

Study Guide

The Dog Stars by Peter Heller

For the online version of BookRags' The Dog Stars Study Guide, including complete copyright information, please visit:

<http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-the-dog-stars/>

Copyright Information

© 2000-2013 BookRags, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Plot Summary

Earth is warming, not cooling as was predicted. Hig still flies his 1955 Cessna, hand pumping the fuel when necessary and keeping his flights local to conserve the fuel that he has. Bruce Bangley, Hig's only neighbor, arrived after Hig had already made his home in the hangar near his plane. Hig retreated there when his wife and child died, unable to face life in the home they shared. Now, Hig and Bangley are part of a small group of survivors. First the flu had hit, beginning when a sample was being shipped from one lab to another and the plane it was in crashed. The illness spread quickly, taking people in days and overwhelming medical services. A blood disease similar to AIDS followed closely behind, killing most of the flu survivors. Some survived. Most didn't. Now, the earth is slowly ridding itself of all species with only few exceptions.

Hig and Bangley settle into a routine of sorts. Hig takes his dog Jasper and hunts deer, using a sled to drag them back down the mountain. He also enjoys fishing, although the trout are long gone. Now, all that remain are bottom feeders, but he makes the best of it. Bangley tries not to resent the time that Hig is gone, feeling unprotected on his own. A group of about thirty Mennonites live ten miles to the south. A sign informing travelers that they have the blood disease keeps them safe from renegades, and Hig, keeping his distance, lands to help them on occasion if necessary. It is Hig's job to patrol their perimeter daily to ensure their safety. When Jasper dies on one of Hig's hunting trips, he is gone much longer than expected and Bangley is sure he is dead. When he returns, Bangley sets himself up in the tower to protect Hig across the open space, and sees that he is being pursued. Bangley talks Hig in, telling him where to hide, how to shoot and when. It is a narrow escape, but Hig is restless. He tells Bangley shortly afterward that he wants to explore a radio signal he heard three years earlier. The problem is that the signal originated from Grand Junction which is a distance past Hig's point of no return. Despite this, sure that he can scavenge fuel in Grand Junction to return, he leaves Bangley by himself. On the way to Grand Junction, Hig discovers a man and his daughter living in a box canyon. The old man tries to shoot him down, but Hig is not deterred. He lands in a field nearby, and approaches to find the area deserted. The man and woman have hidden, and fire on him again from cover. Hig notices the cattle, and sheep, surprised to see either. He finally manages to convince them that he means them no harm, and stays with them for some time. Before the summer ends, the old man explains their need to leave the farm. They are suffering a drought that kills more animals each year. The old man wants Hig to fly them all out of there and back to Erie airport where Bangley waits. Hig explains his point of no return, but with some wrangling, they manage to work out the logistics necessary to get them all to Grand Junction. The surprises continue. The airport at Grand Junction is booby trapped, and Hig has to do some fancy maneuvering to keep them alive. Once the trap is avoided, the couple who armed it are quickly dealt with and the trio heads for Erie after refueling. Bangley is near death, having suffered an attack while Hig was gone. Fourteen people almost manage to get the upper hand, but Bangley's grenade launcher saves him. It is just one of a myriad of close calls, and desperate actions that are required for survival in this new world. Humanity and hospitality are all but things from the past, and they have entered a shoot first ask questions later kind of existence. It is an Earth of challenges, and obstacles, but signs of our species' survival become increasingly evident.

This story is like a glimpse into a possible and perhaps even probable future. Will we succumb to an all encompassing virus? Will we lose our way in the process? This is a good read with thought provoking events and situations.

Book One: Chapter I: Pages 8 - 20

Book One: Chapter I: Pages 8 - 20 Summary

Earth is warming, not cooling as was predicted. Hig still flies his 19556 Cessna, hand pumping the fuel when necessary and keeping his flights local to conserve the fuel that he has. Bruce Bangley, Hig's only neighbor, arrived after Hig had already made his home in the hangar near his plane. Hig retreated there when his wife and child died, unable to face life in the home they shared. Now, Hig and Bangley are part of a small group of survivors. First the flu had hit, beginning when a sample was being shipped from one lab to another and the plane it was in crashed. The illness spread quickly, taking people in days and overwhelming medical services. A blood disease similar to AIDS followed closely behind, killing most of the flu survivors. Some survived. Most didn't. Now, the earth is slowly ridding itself of all species with only few exceptions.

When Hig hikes to the green woods he takes a .308 with him. He hunts elk, having seen sign, but usually returns with a doe instead. Before he goes, Hig patrols the air twice - once by day and once by night using goggles. He covers a thirty mile range. Then, having secured the perimeter, he crosses the eight miles of prairie while Bangley covers him with a .408 CheyTac sniper rifle until he is safe in the cover of the woods Hig knows that Bangley has saved him many times and he is the muscle of their partnership while Hig is merely the eyes in the sky - an early warning system. Hig usually takes Jasper with him.

There are about thirty Mennonites living ten miles to the south of them, and Hig visits regularly despite Bangley's objections. They have the blood disease that followed the flu and like AIDS, only worse, it takes lives each year. It has been nine years since the flu killed almost the entire population, and the blood disease took most of the rest afterward. What remains is in Hig's words 'Not Nice'. It is the reason he and Bangley live at the airport, and patrol every day. Hig even began sleeping in an arroyo behind the house, leaving the porch light on. For the most part, they show up at night - in groups or singly, and Jasper alerts him. Then Hig beeps Bangley on the handset. He walks behind the berm to Hig, unseen by the intruders and enjoys the thrill of the conflict. The largest group to arrive was seven people. That time, Hig had to participate, using the AR-15, which he is pretty proficient with. Hig is determined not to be caught inside. The first summer kept them busy, but by the second summer the numbers tapered off. For almost a year, no one came but then four men almost bested them, and Hig began flying sorties for real. As Hig is readying the plane, Bangley appears and asks him why he insists on going to the Druids. Hig corrects him, and reminds him that one day they may need them, but Bangley isn't convinced. The risk of infection is too high in his opinion. He tries to tell Hig that it is off limits, but Hig is not ready to have Bangley as his base commander and says so. Hig gets him a coke and tries to diffuse his growing anxiety. Hig tells Bangley that he can't choose for him, and that they occasionally need his help. He tells Hig not to go killing them, and leaves him to finish the prep work before he flies.

Book One: Chapter I: Pages 8 - 20 Analysis

Hig didn't show emotion for any of the many species that quickly died off, until the day the last trout swam upstream. He notices that the green areas are growing back a bit more each year, and the sight of them gives him hope. Bangley, his only neighbor, is less emotional about what is left. As far as he is concerned, the people who remain are all a threat to one degree or another. In fact, the previous summer he'd shot a girl because she would have caught up with Hig. Bangley deals with surprise visits swiftly and without emotion. Other than the two of them at the airport, there is a group of about thirty Mennonites that live ten miles south, and Hig visits them regularly, flying in to help when needed. Because they are infected with the blood disease that followed the flu epidemic, they are left alone by most, and when Hig comes, they give him a wide berth to ensure he isn't infected also. Hig had suffered through two weeks of fever in the very beginning, cresting at about 105, and still thinks it affected his mind to some degree.

In the beginning, Hig had slept in a small house, but surprise visits from some less than pleasant survivors had convinced him that it was foolhardy. Now, despite the cold of winter, he and Jasper slept outside behind a berm tall enough for Bangley to walk behind it unnoticed. Whenever company arrived, Hig would beep Bangley on the radio, and he would come to neutralize whatever threat they faced. On occasion, when there were too many at once, Hig would be required to help out. Though he didn't like to, the alternatives were unthinkable. Hig is preparing the plane to fly another sortie when Bangley shows up behind him. He watches for a moment and then asks him why he is willing to risk going to the Mennonites. Hig tries to explain that they need him, and that one day they might need them, but Bangley doesn't seem to hear him. Instead, he tries to forbid Hig from going, but Hig isn't ready to be controlled by anyone. He reminds Bangley that he isn't his boss, and continues to make preparations. Bangley backs down, but can't help a parting shot, telling Hig to try not to kill them both.

Book One: Chapter I: Pages 20 - 37

Book One: Chapter I: Pages 20 - 37 Summary

The Mennonite group live in an old turkey farm on the creek. There are two windmills - one is for drawing water is mechanical. They signal Hig when they need help by running a red union suit on the flag pole. Hig can land on the dirt drive. Though they are weak, they keep the strip in reasonable condition. GPS still functions, but nine years without maintenance left most of the runways unusable at other airports. At one point, Hig had made a survey of the airports within a hundred mile radius, flying low and making notes. After flying low over Colorado Springs, Kirby, Cheyenne and the Air Force Academy, he does the same at Cranton and his low flight nets him a high powered hold in his fuselage. Now they know they have neighbors in Cranton also. Hig still monitors the radio as well. He calls a few times each flight. In the seventh year he was answered. He circled, going higher and then descending, calling until he was almost out of fuel but had no success, hearing only enough to assume he was either a pilot or a controller, calling from Grand Junction. He thinks about that call years later, and about how it is just an hour's flight beyond his point of no return. Jasper growls, waking Hig and he crawls carefully up the berm to check. He counts five men in the light of the porch, all armed. He keys the mic button on the radio three times to notify Bangley and then waits for him to arrive. Bangley hasn't arrived by the time Hig counts to two hundred, and he reluctantly prepares to do the firing himself. As Hig steels himself to fire, the night erupts and bodies fall. Bangley steps out from behind a truck and finishes those still living with a .45 while Hig remains prone, stunned by his sudden appearance and involvement. Hig realizes that Bangley had them covered from the start and can't understand why he didn't let him pull the trigger. Later, Hig will strip all but the boy of haunches from their arms, breasts, calves and buttocks, slicing the meat thin and soaking it in salt brine to dry into jerky. This is for the in between days for Jasper, when meat is not readily available. The boy he will bury instead.

Book One: Chapter I: Pages 20 - 37 Analysis

Jasper loves to fly with Hig. With increasing age, he has more trouble getting into the passenger seat, and to help him for a time Hig had simply removed it. Jasper became morose, unable to sit up and look out so Hig created a wood fence to keep him from skidding into the rudder pedals accidentally, but that had made matters even worse, and he had simply refused to fly with him. It was almost as though the entire thing personally offended him. Now, when Hig isn't picking up oil and pop, he simply puts the seat back in, and Jasper's change is a marked improvement. Excited now, he sits on the seat beside him again. Hig looks at him and laments the fact that they have bred dogs for any number of tasks but no one had thought to find a way to increase their life spans to equal that of their owners. Jasper always goes with Hig - Hig is afraid to leave him with Bangley. On every flight, Hig makes a habit of using his radio, calling a couple of times each flight. Only once in nine years had someone answered, and the single reply was all Hig ever heard. Now, two years later he lies behind the berm, looking at the stars and thinking about that call. He'd heard enough to assume the elderly man is knowledgeable and considers the logistics of getting to Grand Junction where he believes the call originated. Grand Junction is at least a full hour's flying time past Hig's point of no return. He drifts off to sleep, considering options until Jasper's low growl wakes him. It's been some time since anyone has come around, and Hig has to dig the rifle out of the tarp when just a couple of years ago, he would have already been on the bank and assessing the situation. When he sees the group in the light of the porch, he signals Bangley and begins the countdown to his arrival. Hig has never had to count to more than two hundred before Bangley arrives, so when that number comes and goes, Hig begins to get anxious. Hig is not the hunter that Bangley is, and hates having to kill anything - even for survival. He tries to shut everything else out, and concentrate on the job at hand. Just as he is ready to fire, the night erupts and they are on the ground. Hig hadn't fired a shot. Stunned, he lays there watching as Bangley finishes those still moving. Closer inspection reveals that one of the group is just a young boy and something in Hig balks. Hig and Bangley argue about the moralities of his death. Bangley is disgusted, and tells Hig he is still living in the past. He wonders aloud if Hig actually appreciates everything he does for him. He leaves, shaking his head in disappointment. For Hig, the night is over. Later, he will turn what meat

he can into jerky for Jasper to get him through the lean times when meat is unavailable. He is reminded of the rugby team that crashed in the Andes and was forced to do what they had to in order to survive.

Book One: Chapters II and III

Book One: Chapters II and III Summary

Hig loves to fly. In the first week after Bangley's arrival, he'd taken him up in the Cessna for reconnaissance of the area and flying over the Mennonite camp, he tells Hig that they have the blood sickness. He had come across them before meeting Hig and was forced to shoot two of them who had come too close. Bangley voices his desire for an incendiary at that moment, and Hig, stunned, just listens. The children below wave at him on the way by and Hig tells Bangley that they are Mennonites, not Druids. Bangley is silent for the rest of the trip.

After the most recent firefight, Hig leaves rifle, goggles and Jasper behind and passing the west hangers he just walks. Without thinking, his feet take him to his trail into the mountains, past the tower that he and Bangley had built four miles out on the plain. Halfway to the mountain, it was built to kill from, and had taken them two months to construct. Bangley had supervised construction, eager to mount a bench rest and the locking swivel he'd designed for just this purpose. Another mount holds his spotting scope and range finder - all of which he carries back and forth rather than leaving it behind. The only thing he leaves behind is the windspeed/direction indicator and his ballistics tables. He continues past the tower and into the woods. This is the path Hig would walk to the creek where he usually fished, almost able to forget reality for a time. Even the ritual of the assembly of his rod was comforting - something that had seen him through many heartaches. He had been walking for well over an hour when he suddenly realizes that he is almost at the mountain front alone. For the first time Hig can remember, Jasper is not at his side. Suddenly fearful, he turns and trots to the safety of the airport again.

Book One: Chapters II and III Analysis

Hig took to flying as though it was what he was meant to do with his life, as many pilots do. He loves the earth from above, and the beauty of the neat and orderly view it provided of the world. Hig loves seeing the world as a hawk does and the feeling that he is untouchable in the air. Bangley, on the other hand, preferred the solitude of home and hearth, willing to protect it to his dying breath. In his first week with Hig, he had flown over the area, and seen the Mennonite camp. When he learns that Hig knows them, he is silent for the rest of the flight.

Hig walks away after the firefight, leaving even Jasper behind. As he walks, he considers what might happen if Bangley ever decides that he can defend the area on his own. In a strange way, the visit from these five strangers would ensure the need for Hig and Jasper at least for the foreseeable future. He walks the four miles to the tower they'd built, hardly aware of the distance he'd traveled, his mind on Melissa and the fact that by his calculations, today was her birthday. He continues past the tower, the sight of dry peaks frightening him more than any disease or attack. Losing the trout had made him cry, but losing the creek altogether would be catastrophic. Hig still fished there, although the only varieties that remained were suckers and carp. Bangley called it recreating, begrudging Hig any time that isn't directly related to their survival or to killing. Bangley accepted deer hunting as a necessity as he did flying, although he probably would have been happier about both if Hig had hated to do them. Hig walks all the way up to the stream, and assembles his rod and reel, stringing the line with fingers that worked without thinking. He had fished through every crisis he'd ever known, from the death of his father to the loss of his high school girlfriend. He fished when Melissa died of the flu and when the trout became diseased and died off. Still he fished, even when Melissa's body was incinerated, and he knew every curve and angle of the creek now. By the time his mind returns to the present, he is almost at the mountain front. Suddenly realizing he is alone is unnerving, and fearful, he turns and trots the distance back to the airport.

Book One: Chapter IV

Book One: Chapter IV Summary

The weather warms quickly and Hig plants his garden of beans, corn, potatoes and spinach. In the cold frame, he begins his tomatoes. He always grew more than they could eat, and canned the rest to get them through the winter. He secretly took fresh vegetables and sometimes jars to the Mennonite families as well. He talks to Jasper as he works, planting and then siphoning water from the pond to the runnels he created to keep the garden watered. He is tired when he finishes and decides he will take Jasper hunting the next day. The next morning he tells Bangley he will be gone for two or three days as he packs food for himself and jerky for Jasper. Bangley isn't happy. He reminds Hig that every day he and Jasper are gone, and they are vulnerable. He tells Hig that he doesn't sleep very well when he is gone. Hig takes one more flight to assure Bangley's security for at least one day. That night he sits with Jasper in their matching recliners, thinking about the times he and Melissa had gone fishing, and the fight they'd had the last time he'd taken her. After doing his circle, he lands at the Coke truck on the highway, and coasts to a stop. Jasper begins to growl, low and steady, so Hig arms himself and gets out. As he walks towards the back of the truck, he calls out to them, insisting they surrender or die. Three people come out and a man in the group calls out to someone named Curtis, suggesting that Hig has no bullets. Curtis appears with a bow in hand and Hig fires twice. Hig tells the others to load his plan and to drag their buddy's body to the ditch so that Jasper could have dinner. One of the men tells Hig they are all dead anyway, when the 'A-rabs' get here. They'd heard in one a ham radio in Pueblo. Hig notices the man's necklace and asks him what it is. When he reveals their true nature, Hig is so revolted that he shoots him dead. The other one runs off and Hig lets him go.

Book One: Chapter IV Analysis

Hig puts in his regular garden, deciding to hunt a spring buck the next day. When he tells Bangley he will be gone for perhaps as long as three days, Bangley asks why, rightly citing the fact that the snow will mean that the deer are lower. Unable to think of a suitable reason, Hig tells Bangley that he'd seen elk sign, and wants to look again. Their conversation makes Hig feel like they are an old married couple, his lie transparent, just as his single lie to Melissa had been when he assured her she would get well again. In the end, she had begged him to end her suffering, and he'd loved her so much that he had done as she asked. He'd held the pillow over her head, despite her struggles to keep breathing, giving her the release she'd begged him for. After that Hig drank, but only in the beginning. Bangley doesn't drink either, part of his code, so they use what alcohol they find for cuts. The next afternoon he takes Jasper up in the Cessna to do his reconnaissance flight, making the circle first and then going to get a few cases of pop. There are cases of Dr. Pepper at the back and Hig thinks about surprising Bangley with some would make it feel like Christmas early. Hig begins scanning. If he'd seen anything, his hunt would have been off. Instead he would have flown low and played one of four tapes that he and Bangley had created. Each advised the visitors to turn back or die. It continues to say that they are aware of them and they should leave before they become dog food like others before them. The latter was something Bangley insists he add. Once Hig has ascertained that there are no new visitors to the area, he lands on the highway near the Coke truck to load up. As soon as the plane has stopped, Jasper begins to growl. When he persists, Hig grabs the AR and gets out, helping Jasper down behind him. He knows better than to try to tell him to stay in the plane. He's likely just hop out on his own and hurt something. He continues to growl as they approach, Hig calling out that they are dead men. He promises not to hurt them if they come out on their own, and finally a hand with a crowbar comes out. The hands are big and dirty, and seeing Hig, he feels confident that there are no bullets in his gun and advises his partner Curtis to come out and deal with him. Curtis gambles with his life and loses, causing Hig to destroy up to twenty cases of pop in the process. He can't get over the fact that they were willing to kill him for pop. Furious, Hig rages at them, and then calming somewhat, he tells the remaining two that if they load his plane the way he asks, and dump their buddy into the ditch for Jasper to have dinner, he will let them live. They do so, but the first man out of the truck can't keep his mouth shut. He brags about how he's heard the A-rabs are coming and plan to kill everyone, so Hig will be just as dead as the rest. Hig

shoots him, but largely because of the necklace he is wearing, which he proudly announced was made of women's private parts. The last one standing drops his case of pop and runs. Hig lets him.

Book One: Chapters V and VI

Book One: Chapters V and VI Summary

Bangley mocks Hig when he returns and tells him about his encounter. Bangley is furious about the many mistakes Hig made but what aggravates him most is the fact that Hig shot the second man before he explained the situation with the A-rabs completely. Instead, Hig shoots him because he is a rapist and murderer, like everyone else left alive in the country. Bangley is so angry that he doesn't even want the pop Hig brought back. Bangley knows that there are only so many mistakes that a person can make before they use up their allowable amount and have to pay for their stupidity. Bangley is determined not to die because of someone else's incompetence.

When Hig and Jasper leave it is still dark. They walk through the cottonwood trees, the willow thickets and up a grassy slope into the rock canyon. Then finally, they reach the ponderosa forest. They climb along the creek, through the dead forest having long been ravaged by beetles beginning twenty years previously. Jasper moves slowly, and Hig thinks about bringing aspirin for him next time. Last year, Hig had seen elk tracks although he'd thought they were long gone already. By midday, they are crossing through the culvert under the old state highway. It is the first long walk of the year, and Hig waits again for Jasper to catch up. In the early afternoon, Hig decides it is time for a break. He assembles his rod and reel and after some time he finally catches a large carp. The first fish always goes to Jasper and today is no exception. Hig fillets it and gives Jasper all but the bones. After catching and prepping a few more, he heads for their old fire pit not far away. Hig makes a fire, feeling something akin to happiness, as does Jasper. They eat, after Hig cleans and salts the remaining fish he caught, and then set up a place to sleep. Jasper lays down beside Hig as usual and licks his face until laughing, he turns away. In the morning, Hig is stiff and the sleeping bag and Jasper are covered in frost. He pulls Jasper to him and tugs a quilt over him. It takes a few moments before the reality hits him. Jasper passed during the night. Hig stays there for the day, leaving Jasper tucked in his quilt with only his nose sticking out. Hig is devastated and can hardly think of life without Jasper.

Book One: Chapters V and VI Analysis

Hig tells Bangley about the encounter, and Bangley is not happy. He cites the many mistakes Hig made, beginning with his approach and continuing with Hig allowing them to live in the first place. Hig is suitably embarrassed, and the situation doesn't improve when Bangley tells him that the whole issue could have been avoided had Hig just told him the pop was in a semi and let Bangley go and drive it back. 'Your call' he tells him, clearly thinking he'd made a colossal mistake. After he completes his tirade, ending with the fact that Hig kills the second man without first finding out all he can about the 'invasion of A-rabs' that was supposed to be on the horizon, he stomps off leaving the pop behind. Hig takes a deep breath and can't help thinking that even though Bangley is the only person other than the Mennonites for a hundred square miles, he still needs to go up to the mountains for some peace and fresh air.

Hig and Jasper head out, Hig still rankled by the dressing down that he'd gotten from Bangley. What bothers him most is probably that Bangley is right, but Hig still finds it hard to shoot first and think later. As they walk, he thinks about how it is ideology that tears nations and people apart. Bangley always tells him that when he negotiates, he is negotiating his own death. They pass familiar landmarks until they are finally in the ponderosa forest where for Hig the feeling is almost religious. Hig hugs a tree, inhaling the strong, vanilla like scent. They continue on through the beetle kill lodgepole and ponderosas eager to get past the dead section of the forest and into the higher ground where the forest is still rich and dark. Jasper is slowing and Hig makes stops to allow him to catch up. On the other side of the state highway, a pair of wolf tracks catch Jasper's attention briefly. Hig spends the rest of the afternoon fishing, in no hurry. He shares his catch with Jasper who perks up for the fish. Then, after dinner, they lie down side by side and Hig watches the constellations arrive in the sky. In the morning, they are both covered with frost. Hig pulls Jasper to him, throwing a quilt over him to

warm him up, and the dog doesn't move. When Hig runs his fingers through his ears and ruff, they are cold and stiff. His mind balks, unwilling to understand that Jasper is gone. He can't bear to realize that his friend through thick and thin is gone. Instead, he wraps him in his quilt and lays by him for the day, not even getting up to start a fire. Jasper lies with only his nose sticking out of the quilt, as he had on so many other occasions.

Book Two: Chapter I: Pages 81 - 95

Book Two: Chapter I: Pages 81 - 95 Summary

Hig hardly moves until the third day. Finally, he buries Jasper, covering him with rocks. Then for three days he walks, hardly eating or sleeping, not knowing what else to do. On the third night, the snow falls. Finally, reality hits Hig, and he feels a sharp stab of fear to be caught that late in the day, that high above the snow line. Panic threatens to propel him back down but it is too late. He sets to the task of building a shelter. The days are a blur. On the tenth day since leaving, he beeps Banglely on the radio to let him know he is on his way. He has two deer on the sled, hoping it justifies how long he's been gone, but doesn't really care if it does or not. A minute or less later Banglely answers telling Hig he thought he'd croaked for sure. He asks if there was trouble, and Hig admits a little. Banglely is glad he is back and says so. He tells Hig to give him ninety minutes to get into position. Hig waits at the edge of the forest line while Banglely gets into position on the tower to keep Hig safe for the only exposed part of the return trip. There had only ever been trouble three times, so Hig is surprised when Banglely raises the alarm. Banglely tells him he is being stalked a quarter of a mile back. He begins to talk him in and then asks where Jasper is. Hig tells him it's a long story. Banglely is silent for a moment, and then tells Hig he has nine people pursuing him, armed with swords and machetes. Banglely forces Hig to pay attention and focus. Eighty yards ahead, the trail drops into a draw. He tells Hig to drop down into it and conceal the sled with brush and use it for cover. Hig reminds Banglely that he only has six shots against nine stalkers. Banglely keeps him calm, suggesting he sing and act natural and tells him what to do, step by step. He tells Hig to line up ten or twelve bullets on his sled to ready them. Hig has never been more happy to have Banglely there. Banglely tells Hig he'll call the shots for him, and they orient themselves, getting ready. Hig takes out the first two, and sees three more coming over the rise, thinking he's got them too. Then Banglely tells him to run. Five men come over the bank as Hig grabs the gun, bullets and runs. Suddenly a concussive blast throws Hig to the ground. Banglely's voice comes through, asking if he's still alive. He tells Hig that they have scattered, if they survived. Finally, Hig manages to ask just what had happened.

Book Two: Chapter I: Pages 81 - 95 Analysis

Hig wakes and for a brief moment he forgets that Jasper is gone, but then it all comes back and he sobs until there is nothing left inside. Then he finally gets up and using a stick and his hands, he carves out a hole that is deep enough to keep bear and other carnivores away. It is somehow fitting that Jasper stay in their favorite camp. He leaves him wrapped in the quilt, says goodbye and puts the dirt back on top. The rest of the day, he gathers rocks and piles them as high as his chest. Then he puts his old wool sweater down on the pile and puts still more rocks on it. Afterward, Hig loads the sled and walks up the stream, stopping again and again to turn, almost calling his name each time. Once he stops and with tears streaming, he lifts his face to the sun and howls a mournful coyote-like sound for his friend. Everything that was is gone - his wife, his dog, his life.... there is nothing left of it. Again and again, the pain overwhelms him - his loss almost more than he can bear. Finally, just by putting one foot in front of the other, even though it is merely autopilot at first, Hig manages to pull himself together. When the snow begins to fall, it occurs to Hig that he should have gone back down hours earlier. Panic sets in for a moment before he can sort himself out. Then he builds a shelter, hungry and cold, and still missing Jasper like crazy. Slowly, he returns to himself. Ten days after leaving, he beeps Banglely to let him know he is back. Banglely tells him he'll be there in ninety minutes, and Hig settles in to wait for the armed escort across the open plain. He'd only had trouble three times, so when Banglely calls out an alert, Hig is taken by surprise. Some harsh instructions from Banglely bring him back to life and he follows his instructions, trusting his vision from the tower to keep him safe. Banglely helps him into a position of relative safety from which Hig manages to take four of nine people pursuing him out of the picture. Then Banglely tells him to run. Surprised, Hig does just that, grabbing his gun and running for his life. The next thing he is aware of is a concussive shock that takes him to the ground, and then Banglely's voice, asking if he is okay. When it is established that Hig is still breathing, they find humor in even normal things. Finally, Hig manages to ask Banglely exactly what had happened. Banglely tells Hig about the mortars he had tucked

away for exactly this kind of situation.

Book Two: Chapter I: Pages 95 - 109

Book Two: Chapter I: Pages 95 - 109 Summary

Hig flies that afternoon to search for survivors. Bangley helps him haul the sled back, apologizing for the concussion that Hig has. From the seat of his plane, Hig can see the scene left behind. He can see the four he killed and the results of the mortar round Bangley had fired. Hig flies low and throws up out the window, recognizing that the dead men on the ground could just as easily have been him. The red union suit is hanging from the pole at the Mennonite camp, so Hig lands and climbs out. When Aaron asks him where Jasper is, Hig is unable to stop the first couple of tears that fall, but is determined to shed no more in front of this group who has already suffered and lost so much themselves. They are sincere in their sympathy and despite his promise to himself to keep it together, when Matilda steps forward to place a handful of asters on the ground between them, Hig's tears flow despite his smile. Then Reba steps forward with a basket of baby lettuce, saying they'd had a bumper crop. Hig goes forward to pick it up, and doesn't step back. Instead, he holds his hand out towards Matilda, who, after getting permission, steps forward to hold Hig's hand. He stands there, holding it like a lifeline for a while. Bangley decides to build a grenade launcher after their most recent encounter. When Hig announces his intentions to go out again, Bangley tells him they don't need any more venison. He asks Hig if he's going fishing again, but Hig tells him he's going to go to Grand Junction, and tells him about the transmission he'd heard. When Hig admits it was actually three years, Bangley can't help but ask him if he's having a mid-life crisis. Bangley asks how far he can get on the fuel when full and Hig admits he can go for two hundred and sixty miles. Bangley isn't impressed, asking if Hig is trying to kill them both. Bangley calls him a shark that has to keep moving or will die. The comment stays with Hig that night, and he misses the weight of Jasper with an ache. Hig loads as much fuel as he can, adding two cans that he stashes behind the seat. It won't get him back, but he needs to be able to land and take off in a short distance if necessary. He takes a thirty pound survival pack and show Bangley how to water the garden by directing the flow and in the process learns that Bangley is a farmer's son, although a reluctant one on all fronts. As he finishes fueling, Bangley arrives with a basket of six grenades. Then he shocks Hig by saying goodbye, with the obvious understanding that he didn't expect to see Hig again. Bangley says that other than his son and wife, Hig is the only one he ever got along with. Then he told him to try and come back. Hig stares after him, stunned to silent. He takes off, the plane seeming to strain for the sky. He keys the mike to call Eagle Airport as he is passing over, strictly maintaining the habit, and tells the tower that he is enroute to..... and doesn't finish.

Book Two: Chapter I: Pages 95 - 109 Analysis

Hig is in no shape to fly, but needs to look for the remains of the other four. He wanted to make sure they weren't headed to the Mennonite families next. There is no sign of them however and from the air he can see it all. He replays the events and Bangley's behavior, coming to his aid and worried about his health like a wife. Seeing the carnage has Hig bringing up the food Bangley had made him. He circles around the families, and heading back he sees the red union suit hanging from the flagpole. He bounces in for a landing. When Hig gets out, the fact that Jasper is missing is immediately noticed and remarked on. Hig tries to keep it together as he tells them about his passing, but he can't stop the first two tears from falling - promising himself however that they will be the last. When Aaron passes on his condolences however, something in Hig lets go, and the tears stream despite his best efforts to stop them. He smiles, touched when Matilda puts some Asters down for him and tells them how much Jasper loved coming to see them. It doesn't take long before Hig decides he is going out again. Bangley isn't impressed by the news, telling him they don't need for him to do so, but Hig isn't going for meat or fish. Hig is hoping to track down the sender of the message he heard only once three years previously. When he admits this to Bangley, Bangley is sure Hig is losing his mind. Still, knowing he can't stop him, Bangley gives him a basket of grenades, telling him to drop them directly from the plane if he gets into trouble. Hig shows him how to look after watering his garden and in that moment, Bangley reveals a bombshell. His father was a farmer. Bangley left with no intentions of following in his footsteps. For a brief moment Hig gets to see another side of

Bangley but that all ends when Hig calls him a crazy farmer. Even in jest, the comment isn't appreciated, and he knows he probably shouldn't use the expression again. Even without Bangley saying so directly, Hig is sure that he killed his father. Hig gets ready to take off, thinking of his Uncle Pete and what he did in the last weeks of his life. Bangley says goodbye to Hig, and it is clear from his demeanor and speech that he doesn't believe he'll see him again. Despite that, he asks him to try to come back, telling Hig that other than his wife and son, Hig is the only one he has ever really gotten along with. Then he walks away, leaving Hig standing there dumbfounded. Finally ready, Hig takes off. As he passes Eagle Airport, he radios the tower as though everything was still normal. When trying to give his destination however, he gets stuck, unable to definitively say where he is headed.

Book Two: Chapter II

Book Two: Chapter II Summary

By the time Hig gets as far as Paonia, he knows he no longer has enough fuel to get home. He flies above Dominguez canyon and for the first time he sees a box canyon. He circles, so surprised that he almost spirals into the cliff face. He sees cattle and a stone hut set in against the cliff. A woman is in the garden and Hig can see her yelling. An old man comes out of the house with a gun and after taking aim, he fires at Hig. He pulls back on the stick, going into a steep climb. The window on his side is gone and blood is soaking his shirt. At first Hig contemplates going down and peppering him with the AR-15, but he realizes that in his shoes he likely would have done exactly the same thing. Hig circles, distracted to a point where he almost forgets to check air speed and wind direction first, but he can hear Bangle's voice in his head, telling him to pay attention before he kills himself, his plane, or both. Landing in the field is hard on his paint job and his nerves, but he manages to put the plane down safely, allowing himself a moment to hope things go well in reverse also. He gets out, augurs holes to stake the plane down with, and then in a moment of clear thinking, fuels the plane with the cans behind the seat so that he can take off quickly if necessary. Then he takes the key, and puts it in his front pocket.

Book Two: Chapter II Analysis

Flying over Dominguez, Hig discovers a box canyon he had no idea existed. He circles for another look and sees cattle and a small house, but what really throws him is the woman working in the garden. It is the first time he has seen a woman in a long time, and for a change, he didn't have anything to defend. In fact, this time he is the threat. That thought is punctuated by the gunshot from the old man who comes out of the house, and Hig is forced to take evasive action. Even so, he loses the window on his side, and takes some glass to his face. Instead of being angry, or considering retaliation, knowing he could easily kill the old man and force the woman into compliance, he laughs, realizing he would have likely done the same thing. This time, he is the visitor. The idea of meeting new people, seemingly normal people, has Hig smiling for the first time in a long time. He circles, noting the only real place to land is a nearby field and is so distracted by what might be that he almost forgets the importance of what is. He can hear Bangle's voice in his head, chastising him for forgetting to check wind speed and he circles again, dropping a smoke bomb to find that he'd almost forgotten how dangerous bush landings really were. He had to acknowledge the fact that Bangle was probably alive because he didn't forget things - even the tactician and Hig is largely still alive because of Bangle as well. The wind is blowing so stiff that Hig has to line himself up almost sideways into his landing, and when he reaches a stop, he is wide awake. He ties the plane down using stakes and an augur, and puts two of Bangle's special gifts into his pocket. Then, before walking away from the plane, he did the first smart thing he'd done all morning. He took out the two cans of fuel he'd brought with him, and dumped them into the tanks. Then Hig takes the AR and the key to the plane and walks away.

Book Two: Chapter III

Book Two: Chapter III Summary

The place looks deserted. The cows and a few sheep look like they are starving. Using his scope, he looks around, spying a ladder that is leaning against the rock beside the waterfall. He can hear Bangley's voice in his head asking him about exigencies and probing to discover exactly what Hig hopes to gain from this encounter. Hig is so comfortable that he could almost sleep right there, snuggled into the rocks, but Bangley's voice comes back again with a slap, reminding him that while he is there napping, the others were likely to be working their way around his flank like they would have in their shoes. Hig gives himself a mental slap, trying to answer the questions he knew Bangley would be asking. Why did he land? What was he hoping to accomplish by risking so much? He is looking through the scope at the cows in the meadow and thinking about how long it's been since he's had milk or butter that he almost misses them. Pure luck has him noticing the glint from the old man's hunting rifle. Just as Hig and Bangley had, they'd used the house as a draw, and were sitting behind a large block of sandstone. At that moment, he realizes they are sighting on him and ducks just as the splinters around him fly. He can hear Bangley laughing in his mind, teasing him for wanting to make friends and now possibly having to shoot someone instead. The laughter is long and loud in his head. Hig knows he can walk away if he wants to, but what he really wants is company. He trots back to the plane to grab some of the Xerox paper he kept there and a couple of crayons that he typically used to drop notes on the families or on visitors who came too close. Back at the cliff top, he uses one entire sheet to write the letter 'I', and hanging it on Jasper's quilt with the dog and the pheasants on it, he pushes it over the edge just as a shot rings out. Feeling as though he is fishing, he enjoys himself as he pulls the stick back to write 'AM' and push it over the edge. By the time he is finished, his note says "I am not a pheasant". Then he walks back to the plane for more paper. This time he informs them that he could blow them up but he won't, followed by the word peace. He takes a grenade out, pulls the pin and throws it well upstream. The next note warns them that the next one might hurt and then his suggestion that they stand up before he runs out of paper. When Hig creeps forward, he sees that they are standing. Now that they are standing, Hig begins calling to them instead of writing. He assures them that he forgives them for trying to shoot him down, saying he'd have done the same. Finally, he walks back to the plane and grabs another grenade and some venison jerky. Then he takes the AR and heads down a game trail to the creek.

Book Two: Chapter III Analysis

When Hig gets to the small farm, there is no one to be seen. The place looks dead. He notices they have no chickens, but then understands that to keep chickens, they would require a rooster who would be a sure giveaway of their location to others. He had to admire the forethought involved. He lies at the rim of the canyon, looking down and trying to think like Bangley. He can hear Bangley's voice in his head, telling him he has the advantage of firepower. Arguing with himself, Hig wonders if there are more than just the two of them and again the voice in his head asks him for evidence - clothes hanging, old shoes, bedding.... and Hig has to admit to himself that there are no indications of more people. Then Bangley's voice asks him what he is up to. He needs a mission for a plan to be made, and if he doesn't know why he's there, he can't form a mission or have an exit strategy. Hig tries to remember that any negotiation will involve his life. The sun is warm, and Hig is so comfortable that he could easily have fallen asleep were it not for that little voice that sounds remarkably like Bangley, telling him to focus. It is a sure bet that they are trying to find a way to neutralize the threat of his presence. Bangley reminds him that against a group of nine, he did pretty good, but here, without clear purpose, he is acting like a love sick puppy. The voice reminds him that if he starts to philosophize, he will be toast, but all Hig really registers is toast, and how long it's been since he had any. That leads to thoughts of butter and jam, and then milk. He swings his scope around, wondering if any of the cattle give milk when he inadvertently spots a flash from his scope revealing that they had a second rifle. They were hiding at the edge of the creek behind a large sandstone rock, exactly where he and Bangley would have set up to watch the house. A shot rings out, spraying him with rock chips. He can actually hear Bangley laughing at him for the pickle he is in, having come to make friends but now facing the fact

that he might have to shoot one of them. The idea of holding up a white flag for peace makes Hig chuckle, and gives him an idea. He eases back, and trots to the plane to get paper and something to write with, along with Jasper's quilt. He begins writing large letters on the paper, and pinning them to the quilt, he unfurls it over the edge. He manages to communicate his peaceful intentions by throwing a grenade as far away from them as he can, and noting that it could have been thrown at them. He tells them to come out, and they reluctantly do. He gets a much better look at the woman and yells out Hi, still holding his AR on them. She smiles, and Hig is lost. He calls out that he forgives them for trying to kill him, and tells them he is coming down, trusting them not to shoot him on the way. The last thing Hig tells the man before he comes down is that if he decides to kill Hig, he'll be missing the best part of his day, and will be truly sorry. Then he works his way down to the creek where they are.

Book Two: Chapter IV: Pages 127 - 141

Book Two: Chapter IV: Pages 127 - 141 Summary

Hig wonders if the old codger is angry enough to shoot him if he comes down the ladder to them. He can see from a survivalists point of view what a good set up they have. He backs up further, suddenly exhausted and trying to think things through, but dozes off. The next thing he is aware of is a man ordering him to back up and out of his hiding place. The old man frisks him and relieves him of his grenades and pistol while Hig stands there feeling like an idiot. He ties Hig's hands together and marches him to the ladder. Hig can see the woman setting up a rifle on a tripod and he warns Hig that she is a crack shot. Once down, they tie him to a post and sit him on a stool. Despite the hostility, Hig offers the man the two Copenhagen - expired, but an unheard of treat in these days. The old man threatens to shoot him dead if he mentions the woman again, and finally Hig loses his composure, telling the man to go ahead. He'd lost everything anyway. Tears are streaming down his face unchecked when she tells her father to let him go. He does and Hig walks to the creek to pee, and wash his face. He turns and tells them he's leaving, and asks for a pinch of tobacco. She obliges. He asks for the return of the rifle and his Glock, but says they can keep the grenades. Then he hauls off and hits the man, connecting with his left cheek and taking him right off his feet. He sees the .45 in the man's hand, and doesn't care, walking away from them, half expecting a bullet to hit him in the back. She calls out asking if he wants lunch and then serves them shepherd's pie with butter, and milk. For a time, Hig is lost in the wonder of real food. He savors the beef, mashed potatoes, butter and especially the fresh milk which Cima, as she introduced herself, continues to fill whenever it is empty. He never looks up to see if her father is upset by the amount he is consuming of their provisions. The pleasure of the entire experience is a privilege. Hig tells them about Denver and the 99% mortality rate. Hig tells them about his wife, the breakdown of infrastructure, the loss of everything, and how he went to the country airport where his plane was, defending it. Hig tells Cima's father about Bangley, and he correctly guesses that Bangley is the unsympathetic one of the two of them. He also correctly surmises that although Hig hunted in his former life, he had never been in the service. He stuns Hig when he adds his assessment that Hig likes to fish also. After her father goes outside, Hig has another glass of milk, and she warns him that he is headed for diarrhea at the very least. This reveals her former life as an epidemiologist and they talk about how the flu she contracted affects her. She tells Hig that his arrival triggered the onset of their Plan - what they had talked about doing if they were overrun. The pact was that he would shoot her and then himself, and they had come as close as him with a .45 to her head. Then, watching Hig, he decides that Hig is weak and suggests they play things out instead. When he asks if they are fattening him up for another reason, she laughs until it hurts. Then she admits they need him. Hig is so tired he can hardly think, and she points to a hammock, suggesting he nap. He dreams weird and disturbing things about his former home, and wakes to see Cima working in the garden. When he finally rouses himself, Hig helps her weed her garden.

Book Two: Chapter IV: Pages 127 - 141 Analysis

Hig feels like he is heading for his first date as he makes his way to them, nervously anticipating their meeting. The hair stands up on the back of Hig's neck as he thinks about the encounter from the man's perspective. Before he exposes himself, he backs up for a minute and just thinks - mostly about how he isn't ready to die and how easy it would be to pick him off the ladder while his back is turned. Hearing Bangley in his head, he backs away from the edge, concealing himself in the scrub to think. His exhaustion overcomes him and he dozes without meaning to. The next awareness he has is of the man rousting him to his feet. Hig is tied and marched to the ladder where she covers him with a shotgun from below while he climbs down. Then, bound to a post, the interrogation begins. It doesn't take long before Hig is emotionally overwhelmed. Tears stream from his face as he defiantly tells the man that he's lost everything anyway, and he should just go ahead and shoot. He'd be doing Hig a favor. She asks her father to release him, and he obliges. At this point, Hig is ready to leave them to themselves. He asks for his weapons, which they return without hesitation, and then he slugs the old man. It is a petty move, but Hig had been humiliated and was angry. As Hig turns to leave, she invites

him to stay for lunch and he accepts. She feeds them both, neither talking. Hig is in heaven. He hasn't tasted beef, or drank milk in so long that his reaction is almost primal. When he finally slows down, he is able to converse with them, telling them about his life in Denver, and how the end had come. He describes their life now - his and Bangle's, and the old man easily pegs Hig, telling him more about himself and his likes and dislikes than Hig can believe. It is as though he had been watching Hig for decades. Hig doesn't bother to return the examination, and he soon leaves the table to return to work. Hig and Cima talk until Hig can't keep his eyes open, and he reluctantly asks if he can nap for a while. She points him to a hammock where he is out cold in no time. When he wakes, she is working in the garden, and after watching them both for a short time, he joins her pulling weeds.

Book Two: Chapter IV: Pages 141 - 156

Book Two: Chapter IV: Pages 141 - 156 Summary

The next day, in the garden again, she tells Hig about her former life. She talks, describing her earlier life while her father works around them without saying a word. Hig hikes to the plane and retrieves his sleeping bag, sleeping regularly in the hammock under the stars. On the third day, he climbs the ladder and drags back a buck. He does the same the next day, and together they butcher and jerky the meat. Hig continues to help Cima, recognizing that even just snapping peas causes her pain, although she never complains. It simply is. The days pass in a blur. The days are warm and without rain. Daily the creek reduces, the falls become smaller. One day Cima's father brings him a cup of hot liquid concocted of roasted pine nuts as they'd long run out of coffee and tea. It tasted smoky and bitter but not bad. He tells Hig that without rain, they'll have to leave in a few weeks - all of them. Hig explains his lack of fuel. At first, he doesn't believe Hig, and when he finally realizes the truth, he asks Hig why he would do such a thing. Hig tells him some of the things that led to his decision, and the radio signal he'd gotten. There is no point in slaughtering in the cattle as they can't take the weight of the extra jerky in the plane. Hig goes back to his Cessna and runs the numbers. There is not enough room for take off. Hig siphons off some of the gas, repacking the empty can and saving another seventy two pounds. When he has done all he can, he goes fishing. Hig thinks about their situation. The best chance of getting off the ground is to leave the old man behind. Catching five carp, he tries to imagine the conversation, and then has an epiphany. Lunch is ready when he returns and after eating, the old man asks 'Can you?'. The answer is simple. No. He pulls out the calculations and hands them over to him. Hig watches as the old man tries to make up the difference. Finally, he understands that he will have to stay while she goes. He takes it without argument, agreeing, which surprises Hig, but Hig has a surprise of his own. Hig tells the old man that if he leaves a day early, they can pick him up on the highway. The old man reassesses Hig quietly, but he never smiles. He just says okay.

Book Two: Chapter IV: Pages 141 - 156 Analysis

Cima tells him that she felt as though she spent her whole life waiting for something and realizes after it was gone that she had it all along. She realizes now that her husband was the love of her life. He died calling her name, confused, looking for her. Her husband Tomas died while she tended to her sick mother when it was clear she was terminal. She describes their favorite routines fondly and with a wistfulness that touches a cord in him as well. One day, Cima's father approaches Hig and tells him that the time is coming for them to leave. He wants Hig to fly him and his daughter out to the canyon and take them back to Erie with him. Hig tries to explain how he left without enough fuel to return, hunting a signal he heard three years earlier. The old man has trouble believing it. It is almost as hard for Hig to understand why they would leave such a perfect place, but drought is reason enough. The previous summer, half of their cattle had died from lack of water. Until Hig arrived, they hadn't been sure where they'd go. He had tried to dig a well, but the entire canyon was made of ledge rock four feet down. There was no water. Hig gives the old man an honest assessment of the situation. Then he goes to the plane and reduces their carrying weight all he can. Though he tries, he is unable to save enough weight to make the takeoff with such a short distance available. The old man will have to stay behind and he knows how well that will go over. Finally, having done all he can, he goes fishing. When he returns to them with five carp, the old man asks if it can be done, and Hig admits it is not possible, handing over all of the figures. The old man does the same thing Hig had earlier. Certain things he tries to eliminate, but Hig corrects him. The fuel can is necessary if they have to walk for fuel. The extra fuel is necessary in case they have to circle to find a landing site. Finally, the old man resigns himself, knowing he will have to stay behind. Hig admires the way the old man takes his medicine, without complaint. Then he smiles, and tells him that is why the extra fuel is so important. The old man could leave a day early, Hig tells him and meet them on the highway, where Hig and Cima would pick him up. He never so much as smiles, but it is clear that he is reassessing his impressions of Hig as he simply says okay.

Book Three: Chapter I

Book Three: Chapter I Summary

Since the plan is complete, they decide to wait around, fatten up, and let summer come. It is like a vacation for Hig. Cima tells him about her schooling, the scholarship she received and how, because of the tightly controlled conditions, she was forced to write an essay about her dead twin brother, Bo. Hig understands. He tells her about his wife, and how in the end a pillow had taken her life. Understanding, Cima admits she wishes she could have done the same for Tomas. She cries quietly and Hig continues weeding. Hig has a million questions, but doesn't want to burden her with them now. As the weather gets warmer, Hig appreciates the simplicity of life. He and Cima draw ever closer, talking through the days, discovering intimacies and deepening their growing bond. Hig and the old man work on the runway, moving stones leveling the ground. At one point, the old man tells him that he is acting strange and wonders if he needs his blessing or something and Hig can't be more stunned and laughs out loud. That night they make love, but in the morning she is strange and distant. The old man comes to him when he is cleaning the breakfast dishes, and tells him that he is going to scout the highway to make sure it is suitable to land on. Before leaving, he turns back to Hig and simply says everyone has been through a lot. In that moment, Hig felt more of a sense of family and love than he had in a long time. Pops returns to report the highway is fine and he's left a bandanna on a mile marker to use as a wind sock. Cima still comes to him at night, but not with any regularity. The next time she wants physical contact with him, her dream world invades his mind and he is unable. Disappointed, she rolls over putting her arms around him, but Hig feels terrible. When she asks him to pleasure her, he obliges and brings her to an ecstasy that brings them back to that happy place where there is almost no reservations. The day of their leaving draws near.

Book Three: Chapter I Analysis

Once they knew what they were doing, things thawed a little bit. The old man hadn't thought of the contingency plan that Hig had, and that surprised Hig since the old man was much like Bangley in that he was a real tactician. Hig finally realizes that the old man probably had thought it through, and knew, but had waited to see if Hig would offer. It makes Hig respect him even more. It is obvious that he is conflicted about leaving, and wouldn't take anything that wasn't freely offered. The old man thought that if it rained, the animals they left behind might survive, and they could return for them. No one said otherwise, allowing him that simple deception if it made leaving easier. One night, Hig falls asleep in the hammock naked, and wakes to feel the cover had been pulled over him. He tries to sit up, but Cima stops him and surprises him by climbing in next to him. She is asleep in moments while Hig is awake, throbbing for some time, feeling every point of contact. During the day, she is the same as always, but late the next night she comes to him again and again is asleep in moments. Sometime during the night she touches him, rousing him to throbbing again, and once again, leaving him on the edge she falls asleep. The next night she comes to him wearing nothing but a man's shirt. She brings a blanket and without conscience, she slowly opens her shirt. Hig is amazed and drinks in the beauty of her, hardly able to breathe when she turns over to give him another vista. After a few moments, she tells him that if all he wants to do is look, that's okay, but Hig wants so much more. He joins her on the blanket where they make love for the first time. Then she returns to her bedding. In the morning, she is distant and won't meet his eyes. Clearly confused, Hig stares off toward the canyon wall. Pops reminds him they've been through a lot, and Hig feels closer to him than he has to anyone in a long time. After he leaves, she confesses that following their love-making, she'd dreamed of Tomas for the rest of the night - horrible dreams in which he called to her and she ignored him, and finally cut his throat to put him out of his misery. Hig holds her. They find their way back to a semblance of happiness, and Hig can feel the growing momentum leading to their leaving.

Book Three: Chapter II: Pages 178 - 190

Book Three: Chapter II: Pages 178 - 190 Summary

Pop leaves with hardly a backward glance to the family farm. Cima selects a ram and ewe to take along, and they coax them to the plane where Cima hogties them. It isn't a textbook take off, but Hig and the Beast get into the air, Cima screaming as they reach the end of the runway space. They cross the river and land to pick up Pops. He climbs in behind his daughter and they take off for Grand Junction. Ten miles east, Hig begins calling. They reach Grand Junction to find entire areas burned to ash. Bones of the dead had been piled so high that they could see them from a distance. Cima throws up, the cloying smell and sights of the town they'd shopped in overwhelming her. Hig understands her shock. She had told him how they left the area before the worst happened. Hig makes another radio call and to his surprise, a woman's voice answers, professional, polite and guides him in to a runway for landing. Hig lines up to land. The strip is clear and without potholes, looking as though it has been maintained. As they near, Hig can see hangars, many of them damaged, and the control tower with its bulletproof, cantilevered windows. Planes on either side, tied down and beaten is a sight which can be seen at any airport now, but then it hits him. Hig pulls back on the yoke as hard as he can and the lambs wail in surprise. At that same moment, a cable is lifted, missing Hig's wheels by just a few feet. Pops is using his gun to scope the buildings. The cable is one third of the way down the runway, held tight ten feet from the tarmac by T-bar steel arms. There is no gunfire, or secondary attack and Hig asks Pops if he's up for getting them. Pops certainly is, and Cima agrees although she still looks slightly green. Hig banks tightly and brings the Beast in, coasting past a building for cover. The voice on the radio says nice landing, and actually has the nerve to congratulate Hig, telling him he is the first. Hig doesn't answer. When the plane stops, Hig and Pops get out. Hig unclips the Uzi and gives it to her, telling her to shoot anyone who shows up. Pops asks what they did with the angry survivors as he step out from behind the shelter of the building at the same time as the first shot rings out. He stumbles back and Hig grabs him, hugging him to him and thinking for an instant that he'd had it, but he shakes it off, thanking Hig. Now they know what happened to any survivors. Pops is really pissed now. He takes off his shirt and hangs it on a piece of rebar telling Hig to stick it out past the edge of the building when he is ready and not to move until he tells him to. He counts down, gives the signal, and sprints to the back door as shots ring out around him. Hig is amazed. He pulls the shirt back in to find three neat holes that would have gut shot the owner had he been wearing it. Hig counts, like he used to when in similar situations with Bangley. He gets to two hundred and twenty three before he hears a single shot from Pop's .308. Pops opens the back door and waves him over.

Book Three: Chapter II: Pages 178 - 190 Analysis

When Pops leaves before daybreak, it is without emotion or fanfare. He walks away from the family farm without a backward glance, and Hig admires his strength. Hig and Cima load the plane and manage to get off the ground. It is as close as Hig ever wants to push the envelope however, and even has Cima screaming in the last few seconds before lift off. They pick Pops up and fly the short distance to Grand Junction. Hig begins calling almost right away. They fly over the town, Cima remembering their shopping trips, her mind hardly able to process the burned carnage beneath them. Most of the city is charred and the smell is nauseating. Cima throws up out the window, partially because of the smell, and partially because of the piles of bones they can see even from a distance. This time when Hig calls, the voice on the radio answers. A woman's voice this time, professional and polite, instructs him as to where to land, and Hig feels an absurd pleasure at the sheer normalcy of it all. The pleasure is short lived however. As Hig comes into his approach, something feels off. It isn't anything he can put into words at the time, but part of it is that they have power and even though Erie airport has power, something about this whole setup seems wrong. The beacon that is usually only on during the night or when weather is bad is on now despite clear and sunny conditions. By itself, this is no big thing, but Hig can't shake the feeling he has. Only about thirty feet from touch down, with power cut and everything in its final stage of landing, Hig realizes that the plane wrecks are different from those at Erie. They are different in fact from any airport

he'd been near. Hig has seen planes that had come free from moorings and tumbled down the runway unattended. These are crashes from live, running planes - wrecks of a whole different nature. It is a trap. Hig can hear Bangle's voice in his head, giving him a rare compliment, as he pulls back hard on the yoke and banks left, only too aware that they are down to about ten minutes of flying time. The cable is black and the arms are articulated to spring up at the last possible moment. Cima is in shock and doesn't move. It is a combination of the viciousness of this attack, and the scenes of the city they'd just had. It is all too much to absorb. Since this is the largest runway between Phoenix and Denver on the way to L.A., it is reasonable to assume that they'd been playing this nasty game with countless planes and lives. Hig is livid, filled with the betrayal of the whole setup. Still putting it all together as they approach, Pops almost gets himself shot as he rounds the corner of the building. Beyond angry now, he pulls off his shirt to use as a decoy, and while Hig waves it, he zigzags across the tarmac to the back door. Hig counts to over two hundred, just like he would have with Bangle, before a single shot rings out, and Pops waves him over.

Book Three: Chapter II: Pages 190 - 196

Book Three: Chapter II: Pages 190 - 196 Summary

Pops nails the shooter through a lower gun port. He takes two sticks of dynamite out of a belt pack, and tapes them to the metal door. Hig lets Pops lead, watching him slip into commando mode automatically. They go up five floors, clearing each level one at a time. Behind the final door there are cats everywhere, running and hissing. The air is heavy with urine. An old man is crying, trying to hold his guts in. Across the room a woman shrieks the name Samuel and Hig turns to see a woman who looks just like Aunt Bee or the kind of grandma you'd see on pancake syrup. Pops shoots her in the head. They turn to the gutshot 'Sammy' and Pop asks how the trap with the cable is sprung, learning it is by way of a backhoe. Then he asks him about fuel. The man tells him the east tank and Pop takes the keys from the man's belt, telling him to go to hell and shooting him dead. Looking out the windows, Hig can see how easy it had been for them to protect their cat fiefdom. Before they leave the building, Pops takes Hig to the third floor apartment he'd discovered. It is spotless, with patch quilts on the bed, wall to wall carpet and it is immaculate. In the room where a television might have gone in another lifetime, there is a wall with pegs containing baseball caps from every airport in the country. On shelves below them are glasses of every description from reading to bifocals and mixed in with them are crudely stuffed birds of all kinds. They gas up, finding six extra cans and filling them too. As they are taking off, Pops points out three bison grazing contentedly. There are miles of dead forest, but spruce, fir and aspen are returning slowly. They see deer being chased by a grizzly bear with two cubs and deer swimming in the river. Though they have just enough to get to Erie, Hig wants to land and add a can just in case. Cima stands on the road as Pops and Hig refuel, still in a state of shock. Everything looks so normal. They return to the plane and take off, having only to clear the mountains and descend into Erie. Hig is nervous. He's been gone, as near as he can tell, for six weeks. Returning is like coming home, and Bangleley has become family to him. Hig lines up on the south end of the runway and sees his hangar for the first time - ripped open and burned.

Book Three: Chapter II: Pages 190 - 196 Analysis

Hig lets Pop take the front, thinking with amusement that he can hardly wait for Bangleley and Pops to meet as he watches Pops slip into commando mode. Using dynamite he had saved, Pops blows the metal door and they begin clearing the building, one floor at a time. They blow the lock on the fifth and final floor, opening the door to discover dozens of cats. The smell of urine is so strong that Hig gags. An old man sits at the controls, gut shot and trying to hold his insides together unsuccessfully. The cats are venturing close enough to begin feeding. A woman shrieks from behind them, calling out the name Sammy before Pops shoots her dead. Then he turns back to the half dead Sammy and asks him how the trap is sprung and where the fuel is. When he has the information he needs, he shoots him dead. On the way down again, he detours, showing Hig the apartment on the third floor which is filled with souvenirs taken from other hapless victims. Some of the shelves even contain dozens of crudely stuffed birds. Hig can hardly wait to leave. They fuel up, taking extra cans they found along with them, and take off. The countryside is full of surprises, beginning with three bison Pops spies out the window as they are leaving. They also see deer, a grizzly with her two cubs, and the beginnings of new growth in the forests. They land briefly in Winter Park to add the canned fuel before climbing the range to get to Erie airport on the other side. The town is vacant and looks untouched. Cima wants to go into a nearby German restaurant, and Hig goes with her. Inside, she sees a large mirror and stands in front of it, stunned, before bursting into tears. Hig hardly recognizes his own reflection. They go back to the plane, and Hig is surprised to realize that he is excited to see Bangleley. After all the years they'd been together, he is like family now. Hig sees all the familiar landmarks on the way in, and lines up to land. He doesn't see the damage to his hanger until then, and is stunned that it appears to have been torn open and burned.

Book Three: Chapter III

Book Three: Chapter III Summary

The window are shot out in Bangley's house but it is still standing. There is a huge hole in the roof and scorch marks on the now splintered dormer. Hig coasts all the way to Bangley's house and the plane is barely stopped when Hig hops out. There is no answer to his calls for Bangley. Bullet holes strafed the wall in the workshop. They hear a shot and a scream, and hurry back down to see Cima crouching behind the wheel of the Cessna. She points to Hig's hangar and they find Bangley behind Hig's large red tool chest, covered in dried blood. His hand comes up and touches Hig's beard. For two weeks, it is touch and go. Cima set him on the couch, splinting his broken leg, moving him as little as possible. On day six, he opens his eyes, addressing her as Mrs. Hig. She bursts out laughing. Doctor Hig, she corrects. Pops relaxes more each day. Hig takes him up in the Beast to show him the landmarks, and when they fly over the Mennonite camp, the children come running and Hig counts seven - one less than before. They take turns monitoring Bangley. They sleep outside, where he and Jasper used to. Some nights Hig still grieves, but they are fewer. Pops moves into a house next to Bangley's with a view of the airfield - a tactician like Bangley at heart. Almost two weeks after their return, Pops asks Bangley if he can borrow his Sig Sauer. He speaks with some admiration as they discuss Bangley's firefight. Fourteen... four armed, Bangley admits. Hig takes Cima to see the families, and loves the surprise on their faces as she approaches, explaining she is a doctor and introducing herself. They settle into a routine of sorts. Cima treats the families and they love her instantly, just as Hig had. One day Hig is in the garden when two 747's pass overhead. He races to the radio, trying to raise them, but there is no answer. Their conversation might be Arabic, Hig decides, listening to their conversation. For the next two weeks, they fly by again, but on the fourth week, nothing. Cima speculates that they may have immunity. No one ever answers his radio calls. They continue to sleep outside like he and Jasper had done, and Hig still dreams that Jasper is alive.

Book Three: Chapter III Analysis

Pops and Cima can tell from Hig's reaction that what he sees is all wrong. On high alert, Pops scans the area and Hig circles one more time before landing. The garden is still there, and though water is still in the furrows, the weeds are high. He lands as close to Bangley's house as he can, and calls out to Bangley as soon as he gets there. There is no answer. Bullet holes in the walls reveal the firefight that occurred here. Hig flinches when Pops lays a hand on his shoulder. Upstairs, Hig finds the room Bangley used, formerly the son's room, and looks out the window to see the entire encampment. Bangley had a perfect vantage. Pops takes it all in and tells Hig that Bangley didn't die there, but was wounded. They hear a shot and a scream, racing down to see Cima crouched behind the plane's wheel and pointing to Hig's hangar. Hig and Pops immediately realize it is Bangley, and Hig hurries to find him lying behind his large tool chest. His leg is broken, and he is covered in dried blood. His eyes are crusted shut and there is no way of knowing how long he'd been lying there. Cima, using her expertise as a doctor, is competent and somehow more fulfilled than Hig had seen her before. It is as though something inside her flowers. He watches her with Bangley, loving the way they look like friends already. She is, Hig decides, the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. She is even more astounding with the families. Explaining that they are not contagious other than by fluid transfer, she enchants them by her mere demeanor, and Hig can tell that they love her from the very first moment, just as he had. They settle into a routine of sorts. Pops and Bangley play chess, and find much common ground while Hig works in his garden and shuttles Cima to the families so that she can treat them. Hig suspects it is more a case of her wanting to be near the children, and loves her more for it. One day they see two 747's pass over, and though Hig tries to raise them on the radio, there is no answer. He hears them speaking a language he presumes is Arabic, but isn't sure. They fly over once a week for three weeks, and then once more weeks later, but there is never any contact. Hig and Cima sleep outside where he and Jasper used to, tangled together in a mass of arms and legs. Pops takes the house next to Bangley's, setting himself up with a fortified lookout over the airstrip. Hig still dreams of Jasper, always still alive.

Characters

Big Hig

Hig is a middle aged man who is one of the few survivors of an epidemic that took out a large portion of the population. He celebrated his fortieth birthday a year ago. Born in the year of the rat, Hig is an Aquarius. Growing up, his father had been mostly absent, but he had an uncle who taught him how to fish. Hig and his wife had a dog named Jasper which Hig had kept with him until his death just recently. Though he and his wife had no children, she had been pregnant. Hig enjoys reading - his favorite books are Shane and Infinite Jest.

Hig used to build timber framed and adobe houses, as well as some occasional custom work and hated it, thinking all along that he should have been a teacher. After finishing college, he wrote a book of poetry which he says no one read and of the thirty poems in it, twenty three were for his wife. His writing extended to magazines on occasion with fishing and outdoor stuff as the central theme. As a child growing up, he had always wanted to be a writer. He can cook reasonably well for a man, and is healthy and free of disease. Hig loses his dog, Jasper, to old age on a hunting trip. When that happens, he decides to pursue a radio signal he got three years previously, feeling the need to reach out. He meets and falls in love with Cimarron, and grows to have great respect for her father as well.

Bruce Bangle

Bangle is Hig's only close neighbor. He is a gun enthusiast, and owns several varieties, proficient with them all. Bangle is the muscle of their friendship, taking care of any and all threats to their safety. Bangle grew up in Oklahoma. His father was a farmer there and Bangle swears he will not follow in his footsteps. He is so determined not to do so, that he feigns ignorance to avoid it.

Bangle is the kind of guy who gets angry in gradually increasing stages, building internal pressure the way a volcano does. He believes that when Hig flies over to see the Mennonites, he is creating a security breach and fears that the illness affecting them could kill them all. When he discovers that Hig knows who they are and visits them on occasion to help them out, he reminds Hig of this fact. Bangle is only tolerant of things that will improve their security, or feed them.

When Hig decides to try to trace a three year old radio signal originating from Grand Junction, Bangle is not happy. He says goodbye to Hig in a way that makes Hig realize that he doesn't believe he will see him again. Hig does return, but by then Bangle has been the victim of a large attack. Buildings are damaged and Bangle is hiding behind Hig's large tool chest. His leg is broken and he is covered in dried blood. Cima saves his life and it is clear that they will be friends. It is also evident that Bangle and Pops are kindred spirits.

Jasper

Jasper is Hig's blue heeler mix. He has a great nose, is very protective, and goes everywhere with Hig. Jasper has been with Hig for his entire life. Now, living at the airport, he has become accustomed to flying as Hig's copilot wherever he goes. Jasper is Hig's best friend. He is Hig's connection to his life beforehand, and is his confidante, his protector, and ever his early warning system. When Jasper dies on a hunting trip with Hig, expiring quietly during the night, Hig is devastated. For two days he simply ceases to function. He wraps Jasper in a quilt and lies beside him, holding him like always and missing him to the very core of his being. Jasper is laid to rest in one of their favorite stopping places. The hole is deep enough to discourage foragers, and then lovingly covered with rocks to chest height.

Melissa

Hig's wife in better times, he and Melissa lived in Denver on a lake. Their home was only seven minutes from the downtown core which contained the restaurants, theaters and bookstores they liked. The big window in their house looked out onto water, mountains and grass. A flock of Canadian geese became residents while the transients came and went each year. They had gotten Jasper as a puppy then.

Melissa was incredibly smart. Originally, they were told they couldn't have children, but after seeing a doctor who attempted to sell them treatments which they declined, like a miracle she became pregnant. Melissa's birthday was on April 21st. She was never a fan of fuss and parties, so each year Hig took her for what she considered to be a decadent meal which was usually sushi, and bought her a hardcover book - the kind that had an embossed or engraved kind of finish on the cover.

Cimarron (Cima)

Cimarron was an internist in the public health department before life fell apart. She worked in the field of epidemiology in New York City. Cima has a kind of fibromyalgia that she got as a result of the flu she caught. Because of this, she hemorrhages easily, and her muscles become very sore as well. The prolonged fever caused the systemic inflammation, but she survives because of some resistance she has which they believed she inherited from her father. Cima was married to a musician named Tomas who had just finished his dissertation. They lived in a Brooklyn Heights walk up on Cranberry Street. Cima had gone back east as a result of a Dartmouth scholarship. She has only one sibling - a twin brother who died when they were both fifteen in a motorcycle accident. Cima had intended to be a vet, but college counselor, Mr. Sykes chose one person to receive a scholarship. Cima was the person that year.

Cima and her father meet Hig when he flies over the box canyon they live in, and sees them for the first time. Though they almost kill him at first, Cima warms to Hig quickly. They grow close in the weeks that Hig stays with them, and then she and her father return to Erie with Hig to avoid the drought that is slowly killing everything.

Cimarron's Father (Pops)

Pops is a tall man in good condition physically. He appears to be in his early sixties and wears a ratty looking fawn colored cowboy hat. At first meeting, his face is compressed with anger, his gray eyes reflecting his fury. He is lean and has white hair, with a face that is creased with experience. He moves easily, with a body that is no stranger to work. A rancher in his former life and clearly a soldier at some time as well, he is cold and unsympathetic.

Pops is tough. Formerly a Navy SEAL, he did a tour in Afghanistan and in other places before returning to run the family farm. Now, drought has taken even that from him, and being forced out is a bitter pill to swallow. When he returns with Hig and Cima to Erie airport, he finds a kindred spirit in Bangle. Once Bangle recovers from his injuries, they play chess and find common interests in weaponry and tactical operations.

Reba

One of the women who lives in the Mennonite camp, Reba had at one time suffered terrible burns on half of her face, and now stands sideways to Hig so that he won't see that part of her face. Like the country singer, Reba can carry a tune.

Matilda

One of the young girls who lives in the Mennonite camp, Matilda is a pretty young girl despite her waxy looking skin and the dark circles around her eyes.

Aaron

Aaron is one of the people in the Mennonite camp. He is tall, and has a beard that is hooked, and looks like a scoop of carved out wood. He moves slowly, wasted by the disease they all carry, and appears much older than he is as a result. He walks bent forward like a man much older than he is.

Tomas

Cimarron's husband, Tomas was the love of her life. They lived on Cranberry Street in Brooklyn Heights. The walk up has a wonderful view of the river and skyline. A musician, Tomas worked on completing his dissertation so that he could work full time in the faculty, moving up from the teacher position he currently held at Hunter as an adjunct. He made little but he loved his students. So Tomas was waiting.... waiting. He passes his orals just about the same time as the beginning of the illnesses in Newark. Tomas became ill and he succumbed to his illness in a ward alone while his wife, Cimarron was with her mother who was also terminal. He was cremated by friend and co-worker, Joel for Cima, and she picks up his ashes when she returns.

Samuel

Samuel (Sammy) is one of the two people who lived in the tower at the Grand Junction airport. He is shot and killed by Pops after he, Cimarron and Hig are almost killed when they follow instructions to land there.

Objects/Places

Denver

The city that was just seven minutes from the house that Melissa and Hig shared before the beginning of the end.

St. Vincent's Hospital

Located across the lake from where Hig and Melissa used to live, it is one of the first buildings that is taken over to house the dead.

Commerce City

The place where, every couple of months, Hig lands on a cleared section of boulevard to restock ten cases of oil for the plane, and one day discovers a Coke truck. He now takes five cases with him each time as well, two each for them, and one for the Mennonites which he doesn't tell Bangley about.

Arteriosclerosis

The disease that affects Bangley, making his life little more than a ticking time bomb.

Garmin

An instrument in Hig's plane that has a Nearest button. When pressed, it tells the pilot where the nearest airport is, and which way the pilot should go to get there.

Life After People

A television series that Hig used to watch which once showed how quickly New York City would return to nature if the people were suddenly gone.

Cessna 6333A5

Hig's plane and registration number.

Stories That Could Be True

The William Stafford book of poetry that Hig had gone back to his house for.

Sage Pack Rod

The rod that Hig's father gave to him on his sixteenth birthday just after Hig had come to live with him.

Erie Airport

Where Hig and Bruce Bagley live.

Paonia

The town that Hig and his wife Melissa almost moved to. It is a place Jasper was fond of, chasing sticks and swimming.

Fibromyalgia

What Cima has after she contracts and survives the flu, as a result of prolonged fever.

New York City

Where Cima and her husband lived and worked.

Grenades

What Bangley gives Hig just as he is leaving to protect himself, to be dropped from the plane if necessary.

Pact

The agreement that Cima and her father had as a contingency in case they were ever overrun. The Pact was that he would shoot Cima and then himself.

Shepherd's Pie

A meal made of hamburger, vegetables and mashed potatoes, served by Cima on Hig's first day with them.

Hammock

What Hig sleeps in while he is with Cima and her father.

Dissertation

What Cima's husband, a musician, had just completed in the hopes of securing a faculty position.

Hunter

Where Cima's husband taught.

Pilot Operating Handbook

The book which contains the table of takeoff distances which Hig uses to figure out whether or not he can take them both.

Ritter Scholarship

Given to one student from Delta High each year, it is part of an endowment set up by the man, an alum, who built the fiberboard plant. It was his way of giving back to the community he polluted.

Sabrett's

Hot dogs with sauerkraut, grilled onions and mustard, served in New York City and a treat that Cima swore she could eat until she was sick.

New Delhi

Region blamed for initial outbreak of flu.

London

Where the first cases of flu were reported, blamed on New Delhi, but more likely originating in Livermore or Brampton.

Brampton

Location where plane carrying trans-shipment from the national weapons lab crashed releasing superbug.

Grand Junction

The origin of the radio transmission Hig hears and investigates to find a trap.

Themes

Cannibalism - Acceptable Or Not

"The Dog Stars" by Peter Heller delves into some rather stark subject matter, and is not for the easily offended. In this story, the main character Hig allows and in fact encourages his dog Jasper to dine on victims of place and circumstance. It is a decision he comes to after some thought, comparing their situation to that of the rugby team that crashed in the Andes and were forced to consume their fellow travelers in order to survive. Hig didn't partake of this himself of course. At first Hig had cut out and turned the usable meat into salted jerky. That changes when a body is freshly available. Hig doesn't so much as flinch. He remembers how his uncle had told him that a person could get used to anything - even a dead goat. For Hig, these bodies were dead goats. He did his best to think of them as nothing more than dog food once they were dead, and it was clear that Jasper wasn't fussy. Hig could not have done this in his old life. When the markets still sold food, and the cities were still packed with people, this kind of social faux pas would never have occurred but with the world reduced to just a few handfuls of people, the social niceties that kept us all from losing our way were easier to follow.

Shoot First - Ask Questions Later

In this novel, circumstances beginning with a deadly flu and followed by a blood disease quickly reshape the world. The once crowded streets are now empty, most buildings burned or looted. Few people survive the flu, and many who do are then afflicted with the blood disease. Similar to AIDS, the blood disease is one that kills but it acts with more speed. Hig belongs to a class of people who are still struggling to leave the old life behind. Although he recognizes some changes in himself, such as a willingness to butcher human victims, salt them, and feed them to his dog Jasper to get him through leaner times, he has not progressed to the degree that Bangley has. Bangley has a much more realistic view of life now. He knows that weakness will get you killed. Hesitation is equally bad. The only hope of survival in Bangley's mind is to shoot first and ask questions later. Bangley tries to educate Hig. He teaches him how to cope with threats and helps him to devise a method of security that will keep them both alive. He teaches Hig to shoot, and helps him to construct a tower from which to protect the entire compound. When Hig later encounters threats on his own, he can hear Bangley in his head telling him to kill or be killed.

Living Without Infrastructure

"The Dog Stars" by Peter Heller takes a small glimpse into what life might be like should the infrastructure fall apart. The world is a different place without the conveniences we've come to expect as a regular course. For example, lights, heat, communication, travel, medication, food, and so much more can be difficult at best. Once the initial storehouses and supplies are depleted, the search to find more would begin. Even just reading after dark will take thought. While heat can be produced simply by burning wood or adding blankets, obtaining food becomes a lesson in creativity once the stores have been raided for all of the processed foods. Fresh vegetables are only attainable if you grow them; meat is only available if you have cows, sheep, goats, pigs or chickens that can be slaughtered (and the stomach and knowledge to do so); eggs require laying chickens which would also require a rooster to perpetuate the laying birds; milk only if you have both cow and bull, or a goat; and the list goes on. To keep food over the winter, knowledge of canning, and preserving is essential. Hunting becomes a normalcy instead of something that only rednecks and hard core gun enthusiasts enjoy. To survive in a world without infrastructure would require participation and education. Most city dwellers would struggle from the moment they stepped out the front door to discover the elevator isn't working. It wouldn't get better from there. Those who live in rural areas would enjoy more flexibility. Most would already have gardens, livestock, and be mostly self sufficient. They may have generators, a fuel supply, food storage and more. The further dependent we become on infrastructure, the more difficult it is likely to be just to survive when - not if it falls apart.

Style

Point of View

"The Dog Stars" by Peter Heller is a first person recollection and narration by the main character 'Hig' of a time which we can only imagine. In Hig's world, a flu epidemic takes most of the planet, and a blood disease that makes AIDS look tame followed shortly behind taking what few survivors there were from the flu. The small group that survive both are faced with a very different world. When even Hig's wife succumbs to illness, he leaves their home, where he'd known so much joy, and goes to live at the airport where he keeps his Cessna. His only companions are Jasper, his faithful part blue heeler, and Bruce Bagley, another sole survivor. Together they keep the perimeter of their little oasis clear, and watch the passage of time. The narrative is cohesive and though Hig tends to ramble sometimes, his story telling is concise and logical. He tells his story with passion, and the reader is drawn in to the way he feels and the challenges he survives. His character descriptions are vivid and colorful, bringing the story to life. Hig is devastated when his wife dies, and for a time his life with Jasper and Bagley is enough, but then the need to be around people settles in with such a vengeance that he decides to pursue the voice he hears only once while in flight. What follows is an unexpected glimpse into what could become of the world.

Setting

"The Dog Stars" is a novel set almost entirely in one of several airports located in Colorado with a brief respite of a few weeks time at a small farm (located near Grand Junction). The main characters, Hig and Bruce, live at Erie airstrip - a small Colorado airstrip used by Hig and his Cessna. Now, living in and around a hangar at Erie, Hig grows a small garden, and flies the perimeter to ensure their continued safety and enjoys both hunting and fishing. Bruce Bagley also lives in a house at the Erie airstrip. He is a hunter of a different kind. He is a gun enthusiast who most enjoys the contest of himself against the outsiders. A crack shot, he does his part by being the muscle of the friendship. Hig hikes the back country around the airstrip, hunting and fishing to supplement their food supply. When Jasper, his dog and constant companion dies, Hig becomes restless and decides to pursue a single radio transmission he'd heard three years earlier originating from Grand Junction, Colorado. On the way there, he discovers a man and his daughter living on a small farm in a box canyon just a short distance away from Grand Junction. He stays with them for several weeks before together they investigate the Grand Junction radio signal, and then all three return to the Erie airstrip.

Language and Meaning

Peter Heller, author of "The Dog Stars", writes this novel entirely from Hig's perspective, although he does venture into the feelings and emotional baggage of several other characters. Bagley, the enforcer, enjoys the creating and maintaining a perimeter, ensuring their safety and security. Heller does a good job of describing apocalyptic behavior, both by those who lose their humanity in the crisis the world faces, and also to a smaller degree, by those like Hig and Bagley who must change how they behave in order to survive. In this new reality, life is worth little. Hospitality and humanity are things that belonged to the civilized world. In this life, even the best of the rest must kill or be killed to survive. The main character, Hig, justifies his behavior and Heller manages to make him into a sympathetic and likable character despite his admissions that he smothered his own wife with a pillow, killed men, women and children who came too close to the airstrip, and then often butchered and fed them to his canine companion. In this new reality, most of this is considered to be acceptable or necessary evils. Though Heller uses regular English language, he adds enough flight take off and landing information to lend credibility to the tale, and manages to balance power issues introducing solar backup. The author does a respectable job of describing post apocalyptic conditions that are reasonable and plausible.

Structure

"The Dog Stars" by Peter Heller is a fictional story of two hundred and seventeen pages. It is divided into three parts. The first part, titled Book One introduces Hig, Jasper and Bangley who live on a small airstrip in Colorado called Erie. There are six chapters in Book One ranging in length from three to twenty nine pages and averaging just over ten pages each. This segment gives the reader a fair look at these characters, and concludes with Jasper's death in chapter VI. Book Two is divided into four chapters ranging in length from seven to twenty nine pages and averaging twelve pages each. This section introduces Cimarron and her father. It establishes the growing drought and its effects, and sets the scene for them to be taken elsewhere. Hig and Cima's father work on the numbers, and manage to work out a way to fly out, despite the obstacles. Book Three consists of three chapters ranging from thirteen to nineteen pages in length and averaging seventeen pages. This section reveals the truth about Grand Junction, and takes Hig, Cima and her father back to Erie airstrip where they find Bangley near death.

Quotes

Country boys will survive. Book One: Chp I, Pg 20

Bangley to Hig when Hig insists on continuing to go to the Mennonite community to the south of them to help them when needed.

I never thought I'd be an old man at forty. Book One: Chp I, Pg 28

Hig's observations about himself.

Christ Hig we're not Recreating here are we? Book One: Chp III, Pg 44

Bangley to Hig when Hig talks about going fishing.

Took the end of the world to make us kings for a day. Book One: Chp IV, Pg 51

Bangley to Hig when Hig announces he wants to go hunting for the elk he has seen tracks of.

You wait til the door swings open and you see the guy with the drawn bow, and you wait til he looses off a shot just in case maybe he was hunting pheasant or something and didn't have your ass in mind - Book One: Chp V, Pg 67

Bangley chastising Hig for his improper handling of the situation at the Coke truck.

Now what am I going to do? Book One: Chp VI, Pg 79

Hig to himself and to Jasper after Jasper dies on their hunting trip.

Thought you croaked on me. Book Two: Chp I: Pg 86

Bangley to Hig when Hig finally returns from the hunting trip on which Jasper dies.

In that instant I knew what I had come for. Book Two: Chp II: Pg. 113

Hig to himself when he sees Cima from the air for the first time.

"I promise you'll deprive yourself of the best part of your day!" Book Two: Chp III: Pg 126

Hig to the man and woman who Hig discovers in the box canyon who try to shoot him. He tells them if they decide to kill him they'll feel really bad later.

Touch that rifle and you're a dead man. Book Two: Chp IV: Pg 130

Pops to Hig at their first meeting.

I smothered my wife with a pillow. Book Three: Chp I: Pg 161

Hig's confession to Cima as they work together in the garden.

Congratulations. You're the first. Book Three: Chp II: Pg. 187

Grand Junction tower to Hig after he manages to touch down avoiding the trap set.

They suggested that the onset of the autoimmune disease was speeded by a breakdown in the body's ability to make it's own vitamin D. Book Three: Chp III: Pg. 208

Cima to Hig, explaining what little they'd learned about the blood disease.

Topics for Discussion

What unconventional behavior does Hig now indulge in that would have been socially and legally unacceptable before the world changed? Why are these double standards in place? What other issues are obviously different in Hig and Bangley's life now?

Where does Hig live? Where does he sleep? Why did he first start sleeping there? What does he keep with him when he is sleeping? What is Hig's early warning system?

How did Bangley arrive in Hig's life? What is his history? What did he bring to their relationship? How do they divide the security of their surroundings?

Who are the nearest neighbors to Hig and Bangley? What issue keeps them from being attacked by renegades? What are the obvious symptoms of this? How did the medical community believe this was transmitted? What precautions were taken when the camp was visited?

What does Hig do to recreate? Where does he go? How does Bangley feel about these excursions? What makes them barely acceptable to Bangley? How do they increase their odds of safely traversing the open space between themselves and the forest line? How many times has Hig had trouble there in total?

What happens on the hunting trip when Jasper dies? Why does Bangley raise an alarm? What does he tell Hig to do? How many shots does he want Hig to prepare for and how? What is the weapon of choice carried by the others? What assessment does Bangley make of them? How does he finally keep Hig from attack?

Where does Hig want to go that makes Bangley ask him if he's having a mid-life crisis? Why does Bangley feel that way? What does Bangley fear? What experiences have they had so far that supports his fears?

What does Hig discover on the way to Grand Junction? How does this discovery change his plans? What kind of reception does he get and why? How does he respond? In what ways is Hig lucky to survive this encounter?

Why do Cima and her father feel it is necessary to leave the home they have been safe in since the beginning? What evidence have they already seen? What are the largest obstacles to their leaving? How does Hig's arrival change this?

How does Hig respond when Pops tells him his plan? What is the biggest problem associated with this plan? What are some of the factors that must be considered? How does Hig overcome the issues that hinder this plan?