charge. Crodelle offers Skip some money to disappear. Skip takes Crodelle's money and his car, and leaves the villa.

Analysis

Family is a theme seen in the undercurrent of the book. The relationship between Skip and the Colonel is an example of that theme but there are others. Skip's relationship with his mother is another. When Skip learns that his mother has died, he is just beginning his work with Trung. The Colonel says this is what he had in mind for Skip all along and Skip chooses not to leave at this crucial point in the operation. His feelings for his mother are mixed. Skip is the only child and his mother was a widow for many years. Skip grieves but he also admits to himself that he feels a sense of relief because he is no longer responsible for his mother. That seems odd because he has lived far away for years with no contact other than an occasional note but it speaks to Skip's feelings about his mother's devotion to him.

There is another situation involving family dynamics in the substory. Hao lives in a home that once belonged to Kim's family. He has no head for business and has basically lost everything her family built except the buildings. He and Kim own another house and members of Kim's family live there without paying rent. Hao is angry about that and he wants to somehow force them into paying rent. He tells Minh to take a message to them to that effect. When Minh arrives, the patriarch of that family is immediately aware of Minh's mission and he becomes rude, saying that he'll destroy the house before he pays rent to Hao. He says Hao should be thanking him for keeping the house from falling to ruin. This entire line of the story is basically unrelated to any of the main characters other than Minh and Hao, and it's left to the reader to decide the significance.

Voss and Crodelle had obviously arranged to meet with Skip and it's quickly apparent that Voss is working with Crodelle, though Crodelle is in charge. This is the first time that Skip fully realizes how deeply the Colonel's trouble goes, and that he's going to be in just as far.



When the Colonel talks with Skip after Skip's meeting with Crodelle, he seems to talk from the heart. He says that he isn't really fighting for the United States. Instead, he talks about the Vietnamese people he knows, including Hao and the staff members of the villa where Skip is staying. He says these regular people are watching their homeland be torn apart and that he wants to help them. He sees that he's losing in that endeavor and says it "breaks my heart." It seems likely that the Colonel is truly speaking from his heart, and that he's sincere in this desire. It may be that Crodelle has a good grasp on the situation, saying the Colonel has become so caught up in the lives of the Vietnamese people that he's lost touch with his own chain of command. It's left to the reader to decide if the Colonel's motivations are honorable.

The Colonel's death is never explained but it seems possible that enemy agents had him assassinated. For a short time, the author seems to be misdirecting the reader into believing that Fest is in Vietnam to kill the Colonel but that turns out to not be the case. Crodelle insists that the Colonel died of a heart attack, but isn't certain where it happened. It's left to the reader to decide how the Colonel might have died and why.

Jimmy Storm's reaction to the Colonel's death is intense. He beats up Skip, apparently blaming Skip for the Colonel's absence, though he soon admits that he knows that isn't the case. He also blames Voss. When he tells Skip that Voss is dead, he rudely says he wishes he could be the one to tell Voss's widow the news. This indicates the level of his hatred for Voss, apparently because he blames Voss for the Colonel's death. He has been seen with the Colonel a lot but it's not until this point that his true feelings are unmasked. He says that he believes the Colonel isn't dead, but is working a new operation somewhere. Skip argues that the Colonel wouldn't have done that without alerting Storm and Skip. This idea that the Colonel is larger-than-life and is invincible is seen throughout the story. His daring escape from the Japanese is apparently true and it's exploits like this that have made the Colonel such a legend. There have been rumors that the Colonel's body was buried in a Vietnamese village and that his casket rose to the surface when the ground became saturated by rain. There are other rumors as well and Skip says that Storm's rants about a secret operation is only adding fuel to those rumors. This scene gives the reader a deeper look at Storm's character, which hasn't played a major role in the story up to this point.

There is an interesting scene as Fest enters Trung's room. The author never says that Storm shoots Fest but it's highly implied. "Blows struck" Fest's chest and he can't get his breath. Then a door opens and someone is "sucked up through it." Then Fest begins to feel the suggestion of "something unbelievable." This is typical of the writing style seen throughout the book and it forces the reader to make assumptions and determinations that aren't spelled out in black and white. It also gives the reader some insight into specific characters that might not otherwise be revealed. For example, Fest has seemed to be very cautious and may have been on the verge of giving up on this assignment. It seems to indicate that he comprehends the dangers he faces. However, "something unbelievable" comes to his mind, which is probably that he's dying. This seems to imply that Fest had, after all, felt himself invincible.



Discussion Question 1

Do you believe the Colonel died? If so, how do you think the Colonel died?

Discussion Question 2

Explain Fest's purpose for being in Vietnam.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Skip becomes the one everyone blames for the failure of the double-agent operation?

Vocabulary

extraneous, pendulous, picayune, enthralled, strafe, clandestine, exploitative, liberation, pious, brusque, copiously, propitiation, blithely, erudite



1970 and 1983

Summary

The chapter titled 1970 opens with James Houston in Vietnam. He's obviously become a hardened soldier. Bill Houston is released after a year in prison. He immediately gets drunk but then sobers up for a meeting with his parole officer and gets a job.

James and his unit are on patrol when a grenade kills one of their men. James is furious and blames a unit of Green Berets for having sent them into the dangerous situation. James gets back by throwing a grenade into the midst of their unit. They beat him severely. At one point, James and some other soldiers brutalize a young girl, killing and raping her. James is discharged though he's already agreed to another tour. The commander says it isn't fair to turn James loose on the American people but says he won't allow James to remain in the war any longer. He says he'll ensure that James has an honorable discharge, and that he'll always say the discharge was honorable.

James returns home and Bill has to bail him out of jail in June. Bill tries to talk to James about straightening up, which makes James mad. Stevie pledges to stay with James and he promises to try to find a job. James soon meets up with a friend of Bill's, Pat Patterson, who soon announces plans to rob a casino. James agrees to help. Just before James is to make a court appearance, he and Stevie marry. Because of his service record, James is probably only going to serve 2 or 3 years and Stevie promises to wait for his release. Bill gives James advice about how to get by in prison.

Kathy is still working as a nurse in Vietnam. She helps a doctor with an amputation and they start talking about their lives and thoughts.

The chapter titled 1983 opens with Hao bringing a newspaper to the kitchen table. Hao stops reading, which catches Kim's attention. He says he's read news about an American he once knew. Kim points out that the article says "Canadian," but Hao says the man was American. Hao says he knew the man "back home" and Kim says the only thing to do is not to think about it. Hao doesn't know how to do that. He knows that it was "luck and the sacrifice of others" that ended with Hao and Kim living in the servants' quarters of a doctor's home.

Hao thinks of the "trick" he'd played on Trung. Trung wound up in a prison camp but emerged a hero of sorts with a house in Saigon and a "membership in the party." Trung is often sought out by historians. Hao also thinks about the Americans who kept their promises and helped Hao and Kim escape the country. Kim asks if there's anything he can do for the American. Hao says he's in serious trouble but that it's just someone he once knew.

Eddie Aguinaldo receives a letter from Skip dated January 8. Skip says his name is William Benet and that he hopes Eddie remembers him. Skip says he has a common-



law wife and three children in Cebu City. They own some property and Skip asks Eddie to oversee the sale of the property and see that Skip's wife gets the money. Eddie reads that letter over lunch. Later, he gets another letter, also from Skip. Skip explains that he wasn't certain how to address the letter to be sure it was delivered, so wrote two, very similar in content. The second letter indicates that Skip is in Pudu Prison in Kuala Lumpur.

Jimmy Storm is at Kuala Lumpur's Old High Court on the day Skip is to be sentenced for his role in running guns. Storm finds Skip's lawyer and gives him a message. He says to tell Skip that, "I'm completely capable of everything he fears." The lawyer is confused but says he'll pass along the message. The judge sentences Skip to be "flayed with a cane, and hanged by the neck until he was dead."

Storm leaves the courthouse and goes to a fortune teller named Mr. Rajik. Rajik asks if Storm has seen a blackbird that seemed not to belong. He then asks if Storm has seen an image in some ordinary thing. Storm says no to both. Rajik says he doesn't have the answer for Storm yet and urges him to return the following day.

Storm goes to Pudu Prison and claims to be on a humanitarian mission. The warden says Skip has never agreed to see any visitors but Storm urges him to ask. Storm puts the warden in the position of having to say that Storm can't visit and the warden instead says he'll leave it up to Skip. When he returns, he says Storm can have five minutes with Skip. The conversation is soon upsetting with Skip saying he's already lived too long to be afraid of death. Storm, apparently referring to the Colonel, asks where he can find "the old uncle," and Skip again says he's dead. Storm says he knows Skip has relatives in a specific area. Skip begins to shake and finally says that there's a man in Gerik named Ju-Shuan though he's called John, and that Storm should see him if he feels the need. The warden becomes certain he's made a mistake allowing the two men to talk and he begins to ramble, saying that Skip has had lots of support from his embassy.

Storm says that Skip is going to die but that there's "another cycle" ahead. Skip says he doesn't understand. Storm says, "It's just a machine," and urges Skip to relax. Skip says he just wants to be certain his family is left out of this. He then says that Storm won't be able to get any level of revenge. The warden orders Storm out.

Storm thinks about the journey that's brought him to this time and place. He believes that the Colonel was behind his escape from a county jail and believes that a "psychic and spiritual gravitation" has brought him here. He remains in town until Skip is hanged. He makes another visit to Rajik who says that Storm can't be healed and should not hope for it.

Storm arrives in Gerik and Ju-Shuan meets him upon his arrival. He says his name is Mr. John and refuses to admit that he's the man named Ju-Shuan Skip mentioned. Storm soon meets a man who agrees to act as a guide to show Storm the caves in a particular spot. Storm and Mr. John go up the river with the guide. After several miles, they leave the boat. Mr. John says the man will continue up the river to visit his family



and will return later. As they walk, Storm again asks if Mr. John's name is Ju-Shuan. He again denies it but admits that he knew Skip, but as William Benet.

John takes Storm into a cave. Storm attacks John and threatens to skin him, leaving his body for the ants. John eventually admits that he knows where the Colonel is, and that he's living just across the border in Thailand. John gives more information, including a village that Storm should avoid and that there wasn't a road to go the entire distance. Storm leaves John behind and rushes toward the village. Storm realizes that he made a mistake by mentioning the Colonel before John did, meaning that John might be sending Storm on a wild goose chase.

The next day, Storm begins the trip to the Thailand border, eventually winding up on the back of a young boy's motorcycle before they had to continue on foot. They arrive at the home of an entomologist named Dr. Mahathir. The man sews up a wound on the arm of the boy Storm is traveling with. Dr. Mahathir says the boy has made a promise regarding a ceremony the following day. When they begin traveling, the boy stops talking and Dr. Mahathir says that's part of his role in the upcoming ceremony.

When they arrive at the village, Storm wants to ask the inhabitants for information about reaching Thailand, but Dr. Mahathir says it's not the right day and urges Storm to wait. There's a large pyre and Dr. Mahathir says they are going to burn the boy's soul. The people of the village are holding this ritual because they were attacked by a large group of sanan monkeys. They meet the priest who is to perform the ritual.

The boy cries all night and Storm leaves early the next morning. Some local men show him where to cross the river. Storm finds the house where he expects the Colonel to be, but there's a British man there. He says he is not a member of the CIA but that he "perhaps" was at one time. Storm says he's looking for the Colonel. The man says Storm is being rude, but asks if he's a friend. Storm says he is a friend. The man says the Colonel is dead. Storm says he is certain the Colonel is working on "Plan B," and that his current operation is making life more difficult for the Communists.

The man says he knew the Colonel when he was a civilian volunteer in World War II. The man points out a grave and Storm tries to feel the Colonel's presence, but doesn't. The man says the Colonel died suddenly and that one theory is that he was poisoned. Storm suddenly realizes the man is Anders Pitchfork. Anders says he is here to tend the Colonel's grave, though he wasn't the one who buried him. Storm becomes violent and Anders goes inside the house, returning with a gun and ordering Storm to leave. He does.

Storm arrives back at the village just before the ceremony is to begin. He suddenly announces that he is the one who is supposed to be involved in the ritual. He claims the boy is an impostor. He says that a person has to submit to this because it's the right thing to do, and that the boy is only doing it for the money. Dr. Mahathir refuses to translate, saying Storm doesn't understand what he's about to do. He says he's getting the boy "off the hook." The priest finally agrees and Storm is stripped naked, then used in the ritual.



In Minneapolis, Kathy Jones is headed for a meeting where she is to be a guest speaker for an organization related to Vietnamese orphans. Kathy meets a friend for lunch. She is still with World Children's Services and is married to a physician. The friend has a letter that is addressed to Kathy. She realizes the letter is from Skip. The letter opens with the words, "Once upon a time there was a war." Skip talks about the war in Vietnam and how he came to be involved in gun smuggling after leaving the CIA. Skip says he's been in prison for a long time and that he decided not to write until near his execution date so that he wouldn't have to wonder if Kathy would answer. He writes at length, about his life and his feelings. He ends by saying that, given the chance to live his life again, he wouldn't run away from Kathy. Kathy doesn't remember Skip like he describes himself in the letter and she isn't certain how much of it she believes.

Kathy meets with three young women who were Vietnam orphans, now living in America. The woman introducing Kathy talks about Kathy being offered a seat on a plane at the last possible moment and taking it. That plane crashed and many died. Kathy barely listens to the woman as she prepares to speak. She looks out at the audience and suddenly realizes that these people all have lives that she knows nothing about. Someone there probably has cancer and some have dreams while others have turned their backs on their beliefs. But Kathy believes that all of them will be saved.

Analysis

James and some other soldiers brutally murder a young Vietnamese girl. They don't really set out to kill her but they are all hardened soldiers by this point and have lost all their compassion for the locals. This is seen often in situations of this kind and some readers may find the scene horrifying. The murder is the final straw for James's commander and he says James will be immediately discharged.

In the chapter titled 1970, James has returned home. It's obvious at this point that he's struggling to fit back into society. He is going through the same things Bill went through after his return. James is angry and unsettled, and it all leads to trouble. He gets caught up in a robbery attempt and various fights. One day, he starts up the motorcycle of his roommate and it falls on him. The fall makes him think about all the fights he'd been in since returning home. He often got beat up and could sometimes hear someone yelling for the attackers to stop before they killed James. James, however, says that they had never even come close to killing him. This is an important look at James's character. He has seen so much real fighting and has been so near death in Vietnam that he doesn't see the bar fights as even being serious. It may also indicate that he's trying to find a way to erase the pain of his years in Vietnam.

There is a great deal of rambling dialogue and mysterious thoughts in the final chapter of the book. The reader should remember that 13 years have passed between the previous chapter and this chapter. During that time, the various characters have gotten on with their lives in various ways. Kathy Jones has continued her work but is married and seems to be settled and content. The fate of James and Bill Houston is not revealed. Skip has become a gun runner and is hanged for that crime. He seems ready



to accept the death sentence. Jimmy Storm is unbalanced and seems to live only for the possibility that the Colonel is still alive and well. Storm bases this on a couple of events in his life, including his escape from a county jail. There are no details other than the fact that Storm was incarcerated and that a door was inexplicably left open, allowing Storm to simply walk out. Storm believes “the agency” or the Colonel was responsible for that.

Jimmy Storm's final actions are erratic and chaotic. He has a very strange conversation with Skip at the prison. Skip has always refused visitors but accepts Storm and it may be because of Storm's cryptic message to Skip's attorney. When Storm begins talking about one of Skip's relatives, Skip becomes shaky and is obviously upset. He tells Storm to leave his family alone but then tells him that he should go to Gerik and find a man named Ju-Shuan. That seems to indicate that Storm is going to find the Colonel there. Storm's journey to Thailand is dangerous and difficult. He says that he could have simply gone to that house from the Thailand side, but then he wouldn't have paid his dues to arrive there. He seems to believe that paying these dues will increase the chance that the Colonel is alive and living in Thailand.

The fact that Anders Pitchfork is in Thailand leaves a lot to the imagination. Anders and the Colonel had an especially close bond because of their time in the POW camp. Anders might have been living there only to look after the grave where he says the Colonel is buried. If that's the case, the Colonel didn't die in Vietnam. It may also be that the Colonel is alive somewhere but hides from Storm with Anders' help. It's all left up to the reader's interpretation.

The scene in the village seems irrelevant other than Storm's reaction to the ritual. He says that he's the one who is supposed to sacrifice himself for the village. It may be that he's lost hope and knows he'll never find the Colonel or it may be that he's trying to atone for past mistakes. Again, it's left to the reader to decide.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the meeting between Storm and Skip. What do you make of their cryptic conversation?

Discussion Question 2

What happens to Skip in the end?

Discussion Question 3

How does Kathy Jones react to Skip's letter? How has Kathy changed in the years since she last saw Skip?



Vocabulary

miscreants, parsing, prudery, emulators, gentility, scourge, palpable, candor, multifariously, patron, charlatan



Characters

William "Skip" Sands

Known as "Skip," he is the nephew of Colonel Francis X. Sands. Skip is a member of the Psy Ops department of the Central Intelligence Agency and his career falters when he follows Colonel Sands' lead. Skip uses several names throughout the book, including posing as a Canadian. Skip spends about two years working on a project for his uncle, Colonel Sands, organizing, copying, and cross-referencing a huge set of index cards. The information is mainly outdated and useless, but Skip sticks with the project.

At one point, the Colonel helps write a lengthy article that borders on treason. Though he is not the main author, his career takes a serious hit when the article is released to his superiors. He briefly believes Skip might have been the one to release the information and Skip is upset that the Colonel questions his loyalty. Skip is ultimately loyal to the Colonel though it results in his downfall and the end of his career.

Skip is an only child. His father died at a young age at Pearl Harbor. Skip's mother never remarries and Skip feels that he is under an undue amount of pressure as the only child of his widowed mother. He hates that he feels a sense of relief when she dies, but he can't fight that feeling completely away.

Skip is a likeable character and he seems to be devoted to the Colonel, even when he realizes that the Colonel has gone crazy and is not helping Skip's career. He has a love/hate relationship with the intrigue that's a normal part of the CIA. He doesn't have a long-term relationship with a woman until after he leaves the CIA, when he apparently begins living with a woman and fathers three children with her.

Colonel Francis Xavier Sands

Generally referred to as Colonel Sands or the Colonel, he is Skip Sands' uncle. He has a lengthy military career but has lost sight of his true duties in search of various insignificant projects that often include Skip. He is a devoted soldier and that devotion continues even after he is a member of the CIA rather than the military. When there are battles to fight, the Colonel rushes in and never considers giving up. When he winds up in a civilian situation for awhile, he flounders. He knows how to lead men but he doesn't know how to follow the orders of his superiors. He is summoned back to the United States several weeks before he decides he will probably follow that order.

The Colonel is something of a mystery and people credit him with being larger than life. He manages to basically commandeer a large military unit for his own personal project, even though he doesn't have any control over the military as a member of the CIA. He also manages to get control of a helicopter and its pilot, and he uses them for his personal projects for a long time. At one point, Skip learns that the Colonel is planning to get a film of a specific football game. He hints that the troops need to watch that film



to learn strategy but tells Skip that the men need something to lift their morale. These kinds of wild plans continue to hurt his career.

The Colonel spends years fighting the war and leaves his family to fend for itself during that time. He talks about his connection with Anders Pitchfork, saying that they have a deep bond because of their time in a prison camp during World War II. He compares that connection to the love he feels for his daughter when he remembers her holding his hand as a very young girl.

James Houston

James is the younger brother of Bill Houston. He grew up in Phoenix with his mother and two brothers. Bill has already joined the military when James turns 17, and James lies in order to join as well. He celebrates his 18th birthday in Vietnam. James is not serious about anything prior to joining the Army. He goes through an entire first tour without seeing any fighting and he joins for a second. He's involved in a fire fight early in that tour and briefly goes AWOL.

James soon becomes caught up in the fighting and he changes dramatically. He becomes hardened and loses touch with reality. When a member of his group is killed, he blames a group of Green Berets for putting the young soldier in danger, and he apparently throws a grenade into the group of Green Berets as a means of getting back at them. By that time, he has signed up for yet another tour but he's given an honorable discharge and ordered to leave for the United States. Back in the U.S., James flounders and winds up in prison.

Bill Houston

Bill is the older brother of James Houston. He grows up with his mother and two younger brothers in Phoenix. Bill is typical of the young soldiers of the time and place. He begins his tour of duty by sending some of his money home to his mother each payday but soon begins spending all of it on alcohol and women.

Also like many of the soldiers of this era, he has a great deal of trouble when he returns to the United States. He is unable to deal with everyday life and winds up in and out of jail until he finally does time at a prison. By the time James returns from Vietnam, Bill has begun to get his life together and he's frustrated when he can't make James do the same.

Trung Than

Known as Trung throughout the book, he is a Vietnamese who initially believes that the propaganda doled out by the Northern Vietnamese leaders is in the best interests of the Vietnamese people. He later comes to believe that's not true and he decides to help the



Americans in their war against the Vietcong. He becomes a double agent working under Colonel Sands and knows that his life is in jeopardy once the Colonel dies.

Dietrich Fest

Fest travels under several names and nationalities in the story. During his initial appearance when he meets up with Skip Sands for the first time, he is never really named. He is a trained assassin and he kills a priest that Skip Sands is visiting very early in the book.

Anders Pitchfork

Usually referred to as Anders, he was a pilot who was captured along with Colonel Sands by the Japanese. The Colonel mentioned several times that Anders had given him a boiled egg while they were in the prison camp because the Colonel was very sick. The Colonel says he might have declined the egg because Anders, like all the prisoners, needed the nourishment, but the Colonel says he didn't decline and that he has always felt he owes Anders for that unselfish gesture.

Major Eduardo Aguinaldo

He refers to himself as Eddie and is an officer in the Philippine military. He is, in some ways, a difficult character to read. He is outgoing and seems to be somewhat self-serving. However, when Skip is about to be executed, he calls on Eddie to help handle some financial affairs, saying that Eddie is the only person he knows who will be honest with Skip's common-law wife.

Nguyen Hao

Known as Hao, he is Minh's uncle. He is Vietnamese and is married to Kim. They have no children and he feels that he is going above and beyond his duty by letting a relative live in a house he inherited. He admits that he isn't a good businessman. Hao aligns himself with the Colonel and believes that alliance will help him get to America, or at least to another country. Hao eventually becomes something of a double agent and it seems possible that he is the one who shares information about the Colonel with other American agents.

Kathy Jones

Kathy is the widow of a priest named Timothy Jones. She flirts with Skip when she sees him for the first time, but it seems likely that grief and desperation drives her to that action. She has an affair with Skip that resumes when they meet up again by chance in

Vietnam. She struggles for a long time with her faith in God and believes she's bound for hell. She is a nurse and works with children throughout her life.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Tree of Smoke

This term is a Biblical reference used by Colonel Sands to describe his philosophy about gathering intelligence. The Colonel believes the CIA should be gathering intelligence and working back from that information. He says that the policy is to use intelligence to justify actions. Jimmy Storm uses the term “Tree of Smoke” to describe the Colonel's extensive collection of index cards, indicating that he believes them to be worthless.

The Colonel's Footlockers

These are three typical military footlockers that contain thousands of notes about various people and places in Vietnam. Skip Sands is tasked with making copies and cross-referencing all the notes and that keeps him away from real work on the war for several years.

The Colonel's Article

Rick Voss is the first to mention this article to Skip. The article was presented to the CIA for publication in that agency's in-house magazine, but it was never published. The ideas are complex but basically indicate that the CIA's chain of command is ineffective at handling information and passing orders back down that chain. Some believe the argument has merit but that it borders on treason. The reader eventually learns that Voss was at least partly responsible for writing the article.

The Vietcong

These are the Vietnamese people in North Vietnam who are fighting about the people of South Vietnam. They are considered America's enemy mainly because they are promoting the advance of communism.

Echo Recon Unit

James Houston is assigned to this unit in Vietnam. He spends the first year of his time without seeing any real fighting and signs up for another tour mainly because of that. Shortly into his second tour, the unit is attacked and James becomes a seasoned soldier.



Dr. Bouquet

The human Dr. Bouquet was a French physician who died in a cave in Vietnam. He owned the house where Skip stays during his time in the country. Some of the house staff members believe the doctor is reincarnated into a dog, and that dog becomes known as Dr. Bouquet. The dog is treated well and several people apparently accept that the animal could be the doctor's reincarnated form.

The Sumpit

This is a blowgun Dietrich Fest used to kill Father Carignan. Dietrich Fest is proficient with the sumpit and is apparently responsible for killing Carignan.

The CIA

This is the Central Intelligence Agency, an American organization charged with gathering information on specific subjects. Both Skip Sands and his uncle, Colonel Sands, are members of the CIA.

The Death of Skip's Mother

Skip's mother lives in the United States and he doesn't realize she's having health issues. He is in the U.S. for more than a year and doesn't go visit her during that time. He learns of her death just as he's beginning to work with Trung, who is a double agent. Skip feels remorse at having left his mother, who was a widow with only one child, but he also feels a sense of relief. Her death represents his freedom because he feels he no longer is responsible for her happiness.

Double Agent

A double agent is someone who is pretending to be a member of one group while secretly passing information and working for another. Trung is the double agent recruited by the Colonel. He is left in a dangerous position when the Colonel dies before the operation can be completed.



Settings

The House in Manila

Skip and several other people are staying at a house in Manila early in the story. The house is something of a safe house and there is a great deal of description with this specific setting, as is the case with most of the settings. There is electricity and air conditioning but the electricity often fails, leaving the guests to eat by candlelight.

Damulog

This is the village where Kathy Jones is living when she and Skip meet for the first time. Kathy's husband, Timothy, dies in a nearby village. Skip arrives here to evaluate Father Carignan, a man the Colonel believes might be running guns. The village is poor and seems typical for the time and place.

The House at Cao Quyen

Cao Quyen translates to Forgotten Mountain, appropriate because Skip feels like he's been put there to be forgotten. The house has indoor plumbing and a mermaid wallpaper. There is no electricity and they use butane lamps. The house is lavish by local standards but it leaks. There is a "homey feel" about it. Skip sleeps on a screened room and can hear the noises of the night. This house represents Skip's crushed dream of doing important work for the CIA in Vietnam.

Cao Phuc

This is a region in Vietnam where James Houston is assigned to the Echo Recon unit. The area is typical of the country and time. There are many descriptive passages detailing the landscape, which includes hills, agriculture, and caves.

Phoenix

This is the city where James and Bill Houston are raised and where they return after their tours in Vietnam. There is not a great deal of description about the overall city but there are some specific descriptions, such as their mother's small house and the rural area where James spends time with Stevie Dale.



Themes and Motifs

The Effects of War

Most of the characters of this book spend years living through a horrific war. Each struggles with the Effects of War in their own way. Bill and James Houston each pledge to send money home to their mother after they join the military. Each does send money home for awhile but that doesn't last long. Both men begin spending all their money on women and alcohol. The reader may think it sounds irresponsible, but these and other soldiers are far from home and all realize they may die in an upcoming battle. They seek to handle the pressure any way they can, and drinking, fighting, and sex become important means of release.

James Houston is an important example of this theme. When James arrives in Vietnam, he finds that he's in a relatively safe area and he doesn't even engage in a fight during his first year in the country. He signs up for a second tour and is immediately involved in a firefight. An officer in his unit is seriously wounded and James briefly goes AWOL. In most cases, he would have been imprisoned for that crime but because of the chaos of war, he's merely ordered back to his post. James gradually changes as he continues to see the horrors of war and he is in a group that rapes and murders a young Vietnamese girl. That event leads to his discharge.

Skip Sands is also an example of this theme. Skip is a CIA agent and might have lived out his life as a member of that agency in the United States except for America's involvement in Vietnam. Because of that involvement, Skip is stationed in foreign countries and winds up embroiled in a strange situation. When Colonel Sands runs an unauthorized operation, Skip is heavily involved. When the Colonel dies and problems arise, Skip is left to take the fall. Another American tells Skip that he's going to be blamed for the entire operation and he's left with no choice but to run away. He remains overseas and begins running guns, which eventually leads to his execution. There's no doubt that his life would have been different if not for the war.

Another example of this theme is seen in the people who remain at home in America while their loved ones fight in Vietnam. Mrs. Houston, mother of Bill and James Houston, is in Phoenix while her sons serve in the American military. She prays for her sons and fears constantly for their safety. At one point, James calls home and finds that his mother is frantic with worry. Colonel Sands' wife files for divorce because he has spent so many years living in war zones. Bill Houston comes across a young woman who married a man who was killed in Vietnam. She was relieved that she wouldn't have to become reacquainted with this man upon his return. She realized that she had changed and knew that her husband would be different as well.

Finally, the reader should look at the Vietnamese people as an example of this theme. There are many young women acting as prostitutes and others who find ways to profit from the presence of the Americans. Many are afraid of the Americans while others

align themselves with specific Americans in the hope of having a better life once the war is over.

Coming of Age

There are several characters that are examples of this theme, partly because several years pass over the course of the book. It's natural that characters should evolve and mature as those years pass. Some of these changes are directly related to another of the book's themes, The Effects of War. There's little doubt that the lives of some of the characters would have been dramatically different if those characters hadn't been involved in the war. Skip Sands is a young CIA agent as the book opens. He is largely at the beck and call of his uncle, Colonel Sands. As a youngster, Skip looked up to Colonel Sands and followed him into the CIA. He was assigned by the Colonel to a huge project involving the copying, filing, and cross-referencing hundreds of pieces of information. It seems that early on, Skip believed in the project. By 1965, Skip has come to realize that the project may not be as vital as the Colonel indicates. Skip initially questions the project – and the Colonel – without voicing those concerns but he eventually speaks plainly to the Colonel about his thoughts. As a youngster, Skip would never have questioned the Colonel's ideas or his motives. The fact that he is finally able to see through the Colonel's exterior to ask those questions indicates that Skip has begun to mature.

Bill and James are also examples of this theme. Bill joins the Navy and James joins the Army. Both join because they see little hope of a future where they are as teenagers. They are both wild, living chaotic lives, before joining the military. The fact that they are earning money and are far from home brings out the worst in them. For the first few months, they each send money to their mother because she is struggling financially. But after a short time, each begins spending his money on alcohol and women. They are undoubtedly irresponsible but they are also dealing with the Effects of War, another major theme of the book. When Bill returns to the United States, he gets into trouble and even spends time in prison. By the time James is discharged, Bill seems to have gotten his act together, at least to some degree, which indicates an emerging maturity. An interesting aspect of that maturity is that he tries to tell James how to get his life together as well, and he's frustrated when James doesn't heed the advice.

Kathy is yet another example of this theme. When she first meets Skip, she is struggling with the loss of her husband but she's also struggling with a loss of focus, especially regarding her belief in God. Kathy attaches herself to Skip though they are continents apart for awhile. She sends him long, rambling letters filled with doubt and pleas. She is absent from the story by the time Skip is questioning the Colonel and she doesn't appear again until the final chapter. By that time, Kathy is a guest speaker at an event and has her life in order. She's married and seems to have come to terms with all the demons that were plaguing her in the early years of the story.



Conspiracies and Suspect Alliances

There are several conspiracies and conspiracy theories going on throughout the story. One of the first is seen when the Colonel is talking to Skip in 1965. The conversation turns to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the Colonel says there are some people in Washington who believe “we” assassinated Kennedy. He is not the first nor the last to believe that there was a conspiracy at work when Kennedy was killed, and that Lee Harvey Oswald wasn't responsible – or at least not solely responsible – for the murder. Kennedy's death is one of the first historical events mentioned in the book and it is still being discussed several years later. Everyone has been drinking by the time the conversation hits this phase, so it's possible that the Colonel is merely giving in to the effects of alcohol, but it seems more likely that he truly believes his statements.

There are also alliances and unions that form between various people and factions, each leading to other conspiracies and intrigues. An important example of this is seen when Hao aligns himself with Colonel Sands. Hao believes that Colonel Sands will be able to help him leave the country and that Colonel Sands is a powerful man. When other members of an American agency pick him up and ask questions, Hao realizes that he needs to expand his options. A similar alliance is seen between Minh and the Colonel but for different reasons. Minh believes in luck and he believes the Colonel is a lucky person.

Yet another example of this theme is seen when the Colonel decides to create a situation to use Trung as a double agent. He presents the idea as a hypothetical situation but Skip soon knows that the Colonel is already working with this double agent and has the process in motion. The idea is to present misinformation through this double agent but this situation is dangerous because neither side can ever really be certain of the agent's loyalty. The agent might be involved in a conspiracy to double-cross the Americans, leaving the Colonel in a bad situation.

When the Colonel dies, there are several people who don't believe that he's really dead. They believe that the Colonel had created a “plan B,” which is literally a conspiracy to work on the war effort from some other location under some other identity. Another agent named Voss goes to a lot of trouble to find a white man living in Thailand because he believes that man is the Colonel or that he knows where the Colonel is buried.

Yet another example of this theme is seen in the relationships that occur during wars. The Colonel remembers that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and that his brother, Skip's father, was killed during the surprise Japanese attack. He also remembers being held prisoner by the Japanese. During one of his conversations with Skip, he asks Skip to look at how alliances have changed. At his prompting, Skip says that the Soviets were American allies during World War II when the Japanese and the Americans were enemies. Then, by the time of the Vietnam war, the Japanese were allied with the Americans and the Soviets were the enemy.



Patriotism

Skip Sands is one of the most important aspects of this theme. While he is on assignment in Manila, Skip visits an officer's club called the Seafront Club. As he's leaving, he sees an American flag and Skip immediately tears up. He thinks of all the things he loves about America, ranging from the memories of those who served in World War II to playing baseball in his childhood hometown in Kansas. He thinks about the simple things, such as hot summer afternoons and huge elm trees. He believes the American flag sums up everything he loves about America. Skip's love for his country was probably one of the reasons he joined the CIA. The other was his admiration for his uncle, Colonel Sands.

Skip's patriotism is in stark contrast to Bill and James Houston, who joined the military because they felt they had few options available to them. However, there is a scene involving James that is another example of this theme. James and his unit are on patrol when they are attacked, apparently by a single gunman. A member of their unit is killed and James is furious. He blames a unit of Green Berets for the death, saying they sent the patrol into the ambush which makes them responsible. In his anger, he throws a grenade into a group of the Green Berets. The fight is not included in the story but James is brutally beaten. When he goes before his commanding officer, the officer says that the Green Berets are patriotic and believe in protecting their fellow Americans above all else. He says that's the only reason they didn't kill James.

An important aspect of this theme is seen in the men who go to Vietnam to fight. While many of them are drafted, there's no doubt that most believe Communism is wrong and want to promote democracy. Their motivations are not necessarily patriotic but their actions are ultimately aimed at fighting for the beliefs America was founded upon.

The other side of this theme is seen in the actions and motivations of the Vietnamese people. Many of them believe they are fighting for a worthy cause. Trung was initially convinced that the Vietcong's propaganda was true and that he was doing the right thing by fighting for them. He said that he thought that helping them would ensure that he could continue his way of life. It isn't until much later that he begins to question the situation and comes to the conclusion that his patriotism is misguided.

The Price of Ministry

There are several people who give of themselves and their resources in order to help the less fortunate people of the Asian regions depicted in this story.

Father Carignan has been living in Manila for some 30 years by the time he has a visit with Skip. He ministers to the poor and needy of the region but has also adapted his own ideas and practices to the local people. For example, he asks an old man to interpret a dream he had. Carignan is the first to say that ministering in this region is consuming. He says that it's alright to feel sorry for the poor and that he can do what he can for them, but that he can't allow himself to love any of them because it would



literally destroy him. He talks about how easy it is to lose his identity and his purpose, and that keeping an eye on the ultimate goal – ministering to the people – is sometimes difficult. It is, however, the only thing that keeps him from going crazy.

Timothy and Kathy Jones are also examples of this theme. Timothy Jones dies while in Manila and his body isn't found for weeks. It can be said that he paid the ultimate price for trying to help the people of the region, but Kathy pays a high price as well. She has serious mental issues immediately following Timothy's death. She enters into a brief affair with Skip Sands, and it seems that her grief is the main thing that prompts her to take that step.

Later, Kathy works with orphanages in Vietnam and struggles to deal with the horrible conditions. She tries to find supplies even though they are difficult to procure, and she asks anyone she thinks might be able to help. Kathy is a nurse so she's able to handle the medical needs if she has supplies, but she is only able to watch helplessly while children literally starve and die of routine illnesses. Kathy loses her faith in God and that takes a terrible toll on her. She believes she is destined for hell and hates everything that has brought her to this point, but she continues to work toward helping the Vietnamese orphans find homes.

To a lesser degree, the mothers in this book are also examples of this theme. Bill and James Houston's mother is ineffective as a parent but she tries to instill her faith in God into her three sons. She is angry when her sons use profanity and she urges them to go to church. Her concern is largely lost on the sons, mainly because of her inability to truly act as a parent should. Skip's mother is also a very minor example of this theme. She writes to Skip and says that she's praying for him. She doesn't try to make him feel guilty for not coming to visit while he was stationed in the United States but he does feel that guilt anyway. Her gentle concern makes him feel guilty but it seems obvious that it's genuine.

Styles

Point of View

The book is written in third person from a somewhat limited perspective. The point of view varies from one character to the next, depending on where the action is taking place. For example, the reader sees events from Skip's perspective when he is in Damulog where the priest is killed. Skip doesn't know the identity of the assassin, meaning the reader doesn't yet know. That piece of information is revealed much later.

Some of the characters provide reliable perspectives while others provide skewed perspectives. For example, James is planning to enlist in the Army in 1966. He doesn't want to wait until he's 18 and begs his mother to sign for him. She agrees but it turns out that the Army won't take him, even with his mother's permission. James rants about his mother during this scene and calls her "old," "worn out," and "stupid." He fears that she won't be able to get along without him but the fact is that he really isn't contributing to the family's finances at this point. His attitudes are never fully explained or substantiated. With many of the characters, it's up to the reader to decide if they can be trusted as reliable perspectives.

The limited perspective gives the author the opportunity to create twists and turns throughout the book. For example, Dietrich Fest is introduced early in the story but his name and true identity are not revealed until much later in the book. It's not until Fest is sent to kill Trung that the reader learns his name. The use of various perspectives is necessary because there are so many characters who are only loosely related to each other. James and Bill Houston are never directly involved with Skip Sands. This makes it necessary for the author to use the various perspectives. The perspectives and limitations are appropriate for the story.

Language and Meaning

The story is written in modern-day English but is mainly set in Vietnam. There is a great deal of military action and most of the characters are either in the military or some other government agency. The result is that some readers may find unfamiliar words and phrases. Military terms include "jarhead," which is slang for a Marine. Other terms include "lurp" and "klik."

The fact that the story is set in Vietnam means some of the characters use words and phrases common to that country. Trung talks about a "kolkhoz," which is a collective farm located in North Vietnam. It's supposed to be a place where Trung could go to "live in peace and order." There are terms such as "mamasan" and "papasan" used throughout the book, which refers to older Vietnamese people. A "hooch" is a very basic hut.



There are also cultural references that may be difficult for some readers to grasp. Generally, the author explains these references, at least to some degree. For example, Trung sees four dogs in the camp where he meets up with the group of very young soldiers. He says the dogs represent “the Four Noble Truths” and that they are “dogging his lies into the darkness.” These truths are not outlined in this section of the book and it's left to the reader to decide what it means.

The author uses curse words in several sections. These are generally used in the thoughts and conversations between characters, and are obviously meant to make the conversations seem more realistic. Considering the time and place, it seems likely that the characters would use curse words, meaning the conversations are believable and appropriate to the story.

Structure

The book is divided into nine chapters. With the exception of the first two chapters, each is very long and covers many characters, places, and events. The chapters are titled by year only, which gives the reader a sense of the passing of time but does not give any indication of the events that take place in that chapter.

The first chapter is 1963. A few of the major characters are introduced in this chapter, including Colonel Francis X. Sands, a Vietnamese Captain named Nguyen Minh, and Bill and James Houston. The chapter is brief when compared to the other chapters. The second chapter is 1964. There is more information about Colonel Sands and Captain Nguyen Minh. Hao and Trung are introduced as well and the reader begins to see that Trung is dissatisfied with his role in the war.

The third chapter is 1965. In this chapter, the reader is presented with facts about the relationship between William “Skip” Sands and his uncle, Colonel Sands. Skip begins to question his relationship with the Colonel and realizes that he doesn't have all the information for events that are happening. The fourth chapter is 1966. Bill and James Houston are introduced more fully in this chapter. The reader gets a good look at their home life, their attitudes, and the new relationship between James and his young girlfriend, Stevie Dale. In 1966, James has lied about his age in order to join the Army. He goes home on leave while waiting to ship out to Vietnam and finds that he's changed too much to enjoy spending time with his former friends. He doesn't break up with Stevie, but he wishes he hadn't begun a relationship with her. Skip begins to realize that the Colonel's career is in trouble but remains loyal.

In 1967 through 1970, Skip is transferred to Vietnam but remains out of the fighting. The Colonel begins working a double agent named Trung. James Houston returns to Phoenix, winds up in trouble, and is likely going to prison. The Colonel dies and Skip finds himself taking the blame for all the Colonel's misdeeds, forcing him to go on the run. Hao and Kim leave Vietnam. The final chapter is 1983. In this chapter, the reader learns that Kathy is still working for orphans and that Skip was executed for running guns.

There are several literary devices used and the style varies from one scene to the next. In some cases, characters' thoughts are in first person and quotes are not used. There is limited foreshadowing and the author uses rambling dialogue to make minute points. Some readers may have trouble grasping minor points and some ideas are buried under chaotic thoughts and conversations.



Quotes

He felt as if everything was all his fault, and with no one around to know about it, he left himself cry like a child.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1963 paragraph 9)

Importance: This is Bill Houston, who has just shot a monkey. The little creature dies in Bill's arms and he feels remorse for this, but he also feels upset about the situation he's in. He's only 18 years old and he's in a war.

We Vietnamese have two philosophies to sustain us. The Confucian tells us how to behave when fate grants us peace and order. The Buddhist trains us to accept our fate even when it brings us blood and chaos.”

-- A Master Priest (chapter 1964 paragraph 59)

Importance: This priest is talking to Colonel Sands and some others, and it is an important look at the Vietnamese people as a whole. The country is, at this point, involved in a terrible war that is tearing it apart and the priest seems to be trying to make sense of the situation.

All we have to do is hang on until Communism collapses under the weight of its own economic silliness. The weight of its own insanity.”

-- Skip (chapter 1965 paragraph 278)

Importance: This is Skip's take on the situation. He doesn't believe that winning or not winning against the Vietcong will ultimately change things because he doesn't believe Communism can survive on a long-term basis. The Colonel disagrees and says that their biggest strength is “unthinkable sacrifice.”

At the sight of the flag he tasted tears in his throat. In the Stars and Stripes all the passions of his life coalesced to produce the ache with which he loved the United States of America ...”

-- Narrator (chapter 1965 paragraph 386)

Importance: The second sentence goes on to create a lengthy passage about the things Skip loves. Skip's attitude is an example of one of the book's themes, Patriotism.

James was at a loss. He didn't actually know this guy.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1966 paragraph 75)

Importance: James is talking to his brother, Bill, on the telephone. Bill has been away in the Navy for awhile and James realizes that Bill's experiences mean he is a very different person from the young man he was when he left Phoenix.

Far away he saw the ripples of a mirage – either a horrible burning death in Vietnam, like that of a man pried from this charred Chevrolet, or a parade of years filled with



Stevie's questions and her fingers touching his cheek.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1966 paragraph 563)

Importance: This is referring to James and he is at home on leave just before leaving for his first tour in Vietnam. He's scared of the fighting in Vietnam and later says that he has thought a lot about being killed. However, he already feels that he's not really connected to his girlfriend, Stevie, and he seems to fear spending the rest of her life married to Stevie.

It seemed to him that having been asked to meet a member of the Colonel's family on his arrival, he'd now solidified an alliance and crossed a river in his life, which was also hers.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1967 paragraph 22)

Importance: This is referring to Hao, who now feels he is committed to the Americans. Hao feels he is doing what he needs to do in order to keep himself and Kim safe.

Hao disbelieved him. He was betraying his comrades, what could be the motive for that?

-- Narrator (chapter 1967 paragraph 158)

Importance: Hao is talking about Trung, who is on the verge of committing to become a double agent for the Americans against his comrades, who are Vietcong. Hao isn't certain of Trung's motivations and seems to genuinely want to understand.

Hao had seen little of the Colonel lately, and in any case was terrified of him now.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1969 paragraph 278)

Importance: Hao was recently taken to the RSC headquarters and questioned about Trung, and he now knows that the Colonel isn't as completely in control as Hao had thought.

By the third month inside he felt at home. From this distance, the things he thought he'd miss looked small.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1970 paragraph 67)

Importance: This is Bill Houston's thought on his time in prison. He had expected to miss a lot of things but found that he was actually quite at home in prison. This is an important look at the way Bill and others handle themselves in these kinds of situations. While prison is not as traumatic as Vietnam, the attitude is at least slightly similar.

He called the prisoner “an impostor and a psychopath.” He ordered the prisoner to rise and sentenced him to be bound with a rope, flayed with a cane, and hanged by the neck until he was dead.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1983 paragraph 97)



Importance: This is Jimmy Storm's perspective as he watches Skip Sands being sentenced to death for running guns.

Look, whatever kind of revenge you want – you're not gonna get it.”
-- Skip (chapter 1983 paragraph 243)

Importance: Skip is talking to Jimmy Storm and has just given Jimmy information about a place and a man that seems to be a step toward finding the Colonel.