

# What Jamie Saw Study Guide

## What Jamie Saw by Carolyn Coman

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## Overview

One night, a little boy named Jamie awakens to see the man who lives with them, Van, take his baby sister, Nin, and throw her across the room. Fortunately, his mother steps up in time to catch the little baby.

That's when Jamie's life begins to change drastically. While he is still numb from the shock, his mother packs a few things and they leave the house, never to return. Mom has a good friend, Earl, and he takes them in without questions, in the middle of the night.

All these violent and scary events are seen through the eyes of a young boy whose life will never be quite the same. Jamie quickly loses the security of his daily routine and struggles to understand the events in his new life.

He felt nervous getting dressed, in some sort of a hurry, but for no reason. He fought with his T-shirt, trying to get his arms and head through. His mother was lying on the couch, watching. "Slow down," she told him. "We have the whole day."

But to Jamie, something is not right.

He stepped outside into the bright sun, clear cold air, a gorgeous day, so bright it knocked him back. He wasn't ready for it.

It made his eyes ache. His eyes? His head.

His heart. Something about him, the brightness of the day was overwhelming; it gobbled up everything inside itself—everything that had come before and everything that might come next.

Instead of going to school as always, he is staying home while he and his mom are getting settled in a trailer that belongs to Earl, way out of town, among trees and mountains. Earl seems not to be very happy that they are by themselves and mentions that they will be "sitting ducks," but Patty, Jamie's mother, thinks it will be a good place for them to stay. To Jamie, it feels safe because of the trailer's snugness and smallness (that is, not enough room to throw a baby). It seems to protect him from what happened before. "Mostly Jamie did not think about Van. Van wasn't there. They were there—Nin and his mother and himself—and the trailer fit them just right." Yet again and again, Jamie and Patty are reminded of that terrible night. At a school fair, Patty suddenly thinks she sees Van and panics. Only it is not Van. And that is when the fear starts. Patty is not the same, and Jamie, too, feels a rage he cannot control. His mother realizes what is happening.

"Oh God, Jamie", she said, "we're afraid— just sick with fear. And it's so settled within us that we don't even know what living feels like without it." For the next few months, it

is this fear that will come to dominate Patty's and Jamie's life until they hardly dare to leave their trailer anymore.

## About the Author

Born in Chicago, Illinois, Carolyn Coman was a member of the first graduating class of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. After graduation, she worked for several years as a book binder, and then as an editor at an educational publishing house where she developed professional materials for children. She also taught writing at Harvard Extension. While her daughter, Anna, attended school, Coman worked as a volunteer writing teacher in her daughter's classroom. There she met the boys and girls that appear in her novels, particularly Jamie, the child who has more problems than a young boy should have. Today, Coman lives in Newburyport, Massachusetts, with her two children, Anna and David. She is a full time writer.

Coman was awarded a Newbery Honor Award in 1995 for *What Jamie Saw*, as well as chosen a National Book Award Finalist by the National Book Foundation for the same novel. She has won awards for her fiction from the Massachusetts Artists' Foundation and the Writers Exchange Program of Poets and Writers.



## Plot Summary

The main character in *What Jamie Saw* is eight-year-old Jamie. The story begins when he woke in the middle of the night and saw Van, who was his baby sister's father, reach in the baby's crib and throw her, Nin, across the room "like a football." Fortunately, Patty, Jamie's and Nin's mother, stepped in the room just in time to catch her. The baby had been crying all night and it evidently sent Van over the edge. For weeks and months, Jamie retained the image of Van that night standing by the baby's crib with his head hung down.

That very night, Patty packed the kids up and their few belongings in their old car and left Van. Patty told Jamie they were heading to Earl's apartment. Earl was a father figure to Jamie. Although Patty told him that Earl was her best friend, Jamie fantasized that Earl was really his father, or at least an uncle. Earl took Patty and her kids in and the next day drove them out to a small trailer he owed on the outskirts of the small New Hampshire town of Spark. It was a tiny place but Jamie was thrilled at the prospect of his family having its own place. Earl was a little apprehensive about Patty living in such a remote place in case Van would come looking for them. But Patty was stubborn and wanted to strike out on her own and provide a home for her family. They moved in the next day.

Jamie's favorite possession was his magic book. He would lose himself for hours reading about different types of magic and how to do magic tricks. He would perform his tricks for Nin and Patty, entertaining them for hours. Just like any eight-year-old, he was looking forward to going to a Christmas carnival being held at a local high school. Even though Patty didn't have much money, she agreed to take him. Jamie had a great time playing all the games and eating hot dogs and other treats. Just as they were leaving, Patty ducked down with Jamie. She thought she had spotted Van. As it turned out, it was just a man who resembled Van. But that incident brought to light the fear that both Patty and her young son were living under. It recalled to Jamie the fear of that night when he saw his baby sister flying through the air.

Patty was so shaken that she allowed Jamie to stay off school for an entire week, which brought his teacher knocking at their door. At first defensive, Patty opened up to Mrs. Desrochers, who arranged to have her join a support group for single mothers. Jamie was deeply impacted by Van's abuse and the fear and uncertainty he felt afterward. He would begin shaking when he was separated from his mother for even a brief time.

The moment that Jamie had been fearing finally happened when Van showed up at the trailer when Patty was away. Despite his fears, Jamie protected both his little sister and his mother. But thanks to Patty's strength, which she gained from the women's group and the support of Earl and Mrs. Desrochers, she was able to stand up to Van and tell him to never come to their house again. After Van left, Jamie vented all his fears, pain and conflicted emotions in an endless crying jag. When he had run out of tears, his mother gave him just what he needed. She asked him to perform a magic trick for her

and Nin. By doing this, Patty allowed her son to be a little boy again—carefree and enjoying his magic and his family.





# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

When Jamie saw Van throw the baby, his little sister Nin, they moved. Jamie, Nin and their mother, Patty, left Van's house. They went to Earl's apartment, which was above Daggert's Sand and Gravel, in Stark, New Hampshire. The next day they moved to a trailer. Jamie was fast asleep when Van came in the room he shared with Nin who kept crying that night. He woke up when Van reached in the crib and grabbed Nin and threw her like a football across the room. By a miracle, Patty stepped in the room and caught the baby in her arms.

Patty bent down and quietly told Jamie to come to her. But he was frozen. She kept trying to encourage him. Jamie shifted his eyes to look at Van, who was standing by the crib, his head bent down. Finally, Jamie jumped off his bed and ran to his mother and wrapped his arms around her. Jamie's mother led them out of the room and down the hall. They were going to the car, she told him.

Patty got Jamie in the backseat of the car and strapped Nin in her baby seat. She told Jamie not to move. She'd be right back. Jamie watched as his mother walked back inside the house. Jamie was frightened and freezing cold. His mother came back with pillows and blankets and covered the kids up. She went back inside and brought back coats and shoes. Once again, she deposited the items in the car and went back inside. She came out carrying a pillowcase with a baseball bat sticking out. She had gathered a bag of toys. All he could think of was Santa Claus.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Jamie and his sister went through a traumatic incident. Even though Nin was thrown, Jamie suffered the most. He saw what was happening to his sister. She was thrown across the room like a football. Luckily, Jamie's mother caught her and she was not hurt. Jamie was frightened each time his mother went inside to get more items. He had to be thinking: What if she doesn't come back out? What if Van hits her? What would happen to him and his little sister? It was a horrific experience that will stay with the little boy for months and even years to come. When he sees the bag of toys his mother brings out, he can only think of Santa Claus. The image of Santa Claus presented a happy and safer time and a man who was nice and wouldn't hurt him or his sister.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Snuggled in the warm car, Jamie almost drifted off but something woke him up. He wanted to know if his mother brought his magic. She allayed his worries. She had brought his magic. She told him they were heading to Earl's. Jamie was then able to relax and fall asleep. He didn't wake until they were pulling into the gravel driveway at Earl's apartment building.

Jamie's mother carried the still-sleeping Nin and Jamie carried his pillow up the stairs to Earl's apartment. He liked Earl and thought that maybe he was his father but his mother assured him that he wasn't. Jamie thought maybe he was an uncle but his mother told him Earl was her best friend. Earl was stunned to see them standing there when he opened the door. Earl let them in and told Patty he'd make coffee. Patty responded that she'd put the kids down to sleep. But Jamie was confused. It was getting light and he never slept at Earl's house. He watched TV with him and ate snacks and handed tools to him when Earl worked on his truck. Patty opened the pull out couch in the living room, arranged the pillows and blankets and laid Nin down. She told Jamie to crawl in. He didn't really want to but he was sleepy.

The next morning, when Jamie woke up, Patty was asleep next to him. She woke then and was scared when she didn't see Nin. She was relieved to see that she was sleeping on a pile of blankets on the floor. Patty said that Earl had left and went to work. Patty told Jamie that he didn't have to go to school that day. He liked his third grade teacher, Mrs. Desrochers, so a day off wasn't a big deal like it would have been when he had a teacher he didn't like.

Jamie got dressed and ran down to the car to get his magic. It was bright outside and he felt nervous when he didn't see his mother's car right away. He finally spotted it. Earl probably moved it. He grabbed the bag with the magic in it and ran as quick as he could. When he got back inside, his mother was feeding Nin a bottle. Patty looked like she was drifting away, her face encircled in a ring of her cigarette smoke. Patty saw that he looked scared and asked if he saw someone outside. Just then Earl came back in. He announced he was going to make pancakes. Jamie was relieved he liked pancakes and liked to know what was coming next.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Earl is a strong male presence in Jamie's life. He fantasizes that Earl is really his father or his uncle. When Jamie goes outside he feels afraid. After what happened the night before, he felt afraid to be away from his mother. When he came back inside, Patty noticed that he seemed to be on edge. She asked if she saw someone outside. When Patty asked if "someone" was outside, she was probably referring to "Van." She is



probably afraid that he'll come looking for them. Jamie is probably having the same fear although he may not be able to vocalize it. Jamie felt better when Earl came back home. Earl appears to be a very caring and understanding person and seems very concerned about Patty and her children. The comment that Jamie likes to know what is going to happen next indicates the fears he has about his future.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Jamie kept picturing Van standing at the crib with his head down. Jamie kept asking for more pancakes. If he kept eating, he wouldn't have to think about what was next. After breakfast, Jamie settled in the big easy chair with his magic book, his favorite book. He remembered when he got the book. He was with Van and his mom. It was the first thing the three of them had done together. Van told him to pick out anything he wanted and he'd buy it for him. Van seemed to be disappointed when Jamie picked the magic book. He kept showing Jamie different things but all Jamie wanted was the magic book.

Reading the book, he read all the different ways of doing magic—magic for fun, illusion, silent magic. The most skilled magicians were the ones who performed silent magic. Lesser skilled magicians relied on patter to distract the audience from the trick. After Nin was thrown across the room, everything had been silent.

That afternoon after Earl went back to work and while Nin took a nap, Jamie and Patty played cards. At one point, Patty asked Jamie if he understood what was happening and why. He hemmed and hawed for a bit but finally said they left Van because he threw Nin. She wanted to make sure he was okay with everything. He was, he told her. When Earl came home from work, they all squeezed in his truck to go look at the trailer.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The incident from the night before was still lingering in Jamie's thoughts. He pictured Van standing at the crib with his head down. It is the last recollection of the man that he had lived with. Perhaps he was fantasizing that Van was still in the same position, unable to move and thus unable to come looking for them. He recalled how Van was disappointed that he bought the magic book instead of something he wanted him to buy. Van may have been a very domineering person who was difficult to please. It doesn't seem that Jamie misses him.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

As they approached Earl's trailer, Jamie thought it looked like a giant silver toaster. It was isolated— there weren't any other houses or trailers around. He liked the idea that the trailer was located near a pond. Earl said it could be his own private skating rink. Jamie had never skated in his life but it sounded like fun. Earl had lived there with his wife, June, but they had split up.

Jamie was surprised at how small the trailer was inside. Patty asked Jamie what he thought. He liked it, he told her. But she kept asking him which made him think she didn't want to live there. He asked what would they do if they didn't live there. Patty became angry, asking him if he thought they'd be homeless and would have no place to live because they left Van. She collected herself and patted Jamie on the head and told him not to worry about anything.

Patty asked Earl if they could have the trailer but he tried to talk her out of it, saying they'd be sitting ducks. Jamie didn't know what Earl meant and what ducks had to do with anything. Earl said they could have his apartment. June would let him stay at her place for a while. But Patty was stubborn. She wanted the place. Earl agreed, but didn't seem happy about it. He repeated that they'd be sitting ducks. Jamie was happy that they'd have their own place.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Jamie isn't the only one who is worried about the future. Patty is not thrilled with the new trailer but she doesn't have many options. She takes her anger out on Jamie, accusing him of thinking they'll be homeless without Van. But it is really Patty who has that concern. She has the responsibility of two small children and life is not easy for her.

Early doesn't want Patty to live in the trailer. When he comments that they'll be "sitting ducks", he may be referring to Patty and the kids being alone with no one around to help them in case someone, perhaps Van, comes after them.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

They moved in the next day. They didn't have much to move, but Patty said they'd make do with their things and the stuff Earl had left behind. Nin's crib was still at Van's, so Patty made a bed for her out of a bureau drawer that she lined with soft blankets. Jamie slept on a mattress in the back room and Patty slept in a recliner chair. He thought he could close the bureau drawer if he ever had to hide Nin. He wished there was a drawer big enough for him to hide in.

Jamie was bugging Patty to take him to the Groveton Christmas Carnival and Fair but she said they couldn't go because they were poor. But when Friday rolled around, she changed her mind and decided to go. Jamie talked Patty into not taking Nin—they'd have more fun if she didn't have to fuss with Nin. Patty said she'd have Agnes watch her. Agnes was Van's mother but didn't have anything to do with her son. Jamie felt sorry for Agnes for having a son like Van. When they got to the high school, Jamie ran ahead to the gymnasium. He was anxious to play all the games they had set up—ring toss, target shooting, lucky numbers.

Jamie wanted to try ring toss. Patty told him to pick and choose carefully—he couldn't play everything. To his amazement, he tossed one of his rings on a cone. He won a tiny stuffed animal that he gave to Patty for Nin. He had a good time. He saw kids from school and his teacher. They ate hot dogs and drank soda and Jamie played as many games as he could.

The last game he played was the BB target shooting game. He noticed the sign over the booth said "Shooting Ducks". Even though he could barely reach the BB gun that was attached to a wooden stand, Jamie was able to shoot a duck with two out of his three shots. They were out of tickets so they started to walk to the exit when suddenly Patty yanked him and pulled him over to the snow cone stand. She crouched down and pulled him down with her. She had spotted someone who looked like Van but when the man turned around, it wasn't him. Patty quickly stood back up and dusted herself off like she had fallen. People standing in the line for a snow cone were watching them, including Mrs. Desrochers.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Van's abusive behavior was still haunting Jamie. He was glad that Nin was sleeping in a bureau drawer because if Van found them, Jamie could shut the drawer and hide her. He wished he could fit in a drawer and hide too if Van came. Jamie was very frightened of Van which may mean that Van was abusive before the recent incident. Even Agnes, Van's own mother, is estranged from him.



Jamie wanted to go to the carnival with just Patty, he wanted all her attention for a change and not be forced to share it with Nin. Jamie and Patty had a great time at the carnival but when they were ready to leave, Patty became frightened when she thought she saw Van. Mrs. Desrochers, Jamie's teacher, was watching as Jamie and his mother were crouching down and hiding. She may sense that the family is in trouble.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Patty was silent on the drive home from the carnival. Jamie tried to strike up a conversation about winning the stuffed animal for Nin, but Patty had no response. Jamie couldn't understand why Patty was so tense. The man at the carnival wasn't Van. She ran inside at Agnes's house and brought Nin out in record time. Jamie felt the tension all the way home. Patty was driving faster than usual. At home, Patty put Nin right to bed in her drawer and got a new pack of cigarettes out of the cabinet.

Jamie was watching Patty, who suddenly glared at him and yelled at him for staring. Without thinking, he lunged over and kicked Nin's drawer. He wanted to see if the drawer would go right in the chest and hide her like he had thought about. But all it did was scare her and make her cry. Patty yelled at Jamie asking him what in the world was he doing. She took him by the shoulders and accused him of behaving like Van.

Jamie couldn't get to the bathroom fast enough. He vomited and threw up everything he'd eaten that night. He threw up until his ribs hurt. Patty tended to him, putting a cool washcloth up against his forehead. Patty was sorry and apologized to him. He felt better—her voice sounded like the real Patty not the mean and angry one. As Patty tucked Jamie in, he asked her what happened. She thought for a while and then blurted out that they were living in fear and that if they didn't get over it they'd be hiding and vomiting in the bathroom the rest of their lives.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

The tension was thick as Jamie and Patty drove home from the carnival. She didn't not want to talk because she was dealing with so many emotions at once—anger and fear and frustration—that she was afraid she'd explode. She did explode later and took her frustrations out on Jamie. Perhaps it was a good thing that Patty and Jamie had a little confrontation about the evening. By doing so, Patty was finally able to vocalize to Jamie—who really needed some honesty—that she was afraid, too. Now that their problem was out in the open, they would be better prepared to deal with it.





# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Jamie, Patty and Nin stayed in the rest of the weekend. Jamie fantasized that the three of them were the only people left alive on earth after everyone else had been killed by a huge bomb. But Earl survived, too, and would come and visit them. His job was to find food that wasn't contaminated from the blast. On Monday, Jamie didn't want to go to school and told Patty that he was still sick. Patty easily related to how he felt. She got the kids in the car and they drove to the package store where Patty used the phone to call in sick to the grocery store where she worked part-time as a bagger. One day seemed to blend into another and soon it was mid-week. After Wednesday, Patty stopped asking Jamie if he was sick in the morning. They stayed home the entire week.

Jamie practiced his magic tricks and entertained Nin when she was awake. Nothing made him happier than entertaining his sister with his tricks and making her laugh and smile. He recalled when a waiter showed him how to make a rabbit out of a napkin. In the car on the way home, he kept trying to do the trick but couldn't remember how the waiter did it. He got so frustrated that his legs started kicking so hard that he broke the car window handle in the back seat.

Patty swerved the car to the side and warned him to settle down or she'd leave him on the side of the road and he could walk home. He didn't know why his legs started kicking like that—they seemed to do it on their own. But Patty didn't leave him on the side of the road. That was just her anger and frustration coming out and probably her reaction to the sudden and unexpected fit of anger from her usually calm little boy. Instead of leaving him as she warned, like a good mother, she turned around and went back to the restaurant. The waiter was happy to show Jamie how to do the trick.

The next Monday, Jamie told Patty he was still sick and she didn't challenge him. They were both afraid to venture out of their little safe house. But things were about to change. That afternoon, Mrs. Desrochers paid them a visit. Jamie's teacher was concerned about him. Missing that much school would put him behind. She didn't want him to be faced with the challenge of having to catch up to the rest of the class if he were out too long. Patty was defensive initially, telling Mrs. Desrochers that she took good care of Jamie and that he was safe with her. Mrs. Desrochers responded that she knew that Patty was a good mother, but added that she wanted to be a good teacher to Jamie by encouraging him to return to school.

Mrs. Desrochers wanted to talk to Patty alone. Patty told Jamie to go turn on the TV. She didn't want Jamie to hear their conversation just in case it was anything negative that would hurt him. Earl had hooked a TV up for them but the reception was terrible. Jamie strained to hear what his mother and teacher were discussing but all he could hear were just bits and pieces of the conversation. He heard Patty say something about the family hitting a spell of "bad weather" lately.



Patty, sensing that he was eavesdropping, made Jamie go outside where he ran and ran around the trailer until he was just about exhausted. Patty told Mrs. Desrochers that Jamie's father was long gone and that just recently she had split up with Nin's father. When Jamie came back in, Patty seemed more relaxed and happier. Mrs. Desrochers reminded Patty that she could watch Jamie on Tuesday afternoons. After his teacher left, Patty told Jamie that he had to go back to school. He felt angry. How could she send him back out in the contaminated world? But Patty was firm. She told Jamie that his teacher was good person who wanted to help them.

After Mrs. Desrochers left, Patty realized that she had left her book bag behind. Patty grabbed it and told Jamie to stay and watch Nin. She was going to catch up to Mrs. Desrochers to give her the bag. She told Jamie she would be right back. But Jamie had recently been experiencing real anxiety when he was separated from his mother, even for the briefest of times.

Jamie watched out the window as his mother's car pulled away. Jamie hated to see Patty's car disappear down to the road. That old familiar nervous feeling came over him. He felt like he was going to burst. He bolted outside and ran after her. He ran until his side felt like it would split. Patty was heading back by the time he was just a short way up the road. She stopped the car and exited and ran toward her son. Jamie ran into her arms. She carried him inside like a baby and laid him on the bed. She was stroking his hair and when he realized that she was back and he was safe, he kicked her as hard as he could. His fear had turned to anger.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

There is a lot of anger inside Jamie. He recalled how he kicked his legs and broke the car window handle over his frustration in not being able to perform a magic trick. He couldn't control his legs or his his anger. That repressed anger came out again when he kicked his mother after he thought she had abandoned him.

Jamie panicked when Patty drove off to catch up with his teacher. He felt abandoned even when Patty was away from him for even a very brief time. The family had a new advocate, Mrs. Desrochers, Jamie's teacher. She was reaching out to them sensing that they were a family in distress. She was a kind woman who was trying to help both Jamie by encouraging him to return to school and she was help Patty who she sensed was in deep distress.

Jamie fantasized that Patty, Nin and he were the only people alive on earth, except for Earl, who wasn't part of their family but helped them. His fantasy also meant that the scariest person in his life, Van, was also gone. Patty allowed Jamie to stay home from school all week even though she knew he wasn't sick. Patty stayed home from work, which indicated that she wasn't thinking very clearly. Her part-time job was their only means of support. But they were hunkering down together, trying to hide from reality and the outside world.



But the outside world wasn't destroyed by a huge bomb. And that outside world wouldn't stay away for ever and it came knocking at the door. But the person knocking on the door wasn't Van or someone scary; it was his teacher who actually cared what happened to Jamie and his family and who saw the potential for Jamie's future even if he didn't.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Jamie wanted everything for Christmas. Patty told him not to get his hopes up too high but she had planned a shopping trip to Littleton that weekend. But it was so cold that Saturday morning, that Patty's old car wouldn't start. All she could do was cry. Jamie offered to look under the hood; of course, he wouldn't know what to look for. Jamie found a perfect tree near the trailer. They decided to decorate it outside instead of chopping it down and killing it.

Jamie was going to school every day even though he hated to leave Patty and Nin. He felt support from Mrs. Desrochers even though she didn't say anything special to him. Jamie wasn't sure what arrangements they had made, but every Tuesday he stayed with Mrs. Desrochers while Patty went to some meeting of a group of women who were having problems. She asked him if he had thought of getting presents for his mother and sister. He told her he didn't have any money. The things his mother needed were way beyond his reach: a car and a bed.

Mrs. Desrochers walked up behind Jamie while he was sitting at his desk eating a snack. She put her hand on his back and he jumped and spun around. She apologized—she hadn't meant to scare him. Mrs. Desrochers suggested that he give his mother a plant for Christmas. She told him he could have a blooming cactus that she had in the classroom. He gladly accepted the offer.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

It was a bad time of the year for Patty. She had no money to get her kids Christmas presents and her old car wouldn't start in the cold weather. Jamie was frustrated. He wanted to help but didn't know how. Mrs. Desrochers arranged for Patty to join a support group of other single mothers and divorced women. Another frustration for Jamie was that he didn't have any money to buy his mother or sister a gift. Mrs. Desrochers came to the rescue and gave him one of her plants so he has something to give his mother. Jamie was still showing signs of stress and tension and frustration.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

An ice storm hit two days before Christmas. Patty couldn't even get the door open. The ice had sealed the it shut. Luckily Early came by and opened the door by using a propane torch. He had brought Jamie's present early. Outside, Earl pulled a pair of ice skates out of the back of his truck and dangled them in front of Jamie. Jamie grabbed them and ran to the pond.

Earl brought a pair for himself and they were soon on the pond. Jamie immediately fell down and Earl pulled him up. Earl held on to Jamie's hand as they slowly started to move. Earl gave him pointers, telling him to relax and bend his knees. But just like when he learned to ride his bike, Jamie soon fell in a rhythm and began to glide on his own. All that mattered in the world to Jamie at that moment was the exhilarating feeling of skating. Earl told him he did great.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Patty faced further frustration when the ice storm sealed them in. But Earl came to the rescue and got the door open. He also lifted Jamie's day by bringing him a pair of skates for Christmas. On the pond, Jamie caught on quick. He loved the feeling he got when gliding around the pond. He felt free of the normal stress and strains of his life.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

When Patty was gone to the store on Christmas Eve, Jamie spotted Van's truck coming down the road. He picked up Nin and went to the bedroom. He wanted to hide under the bed but Nin was squirming and fussing too much, so he hid her in a fortress of blankets and pillows. Jamie crawled under the bed. He heard Van knocking then he heard the door open and Van call for Patty. Jamie stepped out in the hall so that Van wouldn't go into the bedroom and find Nin.

Van didn't look as scary as Jamie remembered. He told Van that Patty wasn't there. Van said he'd wait for her outside. Jamie thought that if he had Van come inside Patty would see his truck and turn around. He asked Van if he wanted to see his latest trick. Van came right in. It didn't work. When Patty drove home, she didn't turn around. They looked out at the window and as Patty tore out of her car and rushed for the trailer.

Patty's terrified face scared Jamie more than Van did. She wanted to know where Nin was. Jamie ran and got her to show his mother that she was fine. She demanded to know what Van was doing there. He wanted to talk to her, he said. He looked harmless to Jamie. Patty told Jamie to get Nin and start walking toward the school. She'd catch up with them after she talked to Van. Jamie hesitated. He didn't want to leave. Van sensed Jamie's unease and said he'd leave and come back some other time. Patty told him not to. Jamie felt sorry for Van—no one wanted him.

Later, Patty accidentally broke a plate in the kitchen. The sound of the breaking plate set Jamie off in uncontrollable sobs. Patty tried to comfort him but he couldn't stop crying. When he was finally cried out, Patty picked up Nin, sat in a kitchen chair and asked Jamie to do some magic tricks. He was happy to comply.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

The moment that Jamie had been dreading finally happened. Van showed up when Patty was gone to the store. Jamie hid Nin and, even though he was scared, talked to Van. He was very mature, trying to warn Patty that Van was there so she could escape. It was a selfless act for an eight-year-old. Strangely, Van wasn't as scary as he remembered him. But looks can be deceiving and Van was probably the same old Van. Maybe he was lonely because it was Christmas. He showed his lack of concern for his own daughter when he entered the trailer. He didn't ask Jamie where Nin was. Even though Patty was having a difficult time and it would have been easy to go back with Van, she stood strong and told him to never come back. Perhaps her support group had helped her to do the right thing for herself and her children.

Jamie's emotions exploded into an uncontrollable crying fit. The afternoon had been very emotional for him. His mixed and confused feelings were obvious when he felt



sympathy for Van. After Jamie got through his crying spell, Patty was a good mother and changed the subject to a pleasant one by asking him to show her a magic trick. She was letting him be a child again. The family was fragile and had a rough road ahead but they were heading in the right direction.



# Characters

## Jamie

Jamie is the eight-year-old protagonist of the book, *What Jamie Saw*. He lived with his mother, Patty, and baby sister, Nin. In the middle of the night, Jamie saw Van, his mother's boyfriend, reach into his baby's sister's crib and throw the infant across the room "like a football". Her crying apparently had driven him to the abuse. The incident totally upended Jamie's life. Patty, Jamie's mother, moved her kids out that very night.

But the pain and trauma of that night lingered in Jamie's mind. He would literally tremble and panic when he was away from his mother for even a short time. There was anger and confusion and conflicted emotions inside the young boy. His mother's silence taught him to repress the feelings but it didn't make them go away.

Jamie turned to his love of magic to forget the stresses of his life. He would lose himself for hours at a time, poring over his favorite magic book and performing tricks for his mother and baby sister. Jamie would also turn to his imaginative mind and fantasize about a better and safer life for him and his family. Although it was a rough road, Jamie finally had hopes for the future when his mother rejected Van's attempts to return to them for once and all.

## Patty

Patty is the mother of eight-year-old Jamie and baby Nin. When Nin's father, Van, becomes abusive, Patty quickly removes her children to a safer place. Patty struggles with the role of single mother and faces a life of poverty and hardship. The family is forced to live in a small, old trailer in a remote area outside a small town. Life is not easy for Patty. She has to survive on the meager wages from a part-time job as a bagger in a grocery store and is forced to rely on an old, unreliable car.

Luckily, Patty has a few people in her life who care about her and her children and are there to support her. Earl, Patty's best friend, takes them in the night she fled from the abusive Van. He is the owner of the trailer and allows Patty to move in free of charge. Jamie's third-grade teacher, Mrs. Desrochers, has a fondness for the boy, and when she realizes that the family is in distress, she reaches out to Patty. Although Patty is at first too proud to allow Mrs. Desrochers help them, she ultimately agrees to let the teacher make arrangements for her to join a support group of other women who are facing problems similar to those of Patty.

Patty's love for her children and her support system in the end helps her to stand up to the abusive man and refuse to allow him back into their lives.





## **Nin**

Nin is Jamie's baby sister. She was the target of Van's abuse the night that Patty left with her kids. Tired of her crying, Van picked her up and threw her across the room. Luckily, Patty was just entering the room and caught her.

## **Van**

Van is the abusive man who Patty, Jamie and Nin live with. When he throws Nin, his biological daughter, across the room out of anger, Patty leaves with the kids. Van remains a terrifying figure to Jamie throughout the story.

## **Earl**

Earl is Patty's best friend. He takes them in when Patty leaves Van. He also allows them to live in his trailer located on the edge of town in a remote area.

## **Mrs. Desrochers**

Mrs. Desrochers is Jamie's third-grade teacher. She is concerned about Jamie's family and arranges for Patty to join a support group to help her through the tough times.

## **Agnes**

Agnes is Van's mother. She watches Nin whenever Patty needs a babysitter. She is estranged from her son and has no contact with him.

## **Waiter**

A waiter at a restaurant showed Jamie a magic trick—how to turn a napkin into a rabbit. On the way home, Jamie couldn't remember how to do the trick so Patty turned around and drove back to the restaurant where the waiter showed him how it was done.

## **Jamie's Father**

The only mention of Jamie's father was when his teacher asked Patty about him. Patty replied only that he was long gone.

## **Students at Christmas Carnival**

When Jamie and Patty attended the Christmas Carnival at the local high school, Jamie met up with some of his classmates and played games and ate with them.



## Objects/Places

### Van's House

Jamie, Patty and Nin were living in Van's house when Van took the baby and threw it across the room to stop it from crying.

### Earl's Apartment

When Patty spirited her kid's away from Van and his abuse, she drove them to Earl's apartment. Earl was her best friend and let them stay there with him.

### Silver Trailer

Earl owned a trailer on the outskirts of town. He allowed Patty and her kids to move in there. It was located by a pond and was surrounded by mountains.

### The Pond

At Christmas, Earl bought Jamie a new pair of ice skates. Jamie and Earl put their skates on and Earl taught Jamie how to skate.

### Magic Book

Jamie's favorite thing in the world was magic. His most treasured possession was his magic book which he often read, losing himself in the world of the sleight of hand.

### Christmas Carnival

Patty took Jamie to the Christmas carnival at a local high school. Jamie won at ring toss and brought home a stuffed animals for his baby sister.

### Patty's Buick

Patty was forced to drive her kids around in an old, unreliable Buick. When it was below zero, the car refused to start. Jamie felt bad when his mother cried out of frustration because they couldn't go Christmas shopping like they planned.



## **The A&P**

Patty's only source of income was her earnings from a part-time job as a bagger at the local A&P.

## **Patty's Support Group**

Jamie's teacher, Mrs. Desrochers, sensed that Jamie's mother was undergoing a lot of stress. She arranged for Patty to join a support group of other women who were dealing with problems similar to her's.

## **Christmas Cactus**

Mrs. Desrochers knew that Jamie didn't have any money to buy his mother a Christmas present. She gave him a blooming cactus so that he'd have something to give her.



## Setting

The main setting of the novel is the trailer where Patty, Jamie, and Nin are living after they leave Van. "Jamie's first sight of the trailer, from a distance, made him think of a big silver toaster." It is very small, in fact, there is no crib for Nin, and she is put in a drawer to sleep. To Jamie and Patty, at first, it seems to be a perfect place to hide.

But gradually, without them realizing it, the trailer becomes a prison. "For the rest of the weekend after the fair, after they saw the man who wasn't even Van, Jamie and Patty and Nin didn't go anywhere at all."

Jamie starts to pretend that they are the last people left on earth, and this, to him, seems a good thing. He does not want to face the world outside. When Monday comes around, he refuses to go to school. His mother makes some half-hearted protests, but does not push him; in fact, she stays home from her own job at the supermarket.

But much as Jamie pretends that it does not exist, the "world" would not stay away.

His absence at school is noticed, and his teacher comes to find out why he is missing. She has guessed what is going on and offers Jamie's mother reassurance that he will be safe at school. Jamie is not reassured.

School is the other major locale in Jamie's life. Generally he enjoys it, but tries to keep school apart from home. "He didn't like the two places mixed up together, the way he didn't like potatoes and meat on the same forkful. He liked things separate." The school represents the outside world, and right now, Jamie does not trust it. But his mother insists that he has to go back, "back to the exploded, contaminated world." When their old car breaks down, the school bus becomes their daily link to the outside world.

Then winter truly arrives, and they are unwilling prisoners of the trailer. The first major storm seals the door shut with ice so that Patty cannot push it open. Fortunately, Earl comes to the rescue, chipping off the ice. Yet Jamie feels at peace in their remote hideaway where nothing evil can find him.

In this, they are mistaken. Safe as the trailer feels to Jamie and Patty, it becomes the scene for the final confrontation that they have feared so long. While Jamie is alone at home—his mother is gone on an errand—Van drives up. And Jamie knows he has to stop hiding and protect his sister.

Only the final confrontation will set him and his mother free.



## Social Sensitivity

What Jamie Saw is a novel about child abuse and, as such, has a strong message.

There is violence, there is cruelty, there is a sense of fear. For a young child, violence is very threatening to his or her safe world.

Although there are many children who are victims of abuse, this fact is not usually a topic for a children's novel. The reader will need a certain amount of maturity to handle Van's violent act. Given this warning, the author handles the topic with delicacy while not playing down the menace. Jamie's viewpoint makes the subject accessible for the younger reader without going into complex explanations about the psychological reasons for Van's actions.



## Literary Qualities

The most memorable moment of the novel occurs right on the opening page. "When Jamie saw him throw the baby, saw Van throw the little baby, saw Van throw his little sister Nin, when Jamie saw Van throw his baby sister Nin, then they moved."

Coman's style has an almost hypnotic quality that reflects both the disbelieving terror as well as the simplicity of the viewer.

Showing us *What Jamie Saw*, the author has captured very effectively the simple world of a young child as well as his helplessness to understand the events and adults around him. Jamie is too young to do more than observe the adults—he is not able to interpret their thoughts and actions. When Patty panics at the fair, Jamie sees her only as looking "mean"; he is not mature enough to see her as a person who has fears of her own. Like most children of his age, he lacks the insights as well as the experience to fully understand the situation. This makes his narrative more poignant since the reader sees the events from the viewpoint of the nine year old as well as from a more mature perspective.

Coman's style is simple and sparse, and so are the other aspects of the novel. The cast of characters is small, and none of them is developed beyond what a nine year old would notice. Earl and Patty may have a much more complex relationship than the boy comprehends. He simply asks if Earl is his father, and when his mother denies it, he lets it go at that. Mrs. Desrochers is seen by Jamie as a teacher he likes, but when she comes visiting, he does not want her because she does not belong in his "home" world. He fails to understand why she cares and does not understand her motives, so they are not developed. Likewise, it never occurs to Jamie to question why his mother lived with the terrible Van in the first place.

A more mature reader might wonder what Van had to offer, but Jamie simply takes it as a given fact. Critics cite Coman as doing a very effective job of letting the reader see the story exclusively through a young boy's eyes.

In spite of its simplicity, there are stylistic and narrative elements that are subtle, almost symbolic. Jamie clings to the "magic" in his life, the book of magic tricks which he performs again and again for Nin, his mother, and everyone else close. The "magic" is so precious to him that when they abruptly leave Van's home after the violence to Nin, the only thing he asks for is his magic book and tricks. When assured that it is in the bag, "once again Jamie drifted off toward sleep." The book of magic represents to Jamie the only thing he can control, the only permanent and safe thing from home. Ironically, when he finally has to face the specter of Van, he uses a magic trick to distract the intruder and give his mother time to save herself.

Jamie went to the door and opened it and said to Van: "I have a new magic trick.



Wanna see?" Van could see Jamie's trick, and when Patty came home she could see Van's truck and turn around in a hurry, if she wanted to.

Magic becomes a safety net, and something he can control and do.





# Themes

## Abandonment

The young protagonist of the story, Jamie, had experienced the sting of abandonment too often in his young life. The only reference to his biological father was his mother's comment that he had left long ago. Jamie filled the vacuum of a fatherless life with his hopes that his mother's best friend, Earl, was really his secret father. When she assured Jamie that Earl was just a friend, Jamie kept the dream alive by believing that Earl was probably at least his uncle.

Even though Patty was smart and was behaving as a good mother by removing her kids from an abusive situation, Jamie faced yet another emotional abandonment from the split. While Jamie feared Van, he had an emotional connection to him. His confused emotions were obvious when he showed sympathy for Van when Patty later rejected him. To Jamie, it was the same feeling he had when certain kids were not chosen for sports teams at schools.

The abusive incident that Jamie witnessed—Van launched his baby sister across the room—caused his fears of abandonment to surface with ferocity. He would literally shake and tremble when he was away from his mother for even a brief moment. Once, when he thought his mother had left, he kicked her when she came back, which signaled not only his fears of abandonment but the anger brewing within him.

## Communication

Jamie, the story's eight-year-old protagonist, suffers throughout *What Jamie Saw* from the trauma and aftermath of abuse. He, his mother and little sister lived with Van until he became abusive toward Jamie's baby sister, Nin.

Jamie struggles to understand the abusive man who he lived with and had feelings for. He needs to reconcile his very conflicted emotions. But more often than not, Jamie's struggle is a silent one. Through her own silence and remoteness, his mother, Patty, signals that she is not willing to discuss what happened and why. She was damaged and traumatized by the incident and by her relationship that placed her children in harm. Patty, like many people, found it difficult to discuss difficult subjects with children. Therefore, she clammed up and the silence was much more damaging than talking with him.

Jamie desperately needs to express his fears and hear the words that will make him feel that he and his sister are out of jeopardy. But Jamie has no one to talk to. Jamie falls into the same trap as his mother, learning to repress his anguish and pain. Those raw emotions turn into fits of anger that he doesn't understand and cannot control.



Once his mother begins to open up and reject Van once and for all, the family begins the long journey of healing and, as the story ends, are heading towards a safer and happier future.

## Fantasy

Jamie learned to cope with the trauma and fears associated with domestic abuse, at times, by losing himself in his fantasies.

Jamie's favorite pursuit in life was magic which is a form of fantasy. He loved to perform his tricks for his mother and sister and could spend hours reading his magic book. The first thing Jamie thought about when his mother took Nin and him away from the abusive Van was to ask about his magic book. He panicked, thinking that they might have left it behind and he would lose it forever. He was worried about how he would be able to do without his magic book when he needed to escape from his new reality. One of the forms of magic that the book discussed was "escapism", something Jamie was eager to learn about.

Jamie also fantasized that Earl, Patty's best friend, was really his secret father. But Patty assured him he was not. He still held on to the dream that Earl, who was kind and caring, was somehow related to him. Maybe, he thought, he was his uncle.

Jamie also used his vivid imagination to fantasize his way out of distress. He imagined that the world had been struck by a huge bomb and that his mother, sister and he were the only survivors. It was an effective, if elaborate, way to get rid of the abusive Van!



## Themes/Characters

The cast of characters is small, but they encompass Jamie's entire world. There is, first of all, Patty, his mother. To Jamie, she embodies safety, and she is the one who can make things right. She caught his baby sister at the crucial moment, got them out of Van's house, and brought Jamie's beloved magic book with her.

He spoke, and with real urgency too. "Did you bring my magic?" "Yes," his mother answered him right away. "It's in the bag." How quickly her one word stopped the ferocious pounding in his heart.

But Jamie learns that even his mother, too, is afraid, and that upsets him terribly.

After her flight from the school fair, she is silent, still deeply disturbed.

She was doing everything fast, even when she stood still, rubbing her middle finger against her thumb. . . . Jamie stood and watched her. Finally she looked up and saw him and said, "What? Who are you looking at?" So mean. As mean as she could be.

Sensing her terror and losing the safety of her assurance, Jamie literally gets sick and then angrily strikes out at her. She is his mother, and she cannot be weak.

Little Nin, the baby, is the third to make up the tight family circle. Nin has no personality, being simply an infant, but her role as a catalyst sets the action of the novel in motion. She is the one hurled across the room, and she is the prime reason why Patty and Jamie leave for their new life at the trailer. In the end, she is the one Jamie tries to hide in the drawer. It is the helpless baby that gives him the courage to stand up to Van.

The world outside of the trailer is represented by Earl and Mrs. Desrochers. Earl is a childhood friend of Patty, and Jamie sometimes wonders if Earl is his father, but Patty assures him that he is not. Seeing in Earl a protector, he envisions him as his dad, as his uncle, but finally concludes that "For the most part, Earl was just Earl."

The other friend of the family, although they do not realize it in the beginning, is Jamie's teacher, Mrs. Desrochers. An elderly widow, she takes a concerned interest in all her students, but worries especially about this boy, sensing his vulnerability. When Jamie's mother suspiciously asks if she visits all the kids in her class that get sick, she replies: "No, just the missing in action."

She suspects what is wrong and has a long talk with Patty, with the result that Patty promises to send Jamie back to school. Actually, Jamie has always liked school, and he has liked this teacher. But now he is not sure he can trust the outside world again.

Finally, there is the villain of the story— Van. Van is the one who tossed Nin across the room. Since the story is seen through Jamie's eyes, the reader does not know the reason for Van's action—an angry rage, drunkenness, or planned meanness. The only clue is Van's reaction after Patty has caught Nin—he stands by the crib, hanging his



head. "Everything about him was hanging: his shoulders hung, and his arms hung from his shoulders, and his big hands hung off his arms. Drained. A big, dumb drained bathtub." That is how Jamie sees him, and that is also the last time he is seen until the end of the story. In the meantime, he becomes a shadow that frightens and haunts mother and son. Did they just see Van? Will Van come back? Will he hurt any of them?

What will happen to Nin? When he does show up, Van's arrival is totally unexpected. Jamie is alone because his mother went on an errand. And so, after he hides the baby, Jamie goes out to face the enemy and makes a strange discovery.

As afraid as Jamie was, he was able to see Van, his real size, not larger than life, just this man in blue jeans and a work shirt and a thermal vest. He didn't look like he had come to hurt anyone. Jamie thought Van looked scared himself.

Then his mother returns, and she, too, has her confrontation with Van.

Van broke the silence and surprised them all by saying, "I'll go" . . . "I'll come around some other time." Jamie looked at his feet, his sneakers, held his breath and heard his mother say "no." It wasn't her mean voice, but she did say it; "No, don't do that.

Don't come around."

Like Jamie, she finally sees Van as he is and discovers that she can say "no" to him.

One of the themes of the book deals with facing fear, something both mother and son are learning, a process that Coman calls "a journey from fear to safety." From the panicky flight at the school carnival because of an imagined Van, to the confrontation with the real one, Jamie and his mother have tried to hide but with little success. They, themselves, have become prisoners of fear.

By defying Van, they free themselves. And Jamie can now also free himself from an overdependence on his mother. When Patty first sees Van, she tells Jamie to get the baby and get out. But Jamie has had enough of running and hiding. He defies his mother too.

Suddenly what his mother had told him to do next—to take Nin and walk down the road to leave—came over him and he couldn't stand it. He turned and walked out of the room without Nin. Van and his mother hadn't moved an inch. "No," he said. He wouldn't go away from the trailer and his mother, wouldn't leave her, wouldn't take care of Nin one more second.

This leads to the larger, overall theme of the novel, the damage done by child abuse.

Even though Jamie was not really physically harmed, he cannot wipe out that dreadful night when the baby was thrown. His self-confidence and all his courage have evaporated. He relives the moment again and again, seeing the little baby thrown from her crib against the wall. There are times when Jamie is so filled with helpless anger that he goes up to his mother and kicks her; these are the times when he is completely



lost. Jamie almost resembles a shell-shocked soldier as he has recurring flashbacks of the scene with Van and Nin.

Will Jamie ever get over the damage? In *What Jamie Saw*, Coman illustrates how child abuse has long-term emotional effects.

# Style

## Point of View

What Jamie Saw by Carolyn Coman is written in the third-person narrative, limited omniscient. The story is told for the most part from eight-year-old Jamie's point of view. By using this approach, the author is able to poignantly portray the tender feelings and confusions of a child who had been subjected to abuse and who had witnessed the potential brutal injury of his baby sister. The reader is privy to a child's thoughts and emotions and his struggle to find a safe place after a life-changing and threatening event.

When a friend advised Jamie's mother not to live in a remote area because she and kids would be "sitting ducks", the youngster didn't understand what "ducks" had to do with where they lived. In incidents such as these, the author is able to show the confusion of a child who hears bits and pieces of conversations and interprets them on a literal level. The need for communication between the parent, his mother Patty, and the Jamie the child, was underscored when chaotic thinking took over Jamie at times when his mother was silent but seemed frightened. It only served to intensify his fear and uncertainty and, following her lead, began to repress his fears in the same silent manner as his mother.

During the roughest times, the author appropriately portrays Jamie escaping into the fantasy of magic and imagination. He enjoyed performing magic tricks for his mom and sister. He fantasized that he and his sister and mother are the only people who survived a gigantic bomb that killed everyone but them. That was one way a child attempt to destroy the fear that Van, the man who threw is little sister, represented in recollections Jamie could not remove from his memory.

## Setting

What Jamie Saw takes place in a small town in New Hampshire. When Van, who the protagonist Jamie, his baby sister, Nin, and his mother, Patty, live with becomes abusive toward Nin, Patty takes her kids and leaves him during the middle of the night. They find safety at the apartment of Patty's friend, Earl who lives above Daggert's Sand 'n Gravel in Stark, New Hampshire.

Earl also owns a small silver trailer in a remote area outside Stark. He allows Patty and her kids to live there, although he is afraid the area is not safe for them because it is so desolate. The area is scenic, however the trailer is surrounded by mountains and is located on the edge of a pond. The trailer where the family makes their new home is small and cramped. Patty makes a bed for the baby in a drawer from a chest. Jamie sleeps on a mattress in the back room and Patty makes her bed in a recliner in the living room.



Jamie and his mother go to a Christmas carnival that takes place at a high school in nearby Groveton, New Hampshire. Jamie attends third grade at the local elementary school and Patty has a part-time job as a bagger at the local A&P. For Christmas, Earl gives Jamie a brand new pair of ice skates. Earl helps Jamie with his new skates and teaches him how to skate on the little pond by their trailer.

## Language and Meaning

What Jamie Saw is written in the most part from an eight-year-old's perspective and the author uses the innocence of youth to bring added poignancy to the impact that domestic abuse has on its littlest victims.

The reader follows young Jami's struggle to understand why a man who he lived with and who was his father figure turned to abuse. He also is faced with the fear that the man will return to his life and pose a continued threat to his mother, baby sister and him. Using a child's way of expression, the author allows the reader to be privy to the immature mind of a child who doesn't understand the present, is afraid of the future and who is not equipped to deal with the anger he feels which is the by-product of abuse and repression.

Jamie becomes more confused when he, at times, hears only bits and pieces of conversations, forcing him to fill in the unknown with his own imaginings. When Earl tells Patty that he fears the trailer is a risky place for her and the kids to live because it is in a remote, desolate area, he comments that they will be like sitting ducks. Jamie is confused by that comment—what do ducks have to do with where they live. Silence is another enemy of a child who needs assurance. Why doesn't his mother talk to him? Is his mother angry at him? Was the abuse his fault?

## Structure

What Jamie Saw is separated into ten medium-sized chapters. The longest chapter, chapter seven, is sixteen pages long. The shortest chapters are three, four and six, which are each nine pages in length. The structure of the book is laid out in basically a chronological order.

There are several instances in which flashback episodes are employed to provide crucial back-story. For example, when Jamie recalls the first time he and his mother were with Van together. It remained in Jamie's mind because Van, who wound up being abusive, was the person who bought him his favorite book. That recollection is a foreshadowing of later events and helps to explain the conflicted emotions that Jamie experienced over his mother's split with Van.

The author also uses the foreshadowing technique in several other instances. Jamie had recollections about the first time his legs kicked uncontrollably in anger. He was riding in the back of his mother's car and his actions broke the car window handle and upset his mother. This first experience with that degree of anger was encountered while

he still lived with Van which indicates that Van probably had been abusive before and that the incident when Van through Nin across the room was not the first instance of that behavior.





## Quotes

"Something made him spring up in bed. . . just in time to see Van reach into the crib and grab Nin and throw her, fire her across the room, like a missile, like a bullet, like a shooting star, like a football."

Chap. 1, p. 8

"The moment felt more wonderful than terrible, because the terrible part was inside everything that was happening but hadn't had time to catch up and bloom yet."

Chap. 1, p. 12

"Earl announced he'd come back to make pancakes. Jamie was glad to hear it, because he liked pancakes and he liked knowing what was next."

Chap. 2, p. 30

"Things didn't just stop—time didn't—but he still pictured Van standing by the crib, hanging his head."

Chap. 3, p. 32

"Jamie's first sight of the trailer, from a distance, made him think of a big silver toaster."

Chap. 4, p. 41

"We're afraid—just sick with fear. And it's so settled inside us that we don't even know what living feels like without it."

Chap. 6, p. 72

"Jamie began pretending that he and his mother and Nin were the only people left on earth. Everyone else was dead, blasted by a bomb, and only they had escaped."

Chap. 7, p. 74

"He ran as fast as his heart was beating, so fast that he couldn't take in how empty everything was, how gone the car was, how it was never coming back. He ran and ran and ran, even when the stitch in his side became a knife."

Chap. 7, p. 89

"Bit by bit the next day they dressed up the outside tree Jamie had chosen. Sometimes it looked dumb to him and sometimes it looked beautiful."

Chap. 8, p. 95

"Being able to skate was all there was. There was nothing else in the world: nothing had happened before, nothing was coming up. There was just what he was doing, and how good it felt."

Chap. 9, p. 111

"Jamie tiptoed out of the room and looked out the little window above the kitchen table, at the road Patty would come driving up. He wanted her to come and he didn't want her



to come."

Chap. 10, p. 116

"How about some magic?' she asked. Yes. That was just what Jamie wanted, too."

Chap. 10, p. 126



## Topics for Discussion

What did Jamie see Van do? How did Jamie's mother react? Why did Van do what he did?

Why did Jamie keep picturing Van standing at the baby's crib? Did Van feel sorry for what he did? What happened after Patty and the kids moved to indicate that Van didn't have much feeling for his daughter?

What relationship did Patty have with Earl? What relationship did Jamie wish he had with Earl? Why?

Why did Patty get frightened at the carnival? Why was it hard for her to talk about the incident? What made Jamie sick when he got home?

Why was Jamie so afraid to be by himself? Why did he kick his mother one time after she returned from being away? Why did he not want to go to school?

How did Mrs. Desrochers help the family? What kind of relationship did she have with Jamie? What arrangements did she make for Patty?

What gift did Jamie get from Earl? Why did it make him feel free and happy? How was Patty a good mother to Jamie after the visit by Van?



## Essay Topics

1. After Mrs. Desrochers has visited Jamie and his mother at the trailer, Jamie is sent outside. He gets very upset and suddenly panics. Why? What does he fear? His mother comforts him, puts him to bed, and calms him down. Then suddenly, he kicks her. Why?

2. In the opening chapter, describing the scene where Van throws Nin, the author uses a lot of cumulative repetition.

"When Jamie saw him throw the baby, saw Van throw the little baby, saw Van throw his little sister Nin, when Jamie saw Van throw his baby sister Nin, then they moved." There are other examples of this style in the first chapter.

What effect do they create? What impact do they have on the story?

3. Hardly a festive occasion, why does Jamie think of Santa Claus when his mother brings out the bag during their exit from Van's place?

4. What is Jamie's greatest fear? Why is the unpredictability of the events so unsettling to Jamie? What effect does the violence he witnesses have on him?

5. What role does "magic" play in Jamie's life? Why magic? Why not a toy car or a book of fairy tales?

6. At the carnival, Jamie is thrilled to win at the games, but he does not even care for the prizes. What does winning mean to Jamie? Why is it so important at this time?

7. Does Jamie love his sister? What is his relationship with his mother? Is this an ordinary relationship or are there any unusual aspects to it because of Jamie's experience with violence?

8. Do you think Jamie will ever recover from his experience with abuse? Why or why not?

9. What kind of person is Van? Why did he do what he did? Why did he come around on Christmas Eve? Is he a complete villain?

10. Do you think that the ending of the book really resolves the conflicts? Will Jamie and his mother have no more problems after the showdown with Van?

Will he really leave them alone? Is this a realistic conclusion?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The title *What Jamie Saw* literally reflects the viewpoint of the novel since the reader sees events and characters entirely through the eyes of a nine-year-old boy. Sometimes Jamie does not really understand what is going on. Write reports on the events as they might have been told by Mrs. Desrochers, Earl, or Jamie's mother. Note what things they would mention that Jamie does not and what elements they might omit?

2. Research the subject of child abuse.

What are some causes of child abuse?

What organizations try to prevent child abuse? Where can children and parents seek help in avoiding child abuse?

3. *What Jamie Saw* is written in a style called stream-of-consciousness, which follows the thoughts of the main character throughout the story. Other authors who favor this approach are Robert Cormier, Norma Fox Mazer, and Michael Cadnum. Select a work by one of these authors and compare the two books.

## Further Study

Bode, Janet. Review of *What Jamie Saw*. *New York Times Book Review* (February 11, 1996). Bode writes a rather critical review of the novel, questioning whether its young readers will appreciate the subtle nuances of language, eventually recommending it for a more mature audience.

Lempke, Susan Dove. Review of *What Jamie Saw*. *Booklist* (December 15, 1995). Lempke praises the characterizations and comments that young readers can easily identify with them.

Madison, Kate O'Deal. "Kissing the Genie: The Use of Ritual in Children's Literature." *School Library Journal* (February 1997). The author presents the use of ritual in some children's books, including *What Jamie Saw*.

## Related Titles

Bee and Jacky, also by Carolyn Coman, deals with a different form of child abuse.

Fourteen-year-old Bee realizes that the "games" she and her older brother were playing as younger children really involve sexual abuse. Tell Me Everything by Coman is the story of a twelve year old whose mother was killed during a mountain rescue of a lost boy. Although this novel does not deal with child abuse, it employs a stream-of-consciousness approach very similar to the one used in What Jamie Saw. It probes the feelings of anger and confusion of a twelve-year-old girl.



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