

What Dreams May Come: A Novel Study Guide

What Dreams May Come: A Novel by Richard Matheson

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Plot Summary

What Dreams May Come begins with the prologue where Robert Nielsen relates his experience of a psychic who comes to his door claiming to have a manuscript that she has transcribed from his dead brother, Chris Nielsen. She tells Robert that Chris dictated the manuscript and refused to give her any rest until the project was done. All she wishes to do is deliver the manuscript to Robert and finally get some peace. The remainder of the book is made up of this manuscript.

Chris Nielsen dies in a car accident one night after going to a movie. As a screenplay writer, he considers his research to be watching movies. Usually his son, Ian, accompanies him, but his night he is alone. Chris's spirit leaves his body and wanders around Borderland, removed from life and yet not moving on. He is unable to leave his wife, Ann. Her grief at his death is his pain and he wishes to be able to help her. After several attempts at reaching his family, Chris finally prays for help, and is immediately removed from Borderland.

Summerland is where Chris now finds himself. He is greeted by his cousin, Albert, and his dog, Katie. Albert helps Chris to understand that he is dead, though he still has his body and his thoughts that are uniquely his. Albert also explains that the afterlife is a state of mind, and can be whatever an individual wishes it could be. Those who live in Summerland have occupations, but not for the purpose of making a living, but because of their passion for a particular type of work. Chris enjoys Summerland, but cannot get Ann out of his mind. The recurring dreams of her death frighten Chris, and actually are a portent of what eventually happens when Ann takes her own life. Chris is greatly frustrated. He has just learned that Ann would have joined him in twenty-four years, and now she is consigned to a lower realm for that period of time.

Chris cannot stand by and just wait for his love to endure twenty-four years of a realm of Hell. He convinces Albert to help him search the Lower Realms to find Ann so that he can help her. As with Virgil's descent into Dante's Inferno, Chris is exposed to a number of mind-numbing sights that are repellent and abhorrent. He is actually attacked by some of the inhabitants, and he believes that he will die, though he is already dead. He learns later that the attack was perpetrated through the minds of the inhabitants and his own mind. Albert and Chris do finally locate Ann in her house, which is a replica of their home, only this one is in very poor condition, the atmosphere depressing and dark. Ann does not recognize Chris, though he tries everything he can to convince her of his identity. Ann's mind has created her own version of Hell; her afterlife is a continuation of the state of mind she found herself in after Chris's death.

The only thing Chris can now do is to choose to stay with Ann in her Hell because he simply cannot walk away from her. He knows that there is a better way, and hopes that with time he will be able to convince her of this. With this sacrifice, Chris sees that Ann finally understands who he is, but he then loses consciousness and wakes up in Summerland again. Ann has chosen rebirth as a way to redevelop her injured spirit. Chris determines, yet again, that he must join her and insists on learning about rebirth



so that he can experience it immediately, rather than in a few hundred years. As Chris learns about this, he realizes that he and Ann are soul mates and have had several previous lives together. Thus encouraged, Chris tells Robert how he plans to be reborn, and that once he does his incarnation as Chris will leave his earthly memory. That is why Chris insisted that the manuscript be written in such a rush, because Chris is in a hurry to get back to Ann. The message for the readers of the manuscript is that spiritual growth is the purpose of life, and a life of service to others is the utmost good; that death is nothing to fear because it is merely a continuation of one's existence on a new level.

Introduction

Introduction Summary

What Dreams May Come is a story of love and devotion that transcends the bonds of Time, of Heaven, and of Hell. Chris Nielsen dies and leaves his wife, Ann, a widow. Chris explores the level of Heaven called Summerland and finds it to be a very peaceful and wonderful existence. The only thing that bothers him is that Ann is not with him, and her suicide further widens the distance between them. Chris determines that he must reconnect with Ann and convinces Albert to help him to find her. Traveling through the Lower Realms of Hell, Chris is appalled at what he sees, and while Ann is not in the worst part of the Lower Realm, where she exists is abysmal. Chris determines that he cannot leave her there alone, and resolves to stay with her. This allows Ann's eyes to be opened to the possibility that there is life after death and subsequently she chooses rebirth as a way to build up her spirit. While the two are not reunited permanently by the end of the story, the promise of their future together is assured.

A clairvoyant claims to have written a manuscript dictated to her by a dead man. The dead man is Chris Nielsen and he refuses to leave the woman alone until she writes his story and delivers it to his brother, Robert Nielsen. She claims to have never asked for the job of transcribing the manuscript and that it has taken her over six months to complete it. All she wishes to do is deliver it and hope she will finally have some peace. Robert does not know whether to believe that the manuscript really is true, but the events in it cause him to review his life.

Introduction Analysis

Robert, the first person character of the introduction, is the brother of the main character of the novel, Chris. Robert greets a strange woman on his doorstep one evening who hands him a bulky envelope. She tells him that it is a communication from his dead brother, Chris. Robert is initially angry, but the woman insists that he take the manuscript and give her some peace. Robert reads the manuscript three times and does not quite know what to make of it. The included facts that no one else could have known are an indication that there is some truth to the document; otherwise the woman is adept at investigation and doing background checks. The point of the introduction is to orient the reader to understand that what comes next are the words of a dying and then dead man and his journey after death.



Chapters 1 - 2

Chapters 1 - 2 Summary

1. A Blur of Rushing Images

Chris Nielsen usually goes to the movies with his son, Ian. Fortunately, this night, he is alone. As a screenwriter, Chris goes to the movies two times a week and usually Ian accompanies him, but tonight, Ian appears in a school play. Chris is relieved that he is alone in the car when he is hit by a car and spins into the path of an oncoming van. Then there is only pain and cold and whispering voices. Chris can feel a different pain and knows that it belongs to his wife, Ann. It is her agony over his injuries. Chris's mind moves from his current state of injury to a peaceful Sunday evening at home, then he is abruptly brought back. More feelings and sensations and the realization that he is dying. A voice tells him not to fight it and this makes Chris angry. Chris struggles to hold on, he can move with his mind to the next room and then back. The sound of his being separating from his body makes strange crackling sounds. Chris separates from his body and his life flashes before his eyes in reverse from 1974 to 1927 in a blur of images.

2. To Dream of Dreaming

Chris sits up in bed and is happy to realize that he has only been dreaming. His vision is blurry, but he is alive and in his hospital room. Needing to find Ann, Chris gets out of bed just as a nurse enters the room, she then runs toward the bed, and then runs from the room. Chris looks behind him. The man on the bed is Chris, but the Chris standing beside the bed has no substance, his fingers move through the sheet he tries to shift. He is dead. It makes no sense to him that his body is whole, his clothes undamaged. He meets a man in the hallway of the hospital whose touch is humanly real. The man informs Chris that Chris is dead, but Chris refuses to believe the man and is immediately immersed in a fog. Chris begins to think that if this is a dream, then the pain he still feels is dream caused. As soon as Chris has this thought, his pain disappears. He is in his home now and Ginger, his German Shepherd, is ecstatic to see him, but then recoils as Chris attempts to pet her because his hand moves right through the dog. Ginger runs away from him, terrified. Chris reassures himself that he is merely dreaming. Ann has left the coffeepot on again and when his hand reaches for the cord to unplug it, his hand passes through the cord. No one is home and it is nearly seven in the morning. Chris's confusion mounts. Where is his family? The accident, the hospital...is it all a dream? Chris is so tired that he lies down on the bed hoping to tell Ann about his crazy dream when he sees her later.



Chapters 1 - 2 Analysis

Chris Nielsen has been in an accident and is badly injured. He wakes to a world of pain and sensations. His mind moves from the present to the past during a happy time and then back. Richard Matheson has extensively researched death and near death experiences and takes his protagonist, Chris, through the experiences of the dying. Chris feels his spirit ripping loose from his body. However, he still feels real and whole. When he looks at his body, it is uninjured and his clothes are undamaged. But, when he looks at the body on the bed, it looks like him. When he attempts to touch something, his hands move through the object. Chris decides it can only be a dream and in his dream, Chris learns to control his dream world with his thoughts. His pain disappears as soon as he wishes to no longer feel pain. He does feel pronounced lethargy and gives in to it by lying down on his bed at home, anticipating Ann's reaction when he tells her about the strangeness of the dream.



Chapters 3 - 4

Chapters 3 - 4 Summary

3. This Black, Unending Nightmare

Chris awakens to Ann's crying and follows the sound of it so that he can find Ann and comfort her. This takes him to a church where he has never been before and it is filled with gray figures of people. At the front of the church are Ann and all of Chris's family. All are crying, great heartbreaking sobs. Chris understands now; his dream continues and it now includes his funeral. Chris rages at the dream, wishing it would end. Looking around, Chris spies the man who could see him at the hospital, wondering why the man continues to be in his dream. It is also strange that the man seems to be of substance and to talk to him takes no effort. Again, the man tells Chris he is dead. He tells Chris that if it is only a dream, all he has to do is wake up. A very good idea, Chris thinks, and tries to wake up, but to no avail. He finds himself back in his home. Ann is crying on the bed while Ian comforts her. Chris reaches out to touch Ian's head and the boy tells his mother he feels as though his dad is there in the room with them. This only makes Ann cry harder and Chris is left feeling more helpless than before because he cannot connect with her.

4. To Know I Still Exist

As Chris continues with his journey, his greatest need, to be with his wife, eludes him. No matter how he tries, he cannot seem to reach her. Then Chris experiences the strangest episode so far. He relives every moment of his life with full understanding and comprehension of the experience. What he did not know or understand before, he now comprehends. All moments are re-lived, the good and the bad. All efforts in his life, his screenplays, some of which were good and uplifting, more that led others astray. Chris faces every moment of his life with absolute clarity. Then Chris is in the cemetery and Ann is at his gravesite. Yet again, Chris attempts to create a connection with his wife. His son Richard approaches with a friend named Perry. Perry shocks Chris because he can see him. Perry cannot really hear Chris, but he can see him. Perry urges Richard to convince Ann to have a sitting or séance so that he can help them connect with Chris.

Chapters 3 - 4 Analysis

Chris continues to reject the idea that he can be dead. He feels, he hears, he sees. How can this be if he is dead? Chris observes his family grieving at the church and feels Ann's pain. Back at the house, Ian tries to comfort Ann in her room and he can feel his father's presence, but Ann cannot. She thinks Ian is merely trying to comfort her. Chris, himself, faces a personal accounting. The question asked of him is to report what he has done with his life. At this personal and solitary accounting, Chris reviews all of his life, reliving every moment, even the ones that reflect dreams unfulfilled. He must relive



each of his failures and the challenge put forth, wondering what Chris may have done and how far off the mark he landed. At the cemetery, Chris's other son, Richard, brings his friend Perry to meet Ann. Perry can actually see Chris and almost hear him. Richard and Chris are disconcerted, but Ann refuses to believe it. Ann appears to have no belief in life after death. For her, death is the ultimate end and this belief is blocking her ability to feel her husband's presence. Perry is a psychic and is able to see Chris. Richard wants to believe Perry, and is open to the possibility. Ian is the most open to the idea of his father's presence and can actually feel his father's hand upon his head. Ann, however, is completely closed off to the idea that her husband can exist in another form after death, and as a result Chris cannot make any connection with her. His degree of love is not enough to make the connection.



Chapters 5 - 6

Chapters 5 - 6 Summary

5. My Presence is Invalid

Ann agrees to a séance with Perry, although reluctantly. Chris enters his house and Ann is there with his son Richard and the psychic, Perry. Perry immediately sees Chris when the dog alerts them to Chris's presence. Ann is resistant to Perry's words, his claims that he can actually see Chris. Chris tries to approach Ann slowly, knowing her stubbornness. Perry tries very hard to be persuasive, telling Ann that he cannot read her mind; only what he sees is what he shares with them. Ann turns bitter. She wants to know that Chris is still alive in some form, but she does not believe in any sort of life after death. Ann insists Chris is not there because she just cannot see him, it does not matter to her what Perry sees. The effort to Chris, to try to manifest himself to his wife, is extreme and causes exhaustion. Everything Chris does Perry relates; Richard believes, but Ann cannot. Then Chris sees a copy of himself in the living room with Ann, Richard, Ian, Marie and Perry. Perry has created a copy of Chris with his strength of will and the copy says what Perry Projects. Chris tries to stop Perry, but Perry can no longer see Chris, only the copy his mind has created. Perry might have connected Chris with Ann, but his arrogance gets in the way.

6. There is No More

Chris should be able to break free, yet Ann's despair keeps him bound to her. Time has no meaning for Chris, the next time he finds himself in his house he is undetected, even by Ginger. Richard is with Ann, attempting to console her. Ann pleads with him to stop trying, for it only causes her to feel worse. Ian no longer feels his presence. Marie writes a long letter to Wendy about her father. Chris uses all of the strength of his mind to get her to write down the words that he still exists. She does. She even goes to her mother to show her, but stops, fearing that only her intense grief created the words. Chris's fear and despair make him run, to try to get away from the frustration of it all and the faster he runs the deeper the fog. Finally Chris calls out for help. Immediately the man from the hospital who can see and touch him appears. He tells Chris he must move on and Chris is still reluctant to leave Ann. Chris does try to imagine something better, where they used to camp. A sense of pushing is followed by a sense of peace. For the first time since the accident, Chris has a sense of hope.

Chapters 5 - 6 Analysis

Ann cannot accept that Chris may still exist after his death. Initially Perry really does see Chris and relates truthfully what he sees. From the beginning Ann is skeptical, while Richard tries hard to believe. It becomes difficult to determine whether Richard believes Perry for Richard's own sake, or because he wishes too intensely to comfort his mother.



Either way, Richard is the motivating force behind Perry, who can actually see Chris. However, with Ann's persistent disavowal, Perry gets tired of trying to convince her of the truth, so he creates a different one. He creates a Chris in his mind that is easier to manage. His projection of Chris only gives the family trite reassurances that Chris is happy. Chris is angry and terrified at this because he knows his wife and such an experience will shut her mind forever to the possibility that she might connect with her husband. No matter what Chris does, he cannot break through enough for his family to believe the connection.

In his own despair, Chris calls for help. This brings forth the one man who has always been able to really see Chris and whose touch is solid. Chris must let go of Ann's grief in order to move on. Once Chris focuses on a time in the past when they were happy, he feels that he is moving and with that movement comes a sense of peace and contentment. Even though he is null to his family, he now knows that there is more to life after death. He is even eager to explore it.



Chapters 7 - 9

Chapters 7 - 9 Summary

7. Continuation at Another Level

When Chris opens his eyes, the mist is gone and he sees blue sky and green foliage, for he is sitting beneath a tree. The grass tastes and smells better than he remembers. There is plenty of light, but no shadows are cast for there is no sun. To see such beautiful scenery and be dead boggles his mind. Chris knows that Ann would love what he is seeing. A dog runs toward him; it is Katie, their canine companion for over sixteen years, young again, and happy to see him. Nearby is a house, similar to the house Chris and Ann had planned to build one day. It has no doors or windows at the openings and the man Chris has been seeing from time to time since the accident lives there. It is his cousin, Albert. Chris's inability to recognize Albert after his death was caused by Chris's desire to get to Ann and, as a result, Chris was stuck in Borderland. Now in Summerland, Chris learns his existence is a state of mind, whatever it is he wants is what his existence will reflect.

8. Into Albert's Home

Chris learns that Albert keeps track of certain family members who have died; that families do not have the same ties in Summerland as they do on earth. Chris cannot get the idea of reaching Ann out of his mind. Albert assures Chris that Ann has a guide, just as Albert guides Chris. Albert reads Chris's thoughts and answers his questions before he can ask them. Summerland is what Chris makes of it; Albert shows Chris his home and his environment and tells Chris he can have the same thing. Everything is built with the power of the mind.

9. Thoughts Are Very Real

Albert invites Chris into his beautiful home. Inside Albert's home, Chris admires the roominess and the beauty of the craftsmanship and wonders how long a bouquet of flowers will last. Albert's answer is surprising. The flowers last until he loses interest in them and then they go back to the matrix, a place where everything in Summerland is recycled. On seeing the scripts he wrote, bound and stored in Albert's study, Chris regrets that his screenplays were not of a less violent or horrific nature. Albert assures Chris that is unimportant now. Chris still persists in worrying about Ann, and Albert tries to reassure Chris that Ann is fine. The frustration is still there, wondering if there is nothing he can do for his wife. Albert tells him to send loving thoughts.

Chapters 7 - 9 Analysis

Summerland is what most people refer to as Heaven. It is made up of one's thoughts, and merely by thinking of a thing, it can be created from the matrix, and used and



enjoyed until it is no longer desired, at which time it is returned to the matrix and recycled. Chris has a heart, blood flowing, a body, and cognizant thought. His body is very real to him, and Albert assures him that it is real in a different kind of sense. The home Albert shows to Chris is of Albert's thought creation. There is no need for doors or windows because no one would invade another's home. There is also no kitchen or bathroom, as in Summerland there is no need of sustenance and subsequent elimination. Albert's job is to help guide Chris through the understanding of his new existence and that Chris cannot do anything to help Ann except send her loving thoughts.

By finally letting go of his desire to stay and asking for help, Chris inadvertently enables Albert. Until Chris opens himself up to help, Albert is unable to help him. This brings up an interesting question of free will. Until Chris chooses to accept help, Albert is unable to give it. This also brings up the question of whether guides such as Albert can have any effect on their prospect before death. Chris continues to ask questions, especially about Ann and whether she will be all right. Albert deflects the questions, making one wonder if no belief is the equivalent of being entirely alone because help cannot be rendered if it will not be received.



Chapters 10 - 12

Chapters 10 - 12 Summary

10. Look at Where You Are

Thoughts, even bad ones, take on a form that must be faced. During each soul's period of purging, judgment is rendered not by a higher being, but by oneself. "What condemnation could possibly be more harsh than one's own when self-pretense is no longer possible?" Page 84, Chapter 10. Everyone views their life as having been lived incompletely. When Chris heeds Albert's suggestion to rest, he dreams of a camping trip with Ann when the children and Katie were young. Ann had a nervous breakdown two years earlier and though she seems better, she still has terrible stomach pain, seeming like what is bothering her is eating at her from deep inside of her. Chris dreams of a happy time with Ann, but the dream turns into a nightmare, with a different ending than the event Chris remembers. Albert assures him that it is a "symbolic leftover" that will soon pass. Then Chris realizes that Albert and he are speaking to one another with their minds and not with their mouths. Albert explains that communication is the result of pure thoughts without the barrier of inexact words. With Chris's permission, Albert reverts to the "garb" he wears in Summerland, a radiant robe of color.

11. Your Problems Lie Herein

Chris realizes that there are no mirrors in Summerland and thinks it is because of vanity, but Albert tells him that the mirror would reflect this imperfect state. This would prevent the pursuit of perfection. Albert shares with Chris his previous disbelief in a life after death, a fact that should help allay Chris's fears about Ann. Since Chris completely accepts where he is, he no longer feels pain that has been a life-long companion for him.

12. The Power of Mind

All functions in Summerland can be achieved with the mind and there really is no need of a body. What Chris learns is that while all his physical needs have disappeared, he must still solve his problems. Albert teaches Chris to move from one place to another using only his mind. There are no limitations in Summerland. Chris also discovers that there are many types of places for people to live in Summerland, as well as many different robes. The atmosphere in Summerland is malleable, and changes with the thoughts of the individual having them. This is the true nature of the power of the mind.

Chapters 10 - 12 Analysis

At one point in Chris's dream, Ann takes Chris down a path that is closed. The path leads them to a dead end and Chris says, "You're always taking me where I'm not supposed to go." Page 88, Chapter 10. This is an interesting statement for Chris to



make, and should be remembered while continuing through Masterson's story. Ann's path is not the path Chris has taken. This is a metaphor for the path Ann has chosen in life and later. Everyone has their own individual and unique path. Chris wants very much to believe that he can create Ann's path for her, just by loving her enough, however, he must learn that he cannot change her choices, nor can he change who she is. Later in the dream, Ann falls down and begins to slide down the cliff. Chris remembers he had saved her in this instance in the past, but his memory and this vision diverge, and this time Ann continues to fall away from him, screaming to him for help. This memory disturbs Chris greatly. Despite all he is learning, Chris still has apprehension about Ann and finds he cannot let go and trust that she will be alright. Albert's words that for everything in life there is a counterpart in the afterlife, both good and evil, increase Chris's concern for Ann. Each religion, therefore, finds its truth in Summerland. Even those who deny an afterlife find that: "'You'll even find here, those who claim that survival is nonsense,' he said. 'They bang their nonmaterial tables with their nonmaterial fists and sneer at any suggestion of a life beyond matter. It's the ultimate irony of delusion.'" Page 102, Chapter 9. The pursuit of perfection in Summerland is a unique view of Heaven, where most believe it will already be perfect. To continue to have to work toward perfection is daunting. Another idea that divides people of belief is the possession or lack of a physical body. Some believe that they will have their body while others believe that they will have no need of a body. In a strange way, they both are correct.



Chapters 13 - 16

Chapters 13 - 16 Summary

13. Memory Still Haunts

Chris continues to learn still more about Summerland. Everyone there has a job, usually something they love to do, not something that they have to do. Chris has the desire to write something more uplifting than the screen plays he wrote on earth. Albert tells Chris that Summerland is the third concentric sphere of at least seven spheres. Then Albert explains Chris's memories of his death experience and how his etheric body separated from his physical body and is likely to remain near earth for about three days. Chris remained for many weeks because of his connection with Ann.

14. Memories Somehow Shadowed

A person's frame of mind is exactly that of when he dies. If he is still connected to those left behind in their intense grief, his state of mind will be in a constant state of anxiety. Chris's condition was further complicated by Perry's séance. The shedding of his etheric double is how there came to be two bodies of Chris at the end of the séance. In the Catholic tradition of Extreme Unction, the seven centers of the body are anointed to assist the dying person to prepare for complete withdrawal of their body. Cremation within three days of death allows for a clean break from the body as well.

15. Losing Ann Again

Albert leaves Chris for a while beside the shores of a gorgeous lake. Chris has a recollection of a happy family time around the water. Chris remembers when Ann first learned to swim, but his memory of the event alters from what really happened as it did when Ann fell on the cliff path. This time, Ann goes under water crying, screaming for Chris to help her and he cannot. The water becomes murky and he cannot see her. This is the second dream in which Chris loses Ann.

16. An End to Despair

Just then, a young woman appears that Chris originally mistakes for Ann, but her name is Leona. Meeting someone else in Summerland gives Chris an opportunity to ask questions about Albert that he was hesitant to ask himself. Leona tells Chris of Albert's work with those of the lower realms. The mention of this triggers Chris's sense of uneasiness, but he tries to remain positive.

Chapters 13 - 16 Analysis

Summerland is the third sphere. According to Albert, there are at least four higher spheres. There is no specific guidance for how to rise to the levels of the other spheres,



however it seems that it could take a great deal of work for both Leona and Albert still reside within the third sphere. It might be argued that there is adequate satisfaction in the third sphere to simply stay there, yet Chris still feels great fear and anxiety here. Perhaps his connection with Ann is still too strong or that he just refuses to let go, but Summerland is a strange blend of the Christian ideal of heaven and purgatory. That there are no mirrors to keep the residents from seeing their flaws argues that Summerland really is not Heaven. Chris's repeated dreams of losing Ann are foreshadowing, proving his connection to her, and through her, to earth, still exists.



Chapters 17 - 19

Chapters 17 - 19 Summary

17. To Know Ann's Destiny

Leona takes Chris to a city where even the beauty confounds him. He wants so badly to share these experiences with Ann. In fact, Chris's obsession with Ann prevents him from being at peace the way Leona and Albert seem to be. Leona offers to take Chris to the Office of Records to find out when Ann is due to join Chris. Immediately, Chris is filled with impatience and insists that they travel there instantly. His heart beats with suspense and anxiety.

18. When Ann Was to Join Me

They are in an office with a man who can find out for Chris when Ann is due to come to Summerland. He tells Chris he will send the message and Chris is to come back a little later. Soon Chris will know just when Ann is to join him and he finds it almost impossible to wait patiently.

19. No Certainty of Resolution

As Chris waits, he is introduced to the Hall of Literature, a perfect library where they can talk without disturbing anyone. Works of literature and art are present in their most perfect form. As Leona explains it, the original Chris sees is the true form, the concept in the mind of the artist, pure and eternal. The masterpieces Chris has seen on earth are mere replicas of the original. Chris and Leona return to the Hall of Records and finds out that Ann is to join him in twenty-four years. Chris does not understand, now that he has the information he wanted to badly, why he does not feel at peace with it.

Chapters 17 - 19 Analysis

There is still a great deal of human frailty and foibles in Summerland. Summerland is a place where they must grow, face their problems and solve them, and must not see their reflections in mirrors for fear of losing heart at their imperfections. Summerland is really sounding less and less like Heaven and more and more like a state of Purgatory. Chris is further tortured with thoughts and recurring dreams of disasters wherein Ann loses her life. There really is only so much one human can do for another, most motivation comes from within an individual. That Chris is expending so much energy on his wife, and worrying about what will happen to her, causes one to wonder whether Chris is focusing on his wife's problems and not his own. Chris once mentioned that he would like to write something better than the trite screen plays he wrote while on earth. Writing sounds like something Chris would like to do, and perhaps should do. Instead, he focuses on the fate of his wife, refusing to rest and grow until he gets his answer. Indeed, once he gets his answer, he is still not satisfied with it.



Chapters 20 - 21

Chapters 20 - 21 Summary

20. This Dismaying Connection

Chris sees his father in Summerland, but because they were not close in life, they are not close in their afterlife. Chris also relates to Robert how their Aunt Vera and Uncle Eddy are no longer together, reflecting their lives on earth. Chris is realizing that there is so much more than what the limited human mind can conceive.

21. The Return of Nightmare

Albert's friends and acquaintances agree to help create a connection with Ann, yet throughout the process Chris continues to feel apprehension about Ann. Chris and Albert talk about how there cannot be direct communication between the inhabitants of Summerland and those of earth, but only those born with the gift or the most advanced psychics are able to handle it. Albert proposes a thought relay to see if they can somehow touch Ann. During the music and light show that is part of the thought relay process, Chris dreams again of Ann. This time she sees a bear and screams for Chris. Chris runs to her aid, but again this dream deviates from the true course of the event. Rather than laughing it off and backing away from the bear, it attacks Ann, Ginger, and Chris. Soon there is blood everywhere. Albert wakes Chris. Ann has died and is cut away from Chris. She has committed suicide.

Chapters 20 - 21 Analysis

The purpose of Summerland is still unclear. It seems that people are there to work on their problems. They also try to somehow connect with those on Earth to try to help those left behind see the right way; that there is so much more than a mere continuation of life as they have known it. Throughout all this learning, Chris has a third and even more terrifying memory in a dream-like state. For the third time he is unable to save Ann. This time when he wakes, it is to find that Ann has taken her own life. She is cut off from him because she has chosen to circumvent the system.



Chapters 22 - 24

Chapters 22 - 24 Summary

22. One Harrowing Possibility

Chris grieves, and reacts as humanly as he once was to the news of his wife's death. He is furious because he was told that she would live another twenty-four years. He accuses Albert that he promised to keep an eye on Ann, but he failed. Chris is very upset with Albert. He believes that Albert let him down. Ann's suicide shakes everything up in Summerland. Everyone has his or her appointed time of death. Suicide alters that schedule. Albert's sadness at Ann's suicide is deep, for when one takes his or her own life, they do not circumvent their desperate situation, but enter a darker continuation of their reality. This throws Chris into a panic. He tries to persuade Albert of Ann's goodness, to no avail. Ann has broken the law and this is her sentence. Albert disagrees with Chris about Ann's state of mind. He believes Ann made the decision out of her own free will. Chris determines that whatever it takes, he will help her. He must find his beloved. Albert warns Chris that it will be nearly impossible because she is not asking for help. Chris is insistent and finally convinces Albert to help him. Albert agrees, reluctantly, only because Chris and Ann are soulmates, destined to be together. He believes that this connection will help to reconnect the two.

23. Losing Ann Forever

Albert and Chris attend Ann's funeral. The emotional toll nearly breaks Chris, but Albert finds that their son, Ian, believes in the salvation of his mother and prays for her. Due to Ian's prayers, Albert believes they may have a chance to find Ann.

24. Inside the Lower Realm

The two men travel to the edge of Summerland, where the environment becomes harsh and less appealing. Albert warns Chris of the danger of leaving Summerland. Chris barely hears the warnings. His only concern is to reach Ann. Albert's greatest concern for Chris lies in the internal threat and the most that he stands to lose is Ann and himself. The entry into the other sphere gives Chris a feeling of heaviness. With every step, Albert's concern for Chris increases. He warns Chris that what they are seeing is a composite mental image of all who live there. Since their thoughts are so dark and dismal, Albert and Chris feel this and experience it too. Even Chris begins to see how the atmosphere affects Albert, yet he must continue.

Chapters 22 - 24 Analysis

Ann's death hurts Chris in Summerland as much or more than it would have on earth. Chris continues to have feelings and anxieties. "The cliff and pool and bear had all been symbols of my fear for her, not dreams but premonitions. She's been pleading for my



help, asking me to stop her from doing what she'd felt herself about to do." Page 157, Chapter 22. Ann's thoughts been reaching a portion of his mind that is still connected to her. This brings Chris close to despair. Fortunately he has been with Albert long enough that he turns to his cousin and guide for help. Chris's determination to find Ann cannot be swayed, but he does know to ask for help. Albert's work in the lower realms make him a perfect companion for Chris and the man's determination to reach his soul-mate convinces the guide to give him whatever assistance he can. The danger, for both Albert and Chris, is real and extreme. The lower realms are made up of the thoughts of those who live there. The lower they go, the more negative and deadly the thoughts. Despite his knowledge and training, Albert is still susceptible to their influence.



Chapters 25 - 27

Chapters 25 - 27 Summary

25. Entry to Dark Thoughts

As Chris observes the people by the shacks and huts in a haphazard village, he wonders what they may have done, or may not have done, that they deserve to be put there. Albert tells him that they cannot see the two of them because they are so caught up in their own concerns. The burdens of the people trapped in the web of their misery begin to weigh on Chris and his posture hunches and slumps as he walks with Albert. Albert reminds him again and again to be aware; that the mind is everything. Repeatedly Chris succumbs to the feelings of burden and over and over again Albert reminds him to keep his mind strong and fend them off. They pass through atmospheres of gluttony, despair, hate.

26. The Floor of Hell

As the atmosphere continues to worsen, Chris recognizes that his thoughts and behaviors degrade as well. Then they reach the edge of a crater. Down in the crater is what Albert calls a place a close to hell as there is. Chris fears the place, but insists on continuing; the idea that Ann could possibly be down there spurring him on. Albert reveals he has been in this lower realm many times, helping the unfortunate souls because they really cannot help themselves. The story, at this point, reflects some of Dante's horrific visions. Just before the step onto the floor of Hell, Chris prays to God to help him.

27. Hell Within Hells

Virtually unbreathable air suffocates Chris; a visible vapor hangs over the gray and purple flesh covered with tattered rags that are people. Bands and gangs of creatures roam looking for evil to perpetrate. Fetid pools of liquid show movement proving the existence of still more damned creatures below its surface. Flies buzz everywhere. They cover the faces, the eyes, noses, and mouths; creating black writing masks on the faces of the inhabitants. One particularly vile-looking man points out a woman who is being assaulted, and immediately Chris believes it is Ann. He breaks away from Albert, against all the guide's admonitions, intent on saving Ann. It is a trick. The woman is not Ann, but the subterfuge works to separate Chris from Albert. Immediately they fall on him like fresh kill to a pack of starving hyenas. When Chris awakens, he is back with Albert who informs Chris that the inhabitants used their minds to attack him. This is when Albert informs Chris that this is one hell of many hells.



Chapters 25 - 27 Analysis

The journey that Albert and Chris take into hell is a reflection of Virgil's journey into Dante's inferno. They pass through different atmospheres or levels of hell, just as Virgil does, through the levels of limbo, lust, gluttony, avarice, wrath, heresy, violence against self or others, and more. Matheson does not go into quite the detail that Dante does, but the idea here is that there are as many levels to hell as there seem to be of Heaven. Dante specifies nine levels of hell; Matheson merely states that there are "Hells within Hells within Hells." Chapter 27, p. 200. For Chris, the incident where he believes he has been attacked by the inhabitants of Hell seems to be completely real. He discovers later that their attack was perpetrated on his mind with their minds. "'The mind is a spinning wheel,' Albert told me. 'In life, it constantly weaves a web which, on the day of our passing, surrounds us for better or worse. In that woman's case, the web became a snare of selfish concerns.'" Chapter 25, p. 183. The journey through this part of Hell is only because they really have no idea where Ann is. Albert is trying to follow a thread of a connection because of Ian's prayers. There does not seem to be any one place in Hell where suicides are cast, unlike Dante's Hell, where suicides are cast with those of violence whether toward self or others. The purpose of the scene is to demonstrate Chris's dedication to his wife, that he is willing to endure the fires of Hell in order to save Ann.



Chapters 28 - 30

Chapters 28 - 30 Summary

28. Where Ann Now Stayed

There is no one place called Hell. Hell really is an existence in a vacuum where the damned can only ponder matters that are not spiritual. Chris and Albert walk across the barren plains toward a ridge of low hills. Albert is certain that Ann is there. Strangely, Chris recognizes his home and yet he knows that it is not his home. After warning Chris just how difficult it will be to convince Ann and to resist despair, Albert leaves Chris to approach his wife alone.

29. To Reach Her Soul

As he approaches the house, Chris realizes that the house is isolated, there is no neighborhood. A snake crosses the driveway in front of him and disappears into the grass. The bushes are dead, brown and dying. Chris feels the weight of Ann's despair in the atmosphere and reminds himself to deflect it. Overall, the house is smaller, dirtier, unkempt, giving it a dismal and forlorn look. Ann had always taken pride in her home before. Even her car, once so clean and bright is now faded with pitted chrome. First Chris knocks on the door, but when no one answers he goes inside. The interior reflects the sadness and despair Ann feels, walls dingy and dirty, a chessboard, once a showpiece, now broken and sad looking. Even the piano is neglected and out of tune. Music had once been a defining force for Ann. Nothing inside is cheerful, appealing, or inviting.

30. A Poor Beginning

Ann is on the grass outside their bedroom window. Ginger is with her. After Ann died, Ginger mourned until she could join Ann, rather than leaving Ann alone in such a place. Chris is filled with fury. Ann does not deserve to live here, she is better than this. Immediately he quells his feelings. He has found her, now he has to reach inside of her. As Chris steps through the door, Ginger alerts Ann, who seems to recognize Chris, but the shutters to her heart close immediately. Chris pretends to be a neighbor, for Ann does not realize that she is dead and surrounded by all her dead and dying thoughts. Chris tries everything he can think of to make a connection with Ann. He tells her he and his wife are separated. Then he talks about Ginger and Katie and another flicker flashes in Ann's eyes, but is instantly quenched.

Chapters 28 - 30 Analysis

Chris finds Ann, but soon realizes that finding her is just the beginning. The real hard work begins now. Ann, having stopped believing in anything after Chris died, is now stuck in a never-ending world of death, dirt, disrepair, and despair. In her world, she is



alone, her husband is gone, and while she lives in her familiar house, it is not the same as when she once cared for it. If her mind can create a physical environment of snakes in the grass, trash overflowing in the garage, most of the house in disrepair, it seems obvious that her own mind is cluttered with the same sort of skewed reality. The only thing that does not ring true is the presence of Ginger. Matheson implies that Ginger chose to live with Ann in this awful place rather than allow Ann to live here alone. Given Albert's rules about how help cannot be given unless it is asked for implies that Ann has asked for help. This would be the only way both Ginger and Chris can appear in the dismal existence of her new "life."



Chapters 31 - 32

Chapters 31 - 32 Summary

31. The Sheltering of Melancholy

Ann talks to Chris, at first only to tell him that the pine trees have died because the water is shut off. Chris realizes that Ann really does not know that she is dead. To make any sort of connection he tells her he has water at his house; he also has electricity. Chris hopes that by pointing out the illogic of her surroundings, Ann will question them, question something, anything. Her apathy is too deep for such a simple ploy to work. She remains in abject suffering, unable to do anything about it. Chris attempts a different connection by asking if she has children. She tells Chris that she has four. Chris pounces on this next similarity; he lists the names of their children, hoping for some kind of recognition. Instead, Ann turns away from him only to see a tarantula, something that has always terrified her to the point of illness. Chris gets rid of the spider and briefly there is gratitude, replaced immediately with more suspicion.

32. Ye Blood and Pain

Chris persists, despite his own growing depression. He asks her what she drinks, what she eats, about her car, where her camper is and for each question Ann has some roadblock, effectively diverting the conversation and Chris's efforts to connect with her. Chris did not risk everything to be stopped at this point. He pushes harder, making the similarities of their lives more and more obvious. Every time Ann gets irritated, Ginger growls at Chris and bares her teeth. Even in the face of the unfriendly dog, Chris persists, but Ann continues to list all the things that are wrong; the house is a wreck, there has been no rain, her best clothes and jewelry have gone missing, Finally Chris gets angry and yells at his wife, and Ginger attacks him. Chris is puzzled that his afterlife body can feel pain and can actually bleed.

Chapters 31 - 32 Analysis

This level where Ann lives is a "cruel and cunning trap." Chapter 32, p. 231. For each possibly bright thought, there are dozens more to bring her back down. Ann loves things neat, clean, cared for; a garden lush and green is now faced with a life of abject misery. No matter how many times she dusts and polishes the furniture it just keeps getting dirty and dusty. Her beloved garden is dead. The piano, once a source of joyous music, is now tinny and off key. The despair Ann experienced when Chris died has followed her to this place. On earth, she had the choice to choose despair or not. She could water her garden. When she polished the furniture, it would retain its shine. Her water and electricity worked. The difference is that of her own free will, Ann chose to only see the bad things in life after Chris died rather than the good things. Before her suicide, she did

have the potential to change her world if she tried. After the suicide, she is stuck in the world of her own making, only there seems to be no free will at this level.



Chapters 33 - 35

Chapters 33 - 35 Summary

33. There is Only Death

Ann says she wants Chris to leave; Ginger wants Ann to be left alone too. Then Ann starts crying and says she wants Chris and she uses God's name, almost like a prayer. Chris sees an opening and asks Ann to tell him about her husband; he asks for height, hair color, eye color, occupation,. Finally Chris begs Ann to see him for who he really is, her husband. Her response is that her husband is dead, her children are gone, and if she had the courage she would commit suicide. "Her words horrified me. To have committed suicide and ended up in a place so dreadful that it made her think of committing suicide. A twisted, unrelenting reflection within a reflection," Chapter 33, p. 236. Finally Chris understands part of her self-inflicted punishment is to look at the world through glasses that are anything but rose-colored. Ann tries to tell Chris how she feels removed from her life, set apart, tricked. Chris tries to get Ann to consider her new life as a sort of a dream. Finally Chris just puts the truth before her; that he is her husband and Ann rejects this violently. She still refuses to believe in an afterlife.

34. The Battle Ended

Chris challenges Ann then with an offer to prove that he is her husband by providing details of events that happened after his death. Nothing he says sways Ann. She attacks him instead, telling him that if he really were her husband, he would be kinder to her. Chris believes it is all over. Nothing he can do or say is getting through to her. Then, in the bedroom, Ann screams. There is a tarantula walking across her pillow. Acting on reflex and with tacit permission from Ginger, Chris gets rid of the hated spider.

35. Hell be our Heaven

By now, Ann is exhausted and without desire to even care anymore. Chris, rejecting his efforts as completely fruitless, begins to thank Ann for everything she has done for him and their family. The list is long and detailed. Chris thanks Ann for everything from her sense of humor to the memories she helped him to shape with their family, from the freedom she gave him to figure out what he wanted to be, to her exploring her desire to learn more about art. Ann tries, truly tries to connect with Chris. At this point Chris makes a decision. He will stay in this place with Ann, for he finds he cannot leave her. He would rather be here than in Summerland without her. With this decision, darkness now descends over Chris, but not before he sees that Ann finally knows that he is her husband. Finally.



Chapters 33 - 35 Analysis

Chris works very hard to get Ann to see that she is dead, that this is the afterlife and hers is so bad because of her choice to take her life. Chris cannot stand the idea of Ann existing in a place bereft of love and beauty. He knows that there is more and he believes that Ann's situation could be improved if she would just ask herself the right questions. Chris counts on her sense of logic to help her to see that this existence is one of her own making. There is not, however, any evidence that by thinking differently about her situation that it will change. Even Chris, with the knowledge and guidance he has received from Albert, has trouble resisting the oppressiveness of the level where Ann lives. When everything has been attempted, Chris makes the decision to stay with Ann rather than leave her in this awful place alone. Chris chooses Ann rather than heaven without her.



Chapters 36 - 37

Chapters 36 - 37 Summary

36. India

Chris wakes to a sense of confusion and intense exhaustion. He finds himself in a great hall where others are also lying in beds. The men and women taking care of them wear blue robes and their touch seems to have a sedating effect for those who wake and are agitated. Every time Chris wakes he is instantly soothed back to sleep by touch. After an indefinite period of time, Albert finally appears to reassure Chris that he is back in Summerland and that his sacrifice has spared Ann the bleak and horrible reality of remaining in her afterlife. The good news for Chris is that Ann has been "rebirthed" or reincarnated and is now in India. She has chosen a body that will be afflicted later in life with a disease that will cause sleep deprivation. Naturally, Chris wishes to return to earth as well. As much as he is tempted to stay in Summerland, he prefers to be with Ann, to love her, to help her the best way he knows how. Albert considers Chris's request but insists that Chris learn all the risks involved.

37. The Path Begins on Earth

The reincarnated soul moves into a new body and absorbs the experience and hopefully learns from it. The purpose of this is to shape the soul into what it ultimately wishes to be. Life after life of effort in combination with periods of rest, reflection, and study are what shapes a man's soul. The process is repeated over and over again in three steps: incarnation, disincarnation, then reincarnation. Each incarnation will be a different body, a different understanding of self, and no memory of any past lives. Typically thousands of years are spent in afterlife before the rebirth process. What Chris wishes to do is very atypical. He wishes to move up his time table so that he can begin again and this must take place on earth.

Chapters 36 - 37 Analysis

The success of Chris's sacrifice seems hollow to him because he and Ann continue to be separated. His only desire is to be with Ann. There is great merit in that his sacrifice has saved Ann from her punishment, and yet Chris cannot be satisfied with that. His connection with her as her soul mate prevents Chris from simply accepting that they cannot be together. Without the soul mate connection, Chris's need to be with his wife could be construed as obsessive. In this instance, Chris knows that he is meant to be with Ann and is willing to move Heaven and Hell to accomplish it.



Chapters 38 - 39

Chapters 38 - 39 Summary

38. Through All Eternity

Chris knows he can return to earth. Now he has to learn how he can do it. When a soul wishes to be reborn it has to clear it with something like a computer that is responsible for selecting the appropriate soul for a specific task. This is done on an awareness level and the soul most suited to the job will know; the souls not suited will continue their search elsewhere. They are also taught not to have too many expectations in their life of rebirth, but to expect less in order to actually accomplish more. There is a danger because a child could be born dead and the soul will then be stuck in an ethereal coma. Another option or choice is choosing a body that will be sick or deformed, for this must be borne throughout life. This is one way, however for an individual to accelerate one's spiritual growth. This is the choice that Ann made. Once incarnated, all memories of previous lives are erased in order to make room for new mental growth. Once this incarnation is complete it returns home for rest and study before returning to earth until it is perfect, and ready for the ultimate meeting with God.

39. Return My Love

Chris examines his past lives, preparatory to reuniting with Ann. He relates the past two lives where he and Ann were together. The first was in the 1300s and they were sisters in the same household. The next was in 1700s Russia where they fell in love and were married. Chris was a writer in that lifetime too. What Chris discovers and firmly believes is that the ultimate purpose of rebirth is to help others. This is why he has chosen to go back and become a doctor. Ann, later in her life, will need a doctor. Chris chooses parents in America, as an only child and his father is already a doctor, so he hopes to follow in his new father's footsteps. The child is already four and a half weeks old. Chris has some reservations but still intends to go through with it. He hopes, one day, to be permanently reunited with Ann. First, Chris dictates the book through a sensitive psychic to have it delivered to his brother, Robert. Some of Chris's most important messages include the realization that the mind is everything and that after life is as varied as the grains of sand in the world. Paramount is that heaven is a state of mind and that man is striving to become the best that he can be. That is man's ultimate goal. Robert, after reading Chris's message, wonders about the afterlife. If even part of Chris's message is true, it is wise to examine how one's life is truly lived.

Chapters 38 - 39 Analysis

The entire purpose of having lived is to perfect one's soul. Each incarnation on earth is to be an improvement on the last, an opportunity to grow spiritually. In addition, the purpose of living is to be helpful to others. Chris has been with Ann at least two other



times in two different lives. That Chris reached Summerland indicates that he has grown spiritually. That he was willing to give up his position in Summerland demonstrates his bowing to a higher good. Rather than being a slave to his own victory, Chris remains concerned about Ann's spiritual torment and proceeds to do everything in his power to change it. By being open to the possibilities and the dangers of them, Chris continues to demonstrate his willingness to be of service to others. To go back and expect to become a doctor, he has to know that he will be helping and serving many others. His expectation is that somehow he is going to be compelled to work in India, likely as a missionary doctor, for that is how he expects to connect with Ann. His desire to be with Ann is the motivating factor for his decisions, but Chris also knows that his decisions will result in a great many opportunities of being of service to others.



Characters

Chris Nielsen

Chris Nielsen is the protagonist of the story. He is a middle-aged husband to Ann, whom he loves very much. Chris dies in a car accident and spends much energy trying to connect with Ann, who does not believe in anything after death. Finally, Chris asks for help and is then transported to Summerland where he meets his guide, his earth-cousin Albert. Through Albert, Chris learns about his new existence. Summerland is considered to be the third sphere of Heaven, and seems to be a place of contentment and peace. For Chris, however, there is no peace for his wife Ann is not with him and her suicide threatens to separate the two of them forever. As soul mates, Chris and Ann have been together several times in past lives. Chris breaks all the rules of Summerland to go and seek out his condemned wife, and see what he can do to help her. His sacrifice saves his wife from eternity in a lower realm. Still, Chris is not satisfied, for he is again in Summerland without Ann. Breaking more precedent, Chris puts himself on a crash course to learn about reincarnation so that he can experience rebirth almost immediately in order to try to find Ann on earth once again. Chris's deep love for his wife is the driving force of all his decisions. Chris would rather eschew Heaven than to be separated from Ann.

Ann Nielsen

Ann Nielsen is wife to Chris, his soul mate and companion. After Chris dies, Ann loses her desire to live. She does not believe in any sort of afterlife, and so she is in despair with her husband's death. To think that he no longer exists is simply more than she can bear. Her children try to share their experiences with her, but she merely believes they are trying to make her feel better, or that their experiences come from their very own intense pain of loss. Finally, Ann despairs and takes her own life. Her existence in the afterlife becomes one of a cruel and never-ending circle of despair and thoughts of suicide. She lives in the home she knows, but nothing in the home is alive. No one lives with her except Ginger, her German Shepherd, who chooses to be with her. Ann walks around in a fog, feeling like she is somehow removed by a level from her existence. She feels tricked, that her existence is simply a parody of what it once was, which is exactly what her punishment is. When Chris finds Ann, she refuses to believe that he is her husband until he finally makes the decision to stay with her in the lower realm rather than leaving her there alone. This is the turning point for Ann, who recognizes the sacrifice Chris makes for her. She chooses immediate rebirth into a body that will suffer later in life so that she can grow spiritually.



Robert Nielsen

Robert Nielsen is brother to Chris Nielsen. Robert receives the manuscript of his brother's death and afterlife experiences written by a psychic who spends six months transcribing his words. Robert is unsure about the validity of the manuscript, but the very facts and intimate knowledge that the psychic includes in the manuscript speak to an element of truth. He is addressed several times throughout the novel. At the end of the story, Robert reflects that if even a little bit of Chris's story is true, that all must look at their lives very, very carefully.

Albert

Albert is a cousin of Chris's who guides him through heaven. His job is to go into Hell to help the people living there. Albert is with Chris throughout the entire journey into the lower realm, looking for Ann. Without Albert, Chris would likely not have made it through the bowels of Hell. After Chris's decision to stay with Ann, he is in the Hall of Rest where he must get enough rest before Albert can then join him again. Against all rules and recommendations, Albert once again helps Chris to break the rules and learn about the process of rebirth and become reincarnated immediately.

Leona

Leona is the woman who guides Chris through a city in Heaven. At first Chris thinks she is Ann. Leona helps Chris to see how works of art are in their perfect form in Summerland because that is when they were perfect. The human rendering on earth results in an imperfect copy.

Psychic

The psychic is the woman who claims to have received Chris Nielsen's words and writes the manuscript for Chris, who will not leave her alone until she complies. Once she writes it, she delivers it to Chris's brother, Robert. She understands that he does not believe her, but by the time she has completed it she does not care. All she wants is to be rid of it. Robert never does get the clairvoyant's name.

Ian Nielsen

Ian Nielsen is a son of Chris and Ann. Young, sensitive, he is able to feel his father's presence the day of the funeral when Chris goes to his home.



Richard Nielsen

Richard Nielsen is a son of Chris and Ann. Richard wants so very badly to help his mother make a connection with his deceased father that he solicits the help of his friend, Perry, who can see the dead.

Marie Nielsen

Marie Nielsen is Chris' daughter, a beautiful and talented singer looking to make her mark in Hollywood. She writes a very long letter to her friend, Wendy, in which she relates her feelings about her father, and what their relationship was like. She admits that she did not spend as much time with him as her brothers did. She does write some of Chris's words, but fears them, and suspects that they are really a manifestation of her grief.

Louise Nielsen

Louise Nielsen is Chris's oldest daughter, married and with three children.

Mark

Mark is an inhabitant just outside of Summerland who wanders because he spent his life working to support his family, but to the exclusion of their emotional needs.

Bill

Bill is Ann's older brother.

John

John is Ann's uncle.

Perry

Perry is the psychic who can initially see Chris and tries to put Ann in contact with her dead husband.



Objects/Places

The Manuscript

The manuscript is written by a psychic who claims to have transcribed it for Chris Nielsen to give to Robert Nielsen; it comprises the bulk of the novel.

Mist

The occlusion that Chris experiences while he is still on earth trying to connect with Ann—it disappears when he goes to Summerland

Cemetery

Where Perry first sees Chris and tells of his actions and some of the words he can hear, and he gives a complete description of the clothes he is wearing

Séance

Perry's attempt to reach Chris for Ann, but because of her disbelief, it does not work

Summerland

Also known as Homeland, Harvest, or Heaven, the place of each man's creation, a heaven of sorts

Discarnates

People who have died and not moved on

Borderland

This is where Chris stays as a disincarnate until he calls for help.

Third Sphere

The most authentic name for Harvest, or Summerland, this is the third concentric sphere in a series of at least seven spheres.



Matrix

Where everything in Summerland is recycled into something else when desired

Purgatory

Catholic belief of a place where a period of purging and cleansing of the soul occurs.

Ginger

Chris's German Shepherd

Katie

Chris's former dog who died years ago and reunites with him in Summerland

Lower Realms

For all intents and purposes, these are the levels of Hell.

The Hall of Rest

Where Chris finds himself after his experience with Ann in the Lower Realms

Rebirth

Reincarnation

India

The country where Ann will be reincarnated because there is a body readily available

Ethereal Coma

The state in which a soul can become stuck if it moves into a child who dies at birth

Soul Mates

Chris and Ann are soul mates, or souls mated and destined to be together throughout numerous incarnations.



Spiritual Perfection

The necessary state to come face to face with God

Temple

Building in Summerland where those who wish go to learn about their lives and the process of rebirth



Themes

Love Conquers All

In *What Dreams May Come*, screenplay writer Chris Nielsen is in a car accident and loses his earthly life. As he stumbles around Borderland, the plane of existence of the newly dead not leaving their corporeal interests, Chris sees just how hard Ann, his wife, is taking his death. Chris feels his own pain, but he also palpably feels Ann's grief. Chris's love for his wife is so great that he cannot begin his afterlife journey within the usual three days. Time and again Chris attempts to reach his wife with a message; through a psychic, a physical touch with his son, Ian, and when he attempts to get Marie to write a message. Despite all the effort Chris puts into his attempts to reach Ann, no message gets through. Ann had once said that if Chris died, she would too. True to her word, Ann's despair drives her to suicide, and casts her into a lower realm of Hell. Chris breaks all the rules by insisting that he be reunited with Ann. His love for her is so great that Chris chooses to leave the comfort and safety of Summerland to be with Ann. Chris's love and magnanimous sacrifice save Ann from the lower realm. However, finding that Ann is not yet to be reunited with him, Chris breaks the rules again and chooses rebirth to try to reconnect with his love.

Another interesting perspective on love is the existence of Chris and Ann's dogs in the afterlife. Katie was a devoted companion for sixteen years of the Nielsen's life, and once Chris reaches Summerland, he finds that Katie has been living with Albert there. Katie immediately recognizes Chris and greets him with love and affection. Ginger, Chris and Ann's current German Shepherd is Ann's constant companion. After Ann commits suicide, Ginger pines and mourns herself to death. Rather than choosing to join Chris and Katie in Summerland, Ginger chooses to be with the owner she loves so much despite the deeply depressing situation Ann is in. Such love and devotion is another proof that love can conquer all.

The Mind is Everything

Chris discovers the power of his mind when he chooses to ignore the pain of the accident during his time in Borderland. At first this seems just to be an interesting occurrence. Then, when Chris meets Albert in Summerland, he learns that a house can be constructed by concept, that travel can be instantaneous if one just visualizes it. More and more, Chris begins to understand just how powerful the mind is. During his descent into the lower realm, Chris can palpably feel the oppression and negativity there and it manifests itself in his posture and his inability to maintain his light. Albert's ability is stronger, and this example is yet another proof to Chris of the power of the mind. On the floor of Hell, Chris believes that he is being physically attacked by the souls that inhabit that lowest realm, a terrifying experience. Upon awakening with Albert at his side, Chris learns that the experience was an attack on him through the minds of those inhabitants. When Chris reaches Ann the negative power of the mind illustrates



itself yet again. Ann's determination that life is not worth living without Chris becomes a reality. The general state of the disrepair of the house, the perpetual dust and dinginess, the dry and dead garden, all reflect Ann's state of mind. Chris tries so hard to get Ann to see through the illusion of despair to get to the truth, yet she cannot manage it. Her pre-death frame of mind becomes her reality after death. Such is the power of the mind. The mind can create any reality, so minding one's thoughts is a vital skill.

Spiritual Perfection as a Goal

The entire purpose of life and consciousness is to work toward the achievement of spiritual perfection. Each time a soul is incarnated, the life on earth is lived to learn, to improve oneself, and to be of service to others. Death is a continuation of that life on another level. Death does not bring about wisdom or happiness. The choices one makes are what improve the spiritual nature of his soul. When Chris reaches Summerland, he discovers that it is not the highest level of Heaven and he must continue to learn and improve himself for the ultimate meeting with God. What does happen in Summerland is that each individual reviews all moments of his or her life and passes judgment on them as an individual. That is the first step in the awareness of where one is on a spiritual level. Chris considers his work as a screenplay writer and wishes that he had written something more uplifting and enlightening.

The souls in Summerland learn, study, and work toward improving their spiritual state. When they have studied and learned enough, some of the souls choose rebirth in another effort at living life on earth. Should the soul choose badly, as Ann does with her suicide, it detracts from the soul. Ann's choice to experience rebirth in a body that will suffer greatly will add to her experience and to her spiritual growth. Those who reach spiritual perfection are finally united with God.



Style

Point of View

What Dreams May Come is told in the first person perspective of the protagonist with the exception of the introduction and epilogue which are told in first person of the protagonist's brother, Robert. First person perspective gives an immediacy to the story, allowing the reader to step into Chris's shoes and experience the unearthly life of the after life. Chris has the greatest amazement for all the events. His beliefs of the afterlife are really not known to the reader, but the fact that he has arrived in Summerland suggests that he had some belief in the afterlife. His continuous descriptions and expressions of marvel suggest that his expectations of the afterlife are far different from what he is experiencing. The reader sees how Chris rejects certain realities of Summerland, specifically because of his need to find out how Ann is doing. By viewing the three terrifying dreams about Ann with Chris, the reader is filled with the same anxiety Chris experiences. The news that Ann has taken her life and is forever separated from Chris is a palpable hurt for both the protagonist and the reader. Step by step, the reader accompanies Chris on the journey into the Lower Realms and sees first-hand the horrors of Hell and how the depravity of those consigned there continues into their afterlife. Throughout the entire story, the reader is part of the spectacular experience of one man's afterlife; the immediacy of it forcing a personal reflection of one's own journey.

Setting

The setting of What Dreams May Come begins in 1976 with the delivery of a manuscript written by a psychic from the East Coast and this is why the book is delivered to Robert Nielsen rather than the children of Chris Nielsen. The manuscript details all the events of Chris Nielsen's death and his afterlife. The setting of his death is in a hospital where there are images of pain and confusion, sounds and sights that cannot make sense, much as would be expected in an emergency situation in the hospital. When Chris dies he is able to leave his body and wander about on earth, invisible to everyone but Albert, who is assigned to be Chris's guide. This existence is called Borderland; the border between life and death. Typically souls spend about three days in Borderland and then move on. Chris is stuck in Borderland quite a bit longer because of his strong connection with his wife.

Chris finally moves on to Summerland, which is the third sphere of seven known spheres of Heaven. This is where man reaps what he has sown. It is where an accounting of one's life is taken and what needs to be learned becomes obvious. In Chris's case, he is nearly obsessed with his wife and her despair. Three times Chris dreams about events in which Ann is in danger, and in life he manages to rescue her. In his dreams, Ann perishes. Chris's dreams are a portent of things to come because Ann chooses to end her life by suicide. This act of despair excludes Ann from coming to



Summerland. Chris persuades Albert to take him into the Lower Realms to look for Ann. This descent into Hell reflects the nine levels of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. There is a different level of hell for specific categories of sin.

At each level, Chris sees how the person's mind creates his reality. After they see the depths of Hell and do not find Ann, Albert leads Chris to a lonely and barren looking area where a replica of Chris and Ann's house stands. This is where Ann lives now. The house is dirty and rundown. The garden is dead. The trash is overflowing. Ann's mind has created a reality of death, despair, and complete lack of hope. After Chris makes the decision to stay with Ann, he loses consciousness of that existence, waking up in the Hall of Rest. The reader is taken through various levels of Heaven and Hell, seeing what no one has seen before. The setting of *What Dreams May Come* is as unique as the story itself.

Language and Meaning

In *What Dreams May Come*, language plays a large role in the story. The words used to describe how the spirit departs from the body give a realistic and audible idea of what it might really sound like. Initially Chris's language seems garbled; a little like a stroke victim trying to talk. This reflects the difficulty he has when he first starts dictating his manuscript to the psychic sensitive enough to understand his message. The initial passages are choppy, scattered, and disjointed, giving evidence of Chris's journey through the fatal injuries his body has sustained, and the pain and confusion associated with this experience. The experiences of Chris in *Borderland* and *Summerland* reflect Chris's typical manner of speech, proving the efficacy of training a sensitive to hear his story, also giving the reader a clear understanding of how a person's state of mind carries over into the after life. Chris's journey into the Lower Realms of Hell uses words of darkness and despair. Not only is the place awful, the words Chris uses to describe it run through his mind and become like a physical burden, bowing his shoulders. When Chris finally finds Ann, she is in the house they shared, but his words describing the shabby condition of everything prove the reality of Ann's afterlife. What words she uses are reflected in all things around her. After Ann's rebirth and Chris's return to *Summerland*, Chris embarks on a crash course in understanding the rebirth process. The terminology and explanations are complicated and advanced, much like a master's course in anything would be. The language of *What Dreams May Come* creates a very realistic story for the reader.

Structure

Richard Matheson writes *What Dreams May Come* as a dictation from a man, Chris Nielsen, who has died, to a psychic who cannot rest until Chris is finished with the story. The story opens with the woman coming to the door of Chris's brother, Robert, and giving Robert an envelope. She tries to explain how the manuscript came to be, but expects Robert's skeptical reaction. She simply shoves the envelope in Robert's hands and prays that she will now be given some peace. After such a startling prologue, the

manuscript reads in the first person as if Chris were writing it himself. Chris wants his story to be known so that everyone can improve their lives with the knowledge he imparts.

Chris presents the events immediately preceding his death and continues into his afterlife story. He describes the events of the death of his body and his inability to touch anything or anyone for his hand passes right through as if they were not made of matter. The existence of death and immediately after are in the realm called Borderland, where Chris can watch the activities of his family, yet he is unable to communicate with them. He does not exist for them. His stay in Borderland is delayed due to Ann's inconsolable grief, but when Chris asks for help, he is immediately released and taken to Summerland. There Chris learns of his death and what this new existence means. The story moves through the events of Chris's afterlife experience and tells the reader why it is so important to live one's life in a state of awareness.



Quotes

"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause." Hamlet, Act III, Sc. 1,
frontispiece of novel.

"Not so. I saw my body in a sack of many colors, drawn up by the silver cord. I felt a dropping sensation, heard a snapping noise—as though a giant rubber band had broken—felt myself begin to rise." Chapter 1, p. 21.

"Let me discuss it in brief then, this display of scenes. It was more than a 'flash before my eyes.' I was more than just a viewer; that became apparent very soon. I relived each moment with acute perception, experiencing and understanding simultaneously. The phenomenon was vivid, Robert, each emotion infinitely multiplied by level upon level of awareness." Chapter 4, p. 37.

"'I don't believe in survival after death,' Ann interrupted him. 'I believe that, when we die, we die and that's the end of it.'" Chapter 5, p. 46.

"That which you believe becomes your world." Chapter 7, p. 71.

"Your body may not have fiber, but it isn't vapor either. It's simply finer grained than the body you left behind. It still has a heart and lungs to breathe air with and purify your blood. Hair still grows on your head, you still have teeth and finger—and toenails." Chapter 9, p. 81.

"We sank again and I saw her terrified face beneath the water, heard her cry out in my mind: Please don't let me die! I knew she couldn't speak the words but heard them clearly nonetheless." Chapter 15, p. 119.

"One final item. I discovered that Ian had been praying for me without telling anyone. Albert told me that my post-death state would have been far worse except for that. 'A prayer for help always eases that experience,' were his words." Chapter 20, p. 143.

"If you died, I'd die too. If you went first, I don't think I could make it." Chapter 22, p. 157.

"His tone seemed almost unsympathetic and I glanced at him, wondering uneasily if the place was changing him. If he were unable to resist it, what hope was there for me?" Chapter 25, p. 179.

"'With the least effort,' Albert answered. 'The thing is, she doesn't believe she can and the mind is everything. I'm sure her life on earth must have been one of great, self-pitying frustration. Here, that feeling is exaggerated to the point you see.'" Chapter 25, p. 182.



"There is no point in trying to convince her that she's not alive; she thinks she is."
Chapter 31, p. 219.

"I might as well be alive again. This level was so horribly close to life. And yet so horribly far, only racking sensations present, no compensations of any sort." Chapter 33, p. 236.

"Similar I say. It couldn't be the same. I knew that she would live now, not die. Still, our separation was equally distressing to me. I couldn't tell you, Robert, what the higher ramifications are of being soul mates. I can tell you this however. As long as you are separated from your own, that long are you troubled. No matter what the circumstances, no matter how exquisite the environment in which you find yourself." Chapter 37, Page 267.



Topics for Discussion

Describe a situation where you have felt a feeling of a presence. Who do you believe it was? Why do you believe they were there? If you have never felt such a thing, describe one someone you know has experienced. How does this effect your belief in an afterlife?

How is Ann's refusal to believe in Chris's afterlife existence affecting her and her family? Explain how she is affecting the belief of her children.

How does Summerland compare with the typical concept of heaven? Explain.

Discuss why souls that have evolved, such as Albert and Leona, are still in Summerland.

Is Ann's suicide a predictable plot point? Why or why not?

Is suicide as wrong for someone not in his or her right mind? Explain.

Discuss free will and Ann's suicide. Use your arguments from Albert's position and from Chris's position.

If, as Matheson states, people judge themselves, why are there people wandering about, so self-absorbed they cannot see Albert and Chris walk among them?

Describe a lifestyle that might put a person just outside of Summerland. Compare it to Mark, the man who worked to the exclusion of his family and feels that something is "owed" to him.

Discuss Matheson's portrayal of Perry's attempt to connect Ann with her dead husband. How did this make matters worse? Explain.

How is Ginger's desire to stay with Ann in her own perpetual state of despair any different than Chris's desire to do the same? Why is Ginger allowed to stay there, yet Chris is not?

What is the symbolism of the snake and tarantula in Ann's post-suicide world? Why are the photographs faded?

Discuss Chris's decision to reject heaven in favor of staying with Ann. Is this a human decision or a spiritual one? Explain.

Explain why a temporal body requires rest much the same way a corporal body does.

The author is suggesting that love transcends the bonds of Heaven and Hell. Explain how this can be so.