

The Sweet Hereafter Reading Guide

1. Narrating the story of a tragic bus accident and how it affected the community of Sam Dent are four different characters. Do you think having multiple narrators was essential to the novel? Or do you think it was a distraction from the story? Was there a narrator who you trusted more than the others?
2. Each narrator tells his or her story in one chapter, with the exception of Dolores Driscoll. Why do you think the author framed the book with two chapters from the bus driver?
3. Although three of the four narrators were at the scene of the accident, we never learn what actually happened when the bus entered the water. Why do you think the author avoided showing us this scene?
4. "...because you can listen to children without fear, the way you can watch puppies tumble and bite and kittens sneak up on one another and spring without worrying that they'll be hurt by it, the talk of children can be very instructive. I guess it's because they play openly at what we grownups do seriously and in secret" (page 17). What do you think Dolores' comment reflects on in this story?
5. "And as I have always done when I've had two bad choices and nothing else available to me, I arranged it so that if I erred I'd come out on the side of the angels" (page 34). Do you think Dolores came out on the side of the angels?
6. "It's a way of living with tragedy, I guess, to claim after it happens that you saw it coming, as if somehow you had already made the necessary adjustments beforehand" (page 38). Do you agree with Billy -- that people feel the need to explain tragedies with predictions?
7. "Mourning can be very selfish. When someone you love has died, you tend to recall best those few moments and incidents that helped to clarify your sense, not of the person who has died, but of your own self" (page 43). Would you call Billy Ansel, a Vietnam vet who has lost his wife and children, a selfish person?
8. "I knew instantly what the story was; I knew at once that it wasn't an 'accident' at all. There are no accidents. I don't even know what the word means, and I never trust anyone who says he does" (page 91). Does

- Mitchell Stephens say this in order to justify aspects of his job? Or do you think there is some truth to his beliefs?
9. Russell Banks shows us both sides of the confrontation between Billy and Mitchell near the wrecked school bus. Each recounts the conversation (Billy in pages 83-85; Mitchell in pages 134-136) for the reader. Discuss where the text differs and whether this is significant to the characters or the story.
 10. "We were becoming a strange family, divided between parents and children, and even among the children we were divided ... No one in the family trusted anyone else in the family" (page 198). Do you think Nichole's realization of her fragmented family life is what led her to lie at the courthouse? Do you think Nichole did the right thing by lying in court? Why or why not?
 11. "The accident had ruined a lot of lives. Or, to be exact, it had busted apart the structures on which those lives had depended -- depended, I guess, to a greater degree than we had originally believed. A town needs it children for a lot more than it thinks" (page 235). What do you think Dolores means by this? Overall, what do the children in this novel represent?
 12. What is the significance of the last scene with the demolition derby and Dolores' car Boomer?
 13. "A close and haunting story of a small town in distress" (*Mirabella*), *The Sweet Hereafter* exposes our narrators' secrets to us, but not to each other (i.e. Billy's affair, Nichole's relationship with her father, Mitchell's struggle with his daughter, and the truth regarding Dolores' driving that day). Do you feel satisfied with the author's decision to keep these secrets veiled from the town? What is the one thing about this novel that haunts you still?

Adapted from www.harpercollins.com