

Where You Once Belonged: A Novel Study Guide

Where You Once Belonged: A Novel by Kent Haruf

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Plot Summary

Where You Once Belonged is a novel by award-winning author Kent Haruf. In this novel, Jack Burdette went from a football hero worshipped by everyone in the small town of Holt, Colorado to the most hated man in that same community. Jack disappeared eight years ago after stealing one hundred and fifty thousand dollars from the local grain elevator. Now he has returned to commit yet another crime against innocence that will leave a single man desperate for justice. Where You Once Belonged is a narrative with a brooding style that will leave the reader breathlessly anticipating more.

Jack Burdette drives into Holt, Colorado eight years after he disappeared and sits in his car for more than an hour before a local merchant recognizes him and calls the police. Jack is arrested even though he has committed no crime that he can be charged with. However, the anger of the town forces the sheriff's hand, causing him to keep Jack locked up until he can find something to charge him with.

Jack was a late child born to an alcoholic and his overly religious wife. Jack was a mediocre student who learned early in life to charm those around him. In high school, Jack became a football star. As a local sports hero, Jack got through school with the help of a beautiful young girl who was so in love with Jack she was willing to do anything for him, including most of his homework.

Before Jack's senior year of high school, his father was killed in a car accident as he made his way home from the bars late one December night. This caused Jack's mother to tighten her reign on Jack in the hopes of keeping him from becoming just like his father. In response, Jack got a job at the local grain elevator and moved out of his mother's house into a local boarding house. This created a fun spot for the local kids to hang out in, playing cards and drinking beer late on Sunday nights.

After high school, Jack went to college for a short time, but was quickly expelled for stealing another student's radio. Jack joined the Army and served several years before returning to Holt. Jack continued to work at the grain elevator and date local girl, Wanda Jo Evans. Wanda Jo had gotten Jack through high school by doing his homework and now did all of Jack's laundry in exchange for being his weekly date at the local bar. Wanda Jo held on for eight years, hoping Jack would one day ask her to marry him. When Jack was promoted to manager of the grain elevator, Wanda Jo thought her time had finally come.

One weekend, the board of directors at the grain elevator sent Jack to a grain conference in Oklahoma. Jack quickly became bored and found himself attracted to a young woman assigned to showing a film on hybrid grain at one of the many booths for the conference. Jack and this young woman spent several nights together and then got married. Everyone in Holt are shocked when Jack returns home with his new wife, but none as shocked at Wanda Jo Evans.



Over the next few years, Jack and his new wife, Jessie, have two sons. Then one December Jack disappears. Jessie becomes a target of hatred from the community of Holt, but she stays in town and struggles to repay what she sees as her debt to the community as word spreads that Jack stole one hundred fifty thousand dollars from the grain elevator. Jessie gives the elevator her house. A short time later, Jessie gives birth to a still born daughter. After this, the community stops torturing Jessie for her husband's misdeeds.

Eight years pass. Jessie begins to have an affair with an old friend of Jack's, Pat Arbuckle, the local newspaper owner. However, this affair ends when Jack suddenly returns to Holt and forces Jessie and their sons to leave town with him.



Part 1: Chapters 1-2

Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Summary

Kent Haruf is a professor at Southern Illinois University who has written several novels. One of Mr. Haruf's novels won a Whiting Foundation Award and a special citation from the PEN/Hemingway Foundation. This is Haruf's third novel.

Jack Burdette drives into downtown Holt, Colorado and parks his red Cadillac outside the tavern. Jack sits there in his car for more than an hour before Ralph Bird, owner of the Men's Store, notices him. Ralph recognizes Jack immediately and points him out to his wife. Ralph's wife urges Ralph to allow the police to handle it. Ralph, however, goes across the street and confronts Jack briefly. Ralph then goes to the police station and insists deputy Dale Willard call the sheriff. The sheriff, who is at home eating his dinner, calmly finishes it before driving into town and confronting Jack. The sheriff forces Jack out of his car at gunpoint and places him under arrest even though Jack insists his lawyer told him the statute of limitations has already passed for his crime. The sheriff then hits Jack on the back of the head.

Jack was born to an alcoholic and an overly religious woman late in their lives. Jack was a tough kid, big for his age. When he began school, Jack proved to be less than an ideal student. However, he was such a distraction in class that no teacher would agree to have them in their class for more than a year. One teacher even resigned rather than continue to teach Jack over the course of a single year. For this reason, Jack was often promoted to the next grade whether or not his work supported this decision. In high school, Jack discovered football. Jack was an excellent football player in part due to his size, but also some basic natural talent. Jack quickly became a hero in the tiny town of Holt, Colorado. Due to the rules that required a student to be passing to play, Jack befriended Wanda Jo Evans, a classmate who agreed to do all of Jack's homework in exchange for his romantic attentions.

In the winter of 1959, Jack's father was on his way home from the bars one late December night and did not see a train coming down the tracks until it was too late. Jack's father was killed when the train dragged his car along the tracks. Pat Arbuckle, the son of the newspaper owner and a friend of Jack's, photographed the resulting carnage and listened to the story a local man was telling of how it happened. Pat saw Jack at the site of the crash, but found it difficult to offer condolences.

Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The first chapter of the novel takes place in the present. For the purposes of this novel, the present is 1985. Jack Burnette arrives in Holt, Colorado. The reader does not know who Jack is, except that he is clearly someone who once lived in Holt and committed some crime that had to do with a lot of money. The reader can feel the anger of the



townspeople toward Jack as first the author discusses his return to their hometown and later the owner of the Men's Store recognizes Jack. Finally, the calm, quiet sheriff takes his time getting to town to deal with Jack, but when he does he arrests him and hits him over the head with his gun. This suggests to the reader that there is a deep anger in most of the people of Holt toward Jack Burnette, causing the reader curiosity about Jack and his crime.

The second chapter of the novel moves back in time to the early forties when Jack Burnette was born to an older couple who might have been better off divorcing rather than have children. Jack seems a perfect offspring of this unhappy couple, a child who acts without thought to the consequences or the feelings of those around him. Jack is a terrible student, but he has a charm that helps him make friends. In high school, Jack becomes a football hero, feeding his need to be the center of attention, while he uses a beautiful girl all the other boys in town would have been happy to treat with compassion to help him get through his classes. Jack is clearly a self-centered, unkind person. This leaves the reader with an understanding of how someone can go from hero to criminal, but also leaves the reader wondering how the townspeople got from A to B without seeing it coming.



Part 1: Chapters 3-5

Part 1: Chapters 3-5 Summary

With the death of his father, Jack's mother saw an opportunity to reign in her son and keep him from becoming like his father. For this reason, Jack packed up and moved out of his mother's house, taking a room at a local boarding house and a job at the grain elevator. Jack's room became a meeting place for many of the boys in town who would come to drink beer and play poker on Sunday nights. Wanda Jo Evans was often there as well, doing Jack's homework. The boys were unhappy with their arrangement, however, for one reason. The beer was always warm because Jack had to buy it on Saturday and had no way to keep it cold in his room. For this reason, Jack and a group of boys snuck up to Burcham Scott's house and stole the refrigerator he kept on his porch to store his fishing bait. A short time later, the sheriff came to Jack's room during one of these games and told Jack that if he and his friends ever caused a problem in town, he would come down on them hard.

Jack graduated high school with Wanda Jo Evans' help. In the fall, Jack and Pat Arbuckle went to the University of Colorado at Boulder. Pat did not see Jack often because they were living in different dorm buildings. While Pat greatly enjoyed his early days at college, especially his unique roommate, Jack was unhappy with the structure of the university and his lack of stardom on the football field. A few months into the first semester, Jack was accused of stealing a radio from another student. Jack was quickly expelled. However, rather than stick around for his hearing, Jack left Denver and enlisted in the Army. While Jack went off to basic training, Pat remained in college and fell in love with Nora Kramer, the beautiful daughter of one of the university's professors. Traumatized by her mother's horrifying death, Nora was a dark, brooding woman Pat found fascinating in college. Pat's roommate tried to warn him that Nora was not the girl for him, but Pat ignored this advice and now wonders what might have changed had he not ignored it.

Pat and Nora married shortly after graduation and moved to Holt so that Pat might work at his father's newspaper. At the same time, Jack had been home from the Army for nearly two years and working once again at the grain elevator. Jack could often be seen on Saturday nights at the local bar telling stories about his experiences in the Army with Wanda Jo Evans at his side. Wanda Jo had gone from doing Jack's homework to washing his clothes for him as well as sharing her bed with him on Saturday nights. For eight years Wanda Jo would put up with this arrangement, always hoping that one day Jack would be ready to settle down and ask her to marry him. After eight years, Jack was given a promotion at the grain elevator, made the manager after the retirement of the previous manager. Wanda Jo saw this as a sign that her time had finally come.

Six months after Jack became manager at the grain elevator, the board sent him to Tulsa to attend a conference for managers of grain elevators. Jack was to drive down Thursday and return late Monday in time to present what he learned to the board at a



special meeting on Tuesday. However, after attending some meetings Friday and Saturday, Jack became bored. Jack met a young woman, Jessie, and took her dancing Saturday night, spending most of Sunday in bed with her. On Monday, Jack and Jessie got married and stayed in the hotel on the grain elevator's dime until Wednesday morning. Wanda Jo learned of Jack's marriage from a co-worker Thursday morning as the rumor quickly spread throughout Holt. Wanda Jo instead fell into a depression that led her to become somewhat promiscuous over the next few months. Finally Wanda Jo moved to Pueblo to escape Jack Burdette.

Part 1: Chapters 3-5 Analysis

The narrator, Pat Arbuckle, tells the reader about how Jack moved out of his mother's house while still in high school simply to escape her belated attempts to be a disciplinarian. This seems to reflect how Jack deals with most things that he finds difficult. Jack packs up and runs away. In high school it was a great adventure, but the reader suspects the townspeople will not see it that way when Jack grows older.

At college, Pat thrives. Pat loves his classes, his roommate, and even finds love with the beautiful daughter of a professor. However, by contrast, Jack is miserable and quickly leaves the mediocrity his football career has become to join the Army. The reader suspects Jack will enjoy the Army much more than he did college. School work has never really been Jack's thing. It was the glory on the football field that Jack enjoyed. With that gone, Jack has channeled his violent impulses into something else and will more than likely find happiness there.

Pat marries Nora and moves back to Holt where he and his wife have a little girl, Toni. At the same time, Jack has also come back to Holt and taken up with Wanda Jo Evans again. Instead of doing his homework, Wanda Jo now does Jack's laundry. Wanda Jo believes if she is faithful enough, if she is loyal enough, Jack will eventually marry her. Jack's life has settled into something of a routine. Jack is still the hero and this leads to the job of manager of the grain elevator, a job that suggests responsibility and reliability. Wanda Jo sees it as the last step to marriage. Instead, Jack goes off to a conference and comes back married to a woman he has only known for a few days. Jack never intended to marry Wanda Jo and she does not see this until it is too late. Again, this shows how inconsiderate and uncaring Jack can be to those around him. Jack is self-centered, out for his own benefit, a characteristic that does not bode well for those who care for him in Holt.



Part 2: Chapters 6-7

Part 2: Chapters 6-7 Summary

Practically, the whole town of Holt shows up at the diner that Thursday after Jack brought his bride home. Everyone wanted to see Jessie, to check out the kind of woman Jack would marry. Jessie is nothing like they thought she might be. Jessie is a quiet, unobtrusive woman who seems the complete opposite of what the people of Holt thought Jack might marry. Jessie is the daughter of a salesman and a disabled woman who spent her childhood caring for her mother and two younger siblings. Only twenty, Jessie married Jack for reasons only she will ever know. The town of Holt attempts to reach out to Jessie over the first year of her marriage, but Jessie rebuffs them, content with her own company. Over the next five years, Jessie was only seen on occasion with Jack at the bar or on the streets shopping. Two years after her wedding to Jack, Jessie gave birth to a son she named Thomas John, or T.J. for short. A year later, Jessie gave birth to another son, Robert, or Bobby.

In late December of 1976, Jack Burdette went to the local jewelry store and bought an expensive watch on credit. Next, he went to the Men's Store and bought a suit and several shirts also on credit. At Schulte's, Jack was only allowed to get some underwear and socks on credit. After this, Jack disappeared. At first, the town saw it as amusing. As several weeks passed, the town began to worry that something had happened to Jack. Then, in January Jessie came into the Holt Mercury offices and asked to have a notice printed. Pat's office manager was horrified when she read the notice, but Pat agreed to print it. It was a notice that informed everyone in town that Jessie felt she was not responsible for any of Jack's debts in the aftermath of his disappearance.

A little more than a month after Jessie's notice was printed, the grain elevator had the former manager, Doyle Francis, return to the elevator and take charge until Jack either returned or a replacement was found. While going over the books, Doyle noticed some irregularities. Doyle went to the board and told them that Jack and the bookkeeper, Charlie Soames, had managed to steal more than one hundred fifty thousand dollars over several years. It quickly became clear that this was what led to Jack's disappearance. The board called the sheriff and had Charlie Soames arrested. The town, many of whom had a share in the grain elevator, became deeply angered when they learned of the theft. With Jack gone, the only person they could take their anger out on was Soames. After getting bail, Charlie found himself an outcast in town. Charlie went into his attic and attempted suicide by shooting himself with a .22 rifle. However, the bullet did not kill him, but left him brain damaged enough that the prosecutors decided there was no point in putting him on trial.



Part 2: Chapters 6-7 Analysis

Jessie is not what the people of Holt thought she would be, but a quiet, unassuming woman who is content with her own company. Jessie's decision to remain aloof from the other women in town makes her an outsider and she will remain this way for the next five years even after the birth of her two sons. Then Jack disappears. The disappearance of the town's hero leaves everyone amused at first, then concerned, and finally outraged when the truth of his disappearance is made public. Jack has stolen from everyone in town by stealing from the grain elevator where he was manager. Once again Jack has shown that he has little concern for those around him, even the townspeople who accepted him as one of their own and made him a hero.

In the aftermath of Jack's disappearance, the townspeople search for someone to blame. Charlie Soames is the first on this list because he helped Jack steal the money. However, when Charlie fails in a suicide attempt and is left simple minded, the townspeople are cheated out of justice. This leaves them angry and searching for someone else to blame. It will not take much for the reader to understand why then their next target is Jessie Burdette.



Part 2: Chapters 8-10

Part 2: Chapters 8-10 Summary

Jessie and her children quickly find themselves the targets of all the anger of the townspeople when Charlie Soames is no longer a viable target. After weeks of yelled comments on the streets and the death of their cat, Jessie tried to find a way to soothe the anger of the townspeople. Jessie began by signing over the deed to the house she once shared with Jack and her children to the board of the grain elevator. Then Jessie began dancing at the local bar every Saturday night, drinking heavily and taking whatever punishment the men she danced with wanted to mete out despite her late pregnancy. In the end, Jessie fell on some ice and went into labor, delivering a still born baby girl as a result of a detached placenta resulting from her fall. After this, the townspeople of Holt began leaving Jessie to herself.

In the early summer of 1982, Pat and his wife Nora learned that their daughter was killed when a car driven by her boyfriend after his graduation party rolled five times after he attempted to take a curve too fast. Toni was only sixteen. After her death, Nora suffered from depression. In the fall of that year, Nora went to help her father move to Denver. Nora was only supposed to help the old gentleman get moved in, but decided to stay. Pat went to visit his wife and found her more content than he had known her for a long time. Pat had been aware that his marriage was falling apart, and it seemed now that it had reached its end.

Pat was lonely for a while, living in his big house all alone. Pat took to having his meals at the Holt diner where Jessie worked. One night, Pat offered to drive Jessie home. Instead, she invited him over for coffee. That led to many nights of coffee drinking and deep conversations like Pat had never experienced with anyone. In time, Pat and Jessie became lovers.

Jessie had every Sunday off, so Pat and she would plan excursions for Jessie's two sons. One Sunday they drove into Denver and went to a water park and later to a family restaurant that included caves for exploration and Western type play acting. The children greatly enjoyed the excursion and Pat felt as though he was becoming a part of their family.

One night while watching a movie with Jessie and the boys, Pat gets a call from the local sheriff informing him that Jack Burdette is back in town. Pat and Jessie tell the boys, then decide that everyone should take a few days off before having to face the curiosity of the townspeople. On Monday, Pat goes to the jail to visit Jack. Jack refuses to talk to him about the embezzlement from the grain elevator, but seems deeply interested in Pat's relationship with Jessie. Pat becomes angry and tells Jack to stay away from Jessie and the boys. Later, Jack receives a visit from the head of the grain elevator's board when he stole the money that leads to violence, but Jack refuses to show any remorse, only regret that the money did not last longer.



At the end of the week, the sheriff gets a call from the prosecutor informing him that he cannot hold Jack Burdette because the statute of limitations on his crime has passed. The sheriff drives Jack out past the city limits and releases him. At the same time, Pat and Jessie decide to take the boys on a trip into the mountains to avoid any problems with Jack. When they return home, Pat stays with Jessie and the boys at their apartment. In the middle of the night, Jack breaks in. Jack ties up Pat and forces Jessie to pack a bag. Jack then wakes the boys and takes his family away with him. Pat is not discovered until late the following day and by then Jack has a head start on them. Arrest warrants are issued for Jack, but Pat has little confidence that he or Jessie will ever be seen again.

Part 2: Chapters 8-10 Analysis

Jessie, an honorable woman who refuses to leave town in the face of the townspeople's anger, tries to find ways to repay her husband's debt to them. Jessie turns over the deed on her house to the grain elevator's board of directors, a gesture that only pays back a small portion of the amount Jack stole. Then Jessie does something out of character and odd. Jessie begins dancing with the local men at the bar, drinking heavily despite her advanced pregnancy. After a fall, Jessie loses her baby. This causes the town to feel sympathy for her and to stop taking out their anger on her and her children. The reader has to wonder if Jessie did this because she wanted, or knew, the baby would die. A baby would have been a heavy burden for Jessie at this point in her life.

At the same time Jessie is struggling to survive in the aftermath of Jack's disappearance, Pat suffers his own tragedy. Pat's daughter, Toni, is killed in a car accident. Pat's marriage, which has already been quickly falling apart, ends. This leaves Pat alone and available for a new relationship. Pat turns his attention to Jessie. Soon a love affair develops between these two. Jessie finds the love she wanted from a man and did not find in Jack. Pat finds in Jessie the companionship he lacked with Nora and a family that replaces the one he lost in Toni. It seems like the perfect solution.

Jack's return to Holt is bad timing for Pat and Jessie. Pat does his best to protect Jessie and the boys from Jack, but finds himself overpowered and vulnerable when Jack makes his move. The entire town wondered why Jack would come back, risking jail. Now the reader knows that Jack has come back to get his family. Jack takes them at gunpoint, leaving Pat tied up on the floor of Jessie's bedroom. It is a terrible situation that leaves Pat the loser once again and Jack the winner.

This book is a parable about the vulnerability of trusting and caring people in the face of a ruthless man who cares for nothing but himself. Pat is left feeling useless as the woman he loves is forced to take up her position as the wife to a heartless bully, leaving him wondering why Jack married Jessie and why she married him. The reader wonders why Jack bothered to come back for Jessie after eight years. There are a lot of unanswered questions in this book that leave the reader mulling over the plot for weeks after the last sentence is read.



Characters

Pat Arbuckle

Pat Arbuckle is the narrator of the story. Pat, the son of the local newspaper owner, grew up in Holt. Pat was also a classmate of Jack Burdette. Pat and Jack were fairly good friends. They even went to the same college together. However, the two men's lives take drastically different turns when Pat chooses to stay in college and marries his college lover, while Jack finds himself expelled quickly and then in the Army. While Pat marries, settles down to a career and becomes a father, Jack continues his partying ways until he suddenly marries a woman he has known for a short time.

When Pat's daughter dies and his marriage falls apart, Pat becomes involved with Jack's deserted wife. Pat falls deeply in love with Jessie Burdette even though they are both still legally married to other people and have no future to speak of. When Jack Burdette returns to Holt, Pat does all he can to protect Jessie from Jack, but fails when Jack turns up in Jessie's bedroom in the middle of the night with a shotgun. Pat is left alone again while Jack seems to be the winner in this struggle even as he continues to be hated by everyone in Holt.

Jessie Burdette

Jessie Burdette is a young twenty-year-old girl when she meets Jack Burdette at a grain elevator managers' conference. Jack sweeps Jessie off her feet and marries her in a matter of days. Jessie, who spent most of her childhood taking care of her mother and two younger brothers, seems to thrive in marriage even as she cuts herself off from the people in Holt. Jessie refuses offers to join various organizations and social settings, preferring her own company and that of Jack's to the women in town.

When Jack disappears after stealing one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Jessie finds herself the object of anger and revenge. Jessie does all she can to appease the people of Holt, including giving up her house and putting herself in a position to cause the stillbirth of her baby daughter. In the end, Jessie survives on her own wits and her own determination. When Pat comes around and begins courting Jessie, it appears to be a deeply romantic relationship that could build and become something bigger. However, Jack returns just as they are finding happiness in one another, stealing Jessie away with him.

Jack Burdette

Jack Burdette is a selfish and unkind person who wants what he wants and does not care who he hurts as he struggles to get it. Jack uses people. In high school, Jack uses Wanda Jo Evans to do his homework so that he might pass. In the Army, Jack uses his status to make sexual conquests. Back in Holt, Jack uses his history as a football hero



to get a coveted job with the grain elevator. Jack even continues to use Wanda Jo Evans to do his laundry and to entertain him in bed until one weekend he travels to a grain elevator managers' conference and meets the woman who will become his wife in a matter of days.

Jack appears to settle down into a life of wedded bliss for five years. Then one December he suddenly disappears, leaving his wife behind to take the anger of the townspeople who are upset when they learn that Jack embezzled more than one hundred fifty thousand dollars from the grain elevator. For more than eight years, no one knows where Jack Burdette is. Then one day Jack suddenly reappears in Holt for unknown reasons. Jack is arrested, but they quickly are forced to release him because the statute of limitations has passed. Jack then goes to Jessie's and forces her and his sons at gunpoint to accompany him back out of Colorado.

Nora Kramer Arbuckle

Nora Kramer is the daughter of a college professor when Pat Arbuckle meets her. For several years, Pat and Nora date. Pat is fascinated with Nora because she is beautiful and quiet. However, Pat will later realize that he and Nora have little in common. For eighteen years, they remain married, raising a daughter together. However, their marriage is dead before it has even lasted more than a few years. After the death of their daughter in a car accident, Nora leaves Pat to help her father and decides to remain in Denver with the old gentleman.

Wanda Jo Evans

Wanda Jo Evans is a bright and beautiful girl who is in Pat and Jack's class in high school. Every boy in school is in love with Wanda Jo, but she has eyes only for Jack. Jack makes Wanda Jo his girlfriend in exchange for her doing his homework for him. When Jack returns from the Army, he continues this arrangement with Wanda Jo, having her do his laundry rather than his homework. Wanda Jo continues this with the hopes that Jack will one day marry her. However, after eight years, Jack marries another woman after a weekend fling. Wanda Jo is left depressed and alone, finally transferring her job to Pueblo where she lives out the rest of her life quietly.

Sheriff Bud Sealy

Sheriff Bud Sealy is a quiet and calm man who is the law in the small town of Holt, Colorado. When Sealy learns that Jack Burdette is back in Holt, he quietly confronts him. However, all pretense of the lazy, quiet small town sheriff ends there. Sealy forces Jack out of his car at gunpoint and then cuffs him for the embezzlement he committed at the grain elevator. Sealy then hits Jack over the head for all he did to the town. Later, Sealy learns that he cannot charge Jack with anything and is forced to let him go. Sealy drives Jack out of town and tells him to leave without looking back. Unfortunately, Jack does not heed this advice.



Ralph Bird

Ralph Bird is the owner of the Men's Store in Holt, Colorado. Before he left town, Jack Burdette went to the Men's Store and charged a suit and several shirts. Ralph would never see the money owed to him on that suit. Eight years later, when Jack Burdette drives back into Holt and parks outside the tavern, Ralph Bird is the first to recognize him and raise the alarm.

Charlie Soames

Charlie Soames is a bookkeeper who lives in Holt, Colorado. Even though long past retirement age, Charlie continues to do the books for the grain elevator. Jack Burdette convinces Charlie to begin a scheme to steal thousands of dollars from the grain elevator. The two men are supposed to run off together, but Jack jumps the gun and disappears with all the money. Charlie is left behind and arrested when the town figures out what has happened. When Charlie realizes how angry everyone is with him, he attempts suicide, but the tiny bullet only leaves him brain damaged. Charlie will live out the rest of his life unable to communicate meaningfully with his friends, family, and neighbors, and unprosecuted for his crimes.

Arch Withers

Arch Withers is the president of the board for the grain elevator during the time period in which Charlie Soames and Jack Burdette stole thousands from them. Although no one outright blames Withers for what has happened, Withers loses the next election and finds himself unwanted in most of the circles where he once felt accepted. For this reason, Withers has become embittered. When Jack Burdette returns, Withers goes to see him in jail and threatens him bodily harm.

Doyle Francis

Doyle Francis was the manager of the grain elevator before Jack Burdette. When Jack disappears, Doyle returns to oversee the elevator until Jack returns or a new manager can be hired. Doyle is the one who finds the missing money in the books and tells the board about it. Later, it is Doyle who goes to when she turns over the deed to her small house to repay a small amount of the money her husband stole. Doyle is a good man who tries to talk Jessie out of her sacrifice, more interested in protecting the young mother than in taking revenge for something she more than likely knew little about.



Objects/Places

Refrigerator

Jack Burdette and a group of high school boys, including Pat Arbuckle, steal a refrigerator off the back porch of a retired fisherman's house in order to have something to keep their beer cold.

Radio

Jack is kicked out of college for stealing another student's radio.

Legal Notice

Jessie has Pat print a legal notice in the newspaper that states she is not responsible for her husband's debts in uneducated and bordering on vulgar language. This notice does little to keep the townspeople from taking their anger out on Jessie.

Brown Bag of Laundry

A few months after learning Jack Burdette married Jessie, Wanda Jo returns a brown bag of laundry to him that she had washed while he was in Oklahoma meeting Jessie. The laundry has all been cut into little pieces.

Red Cadillac

Jack Burdette returns to Holt, Colorado eight years after embezzling one hundred fifty thousand dollars from the grain elevator in a red Cadillac that was used when he bought it.

Farmer's Co-Op Elevator

Farmer's Co-Op Elevator is a grain elevator in Holt, Colorado owned by a large group of farmers and townspeople in and around Holt. It is here that Jack gets a job in high school and where he will later become manager after Doyle Francis retires. It is also from here that Jack steals more than one hundred fifty thousand dollars.

Letitia Hotel

Letitia Hotel is a small hotel in downtown Holt, Colorado that was once its only hotel but later became a boarding house. Jack Burdette lives in a room in the Letitia Hotel from



shortly after the death of his father until he buys a small two bedroom house for his wife, Jessie, and their two boys.

Holt Cafe

Holt Café is the name of the café in downtown Holt, Colorado. Jessie Burdette takes a job here after her husband disappears and later begins a courtship with Pat Arbuckle here.

Men's Store

The Men's Store is a men's clothing store in downtown Holt, Colorado owned by Ralph Bird. Jack Burdette buys a suit and several shirts on credit in this store before disappearing in December of 1976.

Holt Mercury

The Holt Mercury is the name of the local weekly newspaper owned by Pat's father and later by Pat.

Holt, Colorado

Holt, Colorado is the small farming community where the novel is set.

Denver, Colorado

Denver is the capitol of Colorado. Pat makes several trips here in the latter part of the novel, once to visit his estranged wife at the home of her father and later on an excursion with Jessie and her sons.

Boulder, Colorado

Boulder, Colorado is where Pat and Jack attend university. Boulder is also the area Nora's father decides to move to shortly after Toni's death.



Themes

Unfairness of Life

The main theme of this novel focuses on the parallels between Pat Arbuckle and Jack Burdette. Where Pat Arbuckle has a caring mother and father, Jack has an alcoholic father who seems only interested in his next drink and a mother who is devoted to the point of distraction to her faith. Where Pat Arbuckle studies hard and focuses on his responsibilities, Jack Burdette has a good time, telling stories of his time in the Army, dancing with pretty girls, and using Wanda Jo Evans until something better comes along. In the end, both lose their families. Pat loses his family through divorce and death, Jack loses them through his own desertion. However, Jack seems to win in the end despite his cruelties and selfishness.

Jack steals money from his employer, disappearing for eight years with one hundred and fifty thousand dollars of the grain elevator money. Jack leaves behind a town full of angry people and his innocent wife and children. Jessie, Jack's wife, manages to make a go of her life despite her husband's crimes and his desertion of her. In fact, Jessie and Pat find one another, able to find some joy in one another despite all the tragedies that have shaped their lives up to this moment. However, Jack returns and forces Jessie and her sons to go with him at gunpoint, leaving Pat feeling helpless and vulnerable, tied up on the floor of Jessie's bedroom.

Despite the fact that he has always done everything right, everything the way he was supposed to, Pat is the loser in this book. Jack did everything wrong, did everything his own way for his own purposes, and still manages to come out of the deal with Jessie and her beautiful sons. Pat is left alone, worried for Jessie and her safety. This makes unfairness a theme of the novel.

Revenge

Revenge is a theme of the novel for several reasons. The first time the reader sees revenge in the plot of this novel is when Wanda Jo Evans learns that Jack, whom she has hoped would marry her for more than ten years, has married someone else. Wanda Jo takes out her revenge by sleeping with strangers. While this revenge does little to harm Jack, it goes a long ways in hurting Wanda Jo. In the end, Wanda Jo leaves town rather than watch Jack living in wedded bliss.

Later, revenge becomes a major theme of the novel when the townspeople of Holt learn that Charlie Soames and Jack Burdette worked together to steal thousands from the grain elevator. The people of Holt, many of whom have a share in the elevator, want revenge for this theft. First they turn to Charlie Soames, having him arrested and pushing him out of the social circle he was once a large part of. Charlie responds by attempting to commit suicide. The attempt fails, but it takes away the town's ability to



prosecute him and get their revenge, so they are forced to focus on making snide comments behind his back that he no longer understands.

The town of Holt turns its attention on Jessie Burdette when all other avenues of revenge disappear. Jessie becomes the victim of snide comments, dark looks, and the death of a cat. Jessie responds by handing over her house to the Farmer's Co-Op Elevator, then later placing herself in a situation in which her unborn baby dies in utero. Finally the town of Holt has no one to exact their revenge on and this theme dies out.

Marriage

The narrator of the book focuses on marriage for several reasons in this novel. First the narrator focuses on his own marriage, which is an unhappy one almost from the very beginning. Pat Arbuckle's wife is unhappy with him, with the town where he chooses to live, and marriage in general. Pat quickly finds himself searching for reasons not to go home at night. In the end, Pat and Nora's marriage fails when their daughter is killed in a car accident, taking away the only glue that kept them together.

The narrator also focuses on marriage in relation to Jack Burdette. The focus begins with Wanda Jo Evans' deep desire to become Jack's wife, but his failure to ever broach the subject, let alone make it a fact. Later, when Jack marries Jessie, the author discusses their marriage from the point of view of how the townspeople saw it. Jessie would remain a mysterious creature to many in Holt throughout her marriage to Jack, therefore the specifics of their marriage would remain a mystery. In the end, Jessie would spend most of her marriage alone, sharing only five of thirteen years of marriage with Jack.

Marriage becomes a peripheral thing, something that is more apt to failure than success in this novel. However, Pat implies to the reader that if Jack had not returned and stolen her away, a marriage between Pat and Jessie might have become something like the fabled marriages in romance novels. For this reason, marriage is a theme of the novel.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view. The narrator does not immediately reveal himself to the reader. In fact, the reader does not realize who the narrator is or learn his name until the second or third chapter of the novel. The narrator's focus is tight on Jack Burdette. Therefore he does not go much into his own life or his own thoughts and emotions until later in the novel.

The point of view of this novel is a unique one in that as a first person point of view it does not have a static focus on the narrating character. In fact, the narrating character of this novel is actually something of a peripheral character in the novel, a reporter, not a participant in the action of the novel. The narrating character does not become an active part of the activity in this novel until the final chapters of the book when he explains his relationship to Jessie Burdette and therefore the huge impact Jack Burdette's return to Holt had on him personally. For this reason, the narration of this book is highly unusual, but a useful tool in creating a suspenseful and surprising ending of the novel.

Setting

The novel is set primarily in Holt, Colorado. Holt is a small farming community in Colorado. The community is small and therefore everyone knows everyone else in Holt and strangers are not easily accepted. This small town rallies behind one another, making a football hero a shining star in town where he becomes just another jock in a large university setting. This small town also seeks revenge ruthlessly when one of their own steals from them and leaves them high and dry without anyone to punish.

The setting of this novel is important because the small and tightknit community plays an important role in the actions of the main characters and the reactions of the townspeople. When Jack Burdette steals one hundred fifty thousand dollars from the Farmer's Co-Op Elevator, nearly everyone in town is affected in one way or another. For this reason, the townspeople turn on Jack's abandoned wife, leaving her vulnerable to their attempts at revenge. If this novel were set in a larger town, this united attempt at revenge would not have taken place or would have a smaller impact on Jessie, changing the scope of the story.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in a simple English that should make it easy for readers of all ages to comprehend. The novel contains no foreign phrases, no words that a modern reader might not recognize or easily understand. The novel is told with proper grammar, which



is a grammar that is clearly educated, but not so complicated that it leaves the common reader confused as to the meaning of the sentences.

The language of this novel is clear, concise, and clearly from the mind of an intelligent writer. However, the language is also simple in its clarity, telling a story that could have been told by a small town newspaper man who had an expensive education but learned how to write to the level of his less educated readers. For this reason, the language of the novel clearly reflects the characters who populate its pages and is easily comprehended by even the youngest readers.

Structure

The novel is divided into two parts, each with five chapters. The first half of the novel begins in the present on the day Jack Burdette drives into Holt, then moves into the past and tells of Burdette's childhood, through his attempt at college, his stint in the Army, and his promotion to manager of the Farmer's Co-Op Elevator. The second part of the novel follows the early years of Jack's marriage, his disappearance and how it impacted his wife, Jessie. Toward the end of the book, the narrator brings himself into the story and tells the reader how he became involved with Jessie Burdette, leading to the impact of the final pages of the novel.

The novel contains one simple plot. The plot follows the story of Jack Burdette, a small town football hero whose many escapades and minor crimes are overlooked because of his charm and his successes on the football field. This shows the reader how Jack was able to steal one hundred fifty thousand dollars from the town and disappear without anyone guessing his crime beforehand. Finally the plot focuses on Jack's wife, Jessie, who has been left behind after his escape and forced to cope with the anger of the townspeople on her own. Jessie finally finds happiness when Jack Burdette returns to rectify his mistake in not taking his family away with him in the first place. The plot comes to a conclusion at the end of the novel that is thought-provoking.



Quotes

"In the end, Jack Burdette came back to Holt after all. None of us expected it anymore" (Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 9.)

"I did think you knew better than to come back here. What in hell was you thinking of?"
Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 19

"In fact when it was their year to have him in their classrooms our teachers, by the middle of September, were already counting the days until the end of May. They had big calendars fastened to the walls with heavy Xs scratched and double-scratched through the accumulation of finished days, and one of them, Miss Ermalline Johnson, actually resigned during Christmas break rather than return for another half year" (Part 1: Chapter 2, pg. 24.)

"But it was on the football field that he made his real mark during those years" (Part 1: Chapter 2, pg. 27.)

"He had had his first brief taste of law and authority. He had been warned officially. But the warning hadn't meant much to him. It had merely meant that he had to be more careful, a little more circumspect" (Part 1: Chapter 3, pg. 43.)

"Now I am not very eager to talk about Nora Kramer. And certainly she is less than eager to have me talk about her. For Nora was—and is—a very private person and she will no doubt resent this invasion of her privacy. But I can't help that: like it or not she is a part of this account" (Part 1: Chapter 4, pg. 52.)

"This surprised and astonished everyone in Holt. But it was more than mere surprise and astonishment to Wanda Jo Evans. To her it was nearly a lethal shock" (Part 1: Chapter 5, pg. 73.)

"She was the exact opposite of what people in Holt thought she would be. That is, she was the exact opposite of what people in Holt thought she would have to be. If Burdette was going to marry her, if he was going to leave someone as beautiful and selfless and long-suffering as Wand Jo Evans was and then marry someone else, she would have to be something" (Part 2: Chapter 6, pg. 81.)

"At first people in Holt were not alarmed by his disappearance" (Part 2: Chapter 7, pg. 93.)

"Thus for three or four months that spring Jessie Burdette became public property" (Part 2: Chapter 8, pg. 115.)

"I suppose after eighteen years, even if it was an unsuccessful marriage, you still miss the sound and presence of someone's being there when you go home" (Part 2: Chapter 9, pg. 141.)

"Somewhere in this great world I want to believe that she is all right too. I want to believe that she and TJ and Bobby are still alive, even if it is in California with Jack Burdette" (Part 2: Chapter 10, pg. 176.)



Topics for Discussion

Who is Jack Burdette? Why does his return to Holt, Colorado cause so much anger and frustration in the first chapter of the book? Why does the author go back to the beginning of Jack's story in the second chapter, telling his life story from his birth forward? What does this tell the reader about the importance of Jack Burdette in this novel?

Who is the narrator of the novel? When does the reader learn who this man is? When does the reader learn this man's name? Why does the narrator tell his story in the way in which he does? Why does the narrator not introduce himself in the first chapter of the book? In what way does the narrator's life parallel Jack Burdette's? Does the author create this parallel on purpose and if so, what purpose does this serve?

Who is Wanda Jo Evans? Why does she do Jack Burdette's homework? Why does she do his laundry? What does Wanda Jo think her relationship is to Jack Burdette? What is it really? What does Jack do to show Wanda Jo how he really feels about her? How does Wanda Jo react when she learns that Jack has married Jessie? Why does she react in this way? Why does Wanda Jo leave town?

Who is Jessie Burdette? Why does Jessie marry Jack? How long is their courtship? What is unusual about this? Why does Jessie surprise the people of Holt? What did they expect her to be? Why does Jessie refuse to join the social clubs and organizations of the women of Holt? What does this say about her to the people of Holt? What happens to Jessie when Jack disappears? Why? Why does Jessie not leave town? Why does she stay? How does Jessie compare to Wanda Jo Evans?

What did Charlie Soames do? Why was he arrested? Why did he not leave town with Jack Burdette? What happens when Charlie is bailed out of jail? Why does Charlie attempt suicide? What happens when he does? Why are the people of Holt still cruel to Charlie even when he cannot understand their words? Does this give anyone satisfaction?

Discuss Nora and Pat's marriage. When does it begin to fall apart? For what reason? Who is Toni? Why do they stay together for Toni's sake? Is this a good idea? What happens to Toni? How does this impact Pat? Nora? Why does Nora move to Denver? What does Pat think of this move? Does Pat or Nora file for divorce? Why or why not? Why does Pat begin dating Jessie? What does this say about Pat's feelings toward his wife?

Discuss the setting of the novel. Where is it set? What kind of people populate the novel's pages? How do they reflect the setting? How does Pat fit in with the people of Holt? How does Jack fit in with the people of Holt? How does Jessie fit in? Why are these three people drawn to one another? How does the setting of the novel impact some of the minor characters such as Nora Arbuckle?