Montana 1948

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LARRY WATSON

Larry Watson is a novelist and poet who grew up in Bismarck, North Dakota. He received a BFA and MFA from the University of North Dakota and eventually earned a doctorate in Creative Writing from the University of Utah. As a native of the Midwest, Watson often writes fiction incorporating distinctive Midwestern settings and landscapes. He has written several novels and one collection of poetry, and has earned various awards for his fiction. He taught English at the University of Wisconsin for 25 years before becoming a visiting professor at Marquette University. He currently lives with his wife in Milwaukee, with whom he has two daughters and two grandchildren.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The book takes place only three years after the end of World War II, in a small Montana town neighboring a Native American Reservation. After WWII, Americans were elated at the allied victory and admiring of the bravery and heroism of US soldiers, but the war also brought with it several unhappy realizations: the holocaust in Germany and the dropping of the first two atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki incited new dialogues about human capacity for evil and prejudice and the threat of virtually apocalyptic new technologies. In many ways the postwar climate in America was one where celebration and pride barely disguised profound new worries about the future. The story accordingly investigates hidden evils in an "all-American" Midwestern town, and puts pressure on the concepts of heroism, justice, and liberty by drawing attention to the bigotry and abuse of power that often exist just under the surface.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Montana 1948 is deliberately engaging the "western" genre: stories about heroes like those represented by Roy Rogers, John Wayne, and so many others, and the traditional western trope of Cowboys versus Indians. Watson's tale positions itself as a kind of antidote to these kinds of fictions by revealing the "real" American West—a place where heroes are not what they seem to be, and where "Cowboys" and "Indians" are not caricatures, but people.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Montana 1948*
- **When Written:** 1992-1993
- **Where Written:** Stevens Point, Wisconsin
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Mercer County in the fictional town of Bentrock, Montana
- **Climax:** Wesley goes down to the basement to discover that Frank has slit his wrists with the glass from Gail's preserve jars, preferring death over public arrest.
- **Antagonist:** Frank Hayden
- **Point of View:** First person (David Hayden)

EXTRA CREDIT

Prizewinner. *Montana 1948* was awarded the Milkweed National Fiction Prize in 1993.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story is narrated by David Hayden, who is 52 at the time he is telling the story, but is only 12 when the events of the story occur. He recalls the summer of 1948 as the summer everything changed for him.

One day David notices that Marie Little Soldier, his Native American babysitter and house-keeper, whom he loves dearly, is sick with a cough. His parents, Gail and Wesley, agree to call Wesley's brother Frank, who is a doctor. Marie protests, but they insist. When Frank is treating her, she is so upset and scared that Gail realizes something bigger is going on. After Frank leaves, Marie tells Gail that Frank has been sexually abusing women on the reservations who come to him seeking treatment.

Gail is furious, and tells Wesley what Frank has been doing. Wesley is the Mercer County Sheriff, but is also Frank's brother, and doesn't know how to proceed. He talks to Marie to get a clearer picture of her accusations. David realizes during this process that Wesley already knows his brother is guilty.

David and his parents have dinner a few nights later with Grandpa and Grandma Hayden. David hears Grandpa Hayden make jokes about Frank, who is his favorite son, liking "red meat." Frank is there, and Wesley takes the opportunity to speak to him. David sees them talking, but can't hear what they're saying. At the end of the conversation, Frank shakes Wesley's hand. On the way home, Wesley tells Gail that Frank has promised to stop the abuse. Gail says he needs to be punished for the crimes he has already committed.

The next day, Marie is found lying dead in her bed when Gail

gets home from work. They are shocked, because Marie had been showing signs of improvement. That night, David tells his parents he saw Uncle Frank go into their house in the afternoon. He also says he believes their neighbor and Wesley's deputy sheriff, Len McAuley, saw Frank as well. Wesley realizes his brother has probably killed Marie, and decides he must do something about it.

Wesley locks Frank up in the basement the next day, trying to spare him the embarrassment of being imprisoned in a jail cell. Grandpa Hayden comes to the house demanding Frank be released, and accusing Wesley of arresting him out of jealousy. Wesley tells his father that Frank is likely guilty of murder, and that he must face justice. After Grandpa Hayden leaves, Wesley tells David he should never let Grandpa or Grandma into the house if he's home alone.

The following day, a truck circles the house. David recognizes some of Grandpa's employees in the truck. They approach the house with an axe, presumably thinking they can break Frank out of the cellar door. Gail fires a shotgun at them as warning, and luckily Len shows up to head them off in time. Wesley comes home and asks what has happened. He realizes Grandpa Hayden has too much influence in this town, and that Frank will never be convicted. They all decide it is best to let Frank go.

But when Wesley talks to Frank, he realizes Frank is almost certainly guilty, and that he feels no remorse over killing Marie. Wesley cannot live with the idea of letting Frank go, and says he will take his brother to jail first thing in the morning.

That night David wakes up to the sound of shattering glass. He finds his parents awake. They tell him Frank is smashing preserve jars in the basement, for attention, and that no one should go downstairs. In the morning, however, when Wesley goes to wake Frank up, he finds him dead—Frank has slit his wrists with the broken glass. David believes that now everything can go back to normal, and feels grateful for his Uncle Frank's decision.

Of course, things do not go back to normal. David's family leaves Montana that winter. His father practices law in North Dakota, and David enjoys a relatively good life. He eventually becomes a history teacher, believing all histories contain concealed stories of abuse and depravity. He marries a woman named Betsy.

One night Betsy is having dinner with David and his parents, and she brings up the summer of 1948, remarking that Montana back then really was "the Wild West." Wesley slams the table in anger, and tells Betsy she must never blame Montana. The novel ends with David sitting in his father's seat at the table later that night—he believes he can still feel his father's blow reverberating through the wood.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

David Hayden – David is the story's contemplative and highly perceptive narrator. He tells the story as a grown man of 52 looking back on his childhood. The events of the summer of 1948 mark for David a rude transition into the unpleasant and more complicated realities of adulthood. David is a thoughtful and somewhat quiet and solitary boy, who loves living in the countryside and going on long hikes, horseback riding, hunting, and fishing. At 12, he believes he is in love with his caretaker, Marie Little Soldier, but when he is older he recognizes that this love was chaste and innocent, though still very real. David's childhood was pleasant and uneventful prior to the summer of 1948, but when unsettling rumors about his Uncle Frank come to light, David must contend with some very adult and unpleasant realities: his uncle is a sexual predator and a murderer, many of his heroes are bigots, and his life will never be carefree again. When David grows up he teaches history—he is in part interested in history because of all of the untold stories and tragedies he believes are contained in many historical accounts; for the story of Frank and Marie Little Soldier was not recorded anywhere, but in many ways describes life in Montana better than any official history could.

Wesley Hayden – David's father and the elected Sheriff of Mercer County. Wesley has always felt inferior to his older brother Frank, who is a doctor and hero of WWII. Wesley has an injured leg (from a horse kick in his youth) that causes him to walk with a limp, and prevented him from serving in the military. Wesley's father was also Sheriff, and though Wesley followed in Grandpa Hayden's footsteps, he has always played second fiddle to his brother, who is by far the favorite son. Wesley graduated from law school, and his wife Gail insists he would be happier practicing law than being the sheriff. Wesley generally dislikes Native Americans, a fact that David often tries to forget or ignore. He believes they are lazy and foolish. His prejudice prevents him from seeing his brother's crimes for what they are, and it takes Wesley some time to realize his brother is a predator who has deliberately victimized many women and has murdered Marie Little Soldier. Once he comes around to this fact, however, he fights determinedly for justice, despite threats from his father and the reality that Mercer County will never convict a man as beloved as Frank Hayden.

Gail Hayden – Wesley's wife and David's mother. Gail is an opinionated, idealistic woman who fights for Marie Little Soldier in spite of the fact that her alleged abuser, Frank Hayden, is a hero of the community. Unlike her husband, Gail does not harbor obvious prejudices against Native Americans, and is the first to believe Marie's story and advocate for justice. It is frequently implied that Gail is tired of Mercer County, and wishes her husband would agree to move somewhere and practice law. She doesn't think he can be himself as the Sheriff,

and frequently pushes him to be a better and more honest man.

Marie Little Soldier – David's caretaker. Marie is a vibrant Sioux woman with a great sense of humor whom David loves deeply. The Haydens consider her a member of their family, yet she sleeps in a servant's room off the kitchen even though there is a free bedroom upstairs. She falls ill with pneumonia, but refuses to see a doctor. Wesley calls his brother Frank against her wishes, and Gail is concerned by how afraid Marie seems. Marie tells Gail that Frank is a well-known sexual abuser of Sioux women. She is presumed to be murdered by Frank shortly after her disease seems to improve.

Frank Hayden – Frank is Wesley's brother. He is a highly charismatic and handsome doctor and war hero and is greatly liked by many in the community. However, he sexually abuses Native American women who come to him seeking medical care. Marie Little Soldier discloses this information to Gail, and Frank (presumably) kills her in retribution. Frank essentially admits his crimes to Wesley, and Wesley later comments that Frank showed no remorse at all and thought Marie Little Soldier was less worthy than a dog.

Grandpa Hayden (Julian) – Grandpa Hayden is a bigoted and potentially violent man who favors his son Frank over his other son Wesley. He knows about Frank's abuse of Sioux women, but his only concern is that Frank will father a non-white child. He is furious when Wesley arrests Frank, not because he believes that Frank is innocent but rather because he considers the crimes, perpetrated as they were against "Indians," to be unimportant. He is a very powerful man in Mercer County, and Grandpa Julian's influence is one of the main reasons Wesley believes Frank will never be convicted of his crimes.

Ronnie Tall Bear – Ronnie is Marie Little Soldier's boyfriend. He is an all-star athlete, but is not accepted to any universities because of his race. He eventually enters the military. David fondly remembers Ronnie and Marie as members of his "real" family, people bound not by the obligations of blood but rather by bonds of friendship and acceptance.

Len McAuley – Wesley's deputy, Len is an older man who has worked alongside both Wesley and Julian. Len is a reformed alcoholic who begins drinking again shortly after he realizes Frank Hayden has murdered Marie Little Soldier. He remains loyal to Wesley and Gail after Frank's arrest, and rescues Gail and David when Dale Paris and other employees of Grandpa Hayden attempt to break into the house.

Ollie Young Bear – An "exemplary" Native American man in the minds of many white people in Mercer County, Ollie Young Bear is a hardworking man married to a white woman and generally distanced from the Sioux nation. Wesley seeks his help in investigating Frank's crimes, and Ollie is able to find Native American women willing to testify against Frank.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gloria Hayden – Frank's very pretty blonde wife. She is quiet and subservient. David is attracted to her and feels very conflicted about it. It is frequently implied that Gloria is having trouble conceiving a child—Grandpa Hayden often teases her about it.

Grandma Hayden (Enid) – Grandma Hayden is a frail old woman who has an unknown heart condition that makes it dangerous for her to become too excited or upset. She must exit the room when difficult things are discussed and the family is careful not to say too much around her.

Daisy McAuley – Wife of Len McAuley, Daisy is good friends with Gail Hayden and stands by Wesley and Gail after the death of Marie Little Soldier.

Doris Strickland – A white woman who marries Ollie Young Bear.

Nutty – David's **horse**, who lives at Grandpa Hayden's house. When Julian becomes outraged at Wesley for arresting Frank, David is primarily worried about never seeing Nutty again.

Doris Looks Away – A friend of Marie Little Soldier. Doris comes to look after Marie when she is sick and the Haydens are away.

Dale Paris – An employee of Julian Hayden, Dale is the leader of the group of men who (on orders from Julian) come to Wesley Hayden's house in order to break Frank out of the basement.

Mel Paddock – The state attorney. Mel is responsible for deciding whether or not to issue indictments against alleged criminals. Wesley works with Mel after the arrest of Frank—Mel and Wesley agree that an indictment for murder is hopeless, but Mel does decide to indict on the lesser charge of sexual assault.

The Russells – Mr. Russell is the president of the local Bank. Mrs. Russell is an active kleptomaniac, but her theft is tolerated by the community in Mercer County, especially as her husband pays back all the stores from which she steals.

Betsy Hayden – David's wife when he is grown. Betsy is intrigued by the story of David's childhood, and doesn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation, dismissing it as simply a result of living in "The Wild West."

Ole Norgaard – Lives on the edge of town and brews his own beer. Wesley swears by his recipe.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LAW VERSUS JUSTICE

The central conflict in *Montana 1948* concerns the tensions and differences between the practice and enforcement of law and the more abstract notion of justice, and the realization that the law does not or cannot always provide justice. The book repeatedly notes how the practice and enforcement of law is susceptible to public opinion and abuses of power.

Dr. Frank Hayden takes advantage of the fact that the his brother, Sheriff Wesley Hayden, does not have jurisdiction in the reservations, and abuses Native American women who trust him to provide care for them. His abuse is enabled by a legal kind of technicality. What's more, the Sherriff is an elected official in this town. That means Wesley must make sure he has the support of the people of the town before he makes an arrest. His son David notes, in fact, that his father is at his most social when he is closing in on a suspect. This is in part the reason Gail Hayden, Wesley's wife, wishes he were a lawyer and not a sheriff—perhaps he could pursue justice in the courtroom in a way he could not on the streets.

The arrest of Frank Hayden proves especially difficult, because the law is not well equipped to deliver justice. The fact that public opinion of Frank Hayden is so high—and the public opinion of Native Americans is generally low—makes it unlikely that he will be indicted on the murder of Marie Little Soldier, though Wesley is sure of his brothers' guilt. The power that the Hayden Family has in this town is another factor that corrupts the law. Grandpa Hayden (Julian) will make sure that his favorite son Frank does not go to jail—his wealth and influence allow him to bend the law in his favor.

Wesley himself is often torn about his duty as the law describes it and his duty to justice. He knows the law, in practice, will not convict his brother. Yet he decides to continue pressing charges anyway. He refuses to be personally responsible for the unjust release of his brother. Gail also pursues justice over law—though her husband has no jurisdiction on the reservations, and despite the fact that the law has historically failed to protect the rights of Native Americans like Marie Little Soldier, she insists that the Sherriff do an investigation.

The novella thus portrays how the ideal of justice is often unmet by the practical realities of the legal system in the United States, particularly for the less powerful. Following WWII, the US was experiencing a kind of rude awakening, as the horrors of the war ushered in a clash between idealism and realism—Watson is making a powerful point about the reality of corruption, compromises, and abuses that are present even in "all-American" small-town life. The book takes a stand against the notion that the US is idyllically "free" or "fair" by depicting the profound difference between law and justice.

FAMILY AND LOYALTY

Montana 1948 explores different kinds of familial loyalty, and what happens when these loyalties pull people in different, even opposite, directions. Wesley Hayden has a duty to his brother, but also to Marie Little Soldier, who cares for David and is described as being "like family" several times in the novel. He first tries to deny that his brother Frank could have done the things Marie accused him of doing, but Frank's guilt quickly becomes clear. He remembers how, as boys, Frank often saved him from abuse and bullying at the hands of older kids. He feels indebted to his brother—he is torn between two loyalties. What's more, he also feels conflicted about his duty to Marie and his duty to his wife and son, who are endangered when he decides to lock up Frank in the basement (in order to spare him the embarrassment of a jail cell).

Grandfather Hayden chooses one son (Frank) over the other (Wesley). He even goes so far as to send men to Wesley's house to break Frank out, which terrifies Gail and David. This is a pattern that, it is revealed, has occurred throughout the boys' childhoods. Frank has always been the favorite—Wesley has never earned his father's love or loyalty.

The narrator of the novel, David, feels conflicted about whether or not he should "rat his uncle out." He loves Marie deeply, and hates his Uncle Frank for what he did, but cannot let go of the fact that Frank is family. Tellingly, when David is grown, one memory from his childhood stands out—he remembers playing football with Marie and her boyfriend, Ronnie Tall Bear, and feeling as though the three of them together made a "real family" that wasn't defined by the obligations of blood but rather ties of affection. The book therefore asks what defines a family—is it biological? Should familial love and loyalty truly be unconditional? In many ways the book serves as an account of how an irrational commitment to biological and familial ties can be destructive. But it also maintains that "family" is something individuals can define for themselves—no one is bound to any one definition of family. In fact, the novella portrays the decisions a person makes about what "family" means to them as fundamental to their growth and identity.

RACISM, PREJUDICE, AND THE AMERICAN WEST

Montana 1948 is a historical fiction about life in the "American West" shortly after the Second World War—it serves as an account of how racism affected individual lives in the specific time and place indicated by the book's title. Bias against Native Americans in the Hayden's community is fundamentally unquestioned. David, who narrates the story as he looks back from adulthood, comments that as a child, he never questioned certain biases, but now he can see them for

what they really are. Marie must sleep in a small servant's bedroom off the kitchen, even though there is a free bedroom upstairs. Ronnie Tall Bear, though a star athlete, does not go to college because he cannot get accepted as a Native American. Wesley, though he is Marie's advocate, and (we are led to believe) a generally good man, dislikes Native Americans as a group, believing them to be lazy and dishonest, and their beliefs to be foolish and old fashioned. Frank, meanwhile, is blatantly racist—Wesley believes his brother thought less of Marie Little Soldier than of a dog. And Grandpa Julian is of the opinion that abuse of Native Americans is something that just happens—his biggest concern about his son Frank's abusive behavior is that Frank will accidently end up with a non-white child.

In the novella, popular depictions of the American west—"Cowboys and Indians" as they appear in movies, television shows, and radio programs—are often held up against the realities of the town. David spends a great deal of time sifting through these images and trying to reconcile them with the world he actually lives in. His dad, "The Sheriff" is not nearly as exciting as a western cowboy and his job ends up not being about "defeating bad guys" but rather extremely morally complex. David's caretaker, Marie Little Soldier, meanwhile, does not match stereotypes of "Indians" he sees in popular culture. Throughout the novel, Watson calls attention to one of the most forgotten and underplayed struggles in US history: that of Native American communities who want to maintain their culture, identities, and dignity in a United States that has systematically disenfranchised them and looks upon them with little more than prejudice.

IDENTITY

The novel often asks its reader to consider what determines a person's identity. Is someone defined by their profession? Their familial position? Their successes or mistakes? Their race or culture? Or is there such a thing as "true" identity, some identity that exists independently of all of these things? Gail maintains that Wesley cannot be his "true" self while working as a sheriff, and wishes he would start practicing law instead. When his family talks to him, Wesley often wonders aloud whether they talk to him as a father, a brother, a sheriff, or something else.

David's awareness of identity—and its ability to shift and change in different circumstances—is also growing throughout the novel. Before the summer of 1948, Uncle Frank was to David a "hero," an "athlete," and a "doctor." After the events of the novel transpire, David can no longer think of him as any of these things: Frank is a sexual abuser, a criminal, a murderer. And even worse, his father becomes the brother of a murderer—a startling shift in identity that David struggles to accept.

During all of this, as well, David is growing into and constructing an identity of his own (See "Coming of Age"). The novella explores these questions about identity in order to outline all of the different ways "identity"—a seemingly stable or constant truth about a person—is in fact difficult to pin down, and is prone to dramatic shifts and changes.

GROWING UP

The narrator of *Montana 1948*, David Hayden, often describes the events in the summer of 1948 as events that wrenched him out of the innocence and obliviousness of childhood. The novella is therefore wrapped up in a coming of age narrative. Several elements of his coming of age are present throughout his recollection of the story. The first of these is David's increasing sexual awareness. David is 12 years old when the events of the story take place. He is experiencing a kind of sexual longing for the first time (for Marie, for certain classmates, for his Aunt Gloria)—these urges, because he does not understand them, inspire guilt and fear in him. This kind of dynamic is a highly common trope in coming of age narratives.

David also experiences an increasing awareness of human fallibility and evil. Like many coming of age fictions, the novella depicts the disruption of a childhood belief in the infallibility and upstanding moral character of adults. David's heroic Uncle Frank is revealed to be a hateful bigot who abuses women and murders Marie. Wesley's job as sheriff turns out to be a position fraught with moral conflict and tragedy—before the events of the summer of 1948 David imagines his dad's job is dull, and wishes his dad was more like the sheriffs on TV. David also sees how racism affects everyone living in his community—he realizes his father's distaste for Native Americans, he realizes the injustices Native Americans face daily, and he ultimately recognizes prejudice even in people he deeply admires. He eventually understands his parents have weaknesses, and that the mere presence of his mother or father does not make him safe. He often finds himself comforting Gail—this role reversal impresses upon him the essential humanity of his parents. His naïve belief that his parents are invincible and will always be able to protect him is shattered.

There is also the general sense in the novel that things can never be the same again, that some changes are inevitable and permanent. As David leaves his childhood behind—both literally, when they move from the house, and figuratively—he repeatedly acknowledges a feeling that he will never be able to go back. This is yet another classic figuring of a coming of age story: David realizes that childhood is only temporary, and that time is always moving forward.

The coming of age theme in the novel serves to articulate the narrator's coming to terms with new responsibilities and unpleasant realities. It is perhaps fitting that a story about postwar America is told via a coming of age narrative. The Second World War was a time when certain realities—human

capacity for evil and atrocity, the horror and threat of new military technological advancements, among others—came sharply to light. In some ways we can imagine that as our narrator David is coming of age in 1948, the US is going through a similar kind of development, maturing out of a kind of innocence and grappling with new and unfamiliar questions.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE WIND

Montana 1948 frequently references the windiness of Bentrock, Montana. Gail loves the wind, because she feels it has a kind of cleansing effect, though she notes the wind in Montana smells too much of ice and rock (a lifeless smell), and wishes it smelled more like dirt (organic and full of life). Grandpa Julian, meanwhile, aggressively states that anybody who doesn't like wind ought to get out of Montana. The wind is a natural result of the setting, but it also symbolizes the unavoidability and often harshness of change, bringing to mind the phrase "winds of change." It blows incessantly, just as time moves irreversibly forward, and as David comes to understand his childhood will not last forever, and that adulthood brings with it new and difficult challenges, the wind serves to underscore that this is a story about dramatic and irreversible change.

NUTTY

Nutty is David's horse, who stays in the stables at Grandpa Hayden's house. When Grandpa Hayden confronts Wesley about the arrest of Frank, Wesley tells David he can never let Grandpa in the house ever again. Wesley cries, not because his family had been ripped apart, or because his relationship with his grandfather has forever changed, but because he fears he will never see Nutty again. This is, however, not a trivial impulse on David's part—Nutty is a figure for childhood itself. The horse had enabled David's exploration, his long walks, hunting and fishing expeditions, and imaginary adventures. When David mourns the loss of Nutty, he is not merely mourning a pet, but sorrowfully acknowledging that his life will never be the same as it once was, that his childhood as it was will never return.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Milkweed Editions edition of *Montana 1948* published in 1993.

Prologue Quotes

❝ A story that is now only mine to tell. I may not be the only witness left—there might still be someone in that small Montana town who remembers the events as well as I, but no one knew all three of these people better. And no one loved them more.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Gail Hayden, Marie Little Soldier, Wesley Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: xvi

Explanation and Analysis

In the Prologue to the novel, David Hayden lays out the plan of the book in clear, lucid terms. David was a child during the events he's going to tell us about, and now he's an adult--so his recollections of the events might be imperfect. Nevertheless, David feels a*need* to tell his story again: the story concerns people he loved dearly, and so by telling his story, he'll be honoring their memory.

David is an important character in the novel because he's both an active participant in and a passive observer of the events. His main duty is to record the past--as a historian, he'll examine the evidence, in the process uncovering some information that certain people might like to forget.David suggests that the story is "his," not only because of his proximity to the people involved, but because he *loved* the people involved.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ The harshness of the land and the flattening effect of wind and sky probably accounted for the relative tranquility of Mercer County. Life was simply too hard...nothing was left over for raising hell or making trouble.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, David immediately draws a connection between the people of Mercer County, Montana, and the natural world. The environment itself is harsh and

desolate--there's not much around but wind and dust. Humans have had to fight a long battle with the natural world in order to build civilization in this part of Montana. Such a battle is so long and difficult that there's not much time left over for "mischief." In other words, Mercer County is a calm, tranquil place because everyone works so hard just to get by.

The passage is suspenseful, even theatrical, because it immediately suggests that there *was*, in fact, some"trouble" in Montana--and that's what David is going to tell us about. And yet, as David will show, much of the "trouble" in Mercer County took place in secret, beneath this facade of tranquility and hard work. As David matures, he'll become more aware of the secret evils taking place in his beloved hometown.

> As long as my father was going to be a sheriff, a position with so much potential for excitement, danger, and bravery, why couldn't some of that promise be fulfilled?

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Wesley Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to Wesley Hayden, David's father. Wesley isn't at all like the stereotypical sheriffs David has met in "cowboy and Indian" Westerns--on the contrary, he's polite, laid back, and generally mild-mannered. In this, Wesley seems to be a disappointment his son: David wants a father who fights heroic battles and arrests lots of criminals.

In short, David is bored. He wishes that his life in Montana were a little more interesting--as far as he can tell, nothing of any importance happens anywhere nearby. As David learns more about his community, though, he'll come to realize that there is, in fact, a great deal of crime going on beneath the surface--and furthermore, he'll come to see how childish and narrow-minded his longings for violence and crime (and his ideas about heroism) were all along.

> The sheriff of Mercer County was elected, but such was my grandfather's popularity and influence—and the weight of the Hayden name—that it was enough for my grandfather to say…now I want my son to have this job…It would never have occurred to my father to refuse.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Grandpa Hayden (Julian), Wesley Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David explains that his family is, essentially, Montana royalty. David's grandfather, Julian Hayden, is a well-known figure, prosperous and well-respected. As a result, David's father, Wesley, has a lot to live up to: he wants to impress his father and honor the Hayden name. Thus, when Julian pulls some strings to ensure that Wesley will become the next sheriff, Wesley has to accept: he doesn't want to disappoint his dad.

The passage shows the first hints of corruption in town. For now, the corruption is pretty "standard," just some "good ole boy" nepotism (a father getting his son a good job, but potentially ousting others who were more qualified). And yet the passage shows signs of a tension in the Hayden family: Wesley is loyal and indebted to his family, but he also seems to resent his father telling him what to do at all times. Deliberately, Watson doesn't tell us right away what the crime in Montana *was*--he leaves us to guess. For now, it seems possible that the crime might have had something to do with Wesley and his father.

> I never wondered then, as I do now, why a college didn't snap up an athlete like Ronnie. Then, I knew, without being told, as if it were knowledge that I drank in the water, that college was not for Indians.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Ronnie Tall Bear

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David mentions some of the racism and bigotry inherent in Montana society in the 1940s. David knew of a young Native American man named Ronnie Tall

Bear, who was an exceptionally gifted athlete. Ronnie would have made a fine athlete at any number of great colleges--and yet, David recalls, Ronnie never attended a college. At the time, David didn't think too deeply about why Ronnie never went to college; he just accepted that college wasn't a place for Native Americans like Ronnie. Now, it seems perfectly obvious to question *why*Ronnie would never have been allowed in a college--and to see the unwritten racist rules of higher education and society itself. Thus, the passage conveys the extent of the apartheid state in America in the 1940s: certain races and ethnicities simply weren't treated fairly.

"Are you telling me this because I'm Frank's brother? Because I'm your husband? Because I'm Marie's employer?...or because I'm the sheriff?"

Related Characters: Wesley Hayden (speaker), Gail Hayden, Frank Hayden, Marie Little Soldier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wesley becomes aware that his brother, Frank, may have been molesting Native American patients. Wesley's wife, Gail, has been talking to Marie Little Soldier, a Native American woman whom Frank may have molested recently. Wesley is at first reluctant to believe that his charismatic, heroic brother could be a criminal. He lashes out at Gail, asking her why she's telling him about his brother. He wonders if Gail is speaking to him as Frank's brother, the sheriff, Marie's boss, etc.

In short, the passage shows Wesley in the grips of an identity crisis. He isn't sure what *he* is: should he define himself by his profession, his father, his brother, etc.? By investigating his brother's indiscretions, Wesley will have to come to terms with family loyalty and unbiased justice, and he'll also learn to carve out an identity for himself.

I was beginning already to think of Uncle Frank as a criminal...Charming, affable Uncle Frank was gone for good.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Frank Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

David begins to believe what his mother has been saying about Frank: that he's a molester of his patients, abusing his relationship with Native Americans. It's worth noting how quickly David changes his mind about Frank--it happens almost immediately. David isn't quite old enough to understand the nature of Frank's sexual improprieties (he barely understands his own sexuality, much less his uncle's), but merely witnessing his parents' fraught exchange about Frank has already changed the image of "Uncle Frank" in David's mind forever. The old idea of the "charming, affable Uncle Frank" whom David was unquestionably loyal to was a kind of innocence for David, and once that innocence has been lost--even if it turns out that the charges against Frank are baseless--it can never be wholly gotten back.

He was not only her husband, he was a *brother*...brother to a *pervert!*

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Frank Hayden, Gail Hayden, Wesley Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David becomes aware of his father's resemblance to Uncle Frank--a man David now suddenly regards as a sexual pervert. David notices that his father is calmly eating a piece of pie--a strange behavior, considering how recently he found out about Marie's molestation. Furthermore, David is disgusted by Wesley's resemblance to Frank, and suddenly finds it impossible to look his father in the face.

The passage is interesting because it shows David adopting an instinctive moral pose. He seems to be judging his father for acting so casually--suggesting that David has matured almost overnight because of the incident with Frank. Furthermore, while David's response to his father's resemblance to Frank is a little immature, it brings up a serious point: should we ever be judged for our family's actions? Intuitively, it seems, the answer is no: Wesley might look like Frank, but he's not responsible for Frank's sins in any way. Wesley's *actions*, however--trying to downplay the

accusations against Frank, and (at this point) seemingly choosing family loyalty over unbiased justice--are worth judging.

Chapter 2 Quotes

All of these accomplishments made Ollie the perfect choice for white people to point to as an example of what Indians *could* be.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Ollie Young Bear

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to Ollie Young Bear, a Native American man who's somewhat respected by the town's white community. Ollie married a white woman, and his appeal in the white community seems to be based on his marriage more than anything else. David notes Ollie's popularity even among bigots.

While David doesn't get into why, exactly, a Native American man who's married a white woman would be more appealing to the white community than a Native American who stays within his own culture, it's easy enough to guess. Ollie seems to want to be a part of white America—he's internalized the racist worldview that whiteness equals superiority, and so tries his hardest to escape his own culture and "assimilate." This makes him a great token figure for racists to point to--both to try and prove that *they're* notracist and to try and prove that all the other Indians are somehow not living up to their potential.

Had I any sensitivity at all I might have recognized that all this talk about wind and dirt and mountains and childhood was my mother's way of saying she wanted a few moments of purity, a temporary escape from the sordid drama that was playing itself out in her own house. But I was on the trail of something that would lead me out of childhood.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Gail Hayden

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David spends some time with his mother, Gail. Gail is very careful when talking to David about the incident with Frank and Marie: she mentions to him that it's "possible" that there will be "trouble" in the future, but gives almost no other details about the matter. In such a way, Gail does her son the courtesy of keeping him informed, but holds back on the more unsavory details of her brother-in-law's possible acts of molestation. Instead, she speaks in a metaphorical way about the wind--a constant factor of the landscape, and a symbol of both harshness and potential change.

In all, the passage shows the divide between David and Gail at this point in David's maturity: David is so concerned with figuring out more information about Frank's crimes that he is unable to understand his mother's feelings. He wants to know more, while Gail wants an escape from the horrible things that are coming to light around her.

Looking in the dead bird's eye, I realized that these strange, unthought-of connections—sex and death, lust and violence, desire and degradation—are there, there, deep in even a good heart's chambers.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David is walking around outside, shooting off ammunition. He fires at a bird, killing it immediately. As David looks at the dead animal on the ground, he's deeply moved, and he feels guilty for resorting to shooting to help himself feel better. As he stares into the bird's eyes, he comes to realize that all people have the capacity to do evil: David, who's just killed a bird for no reason; Frank, who molests women; and perhaps even Wesley. Even in a "good heart's chambers" lies the potential for death and sadism, for a particularly sexual kind of violence.

The passage is a key turning-point in David's coming-of-age, because it shows David becoming more cautious in his investigation of Frank's crimes. He's no longer desperate for information at any cost—on the contrary, he beginning to realize the full extent of his uncle's crimes. Furthermore,

he's beginning to think all people are capable of committing crimes, whether or not they actually do. Realizing one's own capacity for evil is a key mark of maturity, Watson suggests.

> "That's not the way it works. You know that. Sins—crimes—are not supposed to go unpunished." Even then I knew what the irony of the conversation was: the secretary lecturing the lawyer, the law enforcement officer, on justice.

Related Characters: Gail Hayden, David Hayden (speaker), Wesley Hayden

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gail tells Wesley the truth about Frank's crimes. Wesley has just had a conversation with Frank, and Frank has supposedly promised to stop molesting women. Wesley seems satisfied with the matter, but Gail insists that Frank needs to be punished for the crimes he's already committed: he can't be allowed to get away with sexual assault for so many years. David is mature enough to recognize the irony that Gail is telling Wesley, a law enforcement officer, how to do his job.

In a sense, Gail is exactly right: Frank deserves punishment. But it's easier for her to say than it is for Wesley. Wesley is Frank's brother, and he can't bring himself to punish one of his own family members. In the end, we'll see, Gail's advice inspires Wesley to become a more committed sheriff, standing up for what he knows to be right instead of sweeping Frank's crimes under the rug.

> "You know what your granddad said it means to be a peace officer in Montana? He said it means knowing when to look and when to look away."

Related Characters: Len McAuley (speaker), Grandpa Hayden (Julian), David Hayden

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David has a strange encounter with Wesley's deputy, an old, recovering alcoholic named Len. Len is a loyal follower of Wesley's father, Julian—at times, he seems more loyal to Julian than to Wesley himself. Here, Len repeats for David a lesson that Julian has often given Len: being a law enforcement officer means knowing "when to look and when to look away." In other words, it's implied, Julian thinks that police officers should be able to take the law into their own hands—choosing when and when not to dole out justice.

We've already seen that Julian is willing to bend the law to suit his own family's needs. But here, it's suggested that Julian might even be willing to ignore his son Frank's horrific, serious crimes, simply because Frank is his favorite sun. Julian subscribes to an unfair, biased interpretation of justice, in which family loyalties, economic power, and racial prejudices are more important than the law itself.

> He had long since stopped being my father. He was now my interrogator, my cross-examiner. The Sheriff. My Uncle's brother.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Wesley Hayden, Frank Hayden

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David explains to his parents that he's seen Frank walking to and from the house the previous afternoon. Wesley is very curious about David's story: he asks David lots of questions about when, exactly, Frank was walking around the house, and what he looked like. As David answers his father's questions, he can feel his father transforming into a different kind of person altogether. Wesley isn't acting fatherly at all: on the contrary, he's acting like a sheriff—deliberate, sharp, serious, etc. David also notes that Wesley is acting like Frank's brother. The big question in the second half of the book is whether or not Wesley is capable of being sheriff and Frank's brother (and David's father, as David himself is now involved) at the same time—how to parse out the different parts of his identity, weighing loyalty against justice, family against the law.

> I imagined all the Indians of our region, from town, ranches, or reservation, gathered on top of Circle Hill to do something about Marie's death. But in my vision, the Indians were not lined up in battle formation as they always were in movies, that is, mounted on war ponies, streaked with war paint…Instead, just as I did in my daily life I saw them dressed in their jeans and cowboy boots, their cotton print dresses, or their flannel shirts.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Marie Little Soldier

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David thinks about the death of Marie Little Soldier—a death that may have been caused by Frank. David has a feverish nightmare in which he imagines Marie Little Soldier's fellow Native Americans preparing for vengeance. Although David is used to thinking of Native Americans dressed up in war paint, preparing for a charge—as in typical Western movies—in the dream he instead thinks of them dressed in civilian clothes.

It's important to notice that David imagines the Native Americans in a more peaceful, and yet still highly Americanized pose. As he learns more about his Uncle Frank, David seems to be making a subconscious effort to treat Native Americans as human beings, rather than Hollywood caricatures. This dream shows Native Americans as still subject to white American racism--they're dressed in the clothing of the culture that oppresses them--but also as powerful figures in their own right. People don't need to fight bloody, exciting battles to be heroes; they can be heroic just by standing up, as normal people, for what is right.

Chapter 3 Quotes

> He was building a case, and my father did this the same way he ran for reelection—by gathering in friends and favors. I suppose he was collecting evidence as well, but that part was never as obvious to me. What he seemed intent on doing—just as boys at play do, just as nations at war do—was getting people to be on his side.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Wesley Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David watches his father being more social than usual—a practice that usually means that Wesley is running for reelection as sheriff. This time, Wesley is trying to build as much community loyalty as possible before he arrests Frank for molesting Native American women: he wants to be sure that when he arrests a hugely popular local, his own brother, people will support him in his actions.

As David notes, Wesley seems to be becoming like Frank in the act of preparing to arrest him: in other words, he's being witty and social, generally charming people into agreeing with him. One could say that Wesley is changing his entire personality as he pursues his brother. Wesley is no longer content to sit back and allow his brother to occupy the spotlight—nor is he willing to let his brother get away with crime. Watson suggests that Wesley is acting both out of an abstract sense of justice and a highly personal desire to boot his brother off the "pedestal."

> I suddenly felt sorry for my father—not as he stood before me at that moment, but as a boy. What must it have been like to have a father capable of speaking to you like that?

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Wesley Hayden, Grandpa Hayden (Julian)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Wesley faces his parents' fury when he suggests that their son is a molester, and should be in jail for his crimes. Here, Wesley's father, Julian, yells at him, furious that Wesley is attacking Julian's favorite son, Frank. David is sorry that Wesley had to grow up in a house in which Julian was such a harsh, prejudiced master: Wesley must have endured a lot of verbal abuse over the years.

The passage shows that David is becoming more mature: he's beginning to put himself in other people's shoes and see the world from their point of view. By recognizing that even his father used to be a child, David asserts his own wisdom, and ceases to be a child himself.

"Screwing an Indian. Or feeling her up or whatever. You don't lock up a man for that. You don't lock up your brother. A respected man. A war hero."

Related Characters: Grandpa Hayden (Julian) (speaker), Wesley Hayden, Frank Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Here, David eavesdrops on his grandfather Julian as he verbally abuses Wesley, David's father. Wesley is suggesting to Julian that Frank—who's always been the favorite child—should be sent to prison for molesting his Native American patients. Julian doesn't deny that Frank has molested some Native American women; he simply says that such actions aren't really crimes at all.

Put bluntly: Julian is an openly racist character—someone who doesn't consider Native Americans "real" Americans, or even real humans, deserving of basic dignity and rights. Thus, he lashes out at Wesley for suggesting that Frank is anything other than a great man. Julian argues that Wesley shouldn't arrest his own brother—and yet Frank, in spite of being Wesley's brother, is a vile criminal, and deserves to be locked up. One wonders how much of Wesley's motivation for arresting his brother is an abstract respect for the law and how much is his desire to assert his independence from his own family and his overbearing, racist father.

A murderer may have been locked up a floor below and the molecules of his victim's dying breath still floating in the air, yet these were not strong enough finally to stand up to my boy's hunger for chocolate cake.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Marie Little Soldier, Frank Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're reminded that David is still a young boy. He's learned a lot of disturbing stuff about his family recently, and yet he's still a fairly immature 12-year-old kid who likes cake. Wesley brings home some chocolate cake the afternoon after his argument with Grandpa Julian, perhaps to take care of David and reassure him that everything is going to be okay. Wesley's kindness to his son contrasts markedly with Julian's cruelty toward his own child, Wesley. Wesley seems to have learned how to be a good father by doing exactly the opposite of what Julian did to him.

But our name was no joke. We were as close as Mercer County came to aristocracy. I never consciously traded on the Hayden name, yet I knew it gave me a measure of respect that I didn't have to earn.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David thinks about his status as a Hayden. For his entire life, David has had a measure of respect among his peers and community, simply because of his last name. David's grandfather, Julian, is a famous man, well-respected throughout Mercer County and beyond. Therefore, the rest of Julian's family is considered to be highly respectable and trustworthy, David included. At its best, the Hayden family is a mandate to be great: Wesley and Frank had a lot to live up to growing up, and the greatness of their father gave them their own aspirations of greatness. And yet the Hayden family name has its dark side: it allows certain members of the Hayden family, such as Frank, to get away with crimes without punishment. Frank molests Native Americans for years without punishment, confident that if he's ever caught, he'll get off scot-free because of his father. Frank's cynical confidence in his own privilege mirrors the social privilege that allowed white people throughout the American West to exploit Native Americans with impunity.

"He's guilty as sin, Gail. He told me as much…Goddamn it! What could I have been thinking of? Maybe a jury will cut him loose. I won't. *By God, I won't.*"

Related Characters: Wesley Hayden (speaker), Frank Hayden, Gail Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wesley spells out some of the consequences of arresting his brother for the murder of Marie. Frank has most definitely killed Marie—he admitted it to Wesley moments before. Now, Wesley is prepared to arrest Frank for his murder, in spite of the fact that they're brothers. Wesley recognizes that it seems unjust to punish one's own family so harshly, and yet he also recognizes his duties as the sheriff of the community.

It's important to note that Wesley's philosophy of justice, and that of the townspeople, reverses 180 degrees here. Previously, it has seemed that Wesley might pardon Frank for his actions, acting out of brotherly loyalty and respect for the Hayden name. Now, however, it's clear that Wesley will enact justice "by the book," while the *jury* might clear Frank out of respect for the Hayden name. As Wesley investigates Frank's crimes further and further, his commitment to justice becomes more intense.

> You see, I knew—I knew! I *knew!* —that Uncle Frank's suicide had solved all our problems.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Frank Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter 3, Uncle Frank, imprisoned in the basement of the house, slits his own wrists with broken glass jars, ending his own life. Frank doesn't want to be humiliated in public for his acts of molestation, and perhaps he finally feels some guilt for his crimes—we never know. David thinks that Uncle Frank's suicide will end the family dispute: Frank will never be taken to court, never tried for his actions, and never tarnish the family name *or* unfairly escape justice.

Of course, it's important to take David's words with a grain of salt. Frank's suicide does not end the family's problems at all; it just starts some new problems. Frank's death will always be a black mark on the family history; furthermore, we're given every reason to believe that Julian will blame Wesley for his favorite son's death: Frank will be a martyr from now on. David is still an immature kid, naively confident that Frank's "disappearance" suddenly solves everything.

Epilogue Quotes

> I wondered again how it could have happened—how it could be that those two people who only wanted to do right, whose only error lay in trying to be loyal to both family and justice, were now dispossessed, the ones forced to leave Bentrock and build new lives.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Wesley Hayden, Gail Hayden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we learn that David's parents, Gail and Wesley, are essentially forced to move away from Montana after Uncle Frank's suicide. Wesley never speaks to Julian again, and his role in Frank's suicide makes his continued existence as sheriff in Montana impossible. Thus, David is forced to watch as his beloved parents pack up and leave their house, taking David with them. David is mature enough to recognize the injustice here; even though Gail and Wesley were only trying to do right, while Julian was trying to conceal a racist murderer's crimes, it's Wesley and Gail who have to move, and Julian who remains in his position of power.

This injustice within the Hayden family then highlights the regular plight of Native Americans, for whom this kind of thing happens all the time on an institutional as well as individual level. Indeed, it's suggested that nothing changes in the status quo of Mercer County after all this--Julian, along with his racist ideals and white community support, remains in power, and the Native Americans who were molested (and killed, in Marie's case) by Frank don't even receive the comfort of having their suffering acknowledged.

> I find history endlessly amusing, knowing, as I do, that the record of any human community might omit stories of sexual abuse, murder, suicide.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we learn that David grows up to be a successful history teacher. He teaches his students what the books tell him to, but inside he knows that this must not ever be the whole story--his experiences as a child (those related in the novel itself) have taught him as much. Because Frank's suicide was ultimately ruled an accident, and his crimes of rape and murder were never investigated, all these events were essentially erased from history (except, of course, the history related in David's writing). Thus David has personal experience with the way history is inherently biased and incomplete, constantly being told and revised by the "victors"--those in power who want to cover up their crimes and erase the suffering of their victims.

> I believe I remembered the incident so fondly not only because I was with Marie and Ronnie, both of whom I loved in my way, but also because I felt, for that brief span, as though I was part of a family, a family that accepted me for myself and not my blood or birthright.

Related Characters: David Hayden (speaker), Marie Little Soldier, Ronnie Tall Bear

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David answers a strongly implied question in the novel: what other options are there in place of literal, biological family? Wesley's family is in ruins, since his brother, Frank, has turned out to be a molester and murderer of Native American women, and has committed suicide when confronted with his crimes. Furthermore, Wesley's father has essentially banished Wesley from Montana, and never speaks to him again. Here, though, David suggests that it's possible to make one's own family connections—not a family based on blood, but one built around human connection and love. David isn't literally related to Ronnie or Marie, but he feels a close connection to them both, particularly in this singular moment that stays with him forever. Perhaps it's intimate, voluntary connections, not the solemn traditions of a "family name," that define a real family.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The narrator, a man named David, reflects on the "summer of his twelfth year" in 1948 and tells us that the images remaining from this summer are "indelible"—the years have not erased or faded them. They are of a young Sioux woman, coughing so hard in a bed in David's house that David is afraid she will die. Another image of David's father, kneeling on the kitchen floor, begging David's mother for help in an unfamiliar, frantic voice. The third is of his mother in the window, on a hot and **windy** day, loading his father's shotgun.

This introduction establishes the role that David's memory plays in reconstructing the story. It highlights the time that has passed, and the importance of these events, which have never faded from David's memory. Already we can see traditional parental behaviors breaking down: a crying father, a mother with her husband's shotgun—images that would startle a young boy.

David mentions other images—broken glass, rotting vegetables—but notes that his memory does not separate these images into a chronological list. They all coexist chaotically at once. That summer was forty years ago. Two months ago, David's mother died, suddenly and quickly, of a heart attack. His father died a slow and painful death of cancer 10 years ago. He will not tell us about the fate of Marie Little Soldier, because to do so would be to give too much of the story away. David notes that there may still be someone in the small Montana town of his childhood who also remembers this story, but no one who knew these three people as well as him, and no one who loved them more.

We learn that David is most likely the last living member of the family he's just described. The death of David's parents underscores David's adulthood, his aloneness. He also considers himself more fit to tell the story than anyone else who might know it because he knew these characters better and loved them better than anyone else. This again emphasizes the crucial role that perspective plays in this story: David's growth and perspective is as crucial to the development of the story as the actual events in it.

CHAPTER 1

The town of Bentrock, Montana (located in Mercer County) in 1948 has a population of less than one thousand people. It is bordered on the west by the Fort Warren Indian reservation, a piece of land that is barely farmable and basically worthless and inhabited by members of the Sioux tribe. The roads are unpaved and the climate is difficult—residents must deal with extreme changes in temperature and never-ending **wind**. David guesses that the harsh and demanding climate keeps people so busy they can rarely find time to make trouble—this is why Mercer county is so peaceful.

We can glean right away that the inequality built into the fabric of this small-town society—the Sioux are relegated to some of the worst land in the state. This fact is almost glossed over, however, suggesting the degree to which the young David doesn't question why *the Sioux land is so bad. David mentions that the residents of Bentrock endure difficult weather conditions—which, while true, is ironically positioned in this section, following as it does the mention of the poverty on the reservations. Tellingly this narration refers to Mercer County as "peaceful": in this way, the author David is embodying and communicating young David's naiveté about the reality of his town.*

The relief over the end of World War II is still palpable in Mercer county. Many men had been in combat—though not David's father Wesley, who has a bum leg due to a kick from a horse—and now they only want to settle in with their families and tend their farms.

Again the picture being painted is one that will be systemically torn down by the events of the story: this postwar small town America is not nearly as idyllic as it seems, and its war heroes are not so heroic.

This tranquility makes for easy work for Wesley Hayden, who is the Mercer County sheriff. As a general rule, being the Sheriff of Mercer county doesn't require great strength or courage. Young David is disappointed in this fact, and wishes his father's job were more exciting. He notes that his father doesn't even look like a western sheriff. He wears a shirt and tie and does not wear boots or a cowboy hat. He owns a small Italian made handgun but never carries it—which is just as well, David thinks, considering the gun is puny and doesn't look the part. David's toy guns look more real to him.

David's childish desires and expectations come to the foreground—he finds his father's job boring and undemanding: his father doesn't even need to carry a gun. For David the absence of old-western style violence means an absence of excitement and challenge altogether. His sense of the world is shaped by entertainment and toys. He is still a child, but his innocence will not last much longer

Wesley does not meet David's standards in this way, but he also fails to meet his wife Gail's standards. Wesley has a degree from the University of North Dakota Law School, and has passed both the North Dakota and Montana state bar examinations. David's mother believes his father should move out of Montana and practice law instead of being a sheriff—not because law is a "safer" profession, but because this is the only way she believes Wesley can be "fully himself."

The question of identity is raised: we learn that Gail and Wesley construct identity differently. Gail believes Wesley's profession prevents him from being his "true" self, and Wesley has clearly resisted her. The book will continue to wonder about what makes (or breaks) a person's identity and sense of self. The difference between lawyer and sheriff also calls attention to the difference between law and justice.

David tries to explain his mother's thinking. Grandpa Julian Hayden (Wesley's father) had once been Sheriff of Mercer county for many terms, along with his deputy, Len McAuley. (David, as an adult, wonders why his grandfather wanted to be sheriff. He concludes it is because his grandfather wanted and needed power.) When Grandpa Hayden finally retired, he turned the post over to Wesley, keeping the Hayden name in office. This is why Wesley is trying, as David puts it, to "turn two ways at once." Grandpa Hayden wants him to be a Hayden, and Gail wants him to simply be himself—something that is impossible in Grandpa Hayden's presence.

Wesley, it is revealed, is torn between two loyalties. His father wants him to keep the Hayden name in office, but his wife (ostensibly for his sake) wishes he could move away from Grandpa Hayden, so that he no longer felt the pressure of his name. Grandpa's corruption is also hinted at in this section. His desire to keep one family in charge is anti-democratic and betrays a love of power and prestige over a love of law. Wesley's desires are notably absent from this description—his decision-making is entirely informed by the wants of his family.

Another reason David's mother wants them to leave Montana is that she fears for her son's development. David does not enjoy or understand living in a community—the rules and requirements intimidate him, and he prefers to be out in the countryside alone. He flees the town and its laws and regulations as often as possible, and Gail worries this is stunting his personal and social growth. But David is happy here—he rides **his horse**, Nutty, and goes fishing, hiking and hunting. He feels that out in the country is the only place where he can be his true self, free of the pressures of human society.

David's isolation worries his mother because it is perhaps inhibiting his growth. This is yet another ironic kind of gesture—by the end of this story, the idea that the countryside could protect David from the realities of adulthood is almost laughable. David's childhood naiveté is accompanied by a kind of naiveté on the part of his mother, who will eventually realize nothing can prevent David from growing up. The realities of the external world will find him even in his isolation.

David's mother works as a secretary, so they have hired a housekeeper, a Sioux woman named Marie Little Soldier. She is a large, beautiful woman with a big personality to match, who likes to tell tall tales and jokes. David loves her (in a 12-year-old's chaste way) because she is beautiful and unconventional, and because she cares for him.

David's love for Marie exists on a kind of boundary: he believes he is "in love" with her but he is in fact recognizing and appreciating that Marie takes care of him, that she is like family. David's sexuality is just starting to emerge, but he is still a boy. Note also how he loves Marie unreservedly, without any sense of prejudice, and focuses on her personality. Many of the older white characters don't see Marie as a "person" in this way.

Marie has a boyfriend named Ronnie Tall Bear, whom David worships. Ronnie is perhaps the most accomplished athlete to ever graduate from Bentrock high school and was a star in every sport he tried. Young David never wonders, as a child, why Ronnie does not go to a top-notch school on a football scholarship—he simply accepts that "college is not for Indians." As an adult however, David understands Ronnie could never have been accepted to college as a Native American in 1948.

David is blissfully unaware, as a child, of the injustices that Native Americans like Ronnie face. Though he admires and even "worships" Ronnie for his athletic prowess, he does not question it when Ronnie does not go to college. It is not until he is an adult that he recognizes prejudice for what it was—and Ronnie's story takes on a darker and more complicated quality.

Marie stays in a servant's room on the ground floor of the house, even though there is a spare bedroom upstairs. One day David passes the door and hears horrible coughing. When Gail returns for her lunch break, David tells her he thinks Marie is sick. Gail is alarmed and investigates, quickly determining that Marie has a fever. Marie is only wearing a nightgown, and David is reminded of the time he accidentally saw her naked getting out of the shower. Gail gives Marie extra blankets and tells her to stay in bed until evening, when they can ask Dr. Hayden (Wesley's brother) to come over. Marie protests, saying she doesn't need a doctor, but Gail ignores her and tells David to keep an eye on her.

Though David and the rest of the family love Marie in an almost familial way, she is still made to sleep in a servant's room—presumably because custom dictates Native American servants do so. Though she is "like" family, her race and position prevent her from being treated as such. Marie's sickness brings out certain dynamics in the house: David is made uncomfortable, but also intrigued, by Marie's exposed state. His mother treats Marie like a child, ignoring her wishes and insisting on care.

David checks in on Marie frequently. She sleeps fitfully and mumbles deliriously. Once she calls David in and makes him promise to keep the doctor away from her. David protests that it's just his Uncle Frank. Marie coughs violently and David rubs her back and feels that she is shaking all over. When he promises to keep Frank away, she seems to relax.

Marie's weakness and fear begins to hint at the terrible reality (one of racial prejudice and abuse) lurking under the picturesque surface in Bentrock. The reader can begin to see that Frank is not "just" Uncle Frank—there's something more to his identity.

When David's parents return home his father remarks that David is "babysitting the babysitter." This is the first time David realizes Marie was hired in part to look after him, not simply to clean and cook. Gail goes to check on Marie, and then tells Wesley he better call Frank, as Marie's fever has worsened. David insists that Marie doesn't want to see a doctor, but his father dismissively responds that it's only "Indian superstition."

Marie's sickness reveals the first of many realities to David—that she cares for him not only out of generosity but also out of necessity—it is her job to do so. Once again Marie's insistence about Frank is ignored, this time by Wesley, who dismisses her because of prejudice. He will not take her worries seriously because he believes she is a 'superstitious Indian."

David first learned of his father's racism when he was about seven or eight. He received moccasins as a birthday gift from some extended family member and Wesley had refused to let him wear them, complaining they'd make him "flat-footed and lazy as an Indian." David admits his father was not as hate filled as other bigots—in fact Wesley probably never considered himself prejudiced—but he held Native Americans in low regard and believed they were, with very few exceptions, lazy, superstitious, and irresponsible. David, when he is grown, puts on a pair of moccasins every day after work, as a small act of defiance.

Wesley is for the most part a good man—but the book emphasizes that even good, small town Americans are capable of certain evils. Part of David's journey to adulthood involves reconciling his love and respect for his father with his father's bigotry—which was undeniable, even if it was comparatively mild. His adult rebellion (in the form of wearing moccasins) demonstrates that he continues to grapple with these realities even as a grown-up.

Wesley gets on the phone immediately. David hears has father tell his Aunt Gloria to put Frank on the phone. Gloria is one of the prettiest women David has ever seen—and though she and Frank have been married over five years, they have no children. David has heard his grandfather ask Frank if Gloria cannot have kids because "the chute is too tight."

David's budding sexuality is evident in his feelings for Gloria—whom he recognizes is attractive. But the innocence and youthfulness of this crush is especially evident when it is introduced alongside complex marital troubles and the crass and cruel humor of Grandpa Hayden

Wesley tells Frank that Marie is sick, and warns him she does not want to be treated by him. Frank asks why and Wesley says he doubts she's ever been seen by a "real" doctor. When he hangs up he jokingly tells Gail that Frank has agreed to do a little dance around the bed and bang on some drums—Gail doesn't laugh and goes back to be with Marie.

Wesley and Frank bond over their mutual disdain for Native American beliefs and traditions—a trait that seems to have been passed down though the family. Gail's displeasure is evident. She clearly cares more for Marie than she does for Frank.

When Frank arrives David is struck by how handsome and charismatic he is. He feels sorry for his father, who seems to him a less attractive and less impressive version of Frank, who was a star athlete in high school and a heroic doctor in WWII. Wesley is dull in comparison to Frank, who is favored by everyone in town including Grandpa Hayden, who sometimes speaks of Frank as though he is his only son. David remembers Grandpa Hayden giving a speech at a town celebration, praising Frank's wartime accomplishments while Wesley limped around picking up litter.

The complicated dynamic between the Hayden boys and their father is fleshed out. Frank's charisma, his accomplishments, his local fame—these all make him "more impressive" in David's young eyes. David even feels sympathy, almost pity, for his somehow inferior father. Grandpa Hayden's favoritism is also made evident. He has chosen Frank over Wesley before and will (as the reader will eventually discover) do so again.

Uncle Frank asks for a drink and Wesley offers him some of Ole Norgaard's homebrewed beer. Frank says he might have some after he treats Marie. Frank goes into Marie's room and shuts the door behind him. Almost immediately Marie begins screaming for Gail. Gail goes to knock on the door ask asks if everything is okay. Frank tells her, with disgust in his voice, that Marie insists Gail stay in the room.

The gravity of the situation becomes increasingly clear. Marie's screams elicit disgust from Frank, disinterest from Wesley (who is more interested in promoting Norgaard's beer), and concern from Gail. The family begins to split apart even in this early moment, foreshadowing the more dramatic fractures to come.

Wesley tells David to come wait outside on the porch. They hear muffled shouts of "no" coming from Marie's room. Wesley ignores them. Finally Frank comes out and asks Wesley for a beer. Wesley leaves and David notices he feels uncomfortable alone with Uncle Frank. When Wesley returns he asks Frank why Marie had been upset. Frank says it's just because she's used to being treated by a "medicine man." Wesley remarks that Native Americans will never make it in the 20th century unless they give up their old fashioned superstitions. Frank agrees, and says Marie might have pneumonia.

David's discomfort around Frank suggests that he has already started to rethink Frank's identity. Frank's status and prestige no longer impress David, who is suddenly fearful of his uncle. Wesley remains unflinchingly on his brother's side, sharing a beer and gossiping about Marie and her (in their opinion) inferior worldview. Once again their racism against Native Americans is apparent and, in Wesley's case, makes him blind to what is going on.

Wesley asks if Marie should be in a hospital. Frank responds that Marie would probably never agree to go. At this moment Gail comes outside and confirms that Marie will be staying at home with them. David notices that his mother seems angry. Though she has never been a huge fan of Uncle Frank, she has never seemed blatantly hostile towards him, as she does now. Frank puts down his unfinished beer and makes an excuse to leave.

David is perceptive enough to notice that his mother is unusually unhappy with Uncle Frank. Uncle Frank's quickness to leave suggests that he has an idea why Gail is angry—his guilt is already being hinted at. Again we can see Wesley at the center of a familial conflict—his wife is against Frank and he is with him (at least for now).

Gail tells David to go into the house. Instead of doing so, he tracks around the side of the house so he can eavesdrop on his parents' conversation—he remarks that if he hadn't done this, perhaps his childhood would have lasted longer. He hears his mother take a deep breath and tell his father what Marie has told her: that Uncle Frank has been molesting Native American girls—his patients—for years.

David here makes one of several decisions that apparently bring his childhood to an end. But the idea that David's innocence could have endured this conflict—that he could have remained blissfully unaware—is perhaps a childish notion in and of itself. Frank's crime is finally revealed, exposing the bigotry and abuse he conceals under his charm and social status.

Wesley paces and asks Gail if she believes Marie. She asks him why Marie would lie about something like this. Wesley suggests she might be confused because she doesn't know enough about modern medicine. He ignores Gail's protests and continues to rationalize in this way. Gail yells, and Wesley stops. Gail tells him Frank rapes these women, and makes them do demeaning things to themselves in the name of "medical treatment." David is shocked at the sound of his mother's voice pronouncing these words. David expects his father will yell or cry, but instead he asks Gail, "why are you telling me this?"

Wesley frantically tries to rationalize, presumably because Frank is brother, and he desperately wants this information to be untrue. Gail will not allow it though, and renders Frank's crimes to Wesley in harsh language. This startles David, whose conception of his mother is challenged by her use of these words. Wesley's response is strange, even to David, who expects that he will respond more emotionally to this news.

Gail doesn't understand the question. Wesley asks if she's telling him because he is Frank's brother, because he is her husband, because he is Marie's employer, or because he is the sheriff. Gail says "I'm just telling *you*." They are quiet for some time, and then Wesley asks if Marie has been a victim of Frank's assault before. Gail says yes, but she hasn't seen the worst of it. Wesley wonders if Marie will talk to him and Gail says she thinks so. Wesley claps his hands and gets up to go inside.

Wesley's crisis of identity is explained. He cannot compute the information Gail is giving him unless he understands which Wesley she's giving it to: should he act as a sheriff? As a brother? As a husband or employer? Gail is frustrated with the question—she believes Wesley is not defined by these categories. But Wesley feels he must choose one of these identities in order to act

David quickly runs back in the house so his parents won't know he's been eavesdropping. They say nothing to him and go straight to Marie's room. While they are gone, David examines Uncle Frank's fingerprints on his beer bottle. He realizes he is already beginning to think of Uncle Frank as a criminal—handsome, charming Uncle Frank is gone forever.

David is coming to terms with the malleable and shifting nature of identity himself—he inspects Frank's fingerprints, a tellingly childish imitation of criminal investigation—we can imagine he learned about it on television. But he has grown in his understanding of Uncle Frank—who is more, and more sinister, than his charming exterior.

When Wesley and Gail leave Marie's room they tell David that Marie is tired and needs rest. Wesley says he is going to talk to Len McAuley. The McAuleys are more like grandparents to David than David's own grandparents—they take an interest in him and entertain him when he is around. Len and Wesley talk out on the lawn, and Daisy McAuley comes to sit with Gail in the kitchen. Both Wesley and Gail are trying to see if the McAuleys have ever heard anything about Frank. David hears Daisy telling his mother that there are rumors that he doesn't "do everything on the up and up." She clarifies: "just the squaws though."

Wesley's first move in his investigation is to talk to his deputy (who was also his father's deputy) and ask Gail to talk to Daisy to gage how much gossip about Frank has already gotten out. This move highlights that Wesley's job as sheriff involves social maneuvering. The way the law operates is affected by the small town politics in Bentrock. It turns out Daisy has already heard Frank has been abusing Native American patients—though she uses euphemistic language to say so (to prevent David from understanding, but also, we imagine, to avoid facing the reality herself).

Later that night, Gail goes in to check on Marie one more time. When she comes out she looks exhausted and frail. Wesley is eating some chocolate cake that Daisy brought over, and casually asks Gail how Marie is doing. Gail cannot believe he has an appetite after all that's happened. David realizes she is seeing his father differently: not as her husband, but as a brother to a pervert, a brother to a man who abused his power and authority to take advantage of women. David knows this because he is seeing Wesley the same way—he can hardly stand to look at his father, because he sees Frank's features on his dad's face.

Wesley's status as Frank's brother, as a blood relative of a heinous, sexually abusive criminal, begins to dawn on both David and his mother. David is disgusted by his father's resemblance to his uncle, and Gail lashes out as well. The book wonders about the meaning of biological relation. Does Wesley carry some of Frank's evil and perversion in him simply because he is Frank's brother and shares his blood? What do the actions of our family members say about us?

Wesley tells Gail he doesn't want this all over town, reminding her that they have no proof of anything yet. David sees a familiar disagreement between them: his father, touting proof and evidence, his mother relying on feelings and faith. Gail notes that rumors have already started spreading, and Wesley clarifies that he doesn't want it getting back to his father. David notes that in many ways Wesley had nothing left to praise God with because he used up all his faith and loyalty on his "earthly father," Grandpa Hayden.

Where Gail is concerned with justice (and follows abstract ideals) Wesley is concerned with procedure, with law. Yet Wesley's loyalty to law is perhaps also shield that lets him also be loyal to his father. The law is more complicated than justice. David's remark about his father's resistance to religion is telling: Wesley's devotion to his biological family is almost dogmatic. Wilson, the novelist, is warning against such blind devotion to biological ties.

Gail emphatically asserts that David will never be treated by Frank again. David is nervous about being addressed, and hopes he doesn't give away the fact that he's been eavesdropping. Wesley tells Gail not to bring David into this. She asks him again why he won't say he believes Marie. David expects his father to insist Marie is either confused or lying, but instead he says nothing. David realizes his father doesn't doubt Frank's guilt—he knows his brother as well as anyone, and he knows his brother has committed these crimes.

A troubling new fact comes to light—Wesley does not doubt Frank's guilt. David must now contend not only with the reality of his Uncle's crimes, but with his own father's willful tolerance of those crimes. Wesley has been resisting action not because of doubt, but because of devotion to the "Hayden" name. David must comes to terms with the fact that his father is capable of such moral shortcoming.

CHAPTER 2

The next day Wesley goes to the reservation, though he has no jurisdiction there, to investigate Marie's accusations. Later that day, David sees him at the Coffee Cup (a café where he often goes to sit and talk with his "regular group" of men from around the town). Today Wesley is sitting with Ollie Young Bear, a native American man who married a white woman and is admired by the town's white people for being an example of "what Indians could be." David, though his father admires Ollie deeply, is intimidated by him. And David has heard Marie say that Ollie simply wishes he were white. David wonders if Ollie is the right person for his father to be talking to.

That Wesley must leave his jurisdiction to investigate Frank's crime emphasizes Frank's manipulation of the legal system—he victimizes Native Americans in part because he can do so "outside" the reach of the law. Wesley nevertheless pursues justice (in part due to Gail's insistence). Though he notably chooses to communicate with Ollie, an "assimilated" Sioux who is held in higher regard among white people than he is among Native Americans. This could be due to Wesley's prejudice, but it is also likely he knows that his case hinges on the support of white people.

When David gets home, Marie is asleep. He notices the house is unusually quiet—Marie usually plays the radio all day. David turns it on hoping that she will hear it and feel better when she wakes up.

This touching moment describes an effort on David's part to return things to normal, to go back to how things were. Moments like this remind us that David is very much still a child.

When his parents get home, David overhears them. Wesley tells Gail he wants to talk to Marie again, but that he doesn't want Gail to be in the room. David wonders if his father is sparing his mother the more gruesome details, or if he is trying to limit the number of witnesses to Marie's testimony, in the interest of protecting Frank.

David is now forced to wonder if Wesley is acting in the best interests of Gail, Marie, or his brother. It is still unclear where Wesley's loyalties lie. Is he acting as a sheriff, a brother, a husband, a Hayden? David, and Wesley, continues struggling with the question of family and identity.

While Wesley talks to Marie, Gail takes David for a short walk outside. David works up the courage to ask her what's going on with Marie. She answers cautiously, telling him there's some "possible" trouble on the reservation. She then changes the subject, telling David she loves the **wind**, because it always feels as though it is "bringing something new." She says she is not used to the smell of the wind in Montana, and misses North Dakota where she grew up. As an adult, David understands his mother was talking about the wind in order to communicate her desire for a few moments of peace and purity. But as a child he cannot see this, and simply continues to ask about Marie before noticing his father has finished speaking with her and returning to go back inside the house.

David's mother is more careful talking to him than she is talking to Wesley. She qualifies her language, disguises her belief in Frank's guilt. She talks about the wind (an ever-present feature of the Montana landscape.) Winds signify change, fresh starts. But for her the wind also reminds her of home, of what she's lost. Her comment paints a complicated picture of the fraught nature of change—it is irresistible, often painful, often necessary. David, however, can only acknowledge this as an adult: his youth is emphasized by his innocent ignorance of his mothers' true meaning.


The following Sunday, David and his parents are on their way to Grandpa Hayden's house. Gail and Wesley had fought about going—Gail hadn't wanted to accept the invitation because she knew Frank would be there. Wesley had argued that he couldn't cut his parents out of his life along with his brother.

The involvement of Wesley's parents complicates the matter. It is suggested for the first time that exiling Frank from their lives might mean exiling Grandpa and Grandma Hayden. Wesley is as of yet unable to accept this fact, unable to place justice above being a Hayden.

When they arrive at Grandpa's house, Frank's car is already parked out front. The house is large and expensively decorated in a way that Wesley believes is cliché and tacky. But David loves the house, because it is big enough for him to disappear into.

Frank has appropriately arrived first—this gestures to his status as first among the Hayden boys, the favorite son. Wesley's distaste for his father's house further emphasizes the fact that he and Julian Hayden have little in common, and raises the question of why Wesley feels so loyal to his family.

Grandpa Hayden greets them in a traditional western shirt and a cowboy boots. When David sees him, he realizes that Grandpa Hayden would never let anything bad happen to Frank, his favorite son. Wesley casually remarks to his father about the **wind**, and Julian responds judgmentally: "If you don't like wind, you don't like Montana."

Grandpa Hayden's attire is a cliché "western" getup. This is appropriate given his tendency to ignore the more complex realities of the society he lives in, to worship Frank for his superficial qualities, and to dismiss the abuse of Native Americans as unimportant. In some ways, David's grandpa is like the sort of Western TV cowboys David used to worship.

David hears his father ask Grandpa Hayden if he has a minute to talk about Frank. David has the brief hope that Grandpa Hayden will hear about Frank's crimes and talk sense into him—make it so that Frank will never dare to hurt a woman ever again. But instead Wesley tells Julian that Frank and Gloria are trying to have children, and that he thinks Julian should lay off teasing them about it. Julian protests, saying that with two sons he expected to have more grandchildren by now. Then he clarifies: "and white. We want them white." Wesley goes silent, and Julian jokingly says that Frank has always liked "red meat." Then he says he suspects that there might be children on the reservations who look quite a lot like Frank. Wesley simply says he thinks Julian may be right about that.

It becomes even clearer that Frank's family has had an idea about his crimes for a while, and tolerated them. Julian's light and even jovial acknowledgement of Frank's abusive conduct is evidence of both his blind devotion to his son and his utter disregard for his son's victims. Grandpa Hayden has been a sheriff, yet his disinterest in justice is especially evident here. Wesley is caught yet again between loyalties and identities. His silence in the face of Grandpa Hayden's remarks illustrates his indecision and internal division. He's not ready to confront his father over all of this yet.

This is the second time David has heard his Grandfather say something about Frank and Native American girls. At Frank's wedding, Grandpa Hayden had said "now he's got a good-looking white woman for a wife. That better keep him off the reservation." At the time, no one had said a word.

David makes a connection between this moment and one from many years ago, understanding that the family's tolerance of Frank's behavior goes back several years. Their silence again illustrates indecision, but also complicity in Frank's crimes.

David sits between his grandmother and Aunt Gloria at dinner. David has had a crush on Aunt Gloria for a while—she is beautiful and kind to him. David has trouble looking at her tonight because he can't imagine that Gloria doesn't know what Uncle Frank has been up to. David tries to suppress a series of thoughts about how Frank could want to sexually abuse Native American women when he had a wife as attractive as Gloria. David feels guilty about it, but he has always envied Uncle Frank for being married to her, for getting to kiss her and have sex with her (even though David doesn't really understand these things at 12 years old.)

David's increasing sexual awareness is brought out in this section. David is not only grappling with the moral failure of adults, he's also grappling with the concept of sexual violence at a time when he is only just beginning to understand sex, attraction, and longing. His inability to understand Frank's actions makes him feel guilty, because he can't help but think of Aunt Gloria's physical attractiveness. Like many twelve year olds, he's not sure what's normal when it comes to sex.

After dinner David quickly excuses himself. He wonders if they will talk about Frank once he leaves, but realizes they can't say anything in front of Grandmother Hayden, who has a heart condition that worsens when she becomes stressed or worried. Before David leaves his grandfather gives him a pistol and tells him to shoot any coyotes if he sees them.

Grandmother Hayden's heart condition complicates further the issue of familial loyalty. Frank is being protected from the law. Grandmother Hayden is being protected from the truth (as is David, though he is discovering it anyway.) The implied question is: who will protect Marie?

David goes outside and shoots off several rounds of ammunition. He likes watching the dirt spray off when he shoots the ground. He notices a magpie and impulsively shoots at it. The bird falls from the tree, and when David goes to inspect his kill, he realizes that all of the tension over the last few days has been released by his killing something—shooting the bird has made him feel better. He looks into the bird's dead eye and sees connections he never saw before—connections between "sex and death, lust and violence, desire and degradation." He realizes even a "good heart" has these connections in it.

This is an especially poignant moment in this coming of age narrative. David is not only learning about the cruelty and perversion present in the hearts of adults (even adults he admires)—he is learning to recognize it in himself. In his adolescent discovery of sex, violence, and corruption, he also discovers moral ambiguity, the coexistence of bad and good in the same person. This is a profoundly "adult" concept for a 12-year-ols to grasp, and emphasizes the speed with which the events around him are making him grow up.

David goes for a ride on his **horse** Nutty around his Grandfather's ranch. As he rides, he sees his father and Uncle Frank talking down by a riverbank towards the back of the property. David dismounts, and sneaks closer. He cannot hear what they are saying. He sees Frank make a move towards his father, and holds onto his pistol tighter, perhaps imagining that he might shoot Frank. But then Frank simply shakes Wesley's hand, and the two of them walk off together.

David continues to get in touch with his more violent impulses, even going to far as to imagine himself shooting Frank, who looks as though he might attack Wesley. However, Frank ends up surprising David my shaking his father's hand. David expects to see violence, rejection, or anger—instead he sees a (rather brotherly) gesture of acceptance, though in that acceptance there is also the privileging of the bonds between brothers above the rules of law or justice.

On the way home Wesley tells Gail he talked to Frank. David pretends to b asleep in the backseat so that they will feel comfortable discussing it in front of him. Wesley says that the problem has been "taken care of" and that Frank has promised to "cut it out." Gail responds with a frustrated groan and Wesley is confused. Gail explains that Frank's sins cannot be left unpunished, ironically (David notes) lecturing an officer of the law about justice. Wesley is silent for a long time, then says that Frank will have to meet his punishment in the "hereafter," because Wesley wants nothing to do with it.

Wesley is so blinded by his familial loyalty that he thinks simply asking Frank to stop assaulting women has solved everything. Gail is not fooled, however, and is quick to point out that Frank's victims—the women he has already *abused—still deserve justice. That Wesley—an unreligious man—remarks about Frank meeting justice in the "hereafter" is notable—Is Wesley just ducking his responsibilities as sheriff to protect his brother and family? Does Wesley really believe there is such a thing as justice in the hereafter? Is he willing to accept that Frank will never face consequences for his actions?*

When they arrive home Doris Looks Away, another Native American woman, is there watching over Marie, whose condition has improved remarkably. David tells Marie about hunting coyotes at Grandpa's, and she remarks that coyotes are hard to find when you're looking for them. These are the last words Marie will ever speak to David.

By the fact that David never speaks to Marie again we learn that even after getting so much better, Marie will die. Her final remark to David—about the difficulty of finding a coyote if you are looking for one—is fitting: This is in many ways a novel about failing to see: failing to see wrongdoing, to see bigotry and abuse, to see injustice.

Marie Little Soldier dies the next day. Gail comes home shortly after 5 pm and finds her lying dead in her bed. When David comes home from fishing, neighbors are out on the porch staring at the house, and Uncle Frank is inside signing the death certificate. David knows before he even walks in the house what has happened. He remarks that he could have run away forever, that he could have held onto his secret, but that he doesn't—he simply walks inside.

We learn that David has a secret, and can guess—based on the fact that he knows what has happened to Marie before he enters the house—that it is related to her death. Once again David remarks that he could have run away, could have held onto his secret, but we can understand this is a fantasy. These are not problems from which David can run.

His parents comfort him, and everyone wonders how this could have happened. Marie's fever was down. Frank simply says pneumonia patients often get worse after they seem to get better. David hears his father making plans to inform Marie's family. He realizes that his father has often had to notify people of their loved ones' deaths. He is amazed that he used to think his father's job was easy.

David finally realizes that being the Sheriff of Mercer county is not a job for the fainthearted—it requires courage and compassion. When David realizes how many times his father has had to deliver bad news to the loved ones of a deceased person, it fundamentally changes how David sees his father, and how David understands courage.

Gail is upset with herself. Daisy insists Gail gave Marie the best possible care, but this does not make Gail feel better. Daisy suggests to David that he go next door and eat some of the pie she's just made, clearly trying to get him out of the house. David agrees. Next door he sees Len and realizes that Len's been drinking. This scares him, because Len has been on the wagon for many years. He tells David to sit down, and says to him that Grandpa Hayden always told him that being deputy sheriff in this town means knowing when to look away.

Gail seems to know that Marie should not have died. David is sent out of the room so that he might avoid hearing a difficult conversation—but is unknowingly sent into an even more difficult one with Len, who ominously tells David that Julian Hayden believes part of being a sheriff is looking away. We can assume Len has seen something he wants to look away from. David is rightfully frightened. That Len is drunk—after being on the wagon and not drinking for some many years—makes it clear to both the reader and David that Len knows something terrible has happened.

David hesitantly asks Len, "did you see something?" wondering if Len knows what he knows. Len asks David what he saw, and David gets too nervous to say. Instead he gets up to get the slice of pie he was meant to eat. Len tells him to look after his mother, and David wonders if Len is in love with her.

Though Len and David never actually tell each other what they've seen, they seem to be on the same page for a moment. Then David's youth shines through again, and he flees the conversation. His conception of Len is different now—Len may have loved his mother. David sees him as a complicated man harboring more than one secret, and love too as something complicated.

That night, David believes he can feel death in the house. He becomes panicked, and can hardly breathe. He goes into his parents' room. They ask him what's wrong, and he says that earlier this afternoon he'd seen something. They ask him what he's saying. David says he saw Uncle Frank cutting through the back yard and going into the house around 3pm. He had been sitting in the McAuley's outhouse, on his way to go fishing, when he'd seen it. Wesley presses him, interrogating him about the exact time, how sure he was. David remarks that his father had stopped being his father. He was the sheriff; he was Frank's brother.

David finally reveals to his parents that he'd seen Uncle Frank enter the house the afternoon Marie died. David notes this prompts a sharp change in his father—who cannot be a father in this moment—he must be the sheriff; he must be Frank's brother. But can he be both at once? It is unclear if he is gathering evidence in the interest of convicting Frank or in the interest of protecting him. He is yet again torn.

Wesley desperately tries to rationalize this information. Perhaps Frank was merely checking in on his patient. Perhaps David was confused. David mentions that Len probably saw Frank, too. This changes things for Wesley. He realizes that even if Len keeps this information quiet, Wesley will still have to see him every day at work, and doesn't think he can stand the guilt. Gail is silent. Wesley tells David he can go back to sleep.

It seems as though Wesley is entertaining the idea of continuing to let Frank get away with it, until he realizes Len has seen Frank, too. He knows Len will not believe the excuses he could make up for Frank. He realizes letting Frank get away with what he's done means a lifetime of guilt and shame for himself.

David sleeps fitfully, and has dreams about the Native Americans he knows play-acting in western cowboys—and-Indian movies. Instead of wearing hides and carrying tomahawks, however, they are dressed as he sees them every day, in flannel shirts and boots. In the dream they seem poised for attack, and David wonders if they want to avenge Marie's killer.

This dream literally converges popular constructions of the American west and the reality of life in the US for Native Americans. David sees the divide between "cowboys and Indians" only he sees it through a new and more realistic lens: Native Americans, not sensationalized or costumed, desiring justice.

CHAPTER 3

The Haydens cannot attend Marie's funeral because her family wishes to bury her in North Dakota. Gail tries to explain to Marie's mother that Marie was a part of their family too, but cannot change her mind.

Gail tells Marie's mother that the Hayden's were Marie's family as well—which brings into sharp relief the fact that Wesley has been protecting Frank, conceivably because he wants to remain loyal to his family. But who protects Marie? And is Gail right to say that Marie was a part of their family, given that she slept in the maid's room?

In the days following Marie's death, Wesley works long hours, and looks more and more exhausted. He is socializing more than usual, and David knows his father is trying to get people on his side before he makes an arrest; he always does this when he is closing in on a suspect. David notices in these times how his father—charming, witty, and social—resembles his brother more than ever.

This section highlights the unfortunate reality that justice cannot be served in Mercer County without popular support. The unsettling reality is that Wesley must fight Frank using Frank's own methods—manipulation, charm, social maneuvering. The law answers not solely to justice but also to public opinion.

Three days after Marie's death, Wesley brings Frank into the house. Frank seems cheerful, but Wesley looks ragged, and simply directs Frank to the basement. They stay down there a long time, and David can't hear any of their conversation. His father comes back upstairs alone, and looks out the window. David notes that his father is doing what David often does in school—being in one place physically but a different place mentally. Wesley tells David he will tell him everything once Gail gets home.

The contrast between the cheerful guilty man and the haggard officer of the law is stark. David recognizes himself in his father, and once again we see how childhood and adulthood converge in David in this story. He sees himself in his father—an adult recognition. But he childishly equates his Father's pain and dissociation with the distraction and boredom he feels in school.

When Gail gets homes Wesley tells her that Frank is in the basement because he wanted to be spared the embarrassment of being locked up in a jail cell. Gail can hardly process what Wesley is telling her. Wesley explains to David that Frank has broken the law and needs to be locked up. David says he understands and tries to keep from crying.

Wesley is still protecting Frank even as he tries to hold him responsible for his crimes. Gail can barely understand his reasoning—Wesley is willing to keep a murderer in his family's home in the interest of protecting family. It is a stunning example of Wesley's twisted logic—a logic twisted by his different opposing loyalties.

Wesley says he has not given any details to Mel Paddock, the state attorney. He wants to wait until he can tell Gloria. Gail tells him he should tell Gloria the truth, and tell her immediately. Before Wesley leaves to do this, he calls David outside and says that they will have to give the house a new coat of paint soon. He dreamily says that if it were up to him, he would let the house fall into disrepair, let the whole town wear down to bare wood, so that it wouldn't attract any new citizens, so that it might disappear forever. David doesn't understand what he means. Wesley then tells him that if there's ever any trouble, he should go find Len. David asks if Len knows about everything, and Wesley says he does.

Wesley must move forward with everything. Before he tells anyone, he feels he owes it to Daisy to let her know what's going on first. His conversation with David about letting the house fall into disrepair reveals his desire to be free of Mercer County—and by extension, of his father, his brother, and the Hayden name. It is as though he imagines the town would disappear along with all of his troubles. David is still too young to understand, but his father is expressing his desire to be free of his prescribed identity.

That night Grandpa and Grandma Hayden come to the house demanding to know where Frank is (Gloria has talked to them). Grandpa Julian is yelling relentlessly at Wesley, and David feels sorry for his father, and wonders what his father's childhood must have been like.

Once again David identifies with his father—he sees his father as a kind of child, and wonders what a childhood with Julian would have been like. This kind of empathy is another indication of David's increasing maturity.

David is sent upstairs but he listens to the conversation through an air vent in the kitchen. Julian demands to know why Wesley would throw Frank in jail for "beating up some Indian." Wesley realizes Gloria has not told Julian the truth. He says Frank has been sexually assaulting women—Julian says you don't lock up a war hero for something as trivial as "feeling up" an Indian. He accuses Wesley of being jealous of Frank, and Wesley snaps and tells Julian that Frank is guilty of murder. David hears his grandmother gasp, and in a flash realizes that the vent he's listening through is connected to the basement—and Frank is probably listening just like he is.

Julian's racism is on full display in this section: he thinks the assault and victimizations of Native American people is not a crime worthy of punishment—is not, in fact, a crime at all—because he doesn't think of the Sioux as really being people worthy of justice at all. Julian even goes so far as to suggest that Wesley is pressing charges because he is jealous of Frank, and of Frank's superior accomplishments. This is a staggeringly misguided thing to think: he supposes Wesley could only possibly care about the victimhood of Native Americans if he had some other motive.

Julian tells Wesley to "stop this before I have to." Wesley does not respond. Grandma Hayden cries. Finally Julian says he won't resort to begging and leaves. David is not sure what to do. What finally drives him to go back downstairs is the fact that his father had brought home a chocolate cake that afternoon. In spite of everything, David still has his "boy's hunger" for chocolate cake.

This is another touching reminder of David's age. He has just witnessed an incredibly difficult conversation. He must know on some level his family will never be the same again. And yet his "boy's hunger" for chocolate cake remains—he is still a child. It's also worth noting that despite everything going on Wesley brought home that cake. Wesley is trying to preserve some normality too, perhaps trying to preserve his son's childhood within this very complicated situation.

When David goes downstairs, his father is on his knees with his head in Gail's lap. David is startled by how old and weak his father looks. His mother and father both tell him it is time for bed. Then his father tells him that if his grandparents ever come to the house again, he is not to let them in.

David's relationship with and perception of his parents is changing. He sees his father weak and resting his head in his mother's lap. He is perceiving real vulnerability and weakness in his parents, and it startles him—this is not how children think of their parents. And he now understands the severity of the break between Wesley and Julian, and that Julian might even be dangerous.

That night David cries for the first time since the beginning of these tragic events. He is crying because he is afraid he will never see his **horse** Nutty again, which is stabled at his grandfather's house. He knows he *should* be crying because his uncle, whom he once idolized, is a bad man. Or because his parents and grandparents, and his community will never be the same again. But instead he cries for Nutty.

David's sorrow at first seems misplaced—his concern for his horse perhaps appears trivial in light of all of the day's events. But in so many ways, Nutty is a figure for David's very childhood—and David's sorrow at the fact that he will never see his horse again reveals that on some level David understands his life has been irreversibly changed.

The next day Wesley leaves to see what other arrangements he can make for Frank. David thinks about how his family, once associated with power, prestige, and influence, will now be associated with perversion and scandal. David wishes he could disown or deny his identity as a Hayden, but knows he cannot.

David must now contend with the reality that he is a blood relative of Frank, that he shares Frank's last name—a name that will be scandalized by Frank's arrest. David realizes, perhaps for the first time, how a certain identity can both enable and limit a person.

On the way to the grocery store, David thinks about how—in spite of small town life having a reputation for closed-mindedness and intolerance—the citizens of Mercer county tolerate quite a lot. Mrs. Russell is a kleptomaniac, but her husband is president of a bank and reimburses the storeowners she steals from. There is a long list of people whose behavior is tolerated by the townspeople—maybe Frank, and his molestation of Native American girls, will simply be added to this list.

David's thoughts here reflect one of the larger projects of the book: to deconstruct stereotypes about small, all-American towns, frontier living, and the American West. David's town "tolerates" plenty—but notably tolerates the behavior of certain kinds of Americans, of white Americans. Certainly Native Americans would enjoy no such advantages in Mercer County.

David cannot see women around town without wondering if they number among Frank's victims. He is ashamed because the image of Frank abusing certain women stirs him sexually. He runs home with the groceries and his mother notices how upset he seems. He demands to know when Frank will be out of the house. His mother simply tells him his father is trying to do what's right.

David's sexuality once again confuses and ashames him. Normal questions and feelings about sex are overshadowed by Frank's crimes, and David wonders where the line is between his (normal and benevolent) desires and the devious and perverted desires of Frank.

Later that day David notices a truck circling the house. He recognizes one of his grandfather's employees, Dale Paris, in the truck, and thinks the other men are also employees of Grandpa Hayden. He tells his mother and she gets worried, and tells him to call his father. David calls his father's office, but can't reach him. He goes to tell his mother and sees the men have exited the truck and are approaching the cellar door with an axe. Gail is loading a shotgun. He tries to help her load it, because he can see she is struggling, and she tells him to go outside and find some help.

Grandpa Hayden values Frank's well being over Wesley's so much that he is willing to send men with an axe to Wesley's home—where his wife and child live—in order to break Frank out. This scene also once again exposes David to the basic vulnerability of his parents. David must help his mother load a gun—he must instruct and coach her. It is a role reversal, the child helping the parent, and David is struck by it.

David runs to his dad's offices but cannot find Len or his father anywhere. He runs back to the house and on the way hears a shotgun fire. He enters the house and can tell from the angle of the gun that his mother has only fired a warning shot. She is yelling at the men to get away. David plans to go steal the gun from her because he cannot stomach the idea of his mother shooting someone. But just as he approaches the window he sees Len tracking across the yard, carrying a revolver. The men back away from the house and get back in their truck.

David cannot tolerate the idea of another member of his family resorting to violence, or compromising their integrity. He has already seen how his Uncle and Grandfather are capable of abuse, he has already noted how his father's racism and blind loyalty have clouded his judgment—he is not willing to see his mother, a calm, idealistic, and nonviolent women, shoot a man (even if that man poses a real threat).

Gail runs out the door to thank Len and gives him a big hug. David thinks the three of them—him, his mom, and Len—look like a family. Wesley comes running across the street and asks what happened. Gail tells him about the men in the truck and about Len rescuing them. Wesley says he had been talking with Ollie Young Bear and Mel—who is going to bring charges of sexual assault against Frank.

Len saves David and Gail by showing up at the critical moment. David thinks the three of them look "like a family"—but we must wonder what a family "looks" like to David, who has been grappling with questions about the meaning of family throughout the story. Is David somehow wishing that Len in his current heroic moment was his father?

Wesley announces that he will speak to his father, and that he will make sure Len is in the house if he is not there. Gail tells Wesley he doesn't have to do any of this—that he can just let Frank go. Wesley tells her she doesn't mean that. She says she does—because Frank will never be convicted. Len agrees. A Hayden will not be imprisoned in this town if his only victims are Native Americans. Wesley relents and says that at least the word will be out about Frank's crimes—maybe that will put a stop to him. Len adds that Wesley will never win another election if he tries to put his own brother in jail.

Reality sinks in—trying to bring Frank to justice in this town, which is both run by the Haydens and hostile to the Sioux, is futile. What's more it is dangerous and damaging. Even Gail is willing to admit this now. No one can, in this moment, see the merit in pursuing justice when it will never be served, and when the pursuit of it will potentially lose Wesley his job, and even worse put Wesley's wife and child in danger.

They go back inside and Wesley goes down to the basement, presumably to release Frank. In the kitchen, Gail asks Len how Frank killed Marie. She no longer cares about what David hears. Len responds that Frank could have done it easily—with pills or a pillow. Then he says it's better that they don't know for sure—it will make it easier to let Frank go.

There is no longer any pretense of secrecy. Gail is comfortable asking Len this gruesome question in front of David. Len is practicing what Julian has preached—he is prepared to "look away"—and believes knowing as little as possible about Frank's crime is best.

Wesley comes back upstairs looking angry, and says he will move Frank to the jail first thing in the morning. Gail drops her head. Wesley tells her Frank is guilty as sin, he has basically admitted everything to him, and that he would probably show more remorse over killing a dog than he did over killing Marie. Wesley says he simply can't imagine living with himself if he lets Frank go free. David suddenly feels that there is distance growing between his parents, and between him and the rest of his family.

In spite of all of this, Wesley cannot let his obviously guilty brother go free. He has finally overcome his misplaced familial loyalty and is ready to stand up for Marie and fight for justice. But David can feel that this decision has consequences—Wesley's family will suffer for this decision, correct though it may be.

That night, David wakes up to the sound of breaking glass. He goes downstairs to find his parents already awake. They tell him Frank is deliberately smashing the canning jars, one by one. Wesley says he is doing it for attention, and that no one should go downstairs. They tell David to go back to bed. Wesley puts a comforting hand on David's shoulder and David cherishes this small demonstration of affection. Wesley assures him that everything will be back to normal in the morning.

David must endure another frightening and sleepless night, but his father is, for once, acting like his father—he is not Frank's brother or the sheriff when he places his hand on David's shoulder. David is so appreciative of and comforted by the gesture that he is able to go back upstairs. He might even believe his father's promise that things will be "back to normal" in the morning.

David doesn't sleep well and wakes too early the next morning. When he goes downstairs he is surprised to find his father already awake and sitting at the kitchen table. Wesley says he is waiting to hear Frank stir, and as soon as he does he's going to go downstairs and take Frank to jail. David knows this will be a hard day for his father, and says so. Wesley simply says he believes people should pay for their crimes, no matter who their family is.

David once again has empathy for his father—he knows that taking your only brother to jail cannot be an easy thing to do. Wesley's response is the realization it has taken him so long to come to terms with: that justice shouldn't answer to family, to name, to prestige, or public opinion. That crimes should be punished, no matter who commits them.

Wesley gets up to make coffee and tells David a story about one day when he and his friends were being chased by bullies, young Native American boys who were much bigger and stronger than them. Frank had protected Wesley and stood up for him. It is a fond memory for Wesley—his brother had been there for him when he needed him most.

Wesley's sacrifice is made clear—though Frank is inarguably a bad man who deserves jail time, Wesley can't help but remember those times his brother protected him, and was there when he needed him. This moment makes Wesley's behavior more understandable.

When the coffee is finished Wesley says he will take some down to Frank now and wake him up if he isn't awake already. He disappears downstairs and after a few seconds David hears his father scream. David runs downstairs and sees his father bent over the dead body of his uncle, who has slit his wrists with the broken glass from the jars. Wesley tells David to get his mother to call Len, and to not let Gail come downstairs. David is glad for an excuse to leave the basement, and as he does, he thinks Frank's suicide has solved all of his family's problems—that Frank's death means everything can go back to normal. His family can reunite, and women will no longer need to fear their doctor. David feels gratitude for Frank—and even, he thinks, love for him—in this moment.

Frank, likely realizing that he could not avoid a public arrest and a trial, takes his own life, apparently preferring death to the public humiliation even if he was likely to set free at its end. Once again David is called on to protect his mother, yet another role reversal. David's youth and misunderstanding are perhaps never more obvious than they are in this moment—he feels as though Frank's death has solved all of their problems; he believes his father's recent words that everything will go back to normal. He is so thoroughly convinced of this he actually feels love and gratitude for Frank, though Frank has been nothing but despicable. We know that David is in for a rude awakening when the continuing effects of Frank's arrest and death are made clear to him.

EPILOGUE

In December of 1948 David's family moves away from Bentrock. Frank's death has been explained away as an accident, and the coroner (the only other person who saw Frank's injuries) has kept the Hayden's secret. His crimes were also kept secret—Wesley noted this was for the best, as Frank had never been proven guilty in a court of law. Wesley and Grandpa Hayden did not speak to each other at the funeral, nor after. Wesley agreed with Gail that he should resign from his post, and they put the house up for sale. Wesley then took a new job in Fargo, North Dakota. David tells his friends he is only going away temporarily, and that he will be back the following summer.

Far from everything "returning to normal" as David thought it would, Frank's death changes everything. Frank died, but justice was not pursued, and new secrets are added to the long list of old ones. The family cannot talk about Frank's crimes or about the actual nature of his death. Wesley, utterly separated from his father, finally moves away from Bentrock and leaves his post as sheriff behind as well, practicing law as Gail always wanted him to. Wesley has his new identity. David, who can't or doesn't want to understand the permanence of this change, tells his friends he will be back by summer.

As they drive away from the house, David tells his parents to wait and jumps out of the car. He runs up a snowdrift to look at his house. It looks dark and empty. He looks back at his parents and wishes he could live away from them and their sadness.

David takes one last look at his home, which already looks deserted. His parents also seem different to him—so sad that he wishes he could escape them, too.

The rest of David's life has not gone poorly. His father got a job as a lawyer, much to his mother's happiness, and David himself eventually becomes a history teacher. He is intrigued by how any history likely conceals stories of sexual abuse, murder, or suicide. Though he tells his students that these texts tell the whole truth, privately he knows that history always contains a cover-up of some kind.

David has enjoyed a good life. David's profession of choice (a history teacher) reveals his adult understanding of these events: he knows his experience was not an entirely unusual one. He knows there are many families like his, with secrets. The events of the summer of 1948 taught him a valuable lesson about the difference between the way things seem and the way they are, between the history you read and the actual history.

Len and Grandpa Hayden have both died of strokes—David wonders if the strokes were caused by their keeping the secret of Uncle Frank for so long. He thinks his own father's cancer is also a result of guilt.

David notes that the men who kept Frank's secrets have all died, and perhaps the stress and guilt of keeping quiet had something to do with their deaths. David, in his adulthood, is capable of understanding how taxing it must have been to keep this information quiet.

One memory of Marie has stuck with David after 40 years. He, Marie, and Ronnie had been playing football in the yard, and he remembers thinking of them as his real family, a family that didn't rely on blood or birthright, and one that accepted him for who he was.

Adult David is also someone who has figured out his own definition of "family." He remembers Marie and Ronnie now as members of a "real" family. He has figured out what "real family" means to him—it is one structured around love and acceptance—and he has restructured his memories accordingly.

David's wife, Betsy, is fascinated by David's story of what happened in the summer of 1948. One night at dinner, when David's parents are still alive, she brings it up, lightly commenting, "that sure was the Wild West, wasn't it?" Wesley responds angrily, slamming his hand on the table and saying "Don't blame Montana! Don't ever blame Montana!" Later that night, David sits in his father's seat at the table, and puts his hand on the tabletop. He believes he can still feel the wood vibrating from his father's blow.

The novella ends with this brief account in order to underscore one of its most powerful messages: that we too often simplify the past according to clichés and stereotypes. Betsy is willing to chalk the events of that summer up to the "Wild West"—Wesley vehemently rejects this impulse. "Blaming Montana" distracts from the real problem: moral weakness, systemic racism, blind devotion to family or the status quo or public opinion: these are enduring American problems, the novella argues, not simply relics of the "Wild West."

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