

The Underneath Study Guide

The Underneath by Kathi Appelt

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Plot Summary

Promises, regret, love, and loneliness are all facets of the book "The Underneath" by Kathi Appelt. Two kittens and an old hound dog give a centuries old serpent the chance to champion love, a choice she forfeited years prior with her own daughter. The story is filled with the Native American view of interconnectedness between people, animals, and plants.

A pregnant calico cat, abandoned by her family, is drawn to a lonely hound dog named Ranger when she hears the sound of his mournful baying. The two become fast friends. When her kittens are born, Ranger takes over the role as father figure for the two kittens, Puck and Sabine. The problem for Ranger and the cats is that he is chained to the porch of a cruel man named Gar Face. Ranger had helped Gar Face in his hunts until one night when Ranger stepped between Gar Face's gun and a bobcat with a kitten. Ranger was shot in the leg, and he has been chained to the house ever since as his punishment for betraying the man.

Although the kittens have been warned to stay in the underneath, under the porch, Puck is drawn out by the sun one morning. The naughty kitten is spotted by Gar Face who grabs him. The calico cat runs out to try to save her baby, but Gar Face grabs her as well. He stuffs the two into a burlap bag and throws them into a creek. Puck survives the drowning attempt, but his mother does not. Puck finds himself alone on the creek bed. He takes up residence in an old, dying loblolly pine tree.

Meanwhile, another story is told about events that took place a thousand years before. It tells how a serpent came to be trapped in a jar entangled in the roots of the loblolly pine. The tree is the same one where Puck now takes shelter. The trapped serpent is a lamia, an enchanted being able to change once in its life to his human form, then back to its animal form. At one time, this lonely serpent had a daughter named Night Song. Night Song gave up her serpent form to be married to Hawk Man, also an enchanted being. Believing she had been betrayed, Grandmother tricked Night Song into changing back into a serpent, without telling her she could never return to her human form. Having been lured away from her husband and young daughter, Night Song mourned and refused to eat until she died.

Sensing her father's distress because her mother had disappeared, Night Song's daughter went on a search for Grandmother because her mother had told her that if she ever needed help, Grandmother could help her. Grandmother, however, was on the way to the village in which Night Song had lived with Hawk Man and their daughter. Grandmother met Hawk Man. She had planned on stealing her granddaughter away. Instead, Hawk Man grabbed her and stuffed her into a large jar that Night Song had made for her daughter's tenth birthday. He buried the jar on the creek bed. In his fight with Grandmother, Hawk Man was injured and the poison from the old serpent threatened to kill him. For a long while, he refused to take back his avian form because he did not want to abandon his daughter.



For one thousand years, Grandmother has been stuffed in the jar beneath the loblolly pine. She doesn't know that her granddaughter had gotten lost trying to find her and has turned into a hummingbird, the bird that foreshadows death. Hawk Man, also, has taken back his avian form.

Grandmother's story about her daughter and the story of the kittens and the hound merge one night when Gar Face decides to use Sabine as bait for a 100-foot alligator he hopes to catch. In an effort to protect the one friend he has left, Ranger bites Gar Face, making him drop the kitten. Then, Gar Face sets his dog on the bank of the creek as bait for the alligator. During the night, Sabine joins Ranger on the shore of the creek. When Gar Face sees the kitten has returned, he raises his gun to shoot her, but he is surprised by Puck's howl and shoots his gun upward into the tree. Puck, perched on a branch above Gar Face, lets go of the branch and lands on Gar Face's face. When Gar Face tries to wash the blood from his face in the creek, he attracts the old alligator. He is eaten.

Puck and Sabine are reunited, but Ranger remains chained to a tree. It is at this moment that Grandmother makes an appearance. At first, it appears that she may want to make a meal of the kittens and hound. Instead, she uses her strong jaws to snap Ranger's chain. After her long, lonely, anger filled life, Grandmother has finally chosen to support love. She is commended by her old friend, the alligator, on her decision. Grandmother, however, has come to the end of her life as Gar Face's stray bullet that went into the tree hits the ancient serpent. As she is dying, she is greeted by the hummingbird, her granddaughter, who tells her she has been looking for her for a long time. Meanwhile, the hound and his two kittens are said to still be in the forest.



Chapters 1-10

Summary

The story of an unusual friendship between three cats and an old hound dog merges with that of a centuries old serpent in the book "The Underneath" by Kathi Appelt. Instead of welcoming the addition of a new family members, the serpent has spent her life stewing in anger because of her daughter's marriage. Her anger results in the loss of her daughter. However, years later, the serpent recognizes the love she sees between a hound dog and his kittens. She uses her jaws to snap the chain that holds the hound dog, freeing him and allowing him to live.

In Chapter 1, a pregnant calico cat has been dropped off by her family in a lonely woods. She finds an unused nest where she purrs herself to sleep.

In Chapter 2, there is a dead loblolly pine near a creek called Little Sorrowful. Twenty-five years before, the tree had been struck by lightning and split in half. Although it is dead, it still stands.

In Chapter 3, tangled in the roots of the dead loblolly pine is a jar holding a creature. This creature waits for her time to come.

In Chapter 4, the calico cat wakes to the sound of a hound baying. She follows the sound of the hound's song.

In Chapter 5, the cat follows the sound of the hound's song to a tilting, unkempt house. She feels the place is wrong, but her kittens move inside her when they hear the hound's song. She understands his loneliness, so she walks up to him and rubs on his front legs.

In Chapter 6, many years ago (on the same day that the loblolly pine was struck by lightning), a boy living in Houston, Texas, was hit by his father hard enough to break his jaw and disfigure his face. This boy, who had become cruel himself after years of abuse, took his father's rifle and left home. He walked into the forest where he has lived for the past twenty-five years. Unlike the pine tree, time has not softened this man who is known as Gar Face.

In Chapter 7, although he's run cats off before, Ranger realizes this cat understands his song.

In Chapter 8, the dangers of the woods in east Texas are described. There are dangerous animals, like alligators, and marshy, deadly areas of quicksand.

In Chapter 9, one early morning Gar Face believes he's discovered an alligator about 100 feet long. He believes he will earn respect if he is able to trap this alligator.



In Chapter 10, Ranger lets the cat stay even though he knows she will be in danger if Gar Face finds her. He is chained to the porch because many years prior he had run between Gar Face and a bobcat the man was trying to shoot. Ranger had sensed something was wrong and tried to protect the animal. Since that time, Gar Face has kept Ranger chained to the porch.

Analysis

A loblolly pine, an abandoned cat, a neglected hound, and an evil man are introduced in the beginning of the book, "The Underneath," by Kathi Appelt. As the story progresses, these seemingly unconnected aspects become more and more connected until their stories merge. The importance of keeping promises, the value of love, and the pain of regret are all themes in the novel that tell the story of unusual enchanted creatures and a family of three cats and an old hound dog.

Loneliness emerges as a theme very quickly in this novel. The pregnant calico cat, who has been recently abandoned, is lonely. The dog Ranger, who has been tied up to the porch by his owner, feels the loneliness of being useless. It is Ranger's song of loneliness that draws the calico cat to him. Even though cats and dogs are usually enemies, these two immediately sense that they understand the loneliness of each other.

The idea of the trees of the forest being the keepers of stories is an idea that will be repeated over and over through the novel. In this section of chapters, the trees tell the story of the lightning bolt that struck the a loblolly pine twenty five years ago.

One of the significant correlations with time is noted in Chapter 6. In this chapter it is learned that on the same night the old loblolly pine was struck by lightning, an already evil boy was struck by his father. The blow broke the boy's jaw which caused him to run away from home. The boy was so evil that he poisoned the water in his mother's birdbath. Then, he laughed when she mourned the dead birds. After running away, he took up residence in the woods. Now known as Gar Face, he has lived there by himself for twenty-five years. He is a very cruel and evil man now. Gar Face chained Ranger to the house because the dog interfered with a bobcat Gar Face hoped to shoot. Although Ranger is hit by a bullet from the gun, Gar Face does not tend to his dog's wound. He only kicks the dog in anger for allowing the bobcat to get away. It seems the only thing that is important to Gar Face is his ability to kill things. He has found what he believes to be a 100-foot alligator in the bayou. He hopes that by killing the alligator, he can earn the respect of the men who drink in the same tavern where he visits.

The story is set in the bayous of East Texas. The Sabine River noted in the novel separates Texas from Louisiana. One of the significant settings is the Underneath, a term that refers to the underside of Gar Face's house. Ranger believes that the calico cat will be safe as long as she stays hidden underneath the house.



Discussion Question 1

What draws the calico cat to Ranger? What do the two share?

Discussion Question 2

What is Ranger's relationship with Gar Face? What is the history between the two of them?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Gar Face want to go after the Alligator King? What does he believe this kill will bring him?

Vocabulary

Gnarled, rogue, bayou, beckoning, baying, wharf, desperation, pitiable, poached, prehistoric, domain, denizens, fens, venomous, pirogue, eddies, fuse, pelts, stagnant.



Chapters 11-20

Summary

In Chapter 11, the Alligator King's age is unknown because there are no records. He has spent his years learning how to hunt and kill his prey, while growing to be 100 feet in length. Gar Face is one of the few who knows where the alligator lives. Another who knows about the alligator is Grandmother Moccasin. The alligator tells Grandmother, who is much older, that her time is coming.

In Chapter 12, Ranger, a bloodhound, has a keen sense of smell and a good sense of hearing. He has become familiar with the sounds of Gar Face's truck and knows how long it will take the man to get home before the cat needs to be out of sight. He's familiar with the sound of the man's rifle. Now, he hears the sound of the calico cat's purr. As he realizes how lonely he has been, Ranger begins telling the cat stories. She tells her stories as well, and the two remind each other of the good times they had.

Leaning against Ranger's chest, the calico cat has her kittens. The two silver kittens, a boy and girl, are almost identical with the exception of a crescent moon shaped white patch on the boy's forehead. When the kittens grow, Ranger becomes their playmate, as they climb his fur. Ranger is proud of his new family and watches over them carefully.

In Chapter 13, as the loblolly pine loses its branches, the jar trapped in its roots begins to work loose.

In Chapter 14, Grandmother Moccasin lived in the open seas until she discovered the dark, protective atmosphere of the bayou. The other snakes in the area called to her, referring to her as sister. She has been in the bayou long enough that the others call her Grandmother.

In Chapter 15, the Alligator King has filled up on turtles and will later feast on a wounded mink and fish, his primary food. He prefers land creatures, however.

In Chapter 16, Ranger and the calico cat name the kittens. For the girl, they decide on Sabine, after the silver Sabine River. For the boy, they choose Puck, fitting for the boy's mischievous attitude.

In Chapter 17, as the trees spread the message of the new boy and girl kitten, Grandmother remembers another daughter. She is angry as she thinks of the daughter who was stolen from her as she slept.

In Chapter 18, the only place Sabine and Puck know is the Underneath. It is where they play, sleep, and eat. Their mother and Ranger warn them to stay in the Underneath where they will be safe. Some days Gar Face feeds Ranger; but, on other days he forgets. On these days the calico cat hunts for food for the both of them. Ranger wishes he could join the cat in her hunts but wonders how far he could go in his condition.



In Chapter 19, the trees in the forest, like the old loblolly pine, have been home to many animals. While many of these animals have come and gone, Grandmother is still at home in her jar entangled in the roots of the tree.

In Chapter 20, the trees can remember back when Grandmother was not in jar. She was napping outside on the backs of alligators, including the Alligator King. She and the alligator share a special friendship, but Grandmother wants a friend of her own kind. She watches the Caddo in their village. She remembers turning her back on her reptile family and becoming a human in order to devote herself to a man who later betrayed her. Because of his betrayal, she chose to turn back into a serpent. She knew that she could never change back into a human; but, she was happy with her decision. Now, still in her jar, Grandmother remembers the man who stole her daughter.

Analysis

The trees continue to be important characters/objects in this novel as they are the ones who have been around for the hundreds of years it has taken from the Alligator King to grow from a baby to a huge monster. The trees whisper stories to one another about the news of the kittens' birth, news of Ranger's new friend, and news of the kittens' names. They also whisper the news to one another that Grandmother is waking up. As the loblolly tree above Grandmother slowly deteriorates, the jar in which she is trapped becomes looser and looser within its roots. It seems the coming demise of the old tree may spell freedom for the ancient snake.

Meanwhile, Ranger and the calico cat share their stories. They become fast friends. The cat's purr is a comforting, friendly sound that helps Ranger remember how much he needs friendship. When the calico has her kittens, Ranger feels as if he has his own family. He watches over them carefully, his attention to the kittens compared to the way in which the stars watch over the Earth, the way the Pharaohs watched the Nile and the way the beach watches the sea.

The moon and its light seem to be significant features in the novel as the calico cat's kittens are born on a moonlit night. One of the kittens, the boy, has a white patch on his forehead that looks like a crescent moon. The image of the crescent moon is repeated in the description of the jar in which Grandmother is trapped. There are 100 crescent moons pressed into the edge of the jar near the lip. In a final reference to the moon, when naming the kittens, Ranger decides Sabine is a good name for the girl as the Sabine River is said to be full of moonbeams.

Rules are stressed in this novel. Two of the rules are included in these chapters. One is directed to the kittens. They are to stay in the Underneath – the space under the house – in order to stay safe. The second rule relates to enchanted creatures. This rule states that an enchanted creature can only take human form once in its life.

The repeated phrase “do not” occurs often in the novel. In Chapter 14, for instance, the narrator warns the reader not to look into Grandmother's “mouth of cotton.” This



warning is underscored or stressed by the addition two-word sentence repeating “do not.” This same technique is used in Chapter 6 as a warning to stay out of Gar Face’s way and again in Chapter 18 when the kittens are warned to stay in the Underneath “Do not leave the safety of the Underneath! Do not, under any circumstances, go out into the Open.”

More information is shared about Grandmother in this section of the novel. She is angry over the loss of her own daughter, a daughter she believes was stolen from her while she slept. She seems to believe there is a price to be paid for the disappearance of her daughter, a price that will be paid soon. She had lived in the open oceans before she came to make her home in the bayou.

She and the huge alligator, known as the Alligator King, become fast friends, catching food for each other and napping together in the afternoon. Although she has the Alligator King as her friend, she wishes there was a creature that was like her with whom she could be friends.

Discussion Question 1

What sort of creature is Grandmother? Why is her unique lineage important?

Discussion Question 2

What roles do the trees play in the novel? Why is the loblolly pine important?

Discussion Question 3

So far, what rules have been discussed in the novel?

Vocabulary

Cagey, lair, imperceptible, venture, native, languid, lineage.



Chapters 21-28

Summary

In Chapter 21, the story goes back in time. The young Gar Face is wandering in the woods for days after he runs away from home. He's eating grass and worms because he isn't able to hit any animals with his gun. Finally, he hits a deer with his last bullet. Instead of falling to the ground, the deer runs. Gar Face chases the deer with hatred, the same hatred that he feels for his mother and father. He decides to strike a bargain based on his hatred. If he finds the deer, he will make his home in the bayou. If not, he knows he will die of hunger. He finds the deer, falling down beside it and laughing. In her jar, Grandmother Moccasin listens to the bargain and mutters to herself about the price of a bargain.

In Chapter 22, the story reverts to the present. The calico cat is spending more and more time hunting as her babies are growing and need solid food instead of just milk. She knows that eventually she must teach the kittens to hunt for themselves.

In Chapter 23, the kittens grow and play. Sabine surprise attacks Puck, and he returns the attack. They believe their lives are just perfect.

In Chapter 24, the story once again goes back in time to one thousand years ago when Grandmother was lonely. One day while basking on a stump, Grandmother is greeted by a small snake who calls her mother. The small snake, who is a carbon copy of Grandmother, says that she has been looking for her.

In Chapter 25, Grandmother does not know her own origin, so it does not occur to her to question the origin of the small snake. The two spend their days and nights together. Grandmother names the small snake Night Song for her surprising gift of song. All the creatures and trees of the forest are entranced by Night Song's music. In the present, Grandmother's eyes glow in her prison. Not far away, the Alligator floats, believing he will see Grandmother again soon.

In Chapter 26, the story reverts to the present time as Gar Face sits in a hidden, out of the way tavern and listens to the other men tell hunting stories. He thinks of the Alligator King and believes that soon he will have the best story of all to tell.

In Chapter 27, Ranger watches over the kittens as if they were his own. He sings a song to them, promising to watch over them.

In Chapter 28, the calico cat teaches her kittens to hunt by bringing home live creatures on which they could practice. Sabine chases the creatures her mother brings. Puck doesn't catch on as quickly. He only chases Sabine.



Analysis

Promises become important in this section of the novel. The first promise is the one that Gar Face makes to himself and to the bayou. He says that if he is able to find the deer which he hit with his last bullet, he will make his home in the bayou for the rest of his life. The second promise made is the one made by Ranger. He promises the kittens that he will watch over them. As Grandmother waits for her freedom to come, she thinks to herself about the price that must be paid when one makes promises and bargains. Also in reference to the idea of promises, notice the promise that Ranger makes to the kittens as he sings them to sleep each night. In his song he promises to always be right there and to always look over them.

In this section of the novel, more of Gar Face's background is learned. It tells how he had made a bargain many years ago to stay in the bayou and make it his home if he found a deer he had shot. He found the deer and staked his claim in the bayou. Since the day when Gar Face first made his promise to make his life on the bayou, one of his favorite spots to hang out is in a bar hidden deep in the woods. He has no friends there. He keeps to himself and listens to the other men share hunting stories. He hopes one day he will be able to tell the story of killing the Alligator King.

Beginning in Chapter 23, it appears that Sabine will be the better hunter of the two kittens. She is compared to the fighting species of wild cats of whom all cats are descendants. These wild cats to which Sabine is compared include the mountain lion, the snow leopard, and the Siberian Tiger. When their mother begins bringing live prey to the kittens in the Underneath, it is Sabine who catches onto the idea of hunting quicker than Puck. Sabine's ability to catch onto hunting more quickly than her brother will be significant later in the novel.

From the images of the kittens playing together in Chapter 23, the novel takes a turn as the narrator goes back in time a thousand years to Grandmother Moccasin when she has no relatives. From out of nowhere comes a small snake, just like Grandmother, who becomes her companion. Grandmother names her new daughter Night Song. The name comes from the small snake's ability to sing, just like the sirens. Her songs have no words, just a beautiful melody that she sings to the creatures of the forest each night. In return, they love her because of the song that she sings to them.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Night Song's name?

Discussion Question 2

To what types of creatures is Sabine compared? Why is she compared to these creatures?



Discussion Question 3

Research one or more of the enchanted beings discussed in Chapter 25. Why is Grandmother's identity as a lamia significant? From where do you think Night Song might have come?

Vocabulary

Brackish, obliterated, tarry, alleviate, spawn, mariners, cartographers, peccaries, ocelot.



Chapters 29-40

Summary

In Chapter 29, the different types of snakes are described, but a special warning is given against the moccasin with a cottonmouth, like Grandmother, as she has jaws like a trap that can take a finger off.

In Chapter 30, the kittens see firsthand what happens when a rat gets in front of Gar Face and his gun. When the rat is shot, it becomes apparent that the rule instructing the kittens not to get in front of Gar Face and his gun is a good one. The rule to stay in the Underneath is also a good one. Also repeated in this chapter is the rule that enchanted creatures can only exist in their human form once.

In Chapter 31, one morning while Sabine, Ranger, Puck's mother are still sleeping, Puck runs out from under the porch to explore the sunshine. He enjoys it so much he decides to run back and tell Sabine. He runs straight into Gar Face's hands.

In Chapter 32, the calico cat wakes and hears Puck cry. She runs out after him, and Gar Face grabs her as well. He ties them both into a burlap bag and throws them into the back of his truck. They drive off to a place near water. Ranger howls and pulls against his chain in his attempt to save the two.

In Chapter 33, Puck's mother makes a point of pouring out her love for him, Sabine, and Ranger in her last moments. She seems to get a glimpse of the future and tells Puck he has to promise to go back for his sister and Ranger. She warns him that Ranger will die if he doesn't find some way to break his chain.

In Chapter 34, Puck and his mother feel as if they are flying in the bag. Then, they are surrounded by water. Puck's mother tells him to swim as she claws against the opening of the bag. He is pushed upward through the opening and thinks his mother is right behind him. Puck can hear her telling him to swim. He doesn't know his mother's paw has gotten tangled in a thread from the bag.

In Chapter 35, the calico cat hears the voice of the hummingbird telling her that Puck is safe. She is suddenly sorry she has asked Puck for such a big promise, but the bird tells her she can't go back.

In Chapter 36, legend has it that the hummingbird can go between the land of the dead and the land of the living. She is called a rainbow bird because of the way she glimmers in the sun. In reality, the hummingbird has been searching for a particular person for a long time.

In Chapter 37, hundreds of years prior, the Caddo lived on the banks of the creek Little Sorrowful. Now, Puck crawls from this same creek and looks around for his mother. All he sees is a hummingbird. He realizes he is alone for the first time in his life. His sense



of loss makes him cry. Inside her jar, Grandmother understands loss, but she warns there is a price.

In Chapter 38, Ranger pulls against his chain until his neck is raw. Gar Face pulls the dog out from under the porch when he returns and kicks him. When Ranger crawls back under the house, Sabine tries to comfort him.

In Chapter 39, Sabine misses her brother and mother, but realizes that she must take charge of hunting for food for herself and Ranger. She decides to go out as soon it is dark. First, she tries to comfort Ranger.

In Chapter 40, if Grandmother had known the stories of the trees, she would have known about Hawk Man. Hawk Man listens to the songs of the Caddo and watches them as they work. He also hears Night Song's music.

Analysis

These chapters, particularly Chapters 31-37 serve as a turning point in the novel. Puck has broken the rule. He has allowed the sun to lure him out from the Underneath and has been spotted by Gar Face. In her attempt to save her baby, the calico cat has also been captured by the cruel man. Puck is able to escape from the bag after Gar Face throws him and his mother in the creek, but his mother's foot gets tangled in a thread from the bag. The bag, heavy with water, pulls her down and she drowns. Puck is suddenly all on his own.

Puck realizes his actions have led to his mother's death. Overwhelming him even more is his promise to his mother that he will go back for Sabine and Ranger. In the text it is indicated that a promise is sacred to a cat. In her dying moments, the calico cat realizes asking her baby to make this promise was too much for him, but there is no way for her to take her request back. At this point in the novel, Puck is alone with no shelter and no friends. He has just lost his mother and has never had to take care of himself before. His situation seems very dire.

Meanwhile, Ranger howls and pulls at his chain until his neck and throat are raw. He is heartbroken that Gar Face has taken away his friend and her kitten. Even with all his desperate attempts, however, he is unable to break the chain or pull it loose. He finally lies under the house where Sabine tries to comfort him. Just as she had been more serious about learning to hunt than Puck, Sabine takes a serious look at her situation and realizes she must try to take care of Ranger. She knows she'll need to provide food for the both of them. She plans to follow her mother's example and go out hunting only when she knows Gar Face is asleep or away from the house. In the meantime, she makes comforting Ranger her priority.

For emphasis, three of the rules that have already been noted in the novel are repeated. In Chapter 30, the kittens watch as Gar Face kills a rat with his gun. The rule instructing them to not get between Gar Face and his gun is repeated, as well as the rule for them to stay in the Underneath. Puck, however, breaks this rule and puts his family in danger.



A third rule, that enchanted creatures can take their human form only once is also repeated. It is assumed the significance of this rule will develop in coming chapters. It is noted that while Grandmother knew about this rule, Night Song did not. This bit of information foreshadows a coming instance where Grandmother will use this rule about enchanted creatures against Night Song.

A character who will become a central figure in the novel is introduced in these chapters. The hummingbird consoles the calico cat in its death, telling her that her kitten is safe. This tiny, fast flying bird is described as being a messenger between the world of the living and the world of the dead. She escorts the calico cat to her final rest. When Puck looks back over his shoulder at the creek, he is expecting to see his mother following him. Instead, he sees only the hummingbird hovering over the water.

There are two things of importance in this section to keep in mind about the hummingbird. The hummingbird is described as glimmering. This will become important in later chapters. Also, the hummingbird is described as being on the lookout for someone. The text notes she has been looking for this person for a very long time.

Discussion Question 1

Research the roles of the hummingbird in Native American legend. Discuss the different stories made up about the tiny bird.

Discussion Question 2

What is the price Puck must pay when he breaks a rule in this section of the novel? Do you find this level of severity for breaking a rule disturbing in a book intended for children?

Discussion Question 3

What is Sabine's role in this section of the novel? Although they are said to look alike, in what ways are Sabine and Puck different?

Vocabulary

Nimble, reveled, electrified, remorse, enormity, conjure, predator.



Chapters 41-50

Summary

In Chapter 41, Puck listens for the sounds of his family. All he hears is the sound of loss. Loss is a word that Grandmother understands.

In Chapter 42, the story returns to an earlier time when Grandmother was swimming through the bayous. Hawk Man saw Night Song and was smitten by her even though the other birds warned him to fly away.

In Chapter 43, the story from the past continues with how Night Song was happy with Grandmother until the young girl grew older and restless. She wanted to have an adventure of her own. During a solitary trek while Grandmother was napping, Night Song saw Hawk Man for the first time.

In Chapter 44, while her mother slept, Night Song slipped down the tree and went to Hawk Man. They both took on their human forms. The trees knew Grandmother would not be happy, so they caused the Zephyrs of Sleep to fall upon all of the forest creatures, including Grandmother, to allow the couple to slip away.

In Chapter 45, the story returns to the present as Puck stands on the bank of the creek, he wonders where his mama is now. He listens to the creek and watches the water go by, and he realizes he will never see her again. He listens for Ranger's baying to help him get a sense of direction, but he doesn't hear it.

Remembering the lesson that he will be safe in the Underneath, Puck curls up to sleep in the space beneath the old loblolly pine. He is above Grandmother, with whom he has so much in common, including the fact they are missing loved ones.

In Chapter 46, the trees know about missing as well. They also know about revenge, like the revenge Grandmother wanted to get on Hawk Man for taking Night Song away from her. She stews in her anger, eats, and grows until her body is as big as a tree trunk. Even the Alligator asks her to find another way, but she will not.

In Chapter 47, Gar Face found the tilting house one day when he and Ranger were coon hunting. It continues to tilt even when Gar Face takes up residence there. It is almost as if it wants to escape from Gar Face by sinking into the ground.

In Chapter 48, Sabine was a witness to her brother's act of rebellion, then the capture of her brother and mother by Gar Face. She watches as Ranger rubs his neck raw trying to pull free from his chain. She curls up beside him and purrs, the only thing she can think to do for him. She knows he won't live much longer on the chain.

In Chapter 49, even though some who have suffered a great loss don't remember their loss severely, this was not the case with Puck. He wakes up missing his mother, sister,



and hound. He tries to clean the mud from his fur, but he is only successful in upsetting himself. He knows he needs to find dinner, but he has the hiccups and can't sneak up on his prey.

In Chapter 50, in their human forms, Night Song and Hawk Man join the Caddo village.

Analysis

Notice the way the author threads together the ending of Chapter 40 to the beginning of Chapter 41 through the image of listening. Hawk Man is listening to Night Song's melody with desire and yearning. Similarly, Puck is listening for hints of his family's whereabouts with a different type of desire and yearning. This same intent listening ties the two together across a thousand years. Next, Puck's situation is tied to that of the creature trapped in a jar beneath the pine tree. They both share and understand the feeling of loss. Puck mourns the loss of his family and life as he knew it. Even one thousand years later, Grandmother still mourns the loss of her daughter. Grandmother's loss has made her revengeful and angry.

In these chapters, it is learned how Grandmother's daughter "betrayed" her. This betrayal was not really a betrayal so much as it was the reality of Night Song growing up and falling in love. Remember that Grandmother already holds a deep hatred for humans because of the man who said he loved her and then really did betray her by running off with another woman. Now, Grandmother equates Hawk Man with the man who hurt her so badly years prior. In her eyes, Hawk Man is the enemy. She is blind to how much love her daughter has for him and how happy they are together. She is only able, at this point, to recognize her own loss. Luckily for Hawk Man and Night Song, the trees recognize the couple's love for one another and cause the Zephyrs of Sleep to fall on the entire forest, including Grandmother, so the two can take on their human forms and sneak away together. Note in Chapter 44 it is indicated that trees are the champions of love and will do whatever they can to help it.

The pieces of the story begin to come together as Puck finds shelter in the loblolly pine tree, above where Grandmother's jar is wedged. The author paints the picture of the kitten sleeping above the jar containing the centuries old serpent, and notes the two are similar because they have family members that they miss. The author then uses this thread of missing to weave the story back one thousand years to the ancient Caddo villages, now missed by the trees, where Night Song and Hawk Man found a home.

Homes are significant in this section of the novel as it is indicated that Gar Face made the tilting house his home when he came upon it one day in the woods. Like everything else Gar Face has, it isn't really his, he just decided he wanted it. He took the rifle from his father, he stole Ranger from a nearby farm, and now he's squatting in a house to which he doesn't have rights. It is indicated in the novel that even the house seems ashamed to provide shelter for Gar Face as it seems to be trying to slip below ground level. Puck, meanwhile, finds a temporary home in the loblolly pine. Through all the



years it has been standing, it now gives shelter to one lonely kitten. It is with the Caddo that Night Song and Hawk Man find a home.

Notice the way the author plays with the word “never” in Chapter 45. It is almost like she is using the technique of personification except instead of having person-like qualities, never is given the substance like qualities of being able to surround Puck, filling up his eyes, ears, and nose, just as the water in the creek had done moments earlier.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the idea of homes of presented in this section of the novel. What is significant about finding a home?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way the ideas of loneliness and missing are used in this section of the novel.

Discussion Question 3

How do the trees know Grandmother will be unhappy when she wakes and finds Night Song gone?

Vocabulary

Smitten, dwell, inseparable, betrayal, avian, soughing, solace, timbre, conjured, fitful, eons, vengeance, berth, inhabited, moorings, encased, travails, traipsed.



Chapters 51-58

Summary

In Chapter 51, Night Song and Hawk Man soon have a baby girl. The girl seems to glimmer.

In Chapter 52, Night Song learns to make jars. On each of her jars, she etches a hummingbird. On the jar that holds Grandmother, however, there is no hummingbird.

In Chapter 53, Sabine wants to leave Gar Face's home but she will not do so without Ranger. One day, however, she plans to find some way to free Ranger and leave that place.

In Chapter 54, Gar Face wonders if the alligator he believes he's seen evidence of actually exists. It is the alligators that give Gar Face the best challenge in the hunt. Their skins are also worth the most money. More than the money, Gar Face wants to see the jealousy on the faces of the men who turn away from him when he walks into the bar. As Gar Face looks into the water below his boat, he wonders if there really is a one hundred foot alligator down there. Meanwhile, if he had looked at his kerosene lantern hanging over his boat, he would have seen the hummingbird there.

In Chapter 55, as Puck wonders if the sun had betrayed him, he decides to scare it by hissing. He doesn't succeed in scaring the sun, but he does get rid of his hiccups. As he listens to the unusual sounds of the forest, he wonders why he doesn't hear Ranger's howl. The sound of the creek makes suddenly realize that Sabine and Ranger are on the other side of the creek.

In Chapter 56, after Night Song and Hawk Man have been together for ten years, Grandmother decides to make her move. The Alligator King warns her she must tell Night Song she will not be able to return to her human form if she decides to change back into a serpent. Grandmother promises to do so.

In Chapter 57, as Puck tries to find himself some food, he realizes that Sabine was the better hunter between the two of them. Puck lies in the sun and remembers the way Sabine had hunted. A bird almost grabs him as he lies but Puck runs to his lair under the tree. Puck yowls at the bird and is surprised when it flies away. Puck cowers under the tree until he realizes has to get something to eat. When he pokes his nose out of the tree, he sees a freshly killed mouse the bird must have dropped when he scared it. Puck "kills" the mouse again then eats his fill. As he curls up to go to sleep, a hawk is watching him from a tree branch.

In Chapter 58, Night Song decides to make a jar for her daughter as the child approaches her tenth birthday. She presses her nail into the rim of the jar, making a crescent moon pattern. After the jar has been fired, Night Song etches a design into it.



She is surprised when she finishes and realizes the design is that of Grandmother Moccasin. The sight of her mother sparks a yearning in Night Song to see her mother.

Analysis

The pieces of the story given thus far continue to come together. Hawk Man and Night Song are happy in their home among the Caddo with their new daughter, but Grandmother is still determined to get revenge. It appears that the alligator, the same Alligator King that Gar Face hopes to kill, has tried to convince Grandmother that the way she wants to go about getting her revenge is wrong. In previous chapters he's cautioned her to find another way. In Chapter 56, the alligator makes Grandmother promise that she will tell Night Song that she cannot return to her human form if she chooses to turn back into a serpent. It would appear that it is this promise that has caused so much pain for Grandmother through all of the years she's been trapped in the jar.

In reference to the jar in which Grandmother is trapped, it would appear from the description of the jar that Night Song has made for her daughter that it is this very jar in which Grandmother is imprisoned. It seems that as Night Song made the jar for her daughter, her hands took on a life of their own as she etched the image of Grandmother onto the jar. It is noted earlier in the novel that all of Night Song's jars had a hummingbird etched on them somewhere in their design. This lack of a hummingbird on the jar that Night Song made for her daughter underscores the idea that Grandmother might have put some sort of spell on her daughter to etch a design that would remind her of her love for her surrogate mother.

It is in these chapters that the reader finally learns what it is that Gar Face desires. He desires to make a kill on one of his hunts that will make everyone jealous. He believes if he kills this 100-foot alligator that lives in the Little Sorrowful creek, he can make everyone who drinks at the bar that he frequents jealous. Note, however, that as Gar Face makes what he believes is the exciting discovery of his next kill, the hummingbird is flying around the kerosene lantern hanging from a pole on his boat.

Also in this section of chapters it appears that Puck has something more than just a tree watching over him. He is frustrated and itchy because of the mud in his coat and he's hungry because he isn't able to stop hiccupping long enough to sneak up on any prey. He is frightened when a large bird swoops down, thinking it wants to eat him. Instead, the bird leaves a freshly killed mouse near the opening of Puck's den.

Notice also in this section of the novel the infant daughter's act of reaching up and touching her father's chin with her fingers. This action will be repeated later in the novel and will help the reader to recognize one of the changed characters.



Discussion Question 1

Why might it be significant that Grandmother is trapped in the jar that Night Song made for her daughter?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Grandmother told Night Song she would not be able to return to her human form? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the hawk left the mouse for Puck?

Vocabulary

Funerary, haints, tenant, circumference, vitriol, retorted, taut, encroaching, migrating, flint, etch.



Chapters 59-66

Summary

In Chapter 59, Puck has gained success in hunting, but still can't figure a way to get across the creek. As he looks at the other side of the creek, he sees the hummingbird for just a second before it is gone.

In Chapter 60, thousands of years ago, the trees had loved Night Song and her music. As she looks at the jar, she realizes how much she misses Grandmother. In the present, Puck misses his sister, his mother, and Ranger.

In Chapter 61, Ranger thinks of the days he was allowed to share Gar Face's kills with him. He and Gar Face both know Ranger was the best hound in the forest, descended from prize hounds. He'd helped Gar Face trap and kill everything, including a black bear. The only reason he'd let the bobcat go free was because he realized she had kittens. The trees around the tilting house sigh as Ranger pulls at his chain and misses his friend and his boy kitten.

In Chapter 62, Gar Face had been happy with Ranger at first, after he'd stolen him from a farm. When the dog keeps him from killing the bobcat, however, Gar Face believes he's been betrayed by the dog. He keeps the dog only as a reminder that he should trust no living thing.

In Chapter 63, when Night Song gives her daughter the jar, the daughter asks about Grandmother. Night Song tells her daughter where Grandmother can be found. She also tells the girl that if she ever needs help, she can go to Grandmother and she will help her.

In Chapter 64, even though Grandmother has never seen Night Song in her human form, she recognizes her right away. She sees Night Song's daughter and recognizes that she has the enchantment as well, which is proved by her glimmering skin. Grandmother realizes she can't force Night Song away from her husband and daughter, but she still doesn't plan to tell her she can't return to her human skin again if she changes back to a serpent. Grandmother doesn't see this as a betrayal on her part.

In Chapter 65, Puck's days settle into a pattern of hunting and napping. He wakes one night and sees the moon for the first time. On the other side of the creek, he sees possums playing. He watches as the mother bathes her babies and wishes he had his own family to help him clean his fur. At the tilting house, Sabine looks at the crescent moon at the same time, and misses her brother.

In Chapter 66, while Grandmother watched Night Song, Hawk Man and her granddaughter hug each other. She might have felt joy for the child if she had not been so angry and more wise. Although she could have chosen love, she instead continues to want her daughter all to herself. She hums, calling the snakes to her. Even though



they warn her of the price she will pay, she continues to hum, calling Night Song. The song pulls Night Song to the creek, away from her husband and daughter.

Analysis

One of the themes in this novel is that of betrayal. It has already been determined that Grandmother feels as if Night Song betrayed her by falling in love and choosing to marry. It appears that betrayal has also become a factor in the relationship between Gar Face and Ranger. The dog had not always lived his life chained to Gar Face's porch. Gar Face had stolen the dog from a neighboring farm to help him on his hunts. Ranger had enjoyed helping his master on his hunts and sharing in the spoils. This had all ended when Ranger had stepped between Gar Face and his gun during the hunt for the bobcat. Ranger had protected the cat only because he realized it had kittens. He could not allow Gar Face to kill a mother with babies. Gar Face, however, sees his dog's actions as a betrayal. Hunting and the success of the hunt are the only things that matter to Gar Face. As soon as Ranger interferes with one kill, and Gar Face believes he might interfere with another, Ranger is no longer worth anything to him.

The etching of Grandmother on her daughter's jar not only sparks Night Song's memory of Grandmother, but also prompts questions from her daughter about Grandmother. Night Song tells her daughter that Grandmother knows all the secrets of the forest. She also lets her know that if she ever needs help that Grandmother will be able to help her. Night Song gives her daughter directions on how to go about finding Grandmother.

Grandmother realizes when she arrives at the Caddo village where Night Song and Hawk Man live that they now have a daughter. She recognizes right away that the daughter has the same enchantment as her mother and father. As she watches the three interact, she realizes how much they love one another. Even though she could have chosen to protect and not interfere with the love invested in this small family, she instead goes ahead with her plan to lure Night Song away. It is indicated that she decides not to force Night Song to take back her serpent form, but she still does not see anything wrong with not telling Night Song she can't change back into a human.

The moon is again an important symbol in Chapter 65. One night, Puck wakes and sees the moon. It is the first time he has actually seen it. Proving that Sabine and Puck are not as far apart as they think they are, they both look up at the same moon that night. As he gazes at the moon, Puck does not realize that the crescent moon shaped patch on the top of his head glows.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the idea of betrayal as it is presented in this section of the novel.



Discussion Question 2

Why does Grandmother choose to go ahead with her plan to get Night Song for herself?
What might have changed her mind?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of the moon thus far in the novel.

Vocabulary

Winsome, stance, taut, harbored, cyclical, veneer, reveled, encircled, audible, intoned.



Chapters 67-73

Summary

In Chapter 67, Puck sees the hummingbird occasionally. The loblolly pine, who thinks of the kitten as his now, knows he needs to get to the other side of the creek.

In Chapter 68, the story once again returns to a thousand years ago. Night Hawk is alarmed when he wakes up and notices Night Song is gone. Night Song cries as she knows her husband is looking for her. She feels betrayed and deceived by Grandmother. Grandmother, meanwhile, is not sorry she did not tell Night Song about the rule. She doesn't even care that her daughter is unhappy.

In Chapter 69, Night Song's daughter wakes, hearing the beating of the birds' wings and her father's voice calling. She knows something is wrong. She carries the jar her mother has made for her to the bank of the creek. On the bank of the creek, she finds footprints where she believes her mother walked into the water. She calls for her father.

In Chapter 70, Hawk Man sees an s-shaped print next to the footprints his daughter shows him.

In Chapter 71, the long and loving relationship between trees and cats is detailed. Sabine takes after her long ago relatives in her ability to hunt. Despite her abilities, she still needs her mother, her hound's bay and her brother.

In Chapter 72, hope has sustained Grandmother in her jar. Hope that he was wrong sustained Hawk Man many years ago. Seeing her father's pain, the daughter decides to try to find her and ask for help in getting Night Song back.

In Chapter 73, that night, Night Song's daughter returns to the creek with the jar. She sets the jar on the bank, then walks off into the water, intending to float to find Grandmother. However, she floats too far.

Analysis

In Chapter 67 it appears that the loblolly pine tree and Puck are developing a relationship with one another. The tree thinks of the kitten as his while Puck, likewise, thinks the tree is his. It is indicated the tree also knows its life is short and that it knows that Puck needs to get to the other side of the creek to help his family.

Interesting in this section is the description of the lineage of cats in Chapter 71. It is indicated the trees talk about cats who have been with them since the beginning of time. The trees miss the cats who have become extinct, but the relationship between domestic cats and trees remains. Cats give trees a good scratching when they need it. In return, the trees love to hold the cats in their branches when they sleep. The trees



also love a cat's purrs. Although Sabine has become a hunter of which her ancestors could be proud, Sabine still misses her mother and brother.

Another turning point comes in Chapters 68-70 when Grandmother lures Night Song away from her husband and daughter. Grandmother's ability to lure Night Song to the creek and convince her to take on her serpent form again marks a major change for the small family. Hawk Man knows instantly that his happiness is over when he sees the s-shaped print next to the set of footprints that his daughter shows him. Night Song has taken on her serpent form and is lost to him.

Notice in this section the daughter's feelings when she wakes up alone, with her mother and father both gone. Her situation is very much like Puck's as he is alone without his mother, sister, or hound. One thing that indicates to the girl that something is wrong is the birds. She hears them flapping and flying but does not hear their calls. She hears instead her father calling for her mother. She does not know what is wrong, but remembers her mother telling her that if she needs help, she can go to Grandmother. Without telling anyone, she goes on a quest to find this ancient serpent. Before she leaves her father, she touches his chin, just as she did when she was a baby, hoping to comfort him.

Notice the way the idea of wrong is given substance here just as the idea of never was when Puck first realized his mother was gone forever. The girl feels as if wrong is all around her in the hut where she lived with her parents. This wrong crept up the girl's legs and into her chest, again the idea not so much of personification but of giving the quality a substance and form that can fill a place and make itself known as this wrong does.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the different techniques used by the author thus far. How does she weave the different parts of the story together? How does she ease the transition between the past and the present?

Discussion Question 2

What is the relationship between cats and trees? How does this relationship exist between Puck and the loblolly pine?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Night Song has taken on her serpent form again? What does this mean for her family?

Vocabulary

Bereft, reeked, arbiters, circular, scimitars, prowess, proficiency, intrepid, sustain, chirred, flail.



Chapters 74-82

Summary

In Chapter 74, Gar Face tracks the Alligator King, who toys with the man, changing locations often and not always letting the man know where he was. In her jar, Grandmother remembers all of the names she has been given through the years. Mother is the one that is most precious.

In Chapter 75, Hawk Man is angry with himself for not discussing the rule with Night Song. He sleeps as his daughter slips out of the hut. He thinks of returning to his avian form, but remembers his daughter.

In Chapter 76, the Alligator King enjoys toying with Gar Face, but knows he will make a mistake. Grandmother knows about mistakes and the price they carry.

In Chapter 77, Puck, also, is haunted by the memory of what has happened because of his mistake. As he sits outside his tree den, Puck sees the hummingbird, then the hawk that dropped the mouse. Puck wonders if the bird is angry and hisses in an attempt to scare him off, and then he hides in his den in the tree.

In Chapter 78, the trees knew that when Night Song changed back into a serpent, she would soon die. As soon as Grandmother tells her she can't turn back into a human, Night Song crawls up into the high branches of a tree and refuses to come down, eat or sing. She slowly changes color from black to purple to yellow to transparent and fades into the air.

In Chapter 79, Night Song's daughter floats too far south to find Grandmother. When she steps out of the creek, she sees nothing that looks familiar and wonders where she is.

In Chapter 80, a thousand years later, Puck wonders where he is as well.

In Chapter 81, Night Song is angry when Night Song dies. She begins eating ravenously again. She decides if she can't have Night Song, she'll take her daughter. She goes to the Caddo village but sees only the jar sitting on the creek bank.

In Chapter 82, the birds call to Hawk Man to put his feathers back on but he can't because of his daughter. He continues to sleep for three days. When he finally wakes, he notices his daughter and her jar are gone.

Analysis

Similar to Ranger when Gar Face took away the calico cat and Puck, Hawk Man hollers for his wife until his throat is raw. Ranger's throat was also raw after he barked and



howled when the calico cat and Puck were taken away from him. Puck waits for the hound to bay, hoping to find where Sabine and Ranger are based on the location of his howl, not knowing that Ranger is unable to call.

The idea of making mistakes becomes a recurring theme in this section of the novel. The alligator remembers people before who have tried to catch him. He thinks that they made mistakes because they fell into the quicksand. The Alligator King believes Gar Face will make mistakes as well. Meanwhile, Puck continues to mourn over the mistake that he caused the death of his mother.

Even though Grandmother had believed things would go back to the way they were before Night Song left, they don't. Instead of being happy being back with Grandmother, Night Song is devastated when she learns she can't go back to human skin. She crawls into a tree where she refuses to eat or sing. She eventually fades away until she is gone. Instead of learning from her mistake, Grandmother is even angrier after Night Song dies. She decides that since she can't have Night Song, she will take her daughter. She doesn't realize that Night Song's daughter has gone looking for her.

Meanwhile, Hawk Man is angry both with himself and with Night Song. He realized when he first saw the s-shaped print beside his wife's footprints that she had taken back her serpent form. He tries to think back and remember if he ever warned Night Song that if she took her serpent form back, she could not return to her human form. He isn't sure if his wife has betrayed him or if she simply didn't know the rules. As he wonders what might have happened to Night Song, the birds flock around him trying to encourage him to turn back into a bird. He refuses to do so because he does not want to leave his daughter.

Discussion Question 1

Why does it make a difference to Hawk Man if Night Song knew the rules for creatures of enchantment?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Night Song's daughter go on the search for grandmother?

Discussion Question 3

Why do the birds want Hawk Man to go back to his avian form? Why does Hawk Man refuse to do so?

Vocabulary

Crevices, tribute, solitary, awry, taunting, ravenous, binging, careening, fastidious, vigil.



Chapters 83-89

Summary

In Chapter 83, Puck continues to think of a way to get across the creek. He sees some turtles riding down the creek on a log. He thinks he can perhaps jump onto the log and ride until it goes to the other side of the creek. When he jumps on the log, however, it spins and goes under the water. Puck is dunked in the water. Although he coat is cleaned of the last of the mud, Puck doesn't make it to the other side of the creek. As he dries off, Puck sees the hummingbird again.

In Chapter 84, back one thousand years ago, Grandmother spots the jar sitting on the side of the creek. She admires it, and then becomes angry when she remembers it was made by Night Song, the daughter who betrayed her twice. She wants to destroy the jar but when she moves to strike it, she is grabbed from behind by Hawk Man and stuffed into the jar. During the fight, he is struck by Grandmother's tail and poison enters his blood. He buries the jar and does not notice a pinecone swept into the hole as well. This pinecone gives birth to the loblolly pine tree.

In Chapter 85, the Alligator repeatedly bumps Gar Face's boat one night while he's out hunting. When the boat begins to spin, it scares Gar Face to the point he cries out. It has been twenty-five years since he killed his first deer in the woods. That was the last time he felt this much fear. When the boat stops spinning, it comes to rest on the shore. Gar Face takes a deep drink of his vodka and lies down on the ground to ease his nausea.

In Chapter 86, Sabine and Ranger worry when Gar Face does not return at his normal time.

In Chapter 87, Puck continues to wonder why he hasn't heard Ranger's howl. He begins to believe something terrible has happened. As he worries, he hears squirrels. Puck watches as they jump from branch to branch across the creek. Meanwhile, Grandmother waits in her jar.

In Chapter 88, Gar Face wakes up burned by the sun and bitten by mosquitoes. He's angry because he can't hear Ranger howling. At the house, he sees Sabine under the porch, believing she is a rat. He throws Ranger some food. As he is on the verge of sleep, her realizes what he saw was a cat. He believes he can use it as bait.

In Chapter 89, the trees know about traps, the same that Gar Face has planned for Sabine. Although Grandmother's memory is long, she has no memory of anything that has happened since she's been in the jar.



Analysis

While the majority of the chapters in this book have been very short, some just a page or two, Chapters 83-85 are some of the longest in the novel. It is in one of these chapters, Chapter 84, that the reader finally learns how Grandmother came to be in the jar the Night Song made for her daughter. It appears that when Grandmother came in search of her granddaughter, she found the jar unattended. Although it is not known how Hawk Man recognized Grandmother or knew she was responsible for the disappearance of his wife, he knows who she is right away. He believes that she knows not only what happened to Night Song, but also what happened to his daughter. Hawk Man stuffs Grandmother into the jar before she can respond to his questions. Trouble comes for Hawk Man because Grandmother slashes him with her tail before he is able to cram her in the jar and he is infected by her poison.

Interestingly, it is Grandmother's imprisonment in the jar that marks the beginning of the loblolly tree under which Puck takes refuge. Hawk Man did not notice when he buried the jar holding Grandmother beneath the ground beside the creek that a pinecone fell into the hole along with the jar. Notice Hawk Man's words to Grandmother when he crams her in the jar, and then buries her. He tells her that her time has come. Notice that in prior chapters of the novel, Grandmother and the Alligator King have both referenced that her time was coming. This time to which they refer, however, is the time that she will escape and be free from the jar.

It is the alligator that sets things in motion for Sabine to be spotted by Gar Face. Gar Face is drinking and boating, hoping to catch a glimpse of the alligator. He is frightened badly when the alligator catches his boat, begins rocking it, and then spins it. Gar Face is so relieved when he is finally out of the boat and on solid ground that he takes a long drink of his alcohol and lies down. The sun is already up when he finally wakes up. He's already in a bad mood when he gets home sunburned and mosquito bitten. He thinks at first he's seen a rat, but realizes just as he's about to go to sleep that it was instead a cat that he saw under his front porch. He decides to use the cat as bait for the alligator.

Of interest in this section is that it is noted that while Grandmother has a long memory, she has no way of knowing what has transpired since she's been in the jar. She doesn't know that Night Song's daughter was lost and left wandering in the woods.

Meanwhile, Puck continues to try to find a way to cross the creek. Even though he hasn't heard Ranger, he believes his family is on the other side of the creek. He sees some turtles floating on a stick and decides to try to float on the stick as well. This plan doesn't work. At the closing of these chapters, Puck is watching squirrels as they jump from branch to branch across the creek. It can be assumed that Puck might try crossing the creek in this way in coming chapters.

Note also Puck's purring as he sits by the creek and thinks of his sister. He has improved so much in his hunting skill that he believes that Sabine would be proud of him. He purrs as he thinks of her. The relationship between trees and cats has already been discussed. Here, it is described that to a tree, a cat's purring is the equivalent of



praying. To the loblolly pine, Puck's purr is translated to his prayer that he will be able to get across the creek and reunite with his sister and hound.

Discussion Question 1

How does Grandmother wind up in the jar? What mistakes does she make that gets her put there?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Puck unable to float on the log like the turtles did? Do you think he will have better success jumping from branch to branch like the squirrels?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Gar Face's fear when the alligator begins playing with his boat? Do you think Gar Face has the ability to kill the alligator? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Tacking, simplicity, consolation, sinewy, ploy, toying, salve, harbored, compensated, nemesis, beacon, agape, vanished, solitary, sallow, fetid, carnivorous, transpired, entombed.



Chapters 90-98

Summary

In Chapter 90, Grandmother doesn't know what happened to Hawk Man. He waited for his daughter to return as he suffered with the poison. The villagers brought him food and birds begged him to return to his bird form so he could survive. The hummingbird comes for him, brushing his chin with her wing and telling him it was his time. When the villagers return the next time to bring him food, all they find are feathers.

In Chapter 91, the daughter walks until she is out of the woods and in a meadow. She knows she will never see her mother again. She reaches up to the air and the birds call out to her to come to them. She becomes covered with rainbow colored feathers, then flies quickly away. In her jar, Grandmother wishes she could hear Night Song's music or see her granddaughter again.

In Chapter 92, Gar Face returns to his normal schedule. One day as he is sitting on the porch cleaning his gun, he, Sabine and Ranger see a hummingbird. Gar Face shoots at it. Sabine cringes when she hears the gun.

In Chapter 93, Puck tries to cross the creek as the squirrels do, by jumping from branch to branch. Just as he's about to try to jump to another branch, Gar Face's rifle goes off. Puck lets go of the branch.

In Chapter 94, the Alligator King knows something has changed with the man. He also recognizes that rain is coming.

In Chapter 95, even the loblolly pine knows a strong storm is coming.

In Chapter 96, Gar Face finally leaves the house to go drink. Both Sabine and Ranger are relieved, as they haven't had much food. When she goes out, Sabine knows rain is coming as well.

In Chapter 97, Puck falls and lands on the bank of the creek. He has vague memories of his mother and the promise he made to her before he passes out.

In Chapter 98, as the rain begins, Sabine returns from her hunt with only a small lizard. Gar Face listens to the other men brag about their own conquests as he thinks about the Alligator King. Even in her jar, Grandmother knows there is a storm coming.

Analysis

The author makes one of her seamless transitions from Grandmother in her jar in the present to Hawk Man and his predicament 1,000 years earlier. In this instance she ends Chapter 88 with the idea that Grandmother doesn't know what has happened in the



world since she's been trapped in the jar. In Chapter 89 she picks up the thought and weaves back into Hawk Man's story using the idea that Grandmother doesn't know what has happened to him either as the transition point.

It is in these chapters that the reader learns that the hummingbird that has been appearing throughout the novel has been the daughter of Night Song and Hawk Man in her avian form. The first clue to this has been that the girl glimmered in the sun. Those who are familiar with hummingbirds know that they also glimmer in the sun. The clue that should let the reader know beyond all doubt that the hummingbird is the little girl is her actions when she goes to Hawk Man, lying on the side of the creek. The hummingbird brushes his chin with her wing. This is the same action made by the little girl when she was a baby, then again her motion of comfort when she left her father to go in search of Grandmother.

After the story of the daughter's transition into the hummingbird is told, the tone of the story becomes more tense. Sabine doesn't know that Gar Face has his sights on her and plans to trap her. He becomes even more frustrated with Ranger as he watches the cat go out day after day and bring food back for the dog. He plans to use the kitten to lure the Alligator King onto the land where he believes he will have the advantage over the old alligator.

The hummingbird appears again at Gar Face's tilted house. It is seen by both Ranger and the man. It is known at this point that a hummingbird is a sign of coming death. To the reader, the fact that both Ranger and Gar Face have seen the bird possibly foreshadows the upcoming death of someone.

Meanwhile, Puck tries again to cross the creek. This time he tries to imitate the squirrels as they jump from branch to branch. But, he is too heavy, and the slender branches buck under his weight. Puck lets go of the branch entirely when Gar Face shoots his gun at the hummingbird that has appeared in his yard.

In the final chapters of this section, the trees, the Alligator King, Gar Face, Ranger, Sabine, and even Grandmother (in her jar) recognize that a storm is coming. The storm is described as being a dangerous one, one that no one will want to be out in. It could be that the coming storm is not only a storm in nature with wind and rain, but also the storm of the showdown between Gar Face and the alligator, as well as the culmination of the stories.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author build a sense of tension in this section of chapters?

Discussion Question 2

Before it was known for sure that Night Song and Hawk Man's daughter had turned into a hummingbird, what clues were given that she had become this bird?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Hawk Man refuse to take on his avian form even though this is the only way he will survive? What changes his mind?

Vocabulary

Buffeted, rancid, foliage, nigh, impending, anecdotes.



Chapters 99-105

Summary

In Chapter 99, Gar Face leaves the bar and goes to what he refers to as his “victory meadow,” the place where he killed his first deer.

In Chapter 100, the rain wakes Puck. He runs for his den under the tree. The rain seems to be reminding Puck of his promise. Grandmother remembers her promise as well. Meanwhile, the creek begins to rise.

In Chapter 101, Sabine believes it will be a good day when Gar Face returns the next morning and remembers to feed Ranger. When the door slams again, Sabine joins Ranger at the food dish but they don’t notice Gar Face standing on the steps.

In Chapter 102, as it rains, Sabine becomes absorbed in giving herself a bath. When she curls up for a nap, Gar Face grabs her.

In Chapter 103, Ranger was rolling in the mud and didn’t notice Gar Face grab Sabine. He growls and lunges at Gar Face. Gar Face stumbles and lets go of Sabine, who runs. Gar Face tries to hit Ranger with a board but misses. Ranger bites Gar Face in the leg. When Gar Face goes inside, Ranger begins to howl. Sabine realizes it is a howl of anger and pain.

In Chapter 104, as Puck watches the creek grow to almost double its size, he thinks there will be no way for him to get across it. The creek seems to be reminding him of his sister. As he thinks, a bolt of lightning strikes. Just after, he hears Ranger howl. He tries to get an idea where it is coming from as he realizes it is a howl of anger. He believes something awful has happened and remembers his promise to his mother.

In Chapter 105, Sabine makes up her mind to wait until Gar Face leaves to go drink so she can go to Ranger. Meanwhile, Gar Face comes back out of the house and drags Ranger out. He hits the dog in the head with an old board. Ranger falls. Gar Face unhooks the chain and leads Ranger to the Sabine. Ranger realizes he’s been a good dog for Gar Face. He also realizes he failed in his promise to watch over the calico cat and her kittens. Sabine follows Ranger and Gar Face.

Analysis

In Chapter 101, Sabine believes the day will be a good one when Gar Face fills Ranger’s food bowl. She doesn’t realize that the food is actually a trap that Gar Face has set for the two of them. Notice the way that the author uses a series of questions, pointing out what Sabine doesn’t know, to build up to Gar Face’s act of grabbing the kitten.



Ranger goes into action when he hears Sabine's cry. For the first time since the calico cat and Puck were taken, he growls and howls. His angry cries are heard by Puck, who is taking shelter under the loblolly pine. The sound brings back Puck's promise to his mother that he will go back for his sister and Ranger.

Back at Gar Face's house, Gar Face has let go of Sabine, surprised by Ranger's sudden anger. Ranger sinks his teeth into Gar Face's leg, angering the man further. Gar Face decides to use Ranger as bait instead of Sabine. Sabine has run away from the house but senses in her hiding place that Ranger is in trouble. Gar Face again feels as if he has been betrayed by the dog. Gar Face's one desire in life is to kill the Alligator King. Just as Ranger interfered with Gar Face's desire to kill the bobcat years prior, he has now interfered with the man's plan to make a name for himself by killing the Alligator King. In both instances, however, Ranger has been standing up for another animal that needed to be alive more than Gar Face needed his pride from making a kill. The first time he stands up for a mother bobcat, the second time for his kitten.

The rain falls and the creek rises. Puck watches believing that since it has grown to nearly twice its size, he will never be able to get across it. In reality, the opposite is the case. The rising creek softens the ground in which the roots of the loblolly tree are lodged.

As the book comes to a close the chapters are shorter. The shorter chapters seem to make the book move along more quickly as the story comes to a climax.

Discussion Question 1

The author uses which techniques to make the story build toward its climax?

Discussion Question 2

The author has done quite a bit of building up of the rainstorm. What role do you think this rain will play in Puck's story?

Discussion Question 3

Are Ranger's actions a portrayal of betrayal or of devotion? Are they both? How?

Vocabulary

Bravado, veered, felled, imprints, pelted, prone, cowered, meager, ruse, pungent, interminable.



Chapters 106-113

Summary

In Chapter 106, the rain has softened the ground to the point the loblolly pine falls. Grandmother's jar is brought to the surface and cracked. In fear, Puck runs.

In Chapter 107, Puck realizes he's running away from Ranger's howl and goes back to the tree. He is so hurt by his missing of his family that he almost misses the fact that the tree has made a bridge for him across the creek.

In Chapter 108, in her freedom, Grandmother goes to her old friend, the Alligator. She asks about the daughter but before he can answer, the Alligator smells someone coming. He sinks under the water while Grandmother slithers up a tree to wait and watch.

In Chapter 109, Puck runs across the tree to the other side of the creek.

In Chapter 110, Puck finds the tilting house, but Ranger and Sabine are gone. He finds the bloody puddle where Gar Face hit Ranger. He realizes something horrible has happened and believes it is his fault. Puck follows the blood trail.

In Chapter 111, Gar Face believes the Alligator will not be able to resist the bleeding dog. Ranger keeps his nose to the ground, but all he can smell is the blood from Gar Face's wound.

In Chapter 112, Sabine continues to follow Ranger and Gar Face. Meanwhile, Grandmother waits.

In Chapter 113, Gar Face's leg throbs where Ranger bit him. He takes a drink of his rum to dull the pain. He sits the injured dog next to the creek and waits. Ranger hopes his death will be fast. When Sabine sees that Gar Face has gone to sleep, she curls up next to him. Along with Sabine's purr, Ranger hears the hummingbird.

Analysis

All through the novel, the trees have been described as not only living creatures, but also creatures able of sharing stories and even interfering in the progression of life. The trees have already helped Night Song and Hawk Man by causing the Zephyrs of Sleep to fall upon all the creatures of the forest, including Grandmother, so that the couple can get away.

In Chapter 106, the loblolly pine makes its contribution to help Puck, Sabine, and Ranger. In reality, the pine's selfless act was probably one that would have happened anyway.



The old, dead tree's roots finally let go of the water soaked ground. The tree falls at just the right angle to make a bridge for Puck to be able to run across it to the other side.

Not only does Puck finally get his bridge when the old tree falls over, but Grandmother is also released from her jar. She goes first to see the Alligator to ask about Night Song's daughter. Ironically, their conversation is interrupted by Gar Face approaching.

By the time Puck makes it back to the tilting house, Gar Face has already left with Ranger, headed back to the creek in search of the alligator. Puck is disappointed to return to his childhood home and find that the hound, who had promised him in his songs that he would always "be right there," is not there. When he finds the pools of blood where Ranger bit Gar Face and Gar Face hit Ranger, Puck is scared that something terrible has happened. He thinks that this terrible thing has happened because of his original sin of breaking the rules and going out into the open.

At the end of this section of chapters, the action moves back to the creek as Gar Face leads Ranger to the banks of the Little Sorrowful. Sabine follows the two, staying just far away enough that Gar Face can't see them. Puck, meanwhile, picks up on the trail of blood leading away from the house. Once they arrive at the creek, Gar Face falls asleep, giving Sabine the opportunity to sneak up and comfort Ranger. Joining the group at the creek is Grandmother. After she'd been interrupted by Gar Face, Grandmother crawled up the tree above where Gar Face is now sleeping.

Discussion Question 1

In what way is the loblolly tree finally able to help Puck keep his promise to his mother?

Discussion Question 2

What is on Grandmother's mind as soon as she is freed from her jar?

Discussion Question 3

How does Gar Face plan for things to happen with the alligator? Do you think it will happen this way? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Girth, vantage, disoriented, noxious, revulsion, pathetic.



Chapters 114-124

Summary

In Chapter 114, Puck sees the hummingbird. He follows it into the branches of a tree. When Puck looks down, he sees Gar Face and hisses. He notices the chain and follows it until he sees Sabine and Ranger. He crawls out onto a branch just below the one on which the serpent is perched.

In Chapter 115, Grandmother moves toward Puck as the Alligator moves toward Ranger and Sabine.

In Chapter 116, as Puck moves down the tree, Gar Face wakes and notices Sabine is back. He grabs his gun. Puck yowls, causing Gar Face to jerk and shoot up into the tree. Puck drops from the branch onto Gar Face's face. He throws the rifle and pulls the cat off his face. He holds Puck with one hand and bathes his face with water from the creek in the other. His blood dripping into the water attracts the Alligator who eats Gar Face.

In Chapter 117, when the man lets go of Puck in the water, Puck hears a voice telling him to swim. When he remembers Sabine is waiting for him, he does swim.

In Chapter 118, Puck is reunited with Sabine. He curls up next to the dog and the three of them sleep.

In Chapter 119, the Zephyrs of Sleep cause all of the animals in the forest to sleep so that Sabine, Puck and Ranger can recover from their ordeal.

In Chapter 120, when Sabine and Puck wake, they notice the hound's breathing has become steadier. They work together to clean his wounds. When Ranger does open his eyes, he sees the hummingbird. He blinks, then sees both his kittens. He wonders about what happened to Gar Face, but then realizes that he was eaten by the Alligator. He feels relief, but no satisfaction that the man is gone.

In Chapter 121, Ranger is still chained. Puck hears a noise, then looks up to see Grandmother.

In Chapter 122, Grandmother realizes the three in front of her are bound by love. Her cousins call to her and she remembers there is a price. She realizes the price she has paid for love before she strikes.

In Chapter 123, Grandmother goes to the Alligator. He has seen her snap the dog's chain and tells her that she surprised him. She has decided not to interfere with love this time. She says goodbye to the Alligator King and goes back into the cypress tree. She has the bullet from Gar Face's gun lodged in her body. She hears the hummingbird,



then sees it. She recognizes the glimmering bird and calls her by name. The bird tells Grandmother she's been looking for her. At the same time, a hawk flies overhead.

In Chapter 124, after Ranger is freed, he and the kittens walk away from the bayous. They did not return to the tilting house, or the base of the loblolly pine, but the trees will tell that the threesome is still there.

Analysis

One of the things to love about this book, especially if the reader is a cat lover, is how closely the behavior of the cats in the book mimics those of real cats. Even in his panic to try to find his sister and his hound dog, Puck allows himself to be distracted by the hummingbird. Typical of a cat to get distracted by a fast moving bird. However, this bird has actually led Puck to the exact spot that he needs to be. When Puck finally returns to reality after chasing the bird into the tree, he's right above where Gar Face is leaning against the tree, having his nap. He has a perfect vantage point of everything that's happening below him.

The main focus of these chapters is what Grandmother does. She has already looked at Gar Face and considered eating him but decided to wait for better things. When Puck appears in the same tree as she, she sets her sights on him as well as Ranger and Sabine so close by on the creek bank. Meanwhile, the alligator is also moving toward the wounded hound and cat.

It is actually a movement by Gar Face that brings about the change in the scene. He wakes and sees Sabine with Ranger. He can think of nothing but getting revenge so he raises his gun to shoot. Had he just sat there, the alligator would probably have gotten them both, perhaps giving Gar Face a chance at the alligator. Instead, Gar Face can think only of killing the cat. He doesn't know Puck is watching from above. Unable to do anything else to help his sister, Puck cries out. It is this cry that changes the course of actions ultimately ending in Gar Face's death.

The split second before Gar Face pulls the trigger, Puck scares him with his howl. Gar Face involuntarily jerks, sending the bullet off course. The sound of the rifle startles Puck, who falls from the branch, landing on Gar Face's already sun burned, mosquito bitten face. It is at this point that Gar Face makes the mistake that the Alligator King had predicted he would make. He bends over the creek to wash the blood off his face. In that creek is an alligator whose already been lured there by the smell of fresh blood and the promise of a meal. Gar Face makes a good substitute for the Ranger and Sabine.

After Sabine, Puck, and Ranger are reunited, the trees protect the weary threesome by causing the Zephyrs of Sleep to fall upon the forest again. They sleep until the next morning. Even though Ranger seems better in the morning, when he opens his one good eye, he sees the hummingbird again. But, he also sees both kittens. Gar Face is gone, a sight that brings Ranger relief.



In the final chapters, there is still the problem of the chain on Ranger's neck. Even with all of the events that have meshed to allow the animals to remain together, there seems to be no way for them to break that chain. Grandmother solves the problem. She sees the three in front of her and remembers the time she saw the three humans — Night Song, Hawk Man, and their daughter — together. She remembers the price of pain she has paid for love as her snake cousins call to her. The chapter ends with the snake striking.

Ultimately, the serpent chooses to use her powerful jaws to snap the chain holding Ranger. Her actions surprise the Alligator King, but she has finally realized she has caused her own pain and prison because she interfered with love in the past. Now in her death, caused by Gar Face's final bullet, Grandmother gets what she wanted most. The hummingbird, her granddaughter, has finally found her. Just as Night Song said when she first found Grandmother, the hummingbird says to Grandmother "I've been looking for you."

Discussion Question 1

Why does Grandmother snap the chain at the end of the novel? What has she realized?

Discussion Question 2

In what way is it ironic that Gar Face allows himself to be eaten by his own prey? What mistake, or mistakes, does he make?

Discussion Question 3

How does the hummingbird help Puck in finding and saving his sister and Ranger?

Vocabulary

Confluence, mesmerized, hypnotized, erratic, demise, solemn, palpable, decipher.



Characters

Grandmother Moccasin

Grandmother Moccasin is a serpent-like creature with both human and reptile blood. She had the option of once taking on her human form. It is hinted that as a human she had a husband, but he betrayed her. As a result, she returned to her reptile form and has lived by herself in the bayou for what is described as more than a thousand years. During this period, Grandmother is approached by Night Song, a creature who is also part human and part reptile. Night Song refers to Grandmother as her “mother.” The two become close until Night Song becomes restless and falls in love with Hawk Man. Grandmother is hurt because she believes she has been abandoned and betrayed once again.

After ten years of waiting and hoping that Night Song would return to her, Grandmother decides to take matters into her own hands. She lures Night Song to the creek and persuades her to change back into a serpent. Although Grandmother had promised the Alligator King she would tell Night Song she could not return to her human form a second time, Grandmother does not do so. The Alligator warns Grandmother there will be a price to pay for breaking that promise.

When Hawk Man, Night Song’s husband, realizes what Grandmother has made his wife do, he finds the serpent, grabs her, and stuffs her into the jar Night Song had made for her daughter. Grandmother stays stuffed in this jar tangled in the roots of an old loblolly pine tree for hundreds of years before the tree falls, pulling up the roots of the tree and releasing her. That same night, Grandmother is shot by a bullet from Gar Face’s gun as he tries to shoot Puck. Realizing she is dying and recognizing the love between Ranger and the two kittens, Grandmother uses the last minutes of her life to break the chain that has tied Ranger for so long. Also at the point of her death, Grandmother is finally located by her granddaughter, Night Song’s daughter, now a hummingbird, who has been looking for her ever since Night Song disappeared.

Gar Face

Gar Face is the villain of the novel. He is the only major character who is fully human. Although he is fully human, Gar Face is portrayed as being purely evil. As a child he laced his mother’s birdbath with rat poisoning, killing the birds she loved. His father was a cruel drunk. On the day that Gar Face left his home, his father hit him hard enough to break his jaw and permanently disfigure his face. Gar Face takes his father’s rifle and walks away from home into the Texas woods. One of his first moves is to carve his given name into a tree and walk away. It is an act of leaving it and his past behind him. From that point on, he goes by the name Gar Face as those who know him believe his face looks like a prehistoric gar fish.



Gar Face has groomed himself into an expert marksman, but when he first came to the Texas bayou he was not a good shot. His first attempt to kill a deer only wounded the animal and he had to chase it. While chasing the animal, Gar Face swore that if he caught up with the animal and finished it off, he would stay in the bayou. Gar Face makes friends with no one in the area but wants to earn the respect of the men who drink at the same bar that he patronizes. He is irritated they have never shown any interest in getting to know him. He believes that will change if he kills the Alligator King, a 100-foot alligator he believes he has discovered in the bayou.

Although Ranger warns his feline friends about the cruelty of Gar Face, one of the kittens, Puck, and his mother are captured by the man. Gar Face throws the two of them into a burlap bag and throws them in the river. The mother cat drowns, but the kitten survives. It is later in the novel that Puck attacks Gar Face and scratches his face. When Gar Face rinses the blood from his face in the river, the Alligator King is drawn by the blood and eats Gar Face. Prior to this, Gar Face had punished the dog, Ranger, by chaining him to his house after Ranger stepped between Gar Face and a bobcat that the man had wanted to kill. Gar Face shows no remorse for shooting his dog. He believes the dog betrayed him by keeping him from his shot.

Puck

In a way, Puck could be considered the hero of the novel. In another way, he could be considered the antagonist. He is one of the calico cat's kittens who grows up underneath the porch of Gar Face's house. Although Puck has been warned not to leave the Underneath, he is lured out by the warm sunshine one day while the others are asleep. Before he returns to the safety of the world under the house, Gar Face spots the kitten and grabs him. When the mother cat comes after her baby, Gar Face grabs her as well and stuffs the two of them in a burlap bag. He throws the bag into the Sabine River where the calico cat's leg is caught in a string. She drowns. Puck, however, survives. He is haunted by the idea that his mother died because of his misbehavior. The memory of her begging him to go back to the tilting house for Ranger and Sabine prompts him to look for a way to cross the creek and find his family. A good deal of time passes before Puck hears Ranger howl when Gar Face traps Sabine, Puck's sister kitten. Once he's heard the howl, Puck knows where the house is, but he can't find a way to cross the creek that runs between where he is and where the house is located. During a storm, the old, dead loblolly falls across the creek, giving Puck a bridge to cross to the other side of the stream. He arrives at Gar Face's house, but Gar Face has already taken Ranger, whom he has hit in the head with a board, to the creek to use as bait. Puck follows Ranger and Gar Face to the creek and drops down on Gar Face from a tree, scratching his face. When Gar Face rinses his bloody face in the creek, it attracts the Alligator King. The Alligator King eats Gar Face.



Night Song

Night Song is a small snake who comes to Grandmother Moccasin, calling her mother. Like Grandmother, Night Song is half human and half reptile. She is raised by Grandmother but soon becomes restless and wanders away to seduce Hawk Man, a male who is both human and bird. The two fall in love and take on their human forms so they can be together as husband and wife. Together they have a daughter. After they've been married ten years, Night Song makes a jar for her daughter's birthday. The jar bears the etching of Grandmother. Seeing this etching makes Night Song realize she misses Grandmother. She is tricked by Grandmother into turning back into a snake. Night Song does not realize she cannot return to her human form, and Grandmother does not tell her this rule. In her grief, Night Song slithers up into a tree and allows herself to die.

Ranger

Ranger is one of the main characters in the novel. He is a bloodhound that Gar Face had stolen from a nearby farm to help with hunting. For years, Gar Face took the dog with him when he hunted. One night, however, Ranger gets a feeling and steps between Gar Face and a bobcat that Gar Face has in his sights. Gar Face shoots Ranger in the leg instead of the bobcat. In his anger with the dog, Gar Face chains Ranger to his front porch and never lets him loose. It is not learned until nearly the end of the novel that Ranger had stopped Gar Face from killing the bobcat because he realized it was pregnant. Ranger is alone until he is joined by a small calico cat. The cat, and the kittens she later has, become Ranger's adopted family. Later, when Gar Face tries to catch Sabine to use her as alligator bait, Ranger bites the man's leg, making him let the cat go.

Sabine

Sabine is the more serious of the calico cat's twin kittens. While Puck plays, Sabine takes her mother's hunting lessons seriously. After her mother and brother disappear, Sabine knows that it has become her responsibility to take care of Ranger and hunt to bring him extra food, just as her mother had done in the past. Gar Face spots Sabine one morning when he comes back late from his evening hunting. He plans to capture the kitten and use her as bait for the alligator. When Gar Face grabs Sabine, however, Ranger bites Gar Face's leg, making him let go of the kitten. Sabine follows when Gar Face drags Ranger off to the creek to use as alligator bait in her stead. Knowing her friend is hurting, Sabine curls up next to Ranger after she believes Gar Face has gone to sleep.



A Small Calico Cat

A small calico cat is the first character introduced in this novel. She is pregnant and has been abandoned on the side of the road by a family who once loved her. The cat is lured by the sound of Ranger's baying to the tilting house where the dog lives with Gar Face. After the cat has her kittens, a boy and girl, Ranger watches over the babies just as if they are his own. The calico cat is killed when Gar Face discovers her and her boy kitten. He ties them in a burlap bag that he throws into the Sabine River. The calico cat is significant because she is the first friend that Ranger has had in a long time. She also puts her trust in the hound, even though the two animal species are generally enemies.

The Alligator King

The Alligator King is what Gar Face believes is a 100-foot long alligator. He is quite old as he was around when the loblolly pine was first planted one thousand years prior to the time of the novel. Gar Face believes killing the beast will earn him the respect he wants from the men at the bar that he frequents. After Puck scratches Gar's face, however, the Alligator King snaps Gar Face up when Gar bends to wash his face in the water.

The Daughter of Night Song and Hawk Man

The daughter of Night Song and Hawk Man is never given a name. She is described as a girl who glimmered in the light. After her mother disappeared, she goes in search of Grandmother in hopes of locating Night Song. The daughter, however, gets lost in the woods. The next time she appears in the novel, she is the hummingbird who comes for Grandmother at her death.



Symbols and Symbolism

Old Loblolly Pine

The loblolly pine is an important symbol in this story. It was planted when Hawk Man captured Grandmother in the jar and then buried the jar near the creek. The tree has grown for about one thousand years before it is struck by lightning on the same night that Gar Face leaves his home. Puck takes refuge in the tree's empty trunk until it falls down in a thunderstorm. When the tree falls, it gives Puck the bridge he needs to reach Sabine and Ranger. It also frees Grandmother from the jar in which she has been imprisoned.

A Large Jar

Night Song makes this large jar for her daughter as a tenth birthday gift. The jar is decorated with an etching of Grandmother, but not a hummingbird as the other jars she had made. After Night Hawk realizes that Grandmother has tricked Night Song into going back to her animal form, he traps her in this jar and buries her and the jar on the bed of the Little Sorrowful Creek.

Ranger's Song

The song that the calico cat hears Ranger singing as he bays outside Gar Face's house is one of loneliness and longing for a friend. Although Ranger is a hound, the enemy of a cat, the calico is drawn to the dog because she recognizes and understands his loneliness.

A Gar

A gar is a prehistoric fish described as half fish and half alligator. It is because his face resembles this fish that the man in the story earns the name Gar Face.

The Rifle

When Gar Face leaves his boyhood home, he steals his father's brand new rifle. It is with this same rifle that Gar Face shoots Ranger when the dog steps between Gar Face and a bobcat.



The Chain

Gar Face chained Ranger to his house after Ranger stepped between Gar Face's rifle and the bobcat he was trying to kill. Ranger is never allowed off this chain. At the conclusion of the story Grandmother snaps this chain in half, freeing Ranger.

Lamia

Grandmother and Night Song are classified as lamia. These lamia have both human and reptile blood. They can change to a human form once during their lifetime; but, once they change back to a reptile from this human form, they can't go back to being human.

Zephyrs of Sleep

Twice during the course of the novel the trees call up the Zephyrs of Sleep to allow characters freedom to pursue their love. The first time the trees call upon these Zephyrs of Sleep is when Night Song and Hawk Man slip away together. The second time these Zephyrs of Sleep are called upon is when Ranger, Sabine, and Puck are reunited after Gar Face's death. The trees know the three need sleep to recover.



Settings

The Tilting House

The tilting house is the place to which the calico cat is drawn by the sounds of Ranger's baying song. Gar Face found this abandoned house and decided to take up residence in it. After Gar Face's death, the house is struck by lightning and burns to the ground.

The Underneath

The underneath is the underside of Gar Face's house. Ranger warns first the calico cat, then her kittens, that they must stay under the house in order to be safe from Gar Face. Puck later equates the safety he feels underneath the loblolly pine tree with the underneath of the house.

The Bayou Tartine

Gar Face lives near the Bayou Tartine. It is the Texas bayou where most of the novel's action takes place.

Little Sorrowful Creek

It is on the banks of this creek that the jar holding Grandmother is buried and the loblolly pine grows. The creek runs by the Caddo village. The creek is also where Night Song changes back into her serpent form after being tricked by Grandmother. The creek got its name because Hawk Man sat by the creek and cried in sorrow for his missing daughter.

The Victory Meadow

Gar Face calls the place where he shot the deer when he first arrived in the bayou area after leaving his home The Victory Meadow.



Themes and Motifs

Personification

Personification, the technique of giving of human-like qualities to animals or inanimate objects, is used often throughout this novel. The old loblolly pine is one specific tree that appears to have its own thought system and the ability to direct its own course of action. Words like “never” and “wrong” are also given human-like qualities.

The trees of the forest as a whole are personified in that they are given the roles of being the keepers of stories. The novel indicates that if humans just knew how to listen to these different kinds of trees and the noises they make, they would be able to hear stories of all the things the trees have seen and what they know. In addition to knowing the stories of long ago, the trees are also credited with spreading news — like the naming of the kittens — through the forest.

One tree in particular is given special emphasis in this novel. It was born when Hawk Man buried Grandmother in her jar. It was struck by lightning and killed the same night that Gar Face was hit by his father and decided to strike out on his own. Twenty-five years after that fatal lightning strike, the old pine tree overhears Puck’s promise to his mother to go back for his sister and Ranger. When the rainstorm floods the creek that separates Puck’s family, the tree is credited with making a conscious decision to fall across the creek and act as a bridge for Puck to cross so he can fulfill his promise to his mother.

Finally, there are certain words in the novel that are given living characteristics. For instance, when Puck realizes he will never see his mother again, this “never” fills his ears, eyes, and nose just like water might do. Similarly, when Night Song’s daughter wakes up without her mother or father, “wrong” creeps up her leg and settles in her spine. When the calico cat first sees the tilting house where Gar Face lives, she sees that there is “wrong” all around, just as if wrongness were a thing that could be scattered among the old bones and trash.

Promises

Keeping promises and the price that must be paid for a broken promise are interwoven themes in this novel. There are three main promises to keep in mind. The most important is Puck’s promise to his mother that he will go back for his sister and Ranger. A promise that was broken centuries ago and has interfered with the present is Grandmother’s promise to the Alligator King that she would tell Night Song about the rule. A final promise that is important in the novel is Ranger’s promise to watch over the kittens.

The main story line in the novel deals with Puck’s promise to his mother to go back for his sister and Ranger. To a cat, the novel says, a promise is sacred. Puck does



everything in his ability to keep his promise even though what his mother has asked for is beyond one small kitten. His friends, including Hawk Man (who brings him his first meal), the loblolly pine (who provides a bridge for him to cross the creek), and Grandmother (who snaps a chain to free Ranger), help him to keep his promise.

It is not until the conclusion of the novel that Grandmother realizes that her own pain and suffering were brought on by her broken promise. Grandmother is angry because she believes her daughter, Night Song, has betrayed her by falling in love with Hawk Man. The two have taken on their human forms and made a home together with their daughter. Instead of protecting this love, however, Grandmother destroys it by luring Night Song into a position where she decides to take back her serpent skin. Although she had promised Alligator King she would tell Night Song she couldn't return to her human form a second time, Grandmother does not do this until it is too late. Her broken promise destroys her family. Night Song dies in her depression, and her daughter is lost looking for Grandmother. This causes Hawk Man sorrow. In his sorrow and anger, he imprisons Grandmother in the jar, where she seethes for a thousand years.

Another important promise in the novel is the promise Ranger made to the kittens in the songs that he sang to them. He promised to protect them and be here for them. On his watch, however, Puck wanders into the sunshine and is snatched up by Gar Face. The calico cat is drowned when Gar Face throws her and Puck into the creek. Ranger and Sabine also fall into a trap set by Gar Face, and Gar Face is able to grab Sabine. This time, however, Ranger is able to protect his kitten by biting Gar Face in the leg. In his anger, Gar Face decides to use Ranger as bait for the alligator instead of Sabine.

Rules

Rules and the importance of following the rules are major themes in this novel. One of the main rules that is broken happens when Puck breaks the rule stating he and his sister, Sabine, are not to go out of the Underneath. Another rule that becomes important in the novel is the rule that enchanted creatures can't take on their human forms more than once. A final important rule is not to get in front of Gar Face and his gun.

When Puck breaks the rule and goes out into the sunshine, he sets into a motion a whole series of unfortunate occurrences. His mother tries to save him from Gar Face, but the man stuffs both Puck and the calico cat into a burlap bag and throws them into a creek. Puck feels responsible for his mother's death. He believes it was directly caused by his willful breaking of the rules. Later, when Puck realizes both Ranger and Sabine are no longer at the tilting house, he believes that whatever happened to them is his fault as well.

Not knowing the rules is another circumstance in which a character in this story gets in trouble. Night Song is not aware there is a rule that states that creatures of enchantment can take on their human forms only once in their life. Grandmother knows the rule exists. When she lures Night Song back to the creek and back into her serpent scales, she does not tell Night Song about this rule until it is too late.



A final rule that is stressed throughout the novel is the rule that one shouldn't get in front of Gar Face and his gun. Ranger has made the mistake of doing this once during their hunts together. He took a bullet in the leg because he stepped between Gar Face and a bobcat with kittens. Throughout the course of the novel, Gar Face shoots at anything that moves including rats, hummingbirds, and even the cats.

Names

Names are used in an interesting way in the novel. Most specifically, some characters have names while others do not. For those who do have names, these names are often significant to either their role in the novel or in their relationship with other characters in the novel.

First, there are two significant characters in this novel that are never given names. The first of these is the calico cat. She is never given a name. She's always referred to as "the calico cat." The other character in the novel who is never given a name is the daughter of Night Song and Hawk Man. The lack of a name makes the character seem like half of a person.

Perhaps, the two most significant characters with names in this section are Puck and Sabine. The calico cat and Ranger make giving the kittens names a serious undertaking. Sabine is named after the silver Sabine River, full of moonbeams. Puck, almost received the name Possum. Ranger and the calico cat decide against that name and decide on Puck in honor of the cat's puckish behavior and personality.

Gar Face is an interesting character in that he gave away his given name when he left his parents' home. The text indicates that Gar Face symbolically carved his name in a tree and left it there. His given name is never known. He is known only as Gar Face, an ugly man with an ugly name.

Finally, Grandmother doesn't really seem to have a given name. The snakes of the forest have given her the title Grandmother because she is so old. Although it is a title of respect and honor, Grandmother is not the ancient serpent's favorite title. Her favorite title is "Mother" the name which Night Song called her.

Loneliness

The emotional condition of loneliness is a situation in which many of the characters of this novel find themselves. At different times in the story, the calico cat is lonely, Ranger is lonely, Puck is lonely, Night Song is lonely, and Grandmother is lonely. In all of these cases, the lonely characters find companions.

The story opens with the introduction to the lonely calico cat. Her family has abandoned her in a strange forest. She is attracted by the sound of Ranger, a lonely hound dog who bays a song about his loneliness. The calico cat befriends the hound, and the two are happy until Gar Face takes the calico cat away.



After his mother is drowned by Gar Face, Puck finds himself alone for the first time. Loneliness is all around him as he misses his mother, his sister, and his hound dog. Linked to Puck by space in the loblolly pine is Grandmother. She is lonely, trapped in her jar for one thousand years. Before she was trapped in the jar, there was a time when Grandmother was not lonely. She had been joined by a young snake whom she named Night Song. Night Song is Grandmother's constant companion until she gets lonely. She finds a male partner and takes on her human form, leaving Grandmother alone again.

Styles

Point of View

"The Underneath" is told from the third person, omniscient point of view. A narrator tells the story from the view of all the characters at different points in the novel. The narrator knows all the thoughts, emotions, and intentions of each of the characters in the novel. Emphasis is put on each of the characters in turn as they take a front seat in the action of the novel. Some of those receiving the most emphasis in the novel include Puck and Grandmother.

Some of the events of the story are from more than a thousand years ago. In other parts, the all-knowing narrator tells the more recent story of Puck, Sabine, and Ranger.

Language and Meaning

The author is magical in the way she weaves her story back and forth between the thousand years that have passed since Grandmother was stuffed in the jar and the time that Puck is separated from his friends. She uses an idea, an emotion, or a feeling that transcends time to link together the past and present. Using these links between the past and present, the author tells the story seamlessly across a variety of points in time and a variety of characters.

Also interesting is Appelt's writing style. There is no one phrase that would describe the way she writes. In some places, Appelt uses very short, abrupt sentences. In some places she uses very long sentences, drawing out the action and adding to the suspense. Similarly, some of Appelt's chapters are very long and some are very short. It seems that as the novel gets closer to the end, the chapters get shorter. This gives the illusion of the action moving faster.

Repetition is another technique that Appelt enjoys using. In talking about the rules in the novel the words "do not" are repeated regularly. "Do not get in front of Gar Face and his gun. Do not...". Certain words are repeated as well. "Soon," for instance, is a word that is used often in reference to Grandmother. The idea of "a price having to be paid" is also a phrase used often by Grandmother. Each of the words is stretched when spoken, almost as one might imagine a snake hissing the words out.

Personification is used throughout the novel as the stories of the animals are shared. The trees themselves become story tellers as they relate events over a thousand year time period. The novel is poetic and lyrical, much like the lonely song of Ranger.



Structure

This novel consists of 114 very short chapters. The longest of the chapters is perhaps 5 pages while the shortest are partial pages, sometimes just a paragraph. Similarly, the author uses short sentences, sometimes dividing thoughts into single words making up a single sentence and single paragraph. In contrast, some sentences, such as the sentence that describes the falling of the loblolly pine in Chapter 106, are very long. The length of the sentence and the stretching out of the idea help to give the reader the idea of how long the tree has held on and how significant it is that it has fallen at this very moment.

The story of Ranger and the cats is told in a linear form beginning when the calico cat is first dropped off in the woods and ending when Ranger is freed from his chain by Grandmother. The secondary stories, those of Gar Face and Grandmother, are woven in throughout the frame of the story of Ranger and his cats. This first flashback comes when the story of the loblolly pine being struck by lightning is told. The next flashback occurs when Gar Face is hit by his father and decides to strike out on his own.

The different stories and different time frames in the novel are tied together from chapter to chapter in unique ways in several places in the novel. Often the author will take an emotion or feeling that a person at one point in time is having and tie it to another point in time in which a different character is experiencing the same feeling or emotion. In this way, the story flows almost seamlessly from one point in time to another and from one character to another.



Quotes

There is nothing lonelier than a cat who has been loved, at least for a while, and then abandoned on the side of the road.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is significant because it is the first sentence of the book, and it introduces the novel's themes of loneliness and abandonment.

For cats, a hound is a natural enemy. This is the order of things.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: Even though cats are generally scared of dogs, the calico cat in the story is drawn to a hound dog because of the loneliness she hears in his howls.

This boy, a boy who sneered at kindness, even from his mother, his mother who loved flowers and birds.

-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 4)

Importance: Even as a child, Gar Face, the main villain of the novel, was cruel hearted.

Ranger watched over his cat family like the pharaohs watched over the Nile, like the stars watched over the sleeping Earth, like the beach watched over the sea.

-- Narrator (Chapter 12 paragraph 17)

Importance: Since it has been so long since Ranger has had someone to love him and for him to be able to love, he watches over the calico cat and her babies, as if they were his own.

The boy's hatred for the deer became his hatred for his hard-edged father and his runaway mother, hatred for the city he had left behind, until all of it mixed together and turned into a bargain, a bargain struck upon hatred.

-- Narrator (Chapter 21 paragraph 13)

Importance: Gar Face makes a bargain that if he is able to locate and kill the deer that he has wounded with his last bullet, he will stay in the bayou. If he is unable to find the deer, he knows that he will die.

Singular. She had no twin. She had no mother, at least not one that she could recall. She had no close companion except for the old alligator, and he was not the snuggly type.

-- Narrator (Chapter 24 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote describes how alone and lonely Grandmother is before she adopts Night Song. It also differentiates Grandmother's situation and the situation of family members from those of Puck.



Only those who earn their keep by trapping and skinning the mink and bobcats and raccoons know of a hidden road where a single pickup truck can carry a hard-edged bitter man to an old tavern where the barkeep will offer up something hard-edged and bitter to drink in return for the skins of those forest creatures.

-- Narrator (Chapter 26 paragraph 2)

Importance: Gar Face spends his evenings drinking in a bar known only to those like him who spend their days and nights trapping and killing. At the bar, skins and furs are traded for drinks.

Do not get in front of Gar Face and his gun. It's a good rule. / Another rule: Stay in the Underneath. You'll be safe in the Underneath. / Rules bear repeating. The beasts of enchantment can don their human forms only once. / Once is all. / Grandmother knew this. / Night Song did not.

-- Narrator (Chapter 30 paragraph 3)

Importance: Knowing the rules and following the rules are important themes in the novel.

They know that the hummingbird can fly between the land of the living and the land of the dead, that she has been known to accompany the spirits to the other side, hover there awhile until they are settled, but then she can return to the side of the quick.

-- Narrator (Chapter 36 paragraph 1)

Importance: The Hummingbird is a frequent character in this novel. She first appears when the calico cat dies. Later in the novel it is learned that the hummingbird is the daughter of Night Song in her animal form.

What do you call someone who throws a mother cat and her kitten into a creek, who steals them from the hound who loves them, a hound twisting at his chain wailing, who never even looks back, what do you call someone like that? The trees have a word: evil.

-- Narrator (Chapter 38 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote drives home the cruel nature of Gar Face.

Finally, on the tenth anniversary of that fateful day, the day that Hawk Man had taken Night Song from her, she made a decision, a decision that had been growing for ten mean years.

-- Narrator (Chapter 56 paragraph 1)

Importance: It is ten years after Night Song and Hawk Man run away together that Grandmother decides to make her move and try to get Night Song back.

The etching on the jar was unmistakable, the long curving body of a snake, the perfect diamonds of the scales moving with the contours of the jar.

-- Narrator (Chapter 58 paragraph 12)



Importance: When Night Song draws the etching on the jar she has made for her daughter, she feels as if her hands are working without her knowledge of what they are doing. Even she is surprised to see the image of Grandmother on the jar when she is finished.