

Messenger



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LOIS LOWRY

Lowry is the oldest of two children. When she was born, her parents initially gave her a Norwegian name (her father was of Norwegian descent), but when her paternal grandmother objected, they named her Lois. Her father was an Army dentist, so her family moved often around the United States and the globe. She attended junior high school in Japan, but graduated from high school in New York City. Lowry enrolled at Pembroke College in Brown University (the associated women's college of Brown; now part of the university itself), but only completed two years. She dropped out when she married her husband, and the two had four children. They settled in Maine after her husband ended his military career and there, Lowry completed her bachelor's degree at the University of Southern Maine. A lifelong writer, she worked as a freelance journalist and photographer and in 1977 published her first novel, *A Summer to Die*. At this point, she and her husband decided to divorce. Lowry has written a number of children's novels since then. *The Giver* and *Number the Stars* have won Newbery awards, and *The Giver* has been one of the most challenged books in American schools. She splits her time between homes in Massachusetts and Maine.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In a variety of ways, *Messenger* reflects several cultural changes of the early 2000s. The fear of difference and attempts to close Village to outsiders can be read as a reflection of rising nationalist sentiment in the U.S. following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, though it also draws upon the legislation of the mid-1990s to strengthen immigration regulations, especially at the U.S.-Mexico border. The Trade Mart, a critique of the ills of consumer culture, mirrors the boom of online shopping in the first few years of the 21st century. The paintings that Matty looks at in Leader's books seem to be primarily paintings from the Renaissance era, specifically crucifixion scenes and images of the Madonna and child.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A number of critics have suggested that *The Giver*, the first novel in the Giver Quartet, marked the beginning of a boom in young adult dystopian fiction. *Messenger* (as well as the other two novels in the quartet, *Gathering Blue* and *Son*) certainly falls into this genre, as well as Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* series and *Scythe* by Neal Shusterman. Several critics have picked up on *Messenger's* clear distaste for capitalism and

consumer culture, which invites comparisons to novels like Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. In the novel itself, Matty and Jean reminisce about Mentor reading Shakespeare's *Macbeth* out loud to them, while Mentor later recites an excerpt from the poem "To an Athlete Dying Young" written by the English poet Alfred Edward Housman.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Messenger
- **When Written:** 2003
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts and Maine
- **When Published:** 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel; Dystopian Fiction
- **Setting:** Village, Forest, and Kira's cottage
- **Climax:** Matty uses his gift to heal Forest and Village, sacrificing himself in the process
- **Antagonist:** Selfishness and greed, Mentor
- **Point of View:** Third Person Limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Interpretations May Differ. Though Lowry has been upfront that she didn't write any of the novels in the Giver Quartet to be overtly Christian, all of the novels (and especially *Messenger*, with Matty's Jesus-like sacrifice for the good of humanity) can be read through a religious lens and, at various points, have been picked up and promoted by a number of churches. On the other hand, some churches have taken major offense to the novels and have spearheaded efforts to ban the books.

Photography. Lowry's photography hobby is more than a hobby—the photographs on the original covers of *The Giver* and *Number the Stars* are ones that she took.



PLOT SUMMARY

A teenaged boy named Matty tries to hurry through supper preparations so he can go check on something in **Forest**. His guardian, a blind man named Seer, teases Matty good-naturedly about whatever it is that Matty needs to see in Forest. After supper, Seer tells Matty to light a lamp, and Matty remembers Seer saying once that Forest—which is dangerous for most people—is "just an illusion." Matty goes past the kind schoolteacher Mentor's house in the hopes of seeing Jean, Mentor's daughter, but he runs into his friend Ramon instead. Ramon invites Matty to his homeplace for supper, but Matty

lies that he has a message to deliver. Lying isn't allowed in Village, but Matty needs to get into Forest alone. For most this is a dangerous proposition, but Matty can pass through Forest unharmed. Because of this, he hopes to one day receive the true name Messenger, as he can carry messages through Forest to other settlements. He finds what he's looking for: a small frog.

On his way home, Matty hears keening—crying and singing about a death—and the next day, Ramon tells Matty that Forest entangled and killed Gatherer. Ramon brags about his family's new **Gaming Machine**, and Matty thinks that he'd like a Gaming Machine of his own. As the boys go fishing, Leader, the leader of the village, watches over Village and sees something troubling in Forest. Later that evening, Matty tries to convince Seer that they should trade for a Gaming Machine, but Seer insists that it'd be a mistake to trade away reading or music in the evenings for a mechanical thing that dispenses candy. He tries to impress upon Matty that Ramon's parents probably sacrificed something important or valuable for the Gaming Machine, but he refuses to allow Matty to attend a Trade Mart so he can figure out how trading works.

One morning, Matty goes to Leader's homeplace so he can deliver messages. Leader's homeplace is filled with books from his old settlement, and he sees them as proof that his old settlement is changing for the better. Leader tries to ask Matty whether there are fewer fish in the river than there used to be, as people are complaining that food supplies are running low. Matty suggests that maybe it seems like there are fewer fish now because he's growing up and the world seems smaller now. He accepts the messages and later, reads the message to Seer. Both are shocked that the message says that there will be a meeting and a vote to close Village to outsiders, and that Mentor is leading the movement. Seer asks if Mentor has traded, but Matty only knows that he doesn't have a Gaming Machine.

A few days later, Matty tells Seer that Jean's dog had puppies and she'll let Matty have one. When Matty goes to visit the puppies, however, he finds Jean in distress: two of the puppies have died, and the remaining puppy and the mother are very ill. Mentor is away courting Stocktender's widow, but Matty sends Jean away to fetch herbs from Herbalist and experiments with his secret power in private. It feels like lightning in his hands and allows him to heal things with a touch. He heals both dogs and later, falls into bed exhausted. He remembers how he healed the frog on accident a few weeks ago and how painful and terrifying it was.

A group of newcomers arrives the next day. Matty and Seer join Ramon in greeting them, but a group, led by Mentor, arrives and chants that they need to close Village. Leader breaks up the tense moment and assures Mentor that they'll vote on this later. Matty notices that Mentor's large birthmark looks less pronounced, and he also looks taller and thinner.

Matty hears that Trade Mart is happening later and he vows to attend. He convinces Seer to let him go, and also assures Seer that he has nothing to trade, but Seer warns Matty that he certainly has things that people will want. After supper, Matty joins his neighbors in heading to the platform. Looking around, Matty notices that everyone seems nervous and secretive. When Trademaster arrives with only a mysterious book, Matty pays close attention. Mentor pushes others aside so he can go first and stands next to Trademaster on the platform. Trademaster asks Mentor, "trade for what," and Mentor says he wants "same as before." Watching Stocktender's widow giggle, Matty assumes the trade has to do with her. Then, Trademaster asks, "trade away what," but Mentor only whispers his answer to Trademaster. Everyone else goes through the same script. Matty tells Seer about it later that evening and says that as everyone dispersed, he saw a normally kind woman make fun of her husband for his limp. He also noticed that Mentor's birthmark is gone.

Jean sends word to Matty a week later that it's time to pick up his puppy. Mentor is away again courting Stocktender's widow, so Jean and Matty have the opportunity to speak privately. Jean admits that Mentor is trading away his "deepest self" to make Stocktender's widow love him. Matty is shocked, but reasons that this explains why Mentor wants to close Village. He wonders if he can heal Mentor with his power.

Not long after, Matty goes to Leader to deliver messages and ask him to give the puppy a true name. He tells Leader what he suspects about Mentor and about Trade Mart, and Leader names the puppy Frolic. As Matty wanders through Village over the next few days, he runs into a woman who recently arrived. She asks Matty if he's noticed her son, Vladik, and says she's worried about Village's potential closure—her other children are still at her old settlement. In the market, Matty and Jean continue to discuss Mentor's transformation, and Jean cries about Mentor's sudden disinterest in literature and poetry. At the meeting, people who traded say that they're tired of caring for others, and the vote to close Village passes. Seer realizes that this means that his daughter, Kira, only has three weeks to come. He asks Matty to go to his old village to help her come to Village and explains that both she and Leader have special gifts.

At Leader's homeplace, Leader admits that he knows Matty has a gift and tells him to not use it. Leader uses his gift to "look beyond," but Forest is "thickening" too much and he can't see through the trees to Kira. He tries to stop Matty from going, but Matty insists he must. Leader succeeds in seeing beyond and asks if Kira is beautiful. Matty isn't convinced she is; she's like a sister to him and has a twisted leg. That afternoon, Jean stops by to bid Matty goodbye. She notices that a tapestry in Seer's homeplace is twisted and snarled, and she explains that Herbalist quarantined Ramon and his sister—who have grown ill—for fear of an epidemic.

By his second day in Forest, Matty understands what Leader

meant about Forest: it's darker, it smells, and it's harder to find food. He thinks about his childhood and how he first connected Kira with Seer, whom she thought was dead. As he progresses, he becomes ill until finally, he feels like Forest spits him out near Kira's cottage. She greets him warmly, but Matty knows his return trip will be his last one. As Kira gives Matty soup, he watches how she moves and decides he must fix her leg so they can move faster. When Matty brings it up, though, Kira refuses—she says she's whole as she is. She's not convinced when Matty demonstrates his gift on himself, but she does show Matty her gift. As she embroiders, her hands shimmer and she embroiders a picture of the future. It shows her and Matty walking into Forest, as well as Mentor building a wall. They decide to leave the next day. After only a few hours, Matty is glad that Kira didn't let him heal her—she's used to walking with her stick. She packed her embroidery frame and carries it on her back, and assures Matty she feels safe with him. Matty doesn't tell her that Forest doesn't feel safe. Back in Village, Leader looks beyond and tells Seer about Matty and Kira's progress, but he leaves out that Forest will destroy them. They listen to the sounds of Mentor working on the wall.

That night, Kira shows Matty her bloody feet. Matty knows that these are Warnings from Forest and stays awake to listen. The next day, Forest begins attacking Matty by dripping poisonous sap onto his arms. It's painful and makes his arms swell, and the stench from Forest starts to bother Kira. The next day, Matty admits that he doesn't know what's going on with Forest. They do their best to navigate a dangerous swamp, but emerge bleeding, muddy, and barely able to breathe. Over the next few days, Matty starts to escape his pain by hallucinating that he's floating above his body. As they stop to rest one afternoon, Matty cuts a vine that tries to wind around his ankle. Kira pulls out her embroidery supplies to use her gift and says that Leader is coming for them.

A few mornings later, Matty wakes up and is surprised that he and Kira are still alive. At this point, Leader is several days into Forest and is bloody and bruised. Matty and Kira are in a similar state; Matty's nose is bleeding, Kira can barely see, and she refuses to go on. Matty asks her to use her gift to try to meet Leader halfway and surprisingly, it works: the two are able to meet in "Beyond." They discuss that they're lost and hurt, and Leader asks Kira to tell Matty to use his gift. Matty groans and falls back when he hears this; he thinks it's too late. However, as he rolls into the mud, his fingers begin to vibrate. His entire body tightens and begins to flow into Forest, healing it. Everyone in Village begins to heal, while Mentor abandons his wall building and recites a poem. Leader and Kira feel well again, and Matty feels like he's been chosen for this. He floats above and understands what Seer meant about Forest being an illusion: it was a reflection of human fear, lies, and power. Now, it blooms as Matty dies. Leader finds Kira and tells her that though Matty wanted to be given the true name Messenger, his

true name is Healer. He carries Matty's body back toward Village.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Matty – The protagonist of the novel; though it doesn't give his age, he's probably around fourteen or fifteen years old. Matty is a kind and compassionate adolescent, and he loves learning things. Matty came from a settlement far away when he was a young child (as described in [Gathering Blue](#), where he was called Matt). His settlement was harsh and cruel, and because Matty remembers what it was like to live there, he has even more of a vested interest in maintaining the harmony, openness, and kindness in Village. Matty does his best to follow the rules of Village, but throughout the novel, he keeps it a secret that he has a special gift: he can heal people and animals by touching them. This gift scares Matty and he at points wonders whether he could trade it away. Trade Mart fascinates Matty, even more so since Seer, his guardian, insists that Matty is too young to go. Matty mostly wants to attend so that he can trade for a **Gaming Machine**. However, when Matty does go to Trade Mart, he sees that people are trading away their deepest selves and are becoming selfish and mean, something that disturbs Matty greatly. Matty is an observant and insightful person, so he's constantly on the lookout for people who have traded. His observant nature also means that he's one of only a few people who can move through **Forest** unharmed, and for this, he dreams of receiving the true name of Messenger. Matty has a way with dogs and so adopts a puppy, later named Frolic, from Mentor and Jean's mother dog. His crush on Jean means that Matty takes any excuse to spend time with her. Because Matty is loyal to those he loves, he insists to Leader that he must follow Seer's wishes, travel to his old village, and return home with Kira, Seer's daughter. During this journey, when told to do so by Leader and Kira, Matty uses his gift to heal Forest, sacrificing himself in the process. Following this, Leader gives Matty his true name: Healer.

Leader – The leader of Village, who was the character Jonas from [The Giver](#). Though he appears older to Matty, he's still a young man in his early 20s. He arrived in Village years ago on a red sled, and he's responsible for making Village what it is in the novel's present. Leader believes in fairness, kindness, and taking care of others, all of which are reflected in the ways that Village functions. A kind, truthful, and honest man, Leader is friends with everyone in the village. Matty notes that Leader is the kind of person that he can tell anything without fear of overstepping boundaries or being made fun of. Among a variety of other things, one of Leader's functions is to bestow "true names" on people in Village. These have to do with what a person's true nature is, and what their most important contribution to Village is. Leader's sense of honesty and his

desire to play by the rules means that Mentor and his supporters are able to vote to close Village to outsiders, something that Leader finds troubling and abhorrent but feels unable to stop, given how Village functions. Leader also has the ability to "see beyond," which means that he can see beyond a normal person's range of vision. He most often looks out into **Forest**, and he notices that Forest is "thickening" and becoming darker and more foreboding as time goes on, especially after Mentor passes his vote to close Village. He appears to have a close and honest relationship with Matty; he takes Matty's concerns and information seriously, and entrusts Matty with spreading the word about Village's closure. Leader's sense of responsibility to Village is so strong that he asks Matty to sacrifice himself for the good of Village and the people in it. After this, he gives Matty his true name of Healer.

Kira – Kira is Seer's daughter; she was the protagonist of *Messenger's* prequel, *Gathering Blue*. She lives in a village a week's walk away from Village, has a "crooked leg" and so walks with a cane, and is a skilled textile artist. She insisted on staying in her hometown years ago, but agreed to one day join Seer in Village. Kira is bright, happy, and confident in what she can do, both in terms of her physical abilities and her artistic abilities. She shows Matty that her crooked leg is part of her identity and makes her who she is, and allowing him to "fix" her leg would mean a massive upheaval in her sense of self. Kira identifies herself instead with her weaving and embroidery. She has the gift of "seeing ahead," which means that when she embroiders and weaves, she can create pictures of the future. Because of this, she's expecting Matty when he arrives and is ready to follow him to Village when he asks her to come. Optimistic by nature, Kira doesn't pick up on the dangers posed by **Forest** until Matty finally points them out. To this end, she tries to good-naturedly ignore the warnings that Forest gives her until it's impossible to continue doing so. She saves herself and ultimately, Village and Forest by reaching out to Leader with her gift and telling Matty to use his gift to heal Forest.

Mentor – Mentor is the local teacher in Village. At first, Mentor is a kind man who looks out for everyone in Village, especially children who have never been to school before. He's middle-aged, stooped, and balding, and he has a large red birthmark that covers half of his face. His daughter, Jean, tells Matty that Mentor loved literature and language, and believed that stories could teach people about how they should live their lives. Mentor begins to change in the weeks before the novel begins, however. Lonely because he lost his wife a number of years ago, Mentor begins attending Trade Mart to trade away his "deepest self" in order to become attractive and make Stocktender's widow love him. This turns Mentor into a cruel and selfish person, and he spearheads the movement to close Village to outsiders. He also manages the effort to build the wall, and does so in a cruel manner. By the time he becomes involved in building the wall, Mentor's birthmark is entirely

gone. Mentor's transformation is extremely disturbing for Jean, especially when Mentor kicks Frolic for behaving in a way that's totally normal for a young puppy. Though the novel doesn't resolve whether or not Mentor succeeds in courting Stocktender's Widow, Matty's sacrifice to **Forest** returns Mentor to his stooped stature and immediately renews his love of books and poetry.

Seer – Seer (who is named Christopher in *Gathering Blue*) is the blind man that Matty lives with. He arrived in Village years before Matty was born after being injured and left for dead by men in his and Matty's old settlement. In Village, Seer is a beloved and integral part of the community. Though blind, he knows everyone, and he walks the lanes daily to check on the wellbeing of everyone in Village. He's also a skilled cook who tries his best to teach Matty the finer points of cooking, and teases Matty when Matty expresses no interest. Seer somewhat cryptically tells Matty at one point that **Forest** is an illusion and that he's not afraid of Forest, something that, by the end of the novel, shows how wise Seer is and how tuned in he is to the negative changes moving through Village (in other words, he sees that Forest's danger is the same danger that trading and selfishness pose to Village). Matty is like a son to Seer and the two are extremely close. Seer also has a daughter, Kira, who still lives in the village where Matty and Seer came from. Following the vote to close Village to outsiders, Seer becomes distraught and tells Matty to go to his old village and bring Kira home.

Ramon – Ramon is one of Matty's best friends. Though he's kind and caring, Ramon is also boastful and self-important, to the point of making Matty sarcastically wonder whether Ramon's true name might be Boaster or Bragger. Born in Village, Ramon has an outsized fear of **Forest**, especially after seeing Gatherer entangled. He's unconvinced when Matty points out that because Ramon was born in Village, there's no reason for him to enter Forest at all. Not long before the start of the novel, Ramon's parents traded for a **Gaming Machine** at Trade Mart. Though the Gaming Machine is fun, Matty only discovers much later that this trade is the reason for the illness that plagues Ramon and his little sister. Ramon develops a cough in the beginning of the novel, tires easily, and by the time Matty is ready to embark on his journey into Forest, both Ramon and his sister have been quarantined by Herbalist. Matty's sacrifice to Forest causes Ramon to begin to get well immediately.

Jean – Jean is Mentor's daughter. She's a young girl with curly hair who's about Matty's age, and she has a reputation for flirting with many different boys. She grows flowers and bakes bread, all of which she sells at the local market. Matty has a crush on her and spends time with her whenever he can. Though Jean appears flighty and childlike at first, she and Matty begin to connect in a more mature way when Jean becomes afraid of what's happening to her father as he trades

his deepest self away to court Stocktender's widow. She shared Mentor's love of literature and learning, and she finds it disturbing that he's less interested in those things as he becomes more handsome. Jean kisses Matty before he leaves for his final trip through **Forest**.

Frolic / The Puppy – An energetic puppy born to Mentor and Jean's dog. Thanks to Matty's use of his gift, Frolic and his mother are the only ones to survive a sickness that strikes the entire litter of puppies and kills two of Frolic's littermates. Frolic is a classically destructive puppy, though he learns basic commands quickly and wants to please Matty above all else.

The Woman – A woman who comes to Village with her son, Vladik. Though happy to be in Village, when the residents vote to close Village to outsiders, the woman considers leaving Vladik and returning to her place of origin to care for her other children, whom she'd originally planned on bringing to Village later.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gatherer – Gatherer is a young man who is entangled and killed by **Forest**. In life, he was kind and generous; both Ramon and Matty remember him fondly for tossing berries in their mouths as he passed by. He leaves behind a wife, toddler, and new infant.

Stocktender's Widow – A woman in Village whom Mentor wishes to court. The one time she appears, she seems cruel and suggests that Mentor will have to trade a lot more of his true self and become more handsome before she'll return his advances.

Trademaster – A mysterious man who oversees proceedings at the Trade Mart. He came to Village already with a true name and appears callous, cruel, and secretive.

Vladik – The woman's son, and the only one of his siblings that the woman brings to Village with her.

Herbalist – The herbalist in Village.

Blue), who is now an adolescent. Matty now lives in Village, a settlement known for its kindness, generosity, and willingness to accept and help refugees from other settlements where inhabitants suffer at the hands of their governments—and often in the cases of people with disabilities, would face execution in their settlements of origin. Despite Village's seeming utopia, however, Matty and his guardian, the blind man Seer, begin to detect something sinister happening to Village and its residents: people are becoming selfish, and this selfishness is poisoning Village, its people, and **Forest**, the sentient forest that surrounds Village. *Messenger* suggests that the true enemy of an ideal society like Village isn't dwindling food supplies or an increasingly violent Forest, as several villagers think. Instead, the enemy exists within Village itself in the form of people's selfishness.

The guiding principle of Village is that everyone looks out for everyone else. This way, those who are disabled or need extra help, like Seer, can become an integral part of the community and give back to it in their own way. Seer, for example, is extremely wise and acts as a guardian and mentor for orphaned Matty, while Mentor teaches any child who wants to learn. The success of Village rests on the understanding that in order to function, all residents must behave in ways that are selfless and prioritize the wellbeing of the group, rather than of the individual. However, the vote to close Village to outsiders shows that even in such an ideal society, the rules that give all people a voice can also be co-opted and used for selfish means. This suggests that such a society is tenuous and must be carefully maintained by people who not only understand that working for the collective good helps them, but also see the value in helping others.

Matty soon discovers that the rise of selfishness in Village can be attributed to the goings-on at the Trade Mart. At the Trade Mart, which happens sometimes in the evenings and is presided over by a man called Trademaster, Matty discovers that people aren't just trading objects they already have for new or better things or things they need, like they do at the Market: people are trading their "true selves" (which, within the world of the novel, is often a person's sense of responsibility to the common good) for luxury items as well as for less tangible things, like physical attractiveness. While Matty never fully discerns how this is happening, the novel implies that some sort of magic is at work, as these trades appear to happen immediately when Trademaster agrees to accept a proposed trade and marks it in a special record book.

The idea that people can trade their true selves away—and that losing one's true self results in cruelty, callousness, and fear of others—suggests, first of all, that selflessness is something innate to all people and is an integral part of one's true self. While certain rules of Village that support the common good, like not lying or keeping secrets, must be learned by newcomers, the general idea that people want to look out for



THEMES

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



SELFISHNESS VS. THE COLLECTIVE GOOD

Messenger, the third installment of Lois Lowry's Giver Quartet, picks up several years after the close of *Gathering Blue* and follows Matty (Matt in *Gathering*

others is, per the logic of the novel, something that exists naturally within all people. Notably, the novel doesn't make any distinctions between trading one's true self away in order to get something that benefits someone else (as when Ramon's parents trade for a **Gaming Machine** to entertain Ramon and his sister) or when a person trades for something that's purely selfish (as is the case when Mentor trades to become more attractive so he can court Stocktender's widow). The novel suggests that trading away one's true self, which contains one's sense of responsibility to the common good, will harm everyone—even those who, in theory, will benefit from a trade.

The situation in Village becomes increasingly dire as the novel progresses and finally, the villagers, led by Mentor, vote to close Village to outsiders. At this point, Matty notices that a number of his friends and neighbors are ill, and nobody seems to care much. When Herbalist quarantines Ramon and his sister and suggests that whatever ails them could start an epidemic, they're not entirely wrong—where Herbalist's assessment goes wrong, however, is in suggesting that the epidemic hasn't started yet and in believing that the illness is physical, rather than emotional. Leader and Matty, however, offer up a remedy for this state of affairs: the ultimate, selfless sacrifice of one person—Matty—for the sake of the common good. When Matty uses his gift of being able to heal people with a touch of his hands to heal the rotting Forest and the residents of Village, dying in the process, he becomes an example of what, per the villagers' understanding, they should all aspire to be: selfless and willing to give up their own futures to ensure the wellbeing of Village for future generations.



YOUTH, MEMORY, AND THE FUTURE

One thing that sets Village apart from the other settlements in the world of *Messenger* is that it's very interested in education. Specifically, Village seeks to educate its young people about the past and about the various places its refugees have come from, in an attempt to constantly remind people of what awful things are out there in the world and why the utopia of Village is worth fighting for. The events of *Messenger* show, however, that the focus on memory can only do so much to mold adult behavior. Instead, the novel suggests, the only ones capable of truly grasping the lessons of the past and turning them into concrete actions in the future are the young people who stand to inherit Village.

The design of Village and its education system in particular elevates memory not for reasons of personal pleasure or as a method to torment those whose pasts are uncomfortable and sad, but to remind people that the ideals of Village are worth fighting for. When newcomers speak about the places they come from—places that, oftentimes, wanted to put them to death for their differences, or sought to otherwise control them in a variety of ways—it allows people in Village to see, up close and personal, the way that things can be in a cruel and

selfish society. This situates memory as a tool more than anything else, and one that can be used to encourage people to be selfless and work for the common good. While Mentor, the schoolteacher, teaches the importance of remembering the past and knowing about other places in a decidedly didactic manner in school, everyone in Village has access to the **museum**. The museum houses things that people bring with them from elsewhere, such as Leader's red sled, that also function as reminders of what the wider world is like.

This use of memory as a reminder does have its limits, however. Ramon, who was born in Village, behaves in a boastful way that Matty finds annoying and tiring—a manner that possibly arose from the fact that Ramon doesn't have personal memories of what it's like to exist elsewhere. Matty, on the other hand, *does* remember what it's like to live in a cruel, dog-eat-dog world, since he was born in a village where cruelty and indifference were facts of life. In other words, Matty understands on a personal level why it's important to preserve the way of life in Village, while Ramon and other children like him are possibly less naturally understanding—reminders of memory, in this case, only go so far.

It's telling that the insular, selfish, and fear-based vision of the future is one that's espoused only by adults—even those adults who came from elsewhere and remember the horrors of the outside world, like Mentor. Matty and Jean, on the other hand, understand that there's something sinister about what's going on. This suggests that, possibly because children and young people have more open minds and are less set in their ways—and also have fewer rights and responsibilities within Village—they occupy a unique space in which they can see clearly how bad things are getting. This is also why Matty must be the one to save Village, not Leader. While Leader sees what's happening and wants to change it, he understands that it's essential for him to remain in Village and, in his capacity as the leader, make sure that Mentor and his group, who want to build a wall around Village at the end of a three-week period, don't start building even sooner. Matty, however, can leave Village without arousing suspicion, and can therefore use what he knows of the past and what he believes about how the future should look to save Village and adults like Mentor from their selfish actions. In this way, the novel suggests more broadly that while adults may appear at first glance to have more power to influence the world, it's the youth who are better able to marry what they know about the past with what they want the future to look like—and in doing so, make sure that everyone, adults and children alike, have access to a better future.



HUMANS AND NATURE

The presence and the actions of **Forest**—the increasingly dark and malevolent forest surrounding Village—initially suggests that Matty's

journey through Forest can be read as a simple conflict of man versus nature. However, as Matty lies dying in Forest and receives Leader's message to use his gift of healing, he discovers that Forest isn't simply bloodthirsty for no reason or for its own selfish reasons. Instead, the dangers posed by Forest to humans are exactly those that the humans in Village pose to themselves. With this, Lowry positions the natural world of the novel as a mirror for the darkest parts of human nature itself.

The residents of Village have a long and fraught history with Forest. Forest is known for "warning" (creating a minor injury) and then "entangling" (strangling, poisoning, stabbing, and ultimately killing people with vegetation) those it no longer wants to travel through it. By turning Forest and the natural world more broadly into a sentient being that's fundamentally violent, Lowry crafts a world where people appear to be rightfully terrified of an entity that seems unknowable and impossible to appease. Notably, with this understanding, characters believe that Forest is something separate and different from themselves, rather than a reflection of them and their society. In other words, the same fear, selfishness, and cruelty that grows in Village is somehow magically manifested in Forest, and people's fear of Forest keeps them from recognizing or accepting their own connection to these changes. The fact that this connection isn't immediately obvious to the characters in the novel speaks to the way that their fear of change and difference is extremely isolating. This in turn mirrors the way that the villagers begin to speak about outsiders with fear and scorn. While once, all people in Village saw refugees as important and valuable to their society, in the novel's present, the villagers' selfishness leads them to see refugees (who, Matty notes, are no different now than they were in the past) as dangerous and unwanted.

Matty begins to suspect that the human world of Village and the natural world of Forest are connected when he first embarks on his journey to fetch Kira from her village so she can return with him to live with her father, Seer. When Matty leaves, Ramon and his little sister have been quarantined by Herbalist for fear that whatever ails them will infect others in Village, while Mentor and his group have begun gathering logs to build a wall around Village. At this point, Matty believes that the "thickening" happening in Forest is something separate and distinct from what's going on in Village. What Matty sees, however, is that Forest is suffering just like his friend and his neighbors. In addition to becoming increasingly violent and dangerous, Forest begins to smell of rot and decay—changes that mirror Mentor's shift to become suspicious of outsiders, as well as Ramon's physical illness.

Though it takes Matty until the end of the novel and the end of his life to realize it, this suggests that Forest isn't actually the one at fault here—it's the humans, as they don't understand that their actions and beliefs have consequences in the wider

world beyond Village. Treating Forest (and, for that matter, other people) with respect and reverence, as Matty does, is the only way to safely and effectively exist in the world—though, as Matty and Kira grow sicker and acquire more injuries on their journey back, the novel suggests that there are times when even this isn't enough.

The fact that Matty can *heal* Forest (rather than simply changing people's thinking or striking down the vote to ban outsiders, for example) and, by extension, Village, reinforces the novel's assertion that the prejudice and selfishness that plague people like Mentor is an illness like any other, though one that only becomes obvious to Matty when he learns to see Forest as "a tangled knot of fears and deceits and dark struggles for power that had disguised itself and almost destroyed everything." Essentially, the issue isn't Forest; it's the "illness" that infects Village and, through the mysterious connection between Forest and Village, infects Forest in just the same way. With this, the novel suggests that kindness as well as cruelty aren't issues that affect just humans or indeed, just the group of people who feel a certain way—one's thoughts, beliefs, and actions have far-reaching consequences in the world, and should be developed with caution.



IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

The non-native residents of Village are overwhelmingly those who have physical disabilities that in other settlements, like Leader's (Jonah) in [The Giver](#) or Matty's village in [Gathering Blue](#), would spell death or abandonment for them. In Village, however, the guiding principle is that physical difference isn't anything to be ashamed of or something that should be "fixed"; indeed, *Messenger* implies at various points that physical difference is often a mark of emotional maturity or kindness. Despite the prevalence and importance of this concept in Village, the characters of *Messenger*—Matty included—often struggle to truly practice what they preach. As Matty embarks on his journey through **Forest**, he grapples with this disconnect and comes to realize that it's not people who are born different who need to change. Instead, the world needs to change to become more accepting of those who are different.

Messenger takes a very clear stand regarding what constitutes a person's identity, what the most important parts of a person's identity are, and what parts should or shouldn't change. It does this first by introducing the reader to the idea of "true names," which are bestowed upon young people or adult immigrants and confer adult status on them in the community. These true names reflect what Leader, the aptly true-named leader of Village, sees as the truest and most important element of a person's identity. Mentor, for example, got his true name because, prior to the start of the novel, he dedicated his time and energy to teaching and mentoring anyone and everyone. Gatherer, on the other hand, was named for the physical

contribution he makes to Village—gathering food—while Matty fears that his regular fishing escapades will earn him the name Fisherman. Instead of Fisherman, Matty wants to be named Messenger, as his admittedly rare ability to walk through Forest unscathed means that he's one of the only villagers able to carry messages to faraway settlements. It's important to note that while the novel offers only a handful of named adults, the names that Leader chooses for people appear to only pertain to what those people can do for the community, whether that be teaching, leading, or working with a food source. They don't, as far as the reader can tell, have anything to do with a person's physical characteristics, either positive or negative—suggesting that, within this society, a person's physicality isn't especially important to the way its inhabitants think about identity.

This begins to change, however, when Trade Mart starts to take on a questionable role and allows people to trade their true selves for physical traits. Matty sees this happen most noticeably with Mentor, who, in his middle age, used to be a bit stooped, balding, and had a noticeable belly, in addition to having a birthmark that covered a large portion of his face. Because of his desire to court Stocktender's widow, Mentor begins to trade away his true self in exchange for becoming taller, thinner, and getting rid of his birthmark. Importantly, the novel suggests that trading one's true self for physical traits is always a bad idea, because as he becomes more handsome, Mentor also becomes callous, selfish, and fearful of those who are different than he is. Matty also notices one woman who traded some of her true self making fun of her husband for his limp after trading—something that Matty finds disturbing and unproductive by nature, given that as far as he knows, the woman's husband cannot change his limp.

However, Matty's innocent and good-natured view of physical difference isn't entirely without fault. When he arrives at Kira's, he asks if he might fix her limp so that they might travel more quickly back through Forest, something that suggests that Matty sees physical differences or disabilities as a struggle to overcome—and one that he knows he can fix with his gift. Kira refuses, however, and insists that her limp is part of her identity and isn't something she cares to change. As a skilled weaver and textile artist, as well as a generous person with the power to "see ahead," Kira's leg simply has little to do with how she sees herself—her value, as far as she's concerned, comes from what she can do in terms of her craft, not what she looks like.

All of this challenges Matty's understanding of what someone's true identity actually is and ultimately, comes to affect Matty's identity as well. While Matty's lack of a true name makes it clear that his identity is still forming, his desire to be called Messenger is, according to Leader, not an accurate encapsulation of who Matty truly is. Leader's choice to bestow the name Healer upon Matty after Matty's death reinforces yet again that identity isn't something someone can bestow

entirely upon themselves. Instead, identity is something connected to what a person can do for their community and ultimately, comes from that community as well.



SYMBOLS

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



FOREST

Forest is the sentient forest that surrounds Village and contains the paths that lead to a number of other settlements. The characters in the novel overwhelmingly interact with Forest as though it's a living, breathing, deity-like entity with the power to warn people that it doesn't want them in it, and then kill them if they don't heed its warning. However, Seer tells Matty that this is just an illusion and at the end of the novel, when Forest is in the process of killing Matty, Matty realizes what Seer meant: Forest is actually a living representation of the fear, greed, and hunger for power that the novel suggests exists within all humans. Taken in this context, Forest becomes representative of the way that fear and suspicion create more fear and suspicion in other people—and ultimately, how those negative emotions and desires can corrupt and transform people (and places) that were once kind and loving into unrecognizable monsters.



THE MUSEUM

The museum contains artifacts, such as Leader's red sled, that people bring with them from other settlements. It serves as a reminder of what else is out there in the world and in some cases, why people wanted to come to Village in the first place. In this way, the museum becomes a physical manifestation of the collective memory of Village's residents. Because of the museum's existence, residents are forced to remember why Village's ideals are worth fighting for.



THE GAMING MACHINE

Ramon's family's Gaming Machine—a slot machine that dispenses candy—serves several purposes throughout the novel. Matty's desire to have one for himself, as well as his jealousy of Ramon, casts the Gaming Machine as an object that illustrates how appealing new, better, more exciting items are for everyone, whether they're morally corrupt like Mentor becomes, or are the good-hearted hero of the novel, like Matty. In other words, the Gaming Machine becomes representative of the dangerous consumer culture enabled by the Trade Mart, in which these exciting new items are purchased in exchange for positive qualities like kindness and compassion. Once Matty becomes fully aware of this, he begins

to see the Gaming Machine as representative of a greater evil in Village, one that prioritizes objects over people. At this point, Matty's jealousy disappears, suggesting that for someone who still possesses their full quota of kindness, compassion, and belief in the common good, the Trade Mart, the Gaming Machine, and the consumer culture that they represent are abhorrent and in direct opposition to the utopian vision of Village.

insightful and thoughtful Matty is.

But here in Village, marks and failings were not considered flaws at all. They were valued. The blind man had been given the true name Seer and was respected for the special vision that he had behind his ruined eyes.

Related Characters: Kira, Mentor, Seer, Matty

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7


Explanation and Analysis

While describing Mentor for the reader, the narrator also explains the general thoughts in Village regarding physical differences. Village promotes a reframing of how people think of differences and disabilities; instead of viewing "marks and failings" as indicators of less worth, those differences are celebrated and make a person who they are. While Village focuses mostly on the collective good, it's able to do this so effectively because it doesn't single people out and treat them as lesser than everyone else. This indicates that in order to serve the common good, a society must be welcoming to everyone and in particular, must care for those who are different. However noble and clear this idea might be, Matty's later desire to "fix" Kira's twisted leg also shows how deeply ingrained ableist ways of thinking can be, even for someone who has lived in a society like Village for years.

Others from Village rarely ventured into Forest. It was dangerous for them. Sometimes Forest closed in and entangled people who had tried to travel beyond. There had been terrible deaths, with bodies brought out strangled by vines or branches that had reached out malevolently around the throats and limbs of those who decided to leave Village. Somehow Forest knew. Somehow, too, it knew that Matty's travels were benign and necessary. The vines had never reached out for him. The trees seemed, sometimes, almost to part and usher him through.

Related Characters: Matty

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt edition of *Messenger* published in 2004.

Chapter One Quotes


"Were you scared of Forest?" Matty asked him. So many people were, and with good reason.

"No. It's all an illusion."

Matty frowned. He didn't know what the blind man meant. Was he saying that fear was an illusion? Or that Forest was? [...] Maybe, Matty thought, *everything* was an illusion to a man who had lost his eyes.

Related Characters: Seer, Matty (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis

While Matty and Seer discuss Seer's journey through Forest and his life as a sighted person before losing his eyesight, Seer insists cryptically that Forest's danger is an illusion. First of all, this allows the reader to understand by the end of the novel that Seer is one of the wisest characters in the book. He sees Forest for what it really is—a physical manifestation of all the transformations taking place in Village and the change of heart that many in Village have experienced. This also plays into the way that the novel conceptualizes physical difference. Seer, the novel suggests, is able to come to this conclusion because he cannot actually see—his physical disability means that he's even more able to pick out things like this that aren't readily apparent to the naked eye, but are visible to someone who must rely on alternative ways of seeing. Matty's musings about how Seer interprets his world also show how

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains how Forest functions and how it terrorizes most people in Village, while inexplicably allowing Matty to pass through unharmed. When considered in terms of the novel's main ideas, Forest's actions and the entanglements that take place before the start of the book suggest that the selfishness that begins to brew in earnest during the story has already started to do so long before. Then, because people are so afraid of Forest, they're unable to recognize that it's their own thoughts and actions that are causing this sort of thing to happen in the first place. The fact that Matty can pass through Forest without Warnings or other harm again elevates Matty above others in terms of his kindness, understanding, and belief in the importance of the rules governing Village. Because he's construed as someone who, while not entirely without fault, is mostly a good person willing to give all of himself to the greater good, Forest shows Matty kindness in return.

Machine really is reminds the reader that, within the logic of the novel, silly games like the Gaming Machine will never be able to create the same kind of connection and perform the same educational purpose as literature or music can.

☹☹ There were no secrets in Village. It was one of the rules that Leader had proposed, and all of the people had voted in favor of it. Everyone who had come to Village from elsewhere, all of those who had not been born here, had come from places with secrets. Sometimes—not very often, for inevitably it caused sadness—people described their places of origin: places with cruel governments, harsh punishments, desperate poverty, or false comforts.

Related Characters: Matty

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis


While explaining why Village puts so much emphasis on educating its populace, the narrator touches on a rule banning secrets and the reasons for this rule. The existence of the rule in the first place indicates that Village is truly an outlier in the world it inhabits. It's a place where people can feel safe, welcomed, and can trust that the government—as represented by Leader—will take them seriously and take care of them, no matter what. Importantly, this also suggests that Village is the way it is because of the way that it emphasizes learning from the past and the wider world. It implies that while kindness and compassion may be normal, the main impetus for elevating those qualities over others is because there are other places in the world that don't. In other words, Village exists as it does in a conscious attempt to be better and different from other places.


Chapter Three Quotes

☹☹ "And so we would give up—or maybe even trade away—reading, and music, in exchange for the *extreme* excitement of pulling a handle and watching sourballs spit forth from a mechanical device?" he asked.

Put that way, Matty thought, the Gaming Machine didn't actually seem such a good trade. "Well," he said, "it's fun."

Related Characters: Matty, Seer (speaker), Ramon

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25



Explanation and Analysis

One evening, Matty tries to convince Seer that they should trade for a Gaming Machine so their evenings won't be boring. Matty's desire to possess a Gaming Machine reminds the reader that though Matty is the hero of the story, he's still very young and certainly not infallible. The draws of consumer culture as represented by Trade Mart are just as compelling to him as they are to others, like Ramon's parents (who traded for a Gaming Machine and are therefore the reason that Matty wants one so badly). Seer's ability to distill into unsavory terms what the Gaming

Chapter Four Quotes

☹☹ There were history books as well, like those he studied at school, the best ones filled with maps that showed how the world had changed over centuries. Some books had shiny pages that showed paintings of landscapes unlike anything Matty had ever seen, or of people costumed in odd ways, or of battles, and there were many quiet painted scenes of a woman holding a newborn child.

Related Characters: Leader, Matty

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 32


Explanation and Analysis

The narrator describes the extensive library that Leader keeps at his homeplace, which, most compellingly for Matty, contains a number of art books. The mention of the history books again reinforces the novel's assertion that Village is the way it is because it continually draws on both the history of the world as well as its counterparts in the novel's present in order to come up with its system of government. The paintings that Matty describes in the art books, on the other hand, foreshadow Matty's coming sacrifice to Forest to save Village and all its residents. The "quiet painted scenes" of a woman and a baby are presumably religious paintings of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, which point to Matty's role as a Christ-like figure.

☞ "No. But why would I go back? I had found a home here, the way everyone has. That's why we have the Museum, Matty, to remind us of how we came, and why: to start fresh, and to begin a new place from what we had learned and carried from the old."

Related Characters: Leader (speaker), Matty

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis



While Matty visits Leader one day, he asks if Leader ever tried to go back to his place of origin, and Leader responds by telling Matty that he came to Village for the same reasons as everyone else did. Leader's explanation of the Museum, which houses artifacts that people brought with them when they traveled to Village, shows that the Museum is a physical representation of the way that Village uses memories of the past to shape what it is in the present. The items that people brought with them are symbolic of the cruelty and danger that they experienced elsewhere, which in turn makes people more invested in making Village the most compassionate place it can be.

☞ "It's not the fish or crops," he said. "They'll use that, of course. They argued dwindling food supply last time. It's..."
"Not enough housing?"

"More than that. I can't think of the word for it. *Selfishness*, I guess. It's creeping in."

Matty was startled. Village had been created out of the opposite: selflessness. He knew that from his studies and from hearing the history. Everyone did.

Related Characters: Matty, Seer (speaker), Mentor

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis


As Seer and Matty discuss the coming vote to close Village to outsiders, Matty is shocked to hear Seer suggest that people want to close Village because they're selfish. Specifically, it's telling that Matty thinks that Village's history means that this is impossible. It speaks to the power of the history of the world to shape the future, at least for the youth who stand to inherit the future. For Matty, who at this point expects to grow up and continue to live in Village, it's essential that Village remain the kind and compassionate place that it's always been in the past. That ideal is what he wants to see in his future, and he'll be willing to work hard in order to make sure that continues.

Matty's attempts to make logical sense of why people want to close Village also speak to the power of Village's history. As far as Matty is concerned, the only good reason to close Village is because of a lack of resources to support newcomers—a fine idea in theory, but one that Seer suggests is actually just a reflection of people's selfishness. This all implies that people's reasons for closing Village and behaving terribly toward others are silly and misguided.

Chapter Seven Quotes

☞ People nodded back or waved in reply, but there was none of the lighthearted banter that was an ordinary part of Village. There was an intentness to everyone, an odd seriousness, and a sense of worry—unusual in Village—pervaded the atmosphere. *No wonder Seer didn't want me to come*, Matty thought as he approached. *It doesn't feel right.*

Related Characters: Matty (speaker), Trademaster, Mentor

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis



Matty carefully observes his neighbors as he walks with them toward Trade Mart. Given the way that Matty notes the seriousness and sense of worry, it makes it extremely clear that these things are out of the ordinary in Village and Trade Mart itself isn't something normal or trustworthy. Instead, it's something that *causes* this worry. Matty's thought that this tenor doesn't feel right shows how sold he is on the way that Village normally functions. As far as he's concerned, the abnormal atmosphere at Trade Mart heralds something that should be treated with immense caution, and suggests that Trade Mart is a bad thing, not something he should be looking forward to participating in. Matty's ability to observe and interpret these things reinforces how compassionate and tuned into the emotions of Village he is as a person.


☝ "Well," said Matty slowly, "when she was leaving, walking and talking with the other women, and her husband behind trying to keep up, she whirled around suddenly and scolded him for being slow."

"Slow? But he's all twisted. He can't walk any other way," the blind man said in surprise.

"I know. But she made a sneering face at him and she imitated his way of walking. She made fun of him. It was only for a second, though."

Related Characters: Seer, Matty (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis


After Trade Mart, when Matty tells Seer about what he witnessed, he recounts seeing one woman taunt her husband for walking with a limp. This is in answer to Seer's question of whether or not people who traded seemed different in any way, and Matty makes it clear that this behavior would normally be out of character for this woman. This suggests to Seer, Matty, and the reader that trading is compromising people's kindness and sense of compassion for others. It's turning these normally lovely people into individuals who think only of themselves instead of the greater good. This speaks to Lowry's broader

implications that participating in the consumer culture that Trade Mart represents entails metaphorically selling one's soul and becoming a person who isn't as naturally good, while also suggesting that this is a conscious choice that people can make.

Chapter Eight Quotes

☝ And now she was talking to him in a way that was not foolish and childlike, designed to entrance, but instead was human and pained and adult. He felt suddenly that he loved her, and it was a feeling he had never known before.

Related Characters: Mentor, Jean, Matty

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 76



Explanation and Analysis

With Jean one afternoon, Matty feels as though he's falling in love with her when she confides in him her worries about how Mentor is changing. It's first important to note that Jean is aware of and concerned about what's going on. She doesn't see Mentor's changes as good, even though she implies that she wants him to be happy and would even accept his courting Stocktender's widow. This suggests that it's the children, like Jean and Matty, who have the best insight into what's going on, as they're the ones who are cut off from participating (as no children seem to trade) but yet seem to be most affected by what's happening to the adults around them. That this connection can make Matty feel as though he loves Jean speaks to the power of the way that Village is structured. The openness that Village's rules seek to foster allows Matty and Jean to connect in a way that's meaningful and adult and, in doing so, they can learn that this is a positive way to connect and can use this information to influence how they behave as they move forward to become adults in Village themselves.

Chapter Nine Quotes

☝ "But you're already here!" Matty reassured her. "You needn't worry! You're part of us now. They won't send you away, even if they close Village."

Related Characters: Matty (speaker), Mentor, Vladik, The Woman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

When the woman confides in Matty that she's worried about the vote to close Village to outsiders, Matty assures her that the vote won't influence whether or not she can stay. This attempt to comfort the woman shows that as mature as Matty may seem at times, he's still young, innocent, and naïve—while it may be comforting for the woman to know that the vote won't negatively impact her, Matty ignores the fact that the vote will absolutely impact a number of other people, including this woman's other children who are still in the woman's village of origin. In other words, while Matty isn't corrupted by trade in the same way that Mentor is, he still thinks of his community in Village as an insular thing and considers it in terms of an us-versus-them dichotomy. At least in what he says here, he gives no indication that he worries about the people who aren't a part of Village who might benefit from Village staying open. Matty is apparently damaged by trade just like those who are actively participating, and this participation on any level has dire consequences for the mindset of those in the community.

“It was so important to him, and he made it important to me: poetry, and language, and how we use it to remind ourselves of how our lives should be lived...”

Then her tone changed and became embittered. "Now he talks of nothing but Stocktender's window, and of closing Village to new ones. What has happened to my father?"

Related Characters: Jean (speaker), Stocktender's Widow, Mentor, Matty

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

At the market, Jean laments what's been happening to her father Mentor as he trades away his deepest self to court Stocktender's widow. With this, Jean lays out a clear cause and effect relationship between her father and what trading is doing to him. Before trading, Mentor was the kind of person who believed that the written word could help people become better, and who notably sought to teach that idea to all of his students. Now, after trading, he's

uninterested in the written word and instead, focuses on improving Village only for those who are already in it and on improving himself for his own personal gain. This illustrates clearly how trading and improving oneself at the expense of everyone else naturally leads, within the logic of the novel, to devaluing difference and other people.

Chapter Ten Quotes

Some of those who had been among the most industrious, the kindest, the most stalwart citizens of Village now went to the platform and shouted out their wish that the border be closed so that "we" (Matty shuddered at the use of "we") would not have to share the resources anymore.

We need all the fish for ourselves.

Our school is not big enough to teach their children, too; only our own.

They can't even speak right. We can't understand them.

They have too many needs. We don't want to take care of them.

And finally: *We've done it long enough.*

Related Characters: Mentor, Matty

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

At the meeting where the villagers vote to close Village to outsiders, Matty watches his neighbors speak poorly of outsiders. One of the things that makes this especially disturbing for Matty is that many of these people who are standing up and speaking out came from other places where newcomers are still traveling from—they remember personally what it's like to live someplace where people aren't kind and compassionate, and so it seems even more horrendous that they no longer want to accept people into Village. The reasons that the villagers list for closing Village also shows how, because of the rise of selfishness in Village, one of the primary sentiments that takes hold is a fear of difference. This is reflected most clearly in the statement that "they can't even speak right," a sentiment that seeks to cast the newcomers as less than human because they have a different language and come with different customs than are usual in Village.



Chapter Eleven Quotes

☞ "She's quite lovely, isn't she?"

Matty shrugged. He understood that Leader was referring to Kira but the blind man's daughter was older than he. She had been like a big sister to him. No one in the old place had thought her lovely. They had been contemptuous of her weakness.

"She has a crooked leg," Matty reminded Leader. "She leans on a stick to walk."

Related Characters: Matty, Leader (speaker), Seer, Kira

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 108


Explanation and Analysis

After Leader looks beyond to try to see Kira in her village, he and Matty discuss Kira's physical beauty. Leader's question—and his willingness to call Kira beautiful at all—shows the reader how fully he's bought into the ideals of Village. Like villagers are supposed to do, Leader values difference, finds it beautiful, and is willing to celebrate others for their differences. Matty, on the other hand, shows here that he hasn't yet fully embraced the mindset of Village, even though on an intellectual level, he understands what Village seeks to do. Pointing out Kira's physical disabilities in response suggests that Matty still fixates on physical difference at times and sees this as a reason to think that someone isn't as beautiful as they could be. Though with Kira this is complicated by the fact that Matty thinks of her as a sister and experiences no sexual attraction of his own to her, this still reminds the reader that as a young person, Matty still has a way to go to fully embrace Village's ideals.

☞ Matty glanced over and saw that she was standing in front of the tapestry Kira had made for her father. Even from where he stood, he could see what Jean meant. The entire forest area, the hundreds of tiny stitches in shades of green, had darkened, and the threads had knotted and twisted in odd ways. The peaceful scene had changed into something no longer beautiful. It had an ominous feel to it, a feel of impenetrability.

Related Characters: Seer, Kira, Jean, Matty

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 112


Explanation and Analysis


Just before Matty leaves for Kira's village, Jean draws his attention to a tapestry that Kira made, which is now knotted and snarled. The forest in the tapestry clearly mirrors Forest in the novel's world, as at this point, Forest is "thickening" and becoming more ominous and malevolent by the day. This foreshadows Matty's future struggles as he tries to make his way back through Forest, while also suggesting that the negative sentiments in Village are reaching a fever pitch at this point. It's only a few days after this that Mentor and his followers begin constructing a wall to keep out outsiders, something that Forest, as a reflection of the darkest parts of human nature, finds abhorrent and mirrors back to Matty and others who try to move through it.

Chapter Twelve Quotes

☞ But on this journey, something was different. For the first time, Matty felt hostility from Forest. The fish were slow to come to his hook. A chipmunk, usually an amiable companion, chittered angrily and bit his finger when he held his hand toward it. Many red berries, of a kind he had always eaten, had black spots on them and tasted bitter; and for the first time he noticed poison ivy growing across the path again and again, where it had never grown before.

Related Characters: Matty

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Over the course of the first few days of Matty's journey through Forest, he begins to understand that something awful is happening. Keep in mind that Forest is a reflection of human nature and specifically, at this point, of the shift to valuing the individual over the greater good in Village. While this sort of mirroring of course doesn't exist in the real world, the way that Forest reflects the changes in Village can be read as a larger metaphor for how nationalism and fear of the other affect communities in the real world. While entities like Forest certainly aren't going to strangle people, increased suspicion and decreased trust in other people make the world lonelier and less safe for those who move



through it, even if the person in question holds no ill will toward outsiders. This encourages the reader to look for things in their own lived experience that are caused by selfishness and greed, and to see the ways in which those ripples continue to spread and negatively impact even seemingly isolated things.

Chapter Fourteen Quotes

☛ To his amazement, Kira said no. Not no to leaving—he hadn't suggested that to her, not yet—but a definite, unarguable no to the idea of a straightened, whole leg.

"This is who I am, Matty," she said. "It is who I have always been."

Related Characters: Kira (speaker), Matty

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis



When Matty offers to "fix" Kira's crooked leg, she refuses. Her insistence that her disability is part of her identity reminds the reader that within the world of the novel, people's identities aren't based entirely on what they look like—but this doesn't mean that a person's physical appearance and abilities don't influence how they see themselves. Kira recognizes that she'd become a different person if she allowed Matty to straighten and heal her leg. Matty's inability to recognize how this would change Kira again shows that the negative changes taking place in Village are still influencing him. Despite Village's insistence that disability should be celebrated, Matty still sees Kira's disability as an obstacle to overcome, not a normal part of who Kira is and something that he just needs to factor into his plans to get them through Forest fast enough.

☛ "You can use the time to become accustomed to being whole..."

"I *am* whole," she said defiantly.

"I meant to having two strong legs."

Related Characters: Kira, Matty (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

As Matty continues to try to convince Kira to allow him to heal her twisted leg, she refuses and insists that she's whole just the way she is. Kira's fight with Matty and specifically, what she says to him encapsulates Village's teachings and beliefs in terms of what constitutes a person's identity. As far as Kira is concerned, she is who she is, and part of that involves having a physical disability—that is, she doesn't see it as an injury to be healed, but as a basic part of herself like her face or height. Readers familiar with *Gathering Blue* will also remember that Kira was only able to do what she did in that novel *because* of her disability, and many of the conflicts she faced were related to having a twisted leg. With this, the novel is able to show clearly that Kira's past is tied up with who she is in a physical sense; she's unable to separate her identity now from who she was then, which is a person who requires a cane to walk. Matty hasn't put this together yet, however. He's still fixated on the idea that Kira needs to be "whole" and "fixed" in order to effectively make it through Forest, which reminds the reader that Matty still has things to learn as he continues on this journey to save Forest and Village.

Chapter Fifteen Quotes

☛ He could see, too, that she was accustomed to her stick and twisted leg. A lifetime of walking in that way had made it, as she had pointed out, part of her. It was who she was. To become a fast-striding Kira with two straight legs would have been to become a different person. This was not a journey Matty could undertake with a stranger.

Related Characters: Kira, Matty

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

A few hours into Forest, Matty realizes that it's a good thing that Kira didn't let him use his power to make her twisted leg straight and strong—it would've made Kira someone different and unknowable. This realization shows Matty coming to terms with and truly understanding the way that Village thinks about disability. Because Village celebrates people for their differences, these differences can become an intrinsic part of who a person is (if also less important than what people can do, as evidenced by the true names that speak to people's actions, rather than what they look like). By realizing that Kira is a person with a twisted leg and


that that fact is undeniable, true, and not going to change, Matty also gains an appreciation for Village and the way that it's organized in such a way as to celebrate someone like Kira for what she can do, rather than punish her for what she can't do.


Chapter Seventeen Quotes

☛ When the sinister, curling stem—in appearance not unlike the pea vines that grew in early summer in their garden—reached his ankle, it began to curl tightly around his flesh. Quickly he reached down and severed it with the small blade. Within seconds it turned brown and fell away from him, lifeless.

But there seemed no victory to it. Only a pause in a battle he was bound to lose.

Related Characters: Kira, Matty

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 166-67



Explanation and Analysis


When Matty and Kira stop to rest after navigating through a vicious swamp, a vine from the underbrush tries to grab Matty and start the process of entangling him. Matty's sense of hopelessness after cutting the vine speaks to the fact that what he's fighting—even if he doesn't know exactly what he's fighting yet—is much bigger than one vine. Matty is battling against what is, at this point, likely years' worth of prejudice and selfishness that's been bubbling under the surface. It's too big now to be able to fix it by fixing only one person or one aspect of what's going wrong; the only way to solve the world's problems is, within the logic of the novel, to fix the entire world.

Chapter Nineteen Quotes

☛ Stumbling and bleeding, he wished briefly that he had brought some kind of weapon. But what would have protected him against Forest itself? It was a force too huge to fight with a knife or a club.

Related Characters: Leader

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis


When Leader is a few days into Forest to rescue Matty and Kira, he begins to wish that he'd brought a weapon to help him get through. The recognition that a weapon, like a knife or a club, would be ineffective in Forest again speaks to the larger issues represented by Forest. In this case, it suggests that individual violence is an ineffective or improper way to deal with the kind of prejudice, discrimination, and fear that causes people to turn to violence and solitude in the first place. However, the fact that Leader nevertheless still craves something to help him get through this suggests that this desire is a normal, human one, and not anything out of the ordinary.

Chapter Twenty-One Quotes

☛ He saw Forest and understood what Seer had meant. It was an illusion. It was a tangled knot of fears and deceits and dark struggles for power that had disguised itself and almost destroyed everything. Now it was unfolding, like a flower coming into bloom, radiant with possibility.

Related Characters: Seer, Mentor, Leader, Kira, Matty

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

As Matty sacrifices himself to Forest and uses his gift to heal it, he realizes what Seer meant when he said that Forest is an illusion. Now that Matty knows he has the tools to heal and fix Forest, he understands that Forest's violence is nothing more than a reflection of the violence and prejudice that Matty saw taking over in Village. By healing Forest and imbuing it with Matty's own blood—and by extension, his compassion, caring, and self-sacrifice—Matty shows that pumping kindness and positive regard into the world is the only way to effectively tackle both the symptom and the root cause of violence and prejudice.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER ONE

Matty is impatient to finish preparing and eating supper, as there's something scary he needs to do. He's no longer a boy, but he's not quite a man either. Matty lives with a blind man named Seer, and they go through their familiar, friendly argument as they prepare supper: Matty wants to throw ingredients together quickly, while Seer wants to teach Matty how to cook properly. Seer teases Matty about a girl who suggested she'd kiss him if he had sweet breath. He jokes that Matty could trade his fishing pole for a kiss, but Matty and Seer then decide that trading is no longer a thing to laugh about.

Seer coaches Matty through sautéing onion and then adding rabbit, even though Matty complains about wanting to get outside before dark. Matty refuses to answer what he's going out to check; he's afraid of it and doesn't know what it means. Finally, after supper, Seer picks up his stringed instrument and Matty creeps to the door. Seer tells Matty to light a lamp and tells Matty that he remembers what **Forest** was like at night, back when he could see. Matty asks if Seer was afraid of Forest like everyone else is, but Seer says cryptically that, "it's all an illusion."

Matty takes a meandering route to **Forest** so he can pass by the schoolteacher's house. The schoolteacher's name is Mentor, though some children call him "Rosy" because he has a bright red birthmark that covers half of his face. In Matty's old settlement, Mentor would've been killed for the flaw, but in Village, such things are valued. Matty admires Mentor because he's a patient and kind teacher, but he really wants to see Mentor's daughter, Jean. Jean is the girl who promised Matty a kiss, and she often spends time in her garden in the evenings. Unfortunately, nobody is home, but Matty draws a heart with their names in it in the dirt by her garden.

Matty, who was Matt in [Gathering Blue](#), will be the protagonist of this book. It's important to note here how loyal Matty is to Seer (Christopher in [Gathering Blue](#)). He's willing to do things he doesn't much care about, like go along with properly preparing food in the way that Seer likes, so that his relationship with Seer remains good. This shows that Matty already has a firm understanding of the importance of looking out for others, even when doing so isn't something that benefits Matty personally. Trading is also introduced as something vaguely sinister.



Seer's cryptic assessment that Forest is an illusion is something to keep in mind going forward. Notably, because Seer can't see in the conventional sense, he understands that Forest isn't actually something separate from humanity. Instead, it's a reflection of humanity and of the bad things that are beginning to brew in Village—including this secret thing that Matty is afraid of.



Matty's crush on Jean reminds the reader that he's currently in the throes of puberty and is in the process of coming of age. At this point, however, he's still one of the kids in Village and therefore, doesn't have all the rights and responsibilities that come with adulthood. The fact that Village's goals are to celebrate everyone, no matter what, shows that Village seeks to create a safe space for people and to elevate the good of humanity over competition and individualism.



Matty's friend Ramon comes around the corner and surprises him. Ramon invites Matty for supper, and Matty thinks that Ramon's homeplace is fun—his parents recently traded for a **Gaming Machine**, which has a handle that makes three wheels spin. If the wheels all stop and show the same picture, the machine spits out candy. Matty never asks what they "sacrificed" for the Gaming Machine. He tells Ramon that he has an errand to run and insists he has to go alone to deliver a message. It's a lie, which feels strange to Matty—as a child lying was a habit, but in Village, lying is wrong.

Matty follows **Forest's** paths. He's comfortable in Forest and knows where to go. Others, however, don't enter Forest because it's dangerous for them. Forest sometimes violently murders people who try to leave Village, but it lets Matty pass untouched. He once told Seer that Forest likes him, and Seer suggested that Forest needed Matty. The people need Matty to ferry messages for them, and he hopes to one day get the "true name" Messenger. Matty heads to a clearing, squats, and listens. He makes a sound and moments later, a small frog appears and croaks at him. The frog sits quietly in Matty's hand as Matty inspects its body. Trembling, Matty finds what he's looking for and puts the frog back down. As Matty returns to Village, he hears keening—people singing in lamentation about a death.

CHAPTER TWO

The next day, Ramon and Matty take their fishing rods to fish and Ramon explains what happened last night: Gatherer died in **Forest**. Ramon's tone is self-important, and Matty privately thinks that Ramon's true name might be Boaster. Last night, when Matty got home to Seer, Seer told Matty that someone had died. Seer was able to listen and figure out how many people were singing at the keening, and he'd heard Ramon among them. Now, Matty asks Ramon if he got to keen. Ramon says he wanted to see the "entangled" body and was allowed to join. Matty asks what the entangled body looked like, and Ramon says that Gatherer had been strangled and then had twigs growing under his eyelids and wrapping around his tongue.

The way that Matty describes the Gaming Machine indicates that it's a tabletop slot machine, or something that's purely in Ramon's home for entertainment. Note that the narrator chooses to describe the trade for the Gaming Machine as a "sacrifice." This continues to indicate that there's something sinister going on with trade in Village, no matter what people are trading for.



The idea of "true names" suggests that what Village focuses on more than anything is what people can do for Village and for the common good, not what they look like. Matty's desire to be called Messenger shows that at this point, he believes that the most meaningful thing he can do for Village is to help it communicate with other settlements by moving through Forest. Because Matty is still a child and hasn't yet come of age, this signals to the reader that Matty's desired true name might not fully encapsulate who he is in the eyes of his peers and neighbors—only his hopes for himself.



The violence of Forest's attack on Gatherer encourages the reader to see the conflict between Village and Forest as one between man and nature, in which nature is sentient and is out to destroy humans. When considered in terms of what Forest truly is (a reflection of the ills in Village), Gatherer's death suggests that innocent people will suffer and die in ways that appear to make little sense when individualism and selfishness rule instead of a sense of responsibility to the common good.



Matty shudders and says that Gatherer was nice, and the boys remember how Gatherer used to throw berries to them. Ramon says that Gatherer went into **Forest** to tell his wife's family about their new baby. Matty asks if Gatherer had had "Warnings," but Ramon says with a cough that he hadn't. Matty thinks that Gatherer must have missed a Warning, as the early ones are sometimes very small. He vows that if he ever receives a Warning, he'll never go back into Forest again. He remembers how Seer received a Warning years ago, when Matty led him to Village. Ramon declares that he's never going into Forest, and brushes it off when Matty points out that Ramon has no reason to enter Forest—only those who have other places to go back to enter Forest and get entangled.

Because Ramon is tired, he and Matty settle themselves on a boulder to fish. Annoyed and a little jealous when Ramon brings up the **Gaming Machine** again, Matty thinks that maybe Ramon's true name will be Gloater or Bragger. The narrator explains that in Village, life proceeds as usual. Mentor teaches, while Jean sells flowers and bread. Seer walks through Village checking on everyone, and a tall young man called Leader watches everyone in Village. He arrived as a boy and now, the sled he arrived on is in a glass case in the **Museum**.

The **Museum** is filled with other "relics of arrival," as everyone who came from outside Village has a story about how they arrived. Unlike other people, Leader has never tried to go back to his old settlement, as Village is now his home. With gratitude, he watches everyone, wishes Gatherer's body peace, and looks to **Forest**. He can see beyond the shadows, and what he sees makes him uneasy. He can't tell whether it's good or bad. In Forest, a frog hops through the underbrush with an oddly stiff back leg.

CHAPTER THREE

That evening, Matty comments that if he and Seer had a **Gaming Machine**, they'd never be bored in the evenings. Seer laughs and says that their evenings, when Matty reads out loud to him, are his favorite time of day. Matty says he likes reading, but it's not exciting. He tells Seer about the Gaming Machine again, describing the candy carefully, as Seer sends him to the garden for produce. Matty washes lettuce, points to a tapestry made by Seer's daughter, and says that the Gaming Machine could go next to it.

Matty's musing as to whether or not Gatherer missed a "Warning" suggests that Matty believes on some level that Gatherer should have seen this coming. At this point, Matty doesn't know what he's dealing with in Forest and doesn't see it as a reflection of the worst parts of human nature. Viewing it the way he does (as a sentient and dangerous being, separate from humanity) allows him to create some distance and believe that nothing he does could fix the situation with Forest.



Even though the novel overwhelmingly shows that kindness and a sense of responsibility are natural states of existence for all people, jealousy is as well. What matters most, the novel implies, is what a person chooses to do with their jealousy or other negative emotions. Leader is implied to be Jonas, the protagonist of [The Giver](#).



Leader's sense of gratitude when he looks out on Village marks him as a kind person who truly embodies the ideals of the community. His ability to see something strange and bad in Forest is the first real indication that there's more to Forest than meets the eye; this foreshadows the negative things to come and encourages the reader to look to Forest for explanations.



Notably, Matty doesn't just desire a Gaming Machine for himself—he believes that it's going to improve his life as well as Seer's life. This is, again, a mark of Matty's youth and lack of understanding, as he doesn't yet fully grasp what happens when a person trades for something like a Gaming Machine. Seer, on the other hand, suggests that there are more meaningful things in the world than the simple and quick pleasures of getting candy.



As Seer washes salmon, he asks if Matty really wants to trade away or give up reading and music for the "excitement" of getting candy from a machine. This makes it seem less fun to Matty. He continues to talk about candy, but Seer points out that Ramon's parents probably traded something very valuable for the **Gaming Machine**. As they sit down for dinner, Matty admits that Ramon doesn't even know what his parents traded for it. Matty asks when the next Trade Mart is, but Seer says that Matty is too young to even go and watch. Silently, Matty thinks that he'd like to trade and that he wants to know how trading works.

The narrator explains that in Village, there are no secrets. Leader suggested that rule a long time ago. Since most people came from places with lots of secrets, they voted to create the rule. Most people came from places with poverty, harsh punishments, or conniving governments. Matty thinks often of his own "brutal beginnings" and knows now that his experience wasn't unusual. Some people, however, suffered from ignorance and censorship, not violence. This is why Leader insists that everyone in Village must learn. Once, when Matty was a boy and lied, Seer punished him by keeping him from lessons one day, and Matty was surprised to find that he actually wanted to go to school. Now, he's a model citizen, so it bothers him to have a secret.

CHAPTER FOUR

One morning, Leader summons Matty to run messages. Matty loves going to Leader's homeplace, as Leader has a spiral staircase and more books in one place than Matty has seen anywhere else. He has stories, history books, and books with paintings of landscapes, battles, and of "a woman holding a newborn child." Once, when Matty asked about a book written in Greek, Leader explained that Mentor was teaching him some Greek, since Leader couldn't learn things like that in his old village. Leader explained that two years after he left, a river barge arrived filled with crates of books. He'd been afraid that his old village was still looking for him and would want to put him to death, but when he saw the books, he knew it was changing and getting better. Matty asked why Leader never went back, and Leader said that this is his home now.

Matty admires Leader's books and bounds up the stairs when Leader calls him. With a smile, Leader asks Matty how the fishing is and confirms that Matty has been fishing for the entire six years he's lived in Village. Matty stiffens; he doesn't want to be given the true name Fisherman. Leader laughs, and Matty explains that he doesn't want fishing to be anything more than a fun thing to do. Leader explains that he's trying to assess the food supply, as there are rumors that there aren't as many fish now as there used to be.

Matty's desire to understand trading and how it works shows that he's interested in learning anything and everything that will help him move forward and be more successful in the future. Trading appears to be an integral part of life in Village, which would suggest that Matty needs to know how it works in order to properly come of age and join adult Village life.



While the reader still doesn't know what Matty's secret is, the fact that Matty loves Village, supports its rules, and still feels compelled to keep whatever's going on a secret shows that the secret feels too big and important for him to ask for help. However, asking for help from someone he trusts would be the only surefire way to get any answers about whatever this is, which in turn suggests that Matty might not trust people in Village as much as Village's ideals would suggest he should.



The mention of a painting of a mother and child is a nod to classic Christian imagery of the virgin Mary and baby Jesus. This foreshadows Matty's later sacrifice to Forest in an extremely Christ-like fashion. Leader's elevation of books and his desire to look at them as a symbol of progress suggests that within the world of the novel, education and knowledge are the only things that allow people to truly know who they are and understand how and why they should make decisions that serve the common good. In other words, Village desires a knowledgeable and therefore fully informed and willing populace.



The fear that Matty experiences at possibly being named Fisherman reinforces how much he identifies now with his role as Village's messenger. This also suggests that as integrated into Village as Matty is, he still believes, at least on a personal level, that there's a hierarchy of jobs and things that people can do for the community—and as far as he's concerned, fishing isn't especially high on the list.



Matty looks over Leader's tally of salmon and trout caught from the river and says that he remembers pulling many fish out of the river as a boy. He says that he was little then, and points out that when you're little, it always seems like things are bigger, farther, and more than they do when you're an adult. As an example, Matty says that while it's true the journey to his old settlement takes days, it doesn't seem to take as long now that he's bigger. Leader considers this thoughtfully and then gives Matty messages about an upcoming meeting. As he leaves, he tells Leader the proper way to catch a fish, which makes Leader laugh.

Matty spends most of the day delivering the messages. He thinks about how much he likes carrying messages to his old village, as there, he gets to snub people who were cruel to him. Matty reads the notices as he delivers them and realizes why Leader questioned him about the supply of fish: people want to vote to close Village to outsiders. When Matty reads this to Seer later, Seer points out that they just voted on this a year ago. Matty notes that there's plenty of food, and Seer says that while they'll cite dwindling resources, this is a matter of selfishness creeping into Village. This startles Matty, both because Village was founded on *selflessness* and because Mentor is the one spearheading the movement to close the border.

Matty obediently cooks and says that Mentor isn't selfish. Mentor accepts everyone at school and teaches them all the same, and Seer agrees. Seer then asks if Mentor has traded. Matty thinks and says that he stops by often, and doesn't see anything different there—Mentor doesn't have a **Gaming Machine**. Seer doesn't laugh. He says that this is about more than Gaming Machines.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Matty and Seer unearth beets in the garden, Matty says that Jean's dog had three puppies and she's promised that Matty can have one. Seer teases Matty that if Jean is the girl who promised him a kiss, he'd suggest taking the kiss. Matty says that he misses Branch, his old dog, and Seer gently says that a puppy would be fun. That afternoon, Matty goes to Jean's but finds Jean in distress. She explains that all the dogs came down with some illness, and two of the puppies died. The mother dog won't drink the usual cure, and the puppy is too little to drink.

Matty's insight shows that he's thinking critically and often about what it means to grow up and look at the world in a different way. As the novel progresses, Matty will possibly be more willing to truly consider the information that comes to him and use it to make well thought out decisions—a result of the fact that Village wants its citizens to be critical and educated. The fact that Leader has heard complaints about not enough food also foreshadows the push to close Village to outsiders.



Again, Matty's little thrill at being able to snub people who were once cruel to him reminds the reader that while Matty is the novel's hero, he's not entirely without fault—he still likes feeling superior. However, he also possesses the capacity to understand that in order to properly serve Village and work for the common good, it's important to understand Village's history and the way that things could be if Village didn't focus so much on the common good. It's clear that something fundamental has changed about Mentor if he is suddenly acting in such an uncharacteristically selfish way.



Matty believes that an adult's identity is static, rather than capable of changing just like his is. This again speaks to his immaturity. Seer's grim response implies that there is something very sinister going on regarding trading, and that somehow trading has made Mentor change for the worse.



As kindhearted as Seer's teasing of Matty about Jean is, it's important that he does come around and accept how important it is to Matty to adopt this puppy and have a dog again. Just as Matty makes concessions for Seer by cooking supper slowly and properly, Seer humors Matty about things like this. This in turn allows the two to form a closer, more trusting relationship.



As Jean leads Matty to the dogs, Matty looks around the house and doesn't notice anything silly or frivolous that might point to a trade, though he remembers that there are other kinds of trades for things you can't see. Those are the most dangerous, but he doesn't know how they work. Jean takes Matty to the storage shed and Matty looks at the puppy and its mother. As he touches the puppy, he feels a painful jolt in his finger and jerks away. He remembers what people say about lightning—to go indoors—and thinks of one Village farmer who was struck by lightning. It's the same sensation that Matty felt in the clearing one day, and he's tried to put it out of his mind, but he knows he needs to test it.

Matty asks where Mentor is, and Jean explains that he's at a meeting. With amusement, Jean says that she believes he just wants to court Stocktender's widow. Matty briskly sends Jean to Herbalist for a variety of herbs, though he knows the herbs won't do anything. Jean flounces off and when she's gone, Matty puts a hand on the mother dog and one on the puppy and wills them to live. When Jean returns later, Matty lets her believe that the herbs cured them. He sits weakly against the wall and heads home when he has enough strength to do so. At the homeplace, Matty is relieved that Seer isn't home and crawls into bed.

Matty remembers healing the frog. He'd been in **Forest** and stepped on the frog on accident. The frog was injured, and its hind leg was almost severed from its body. Matty inspected the frog and began to dig a grave but as he tried to put it in the ground, the frog became painfully connected to his hand. The frog's body twitched, and finally Matty was able to put it down. Scared, Matty got ready to leave, but then decided to find a rock to cut off the hurt leg. As he touched the frog again, Matty felt his own blood flowing into it. When the sensation ended, Matty felt sick, and the frog hopped away on two useful legs. In bed, Matty thinks that he needs to learn to control this power, whatever it is. He starts to cry and finally falls asleep. His dreams are scary at first, but soon become dreams of calm and healing.

The revelation that people can trade for things that aren't immediately visible suggests that in this world, there's magic of some sort afoot. This also explains why Forest behaves the way it does—it too is something that works magically to interact with the people of Village. Bringing up lightning's danger suggests that whatever's going on with Matty, it likely has to do with his secret and may be actually dangerous or painful. This explains better why he'd want to keep it secret and go against Village's rules to do so.



The fact that Matty heals the mother dog and the puppy tells the reader that what Matty is hiding is an ability to heal things with the touch of his hand. While his fear is understandable, this also suggests that Matty's special power is fundamentally selfless in nature, as it would allow him to exclusively do things that help others.



The quiet, calming dreams suggest that Matty shouldn't actually be afraid of his power. Even if healing the frog in a way that startled him was scary and unexpected, the dreams indicate that on some level, Matty likely understands that this power is a good thing and will allow him to serve his community going forward. His fear also explains why he's trying so hard to keep it secret: presumably, he wants to be able to understand it before he shares it with others. In this case, Matty seems to feel the need to educate himself.



CHAPTER SIX

Ramon hurries by Matty and Seer, calling out that new people are arriving and there's a pretty girl with them. Both Matty and Seer decide to go welcome the newcomers. While people used to arrive alone or in pairs, now, they often arrive in large family groups. The new arrivals are often terrified and damaged in some way, though all are hopeful. Matty smiles as a greeter takes down the names of the newcomers, and he notices the pretty girl holding the hand of an ill-looking young boy. Matty and Seer whisper that the group may be so large because they've heard rumors that Village is closing. Matty then turns and sees a small group, led by Mentor, approaching. They chant, "Close. Close. No more."

Everyone, especially the newcomers, is uncomfortable with this. Leader arrives, calmly greets the newcomers, and asks the greeters to settle them in their new homes. After the group leaves, Leader thanks those who were welcoming and then turns to Mentor. He notes that while dissent is an important right in Village, it's inappropriate to scare newcomers, especially when the meeting is in four days. Leader asks Mentor directly for his opinion. Matty studies Mentor, who's deep in thought, and notices that Mentor's birthmark seems somehow lighter. He reasons that it's just because Mentor is tanned, but thinks that there are other strange changes in Mentor. He also seems somehow taller, but Matty thinks that Mentor is just standing up straighter than usual.

Mentor tells Leader that they'll see what happens in the meeting, and Matty thinks that Mentor's voice also sounds different. Matty notices a puzzled look on Leader's face as the crowd begins to disperse. As Matty turns to follow Seer home, he hears someone calling out that Trade Mart is tomorrow night. Matty decides he's going to attend.

The narrator explains that when Seer first arrived in Village, injured and ill, he listened to other people talk about going to Trade Mart. He decided early on that since he had nothing to trade, there was no reason to try. He later went to observe and told Matty how dull it was, as people just traded old trinkets for new ones. In the present, Seer says with concern that something has changed and now, trading is secretive. Matty says that he asked Ramon what his parents traded for the **Gaming Machine**, but Ramon didn't know and said his mother acted like she had something to hide.

Mentor's group makes it very clear that there are horrible things going on in Village. Remember that Village exists to celebrate everyone, no matter who they are, what disabilities they might have, or where they come from. Mentor's group, on the other hand, suggests that the selfishness that Seer mentioned is permeating Village and changing even the kindest members of the community into people who no longer care for others and want to hoard Village's resources for themselves.



Matty's attempts to explain away Mentor's physical differences proves that Matty doesn't understand trading yet—Mentor is trading to become more handsome. The fact that Matty tries to make up excuses for this shows that at this point, he's not fully versed in how his society works and therefore, cannot make appropriate assessments of what he sees or try to fix the bad things happening.



Note that Matty says nothing about trading himself—he just wants to understand what Trade Mart is all about. This again speaks to the way that Village conceptualizes education and seeks to create an informed populace. Matty now understands how to continue that project by continuing to educate himself.



When Ramon suggests that his mother acts like she has something to hide, it makes it even clearer that secrets are beginning to infiltrate Village despite the rules. Since Matty is keeping a secret of his own, this reminds the reader that he's not entirely innocent in all of this, even if the reader may agree with Matty that he's keeping his secret for a good and understandable reason.



Seer says again that something is different and that even Leader is worried. Matty tells Seer that he wants to go watch so he can figure out what's happening. With a laugh, Matty promises Seer that he won't trade—he doesn't think he has anything to trade anyway. Sighing, Seer says that Matty has more things than he thinks he does, and people will want what he has. Matty thinks that this is true; he briefly wonders if he can trade his strange power away, but he decides that he promised Seer and will only watch.

The thought process that Matty goes through as he resolves to not trade his strange power away shows how powerful and positive it can be to think of others when making decisions. The thought of his promise to Seer is enough to steel Matty's resolve and make him understand the importance of keeping his word.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Just after supper, Matty joins the crowd hurrying toward Trade Mart. Matty greets his neighbors and they greet him in return, but the atmosphere is intent and serious. Matty thinks it doesn't feel right, especially when he realizes that people are whispering nervously. He joins a group standing near a platform and stands next to Mentor, hoping that Jean will come. Mentor greets Matty affectionately and when Matty says he has nothing to trade, Mentor says that *everyone* has something to trade. Matty notices that Mentor has lost weight. He tries to shift the conversation to Jean and mentions the puppy, and Mentor laughs and says that Matty needs to take the puppy soon, as he's getting destructive.

Mentor's insistence that everyone has something to trade seems especially ominous, given that Matty has already clued the reader in on the fact that people can trade away intangible things. It's also telling that Mentor needs Matty to take the puppy—the way Matty has previously described Mentor would suggest that he'd take a naughty puppy in stride. This creates more evidence that somehow, Mentor is changing and becoming a different person.



For a moment, things seem normal and cheerful. Then, Matty wonders why people are here, as nobody seems to have anything to trade. He notices that some couples appear to be arguing. Then the tall man named Trademaster walks to the stage. Matty knows that he came, already named, from somewhere else and brought trading to Village. He stops at houses after Trade Mart to check on trades. Tonight, he carries a thick book. Everyone stands at attention as Trademaster announces the start of Trade Mart. A woman begins to cry, and several people lead her away, but Matty notices that few people look in her direction. Mentor's face looks different, and he's focused on Trademaster. When Trademaster asks who's going first, Mentor frantically calls out and shoves his way to the front of the crowd.

While the novel overwhelmingly suggests that immigration, new points of view, and new customs are good and necessary, Trademaster's arrival (and the fact that trading is the real antagonist of the novel) suggests that there is reason to be cautious about what exactly becomes a part of the accepting culture's mainstream. In this case, Trademaster seems to be distracting everyone from what Matty believes is the most important part of Village—looking out for others—and instead, encourages them to be more selfish and individualistic.



When Matty gets home after Trade Mart, he tells Seer what happened. Mentor went first and stepped onto the stage after pushing everyone aside. Seer looks concerned and says that the few times he went to watch, people called out, laughed, and teased. Matty says that people seem nervous now, and says that when a person stood next to Trademaster, Trademaster asked them, "trade for what." Mentor answered that he wanted "same as before," and everyone laughed in an odd, knowing way. Matty says that whatever Mentor is getting, it has to do with Stocktender's widow. She blushed and said to her friends that Mentor needs to trade more.

The response of Stocktender's widow suggests that if trading is truly what's causing people to become callous and cruel, she's also been involved. It seems clear that Mentor is trading to impress her, which suggests that at this point, both of them value trade and obtaining whatever intangible thing that trading gets them over valuing each other as they are, or valuing the community for its numerous flaws and differences.



Matty says that Trademaster seemed to agree and wrote something in his book. Then he asked, "Trade away what?" This time, Mentor whispered his answer to Trademaster so nobody could hear. For everyone who traded, Matty says, their first answer was loud and public, and their second was secret. Sometimes, the crowd jeered at a person, and Ramon's mother wasn't allowed to trade for a fur jacket. Restlessly, Seer asks Matty to make tea and confirms the verbal exchange people went through with Trademaster. Matty suggests he steal Trademaster's book, but then apologizes for wanting to steal.

Seer asks if anyone got things to take away, and Matty answers that some people were given delivery times. One woman got a **Gaming Machine**, and Matty makes one final plea for a Gaming Machine of his own. Seer ignores this and asks if people who traded looked different when Trade Mart was over. Matty says he wasn't paying attention; he was tired and uncomfortable. Seer asks about the person who got the Gaming Machine. Matty says it's the woman who lives near the marketplace. As she left, she was walking with her friends while her husband, who has a limp, walked behind. Matty thinks of his puppy and remembers something. He says that the woman is usually nice to her husband, but as she left, she scolded her husband for being slow and made fun of how he walks. Disturbed, Seer begins to walk toward bed. Matty says that Mentor's birthmark is now gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A week later, Matty receives word that it's time to pick up his puppy—it's becoming mischievous and Mentor wants it gone. He finds Jean in the garden and thinks that she looks unusually troubled. She says that Mentor wants the wild puppy to go, and Matty smiles and says that Mentor deals with all manner of wild children. He asks if Mentor is home, and Jean replies that he's visiting Stocktender's widow, which he does often now. They agree that Stocktender's widow is nice, but Jean asks if she can share something that's bothering her. Matty thinks that while he's been attracted to Jean for a long time, this is the first time he's felt like they're speaking as adults, not children. He feels like he loves her.

This communal act of talking about secrets shows Matty that whatever's going on, it's clear that secrecy is permeating every aspect of Village. Matty is still a good person, as evidenced by his remorse for wanting to steal, but everyone else who's now keeping secrets in a public way is suggested to be somehow morally compromised. This indicates that while trading is the vehicle for this corruption, the real problem is the secrecy and selfishness.



Matty's youth comes up again when, despite all he's seen at Trade Mart, he still wants a Gaming Machine and at least on some level, feels that whatever people are trading is worth it to get a fun and exciting toy. His disturbing story of the woman making fun of her husband draws a clear connection between trading and becoming less invested in caring for others, even those whom a person should in theory love above all else, like a spouse. Mentor's absent birthmark suggests that he's trading for conventional physical attractiveness—in other words, he no longer values difference.



Speaking with Jean in this adult manner shows Matty that in order to come of age in Village, he'll need to begin connecting with his peers in this honest adult way, rather than in the coy and teasing manner of children. This offers Matty a path forward to maturity and notably, suggests that both Matty and Jean are still fully invested in the way that Village used to be (welcoming to everyone and not negatively affected by trade).



Jean says that it's about Mentor, and Matty says that he's changing. Jean starts crying, and says that Mentor traded away his "deepest self." This surprises Matty, and Jean explains that he traded for Stocktender's widow to love him. He's getting taller, straighter, and more handsome. This is why, Jean says, that he can't deal with the naughty puppy—he kicked the puppy yesterday, but he once loved all sorts of ragged and wild children. Matty says that this is what the petition is about too. They hear a whine from the shed and Jean lets the puppy out. It bounds to Matty immediately and Matty says he needs time to think. Jean says that there's nothing to think about—trades are forever. Matty considers telling Jean about his power, but he's not sure he can fix Mentor's soul.

Later, Matty excitedly tells Seer to look at the puppy sit on command, and then groans when he remembers that Seer can't. Seer laughs and says he can *hear* the puppy sit. Matty says he's trying to come up with a name for it and hopes that he'll get his own true name soon. He says he thought of Survivor or Live-er for the puppy, and he and Seer laugh. Seer suggests that Matty ask Leader to name the puppy, since Matty will be there to pick up messages later. Matty goes to Leader's home and Leader explains that where he came from, they didn't have animals to eat or to keep as pets. He didn't know then what it was like to love and be loved. Matty blushes and asks if Leader never loved a girl. Leader considers, and says that he had a sister and wishes her well.

Matty restates his question and Leader says he started to love a girl, but they both changed. Matty then brings up Trade Mart. He says that people are getting **Gaming Machines**, which makes Leader make a disdainful face. Carefully, Matty says that people like Mentor are changing at Trade Mart. He says that Mentor traded his deepest self, and others are trading their deepest selves too. Leader listens intently. Later that afternoon, Matty tells Seer that Leader named the puppy Frolic. Frolic obediently sits and lies down on command to show that he knows his name.

CHAPTER NINE

Matty hears lots of talk in Village about the coming meeting. He notices too that the newcomers are joining in on life in Village. The children play and seem healthier, and they make Matty remember how alone and isolated he felt as a child. It took him a long time to trust Village to be kind to him. One morning, Matty heads to the market with Frolic and greets one of the women who recently arrived. She gently pets Frolic as Matty assures her that Village is welcoming and talks about how Seer learned to navigate blind.

The idea that a person can trade away their "deepest self" for something like attractiveness—and in doing so, become cruel—again shows that per the logic of the novel, kindness, compassion, and a desire to care for others is the natural state of what it means to be human. While it's also normal to want to be loved, the novel suggests that what's not normal is compromising entirely who a person is in order to earn the affection of someone else (or, for that matter, to have a Gaming Machine).



The way that Leader dances around the question of whether he's been in love before suggests again that the life Leader led before Village wasn't one conducive to experiencing love—in other words, it was far more akin to what Village is becoming, where the "love" between Mentor and Stocktender's widow is cast as less meaningful and genuine than the care and comfort that, for example, Matty and Seer show to each other.



Choosing to tell Leader about what he's discovered shows that Matty is developing quickly and understands that in order to do what he can to serve Village, it's essential that he trust others and ask for help from the people he knows will be able to assist him. In this way, Matty is able to build his personal community, while also looking out for the greater good by going to those people with power to effect change.



When Matty thinks back on his life before Village, it shows that he still uses his personal memories of the past to continually remind himself of why Village and its ideals are worth fighting for. Though Village's way of life can be hard to learn, Matty finds it more meaningful and more fulfilling to trust others and look out for them.



Suddenly, the woman interrupts and says she has a concern. Matty tells her she can speak to Leader, but she asks Matty about the petition to close Village. Matty assures her that since she's already here, she's a part of Village and can't be sent away. Brushing this off, she asks Matty if he's noticed her son, Vladik. Matty hasn't noticed him, but tells the woman that Vladik will adjust. The woman explains that she's not concerned for Vladik—she left her other children behind and now, she thinks she needs to leave Vladik here and go back. Matty hesitates, wondering if **Forest** will entangle the woman. Noting her injuries, he wonders if she was stoned. He tells her that the two of them can't vote since they don't have true names yet, but tells her how to get to the platform so she can participate in the meeting.

At the market, Matty buys bread from Jean. She tucks a flower into the paper wrapping and sighs that she's going to the meeting tomorrow with Mentor. Suddenly, she bursts out that she remembers how, after her mother died, Mentor used to tell her stories and recite poems. She and Matty reminisce about learning about literature in school, and laugh at how Mentor used to perform different voices when he read [Macbeth](#) out loud to them. He could make them cry with his passion. Jean busies herself for a moment and then says that Mentor used to love literature, and used to talk all the time about its ability to remind people how to live their lives. Now, he only talks about Stocktender's widow and of closing Village. Matty can't tell her what happened to Mentor and suddenly feels hopeless. He forgets his power.

CHAPTER TEN

The meeting proceeds as meetings usually do. Leader reads the petition and one by one, the people of Village stand to speak while the newcomers, including the woman and Vladik, stand and watch. Matty stands with the adults and pays close attention. He notices that something horrible is happening, and he realizes that he couldn't see people in the dim light of Trade Mart. In daylight, Matty notices that Ramon and his sister both look very ill, and when his sister coughs, Ramon's mother shakes her and tells her to be quiet. As people speak, Matty can identify who has traded and who hasn't. Those who have traded say that "we" shouldn't have to share resources anymore, while those who haven't traded speak of Village's history and how welcoming it is.

Matty's insistence that the woman won't be turned away from Village now shows Matty missing the point. The purpose of Village isn't just to care for those who are already there; it's also to create a safe haven for those who haven't yet come. The woman recognizes this and understands the implications of closing Village. She's aware that her children outside of Village are no less deserving of love and care than any other children—there's no reason other than selfishness why they shouldn't be accepted, just as she and Vladik were.



[Macbeth](#) is, importantly, a play about a foolish and misguided struggle for power—just as Mentor's attempt to close Village is a heartless and misguided attempt to take power for himself and those who think like him. When Jean mentions that Mentor used to use literature as an example for how to live, it suggests that she took the morals of works like [Macbeth](#) to heart and understands how important it is to draw from the historical and fictionalized past in order to make the best choices possible in the present and the future.



Though Matty hasn't entirely put two and two together yet, the illness that Ramon and his sister experience comes from trading, just like the illness that killed Frolic's littermates did. This shows that the selfishness espoused by Mentor has dire consequences and is, in some ways, a very literal illness affecting Village. The things that villagers say here show that because of their selfishness, they now fear difference. Even if they do close Village now, it won't be as kind as it always was, given that many no longer believe in the ideals it promoted.



Seer speaks about being cared for for months by people in Village until he was able to live independently. Seer also speaks on Matty's behalf, and Matty is thrilled to hear Seer refer to Matty as his boy. He says that Matty used to lie and steal but now, Matty is a model citizen and will soon receive his true name. Matty half hopes that Leader will call him up now to give him his true name, Messenger. This doesn't happen. Instead, Matty's neighbor, a woman who made clothes for him when he first arrived, says that if they close Village, they won't have to deal with dirty, thieving kids like Matty anymore. She'd been gentle when he was a child but now, she has a fancy sewing machine. Matty knows she traded for it. People begin to chant to close Village.

After people finalize the vote to close Village, Matty and Seer walk home. Matty tries to make light of things and says that he'll probably get to travel a lot to give messages to other villages. He says that Leader knows lots of things, and Seer says that Leader "sees beyond." It's his special gift, and it makes Matty think of his own strange power. He asks if all people who have a gift have the same one, and asks if Seer's ability to walk is a gift. Laughing, Seer says he learned to walk because everyone in Village helped him when he first arrived. Seer says that his daughter Kira also has a gift. He sits down, and urgently says that the border is closing in three weeks, and he needs Matty to go to Kira's village and bring her back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Matty does as Leader tells him to do and puts the packet of messages inside his shirt. His job is to post messages on all the paths through **Forest** so that people have the time to turn back. The only settlement Matty will go to is his old one, which is in regular communication with Village. Leader asks Matty if Seer mentioned Leader's gift to see beyond. They discuss Kira and that Seer says that she has a gift too. Matty wonders if Leader knows about his own gift. As though he's reading Matty's mind, Leader says he knows about Matty's gift. Matty explains that he's kept it a secret because he doesn't understand it.

Leader tells Matty that when the gift rises up of its own accord, it's because someone needs the gift. Matty is indignant that he had to start with a frog, but Leader says the first time he saw beyond, he saw an apple. Matty chuckles, and Leader cautions him to "wait for the true need" and not spend his gift. Leader puts his arm around him and insists that Matty will know when the time is right.

Again, the way that Matty's neighbor speaks about him and others like him as "dirty" and "thieving" shows that in order to justify closing Village, she feels compelled to dehumanize newcomers and make them more difficult to sympathize with. While Matty's transformation is a clear signal to a compassionate person that bringing in outsiders and teaching them to behave properly in Village does good things for everyone, dehumanizing Matty suggests that he's an outlier, not a normal newcomer representative of many others.



While it doesn't occur to Matty here, it's worth considering that if Village closes, his role as a messenger might also come to an end—it's implied later that Mentor thinks that if a person leaves, they shouldn't be allowed back in. This shows that even Matty and what he feels is his true identity are in danger because of this new policy. It affects everyone and damages everyone, whether they're involved in it, believe in it, or reject it.



Finally opening up to Leader allows Matty to feel seen and heard, something that will in turn give him the confidence and the sense of community that allows him to go on successfully with his task. This also suggests that Matty's gift might be more a part of his identity than he realizes, given that Leader is the one who bestows true names and is, in this case, the one speaking to Matty about his gift.



Leader's warning to not spend the gift suggests that while Matty's gift may be able to help many different people, there's something bigger and more profound that Matty must do. This again reminds the reader that the issue is bigger than any one sick person in Village.



Matty says he needs to go tell Jean he's leaving, but Leader keeps his arm around Matty's shoulder. Then Leader looks out the window, and Matty feels Leader's arm come alive with power and energy. After a few moments, Leader lifts his arm. He seems exhausted, and collapses into a chair. Then he says that **Forest** is "thickening," though Matty can't understand what this means. Leader says he doesn't understand it either, but it's as if Forest is clotting like blood. Matty tries to say that there's a storm coming, so maybe that's what Leader saw, but Leader explains that he was trying to look through Forest to see Kira, and he couldn't push through. He says that Matty shouldn't go; it's not safe in Forest.

Matty is momentarily disappointed, but then says he has to go—he promised to bring Kira to Seer. Leader asks if Kira will want to come, and Matty assures him that she will. Leader explains that he's going to try to look beyond **Forest** again. Matty sits down with Frolic and watches as Leader's body tenses like he's in pain, and his eyes look somewhere far away. He finally slumps back into a chair and explains that he reached Kira. Matty asks if two people's gifts could somehow meet each other halfway, making it easier for both of them, but Leader doesn't know. Matty insists that he's going. He listens to Leader warn him again to not spend his gift. As Matty starts down the stairs, Leader asks if Kira is pretty. Matty points out that she has a crooked leg, but Leader says that she's lovely.

Matty isn't ready to go until late afternoon. He packs the messages in his blanket as Seer packs food in a backpack. Seer asks Matty to tell Kira about the homeplace and their flower garden, but Matty insists that since Kira has a gift, she'll already know. He also tries to assure Seer that Kira will want to come. Jean knocks on the door and offers Matty a loaf of bread to take with him. Matty mentions that he wants to say goodbye to Ramon before he leaves, but Jean says that Herbalist has quarantined Ramon and his sister, fearing they'll start an epidemic.

This concerns Matty, as epidemics have never come to Village like they once went through Matty's old settlement. Matty considers using his gift to save Ramon, but knows that he wouldn't be able to make it through **Forest** weakened from the effort. He also remembers Leader's advice to not use his gift. Jean calls for Matty's attention and points to the tapestry that Kira made. She says it's different, and Matty sees what she means: the threads that create the trees in it are now knotted and twisted, and it seems ominous. Matty gives Jean a look and says the tapestry seems fine. He hugs Seer and Jean kisses Matty before he leaves.

The visceral language that Leader uses to describe Forest's "thickening" again suggests that Forest is more human or connected to humans than anyone at this point is willing to give it credit for. This continues to provide evidence that Forest is a reflection of humans and, in this case, can even reflect their bodies and bodily processes like clotting blood. Leader's gift of seeing and communicating with large forces gives greater weight to his words to Matty regarding his own gift.



When Matty insists he must go because he promised to bring Kira back for Seer, it shows that Matty still has a strong sense of responsibility to help the people he loves. He is, in other words, fully invested in working toward a common goal and helping others. Matty knows Kira from before—as related in [Gathering Blue](#)—and in his old village, Kira's disability meant that she would never be considered "lovely." Matty still retains some of these old prejudices, as his conversation with Leader here shows.



Herbalist's fear that what ails Ramon and his sister is an epidemic isn't entirely wrong, but it is incorrect in that what's plaguing Village is only physical illness. Ramon is sick because Village as a whole and his parents in particular are becoming selfish and afraid of difference. The fact that Ramon—a child—is sick from this again shows that when one part of society takes a turn for the worse, everyone suffers.



Deciding to not heal Ramon reinforces the possibility that Matty will have something bigger and more meaningful to do with his gift than save just one person. Matty's willingness to take Leader's advice to heart and leave his friend shows that though he has his faults, Matty is still fully engaged with the ideals that Village originally espoused and is willing to follow the rules in order to most effectively help others.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Just after nightfall, Matty realizes that Frolic is afraid of the dark. He picks Frolic up to comfort him and chooses a sheltered spot to spend the night, near the clearing where Matty first healed the frog. By the fourth night, all of Matty's food is gone. Matty isn't concerned; he knows how to find food in **Forest**. The journey is longer than normal, however, since Matty has to backtrack and go off course in order to post the messages of Village's closure. He finds what he thinks is evidence of the woman's group traveling through and wonders if she's gone back yet.

Matty begins to understand what Leader meant when he said that **Forest** was thickening. While Forest has always been familiar and welcoming to Matty, it now seems hostile. It's harder to catch fish, and some of the berries have black spots. Matty also notices poison ivy and that the trees seem to be creating more of a canopy. While this protects Matty from the rain, it makes Forest much darker. Forest also smells like decay. Matty starts to have nightmares and his throat and head begin to ache. To distract himself, he thinks of what he was like as a little boy. He was a fierce child and Kira's good friend.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Matty used to be a brash and swaggering boy. His mother didn't want him, so Matty spent time with a gang of dirty boys and learned to steal. However, there was also a gentle side to him. He befriended his dog and eventually, Kira. Kira taught him to bathe and showed him he could be better. Matty spent his time wandering through **Forest** and once, found his way to Village and to Seer. He led Seer back to Kira, keeping Seer from the men who thought they'd killed him, and then led Seer back to Village and assured him that Kira had no real reason to stay in her settlement. He explained that "they" only keep her because she can dye and weave; if she didn't have those skills, they'd kill her. Matty noticed that Forest warned Seer as they walked.

In the present, Matty tumbles out of **Forest** and feels almost blinded by the sunlight. Frolic snuffles around Matty as Matty thinks that Forest has kicked him out. Looking through the trees, he knows that the return journey with Kira will be his last trip. Matty calculates how many days he has and thinks that he doesn't have time to look up his old friends or his brother. He needs to rest, collect food, and return to Village promptly.

Note that Matty still believes that at least when it comes to him, Forest is a benevolent and guiding force. This suggests that Matty still doesn't understand that Forest is a reflection of what's going on in Village and will soon begin to reflect the fear and suspicion that's gripping his home. At this point, Matty believes his world is insular and confined to humans, rather than capable of influencing things on a grander scale.



The smell of decay in particular mirrors Ramon's illness and suggests that just like Ramon, Forest is dangerously ill. It's also contagious, given that Matty suffers just like Forest and Ramon do as he continues on his journey. Matty's choice to think of his friend Kira during this time reminds the reader that Matty still draws on his friendships and a sense of community to get him through difficult times.



Matty's thoughts here are a very concise summary of what happens in [Gathering Blue](#), specifically focusing on the fact that Kira would be in danger in her village if it weren't for what she can do with her hands. In contrast with Village, this reminds the reader of the horrors that can happen in the rest of the world while also pointing out again the ways in which Village is a superior and utopian society—in Village (as it used to be, at least), Kira's disability would be celebrated rather than make her a target.



Forest continues to exist in Matty's mind as an entity entirely separate from himself and his community. Matty still doesn't realize that Forest is a reflection of the bad things happening in Village.



Matty admires Kira's large garden and wishes he knew what some of the flowers are called so he could tell Jean about them. Kira appears in the door and greets Matty happily. She embraces him, and Matty feels ready to cry. Kira looks Matty over, and comments that he's almost a man. He brags that he can read Shakespeare. When Kira says that she can too, Matty knows things have changed here—girls used to not be allowed to learn. He follows Kira inside and as she dishes up soup, he looks around at her dried herbs and colorful thread. He also watches the way that Kira walks and moves as she fills a bowl of water for Frolic and puts it on the ground. Her right leg is shorter and drags behind her.

Kira sits with Matty, offers him bread, and then talks about how sweet Frolic is. Matty is lost in thought about healing Frolic and Frolic's mother. He looks again at Kira's leg and thinks that if her leg were straight, they could travel faster. He thinks of how tired he was after healing Frolic and reasons that it would take him a few hours to recover. Kira calls him back from his reverie and points to Frolic, asleep on a pile of yarn. She suggests that Matty sleep while she works in the garden. Matty lies on the sofa and watches her drag her foot while she collects her garden tools. He thinks he must fix her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

That evening, Kira says no to the notion of a “straightened, whole leg,” and says that this is who she is. She recounts for Matty about a time when, on a rainy day, she slipped and fell because it was hard to navigate the muddy paths with one foot and a stick. Matty then blurts out that he can fix Kira's leg with his gift. Kira says that she has a gift too, but it's in her hands. She begins to explain, but Matty cuts her off. He pierces his knee with a knife and then heals the cut with his hands. Kira inspects Matty's knee and then says simply, “I see.” Matty says that it will take him a day to recover from fixing Kira's leg, during which time Kira will be able to get used to “being whole.” She insists she *is* whole.

Matty suggests that Kira lie on the couch so he can fix her leg. He moves his chair over, but Kira ignores him and does the dishes instead. She refuses to argue and finally, Matty pulls his chair in front of the fire. After a bit, Kira grabs one of her embroideries and joins Matty. She says that she'll go with him, but she'll go as she is. She tells Matty to move closer so he can see her gift. Matty scoots over and looks at the embroidery, which is a landscape of **Forest** with Village in the distant background. Kira says that sometimes, when she embroiders, the threads move of their own accord. She asks Matty to watch.

Kira's proud proclamation that she can read Shakespeare shows that just as things were changing for the better in Leader's former settlement (as evidenced by the books they sent Leader), the same thing is happening here. The fact that this is all happening because of books, knowledge, and education suggests that in order to truly improve society in a meaningful way, it's essential to educate everyone so that they can celebrate diverse viewpoints and feel compelled to give back to their communities.



It becomes clear that Matty hasn't entirely bought into Village's celebration of physical difference, given that he sees Kira's leg as a hindrance, not a natural part of her (and it's important to distinguish that her twisted leg isn't an injury that she wants healed, but something she considers a part of herself just like her face). The novel implies that a better thought process would be to ask Kira what she wants, and then simply factor in how Kira's disability should be accounted for in Matty's travel plans.



As far as Kira is concerned, her leg is an essential, fundamental part of who she is and isn't something she wishes to change. It's important to note that while Matty does use his gift here against Leader's wishes, he uses it only on himself, not on anyone or for the greater good. This enables him to maintain his strength and his power and behave in such a way as to make it easier for him to perform his necessary tasks later in the novel.



Kira's depiction of Forest allows her to see what's going on and interpret it. It gives her a bird's eye view of the world, which in turn enables her to pay attention to changes and events on a grander scale than just her immediate surroundings. In this way she's like Matty and Jean in that, because of who she is in society, she is better able to observe and understand how things function.



As Kira works, her hands vibrate and shimmer. Her eyes closed, she embroiders and then tells Matty to look quickly, as the picture will fade. He sees himself, Frolic, and Kira preparing to enter **Forest**, while Seer is next to his home in Village. Matty also sees crowds of people, led by Mentor, piling up logs as though to build a wall. The image fades and Kira announces that they need to leave in the morning. Stunned, Matty says he doesn't understand. He admits he doesn't understand his own gift, but Kira explains that with her embroidery, she can see the future. She saw Matty coming and saw Seer waiting for her. She says that she's also seen Forest thickening. Matty asks if she's seen Leader, and though Kira hasn't, she says she's felt him.

Here, the novel suggests that understanding one's gift is an essential part of coming of age for those who have these special powers. When Kira says that she's felt Leader and repeats Leader's phrasing about Forest "thickening," it suggests that there's a spiritual community of sorts between those who have these gifts that allows them to interpret together what's going on in the world. Indeed, Kira and Leader seem to have similar gifts in their ability to see and understand things far beyond their immediate circumstances.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kira and Matty wake up early the next morning. Kira straps a large bundle containing her frame, needles, and thread to her back. Matty tries to tell her not to bring it, but realizes she needs it for her gift. Thinking of the weight of the food in his own pack, Matty is almost relieved that Kira hadn't let him fix her leg. He also notices that she's comfortable walking the way she is, and realizes that she would've become someone different if she had two straight legs. When they're ready, Kira takes one last look around the room and shuts the door.

Though Matty's sense of urgency makes him less able to be understanding and compassionate, the fact that he's still able to understand that it's essential for Kira to bring her embroidery materials shows that he understands that the best way for them to make it through Forest is to do what he can to take care of Kira and make her journey enjoyable and safe for her. She's also made it clear that embroidery is essential to her gift, which will surely be useful on their journey.



As they walk, Kira notes that though she's walked a forest path between her cottage and the center of the village, she's never been in **Forest** and has always been a little afraid of it. Matty thinks that the path seems darker, and asks Kira if she's afraid now. She says she's not, since Matty knows Forest so well. Though Matty knows she's right, he thinks that things don't look as familiar as they should, and it definitely feels hostile.

Keeping it from Kira that Forest seems different is a way for Matty to feel as though he's taking care of her and looking out for the common good. It allows her to feel confident in their journey, rather than slowing them down by acting afraid or upset about what they might find in Forest.



Back in Village, Leader tells Seer that Kira and Matty have entered Forest. Seer is relieved that Kira agreed to come, but Leader explains that because of her gift, she knew it was time. The two men listen to the sounds of Mentor directing a crew as they prepare to build the wall. They hear him reprimand someone and it makes Leader wince. Seer asks Leader to look at Mentor and tell him what Mentor looks like. Leader obliges and says that Mentor is taller, has lost weight, and his bald spot is gone. He shrugs, saying that people do strange things for women. Seer asks Leader to look beyond again, but Leader assures him they're fine. He keeps it a secret that when he looked beyond, he saw that **Forest** is thickening and getting ready to destroy Kira, Matty, and Frolic.

Here, Leader does the same thing with Seer that Matty did with Kira: he believes at this point that if he keeps it a secret that Kira and Matty are in grave danger, Seer will be happier in the long run. This is still a secret, however—something that, within Village, isn't supposed to be acceptable. This suggests that eventually both secrets will have to come out, while also showing that there are times when Village's rules can be bent or broken in order to take care of someone else.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Matty and Kira stop for the night, Matty explains that Kira should eat as much as she wants, since he'll be able to catch fish further along. Kira takes off her sandals. Matty comments that she was able to keep up really well, but Kira points out that the bottoms of her feet are bleeding. As she blots them with the hem of her dress, Matty says she'll be able to borrow clothes from Jean in Village. Kira perks up at Matty's mention of a girl, and Matty is relieved it's dark—Kira can't see him blush. Kira explains that her shoes are fine, but it seemed like twigs were trying to poke her. Matty is privately concerned that this is a warning and agrees that wrapping cloth around her feet is a good idea.

After they curl up to go to sleep, Matty stays awake and listens. He hears normal animal sounds and smells the rotting stench of **Forest's** center. He's surprised to smell it from such a distance. In the morning, Kira bandages her feet and declares that she'll be comfortable. Matty asks her to say something if she feels twigs poking her again. As Matty prepares to lead her on, he discovers that he can't find the path. He searches, puzzled, and finally finds it. The brush has grown across in the last few days. Kira begins pushing thick vines aside, but Matty takes over with his knife. When he cuts the first ones, however, acidic sap drips onto his arms and burns them.

Kira and Matty finally make it past the thick vines and stop to rest. Matty inspects his arms, which are now covered in oozing blisters. He says it doesn't hurt much, but in truth, Matty is in excruciating pain. He considers using his gift, but he remembers Leader's warning. Matty knows they have to keep going and does his best to keep it from Kira that what's happening is unusual. Frolic refuses to go further, so Matty picks him up and puts him inside his jacket. Kira comments on the decaying smell and asks how Matty usually deals with the stench. Matty wants to tell her the truth—that he's never smelled it before this time—but instead, he says that they'll wrap cloths around their faces and use a salve to block the smell. Though Matty's body feels weak, he leads them on and thinks of Jean.

That evening, Leader tells Seer that all is going well. Seer is cheerful and happy to hear that Kira and Matty are on their way. Leader doesn't say that he saw Kira's bleeding feet and that now, **Forest** is attacking Matty. He knows that the worst is yet to come.

The state of Kira's feet shows that Forest isn't going to let Matty and Kira through without a fight. Notably, Forest allowed Matty to pass through on his way away from Village, but is now trying to stop him from returning. This suggests that Forest is currently reflecting Mentor's wall-building and the desire to keep people out of Village. In other words, it was fine for Mentor and his followers when Matty left—he's now one less person to feed and care about.



The poisonous, burning sap functions in much the same way that Mentor's sudden shift to being cruel and selfish did: both surprise Matty, as he never expected to encounter this sort of thing from a previously benevolent source. This reinforces that Forest is reflecting what's going on in Village, and suggests that wherever Matty encounters this kind of selfishness and harm, it's surprising for him—evidence that he's still entirely sold on Village's ideals.



It's telling that as Matty and Kira get deeper into Forest, Matty becomes more and more convinced that he has to obey Leader and not use his gift. This shows that in difficult situations, Matty knows that he must rely on people he loves and trusts to guide him through. With this, the novel again suggests that in a communal society, someone like Matty will know that there are people around to help them and interpret events for them—though he has to protect Kira here, he still draws on Village's ideals to do so.



The fact that Forest is attacking Matty specifically again shows that when people like Mentor become selfish, it's innocent, powerless children like Matty who sometimes suffer the most.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

By that evening, Matty is in unspeakable pain. He tells Kira the truth and admits that he doesn't know what to do. He says they can't go back through the poisonous vines, and he pulls his sleeves back to show her his arms. They're so swollen that the skin is split and oozing in places. Kira and Matty decide to keep going. They find a pond where Matty usually refills his water, but now it's stagnant. The smell worsens as they reach a swamp that Matty has never seen before. He decides that they should tie themselves together, and Kira fastens a vine around their waists. They inch through the swamp. Sharp reeds cut their legs, attracting mosquitos, and occasionally they get stuck in mud. Kira loses both of her sandals.

On the other side of the swamp, Matty pulls Kira out of the thick mud and notices that the mud has coated his feet and legs in what look like massive boots. The sight almost makes him laugh. He notices Kira's bleeding feet and legs and covers her legs in mud too, hoping to stop the bleeding and cool her hot skin. They can barely breathe due to the smell. Matty tries to sound optimistic as he leads Kira into the center of **Forest**.

Matty begins to hallucinate that he's floating above his body and Kira. He likes escaping the pain, but he wishes he could help himself and Kira. At one point, Kira asks to sit and rest. Matty leads her to a clearing, and after she sinks down on the blanket, Kira says that the branches seem to reach for her clothes, though they haven't gotten to her skin yet. Matty remembers how Ramon described Stocktender, who was entangled by **Forest**. He wonders if Forest teased and scared Stocktender before killing him.

Kira and Matty examine their wounds. Matty remembers how in Village, people would happily help those with trouble walking or with injured arms. He thinks he almost hears Village, but he knows it's not real. Both Kira and Matty realize they're having trouble breathing, and Matty considers using his gift. He thinks it's useless. As he looks down, he sees a thin vine inch toward him. It winds around his ankle, but withers when Matty cuts it. He knows this is just the beginning of the battle, and he believes he'll lose.

The mass destruction happening to both Forest as and its human travelers again reminds the reader that the horrible things going on in Village affect everyone and everything. It's also important to note that as Matty and Kira make their way through Forest, Kira shows Matty again and again that her bad leg isn't something that diminishes her ability to contribute. Her ability to tie the vine properly is what keeps them alive in this situation.



Matty's desire to laugh suggests that he's beginning to separate from reality because of the horrible pain and the awful things that are happening to him. Again, this reflects the novel's assertion that as a society becomes more selfish, people begin to doubt themselves and suffer for it.



Looking back to what happened to Stocktender allows Matty to try to make sense of what his future is going to look like. Stocktender's fate paints an admittedly horrific view of the future, but knowing what might happen allows Matty to mentally prepare for the battle to come.



This sense of hopelessness represents Matty's emotional low point. In his panic, he's lost sight of the common good and knows that fighting Forest by himself with conventional weapons (like the knife) is useless. The vine seems to confirm that Forest is teasing Matty and Kira and will entangle them just as it did Stocktender and Gatherer.



Kira begins to pull things out of her pack and ignores Matty's warning that it's too dangerous to remain here. He bitterly thinks that she's going to create an embroidery depicting their last hours, and thinks of some of the art books at Leader's homeplace. Some of the paintings show battles, severed heads, and nails in a man's hands. Kira's hands fly over her embroidery frame. Finally, she says that Leader has entered **Forest** and is coming to help them. Matty says that Leader can see beyond; he'll know where they are.

Thinking back to the art books at Leader's homeplace again reinforces the Christ imagery associated with Matty—the nails in a man's hand is a reference to images depicting the crucifixion of Jesus. This suggests that, like Jesus, Matty will have to die in order to fix what's gone wrong in the world and return it to its former glory.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Seer sits alone at home, afraid. Yesterday, he started to dig Kira's garden and told Jean happily that Matty and Kira would arrive soon. Earlier this morning, however, Leader told Seer the truth about what's happening to Matty and Kira. Leader prepared to leave and told Seer to keep it a secret that he's going into **Forest** to save them. He said that he's afraid that if Mentor and the others building the wall realize he's gone, they won't let him back in. Seer suggested that Leader take weapons, but Leader insisted that his gift is his weapon. Seer feels hopeless and touches the tapestry that Kira made. He feels the knots and the snags, and he can smell death.

By insisting that his gift is an acceptable weapon with which to battle Forest, Leader implies that he'll be able to fix what's happening by tapping into his mind and the minds of others. This mirrors the novel's larger assertion that things can change only when many people change their thinking and agree either to focus on selfishness and individuality (as is currently happening in Village) or on the common good.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

A few mornings later, Matty and Kira wake up. Matty is surprised they're still alive. Kira can barely see, and Matty discovers that his nose is bleeding. Kira says that she can't walk and Matty looks at her legs, which are cut deeply enough in places to expose muscles and tendons. Frolic lies motionless against Matty as Kira tells Matty to go on while she sleeps. Matty pushes through the pain to pull out Kira's embroidery frame, thread a needle, and shake her awake. He asks her to try to figure out where Leader is by meeting him with her gift. She obliges and finally, her hands shimmer.

When Matty asks Kira to use her gift, it recalls Leader's insistence that he's going to fight Forest with his gift. If both of them are able to work together and "meet" each other, they might be able to make a plan to get out of Forest alive. The fact that Matty is the one to instigate this suggests that even though he's a child, he's wise and has taken Leader's advice to heart thus far.



Two days into **Forest**, Leader feels the attacks. He realizes that they probably started earlier, but he brushed them off as clumsiness. He reaches a place where the path seems to end. A frog hops out, croaking, and hops away. Leader follows it and is surprised when he comes across the path again. Suddenly, stinging insects swarm around Leader and fly away. He runs, but rocks throw themselves at his knees. Leader wishes he'd brought a weapon, but thinks that Forest is too big to fight with a knife or a club. He thinks of telling Seer that his gift is his weapon. Now, he's not even sure what he meant by that. As a vine grows around his ankle, he tries to look beyond.

The frog is presumably the same one that Matty healed, which gives it a good reason to help Leader, consciously or otherwise. This suggests that there are still parts of Forest that are healthy and able to function in a way that helps the common good—even if the frog isn't doing this on purpose, it's still something that Matty healed and seems relatively unaffected by the destruction taking place throughout Forest. This again suggests that Matty is the one capable of fixing everything.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Matty asks Kira what she sees, but she doesn't reply. He lies down and pulls Frolic close, feeling immensely sad that Frolic, a young puppy, will die so soon. He realizes he's sad for Village, Kira, and Leader, all of whom are suffering. Kira whispers that Leader is close.

Leader stands still as the vine wraps around his ankle and looks beyond to Kira. He finds her in "the place called Beyond," and his consciousness meets hers. They both explain that they're hurt and lost, and then Leader is pulled back to the clearing. He reaches out for Kira again and tells her to ask Matty for help and to use his gift. Matty feels Kira move and leans close to hear her speak. He hears her say that they need his gift, and he falls backwards. He thinks it's too late to use his gift and that there's too much that needs help. He rolls off the blanket into the mud and waits to die. His fingers begin to vibrate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

At first, Matty feels only a small sensation of the power in the tips of his fingers. He feels his blood start to warm and feels as though he can see every cell in his body. With a gasp, he calls for his gift and scrabbles at the ground. Matty knows he's been chosen for this. Kira starts to breathe and falls asleep, while Leader discovers that the vine is no longer attacking him. A breeze blows through Village and Ramon sits up, his fever gone. Seer feels the breeze and then touches the tapestry. He finds that the stitches are now even and smooth. Matty groans, presses harder into the soil, and feels his blood and breath become part of the earth. He floats up and watches his body give itself to the people and the places he loves. He feels free.

Leader begins to walk forward, feeling the sores on his face disappear. The path reappears, dappled with sunlight. Matty feels as though he can hear and see everything. He sees Jean call to Mentor, who is once again stooped and holding a book. Matty hears him recite a poem and watches those building the wall walk away. He hears the newcomers singing in their own languages, but he sees that they all understand each other. He also understands now that **Forest** itself is an illusion: it was a reflection of fear, lies, and power grabs, but now, it's blooming. Matty sighs, lets go of life, and watches Leader find Kira.

Thinking of Frolic instead of himself again reinforces that Matty is a relatively selfless character who considers others before himself—especially since Matty is also very young and has his whole life ahead of him.



Matty's fingers start to vibrate even though he doesn't think he can do what's asked of him—he still has the power to help others, even if he isn't aware of it. It's telling too that Matty is able to begin healing Forest even though he's not sure of what he's doing. This suggests that Matty's actions are innate and instinctive to him, rather than something that he needs education to be able to tap into.



Matty's sacrifice is the ultimate act to serve the common good, as he's literally giving his body and his life to help the people and the place that he loves. In this way, Matty will become an example to others in Village of how one should aspire to behave in a selfless, community-oriented manner. Further, with what Matty is doing, he's able to heal Ramon and others he previously thought about healing, in addition to Forest and Village. This suggests that sometimes the best way to help individuals is to help fix larger broken systems.



Now that Matty is in the process of giving himself to Forest, he can understand that Forest wasn't malevolent of its own accord—it was only reflecting back on others what was happening in Village with trading and the wall. With this, the novel encourages readers to look in unexpected places for the effects of selfishness and negative individualism—it will reflect back in surprising ways.



Kira wets a cloth and with a sob, bathes Matty's arms. They're unblemished now. She tells Leader about Matty's dirty, mischievous face when he was a boy. Leader says that Matty wasn't his true name, and Kira tells Leader that Matty wanted to become Messenger at the end of this journey. Leader says that that wasn't Matty's true name either. He tells Matty that his true name is Healer. Frolic startles Leader and Kira as he crawls out of the bushes and greets Kira. Leader picks up Matty's body to carry him home, listening to the keening that's starting in the distance.

Giving Matty the name Healer shows that Matty did truly come of age during his journey through Forest. The fact that his true name isn't what he expected it to be also shows that one's identity is as much a community effort as an individual one. Matty can only receive this name because this is the most important thing he could do for Village and his friends, and with this name, he'll be remembered and be able to inspire others to behave similarly.





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