

The Wallcreeper Study Guide

The Wallcreeper by Nell Zink

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Plot Summary

“The Wallcreeper” by Nell Zink is a collection of random scenes from the lives of Tiffany and Stephen, a young couple who married before they really knew one another. The action could best be described as a couple making the best of a disconnected, often unemotional situation. Tiffany and Stephen’s lives are also messy ones, as they both cheat on each other at times in their marriage. Stephen additionally was addicted to or using drugs during a good deal of their relationship. Recurring concerns in the novel include having children, infidelity, relationships and environmental issues.

This novel doesn’t have a plot as much as it follows the life of flighty Tiffany beginning at the time of her miscarriage until she finally settled down after the death of her husband. Tiffany, who also served as narrator for the novel, seems to have no ambitions beyond having good sex and doing whatever she had to do to keep from working. She married her husband, Stephen, because her parents liked him. Tiffany was content to follow Stephen wherever his job took him. She had a variety of affairs but stayed married to Stephen because he was stable and earned a good living.

Tiffany knew little about Stephen when they got married. She only learned he liked birds after he gave her a pair of binoculars as a wedding gift. Stephen got involved in environmental issues, particularly the damage being done to the ecosystem because of dams, when he fell in love with Birke, who was working as part of a movement against hydroelectric power. Stephen had an obvious affair with Birke and then followed her to Berlin. After the affair ended disastrously, Stephen quit his job and returned to birding full time. He took long trips to count birds and would often return home to Tiffany addicted to drugs.

During this time Tiffany became involved with a minister, Reverend Gernot, who encouraged her to destroy a levee on the Elbe River. Stephen helped for a while but soon grew disinterested. Tiffany went on with her work on the levee and even pulled down some of the granite rocks lining the Elbe River so that water could flow into a nearby forrest. After she finished her work, Tiffany joined Stephen on some of his birding trips. During one of these trips she realized her husband had a heart condition. While they were wading in Lake Prespa together Stephen had a heart attack and died. After his death Tiffany briefly lived with a boyfriend and then took Reverend Gernot’s offer to live in and care for his family home. She went on to work at the Federal Environmental Office and then founded an ecological planning commission.

Pp. 7-25

Summary

Stephen swerved his car, trying to avoid hitting a wallcreeper, and caused his wife, Tiffany, to hit her head and have a miscarriage. He seemed more interested in picking up the bird he'd hit instead of taking care of his wife. He put the bird in a bread bag in the front seat and Tiffany in the back seat. The bird began calling from the bag. In the next scene, when Tiffany was finally allowed to have coffee Stephen told her he had a surprise. She could hear the wallcreeper calling from the kitchen. She cried when she realized she was no longer pregnant.

When Tiffany met Stephen she'd been considering stealing files from the pharmaceutical company at which she worked. Stephen was interviewing for a job in R&D at the same company. When Tiffany saw him she thought they would sleep together. He wooed Tiffany with the intention of taking her to Berne with him when he moved to take his new job. Tiffany's parents encouraged the marriage. Tiffany met Stephen's father but not his mother. They were married in Orphan Court three weeks after they met.

Tiffany got pregnant immediately without intending to. She didn't realize how much losing the baby would affect her. In the next scene, Stephen's friend Omar told Stephen the wallcreeper would never be able to fly again. Tiffany was worried about the bird and suggested to Stephen they put up a pegboard for traction and feed it bugs until they could release it to the wild.

Even though Tiffany was not healed from her miscarriage, Stephen wanted to have sex with her. He did it anally. It was painful. Tiffany felt defiled. After the experience, she decided she didn't love Stephen any more. Stephen followed her into the bedroom and continued to be inconsiderate. After a scene in which Stephen described the wallcreeper to Omar's wife, Omar suggested to Stephen that he give the bird to a zoo that collected wallcreepers. Omar was the only one of Stephen's co-workers he'd told about his birding hobby. Tiffany hadn't known until he'd given her a pair of binoculars as a wedding gift. They had been birding when they had the car wreck that caused Tiffany's miscarriage.

Tiffany's parents and sister came to visit at Christmas. She believed Stephen would sleep with her sister. He claimed he didn't sleep with her. Their apartment in Berne was close to a gas station where a Montenegrin named Elvis worked. Tiffany wound up having an affair with Elvis. Sex was good but Tiffany decided she was better off staying with Stephen because he was stable. In the next scene, Tiffany learned Stephen was a music "operator." She didn't understand his tastes in music but was never asked to go to his shows. Rudolf the wallcreeper became restless in March so Stephen let him go. He told Tiffany they should try to have a baby. Tiffany said she wasn't ready for a baby yet. Tiffany continued to see Elvis.



Analysis

Although this novel doesn't have a well-defined plot it does make statements about a variety of topics. These include infidelity, relationships and having a family. Another topic of importance is that of environmental issues, particularly the damage done to the environment by hydroelectric dams. An image that is important to this part of the novel is the wallcreeper, a bird the couple treats almost as a surrogate child after Tiffany miscarries their baby.

The wallcreeper, a small bird, made a dramatic entrance into the novel when it caused the wreck that made Tiffany miscarry her baby. Believing the bird was dead Stephen put it in a bread bag because he wanted to have it stuffed. The bird survived the wreck and regained consciousness in the car. Stephen brought it home to the couple's apartment where they nursed it back to health. Irony is the major literary device used in this novel. For instance Omar visited to see the bird and told Stephen the bird would never fly again. In the next scene, which took place on the day following Omar's visit, Tiffany watched as the wallcreeper flew across the room and banged into a window.

Infidelity is a major theme in the novel as both Tiffany and Stephen have extramarital affairs through the course of the novel. It is in this section of the novel that Tiffany met Elvis, the man who worked at the gas station. She began having an affair with Elvis and even considered marrying him. Tiffany decided against splitting with Stephen in favor of Elvis because Stephen was stable and she could live with him without having to work. Apparently much of Tiffany's thought life revolved around sex because she believed that once Stephen saw her sister that he would sleep with her. She even indicates that she took her parents out to see Berne so Stephen and her sister would have a chance to sleep together.

Relationships are important in the novel. The reader learns about the beginnings of the relationship between Tiffany and Stephen in this section. Tiffany indicated that when she met Stephen the meeting stopped a crime because she was thinking about stealing some files from the pharmaceutical company where she worked. She and Stephen got married only three weeks after they met. The marriage seemed to be a marriage of convenience more than one based on love. Tiffany knew very little about Stephen when they got married. It was not until he gave her a pair of binoculars as a wedding gift that she even knew he was a birder. Notice throughout the book that Tiffany's opinion of Stephen changed depending on how he treated her. For instance, Tiffany's opinion of Stephen changed after he had anal sex with her. She felt defiled and used. It was after this encounter that Tiffany decided that she didn't love Stephen at all.

Stephen does things with Tiffany that make the reader wonder if he cared about her at all. For instance, even though Tiffany was obviously injured after the wreck Stephen seemed more worried about the wallcreeper than he was about his wife. He rambled about how happy he was about seeing the wallcreeper, under the guise of keeping Tiffany awake, until Tiffany told him to shut up. Stephen also seems unable to find any



way to comfort his wife after her miscarriage. When she cried, he put his hands over her ears, an action that made no sense.

The issue of children for Tiffany and Stephen is whether they should or shouldn't have a child. Fate almost took the decision out of their hands because Tiffany got pregnant soon after their marriage. Even though Tiffany made it clear she didn't want a baby at all, she was surprised how depressed she was when she lost the baby. She seemed to transfer the affection and care she might have shown to the baby to the wallcreeper. The irony in the novel, or perhaps Tiffany's snarkiness pops up when Stephen asked her to go birding with him one day. She told him she was reading a novel titled "The Man Who Loved Children." Stephen automatically assumed that the reading material was prompted by Tiffany's depression about the loss of the baby. The novel instead is about a man who hated children. Notice that it was after they let Rudolf fly away that Stephen told Tiffany they should try to have children again. It was almost as if not only Tiffany but also Stephen saw Rudolf as their surrogate child. Once the bird was gone Stephen felt the need to fill its spot with a baby.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the relationship between Tiffany and Stephen.

Discussion Question 2

How is the wallcreeper used as both a character and a symbol in this part of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the tone of the novel.

Vocabulary

hyperventilate, protested, conquest, palate, unanimous, sentimental, conspicuous, passivity, metaphoric, euphemism, defilement, dissociate, nostalgic, irredeemable, abashed, orifices, opined, amnesty



Pp. 25-43

Summary

During a birding trip Tiffany asked Stephen to tell her about himself. He talked about his music and the time he was into drugs. His dad took him to rehab when he was 18. He said it was his scout leader that got him interested in birds. He'd earned the status of Eagle Scout to keep his dad happy. From his description of himself, Tiffany realized how different they were. When he put his hand on her leg, Tiffany noticed he was shaking.

Elvis wanted to take Tiffany out dancing. Tiffany asked Stephen to act as their chaperone as a way of getting permission to go. They picked Elvis up and he directed them to the bar. It was a pitiful bar and Stephen didn't want to stay. Stephen took them to another place. Elvis told Tiffany he wouldn't have been able to get into that bar if she hadn't been with him. He was wooing her when Stephen brought Tiffany the keys and said he was staying at that bar for a while. Elvis and Tiffany left and went to the farmhouse where Elvis lived. Tiffany refused when Elvis said he wanted to have anal sex with her. After Tiffany explained her viewpoint Elvis said he'd never ask a woman for anal sex again. They had vaginal sex instead.

The next day, Stephen suggested they make a baby. He thought he could get promoted if he had children. When she wouldn't commit he asked why she was not being faithful to him but was instead sleeping with Elvis. He begged her to try to love him a little. On their next birding trip, Stephen asked Tiffany to talk about herself. She said her parents had sent her to a boarding school for wayward girls then she had gone to Agnes Scott because Bryn Mawr was too expensive. She got a job and then she met Stephen.

Analysis

It is almost unbelievable in this section that Tiffany decided to tell her husband when Elvis asked her out dancing. In fact, she not only told him but invited him along. Notice also that Stephen stayed at the dance club longer than Elvis and Tiffany. It was almost as if Stephen were giving them permission to mess around, something that a typical husband would never do. Later he asked her why she wasn't faithful to him and if she couldn't try to love him a little bit. These seem like odd statements to make after Stephen agreed to go out with Elvis and Tiffany knowing that they were having an affair, and then almost directing them to go off alone.

In the theme of relationships Tiffany finally got around to asking Stephen about himself during one of their birding trips. She learned he'd been into drugs, had been an Eagle Scout only because it made his father happy and had been in a band. He'd enjoyed doing anything that made his parents angry. When Stephen asked Tiffany about her childhood she had significantly less drama. She didn't do anything she didn't want to do, a personality trait that followed Tiffany into her adulthood. It was at this point that Tiffany



realized just how different she and Stephen were. Notice she indicated she went birding with Stephen only because she got to spend plenty of time with Elvis during the week.

Important also in the theme of relationships is Tiffany's discussion with Elvis about anal sex. Tiffany argues that people in a relationship shouldn't do things they know will hurt the other person. On the topic of anal sex she told Elvis that she had already suffered through that for Stephen and didn't plan to let a lover make her suffer in that same way. She drew a line between her husband and her lover. She would take certain treatment from her husband but not from her lovers. It was almost as if she felt she had to act a certain way to please and keep her husband, but was not interested in pleasing a lover. She felt he was there to please her.

Regarding Tiffany's relationship with Stephen, Tiffany told Elvis she believed when people talked about a couple getting through difficult times together they were referring to the difficult times the world threw at them. She didn't think the couple should purposefully do things to hurt the other. This seems strange coming from a woman who is having an affair. Notice the imagery of the meadow at the end of their discussion. She described a meadow as being loving and beautiful as long as the viewer could overlook the hamsters filling it that were ready to kill each other. This is an odd description not only because hamsters generally aren't found out in open meadows but also because hamsters generally aren't vicious.

In this section Stephen again brought up the fact that he wanted a baby. It is significant that Stephen voiced his desire for a baby just after he and Tiffany had let the wallcreeper go. It appeared that both Stephen and Tiffany used the bird as sort of a surrogate child.

Discussion Question 1

What did Tiffany learn about Stephen when she finally took the time to ask him about himself? On what levels did she think they were different?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the night when Stephen went with Tiffany and Elvis to the bar as a chaperone. What is your take on Stephen's dismissal of the two?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think that Tiffany truly changed Elvis' mind about his sexual preferences and requests forever?



Vocabulary

psychedelics, anaerobic, inevitable, ineluctable, proprietor, leverage, ecstatically, polymorphous, wayward



Pp. 43- 63

Summary

Tiffany told Stephen she'd decided they should try to have a baby. This time Stephen disagreed with her telling her they had nothing in common and that a baby would only make them turn weird from the stress. He'd decided he wanted to be free and float through life. Tiffany was relieved because she was afraid if she didn't have a baby soon that Stephen would make her get a job. Stephen told her he wanted a baby before he died because it was on his list of things to accomplish. Tiffany asked him if anal sex had been on that list.

In November, Rudolf returned to Tiffany and Stephen's apartment. Tiffany had seen some birders in the street and had opened the window to see what they were looking at. Rudolf flew in when she opened the window. Pictures of Tiffany leaning out the window to welcome the bird were seen on the Internet. Tiffany worried Stephen would see Elvis standing in the background in their kitchen but he seemed more concerned about the bird.

In his quest to find two particular ducks, Stephen began joining birding societies. He was given a marsh on which he could look for and count the birds. He discovered a man hunting on the marsh on Sundays. Stephen was unable to do anything about the hunter. Even the Society for the Protection of Birds said there was nothing they could do.

Elvis visited Tiffany to tell her that he'd gotten his ex-wife pregnant. She hadn't realized how irresponsible Elvis was. Tiffany broke up with Elvis but didn't tell Stephen. She signed up to take a course in German. She realized as soon as she broke up with Elvis that she'd fallen in love with him.

Birders began coming to see and take pictures of Rudi. Tiffany and Stephen were talked into fitting Rudi with a GPS transponder before they set him free in the mountains. One Saturday after they'd set Rudi free, they located him. They watched as a hawk ate Rudi's innards. Stephen lost interest in birds after Rudi died. Tiffany believed Rudi's death had humanized Stephen. She began to fall in love with him.

In the next section Tiffany had a strange encounter with Omar's wife in which that woman asked Tiffany to have an affair with Omar so she could get a divorce and keep her apartment. She wanted the divorce because the company was moving Omar to Topeka and she didn't want to live there. Omar was being sent to the United States because he was working on the contraption, which appeared to be some sort of sexual appliance, and the regulatory market was better in the United States.



Analysis

The novel continues in the same lines as the lives of Tiffany and Stephen; no real direction. There is still no developing plot, just a series of scattered, chronological events. Tiffany does break up with Elvis in this section because he got his ex-wife pregnant. Without him around Tiffany described herself as feeling like a “cat in heat with hallucinations” (p. 53). Just when the reader thinks things can’t get worse for the couple, Omar’s wife asks Tiffany to sleep with Omar so she can get a divorce and be awarded alimony. From their conversation Tiffany deduced that at some point Stephen had slept with Omar’s wife. Tiffany didn’t seem terribly upset by the realization.

More discussion about relationships takes place in this section of the novel. In this section it is Stephen who told Tiffany that “a couple that’s completely wrapped up in each other can get through anything, because they don’t have a choice” (p. 44). Stephen seemed to think this description fit his relationship with Tiffany. However, it would be difficult to say that Stephen and Tiffany were really wrapped up in each other since Tiffany had an ongoing affair with Elvis and Stephen was still doing drugs. Stephen does in this section apologize for the anal sex. He’d thought of the act as taking the opportunity to try something new. He hadn’t looked at it from Tiffany’s standpoint. Tiffany continued to come up with unusual ways to describe her circumstances. She borrowed a term from economics to describe her marriage. She said the marriage was beginning to “feel like an exercise in opportunity costs” (p. 53) as she hung onto Stephen because she felt he was best for her even though she missed Elvis.

In a previous section, Stephen had asked Tiffany to pretend like she loved him just a little. This request was included in a scene after Rudi died where Tiffany told Stephen about the proposition that Omar’s wife had made to her. Stephen pretended to be angry with Tiffany but in reality he had softened toward her because he snuggled with her instead of beating her when he asked her to come to him. Stephen may have interpreted Tiffany’s anger about the situation proposed by Omar’s wife as a sign that Tiffany did care for him and was made jealous by the idea that another woman was interested in Stephen.

The wallcreeper, Rudolf, returns to Tiffany and Stephen’s apartment in this section of the novel. This time they give him a GPS tracking device before they set him free again. They find him but unfortunately he’s in the process of being eaten by another bird. The shock makes Stephen lose his interest in birding. Also of interest in this section of the novel is Tiffany’s comparison of birds, whom she sees as representing women, and birders, whom she sees as representing men.

Environmental issues will become a more important theme later on in the novel but it is in this section that Stephen begins to be interested in the environment. In Tiffany’s words “You need to stay out of nature’s way while you’re still young enough for it to ruin your life” (p. 48). Stephen’s not able to even elicit change on the small piece of protected marsh he had been assigned to count the birds. He discovered a man was



hunting there on Sundays. He tried to get something done about the hunting but even the Society for the Protection of birds didn't support Stephen's desire to get rid of the hunter.

Although Stephen had been hounding Tiffany about having a baby, the roles reverse when Tiffany brought up the idea of having a baby in this section of the novel. Stephen said at that point in their lives he just wanted to be free. He did tell Tiffany that he needed a baby for his life list. It is difficult to tell when Tiffany is kidding and when she is being serious but it may be some comfort to the reader that not even Stephen was completely aware of when his wife was kidding and when she was being serious. When she told him she was afraid he would make her go to work if she didn't have a baby soon Stephen had to pause before answering her.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Tiffany's sense of humor.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the effect that seeing Rudolf killed had on Stephen. Tiffany believed it humanized him. Do you agree?

Discussion Question 3

What do you make of Omar's wife asking Tiffany to have sex with her husband? Do you think this situation was realistic at all?

Vocabulary

daunting, quantum, pelagics, homonyms, ubiquitous, trajectory, bane, inexorable, laurels, jurisprudence, subsume, pragmatic, dalliance, conspiratorial, transponder, plausible, ornithologist, cogent, forlorn, unrequited, prevaricating, enigma



Pp. 63-81

Summary

Stephen and Tiffany move downtown even though Stephen hadn't wanted to at first. After Stephen hurt her with a comment about Rudi, Tiffany asked if he was in such a bad mood because of Omar's wife. She admitted what she knew about the woman's plans including her request for Tiffany to have sex with Omar so she could clean him out. Stephen told her to come to him and they snuggled. They look at the wall unit where Rudi had spent his time flitting into and out of a shoebox. The new apartment was small and located in a medieval house that was too old to renovate.

Shortly after their move Tiffany ran into Elvis. He told her about his new life with his baby. He was dating the psychotherapist to whom he'd gone for treatment after he'd found out about the baby. He tried to make a move on her but Tiffany resisted. The owner of the bar where they were having coffee misinterpreted their actions and asked them to leave. In the street, Elvis asked Tiffany for money to replace his shirt because his had coffee spilled on it. She thought everyone who saw them probably thought she was paying Elvis because he was her pimp.

At a dance club called Mancuso's Loft Stephen pointed out to Tiffany a girl he described as a mangy tourist. Tiffany asked Stephen if they were in on the contraption that his company was making. He said they were. While Stephen took a break from birding, Tiffany began reading more bird books. Stephen began playing his music when he was awake. Because he wanted to get serious about his music, Stephen rented an apartment in Berlin for a month. Tiffany described Berlin as being bleak, huge and flat. Stephen decided they needed to move to Berlin. His company had a pump in production there. He told Tiffany that in order to stay in Berne, she'd have to get a job. Even though Stephen wanted to go to Berlin, he didn't get transferred there.

Back in Berne Tiffany was shopping for vegetables when she saw Stephen at a cafe with a girl who she thought might be a cancer patient because she had bald spots on her head. When Tiffany questioned Stephen about the girl he said she was the mangy girl from Mancuso's Loft. She worked at an ad agency where there was a poster illustrating the damage to nature caused by hydroelectric power. She'd told him all about the damage that dams did to nature. Stephen decided to become an environment activist which meant he'd have to work with Birke. When Stephen talked to Tiffany about the horrors of dams, she got the sense that he thought Birke was more interesting than she was.

Analysis

In this section of the novel it is apparently Stephen's turn to have an affair. He doesn't just try to sleep with Birke, he also joined her campaign for environmental awareness.



Also in the theme of infidelity, Elvis tried to make a move on Tiffany again. She refused him. This encounter with Elvis in this section of the novel illustrates Tiffany's thought patterns. After he had coffee spilt on him when she tried to get away from him in the coffeehouse Elvis told Tiffany he needed money for a new shirt. She believed everyone who saw them in the street thought she was giving money to Elvis because he was her pimp. It appears that all Tiffany thinks about is sex.

In the theme of the wallcreeper, Tiffany asked Stephen if they could move. They'd apparently stayed in the same apartment because they wanted to make sure Rudi could find them if he tried to come home. Stephen read a letter to Tiffany that Tiffany claimed hurts her feelings even though it was only about the living habits of the wallcreeper. She described the letter as a fable about their cute dead friend. After a fight they both realized they missed Rudi, shown by their snuggling and looking at the box in which Rudi had once played.

In the theme of environmental issues, notice that Stephen made the comment to Tiffany that he was not even capable of saving one wild thing. That one wild thing to which he referred was Rudi. He turned his back on birds after this experience but soon took up with Birke and went to work with her against dams and hydroelectric power.

Notice in this section that Stephen hoped his company would transfer him to Berlin. His desire to be transferred will come up again later in the novel.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think Stephen meant when he said that Tiffany knew how to look out for herself? Why did this belief make him feel better?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the letter that Stephen read to Tiffany when she suggested they move. Why did Tiffany think Stephen read it with the intention of hurting her feelings?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the beginning of the relationship with Birke and Stephen.

Vocabulary

vagrant, avatar, pristine, dormice, galleon, perpendicular, gallivanting, meticulous, desolated, fecundity, colonnade, fastidious, mores, fuselages, tawdry



Pp. 81-102

Summary

Birke's boss started a new charitable foundation called Global Rivers Alliance. Tiffany volunteered to help. She made copies of posters while Birke talked to her about the Isar when the smooth banks were dismantled by birders and the river allowed to run where it pleased. Birke wanted the same thing to happen with the Rhine. Unfortunately the birders that Stephen had hoped would donate money to the project weren't happy with him and didn't like his campaign designs.

George, Birke's boss, hit on Tiffany but she ignored him. Even after he took her swimming and held onto her to pull her out of the water, Tiffany was still not interested in George. Although they'd been to other conferences alone together, Birke and Stephen asked Tiffany to attend the BUND Nature Protection Days in Lenzen. Stephen stayed with Birke in her room in a bike club. He didn't talk to Tiffany much. Instead of attending the opening session of the conference Tiffany decided to go out and rent a bike. After lunch a man named Olaf followed Tiffany out to the porch. She had an instant crush on him and made a point to attend the outing he suggested.

The next morning Tiffany rode alone to the river. She misjudged time. It was still dark. She could hear the birds but could see nothing. She learned later the place she had visited was called "The Evil Place." Meanwhile, Birke's presentation was a success. Tiffany watched as Birke and Stephen manned their information booth. Olaf touched her arm and they went together to the back porch.

After the conference, Tiffany and Stephen returned to Berne and Birke went to Berlin. Stephen was down. Birke became known as a result of the conference but Stephen didn't. Tiffany and Stephen had fights because Stephen wanted to go on the Berlin even though his transfer hadn't come through. Birke wanted to marry Stephen. She thought their marriage would solve all of their problems. Tiffany, however, believed Birke had no chance against her. She knew Stephen believed marriage was an institution and planned to stay with Tiffany. He turned down the offer of a transfer to Topeka. He was given a new car and a computer. Tiffany was unhappy. He worked hard all week and then went to Berlin on the weekends leaving her alone.

Analysis

In this section of the novel Tiffany was the member of the couple left alone while Stephen had an affair. While "considerate" probably isn't a good word to describe the actions of a spouse who is having an affair, some cheating spouses are more considerate than others. While Tiffany was having her affair she was much more considerate of Stephen than Stephen was toward her during his affair. Tiffany pointed out that she spent time with Stephen on the weekends and saw Elvis through the week.



Stephen wasn't completely cut off. In his relationship with Birke, however, Stephen seemed to completely cut Tiffany out of the equation. He invited her to attend a conference with them but then did not stay in the same room with her nor did he talk to her much. The image of Tiffany standing alone on the part of the river known as the "Evil Place" in complete darkness waiting for the sun to come up illustrates her feelings at this time. Notice that she believed this dark time in her life was the consequences for her choosing to attend the conference with Birke and Stephen. She believed she'd "signed on the wrong dotted line" (p. 93) and it was her "responsibility to face the consequences" (p. 93) as if her relationship with her husband was contractual.

Notice that Tiffany was hit on by Birke's boss but turned him down. She was, however, attracted to Olaf, a man she met at the conference. Remember that when Tiffany described Elvis to Stephen she described him as being harmless. She uses this same description for Olaf. When Tiffany saw that Olaf wore a wedding ring she believed she had a problem. Apparently she thought it was okay for her to have an affair even though she was married but had an issue with messing around with other people who were married.

In the theme of relationships notice how certain Tiffany was that Stephen would not divorce her to marry Birke. Amusing is Tiffany's belief that she had proven to Stephen by staying at home that she intended to stay with him forever. Yes, Tiffany did stay at home but she still had an affair with another man while staying at home. She also argued that Stephen believed marriage was an institution and that it was that belief that would keep the two of them together. She doubted Stephen would ever want to try marriage again even if they did break up and doubted it would be with Birke because she had so many different options available to her when it came to men.

The theme of environmental issues really ramps up as Stephen became interested in fighting against hydroelectric dams. It can be deduced that Stephen was interested in this topic because he believed it would earn him points with Birke. However, his attempts to get donations from his birder friends for a movement against hydroelectric power blew up in his face because he hadn't consistently maintained those friendships. When Birke's internship at Global Rivers Alliance ended and she went back to Berlin Stephen was unconsolable. He was also unhappy because Birke became known for her work in the alliance while Stephen remained in the background.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the differences in the relationships between Stephen and Birke, and that between Tiffany and Elvis.

Discussion Question 2

Tiffany indicates that when Stephen began working for Global Rivers Alliance he became more earnest. What do you think she meant by this?



Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Stephen refused a transfer to Topeka?

Vocabulary

espouse, appraisal, plovers, vagrancy, tributary, ethereal, anarchism, balustrade, conducive, contractual, grandiose, abashed



Pp. 102-121

Summary

Stephen was revolted by George's new intern. Meanwhile, Stephen and Birke worked together to prepare for the Rhine Conference. When Stephen returned to the apartment he shared with Tiffany he told her the people there had paid no attention to him. He believed he represented to the people at the conference the ultimate smartass. He'd come to the conclusion that life needed to be left alone but no one wanted to leave it alone. Tiffany tried to compare his feelings with the story "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" but Stephen criticized her. He continued to rage about the conference. It turned out he had also found Birke with Olaf and had become very angry. As a result of his grief Stephen stopped sleeping. When Tiffany begged him to take off a few weeks of work, he quit completely.

Global Rivers Alliance would remain centered in Berne but Stephen was to operate out of an old machine shop in Berlin. Tiffany described their new apartment as being dim and dank. Teenagers drank vodka in the park outside. Tiffany learned that the Germans didn't consider her to be a feminist since had followed her husband to Berlin for his job. Instead, the Germans thought she was a mindless whore. Tiffany met a woman whom she believed was a perfect wife. She had two children and did her own baking. Tiffany envied her.

Olaf invited Tiffany and Stephen to a lecture on storks. Tiffany went alone. After he finished his talk, Olaf asked Tiffany if she would go out for a drink with him. He took her instead to a townhouse where he put his arms around her waist and said he'd been waiting for her. They had sex in his rented room. Olaf told her that he had not slept with Birke. Stephen was not happy when she returned home. He called her a home wrecker but slept with her anyway. Tiffany had trouble remembering that Olaf was married.

Donations to the Global Rivers Alliance Society were down as was public support for environmental causes. However, interest had changed to wind turbines and fracking, and was backing away from the rivers. Tiffany believed that Birke had won.

Analysis

Tiffany was again unfaithful to Stephen in this section of the novel. Again, like with Elvis at the bar, Stephen had a chance from the beginning to try to have some influence on Tiffany's behavior but he didn't choose to use this opportunity. He knew that the invitation to the lecture had come from Olaf. Instead of going with Tiffany to the lecture, or asking Tiffany not to go, Stephen encouraged her to go alone. Alone with Olaf, Tiffany had an affair. Stephen was angry with Tiffany when she returned home. He called her a homewrecker. The home he was accusing her of wrecking was that of Olaf and his wife, not their own.



It was also in this section that Birke and Stephen's relationship fell apart. Note that Stephen told Tiffany he'd seen Birke with the man she described as the harmless man, he doesn't give the man's name. It is assumed by the reader, and by Tiffany, that he was Olaf. It was probably doubly painful to lose his girlfriend to Olaf and then have his wife have an affair with Olaf.

Although there is no active tearing down of dams as a result of Birke and Stephen's work, Tiffany indicates that they won in their fight against hydroelectric power. She said that power producers began looking at wind and fracking as alternative sources for power.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the relationship between Tiffany and Olaf. Why did this affair make Stephen so angry?

Discussion Question 2

How did Stephen react to his break up with Birke?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Stephen and Tiffany move to Berlin?

Vocabulary

aphorisms, fortitude, biophilia, vertiginous, delude, unrequited, defunct, strident, disconcertingly, ascendant, improvised, retrospectively, binary, indeterminacy, jettisoned, lignite



Pp. 121-142

Summary

It was hard for Tiffany and Olaf to see each other in Berlin without Olaf's wife learning about their affair. He finally arranged a dinner date with Reverend Gernot, a radical priest, in Saxony-Anhalt. During the dinner Tiffany wondered where she fit into the relationship. She believed she was only a distraction for Stephen and that he was fonder of Birke. As she heard Olaf and the priest talk seriously she wondered if she had been brought for contrast. Tiffany prompted a discussion about birds. When Olaf stepped away to answer the phone, the priest invited Tiffany to take a walk in the forest with him. Tiffany turned him down. When she looked at him closely, she realized the priest was at least 50. He was also treating her like a child. When Tiffany went upstairs to find Olaf, he and his shoulder bag were gone. She ran to find him. He rolled down the window of his car and told Tiffany that he needed his space. Tiffany walked to the motel. She had time to wash her face before Olaf appeared. They had sex and he left to go home to his wife.

The following morning Tiffany took a walk with the priest. A week later he invited Stephen and Tiffany to his family home for dinner. He talked to them about the Steckby-Lödderitzer Tree Farm and how the channeling of the river was causing the trees to die. He said no one had ever mentioned the Elbe River as an environmental cause. He explained improving the environment of the river and surrounding areas wouldn't require dams to be broken down, just levees built in the Middle Ages would have to be removed. That was how Stephen and Tiffany began pulling apart the stones on the banks of the Elbe River. The priest allowed them to stay in his country house while they were working.

After two weeks, Stephen had enough of hard labor and realized he had marketable skills. He decided he should go to Macedonia to count birds. He believed even his compatriots at Global River Alliance would not miss him. Tiffany decided to stay in Breitenhagen but told Gernot she wanted to make a change in the project. She proposed she could remove the stones from the banks so they would wash out completely. From that point on she went out twice a week to pry rocks off the banks. Although Gernot had discouraged it, he looked happy when he saw the progress she'd made. He explained it would allow the water to flood into the forest and keep the trees alive.

Olaf was angry with Tiffany when he learned she was living in Gernot's home. He told her what she was doing was stupid. When he brought up the Rhine Tiffany told him it was his old girlfriend who was fighting for the Rhine. He told her that Gernot was an informant who would turn in his friends and family for the sake of professional advancement. The discussion was difficult but the two decided to stick together because they had in common that they were adulterers. When Tiffany asked Gernot about being



an informant, Gernot got mad. He asked who had suggested it to her. When she admitted it was Olaf she realized Olaf could have lied.

Analysis

The novel takes a turn in this section with Tiffany, who didn't want to work, becoming an environmental activist who was prying rocks off the banks of the Elbe River in order to help direct water into a neighboring tree farm. The change of events in this section alone demonstrates how easily Tiffany and Stephen were moved to go with the flow of whatever was happening around them. Tiffany met the Reverend Gernot when Olaf set up a meeting with the reverend as a cover for a date. During the dinner meeting Tiffany believed Gernot was treating her like a child. Soon after Tiffany and Stephen got an invitation from Gernot for dinner. They attended. Gernot suggested they sabotage the levees on the Elbe River. They did so. Stephen, who was the one who got Tiffany into environmental issues when he began dating Birke, got bored with the work and went back to birding. Tiffany, who didn't seem terribly intelligent up to this point, continued to work but came up with the idea that she could also pry the rocks off the riverbanks to allow the banks to wash away. Tiffany and Stephen had not gone about seeking a way to bring changes to the Elbe River, they just had a man who was basically a complete stranger suggest they tear down the levees on the Elbe River so that was what they did. The two seemed to not have any real plan for their lives, they just bounced around aimlessly doing whatever someone else suggested.

Notice in this section of the novel that it was through Tiffany's infidelity that she became active in making changes in the Elbe River. Olaf set up a dinner meeting with Reverend Gernot who later reached out to Tiffany and Stephen. Also in this section Stephen left Tiffany in favor of the birds. He decided he wanted to go count birds in Macedonia. Tiffany was left alone with two single men, one of whom Stephen knew his wife was having an affair with. Along this line, remember that Olaf left Tiffany alone in the village of Saxony-Anhalt. He'd taken a phone call in the middle of dinner that the reader can assume was from his wife. Instead of telling Tiffany he had to leave, Olaf was in the process of high-tailing it out of town when Tiffany confronted him.

In the theme of relationships, notice that although Olaf used Reverend Gernot as a way to see Tiffany alone, the two men apparently weren't friends. When Olaf learned that Tiffany was staying at Reverend Gernot's house, he was angry with her and told her what she was doing was stupid. He told her that the reverend was an informant who would turn in even his best friends. Gernot, on the other hand, was angry when Tiffany asked him about the accusation that Olaf had made. His reaction made Tiffany believe that Olaf might have been lying about the minister.

Notice that although the novel takes its name from the wallcreeper, the bird that stayed with Stephanie and Tiffany for some time, the bird has completely dropped out of the narrative of the novel. There have been no more references to the bird or its importance in Tiffany and Stephen's lives.



Significant in this section is that Stephen had always been the member of the couple who was involved in environmental issues. One could say he became active in these issues only because he met a girl he liked, Birke, but there were signs before this point that Stephen would have liked to have been responsible for saving some small part of the environment. For instance, consider his anger when he realized that a man was hunting on the protected marsh he had been assigned to count birds. Notice also his depression when Rudi died. He told Tiffany he felt he was not even successful in saving one single wild thing. When Tiffany and Stephen both got involved in helping to revert the Elbe River back to a more natural state, notice that it was Stephen who gave up to return to counting birds. He had grown tired of the physical labor. It was Tiffany who continued the work until it was finished.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the encounter between Olaf and Reverend Gernot at dinner.

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Stephen gave up on the Elbe River project and decided to go count birds?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Olaf left Tiffany at the motel without telling her he was leaving?
Discuss the changing relationship between the two in this section of the novel.

Vocabulary

provenance, blatantly, sordidness, plebeian, venal, aver, perturbed, androgynous, idyllic, impediment, denizens, opposable, holistic, gunwale, riparian, nematode, renege, retroactively



Pp. 142-163

Summary

Tiffany called Stephen on Christmas Day, went to check on their apartment in Berlin and then returned to her job of removing rocks. By mid-February Tiffany had made a sizeable gap in the rocks covering the river bank. She watched as winter turned into spring. She started working on the second gap in the rocks on the river bank. In mid-April she stopped working. She enjoyed herself and thought she could stay there forever as long as no one expected her to work. At the Elbe Conference she got to see Gernot as a clergyman. He appeared to be soft and sheepish, not the commanding and cynical man that she knew.

Tiffany had planned to join Stephen in the Balkans but he didn't want her to come. She didn't see him until he came home to Berlin in June. He had become addicted to opium and went through withdrawal cold turkey on their couch. Stephen did allow Tiffany to go with him to Albania in July because he thought she could keep him on track. Tiffany was bored while Stephen counted his birds. They finally went to Montenegro where one of the English tourists got Tiffany pregnant. She told Stephen she wanted to go to Tuskwila so she could get an abortion. On the plane on the way there, she got her period.

Tiffany's sister lived in a cheap apartment and made her living by dancing at a strip club. She explained to Tiffany that her downfall was her short legs. Tiffany criticized her sister because she made it sound like she was trapped in Tuskwila. When Tiffany talked to Stephen he said he was sad because she had not been pregnant at all. She told him about the tiny birds that were all over Tuskwila.

Tiffany decided she had to get her sister out of Tuskwila after she saw her do an ariel cartwheel in the parking lot of a bar. They started making a list of her marketable skills. When it came time for Tiffany to fly home, Constance went with her. Stephen was trying to count birds in Albania but was fighting against the Albanian hunters who used the birds for food. Constance flew straight to Berlin while Tiffany stayed at a coffee shop and read an article Gernot had sent her about flooding at the Steckby-Lödderitzer Tree Farm. Tiffany imagined herself being arrested. Response was positive with environmentalists saying that riverside forrests should be underwater every once in a while. Others called for the removal of all of the rocks. Other people wondered why the person who had removed the rocks had not been caught.

When Tiffany finally returned home, she found Constance in bed with Stephen trying to help him drink a smoothie. Constance said nothing had happened between the two of them. Tiffany took it for granted he was sick because he was withdrawing from drugs again. She'd already gotten two jobs in Berlin. Constance had told Tiffany nothing happened between she and Stephen. Stephen told the same story. He suggested they try to have a baby. He told her how he thought he would be able to uncover all of the things that were threatening the birds. He finally told Tiffany he was proud of her for



tearing down the levees. Tiffany realized at that point that she should have known that Stephen was thinking up some sort of sabotage project.

Analysis

Although she had begun to think what she was doing was trivial, Tiffany's work on the banks of the Elbe River paid off in this section of the novel. When she was still in America visiting her sister Gernot sent Tiffany a copy of the article about the flooding in the tree farm caused by the sabotage she had done. Soon people began wondering why the rock cladding couldn't be removed from the entirety of the river banks. It was after Stephen realized his wife had done a good thing by seeing the project through to the end that he gave her the one bit of praise and true affection that he'd given her through the course of the entire novel. Notice that Stephen also believed his birding project was one that would lead to some sort of activist discovery. He seemed sad that it had instead led to nothing. It was only later that Tiffany realized that Stephen was hoping to draw attention to himself as an activist by sabotaging something, like she had done.

The issue of children comes up again in this section of the novel. Tiffany told Stephen she'd gotten pregnant by an English tourist and wanted to go to America to get an abortion. He allowed her to go but argued she should keep the baby. Even when Tiffany called to tell him she hadn't ever really been pregnant Stephen seemed disappointed. After he returned a second time from a birding trip in which he got addicted to drugs and had to dry out, Stephen suggested to Tiffany they should have a baby.

The inclusion of Tiffany's sister at this point in the novel is almost comic relief after the heavy and technical talk about environmental issues. Tiffany's sister works as a dancer in a club in America. She believed it was the only job she was capable of keeping. Tiffany got the bright idea to invite Tiffany, whom she had already accused her husband of sleeping with, to Berlin so she could get a better job. To make the situation even worse, Constance arrived in Berlin before Tiffany. When Tiffany did get home she found her sister and her husband in bed together. Constance and Stephen were quick to say nothing had happened and even Tiffany recognized that Stephen was having withdrawal symptoms again but that didn't stop her from accusing him of wanting to have sex with her sister. And consider the "skill" that Constance performed that made Tiffany realize that her sister had other options. She'd seen her sister do an aerial cartwheel. It was this trick of acrobatics that made Tiffany think there was a better life available for her sister.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Stephen was serious when he told Tiffany he was sad she wasn't pregnant by another man? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

What do you think of Constance's marketable skills? Do you think she had a better chance at getting a good job in Berlin than in America?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Stephen's belief that his work counting birds was somehow a sort of activism. Do you agree with his argument? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

trivial, incontrovertible, affectless, littoral, entropy, malfeasance, fetish, concave, conspecific, fervidly, attrition, extrapolating, inundation



Pp. 163-180

Summary

After a month in Berlin, Constance got a job as a fifth grade teacher. Because Stephen had been replaced at Global Rivers Alliance he and Tiffany had less money than ever. Tiffany still had some of her own money from before they were married but didn't want to spend any of it on Stephen. Stephen suggested she could get a job like her sister did. He said he needed cash to get back to Albania. Tiffany got a job taking tickets at SO36. After working only a few weeks she saw Elvis and realized she could not control her desire for him. She quit her job.

Stephen decided he wanted to make workers abandon a hydroelectric project in the Neretva Delta. Tiffany pointed out that he couldn't sabotage something that didn't exist so Stephen set his sights on Buško Jezero. He planned to blow up the dam with a bomb. Tiffany said the public might not like the idea of a bomb even if it was for a good cause. Stephen began talking about having children again. He said he'd wished he'd had a child by accident. He said he knew he didn't have any in the United States as Tiffany suggested because he was a virgin when he married Tiffany. Tiffany asked if there had been anyone for him other than Birke, Constance, Omar's wife and Tiffany.

Later Stephen told Tiffany that he'd gotten angry when he'd seen Birke with Olaf. He said he'd been confused about the guy that Tiffany believed was harmless. Stephen imagined Tiffany was dating the minister. Tiffany realized that when Stephen told her that Birke had hooked up with her harmless man he meant Gernot.

In October Stephen and Tiffany went back to Albania. It was at this time that she realized he couldn't walk uphill and had done many things she thought were strange because he had a bad heart. Tiffany wanted them to rent a car but Stephen wanted to get a donkey. Tiffany called the donkey Brighty. Stephen rode Brighty while Tiffany led the donkey. During the trip Stephen saw his first and last partridge. When they got tired of the mountains they gave Brighty to a single mother. They got on a bus and soon arrived at Lake Prespa.

They both waded into the lake. Stephen only went in up to his thighs and began to whine. One minute he was talking to Tiffany and the next he was underwater. Tiffany reached him and pulled him to the edge of the lake. She tried to perform CPR but Stephen was still in the water and had water in his lungs. She thought he had a heart attack.

Analysis

In the topic of infidelity, Tiffany quit her job at the SO36 because she saw Elvis there one day. She decided she couldn't trust herself to resist his advances. This could be interpreted two ways. Either Tiffany really didn't want to have sex with Elvis again and



thought that he might begin pursuing her since he knew where to find her. In this case she would have felt she had to quit to keep from being unfaithful. In the other interpretation Tiffany, who really didn't want to work anyway, believed she'd stumbled on a good excuse to quit her job.

Although Tiffany believed she was bringing her sister to Berlin to help her sister better herself, Tiffany actually did herself a disservice. Because Constance who had worked only as a dancer in a bar before she moved to Berlin had gotten a job as a teacher Stephen assumed Tiffany should be able to work as well. Up to that point in their lives together Stephen had supported both he and his wife. After he quit his job he expected her to pick up the slack and support him.

Stephen talked one more time about children in this section of the novel. He told Tiffany he wished he had some children he didn't know he had fathered to come to him. It almost seemed like he was making a last ditch wish for a child he could get to know and over whom he could have some influence. Stephen died soon after he talked this one last time about his desire to father children. For Stephen having children was the item he felt was most important on his life list.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think it took Tiffany so long to realize her husband had heart problems? What does it mean that he didn't tell her about it?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Stephen talked to Tiffany again about having children just before he died?

Discussion Question 3

How would you describe Stephen and Tiffany's relationship during the final trip they took together? Was it better or worse than it had been in the past.

Vocabulary

ingenuity, depreciate, parodies, corollary, juxtaposed, stoic, improvised, periphery, incoherent, diurnal



Pp. 180-193

Summary

A nurse got in touch with Trajco. He sat with her until her sister could come pick her up. Constance dealt with all the paperwork related to the disposal of Stephen's body. Omar called and told Tiffany the pump that Stephen had been working on was an artificial heart. She met Stephen's mother at the funeral. She looked at Tiffany with hatred. Tiffany learned that if she had used her money to pay Stephen's bills she would have been a millionaire. He had a life insurance policy he had let lapse.

Tiffany accepted Gernot's invitation to stay with him in Breitenhagen. Olaf came to visit her one day while Gernot was at church. She told Olaf she hadn't imagined she'd ever be without Stephen. She told him he should understand because he had a wife. Olaf said he no longer had a wife. She realized he was proposing marriage. He told her that she lived near Berlin and was working for Global Rivers Alliance. Tiffany asked if he was sleeping with Birke. She told him she couldn't watch Birke get rich off Global Rivers Alliance. He told her he lived in Lehnin. Tiffany stomped her feet and told Olaf she wanted to be the kind of activist that made a difference. He promised her that if she moved in with him there would be nothing to remind her of Stephen. He said the Alliance was paying him good money, he had a big yard and a shed with a kayak in it.

When Gernot found out that Tiffany was leaving, he discouraged her. As soon as she moved into Olaf's house he lost interest in her. He began spending the weekends in Berlin with Birke and then eventually moved out all together. After a few months Tiffany called Gernot and told him what had happened. She asked if he would marry her. He said he wouldn't ever marry anyone but would allow her to live in his house. He reasoned it would be doing him a favor as someone needed to live in the house but it was too big to rent. He would allow her to do whatever she wanted with the house. He told her he wanted her to stop giving herself away and he wanted her to learn. She worked on the house, wrote "The Wallcreeper" and went back to school. She worked at the Federal Environment Office and then founded an ecological planning bureau. Her work made dredging in the Elbe "prohibitively expensive" (p. 192) resulting in the river getting more silty and meandering around sandbars. She continued to work on the house, making it nicer and nicer.

Analysis

Remember in a previous section that Tiffany had said she didn't want to use any of her money to pay what she saw as Stephen's bills. In this section of the novel she realized that way of thinking backfired on her because one of the things that didn't get paid was Stephen's life insurance policy. Had she used "her" money to keep the policy in force, she wouldn't have ever had to worry about money again.



Although Tiffany had always referred to Olaf as being harmless she realized in this section just how harmful he was. She believed him when he promised her marriage and children. Instead, almost as soon as she moved in with him he left her for Birke. When she looked at the kayak he'd told her that he owned she looked at it and saw that it was cracked. Tiffany indicated the crack was made worse by the amateur attempts made to fix it. It is almost as if Tiffany was seeing a correlation between her life and the shape of the kayak. She might have realized that unless someone took charge of her life who was capable of "fixing" it correctly it would eventually be useless beyond repair.

It was Gernot who came to Tiffany's rescue. He promised her what she seemed to have been wanting all of her life. A house to live in, plenty of money to live on and her freedom to do what she wanted. Surprisingly, Tiffany went back to school and became an environmental activist in the legal sense. As a founder of an ecological planning bureau Tiffany stopped the dredging in the Elbe River.

The wallcreeper is mentioned again in this section of the novel. In the first reference, Tiffany suspected Gernot was comparing her to the wallcreeper when he called her a butterfly among birds. Although Gernot did not know what the reference meant and didn't ask, it obviously was significant to Tiffany. Notice it is also in this section of the novel that Tiffany credits herself with writing the novel "The Wallcreeper."

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the ending of the novel. Do you think it was realistic compared to Tiffany's past life story?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way Olaf treated Tiffany. Did his behavior surprise you? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Tiffany agree to stay with Gernot? How is this arrangement beneficial for them both?

Vocabulary

sanctimonious, rhetorically, incubus, liaison, volubility, supplant, montage



Characters

Tiffany

Tiffany is the main character and narrator of the novel. She is the wife of Stephen. She married Stephen after they dated only three weeks and knew very little about him. She got pregnant soon after she and Stephen got married but lost the baby because of a car wreck.

Tiffany had an affair with Elvis, a man who worked at a nearby gas station, but admitted she wanted to stay with Stephen because he was stable. As long as she was with Stephen she knew that she would not have to work because he made enough money to support them both. Tiffany next became involved with Olaf who was also married. Olaf introduced her to Reverend Gernot who got Tiffany interested in the Elbe River and the Steckby-Lödderitzer Tree Farm. She stayed at Gernot's house while she worked prying rocks from the river's banks.

It was not until Tiffany went to Albania with Stephen that she realized he had a bad heart. She was devastated by Stephen's death by a heart attack. Olaf invited Tiffany to live with him. She agreed but he soon lost interest in her and moved out to stay with Birke. When Gernot learned Tiffany was alone he allowed her to live in his family's home. With his encouragement, Tiffany went back to school and got a job in the Federal Environmental Office. She also founded an ecological planning bureau and went on to help put a stop to dredging in the Elbe River.

Stephen

Stephen is Tiffany's husband. He pursued Tiffany and married her within three weeks of their first meeting because he wanted her to go to Berne with him when he left for his new job. The first impression the reader gets of Stephen is that he was more concerned about the bird he'd just hit with his car than his wife who was bleeding from a head wound. Stephen continued to be unmindful of Tiffany through the remainder of their relationship. The only time he seemed to show her any real affection was when he praised her for following through with her plan to sabotage the Elbe River.

In the course of their relationship Stephen had an affair with Birke, slept with Tiffany's sister, slept with Omar's wife and abused drugs on a regular basis. Tiffany began to suspect Stephen was going on his birding trips alone just so he could use drugs as much as he wanted. It was noted he would always suffer withdrawal when he came home. Although Tiffany didn't learn Stephen had a bad heart until one of the last trips they took together, she realized it had affected him all of their lives together. When Stephen went underwater while they were wading in Lake Prespa Tiffany believed he'd had a heart attack. It was never indicated if Stephen died of the heart attack or drowning.



Olaf

Olaf was the man that Tiffany met in Lenzen at an environmental conference. Whenever Tiffany spoke to Stephen about Olaf she referred to him as being “harmless.” She and Olaf had an affair together. Because Olaf was married he had trouble seeing Tiffany. He arranged a dinner meeting with Reverend Gernot so that he could take Tiffany along and they could spend time together. Olaf discouraged Tiffany’s friendship with Gernot and criticized her work on the Elbe River. After Stephen died Olaf invited Tiffany to come live with him. He promised her marriage and children but as soon as she moved in with him he told her that she was depressing him because she was a widow. He eventually left her and moved in with Birke.

Reverend Gernot

Reverend Gernot was described as a high church Anglican pastor. He was the one who got Tiffany and Stephen interested in working on returning the Elbe River to its natural state. After Stephen died, Gernot wanted Tiffany to stay with him but she chose first to move in with Olaf. When that didn’t work out, Tiffany accepted Gernot’s invitation to live in his family’s home. He provided her with all the money she wanted to repair the house and decorate it as she liked.

Omar’s Wife

Because her husband was being transferred to Topeka and she didn’t want to go with him, Omar’s wife asked Tiffany to have an affair with Omar. She knew that if Omar were caught having an affair she could file for divorce and she would be granted alimony. Tiffany realized from the way Omar’s wife talked to her and responded to her questions that she and Stephen had slept with each other.

Rudolf

Rudolf is the wallcreeper that caused the wreck that made Tiffany miscarry her baby. The bird stayed with Tiffany and Stephen in their apartment until they let it go. Rudolf returned to the apartment several months later. Tiffany and Stephen chose to have a GPS tracker put on the bird before they let it go again. One day they found Rudolf in the wild. They watched as a hawk ate Rudolf’s innards.

Omar

Omar was a fellow employee of Stephen’s. He tried to give Stephen advice about how to take care of the wallcreeper. Omar was transferred to Topeka to work on a “contraption.” After Stephen’s death Omar told Tiffany that Stephen had wanted to go to Berlin in order to work on an artificial heart that the company was developing.



Elvis the Montenegrin

Elvis the Montenegrin was the first man with whom Tiffany had an affair. She broke off the affair when he told her that he'd gotten his ex-wife pregnant. When Tiffany saw Elvis again at SO36 she quit her job because she didn't think she was strong enough to reject him if she saw him on a regular basis.

Constance

Constance was Tiffany's sister. She worked as a dancer in a club while she lived in America. After Tiffany encouraged Constance to move back to Berlin with her, Constance quickly got a job as a teacher. Tiffany suspected that Stephen had an affair with Constance but Stephen denied it until near the end of his life.

Birke

Birke is the woman who was Stephen's major extra marital affair. She worked as an intern at an ad agency. Birke and Stephen joined over a plan to get rid of hydroelectric power because they believed this type of power was bad for the universe. Birke also had an affair with the Reverend Gernot and then later with Olaf.

Trajco

Trajco was a veterinary student who assisted Stephen during one of his birding trips to Macedonia. After Stephen died Trajco was contacted by a nurse at the hospital. He sat with Tiffany until she could get a flight back home.



Symbols and Symbolism

Files

Tiffany was considering stealing some files from the pharmaceutical company where she worked when she first met Stephen. The files represent the beginning of their relationship.

Two Thousand Dollar Binoculars

This expensive set of binoculars were a symbol of how little Tiffany knew about Stephen when they married. Stephen gave the binoculars to Tiffany as a wedding gift. It wasn't until she received them that she knew that he liked bird watching.

The Wallcreeper

The wallcreeper, whom Tiffany and Stephen named Rudi, represented to them the child they never had.

The Contraption

Omar was sent to Topeka where the pharmaceutical company was working on a project called only the "contraption." It was suggested this contraption was some sort of sexual device though its real purpose was never discussed. Tiffany believed she was being given insider information about the gadget when she was first told about. She later asked Stephen if they owned stock in the gadget. He said they did. When Stephen quit working for the pharmaceutical company he lost his stock option. The contraption and stock associated with represented a possible windfall of money for the couple, This windfall was given up because Stephen wanted to pursue Birke.

The Poster

This propaganda poster against the use of hydroelectric power represented water in a state of collapse, according to Tiffany.

Mercedes

Stephen was given a Mercedes when he refused to be transferred to Topeka. Tiffany seemed to believe the car was a consolation prize from the company. It also represented the secretive nature that Stephen had developed because he hid the car from Tiffany and did not let her know where it was.



Rocks

The rocks that Tiffany dug from the banks of the Elbe River represented the damage humans had done to nature in their attempt to control it.

A Partridge

This partridge is a symbol of the end of Stephen's life. Tiffany indicated that shortly before he died, they spotted a partridge while birding. She said it was his first, and last, partridge.

Kayak

Among the benefits Olaf told Tiffany she would enjoy if she moved in with him was a kayak that he had. After Olaf left her to live with Birke she discovered the kayak was cracked. The damaged kayak was a symbol of the many false promises that Olaf made to Tiffany.

Walnut

Reverend Gernot used a particularly strong walnut to illustrate to Tiffany what he believed Olaf would do to her.



Settings

Interlaken

Interlaken is the place where Stephen had a car wreck that caused Tiffany to miscarry her baby. Stephen paid more attention to the wallcreeper he believed he had killed than Tiffany's injury.

Berne

Berne is the city in Switzerland to which Tiffany and Stephen moved immediately after they got married. Tiffany liked living in Berne.

Mancuso's Loft

Mancuso's Loft is the bar to which Stephen took Tiffany and Elvis the night that Elvis wanted to go dancing. It was in this same bar that Tiffany first saw Birke.

Berlin

Berlin is the city to which Stephen was sent to work with Birke from Global Rivers Alliance. Tiffany moved to Berlin with Stephen but disliked the city.

Breitenhagen

Breitenhagen is the village where Tiffany first met the Reverend Gernot. Olaf brought her to this village for dinner with the reverend and so that he could have a rendezvous with her without his wife knowing.

SO36

SO36 is the alternative discotheque where Tiffany worked for a short while as a ticket taker. She quit her job when she saw Elvis there.

Lake Prespa

While wading in Lake Prespa Stephen had a heart attack and died.



Tukwila

Tukwila is the name of the town in Washington where Tiffany's sister lived until Tiffany persuaded her to move to Berlin. Tiffany went to Tukwila to visit her sister with the intention of having an abortion.

Lehnin

It was to the town of Lehnin that Tiffany moved to be with Olaf after Stephen died.

Wittenberg

Wittenberg is the name of Reverend Gernot's family home. After Stephen died and Olaf ditched Tiffany, Gernot allowed Tiffany to live in the house.



Themes and Motifs

Infidelity

Although it is hard to say that this novel really has any clearly defined themes, the act of infidelity comes up again and again in the course of the story. Tiffany cheated on Stephen, Stephen cheated on Tiffany, Tiffany cheated on Stephen and got pregnant, Stephen cheated on Tiffany with Tiffany's sister. The novel could compete with a soap opera for the number of and circumstances of affairs that take place within the story. There are a few interesting things to notice about the reactions the characters have to all the cheating going on.

Tiffany was the first one to have an affair. She had an affair with Elvis, a man who worked at a nearby gas station. Tiffany told Stephen about her affair, even had him serve as a chaperone for a date when Elvis wanted to go dancing. At one point in the affair, Stephen begged Tiffany to try to love him just a little bit. Tiffany seemed to think she was making Stephen feel better by telling him that Elvis was hurt by the fact that Tiffany did love Stephen.

Tiffany felt the other side of the cheating game when Stephen began having an affair with Birke. She was lonely when she went to the conference in Lenzen with Birke and Stephen especially since Stephen barely spoke to her and stayed in the room with Birke most of the time. Tiffany was hurt but believed that she had the responsibility to deal with the consequences of her own actions.

Note that the only time in the novel that Tiffany and Stephen seemed to agree that cheating was wrong was when Tiffany began having an affair with Olaf. The problem for both of them was that Olaf was married. When Tiffany had first seen that Olaf was wearing a wedding ring she knew she had a problem. Tiffany went ahead with the affair anyway. When Stephen welcomed Tiffany home after one of her stints with Olaf, he called her a home wrecker. They apparently thought it was okay for them to have affairs on one another but didn't think it was right for them to interfere with other peoples' marriages.

Relationships

The relationship, or more correctly the lack of a relationship, between Tiffany and Stephen is another topic that surfaces again and again in the novel. The novel tells the story from the time near the beginning of Stephen and Tiffany's marriage to the time after Stephen died. Stephen and Tiffany married after they'd know each other only three weeks. At the time they got married, they didn't know each other very well. It was not until just shortly before Stephen's death that Tiffany even realized her husband had a bad heart. When Tiffany did finally get around to asking Stephen to talk about himself the most she learned was how different the two of them were.



Despite their differences Tiffany and Stephen seemed to have an unusual bond that kept them together. Because Stephen was stable, Tiffany had no desire to leave him. She didn't want to be married to a man with whom she would have to have any responsibility for her life. She believed Stephen would stay with her because he believed marriage was an institution. She also thought he realized if he did divorce her to marry Birke, he'd only get divorced again because Birke had too many other men available to her. Although they did not know each other well and had little in common with the exception of their affection for the wallcreeper, the two stayed together until Stephen's death.

The Wallcreeper

The wallcreeper is a character and also an important symbol in the novel. It was because of the wallcreeper that Stephen and Tiffany did not have children. Stephen braked quickly to try to avoid hurting the wallcreeper and caused Tiffany to hit her head hard enough to get a concussion. As a result she miscarried their baby. Even though his wife was hurt, Stephen took the time to pick up the wallcreeper even though he believed it was dead. Stephen and Tiffany kept the bird in their kitchen while it recuperated. It seemed to take the place of a child as they took care of it, fed it and developed affection for it. As soon as they believed the wallcreeper was well enough Tiffany and Stephen allowed the bird to go free.

A few months later the bird returned the apartment. Both Tiffany and Stephen were overjoyed to see the bird. They cared for it again until they decided to have it fitted with a GPS chip and released into the wild. One day they accessed the GPS chip to find where the bird, whom they had named Rudi, was. They found the bird but when they got their binoculars for a closer look saw that he was in the process of being eaten by a hawk.

After Rudi's death the wallcreeper disappears from the novel. There are a few references at the end of the story to the wallcreeper but these references don't really connect well with the significance of the bird at the beginning of the novel. When Gernot told Tiffany she was a butterfly among birds, she asked him if he was referring to the wallcreeper, a bird that he did not recognize as being significant. In the final paragraphs of the novel Tiffany also indicated that she had written the novel she has chosen to call "The Wallcreeper," assumedly this very story.

Environmental Issues

Environmental issues also surface repeatedly through the course of the novel even though there is little connectivity between the mentions. After they got married, Tiffany learned Stephen was interested in birds when he gave her an expensive pair of binoculars as a wedding gift. He told her he'd studied birds as an Eagle Scout in order to make his father happy but apparently his affection for birds went beyond pleasing his father. Stephen was broken hearted when Rudi died and for a while gave up birding



entirely. He told Tiffany he felt he had failed because he was unable to keep even one wild thing alive. He left Tiffany when she was working on tearing down the levees on the Elbe to return to birds because he felt that was where he would be useful. Unfortunately, he never achieved any significant environmental impact through his work with birds.

Environmental issues, this time the impact of dams on wildlife, came up again when Stephen became interested in Birke. He followed her and worked tirelessly believing he could make an impact through her project. Unfortunately Birke became known through the work she and Stephen did but Stephen never managed to make a name for himself. It was through this new environmental interest for Stephen that Tiffany seemed to find her own calling. It was at the suggestion of Reverend Gernot that Tiffany and Stephen began the project of tearing down the levees on the Elbe River. Soon Stephen had enough of the hard labor and decided to return to birding. Left to her own devices Tiffany continued the work they had started and even pulled some of the rocks that lined the river, allowing water to seep into a forest near the river.

Although no one but Stephen and Gernot knew that Tiffany was responsible for the missing rocks, her actions were praised by some members of the community. What she had done started a process to free the river from its uncompromising banks. Later, after Tiffany became a professional environmental supporter, she made it so it was prohibitively expensive to dredge the Elbe River. Because of what she did, the river returned to its natural state.

Children

Having children is a topic that was discussed often between Tiffany and Stephen through the course of the novel. Stephen seemed to want to have children more than Tiffany did. At the beginning of the novel, Tiffany was pregnant. She believed she'd gotten pregnant on the night they were married and was not happy about being pregnant. Tiffany was surprised how devastated she was when she realized she had lost the baby. At the same time Tiffany and Stephen were helping the wallcreeper to recuperate. They both seemed to give the bird the affection they might have given the child that Tiffany miscarried. When they saw the bird killed, it was as if they had lost their own child.

After Tiffany's miscarriage, both Stephen and Tiffany mentioned at points throughout the novel that they needed to have a baby. Stephen made these suggestions more often than Tiffany. Soon after the wallcreeper died, he told Tiffany they needed to have a baby. The timing made it seem almost as if Stephen believed it would give him something to think of other than the loss of the bird. Stephen also told Tiffany that he wanted a baby eventually because it was one of the most important items on his life list. Unfortunately, he never got to check having a baby off his list. He died before the two had any children.



Styles

Point of View

This novel is told from the first person point of view of Tiffany. The reader can tell the story is written in the first person point of view because Tiffany refers to herself as “I” throughout the course of the story. Notice that in the final paragraphs of the novel Tiffany credits herself as being the author of the novel. Tiffany’s, and therefore the reader’s, knowledge about other characters in the novel is limited to what they tell her through conversations. She records her own actions and feelings as well as how other people’s actions affect her. It is appropriate that Tiffany tells the story because its style is similar to her personality and attitude toward life. She tells a disjointed, random sequence of events that show no evidence of planning on her part or the part of other characters.

Language and Meaning

Just like the structure of the novel, the language of the story is also random and not particularly meaningful as the reader sometimes doesn’t even know to what the characters are referring. For instance, when Tiffany had first met Olaf and was shaking his hand she makes a reference to Allen Ginsberg calling a part of the body near which Olaf wore his ring “the center of the flesh.” After this reference, Tiffany moves on to another topic leaving her reader to wonder exactly what she meant by the Ginsberg reference.

Also significant about the language used in this novel are the terms that refer to birding and hydroelectric power. There are times in the novel where Stephen went on rants against political groups in which his thoughts were difficult to follow. Sometimes it seems as if a deeper understanding of politics and activism would benefit one when reading the novel. The discussion between Gernot and Olaf during the dinner date with Tiffany was also deep and complex. Notice that even Tiffany mentioned she felt she had been brought to the dinner to serve as a contrast from the intellectual nature of the conversation.

Structure

This 193-page novel is very loosely structured. There are no chapter breaks. The switches between thoughts and scenes is indicated only by the author skipping a line between these sections. The events of the story are told in the past tense and seem to be fairly chronological in nature. Although the events do seem to be chronological, there are huge chunks of time that are skipped entirely between some scenes with other scenes happening one immediately following another. The ideas and scenes presented are also random in nature. They general deal with infidelity, birding, children or some environmental issue but never work together to form a real plot with a well defined



conflict and a resolution of this conflict. The characters just seem to wander through their lives without purpose. It is not unusual for the setting of the novel to change without warning. There is also no good feel for how much time has passed between the beginning of the novel and the end.



Quotes

Losing the baby was more dire than I had dreamed possible.”

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 3)

Importance: Even though Tiffany had not wanted a baby and her pregnancy was accidental she was more upset by her miscarriage than she had thought she would be.

After a shower with fantasies of pharmaceutical-grade trisodium phosphate and nothing to wash with but gentle pH-negative shower gels, I had recovered sufficiently ... actually I had recovered from everything! I was no longer in love! My sense of depending on Stephen for my happiness had evaporated.”

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 3)

Importance: After Stephen had anal sex with her Tiffany came to the conclusion that she could no longer depend on him for her happiness. She believed this one inconsiderate act had killed all of the love that she had for him.

I had hypnotized myself because Stephen had a job that could support us both and secretarial work bored me.”

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 71)

Importance: Tiffany used the word “hypnotized” to explain what she had done to herself in order to believe that sex with Stephen was as good as it could get. She thought she had made herself believe this because she knew if she stayed with Stephen she wouldn’t have to work.

It should be about getting through difficult stuff together. Difficult stuff the world throws at you, not difficult stuff you do to each other.”

-- Tiffany (N/A paragraph 8)

Importance: During a discussion with Elvis about love, Tiffany told him she believed couples should not try to do cruel things to each other, they should instead concentrate on getting through the hard things together that life threw their way.

Stephen really did love birds. Plus psychedelic drugs, discretion, and sarcasm.”

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 1)

Importance: It was when Rudolf the wallcreeper returned home that Tiffany realized how much Stephen really did love birds. She noted she also had learned he liked drugs, discretion and sarcasm, things that were totally unrelated to birds.

He has those seven habits of highly effective people, and he’s graciously letting me pick up one habit at a time.”

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 4)



Importance: Tiffany described the differences between Stephen, whom she believed had the ability to highly effective, and herself, who she believed was being allowed to pick up the habits one at a time as she pleased. Basically, she's saying Stephen let her do as she pleased and required little proof of progress.

Stephen's grief humanized him. I began to fall in love."
-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 1)

Importance: In another of Tiffany's rapid swings of affection, she decided she was falling in love with Stephen when he grew depressed because of Rudi's death. She saw his depressed mood as a sign he had been "humanized."

She simply knew she was about to lose something valuable, and like anybody else, she wanted to take the next logical step to make it her own: She wanted to fuck it."
-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 1)

Importance: Tiffany describes Omar's wife when she came to ask Tiffany to sleep with her husband. Tiffany believed that Omar's wife wanted to stake a claim on Stephen.

I think approximately seven hundred passersby, including ninety of Stephen's coworkers, saw the handoff of cash and were confirmed in their belief that I was turning tricks to support an ungrateful pimp."
-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 2)

Importance: Tiffany's mind set is illustrated in this section of the novel as she assumed that anyone who saw her giving money to Elvis would believe she was giving money to Elvis because he was her pimp.

I was starting to sense that Stephen found me uninteresting relative to Birke."
-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 1)

Importance: Tiffany understated the obvious when she said that she believed Stephen found Birke more interesting than she. Stephen's interest in Birke appeared to be not only work-related but also sexual.

By coming along to Lenzen, I had signed on the wrong dotted line. It was my responsibility to face the consequences."
-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 4)

Importance: Tiffany realized that just as she had cheated on Stephen with Elvis, Stephen was now cheating on her with Birke. Instead of being angry with him for leaving her alone during the conference, she believed she was paying for the times she'd left Stephen alone to be with Elvis.

That's all the poster showed: water in a state of collapse—the real, existing state of collapse that every dam represents, the collapse of a river and its ecosystem. And posing in front of it, Stephen and Birke, ready to be swept away."



-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 4)

Importance: Tiffany creates the image of Stephen and Birke about to be swept away by the collapsing water depicted in their propaganda poster.

If you believe in marriage as an institution the way Stephen did, one thing you definitely don't want is to try it more than once. If Stephen married Birke, the marriage would end, because for her it was one option among many."

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 1)

Importance: Tiffany explains in this quote why she believed that Stephen would not divorce her to marry Birke.

And thus it came about that armed with free time, relative solitude, and a pickaxe, we quietly set about dismantling the stonework that separated the Steckby-Lödderitzer Tree Farm from the Elbe."

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 3)

Importance: It was because of the Reverend Gernot's suggestion that Stephen and Tiffany began their first active work to better the environment.

It was getting to be a pattern: blissful happiness in the Balkans, precipitous flight home, withdrawal symptoms. But he had no needle tracks or anything to really give me pause."

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 5)

Importance: Tiffany believed that Stephen was feeling bad when he came back from his trip to the Balkans because he was withdrawing from drugs, his usual pattern.

He sat up again. 'That you were right to tear down those levees. I'm proud of you.' He put his arms around me and hugged me very tight."

-- Stephen (N/A paragraph 4)

Importance: This may be the only time in the novel that Stephen praised Tiffany.

And rented that place that was almost a basement, and drove up roads in Switzerland it had been totally illegal to drive up, and gave the appearance of being addicted to pills: Stephen had a bad heart."

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 3)

Importance: It was not until one of their trips to Albania that Tiffany put together the clues and realized that her husband had a bad heart.

He said, after swearing me to secrecy, that the pump was an artificial heart and Stephen wanted to work on it and that's why he was so desperate to get a transfer to Berlin."

-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 3)

Importance: Omar explained to Tiffany after Stephen's death that Stephen had wanted



so badly to go to Berlin because the company with which he had worked at the time was trying to make an artificial heart.

Stephen turned out to have a major life insurance policy he had let lapse. If I had liquidated the Tiff Foundation to pay our bills in Berlin, I would have been a millionaire.”
-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 5)

Importance: By refusing to pay any of Stephen’s bills with “her” money, Tiffany had actually punished herself because one of the things Stephen had let lapse was his life insurance policy.

We did that classic couples thing, where you delegate functions to each other and end up losing basic competencies, but we were always together, so it was no problem. Now I have to figure out what aspects of myself I let him adopt and represent, and what parts of me are actually him.”
-- Tiffany (N/A paragraph 1)

Importance: Even though Tiffany later admitted she didn’t believe what she’d said about her relationship with Stephen was true, she seemed to be trying to make Olaf believe their relationship was ideal.

I had been treating myself as resources to be mined. Now I know I am the soil where I grow.”
-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 3)

Importance: Tiffany made a complete change in the end of the novel when she suddenly began to see her own worth. Before this she had seen herself only in the way she related to men as a sexual object.

I am proud to say that my environmental impact statements have helped make dredging the Elbe prohibitively expensive.”
-- Narrator (N/A paragraph 3)

Importance: Tiffany continued to work for the preservation of the Elbe after she became an environmental leader. She was pleased by the positive change that she’d brought about in the river.