

White Noise Study Guide

White Noise by Don DeLillo

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Plot Summary

This novel is the life story of a man named Jack Gladney or J.A.K. Gladney, as he is known around the College-on-the-Hill, where he is a professor. Jack specializes in Hitler studies, but is consumed with the idea of his own death. It follows him as he and his wife Babette deal with their own individual, inevitable, impending death.

The reader follows Jack's family as they encounter a variety of typical daily tasks, day to day. This is an extraordinary family. They are the result of many marriages and many children from these different relationships. The children, however, have come together as a single family of sorts under Jack and Babette.

The novel is broken up into three main sections. The first part follows the Gladney family as they perform average, daily activities, such as trips to the supermarket and dinner together. They lead an average, normal existence. The second part of the novel is the airborne disaster of Nyodene Derivative that invades their town and forces their evacuation. At this point, Jack, Babette and the children each face their individual mortality in unique ways. The third part of the novel resumes the Gladney family as they try to regain their normal life that they experienced before the disaster. This attempt proves to be nearly impossible for Jack and Babette. Whereas before the disaster, they worried about who would die first, now they both are obsessed with death and the imminent fear that accompanies their death.

The novel has a weak plotline, dealing more with the philosophical elements of life and death. The actual plot is more like a backdrop for Jack, Babette and the children to use as an impetus to discuss whatever is on their minds. All of the family members have a great deal of seemingly random knowledge that they have gleaned from the television, books, radio or other. They use this information to have conversations with each other that sound more like free association thinking than real communication between each family member.

The airborne disaster that changes their lives is a random accident that occurs on the train tracks outside of their home. None of the family members wants to accept that they will have to be evacuated, but they are all eventually routed off to another part of town. The next day, the seemingly random "dark billowing cloud" of Nyodene Derivative changes directions and they are once again evacuated from their "safe" spot. After the Nyodene Derivative is taken care of and the family returns home, all of the family members deal with the disaster in a variety of ways.



Book 1: Chapter 1 - Chapter 3

Book 1: Chapter 1 - Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter sets the scene of a small town college, where the students are returning to school. The parents look similar and the students perform the same acts that similar students have performed in years past. We are introduced to Jack Gladney, the chairman of the department of Hitler Studies. He has been a professor here for 22 years. Babette is introduced as Jack's wife. She has missed the usual parade of children and the parents' cars as they drop them off for school. Jack explains their relationship and how she tends to their children, teaches about Posture and volunteers to read to the blind. Heinrich, Denise, Steffie and Wilder all come into the picture as well as they sit down for lunch together. This is the very picture of a normal, happy family. However, the smoke alarm goes off in the middle of lunch and not one family member seems disturbed or moves. Jack begins to explain his department of Hitler studies. It is located in the Centenary Building with a number of American environmentalists. He goes out to lunch with a visiting professor named Murray Jay Siskind. He is new and he is mostly interested in pop culture and society at large. He tells Jack that what Jack has done with Hitler, he wants to do with Elvis. They go to visit the Most Photographed Barn in America together.

Book 1: Chapter 1 - Chapter 3 Analysis

Here, the setting of the book immediately gives the reader a comfortable feeling. We are introduced to a small town where an established professor is watching his students return to campus. All is normal and average in the world and there is a sense of satisfaction and contentment. The happy ritual is continuing as it has like every year before this one. The reader gets an introduction to Babette and the children, Jack's family. The normalcy and sweet satisfaction of daily life is conveyed through the description of an average mother with her children. However, when the smoke alarm goes off upstairs, no one moves. The fact that the Gladneys do not react or respond to the smoke alarm is foreshadowing to the airborne disaster that will eventually infiltrate their lives. At this time, however, it demonstrates that disaster and its warning signals do not faze the Gladneys. They seem themselves beyond the grasp of any natural disaster or Death itself. Finally, Murray's role is an important one in the novel, because he provides the analytic commentary to Jack's actions as well as the actions of his family. Their visit to the Most Photographed Barn in America is the first sign of identity in the book as Murray remarks that no one actually sees the barn. The barn exists as others have decided it should be the most photographed architectural structure shaped like a barn in the area, but it is not the barn they are taking pictures of. It is just the act of taking the picture that brought the tourists here.



Book 1: Chapter 4 - Chapter 6

Book 1: Chapter 4 - Chapter 6 Summary

Jack goes to watch Babette run the stadium steps. He considers their relationship and defines them by the usual actions they perform, such as playing word games with Wilder or twisting garbage bags. Jack tells Babette on the way home that Bee is going to visit this Christmas and they will put her in with Steffie. Bee has been in South Korea. That night is a Friday night, so the entire family watches television together, while Jack reads Hitler. That night, he tells her about the chancellor that advised him to not go by Jack Gladney, head of the Hitler Studies department, but to change his name to J.A.K. Gladney instead for more emphasis. The same advisor also suggests to Jack that he gain weight. Jack says that he is a false character that follows the name around. Babette, Jack and the children go to the supermarket. They run into Murray who provides analysis of their activities and specifically of Babette. He remarks on her maternal and feminine ways, entranced by her activities. He tells Jack to appreciate everything about her. He is developing his reactions towards women and other individuals in the supermarket. He gets a lift from the Gladneys and goes into his boarding house. Heinrich and Jack spend time together. Heinrich's hairline is receding, although he is only a 14-year-old. They have a philosophical debate about whether or not it is raining outside. Heinrich's mother is now called Mother Devi at an ashram in Montana called Dharamsalapur. Heinrich plays chess by mail with a convicted killer. Jack goes into his only class that he is teaching for the semester, commanding attention and respect from his students.

Book 1: Chapter 4 - Chapter 6 Analysis

Jack and Babette's average and happy relationship is further defined. Also, when Babette asks if Steffie and Bee have ever met before, the reader understands for the first time that this family is a conglomeration of a number of marriages and past relationships. These children are not all related by blood. They lead very distinct and separate lives from one another. They watch television together but this instance has each one of them more removed from the television than they will be in the future. In addition, the very conscious physical presence of Jack is explained in this chapter. His deliberate appearance for the sake of his position as head of the department of Hitler Studies is analyzed here, yet Jack indicates it is an identity that he has not fully grown into or accepted since he says that he follows the name around. The supermarket is a frequent backdrop for the Gladney family, as it is a place they often visit and it is steeped in average activities, which demonstrates how normal their lives are. Murray is very appreciative of Babette, but is not trying to steal her from Jack, but instead uses her as a prop for him to establish his own sense of identity around women. Murray has come to Blacksmith in order to escape New York City and its trappings there. He is working on his vulnerability and is using Babette as a test subject. Heinrich might only be 14, but he is already beginning to look and think as a much older man. His hairline is



receding as if to physically demonstrate his mature mind. His debating skills indicate how intelligent and philosophically aware Heinrich is. Also, Jack's speech to his class mentions plotting and how all plots lean deathward, but immediately questions his own statements. Does he really believe what he just said?



Book 1: Chapter 7 - Chapter 9

Book 1: Chapter 7 - Chapter 9 Summary

Babette goes to the Congregational church to teach correct posture. Jack refers to this as the end of skepticism. They walk home together, seeing Denise doing her homework and watching Wilder. The entire home is in general, happy disarray. Jack and Babette then discuss what erotic texts to read to turn them onto each other. Jack puts on a robe and goes to ask Heinrich for some texts, but instead finds family photos and he and Babette spend hours looking over those together instead. Jack cannot speak the German language despite there being a minimum requirement to take German in order to graduate in Hitler Studies for his students. Jack is determined to learn and try again despite his failed attempts in the past, because there is a Hitler convention coming to the College. He finds a teacher through Murray's reference. Howard Dunlop lives in Murray's complex and is a former chiropractor that teaches a number of miscellaneous skills. The family continues with their normal everyday activities and sits down to dinner. The elementary school is forced to evacuate, because the kids and teachers were experiencing headaches, eye irritations, tasting metal and the teachers were rolling on the floor incoherently. They send in men in Mylex suits to examine the problem. One of these men will eventually collapse and die. They run into Murray when they go to the supermarket. He sidles up to Babette and she invites him to dinner whenever he would like to come over. The girls tell Jack they are reading the Physicians' Desk Reference, because they want to see the side effects of all the medications that Babette is taking. Murray, meanwhile, analyzes the supermarket itself and a large, clean and modern place. Steffie holds Jack's hand throughout this exchange as if to restore confidence in himself that he might have lost through Murray's actions around Babette. Murray then invites both Jack and Babette to dinner at his place without the kids. He tells Jack that he's coming back next semester to teach a course in the cinema of car crashes. In the checkout line, Jack fondles Babette affectionately.

Book 1: Chapter 7 - Chapter 9 Analysis

The question of why humans would need a class on posture is addressed here. Do we need a teacher for everything, as Jack ponders later in the novel? Jack states here that if you love someone enough, you are willing to place your identity in their hands. When they walk home from her class together, the scene they enter is classically normal and family-friendly, which most likely prompts Jack to ask the final question of the chapter "Who will die first?" Jack does not want his idyllic setting to disappear. Jack is hiding a terrible secret as the head of the German department since he is unable to speak German. While learning the language, Jack is fascinated by Howard's use of his tongue as he is speaking German. It transforms his ordinary persona. When he returns home, Steffie tells them that they need to boil their water now, which Babette promptly dismisses. The idyllic family scene continues. The school evacuation is the first disaster that the Gladneys will face in this novel and their reaction to it is telling. They are not



upset by it. They treat it as though it is something happening to other people in another town, not their school in their town. In fact, this school evacuation will be more serious than the airborne disaster since it will claim a single victim, while no one dies during the Nyodene Derivative scare. Again, the family goes to the supermarket and finds Murray there. He is obviously hitting on Babette now, trying to get her to have dinner with him. It is most likely due to Murray's comments and feelings towards Babette that Jack possessively touches her and fondles her in the checkout line of the supermarket, as if to reclaim his wife. The hint of Babette's potential infidelity foreshadows future events.



Book 1: Chapter 10 - Chapter 12

Book 1: Chapter 10 - Chapter 12 Summary

Denise analyzes her mother chewing sugarless gum, telling her to stop, because it is bad for her health. She wants her to stop even though Babette says it helps her to stop smoking. Steffie questions why she has to do either one at all. Denise mentions that Babette forgets things frequently, which Babette denies. Heinrich and Jack discuss Heinrich's chess opponent, the convicted killer in jail. Jack notes that the killer won't go down in history, because he randomly killed an ordinary person, rather than one famous person, which would have stuck out in history's books. When Jack remarks that he will not go down in history either, Heinrich points out that at least he has Hitler, which Jack agrees with. Heinrich debates visiting his mother at the ashram. Jack goes to the bank the next morning and is pleased with the systems that are all in harmony.

Jack wakes up in a sweat, fearing his death at 3:51am. He goes back to sleep but wakes up to burning toast, which is one of Steffie's favorite things to do, because she loves the smell. Jack tells Steffie his age, which she says is not old. However, she points out that 51 is an odd number and Jack is currently debating whether death is an odd number. They discuss his ex-wife Dana, her mother, who works for the CIA. Jack and Babette visit Murray in his room next to the insane asylum. He tells them that he wishes they had brought the children and asks how many they have. Babette only mentions a few of them. Murray then tries to impress both of them with his range of knowledge, finally telling them how much he enjoys intelligent women with long legs. Babette discusses her memory lapses. She ends by analyzing all of the things that she does throughout the day. Jack mentions that it sounds like a boring life, and Babette ends by saying she hopes it lasts forever.

Jack continues to go to his German lessons twice a week. Howard does not tell him much about himself, save his love of meteorology after the death of his mother. When he returns from his German lesson, he finds Bob Pardee, Denise's father in his kitchen. Bob wants to take them all out to dinner, but Jack, Babette and Wilder decide to meet up with them at another location after Bob and Denise go to dinner together. Jack drops Babette off at Mr. Treadwell's house to read to him. She quickly comes back outside, however, since Mr. Treadwell is nowhere to be found. They go to meet with Bob and Denise at dinner early, while Babette analyzes her relationship with Bob, which was not always a good situation. The town begins to drag the river for Mr. Treadwell and his sister.

Book 1: Chapter 10 - Chapter 12 Analysis

Denise and Steffie are products of a society that believes if you avoid harmful things, even so small as sugarless gum, you can ultimately live longer. It is this sentiment that has them asking Babette to stop chewing the gum. Ironically enough, Babette is doing



her own part to avoid death, although no one in the family is yet aware of her Dylar prescriptions yet. The idea of death versus immortality is mentioned here as the convicted killer represents a random and quiet existence, while Jack has Hitler and thus a shot at immortality. Jack looks around at the bank and is pleased with the methods of simplification that exist in his life and enjoys that these systems are all in harmony with his life. Jack is questioning death more introspectively now, wondering if his odd-numbered age is yet another sign that he is about to die. Murray entertains Jack and Babette over dinner and again tries to impress Babette and seduce her. She analyzes her memory loss, but doesn't believe it's something to be concerned about. We will later find out that her memory losses are a direct reaction to her fear of Death and the Dylar prescriptions. Her wish to have a boring life is also an attempt to keep her life exactly as it is to avoid death. The most telling part of these chapters is the immediate and familiar presence of Bob Pardee. The reappearance of Jack and Babette's exes is a common theme throughout the novel, as it never seems to bother or seem unusual to either one of them. In addition, the disappearance of the Treadwells does not seem to overly upset Babette, but she does report their disappearance to the police, who just mention that someone disappears every eleven seconds.



Book 1: Chapter 13 - Chapter 15

Book 1: Chapter 13 - Chapter 15 Summary

Jack goes to the office and Babette calls to tell him that they have found the Treadwells in an abandoned Mid-Village Mall. They had been wandered the mall for four days and living in an abandoned cookie store. The police had consulted a psychic to help them find the Treadwells and had successfully found a drug bust instead. The family crowds into Steffie's room to watch the sunset. Heinrich does not go either, because he hates communal events or because he distrusts modern sunsets. Denise comes into Jack's room as he is studying his German, asking about Babette's medications. She cannot find Dylar in the Physicians' Desk Reference and wants to know more about it. She asks why they gave Heinrich his unique name and Jack explains that he wanted to make a gesture after becoming head of the Hitler department. Steffie walks in wearing Denise's visor and the three of them pour over Jack's German-English dictionary looking for German words that look like their English counterparts. They are disrupted by Heinrich yelling at them to watch the plane crash footage on television. The entire family is mesmerized by the disaster footage and from then on, cannot get enough of it.

Later, Jack asks the New York émigrés and College colleagues why his family was so entranced by the coverage. They conclude that for most people, there is only their everyday surroundings and what occurs on the television so they have a right to be obsessed with the TV. They spend the rest of their time asking personal questions that let them share common societal occurrences, such as where they were when James Dean died. Jack puts on his dark glasses and walks into Murray's classroom. He immediately starts to compare Murray's speech about Elvis to his favorite subject, Hitler. The analysis continues, becoming more and more intense. He wants the importance of Hitler to be transferred to Elvis to give Murray the opportunity to build a department and on-campus presence similar to what Jack has done with Hitler. A crowd forms to watch this debate, including both students and staff. Their planned discussion looks impromptu and is successful in raising the importance of Elvis to the community.

Book 1: Chapter 13 - Chapter 15 Analysis

No one seems overly surprised that the Treadwells were found safe. Heinrich had been watching the police trudge the water for the bodies of Treadwells, which does not seem to bother either Jack or Babette. The police think that the Treadwells were left at the mall by their younger grandchild, which is a definite comment on the callous nature of the younger generation. Again, the girls are questioning Babette's use of the medication Dylar, which indicates it is getting to be serious. The family also realizes their obsession with the television and specifically with the disaster footage they see. The department analyzes watching television and remarks on how society treats the television as an inherent part of their lives. Jack plays a dramatic, yet choreographed role. In fact, at one point, he meticulously counts for seven seconds before continuing, indicating that this is



a well thought out discussion he is orchestrated. His willingness to compare Elvis to Hitler shows his gratitude for Murray's friendship and relationship. However, by having this discussion, Jack could be risking his whole career and the very item that ensures his immortality in his eyes. This potential sacrifice does not go unnoticed by Murray, who is deeply grateful.



Book 1: Chapter 16 - Chapter 18

Book 1: Chapter 16 - Chapter 18 Summary

Wilder cries all afternoon. Jack and Babette take him to the doctor, but the doctor only suggests giving him an aspirin and letting him sleep. They consider taking him to the emergency room, but do not go. Jack takes Babette to her posture class and stays in the car, letting Wilder sob continuously. He finds himself enjoying the cries after awhile. They are halfway home after Babette's lesson when Wilder suddenly stops crying. When they return to the house, all of the family members move carefully around Wilder as though not wanting to disturb him again. Babette remarks how thrilling it is to have all the children around and is excited for Bee to arrive. They are driving on the way to the Mid-Village Mall when Denise carefully waits, planning the right time to ask about the Dylar. When she does, however, a seemingly random conversation occurs between all members of the family and her question is never addressed or answered. Jack states that his family is the cradle of the world's misinformation. While they are at the mall, Jack runs into Eric Massingale, who works at the College. He remarks that Jack looks harmless, aging and indistinct without his dark glasses on. Jack's immediate response is to go on a shopping spree, which startles yet excites the family. It exhausts him and the family and when they return home, they are all anxious for their separate rooms and space. Jack says that a small town like Blacksmith has no complaints other than the television, which is where their outer torment lies, causing fears and desires in everyday people. He drives to the airport to pick up Bee, but is met by Tweedy Browner, his ex-wife instead. He fears that Bee is dead, but instead Tweedy has decided to stay with him as well in order to spend time with her daughter who has been spending time with Tweedy's current husband, Malcolm Hunt, in Indonesia. They discuss Jack's children and Janet Savory, Jack's ex prior to Tweedy. She calls him Tuck, which is a family nickname for all the men in the Browner family and revisits old times with him. One of the plane flights land and the passengers relay a near-death experience they had as the plane lost its engines. There is no media to cover the incident, however, and Bee shows up to remark that they went through the disaster for nothing if there is no media coverage. Tweedy remarks that airplane travel is some of the safest and most gracious living possible, barring mechanical failures, turbulent weather and terrorist acts.

Book 1: Chapter 16 - Chapter 18 Analysis

Wilder cries for seven hours continuously. The family is in awe of him after this and Wilder establishes himself as a unique member of the family, no longer to be frequently forgotten in the supermarket or other random places. The family communicates through misinformation and a kind of free association thinking. Rather than address what the previous person said, the family member will pick up on one point of the previous sentence and say a random fact of his or her own. In this way, no family member ever really listens to the other one, although they are all talking with each other freely. Jack is startled by running into his colleague and is disturbed when Eric mentions that he looks



harmless and aging without his dark glasses on. His Hitler persona questioned, Jack responds by buying as many things as he can in an effort to plump up his life throughout materialistic items. Later, when Jack is trying to escape Death, he will throw away his things in an effort to start saying goodbye to himself. Tweedy Browner shows up in Jack's life the same way that Bob Pardee showed up for Babette — unannounced and familiar with the family, as if an ex showing up without warning is a common occurrence for them. The plane disaster is a foreshadowing of the airborne disaster. As there is no media coverage in Iron City for either the plane flight or the airborne disaster, these people will not see their story on the television and therefore consider their incident wasted and unfulfilling.



Book 1: Chapter 19 - Chapter 20

Book 1: Chapter 19 - Chapter 20 Summary

Bee's presence makes Jack feel self-conscious at times. She discusses Tweedy's behavior with Jack, saying that she doesn't have anything to live for in her life and has no identity. Bee watches as Denise and Steffie argue over taking a bath, and Jack drives her to the airport the next morning. After he drops her off, he visits the Old Burying Ground in the Blacksmith Village and waits to feel the presence of the dead. Mr. Treadwell's sister Gladys dies suddenly of lingering dread from being abandoned. Jack reads the obituaries and questions how other great men felt right before they died. Babette tells Jack that their life is good. He then questions again what will happen if he dies before Babette. Murray comes over to watch TV with the kids. Heinrich argues with Jack that he should not waste time in his life in an effort to live longer overall. Jack questions who is in charge of their dying and who is out there that he can address the situation to. Murray takes notes about the children watching television when all of the sudden, the television screen shows a picture of Babette, silent, teaching her posture class. This startles the family immensely, and Jack wonders if Babette is already dead. Murray takes notes of their reaction. Denise tries to turn up the volume with no success, and Wilder starts to cry silently inches away from the television.

Book 1: Chapter 19 - Chapter 20 Analysis

Bee does not seem to fit in whatsoever with the rest of the Gladney family, yet proves to be the outside perspective, looking in on the normal and average life of Jack with disdainful eyes. When she is dropped off, Jack directly visits a burial ground to feel the spirituality associated with the dead. He then thinks to himself that he wishes for aimless days and seasons that drift along peacefully, indicating that he is happy with his current life and does not want it to change. Jack is becoming more obsessed with death. Gladys's death from lingering dread hints at what might happen to Babette if Jack were to die before her. The question of who controls who dies when comes up and Heinrich's personal strategy towards living longer is demonstrated. Finally, the family's life changes as they see Babette on the television, silent. They are unable to communicate with her and the lines between their television and their everyday lives cross. It scares them and makes them believe that Babette might already be dead.



Book 2: Chapter 21

Book 2: Chapter 21 Summary

Jack goes outside in the January light and appreciates the weather on his walk outside. He is halfway down the street when he sees Heinrich standing on the small ledge outside the attic window. He is looking at something through his binoculars. Jack goes inside and finds out that a train car has derailed and a lot of smoke has been released. Soon, the smoke becomes a dark billowing cloud of Nyodene Derivative. The family wonders whether they will have to evacuate, but Jack calms their fears by saying that college professors don't run from disaster. Society is set up so only the poor are troubled by disasters. They watch the disaster grow more and more, finally eating dinner and ignoring the growing disaster until they are finally told to evacuate by a voice booming from a truck driving around the neighborhood. They are in the car driving to the abandoned Boy Scout camp 20 minutes later. While driving to the Boy Scout camp, Jack has to get out to pump gas and is exposed to the airborne disaster for 2 minutes. He will later be told by the personnel in charge that he is dying from his exposure. The next day, the Gladney family has to move to another location in Iron City, because the seemingly random movements of the airborne disaster are headed their way again, making the camp a dangerous place to be. They stay here for nine days before they are allowed to go back home again.

Book 2: Chapter 21 Analysis

The disaster significantly changes the family in a number of ways. It forces each of them to face their own mortality and each member reacts to it differently. While on the drive to the Boy Scout camp, Babette swallows Dylar, but tells her family it is a Life Saver, which is a pun on what Dylar intends to be for Babette. Steffie proceeds to mutter television commercials and products in her sleep. Heinrich shines with his excessive information on a topic that would have never earned him much respect were it not for the disaster. Deja vu is one of the symptoms of Nyodene Derivative and many of the evacuees report feeling sensations of deja vu. Jack ties these feelings of deja vu to death's presence.



Book 3: Chapter 22 - Chapter 24

Book 3: Chapter 22 - Chapter 24 Summary

Normalcy returns to Jack and his family and they enter into the supermarket together. A heavy storm has been predicted so the supermarket is filled with persons stocking up on supplies. Murray tells Jack that he would have won the Elvis department without Jack's comparison of Elvis to Hitler as Murray's rival was suddenly killed. Babette tells Jack that she is going to be teaching another course — Eating and Drinking — in addition to her Posture class. When they go to sleep at night, Jack sleeps with his head in the middle of Babette's chest. Jack's German lessons increase to three times a week. In the middle of one of the lessons, however, Howard reaches in and grabs Jack's tongue, which startles him immensely. Signs from the airborne disaster are still seen in the town. Jack and the kids discuss the impact of data and the industry of terrifying data as a whole. Jack discovers Babette's Dylar. He immediately goes to find Denise, and they agree to not tell Babette that they have the drug. They are also going to find out what Dylar is and what it is for. They call Babette's doctor and Jack's doctor, to no avail. Jack goes to visit Heinrich in his room and he learns of Orest Mercator. Orest is Heinrich's newest friend who is attempting to break the Guinness Book of World Records by sitting in a cage with the world's deadliest snakes.

Book 3: Chapter 22 - Chapter 24 Analysis

The disaster of the airborne disaster is juxtaposed directly with the typical and everyday weather disaster of a snowstorm. At one point, Jack takes Wilder to the fruit bins in the grocery by himself, because Jack is suddenly satisfied with Wilder's series of fleeting gratifications. These immediate and easily replaced small satisfactions seem to eliminate the fear of death entirely. Finally, Jack and the children are acknowledging that the society and world they operate in exists on data and having too much data does nothing but scare them. Jack continues to sleep with his head between Babette's chest. Jack and Babette have finally found Dylar and can now analyze what it does. Remarkably, the Dylar pill will reveal flaws in Jack and Babette's relationship, as well as illuminate how much Jack and Babette are consumed by the idea of their own death. Oster will prove to be Jack's polar opposite, meeting the possibility of death head-on, versus hiding and avoiding it like Jack does.



Book 3: Chapter 25 - Chapter 27

Book 3: Chapter 25 - Chapter 27 Summary

Jack gives the Dylar to Winnie Richards to analyze. Jack tells Babette that she's changed. Jack finally tracks down Winnie and she tells him the physical characteristics of the Dylar pill, but she cannot tell him what the Dylar pill is used for, specifically. Jack confronts Babette about the Dylar. He is worried, because his Babette is a joyous person and doesn't have self-pity or gloom. She explains about Dylar and Mr. Gray. She tells Jack of her infidelity to Mr. Gray in exchange for the Dylar. Jack is most upset about the fact that Babette reveals that she is not the joyous person he thought she was and for this, he is devastated. After her revelations, they make love and do not want to be alone from one another. Jack reveals to Babette that is tentatively scheduled to die from the Nyodene Derivative exposure. Jack goes to the doctor again to review the Nyodene Derivative exposure, although he does not reveal this to his doctor. On his way there, he sees a simulated emergency, although the real one has passed. He sees Steffie in the street, pretending to be sick, but he doesn't stick around to watch. He walks up to Heinrich and Orest on the front steps and introduces them formally. Jack questions Orest and his motivations and goals for attempting such a feat just to be a line in a book, as Jack says. Babette and Jack both now enjoy Wilder's company and his full appreciation of the special moments in life. Jack now wants the Dylar for himself, but Babette tells him to forget it, that the drug is fool's gold and does not actually work. Jack picks Denise up from school and tells her what the Dylar is for. Jack knows that Denise took the bottle, but she will not give it to him.

Book 3: Chapter 25 - Chapter 27 Analysis

Jack is finally noticing huge changes in his wife. Winnie, on the other hand, is a master of going from one place to another without anyone seeing her, which Jack admires. She says that the twentieth century has been all about disappearing and hiding even if you don't need to. Jack tries to make her blush almost in an effort to have her come alive in front of him. Jack and Babette reveal their darkest secrets to one another, yet still stay together and make love despite Babette's confessions. Now they are certain that Jack is going to die soon from the exposure and the "Who will die first?" question has been answered. Jack is most offended by the fact that Babette has not upheld the identity that he has created for her. Finally, Babette's extreme fear of Death has been shown and the questions about Dylar are answered. Jack is now fully obsessed with trying to avoid his death by analyzing his own medical data and doing everything he can to stay healthy. The simulated emergency is filled with irony since the small town has already experienced a real emergency and knows how they will handle it. Jack is trying to avoid death while Orest is addressing death and its imminent possibility directly.



Book 3: Chapter 28 - Chapter 30

Book 3: Chapter 28 - Chapter 30 Summary

Wilder sits in the kitchen, mesmerized by the process of water boiling. Steffie's mother, Dana Breedlove, wants her to visit Mexico City for Easter. Dana was Jack's first and fourth marriage and she is a part-time spy. Jack goes to the College and has another debate with his colleagues, asking questions about who the greatest influence on their life is, etc. Murray tells Jack about the class he is teaching this semester about car crashes. Jack and Babette go to the grocery store together after their revelations. Babette does not ever want to be left alone. Jack goes to his German classes religiously. When he returns home, Babette is listening to her talk radio shows, while Jack starts to throw out random items in the house. Three nights later, he goes into Heinrich's room to watch disaster coverage on television, but walks away disappointed by the experience. Jack wakes Babette up in the middle of the night to discuss Mr. Gray and what she had done. He has a homicidal rage now towards him and wants the Dylar. Babette tells him to leave the Dylar alone and let it be her mistake only. He goes to the office the next day and chases after Winnie. Together, they watch the sunset on a hill and discuss Dylar. He tells her what the pill is originally for and they have a conversation about death and its existence with life.

Book 3: Chapter 28 - Chapter 30 Analysis

Steffie is becoming entranced by Wilder's love of the everyday as well. She will be leaving the family for a while to visit her mother, which is a potentially dangerous situation that no one seems to fully appreciate in a traditional manner. Also, Jack and his colleagues continue to ask each other the questions that lovers will typically ask each other. Babette has always been scared of death, but now she does not want to be left alone at all after Jack's revelation that answered their question as to who will die first. Meanwhile, Jack starts to throw things out in his house for no apparent reason. Now that Jack and Heinrich have experienced a disaster first-hand, the media coverage of it does not nearly excite them as much as it used to. Jack is now being awoken with his homicidal rages, which is a foreshadowing of events to come. Meanwhile, Winnie's reflections on death gives Jack a sense of sadness and peace, and she says that it is a mistake to lose death, that it is something you need as a boundary to give texture and meaning to life itself. Jack tells her that she has given his sadness a depth it has never known before.



Book 3: Chapter 31 - Chapter 33

Book 3: Chapter 31 - Chapter 33 Summary

No one feels like cooking so the family goes to a commercial strip and eats from a fast food place that specializes in chicken parts and brownies. They all eat in the car together. They have a conversation vastly different from the one chapter back when Denise asks about the Dylar. This time, they all debate the concept together. Later that week, a policeman spots a UFO throwing a body from its ship. There are many sightings after that instance. Jack gets a postcard from Mary Alice, his first and oldest daughter with Dana Breedlove. She is Steffie's full sister, although from different marriages. When asked, Babette tells Jack that she only wants Wilder to stay the way he is forever and for Jack to not die before her. Murray and Jack are walking across campus when Murray asks about Jack's German lessons. They try to place what is unusual and off-putting about Howard. Four days later, Murray tells Jack that he thinks Howard is the type of man who finds dead bodies erotic. From then on, Jack can only attend one more lesson, because he finds Murray's statement so accurate.

Later that evening after Jack's last German lesson, the insane asylum goes up in smoke. Heinrich and Jack go to watch the flames and witness a woman covered in flames walking on the asylum grounds, yet no one goes to help her. After awhile, there is a synthetic smell in the air, and the crowd disperses with disgust. Jack stays up late that evening thinking about Mr. Gray. Jack awakes to see Wilder staring at him. He follows him downstairs and sees a grey-haired man standing in his backyard. Jack immediately assumes that this is Death and gets very upset. He looks in on the children for what he believes will be the last time. Finally, he goes outside with a copy of Mein Kampf clutched to his stomach. Instead, it is Vernon Dickey, Babette's father. He has come to visit without warning. His presence startles Babette, and he makes a single comment about the television while he is in the house, asking simply if people were this dumb before it. He stays for a few days, but before he leaves, he gives Jack a gun for his protection. Jack also tries to persuade Denise to give him the Dylar but she will not be tricked, she says.

Book 3: Chapter 31 - Chapter 33 Analysis

In their own way, the Gladney family is now a tight, self-sustaining unit. While the children might be from a range of different marriages, they are bonded together through their common experiences. As a group, they sit in the car, eating and having conversations together. The UFO occurrence is a random event that seems to match the rest of the odd disasters that follow the family. Again, Babette only wants her youngest son to stay captivated by his immediate surroundings and she wants her husband to stay by her side. Yet another disaster occurs near Jack and his family. This time it is at the insane asylum next to Murray's home. Heinrich and Jack witness the event as though they are watching it on television, viewing it apathetically. The crowd



will disperse from a synthetic smell that hits this seemingly primitive disaster of fire is tainted by a manmade, unnatural intruder of the smell. The magical nature of the fire is gone with this smell and Jack says that their sadness has been complicated from this point on. When Vernon is at their home, Babette starts to define Vernon's identity with statements about how he is. In this way, she is mirroring what Jack will say about her to help her form her own identity. Jack comments that only other relatives and your loved one can comment on your identity with confidence. Vernon's comment about the television sums up what has happened to the Gladney family. They are filled with random, odd knowledge but has dulled their activity and mental prowess through an addiction to the television and all of its sensational disasters. Vernon's gun will come into play later as the gun merges with Jack's homicidal rages.



Book 3: Chapter 34 - Chapter 36

Book 3: Chapter 34 - Chapter 36 Summary

Murray and Jack resume their extended walks, talking about a range of philosophical ideas. Jack goes to Dr. Chakravarty again who tells him he has high levels of potassium in his system, which Jack denies knowing anything about. Oddly, Dr. Chakravarty does not mention the recent airborne disaster. Instead, he sends Jack's medical records to a high-tech lab to have them fully analyzed. Jack goes home and continues to throw out a number of random objects. Babette is obsessed with her talk radio and continues to go running, although with a large amount of sunscreen on, thanks to Denise. Jack takes Orest and Heinrich out to dinner to further question Orest's perspective on life. When he returns home, he finds Babette ironing in the bedroom. He demands to know where the pills are and to know more about Mr. Gray. Babette dismisses him so he goes down the hall to help Steffie pack to visit her mother. She is worried that she will not recognize her mother, and Denise adds to the worry by suggesting that her mother will kidnap her and they will have to go rescue her from Mexico.

The next day, there is a simulated evacuation for a noxious odor, which is promptly played out by the SIMULVAC team. Three days later, an actual noxious odor occurs, and everyone ignores it politely. Mother Devi call Jack one night while he is thinking about the gun hidden in his bedroom. She wants Heinrich to come visit her and her Swami. He is immediately threatened that Heinrich will find answers to questions that Jack cannot give him. She tells him that the end of the cycle is approaching. He hangs up on her and finds Babette in her sweatsuit staring out the window. The Hitler conference begins and Jack feels feeble in their presence. He gives an introductory welcome speech and spends the rest of the time hiding in his office. He goes to the high-tech lab to get his results and have the tests done. The doctor tells him that he has Nyodene Derivative in his system, which again Jack lies knowing anything about. Instead, he talks about all of the good things he has done, such as not smoke, avoided milk, exercised, slept regularly, etc. He gives Jack his chart to give to his doctor that will explain his condition, saying only that his Dr. Chakravarty will know the symbols.

Book 3: Chapter 34 - Chapter 36 Analysis

Jack is receiving confirmation that the Nyodene Derivative is in his system, despite his denials. His response to his impending death is to again clean out his house from all the objects and things he has accumulated over the course of his lifetime. Jack is asking more and more questions about Mr. Gray. It is as though his fear of Death has been personalized into the figure of Mr. Gray and the Dylar pills. The simulated evacuation is yet another ironic twist on disaster. They readily perform if it is a test, but when the real thing occurs, they all ignore it until it goes away as if it cannot harm them if they do not acknowledge it. The idea is that by simulating a disaster, it will not occur and to acknowledge the disaster of the noxious odor, they will disintegrate this theory. Jack is



trying to have someone tell him that his death will not occur, but instead keeps hearing that his death is inevitable. He avoids the Hitler convention mainly, because he uses Hitler as a way to avoid his death through his immortality as head of his own department. He does not feel that he really belongs among these people. The Hitler convention does not define him as a person; it is only his career persona. Jack will avoid giving Dr. Chakravarty his charter as a way to avoid death if someone cannot unequivocally tell him that he is dying.



Book 3: Chapter 37 - Chapter 40

Book 3: Chapter 37 - Chapter 40 Summary

Jack and Murray start walking around campus and talking again, but this conversation takes the rest of the afternoon and has practical consequences, as Jack says. They discuss death and Jack asks why he is so worried about death when his entire life, he has done everything possible to avoid death. Jack says that he wants to have accomplished everything he can in life before he encounters death. Murray suggests that Jack get around the fear of death by concentrating on the life beyond. Together, they walk to the supermarket. Murray suggests that you can put off death by killing someone else. Through plotting, you can control your death and increase your life. Plotting is how you advance the art of human consciousness. Finally, you have to learn to say goodbye to yourself. Jack tells Babette that Murray's says to repress their fear of death, which Babette calls an outdated theory. As she strokes his shoulder, he has flashes of Mr. Gray with her. Later, he takes his gun to work and looks at the bullets. He comes home to find Heinrich in a bad mood, because Orest's challenge with the snakes fell through. Since he failed, Orest has completely disappeared.

Jack runs into Winnie on campus, and she tells him about a story that she read about Dylar and the scientists behind it. She tells him the exact location of Mr. Gray. He goes home and tells Babette he needs the car. They argue about it, because she wants the car to go for a run. Instead, he drives to Middlebrook to find Mr. Gray, running lights along the way. Jack finds Mr. Gray's hotel room, who's real name is Willie Mink. Willie relays the story of a woman who came to see him in a hotel room with a ski mask on, not knowing that he is referring to Jack's wife. Jack begins to feel sorry for Babette, realizing that she believed this man to be her last hope against death. Jack plots Mink's death while he is in the room, talking with him. Finally, as Mink is popping Dylar pills like candy, he shoots him in the stomach. He fires a second shot into his right hipbone. Mink, however, gains control of the gun and shoots Jack in the wrist. Jack drags him out into the parking lot, feeling virtuous, helping to save him. Mink asks who shot Jack, and Jack tells him that Mink shot Jack and then himself. He drives them to a church, and nuns answer the door. They are German and speak to Jack in German, but he cannot understand them. The doctor tells Jack that he and Mink will be just fine so he drives home.

Wilder gets on his plastic tricycle and rides across a very busy highway. He survives, but bursts out crying at the end of the ride. Dr. Chakvarty is eagerly pursuing Jack to see how his death is progressing, but Jack is avoiding him. The supermarket shelves have been rearranged, which panicked the customers who find no sense in it. Jack wanders the aisles, looking for the items he needs.



Book 3: Chapter 37 - Chapter 40 Analysis

The conversation with Murray will be the final piece to connect Jack's homicidal thoughts and his newly acquired gun with the right philosophical bent to become a murderer. The concept of plotting and killing someone to stay alive longer is appealing to an individual who has spent his life avoiding death and trying to stay alive as long as possible. Again, they end up in the supermarket, which has now become the obvious symbol of life and mundane normalcy. Murray tells Jack that the most important thing is to learn how to say goodbye to yourself, which is what Jack has been doing with his recent cleaning/discarding items at home. On some level, Murray suggests, everybody represses their fear of death on a daily basis, and Jack and Babette have been unable to do so. Babette suggests that to repress something is outdated, as if this is a trendy concept rather than an unconscious thing most humans typically do.

Winnie will give Jack the details that will help him to actually find Mr. Gray, now known by his real name of Willie Mink. Jack does not wait a moment but drives directly to see Mink. Jack's attack on Mink has less to do with his former relationship with his wife, and more to do about the concept of death itself. Jack plots to extend his life. He attacks the man that tricked Babette into thinking she could control her own death. He pulls him out of the room and saves his life. Through these acts of violence and redemption, Jack ultimately is restoring himself by taking back his fear of death and entering back into a life worth living.

Jack speaks with a nun who tells him that only the non-believers need the believers; the non-believers need to think that someone believes in religion and all of the doctrine that goes with it, but even she is not foolish enough to believe it. By this, Jack realizes that everyone is dealing with the same issues, that there is no one exempt from neither the fear of death nor any method of thinking that will eliminate it. With Wilder's trek across the highway, the flip side of his immediate gratification and inability to foresee future events and outcomes is shown. His nature does not compute the terrific danger he is in by biking across the busy highway, and it is not until he has come to the other side that he realizes how close he came to death and cries. It is here that Wilder grows up to see the outcome of his actions and will lose his immediate gratification in all the small things in life.

When Jack enters the supermarket and sees that all of the shelves have been arranged, it symbolizes how chaotic life itself is. The supermarket is the place of normalcy, where you gain life-giving items like food and commingle with your neighbors. As the shelves are suddenly all changed, and mild panic ensues, so too will life and its string of disasters throw a life into mild panic until normalcy regains hold again.



Characters

Jack Gladney or J.A.K. Gladney

Jack Gladney is the main character of the book and the narrator throughout the novel. He is a college professor at the College-on-the-Hill where he is the head of the Hitler department. When he is on the College grounds, he is referred to as J.A.K. Gladney. He wears dark glasses and has gained an appropriate amount of weight to be deemed a serious department head. His name change, weight gain and dark glasses are all conscious decisions to make him a mysteriously influential person around the College.

Jack lives with his wife Babette and their children from previous marriages. Babette is Jack's fourth wife but his fifth marriage. He married his first wife twice. Babette has been married at least once in the past.

For the first part of the novel, Jack's life rotates around normal activities, such as spending time with his family, learning German, having intellectual conversations with his oldest son Heinrich, traveling to the supermarket with the family or enjoying the events at the College like having lunch with his colleagues. His marriage to Babette and life in general is blissfully ordinary, although he does have a passing preoccupation about whether he or Babette will die first.

After the airborne disaster and Jack's immediate confrontation with death, he questions his own mortality. Both he and Babette struggle with the fact that they are going to die and these fears dictate their actions for the remainder of the book. As much as they want, they cannot resume their life of average normalcy after the airborne disaster.

To Jack, Hitler holds the utmost importance. Hitler becomes a symbol of intelligence that Jack has over other individuals, as well as a comforting presence when Jack is agitated or uncomfortable in any way. Jack will carry around Mein Kampf to alleviate stress or boredom. In all, he is an average man with above-average intelligence.

Babette Gladney

Babette is Jack's wife. She has been married before Jack and had Denise. She performs a number of volunteer events around the community, including reading tabloids to a blind man, Mr. Treadwell. She also teaches posture and eventually eating and drinking courses in the town. At one point, her posture seminars end up on television.

Babette becomes obsessed with death after the airborne disaster. She will answer a tabloid ad promising her the end of her fear of death. She meets a Mr. Gray who gives her tests to qualify her for a special pill that blocks the fear of death in the brain. She is the only individual who begins to take a pill called Dylar. There are a number of fatal and



nearly fatal side effects for Dylar, but Babette continues to Dylar. She will compromise her marriage to quell her fear of death.

Heinrich Gladney

Heinrich is Jack's 14-year-old son with his second wife, who is now Mother Devi, but used to be called Janet Savory. He was named Heinrich Gerhardt Gladney to honor the advance of his father's Hitler department. He is very intelligent and is the first member of the family to spot and analyze the airborne disaster. Heinrich comes into his own as an individual at the Boy Scout evacuation camp, where he creates quite a crowd with his intellectual knowledge and analysis of the disaster event.

After the event is over, Heinrich deals with death in his own way, becoming best friends with a boy named Oster who is trying to set a world record by sitting in a cage with the world's deadliest snakes.

Murray Jay Siskind

A visiting professor at the College, Murray gives the novel an outside perspective and becomes the omniscient voice analyzing the family's surroundings. He admires Babette in the grocery store for her maternal talents. He relishes in everyday, average objects and activities. He finds amazement in diagonal parking lot designs. Murray recommends Jacks' German teacher, Howard Dunlop, to him since Howard lives in the same apartment complex as Murray. Murray's voice is outside of the family and he gives commentary to their everyday lives and actions.

Denise

Denise is Babette's daughter from a previous marriage. She is eleven. She is often concerned about her mother and questions her mother's use of Dylar. She will eventually find and hide the bottle from both Babette and Jack

Steffie

Steffie loves to burn toast. She is Jack's daughter from his marriage to Dana Breedlove, who currently reviews books for the CIA.

Bee

Bee is Jack's daughter from his marriage to Tweedy Browner. She was living in Korea, but is returning to the States to spend time with her father. Tweedy shows up during the visit unexpectedly, and Tweedy and Bee analyze Jack's current family and its ordinariness.



Howard Dunlop

A former chiropractor, Howard lives in Murray's building and teaches Jack the German language. Jack is enthralled by his tongue movements and, at one point, Howard actually reaches into Jack's mouth to manipulate his tongue. After Murray points out that Howard is the type to most likely be turned on by corpses, Jack stops taking his lessons from Howard.

Wilder

The youngest son of Babette's from a previous marriage, Wilder also has a brother Eugene who is living with his father. The reader never becomes familiar with Eugene.

Winnie Richards

Winnie is the brilliant neurochemist who analyzes the Dylar for Jack. She is awkward and intelligent, running from place to place whenever she travels as if to hide herself from ever being found. She describes the pill to Jack to explain its potency, and how it technically works on the brain. She cannot, however, determine what it is used for. Jack eventually tells her, and she offers him her opinion about death.

Dana Breedlove

Dana is Steffie's mother and Jack's third wife who works for the CIA and enjoys plotting.

Bob Pardee

Pardee is Denise's father and Babette's ex husband. He shows up unexpectedly one day to take them out to dinner.

Janet Savory

Janet is Jack's second wife and Heinrich's mother. She suggests that Jack not grow a beard, which he regrets not doing.

Tweedy Browner

Bee's mother and Jack's third wife, Tweedy visits Jack and his family when Bee flies into town to spend time with him. She and Bee will be an outside opinion, analyzing the Gladney family from their personal perspective.



Objects/Places

Mein Kampf

Jack frequently carries his copy of Mein Kampf with him throughout the novel. Oftentimes, his book will show up when he is in an uncomfortable or unsettling situation. He uses his copy of Mein Kampf to remind him of his sense of self and self-protection.

Dylar

The supposed cure to end the fear of death, Dylar is a unique prescription pill that Babette takes. The pill does nothing to assuage her fear of death, however, and only really leads her to compromise her marriage. Jack will eventually crave the pill for himself, despite its outrageous side effects.

The Black Billowing Cloud

At first, the airborne disaster of released Nyodene Derivative is called a plume in the sky. However, the Gladney family decides it is more like a black billowing cloud and shortly after, the radio calls it a black billowing cloud. The black billowing cloud is the disaster that forces the Gladney family to evacuate their home and acknowledge their own mortality.

The Supermarket

Many times, Jack and his family will meet in the supermarket throughout the novel. Specifically, this setting is to demonstrate how mundane and average the life of each individual Gladney member is. They go to the grocery store and purchase items here. There is nothing extraordinary about their visits.

Dark Glasses

For Jack, the dark glasses are a part of his identity at the College. He does not consider himself to be fully in persona as the department head of Hitler Studies unless he has his dark glasses on. He will take them off when he is not playing the role of department head off-campus.

The Television

There are two prominent televisions in the novel. The first is the television that is in the Gladney household. It follows the children around, ending up in one bedroom or another



and constantly providing commentary to whatever is happening in their lives. It is an ever present presence in the entire family's life. The other television is in the motel room that Babette goes to. She describes that television as more like a monitor, a watcher, a recorder of her deeds in that room.

Jack's tongue

Jack cannot speak German, which is a weak point for a man who is head of the department of Hitler Studies. Therefore, he gets German lessons from Howard Dunlop. He is entranced by Howard's use of his tongue. Jack, however, cannot get his tongue to move in similar motions to succeed at the language. Howard will eventually grab Jack's tongue in an effort to get him to speak the language properly.

Nyodene Derivative

Nyodene Derivative is the synthetic gas that is released from a train accident, terrorizing Jack's neighborhood and making them evacuate. It is a man made gas that has caused a number of malicious side effects in rats and is responsible for sweating palms, vomiting, comas, miscarriages and severe cases of deja vu in humans.

College-on-the-Hill

The College-on-the-Hill is where Jack teaches. It is here that he also interacts with other professors at lunch, asking random questions to probe into their personal lives. This is where one identity, J.A.K. Gladney exists.

Boy Scout camp

When the Gladneys are evacuated, they are directed to an empty Boy Scout camp to spend the night with the rest of the evacuees. It is here that Heinrich commands an audience of people interested in his full range of knowledge about Nyodene Derivative, and Jack finds a kind of spirituality watching his children sleep peacefully.



Themes

Identity

Jack and his wife Babette deal with their concept of identity in different ways. Frequently, throughout the novel, Jack will define Babette based on how he knows her in the past. For example, if she says something negative, he rebuffs her for breaking character, saying that the Babette he knows is healthy and outgoing and he depends on that Babette. Conversely, Babette will predict how Jack is going to act against Mr. Gray based on his male characteristics, saying that he will act out of primal rage against him. Early in the novel, Jack says that love helps them to develop an identity that is secure enough to be placed under the care of each other. In this way, he admits that their relationship works by letting each member of the family help to give identity to the other members.

Jack is very conscious about the identity and presence he has created on campus at the College-on-the-Hill. He wears dark glasses and has gain an appropriate amount of weight to be taken more seriously. In addition, he has contemplated growing a beard, but his wife at the time suggested that he leave the vast expanse on his chin, saying it had more of a presence than he realized. He will later remark on another professor's beard, saying that is the beard he wished he could have grown.

In a store at the mall, he runs into a colleague who has never seen him with his dark glasses off. Jack remarks that he only wears them at the college, implying that he currently inhabits a different form of self, the self that he is with his family and away from the College. The colleague tells him that he looks like a big, aging and indistinct fellow without his glasses on, which offends Jack immediately. Jack's identity on campus is defined through his special name of J.A.K. Gladney instead of "Jack" Gladney, his dark glasses and his weight. There, he is respected, but Jack himself early in the novel suggests that he is the false character, following the name of J.A.K. around. He is pretending to be more than he actually is in the hopes that he will take on this new persona and be worthy of his identity.

Death

Death is the overriding concept throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Jack blithely questions whether he or Babette will die first, more as an act of love towards their relationship. As the novel progresses, however, he and Babette's thoughts towards death become obsessive, introspective and driven.

Before the airborne disaster, Babette is satisfied with her boring life that consists of running stadium steps and chewing sugarless gum. She teaches and is fulfilled in her life, mothering her children, reading to a blind man. After the airborne disaster, however,



she becomes obsessed with her own mortality, seeking her to search for a way to control her own destiny and escape her fear of death.

Simultaneously, Jack also deals with his own worries about death. He analyzes his thoughts and questions others about their beliefs in death. Jack is an intellectual who has not yet answered his own questions about beliefs and is disturbed by the very fact that he cannot control his death. Toward this end, he avoids certain foods and doesn't get into unhealthy situations as though to borrow time against his inevitable death. It is therefore ironic when he is diagnosed as "dying" of the Nyodene Derivative after the disaster occurs. Through this diagnosis, he is directly confronted with an inability to control his death and immediately goes out to seek answers.

He is fascinated by Heinrich's friend Oster who does not shy away from death, but instead approaches it head-on. He discusses a belief in the afterlife as a way to quell his fears about death by refocusing them on the time after death's occurrence. He is a man on a quest to find out how to solve his problem and fear of death, but who never resolves himself towards or against anything. In this way, the self that he has built up will disintegrate after his death. Murray says that the reason he is so fearful of death is due to his lack of repression and the fact that he wanted to be remembered for his work with Hitler, yet did not want to stand out to risk getting Death's attention at the same time. It is because of his dichotomy within himself that Jack has problems and fears with his death.

Television's Impact on the Family

The impact of television on Jack and his family is pronounced throughout the entire novel. At first, the television is consistently on, shouting seemingly random comments at the family throughout their daily activities. However, Babette demands that the family get together on Friday nights to watch television together in an effort to de-glamorize its existence in their lives. The reverse happens. In fact, the last time they all watch television together, they are glued and mesmerized by a disaster on the news station, unable to get enough of the details and coverage.

One day, after Babette leaves for work, Jack is speaking to the children when he suddenly sees Babette on the television screen. They are all immediately shocked since she did not tell them that one of her posture classes was going to be covered on television. Oddly enough, there is no sound on the channel that covers Babette, although the other stations are coming in clear. It is here that the television blurs the lines between fiction and reality for Jack and his family. While picking up Bee at the airport, another flight has a near-death experience, but the media is not there to cover it, which disappoints Bee who asks why they had to go through all of that for nothing. Here, the reader understands that television has become the medium through which recognition is given in society.

After the airborne disaster has occurred, the townspeople are very upset that no coverage of their event happened on television. There wasn't a media circus that they



believe is their right after going through such a fearful event. If they cannot be on television after surviving this disaster, what was the reason for going through it to begin with? They need media recognition and to see themselves on television to complete the reasons as to why the disaster happened to them in the first place. They cannot accept random disasters without media coverage.

When Jack discusses death with Babette, he remarks that death might be like endless electrical white noise. The only electrical white noise that we experience in our everyday lives is when the reception on the television goes out. This white noise is the loss of our ever present commentary on society and life, thus the end of life as we know it to be.

Plots

Plots are a common theme throughout the novel. The first mention of plots and plotting is during Jack's speech to his students in Chapter 6. Here, Jack tells his students that all plots tend to move deathward, that they all end in a death of sorts. Later, Jack and Murray will decide that the only way to truly live is through plotting. He changes his viewpoint on the idea of a plot 180 degrees from what he had previously thought, perhaps now, because he has someone to plot against.

Plotting has been a common theme in Jack's theme as he refers to his ex wife Dana Breedlove's love of plotting to Steffie. Her plots, however, seem to be rather ordinary and average, as she had him plot factions between friends and other everyday relationships.

Disasters

Disasters and the Gladney family's reaction to them is an important way for the reader to understand who and how these characters are. In the beginning of the novel, the children are sent home from school due to an unknown disaster in their school. The children become sick and the teachers roll on the floor, speaking incoherently. One of the inspectors in a Mylex suit will eventually die from whatever has caused this unknown disaster. None of the children, Babette or Jack seems very upset by this situation. It is almost as though they truly believe the disaster could not and would not affect them. When Steffie tells Babette to boil the water or stop chewing sugar-free gum, Babette dismisses her precautions as if dismissing the idea that any harm could come to her or her family.

When the smoke alarm goes off while they are eating dinner early in the novel, none of the members of the family are fazed by this. They simply continue eating. This sentiment will again be repeated when they are eating dinner right before the airborne disaster forces their evacuation. They act as though disaster is outside of their reality and could not affect them personally. In fact, when the idea of evacuation is first entertained by Heinrich and the children, Jack completely dismisses the idea, stating that he is a college professor and have you ever seen a college professor escaping from a disaster? Society is set up in such a way that only the low-income families have

to deal with disaster, not persons of his prestige and stature. In this way, Jack is using her persona as a college professor that is head of his department as a shield from the idea of disaster and destruction to him or his family.

As the possibility of disaster inches closer and closer to Jack and his family, they see the television in a new light. When they watch television, they are enthralled and captivated by the disasters and destruction they see on television. It becomes a sort of addiction they cannot get enough of. However, when a disaster comes to threaten their home, they completely ignore it.

After they survive the airborne disaster, however, Steffie embraces the idea that a disaster could strike at any time. She joins the team to practice simulated evacuations and disasters as a way to prepare herself in the future. Jack and Babette, on the other hand, stop addressing disaster and death as a future, vague possibility and start treating it as the inevitable occurrence that could strike them at any moment.



Style

Point of View

The entire book is written from the point of view of Jack Gladney, the main character of the book. The reader always gets his viewpoint on all the different events that occur throughout the novel. The only outside opinions the reader will sometimes enjoy are the perspectives of Murray Jay Siskind, who will remark on what and who Jack is and what he and his family stand for in the scope of society and life.

From Jack's point of view, we learn his opinion on the natural disasters, the television disasters and the everyday thoughts throughout his normal (and abnormal) days. However, through the in-depth and philosophical comments of the children and Jack's companions, we learn their personal thoughts as well. Jack doubts himself frequently and questions his actions and thoughts, which make the reader feel uneasy with Jack's opinions.

Most of the actions occur through philosophical debates between Jack and a person that comes across his path. He depends on these outside opinions to help him form his own ideas, which in turn helps the reader understand what is actually occurring in the story.

Setting

For the most part, the story revolves around Jack's immediate world. His home is a primary location, especially Jack and Babette's bedroom. For the first half of the book until Book 2, Chapter 21, most of the action occurs in Jack's home. It is also at the home that they see the dark, billowing cloud of Nyoplene Derivative that will force them from their homes.

When Jack and his family are forced to evacuate their home to the Boy Scout camp, we watch the family interact with other public individuals for the first time. As Jack moves his family from the Boy Scout camp to Iron City to avoid the airborne disaster, the terror of death grows more and more steadily for Jack.

Jack returns to his home after the disaster has passed, he attempts to resume his life of satisfied ordinary activities, but he cannot fulfill the same obligations with the same rigor that he did before.

Language and Meaning

The language throughout the novel is very intellectual and philosophical. All of the characters exhibit similar characteristics and it can be difficult to determine which character is talking since they all talk with the same philosophical, debate-style tone.



The topics are typically personal and intimate concepts, such as sex, love and especially one's impending death.

Typically large events, such as characters leaving or arriving, are not clearly described, while simple actions like what is on television or what Jack is thinking about is thoroughly analyzed. This structure shows that he is less concerned with people coming and going in his life than his own personal problems. It can be difficult to follow who is talking and what the point of the conversation is at times. The entire novel can seem like one long philosophical debate.

Structure

The entire novel has 40 chapters. Most of the chapters are between three to seven pages long. The chapter describing the airborne disaster, however, is one long chapter of sixty pages. The continuous chapter of the Nyodene Derivative gives the reader the sense that the event does not end. In addition, the event takes up the middle of the plot and shows the reader its substantial impact of the disaster on the everyday life of Jack and his family.

The plot is very straightforward. There are no subplots. Typically, the plot progresses through dialogue, but Jack can be prone to long, descriptive paragraphs about normal events and objects, which adds meaning to seemingly ordinary things. The novel reads more like a philosophical debate than a piece of fiction with a traditional plot and cast of characters.



Quotes

"She runs, she shovels snow, she caulks the tub and sink. She plays word games with Wilder and reads erotic classics aloud in bed at night. What do I do? I twirl the garbage bag and twist-tie them, swim laps in the college pool. When I go walking, joggers come up soundlessly behind me, appearing at my side, making me jump in idiotic fright. Babette talks to dogs and cats. I see colored spots out of the corner of my right eye." Chapter 4, p.15

"She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents and stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport." Chapter 4, p.16

"Love helps us develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another's care and protection." Chapter 7, p. 29

"He gaped at me and gestured, he croaked, he verged on strangulation. Sounds came spewing from the base of his tongue, harsh noises damp with passion. He was only demonstrating certain basic pronunciation patterns but the transformation in his face and voice made me think he was making passage between levels of being." Chapter 8, p. 32

" 'Sounds like a boring life' 'I hope it lasts forever,' she said." Chapter 11, p. 53

" 'There's something about German names, the German language, German things. I don't know what it is exactly. It's just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course.' "He was on again last night.' 'He's always on. We couldn't have television without him.' " Chapter 15, p. 63

"Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd." Chapter 15, p. 73

"If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires." Chapter 18, p. 85

"Who decides these things? What is out there? Who are you?" Chapter 20, p.103

"These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith." Chapter 21, p. 114



"What people in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos." Chapter 21, p. 120

"It just means that you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that." Chapter 21, p. 141

"They were content to exchange brief and unrelated remarks, as during a break for a commercial on TV. The tabloid future, with its mechanism of a hopeful twist to apocalyptic events, was perhaps not so very remote from our own immediate experience. Look at us, I thought. Forced out of our homes, sent streaming into the bitter night, pursued by a toxic cloud, crammed together in makeshift quarters, ambiguously death-sentenced. We'd become part of the public stuff of media disaster." Chapter 21, p. 146

" 'This is the nature of modern death.' Murray said. 'It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension.' " Chapter 21, p. 150

" 'Baba, I am the one in this family who is obsessed by death. I have always been the one.' 'You never said.' 'To protect you from worry. To keep you animated, vital and happy. You are the happy one. I am the doomed fool. That's what I can't forgive you for. Telling me you're not the woman I believed you were. I'm hurt, I'm devastated.'" Chapter 26, p. 196

" 'What if death is nothing but sound?' 'Electrical noise.' 'You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.' 'Uniform, white.' " Chapter 26, p.198

"Self-pity is something that children are very good at, which must mean it is natural and important. Imagining yourself dead is the cheapest, sleaziest, most satisfying form of childish self-pity." Chapter 28, p. 216

"Routine things can be deadly, Vern, carried to extremes. I have a friend who says that's why people take vacations. Not to relax or find excitement or see new places. To escape the death that exists in routine things." Chapter 33, p.248

"On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength." Chapter 37, p. 287

"I know how you feel. But the tough part is yet to come. You've said good-bye to everyone but yourself. How does a person say good-bye to himself? It's a juicy existential dilemma." Chapter 37, p. 293



Topics for Discussion

How does disaster affect Jack and his family? How does each deal with the disaster after they each come face-to-face with the airborne disaster?

Explain the concept of believing in an afterlife in relation to death. How do the nuns feel about non-believers?

How does the power of suggestion affect the family during the disaster?

How does Jack define Babette's sense of self?

What role does the television play in relation to Jack and his family?

What is the irony on the SIMULVAC team during and after the airborne disaster?

Describe the way the family communicates with each other during family conversations as well as one-on-one conversations.

What is Murray's role in relation to the Gladney family? Why is he so enthralled with their behavior?