

The Hazel Wood Study Guide

The Hazel Wood by Melissa Albert

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Albert, Melissa. *The Hazel Wood*. Flatiron Books, 2018. Hardcover.

The novel begins with an excerpt from *Vanity Fair* explaining the mystery behind the author of a book called *Tales from the Hinterlands* named Althea Proserpine. The narrator calls this person her grandmother and explains that she and her mother, Ella, have been living on the road for years. As a child, she was temporarily kidnapped by a red haired man who claimed to be a fan of Althea who she believed might be her father. However, when police found her, Ella claimed to have never seen the man. The narrator says that she was 17 when Althea died and her mother was overjoyed. Instead of claiming the estate that was there, they head to New York where the narrator reveals her name: Alice.

Alice explains that she and her mother had always been plagued with bad luck, and her mother believed Althea's death would stop it. However, less than a year after settling in New York, Alice knows that Ella's marriage is falling apart. At her job, Alice sees the red haired man reading *Tales from the Hinterlands*, but he leaves before she can confront him. It is revealed that after Althea wrote her novel, she moved to her Hazel Wood estate and was never seen again. Ella spent 14 years at the estate before escaping with Alice. At home, Alice hears her stepfather Harold yelling at Ella. When Alice confronts him, Ella tells her to leave. Ella later joins Alice in her room and says that she married Harold because it felt good to have a normal life.

On the way to school the next day, Alice's step-sister Aubrey tells Alice that Harold is planning to divorce Ella. At school, where Alice is one of the few students who is not a direct child of wealth, she attends drama class to see that Audrey has left. This means Alice is paired up with one of Althea's biggest fans: Ellery Finch. Finch is one of the wealthiest people at the school who clearly has a crush on Alice. After class, he asks to see her again outside of class and Alice agrees despite being confused at how she feels about him.

After school, Alice waits for Aubrey and the car, but neither come. As she walks home, a cab drives up to her and the driver tries to get her inside. She runs home. There, she finds the home empty and reeking of an unfamiliar stench. She tries calling her family, but no one answers. In her own room, Alice finds an envelope on her bed with nothing but her name. Inside, is the title page from the *Tales from the Hinterlands* titled *Alice Three-Times*. Alice runs to the building where Finch lives, and he welcomes her upstairs without question as his family is not home. He agrees to help her find her grandmother's book. Alice and Finch return to Harold's home, but he pulls a gun on them. Audrey briefly explains that they were all kidnapped when Harold demands Alice leave.

Finch wonders if Ella was taken to the real Hinterlands. Alice asks Finch to tell her about the story of *Alice Three-Times*. He explains that *Alice Three-Times* was a princess born with black eyes to a queen that despised her. She grew rapidly at random times, and



eventually had the body of an adult while still technically being a child. Because she tormented her other siblings, her parents were excited to marry her off. Alice demanded that potential suitors bring her ice from a cave far away and killed anyone who did not succeed. However, the two men that brought her the ice said they were going to make her a slave instead of a wife. Alice then swallowed the ice and froze. The men took her away, and she revived and killed them before beginning her trip home. Finch then stops before the ending. They then see a woman Finch calls Twice-Killed Katherine drain life force from a man. As they run, Finch tells Alice that Katherine does not kill women, so Ella is safe.

They arrive at a friend's house where Alice and Finch share the same room. Finch wonders if the Hinterland actually wants Alice and not Ella. The next day, they head to a bookstore claiming to have the Tales from the Hinterlands. However, when they arrive, the store owner finds a picture of Finch and Alice in the book and accuses them of swindling him. He kicks them out and Alice sees more people from the Hinterlands and passes out. When she wakes up, she tries calling Audrey. The latter explains that the people who kidnapped Ella called themselves Hinterland and that Ella wanted to tell Alice to stay away from the Hazel Wood. This, however, convinces Alice that that is where they need to go. Finch shows Alice a blog from a woman who attempted to find the Hazel Wood, and suddenly stopped posting the day after she found it. Alice leaves the woman a message, and the woman answers with an address.

When they arrive at the apartment, the woman - named Ness - asks Alice to come in alone. Ness reveals that when she entered the Hinterlands, her partner was killed. Ness refuses to return to the Hazel Wood, but gives Alice a cryptic rhyme that Ness says will allow Alice to enter the Hinterlands if it wants her to. Alice returns to Finch and they rent a car to drive to a town called Birch where Ness had first entered. Alice asks Finch if there are any fairy tales about a door, and he begins telling the story titled "There is a Door that Wasn't There." It follows the story of Anya, a 17-year-old whose father is rarely home and mother is always locked in her room. One day, her mother vanishes, leaving behind a pool of blood that Anya is terrified of. However, after her step-mother locks Anya and her sister in their mother's room and leaves them to die, Anya hears a voice that tells her how to open a door to another world. She uses her sister's blood to create the door, but it kills her sister when it opens. Once Anya walks through, she realizes she is in the land of the dead. Eventually, she finds three gifts on her sister's grave, and uses these to convince her father's new son to create the door with his own blood and let her out. She then kills her father's new wife, and leaves behind a glass that will allow him to see his trapped son in the land of the dead.

After the story, Alice starts driving. However, Alice is stopped by a policeman claiming that the road is closed because of an accident. Finch stops Alice from arguing with the cop, but as they drive away her anger takes over and she nearly runs them into a tree before swerving back, confused. They drive to a motel and spend the night. When Alice wakes up, she is angry to learn that Finch listened to her talk in her sleep, but refuses to tell her what she said. Outside, they find their rental car filled with water and are forced to wait for a bus that will take them to Birch. Finch finally tells her that she said the



words feather, comb, and bone in her sleep. On the bus, after Finch falls asleep, Alice finds those items in her bag.

When they reach Birch, Finch reveals that he made a promise to the people from the Hinterland in exchange for gaining access to the other world. Twice-Killed Katherine and another man approach them with the man grabbing Finch. When Alice refuses to kill herself, the man slashes Finch's neck and takes his body to the Hinterlands. Alice realizes that Katherine cannot harm her, and Katherine tells Alice that she will kill herself before morning. Katherine then takes her to a place called the Halfway Wood, and leaves. Alice wanders through the halfway wood where she accidentally freezes the lake and convinces a monster from the lake to let her cross in exchange for the comb. A little while later, she finds a group of people who attack her, and she kills the leader with the bone that turns into a sword. She leaves that behind and uses the feather to turn into wings and fly toward the Hazel Wood.

When Alice enters the estate, she sees a younger Ella running around and stumbles upon a party where Finch is dancing with a woman that looks like her. After a man throws her out of the party, she finds a room with Althea inside. Althea tells Alice that the later is from the Hinterland, but Ella stole her. An unknown woman refuses to let Althea die until Alice is returned. Alice is then thrown out into the Hinterlands. She runs into a man who is a refugee from earth. He panics when he sees that Alice's hands have turned to ice. He gives her gloves and she leaves to find a fairy that will take her to a woman named Janet. After doing so, Janet welcomes Alice into her home before giving her a truth serum and asking about Alice's past. Alice tells her about her journey with Finch, and accidentally tells Janet that she is part of a story. Janet explains that Althea convinced the Story Spinner - the ruler of the Hinterlands who creates the fairy tales - to return her to earth. However, Althea's novel opened holes between the Hinterlands and other worlds. When Ella removed Alice, the latter also became a pathway. Janet tells Alice to find the Spinner.

Alice leaves and finds a tavern where she tells stories of earth to refugees who have been missing for years. However, they all suddenly leave, and a woman introduces herself as the Story Spinner. She tells Alice that fairy tales are the lifeblood of the Hinterlands, and they continuously repeat. In order to truly escape the Hinterlands, she must make a new ending for her story and break the cycle. Although Alice does not know the ending, she agrees to follow the Spinner. The two bike to a castle where Alice finds many people frozen in time. The Spinner explains that when Alice left, everyone else in her story was left frozen at the beginning of the novel. However, the Spinner then grabs Alice and begins telling her fairy tale, locking Alice back into the story of Alice Three-Times.

Alice experiences her fairy tale from the first person, unable to remember anything before the Spinner put her back into it. However, during the moment when she is going to kill the brothers, the younger one reveals himself to be the red-haired man and convinces Alice to remember her time on earth. The threads of the story try to repair the damage as Alice and the red-haired man try to escape. Finch and Janet arrives, the former revealing that he survived thanks to the refugees. They attempt to leave, when



Alice sees the threads at the edge of her story. She begins telling a new story of a girl who set herself free, and opens a hole large enough that she, Janet, Finch, and the red-haired man can escape. They find a refugee camp where Finch reveals that he will not be returning to earth with Alice. Janet tells her to find the Story Spinner again to be let out, and Alice leaves. She finds the Spinner at the edge of a desert, who opens a pathway to earth as Alice's story is no longer worth telling.

Back in the real world, Alice is found by an old woman who calls paramedics after revealing that two years have passed since Alice went into the Hinterlands. In the hospital, Alice sees Ella who explains that she was locked in an apartment for three days before she eventually traveled to Birch. Unable to enter the Hazel Wood, she took odd jobs until Alice returned. Alice calls Ella her mother, despite knowing the truth. A year later, the two are settled in Brooklyn when Alice sees Janet and her lover at a coffee shop. Janet explains that other doomed princesses began to change their stories and that the Hinterlands is slowly collapsing. She gives Alice the address of a psychiatrist who secretly works with those from the Hinterlands, including ex-stories. Alice meets another girl named Sophia Snow, and the two decide to go to school together. In the final scene, Alice comments on her newly changed brown eyes, and how they look so much like her mother, Ella's.



1 - 3

Summary

The novel begins with an excerpt from Vanity Fair. It explains that a woman named Althea went missing for some time. However, she returned with fairy tales from the woods. The writer of the article says all communication with the author was over the phone, as her home in the woods was impossible to find.

The novel then shifts to the first person view of an unnamed teenager and granddaughter to Althea. She and her mother had been living on the road for years. The narrator is so desensitized to strangers that she once travelled with an unknown man for 14 hours before police found her. He had claimed he was a friend of Althea, but her mother called him a crazy fan. The narrator reveals that Althea died when she was 17 years old. Her mother, Ella, got a letter at a place they had only lived in for a day. Ella tells her daughter that Althea died and that they are free. The narrator is surprised that she feels sad at the news since she had never seen her grandmother. She asks if they are going to the estate called the Hazel Wood. Ella says no and leaves. The narrator finds the letter which mentions her by name: Alice.

Alice says that she and her mother have always been plagued by bad luck. Everywhere they lived, bad things, such as flooding, invading wildlife, and even accidental deaths, happened. After Althea's death, the two settled in Brooklyn as Ella dreamed of a future for Alice who believes she could never settle down. Less than six months later, Alice says that her mother's marriage is failing and that Alice's anger issues are getting worse. She starts her shift at a coffee place called The Salty Dog and chats with her coworker Lana. Alice admits that Lana preferred Alice as a listener instead of a friend. Then, Alice sees the man from her childhood in the shop. He leaves and disappears into the crowd outside before she can confront him. Back in the table, Alice feels weak and collapses at a table, realizing that the man was reading Tales from the Hinterlands.

Alice recalls when she first saw that book seven years ago. As a child, she was thrilled by it, and once started reading a story called Alice Three-Times before her mother took the book away. This made Alice more curious and created an obsession about her grandmother. Back in the present, Alice leaves her job. However, she is paranoid, believing the man is watching her. She takes the train home and wonders if her mother lied about not knowing the man. She reads her favorite Vanity Fair article about her grandmother. Before Althea wrote the fairy tales, she had gone on a trip. She returned to the United States three years later and wrote Tales from the Hinterlands which became a sensation. After marrying a few times, Althea moved to the Hazel Wood. As a child, Alice had believed her grandmother was a fairy godmother. Now, she sees Althea as arrogant for never trying to contact Ella. Alice explains that Althea's second husband killed himself, and Ella spent 14 years trapped at Althea's estate.



Alice returns home where she hears her step-father Harold call Ella trash. Alice tries to enter their room, but Ella says she is fine. However, Harold slams the door open and accuses Alice of looking at him like he is a monster. She sees her mother in a elegant dress and tells the reader that they share a tattoo of a flower and stem which her mother was angry at Alice for getting. At Ella's request, Alice wanders to the kitchen where her step-sister Audrey finds her and insults Alice for her cheap clothes and previous living conditions. Alice leaves for her bedroom and tells the reader that she does not feel like she belongs. A few hours later, her mother wakes her up and tells Alice that she married Harold because she wanted to rest. Alice thinks that her mother deserves peace and decides not to tell Ella about the man as they both fall asleep.

Analysis

The author immediately establishes the relationships between Alice, Ella, and Althea to explain why they are separated. First, it is clear that Ella has a terrible relationship with her mother Althea. She deflects any attempts by Alice to talk about Althea, and refuses to read the book that made Althea famous. When news of Althea's death reaches Ella, she tells Alice "forgive me, but this isn't a bad thing. It's not. It could change things for us" (4). After shedding a single tear, she tells Alice "we're free" (5). Alice, like the reader, does not know what she means by this. However, we can deduce that their mother-daughter relationship was spiteful, as Ella makes no attempt to reclaim the Hazel Wood estate that is now her own.

This relationship and Alice's descriptions also gives the reader a small impression on Althea's personality that they could not get otherwise because of her death. They know she is reclusive, as she has locked herself in the Hazel Wood for the entirety of Alice's life. However, the author is dropping clues that Althea was not a wonderful mother. After telling Althea's story, Alice tells the reader, "I was reading her story with fresh eyes. She wasn't a fascinating fairy queen, she was an arrogant fantasist. Who hadn't once, from my babyhood to her death, tried to contact Ella. Ella, who had me at nineteen and hasn't had anyone but me to hold onto since" (25). These descriptions fill the reader in on the backstory of all three of these characters, without spending too much time explaining every moment. The reader knows Ella has no relationship with Althea, which means Alice does not either. Now that Althea is dead, they are free from something. That is all the author needs to reveal for now to keep the reader's interest.

In contrast, the relationship between Ella and Alice is much more traditional, while showing the reader their strange living conditions. Ella and Alice have been on the road for years, running from something Alice does not understand. Alice explains this to the reader when she says, "my mother was raised on fairy tales, but I was raised on highways. My first memory is the smell of hot pavement and the sky through the sunroof, whipping by in a river of blue" (2). Alice remembers nothing but the road. Her interactions with Ella, for the most part, are positive. Alice does not want to leave Ella like the latter left her mother, Althea. Yet, there are hints that Ella's treatment of her past, especially in relation to *Tales from the Hinterlands*, is affecting Alice. When Ella was young, she found the book for the first time. When she tried to read it, however, Ella



ripped it from her hand. Alice tells the reader “hearing her pull the age card for the first time in memory made me horribly, burningly curious. I had to read that book. Had to” (19). Like so many other people in this world, Alice becomes obsessed with Althea’s work, and only because her mother took it away. However, the author highlights that their mother-daughter relationship is strong enough that Alice puts aside her desires to keep Ella happy. After Ella tells Alice that, “it feels so good to just rest” (31) referring to her marriage to Harold keeping them grounded in one spot, Alice tells the reader, “Ella deserved this.. Peach in a city so dense and bright its’ lights ate bad like like they ate darkness” (31). Even though Alice and Ella are sometimes harsh to each other, they also love each other. This relationship will drive the novel forward as Alice struggles to find her own answers in life.

Discussion Question 1

How and why does the author explain the relationship between Ella and Althea?

Discussion Question 2

What hints has the author given about Althea’s personality?

Discussion Question 3

What is the relationship between Ella and Alice like? Is it a normal mother-daughter relationship?

Vocabulary

turreted, slats, vagrants, ivory, desolate, condolences, vigilant, obscene, cased, abated, symbiotic, benevolent, psychedelic, zaftig



4 - 7

Summary

The next morning, Alice goes to the kitchen to make coffee when Harold arrives in a suit. He insults her for looking young, but leaves before she can react. Alice avoids Audrey, as her sister may be in an abusive mood. In the car, Audrey tells Alice that a divorce is imminent because Harold took a day off work. This means he is already planning a visit to the marriage counselor to pretend like he tried to fix the marriage. While Alice is not surprised, she is upset because Ella was happy settling down. Alice stops herself from lashing out, but defends Ella. She tells the reader that Ella's relationship with Harold was quick. Harold saw her working as a cocktail waitress and they were married less than three months later. Alice says that she was surprised that her mother had managed to act happy, as she is used to Ella making other people miserable.

They reach the school and Alice talks about how alone she feels always being the new kid. She keeps expecting to see the man as she heads to class. That afternoon, she attends drama class to find Audrey missing, forcing Alice to pair with a boy named Ellery Finch.

Alice says that Finch is the wealthiest student in the school and is smart and nerdy. He is the only student who pays attention to her aside from bullying, and he knows that she is Althea's granddaughter. Despite trying to ignore him, Finch always shows up and even leaves his family and friends to talk to her when he sees her. Alice believes she is connected to Finch in some way. Back at drama class, the two read lines together. After, Finch asks to see her outside of class. Even though Alice knows she will leave town soon, she agrees. Alice is confused about her feelings toward Finch. She says that Finch's mother had committed suicide, and Alice thinks that Finch acts happy to survive.

After school, Alice waits for Audrey and the car but neither show. Instead, a rickety, yellow cab arrives and the driver asks her to get in. Alice runs away and nearly gets run over by a bus. When she gets home, she finds the door to Harold's building open and the doorman missing. She uses her key to take the private elevator to Harold's apartment where she expects to find Ella packing. However, she arrives to a rotten stench and an empty apartment. She tries calling her family, but no one answers. After looking around for a bit, Alice heads to her room where she finds an envelope with nothing inside but a title page for the story *Alice Three-Times*. Alice runs back to the lobby, still unable to call anyone. She checks the garage, but the car is still there. She leaves the building, thinking that the envelope had either been a trick or a message. She decides to try and find the *Tales from the Hinterlands*.

Alice jogs to Finch's apartment in the richest part of town. She tells the doorman she wants to see him. As Finch comes downstairs, she begins to cry and he takes her upstairs. As they reach the apartment, Finch tells her that his parents are out and he is



excited that she is visiting him. They sit down to eat and Alice tells Finch that she needs a copy of Althea's book. He is surprised that she has never read it, but claims that a young boy stole it from him. Alice tells the reader that she found a small scrap of story when she reached out to Althea's fans, but no one has ever posted it online and it is rarely sold in stores. While she was reading the clip, the camera on her laptop had turned on. Later, when she opened the laptop again, Ella caught her and snapped at Alice, telling the latter that Althea did not want to be Alice's grandmother. Finch pulls Alice out of her thoughts to take her to the third floor where he shows her a picture of Althea. He claims that both Althea and Alice look like they are hiding their feelings. Finch is surprised to learn that Althea is dead as no news site had reported on it. Alice tells him Althea does not talk to fans, but does not know why. Finally, Alice says she will accept Finch's help.

They return to Harold's home, but Harold pulls a gun on her. Alice asks where Ella is, but Harold grabs her. Audrey stops him and tells Alice that they were all kidnapped by people calling themselves Hinterland, but she and Harold were released. Harold grabs the gun and tells Alice to get out. Alice complies and swears to never come back.

Analysis

Ella and Harold's relationship is important because it shows the reader the different facets of Ella's personality. On one hand, Ella is an intelligent and resourceful woman, capable of wooing men with her mere presence. When Alice describes Harold and Ella's meeting, she says, "Harold ate a spanakopita and asked her to write her number on the napkin. Which she did. This is the part I still can't understand. Was it his Jersey accent that got her? The hair coming out of the top of his shirt? My guess is it was the expensive watch glittering around his thick wrist - or, if I'm being less jaded, his eyes" (37). Even Alice believes Ella pursued Harold for his money. After Audrey tells Alice that Harold is pursuing a divorce, Alice says, Harold was the last man she should have been with. "His taste in books, his rigidity, his obsession with how things looked from the outside: all of it was antithetical to who she was" (35). This tells the reader that Ella is an independent spirit who does not care about looks as much as she cares about being free. Lastly, Alice tells the reader that Ella is nothing like she was when she courted Harold. After their engagement, Alice says, "the person who married Harold six weeks later wasn't my mother. The woman who was making him miserable now? That was the Ella I recognized, coming out of deep freeze" (39). Despite the harsh tone Alice is making, this does not mean that Ella is a terrible person. What it does mean, however, is that Ella is only capable of hiding her true self for short periods of time. Despite her desire to create a stable home for Alice, Ella cannot get rid of the restless spirit she has created.

Alice's feelings toward Finch are kept purposefully ambiguous because Alice herself does not know how to feel. Alice is a girl who does not know where she will be living in the next week. She is someone who does not belong at the rich school she attends, and a girl who spends more time on the road than in a home. These factors make relationships difficult for Alice. Why build friendships with people she may not see in a



few days? Finch, however, is an odd exception that Alice cannot explain. He is obscenely rich - even more so than Harold - and he is clearly a huge fan of Alice's grandmother, Althea. Alice says, "it was just my luck that one of Althea Proserpine's few remaining superfans happened to go to Whitechapel, and managed to find out who I was. Finch had cornered me at my locker my first week of school" (42). Finch seems like a selfish guy, only pursuing Alice to learn more about Althea. However, things become more complicated when he asks her out directly. Despite Alice's hesitance to befriend anyone, even she admits there is something about Finch that draws her to him. She tells the reader, "it made me think of the way Finch's eyes blanked out to zero when he wasn't smiling or laughing, and the way almost nobody smiled and laughed as much as he did. And it made me wonder if we weren't a little bit alike. Behaving the way we had to to get by, while hiding a core that was a mystery even to ourselves" (48). This implies that the narrative of the novel will be driven, in some part, by the friendship between Alice and Finch.

Finally, Harold pulling the gun on Alice is a sign to both her and the reader that this is the last time she can ever return to that life. Harold's willingness to possibly shoot his step-daughter, and his sudden hatred of Ella, means that Alice cannot rely on him or Audrey for help. From a narrative perspective, this keeps her from backtracking and forces her to rely on Finch, whom she knows way less about than Harold or Audrey. This moment also shows what kind of character Alice has. She does not mourn the loss of this family connection. She moves on. When Finch says they should come back with the police, Alice says, "No we won't. I'll never come back here again" (82). This confirms that Alice is capable of moving on without hesitation: a trait she picked up from years on the road with Ella.

Discussion Question 1

What does Ella and Harold's relationship say about Ella's personality?

Discussion Question 2

What are Finch's motives for befriendng Alice? Do his feelings seem genuine?

Discussion Question 3

What does Alice's reaction to Harold pulling a gun on her tell us about her character?

Vocabulary

gamey, perverse, rigidity, antithetical, jovially, spanakopita, clannish, ennui, corduroy, thermos, affectedly, loitered, neurotically, geode, benignly, disdainng, opulent, tinnitus, bequeathed, unsolicited, quirked



8 - 11

Summary

Finch tells Alice they should call the cops, but she begins to panic over her mother's loss. He helps her sit down and says again that her mother must have been taken by people from the real Hinterlands. He tells her a theory that when Althea disappeared, she actually went to the Hinterlands, which many people believe is a country in the north. Finch thinks Althea may have stolen the stories and now someone wants them back. Alice does not tell Finch about the red-haired man, but asks him to tell her about the story of Alice Three-Times. They go to a diner and he begins the story.

Once upon a time, a daughter with black eyes was born to a King and Queen. The Queen despised her and refused to name the child. Two years past and she did not grow. However, one day a nurse found that the child was now the size of a seven-year-old. The Queen called her Alice and the latter began tormenting her brothers and sisters. Weeks later, Alice grew to the size of a 12-year-old, then eventually 17. The queen decided it was time for her to marry, as she was beautiful despite technically being only a few years old. Alice told her suitors that they needed to bring ice from another kingdom or die. Eventually, a pair of brothers succeeded and said they would make her a slave instead of a wife. Alice ate a piece of the ice and froze. The brothers took her anyway. At night, the youngest brother had a nightmare, only to wake up and realize his brother was frozen to death. The younger brother ties the frozen Alice's wrists and ran away. Despite riding for hours, he woke up to find his horse frozen as well. He continued on, but eventually passed out in exhaustion. Alice then appears and kills him before heading back to her palace.

Finch stops the story as he thinks he saw something. He tells Alice the story ends with bloody revenge against the family. Alice wonders if her mother named her after that story and why. She tells the reader she was surprised that the story had no message and was violent. Finch tells her about his family, specifically the idea that his stepmother only calls him Oliver and pretends he is not related to his own father. He says she wants to get pregnant and convince his dad to leave his fortune to her legitimate son. Finch says he does not want the fortune anyway. The two share stories about their mothers. However, Alice sees the boy from the cab earlier in the novel. She tells Finch they need to leave. Outside, Finch stops and pulls her into hiding. He tells Alice he sees Twice-Killed Katherine from the Hinterlands. The girl he sees opens a birdcage and a demonic bird attacks a man. The girl instantly gets younger and leaves. Finch says that Katherine only kills men to keep herself young and avenge her murder. He tells Alice they need to find a place to stay.

Finch takes Alice to the house of a man named David. His family lives in a converted church, but everyone besides David are in France because his younger sister had gotten in trouble at her private school. David tells Finch that he and Alice can stay in David's sister's room. Alice describes the room as covered in posters and a large



amount of DVDs. Finch gives Alice the bed and finds a sleeping bag. Alice tells him about the man who abducted her as a child, and Finch says the man must have been Hinterland. He tells Alice he used to like traditional fairy tales because they are formulaic. However, after his mother's suicide, he wanted fairy tales with messed up endings. Althea's book is just harsh realities with magic. Alice says she agonized over how to meet Althea, but never did. Finch wonders if people from the Hinterlands want Alice and not Ella. Alice says they should have just kidnapped her, but Finch says that they might not have been able to. Eventually, the two fall asleep.

Analysis

The story of Alice Three-Times is meant to give the reader questions about people's obsession with the Hinterlands. Alice Three-Times is a morbid story. The heroine (if you can call her that), is a hated child whose sole purpose in life becomes tormenting her siblings. She kills dozens of suitors who are unable to please her, and eventually murders the two men before returning to her castle. This is not a usual fairy tale princess. As Alice puts it, "this story had no allegiance to anything. It was winding and creepy and not even that bloody. There were no heroes, no wedding. No message" (97). This should cause the reader to question why people are so in love with these stories. Finch provides a little insight into this strange obsession. After Alice asks him why he likes Althea's book, he says, "There are no lessons in it. There's just this harsh, horrible world touched with beautiful magic, where shitty things happen. And they don't happen for a reason, or in threes, or in a way that looks like justice. They're set in a place that has no rules and doesn't want any" (111). This shows that many people love Althea's stories because they are not typical fairy tales. They do not follow the expected and unrealistic formula. The Tales from the Hinterlands feel real to those who suffer for reasons they do not understand.

Secondly, the tale of Alice Three-Times shows how vastly different Tales from the Hinterlands are from traditional fairy tales. As mentioned above, Alice Three-Times is nothing like a traditional princess. She is not a meek princess waiting for a prince to save her. Instead, she is a murderer who takes her vengeance into her own hands. Finch explains these differences in greater detail when explaining why he likes fairy tales. He tells Alice, "I liked formulas. I like narrative arcs I could predict. I like doing stuff the same way every day and reading stories I could take apart into pieces and never really being surprised by anything" (110 - 111). Traditional stories have arcs that are predictable. The prince saves the princess. A king finds his queen. Evil is slain, and everyone lives happily ever after. In the Hinterlands, however, these lies are blurred. The heroes and villains blend together. The narrative is surprising and impossible to predict. Even if the reader does not see the ending of Alice Three-Times, it is easy to predict that the ending is anything but happy, even if Alice Three-Times survives. These differences make them unique and dangerous, especially as these characters begin to consider that they might all be real.

Finch's description of his family is important because it sets up his goals and what he values out of life. The reader already knew that his mother committed suicide after his



father left her and married his secretary. However, Finch reveals to Alice that his pain goes far beyond the loss of his mother. First, his stepmother is attempting to discredit the legitimacy of Finch's birth to his own father. He tells Alice, "my stepmother has never once called me Ellery. She only calls me Oliver. She likes to pretend I'm not related to my dad at all - because I don't look like him. I look like my mom. Like my uncle. She's trying, through, like, power of sicko suggestion to imply I'm not my dad's" (98). This shows the reader that Finch's relationship with his stepmother is non-existent. She would rather toss him out on the street than accept him as her son. Even worse, she wants Finch's father to pledge all of his fortune to a child she has not even had yet. Finch tells Alice that his stepmother (is trying to get pregnant right now, and she's at least 45. It's straight out of a fucking fairy tale - like someday she'll convince my dad I'm not even his, and her baby will inherit it all. Like I even want it. Like I'd ever want to be a man like my dad" (98). This quote tells the reader two very important things about Finch's goals in life. First, he is not interested in becoming his father. This would imply that their relationship is also strained. Consider that his stepmother is actively trying to convince his father that Finch is not legitimately is, then the father-son relationship was probably suffering even before his mother died. Secondly, this shows that Finch is not interested in money. He is willing to use it to help Alice, but that is not what he wants. This means that Finch's ambition is much different. The author wants the reader to wonder what Finch is really after by using clues to tell them what he does not want. Eventually, his ambitions will become apparent. For now, readers can only guess.

Discussion Question 1

What is the purpose of the story "Alice Three-Times"?

Discussion Question 2

What are the differences between traditional fairy tales, and stories from the Hinterlands?

Discussion Question 3

What does Finch's explanation of his family say about his potential goals and values?

Vocabulary

boonies, congealed, metaphor, bedrolls, resinous, mulch, teeming, vaporous, hedged, pitiless



12 - 14

Summary

Alice dreams about her mother and their constant moves. One night, when she was ten, she had woken up with her hair coiled into braids. Ella had immediately begun packing and the two left that same night. Alice tells the reader that the way they lived was her fault because of her rage and irritability. She then wakes up and cleans up the best she can. Finch declares that he has found the Tales from the Hinterlands. He called every rare book dealer and found a man who had it. Suddenly, a bird with paper in its' beak crashes into the window multiple times before it kills itself, leaving behind a page that says Alice's name and the title of three of Althea's stories. The two head to the bookstore. The seller, William, greets them. He shows them the book and says he got it that morning. However, they find a polaroid inside of Alice and Finch from the night before. William accuses them of scamming him and refuses to sell the book. Outside, Alice wonders why they would take the picture and not kidnap her. However, she is overwhelmed by the feeling of the Hinterland and she passes out.

Alice tells the reader that she remembers very little over her own life. Every time she left a place, she felt like her life was being erased. However, she can recall memories around the numerous books she has read. She feels that if Ella is not there, nothing she does matters. Alice wakes up. Finch says he did not see any of the people and helps her up. Alice tries calling Ella to learn that the number is disconnected. Instead, Alice calls Audrey. Audrey explains that she left school at lunch and found her apartment filled with the same stench Alice found. Audrey heard Ella pleading with someone and Harold was staring blankly ahead. Audrey says the people looked like monsters and told Harold something that made him hate Ella. Then, they were teleported into a car where Ella was calm as they dropped Harold and Audrey off. Ella told Audrey to tell Alice to stay away from the Hazel Wood. Audrey is forced to hang up as Harold catches her on the phone.

Alice tells Finch they have to go to the Hazel Wood. Finch pulls up a blog about a woman who was searching for the Hazel Wood since it was not on a map. Vanella (Ella's full name) ignored any contact the writer tried to make. Further down, they read that the writer believed Althea was self-imprisoned. She believed the Hazel Wood was five hours outside of New York and eventually found a pair of metal gates hidden in the trees. When the blog writer checked the map on her phone, it said she was in the Berring Sea however, and she was unable to enter and left. Alice finds the writer's name, Ness, and realizes this is her last post for nine months, just before Althea died. Alice sends Ness a message through her website, and the latter immediately responds with an address. Although Alice thinks it is strange that Ness answered so quickly, the two decide to go to the address.

At Ness' building, Finch rings the bell and answers a riddle about the Hinterlands with the word Death. He explains to Alice that Death is usually the answer to anything



related to the Hinterlands. At the apartment, Ness says she will only talk to Alice. Inside, Alice finds a headline about murders near Birch, New York. She takes the article as Ness arrives with tea. Alice tells Ness she needs to find the Hazel Wood. Ness refuses to go back. However, she tells Alice a cryptic rhyme that she says will get her there. Ness says she thought meeting Alice would change the fact that Ness has not felt any emotion since she left the Hazel Wood. She says that nothing is worth going there, as Ness cannot remember anything she liked or any meaning in her life. Ness tells Alice she will find the Hazel Wood if it wants her to.

Analysis

The author's use of birds is important because it compares Alice's story to that of a fairy tale, while shifting the reader's expectations. Birds are a common creature in fairy tales. Most of the time, they are related to princesses such as Cinderella or Snow White. Good princesses with birds who help them achieve their dreams. However, the birds in this novel are as dark as the Hinterland fairy tales themselves. The first example is when Twice-Killed Katherine kills a man using a demonic bird. The second example is when the bird tries to deliver a message to Alice. In a normal fairy tale, this would be a traditional trope. However, the author twists it to match the cruelty in the Tales from the Hinterlands. This bird kills itself to deliver a cryptic list of fairy tales to Alice. Alice, David and Finch watch as the bird "slammed against the window... a massive raggedy blackbird flapped backward, then threw itself against the glass a second time" (118). It does not wait patiently for anyone to open the window. Instead, it slams itself into the glass until it dies, leaving its message behind as its' body crumbles to the ground. This bird is not part of a sweet fairy tale. It is part of a cruel and unrelenting world where the bird had to deliver its' message at the cost of its' life. This is just another example that the Hinterlands is not the dream world so many people expect it to be.

The author shows the reader Ness' blog in order to lead Finch and Alice to answers that they could not have gotten otherwise thanks to the meddling of the Hinterlands. At first, the reader is introduced to a woman obsessed with Althea and the Hazel Wood. On her blog, Finch and Alice read, "I have long believed the Hazel Wood is as much a state of mind as it is a place. And ever since I had the good luck of studying Althea's work under Professor Miranda Deyne, it has been clear to me that her work bubbled up from a spring fed as much by magic as by mind" (137). Not only does Ness love Althea's novel, but she goes as far to study it and create a daily blog in her attempts to find it. This blog also confirms that the Hazel Wood is somewhere around New York. This has a deeper meaning because Ella and Alice have been running away from Althea their entire lives, yet Ella brought Alice back to New York the moment she thought Althea was dead. The reason why Ella would return to New York but is not willing to live in the Hazel Wood is currently unclear, but is likely tied to Ness' observation of Althea. On the blog, she says "there are recurring themes in Althea's work that are disturbing to anyone who knows of her supposed self-imprisonment at her estate: of displacement, of abandonment and assault, of a sort of supernatural identity theft and, naturally, of incarceration" (138). Since Alice has never read Althea's novel, Ness' observations confirm what Finch has told her: that Althea's work is dark and brutal. Even more, the blog provides vague



directions to get to the Hazel Wood. The blog says, “our instincts told us to turn down a dirt path lined with cherry trees blooming very much out of season. When, ten minutes later, we reached a pair of tall, green-metal gates, we knew we’d found our destination: the gates were decorated with a stylized hazel tree” (140). Now, Alice and Finch know what they are looking for.

However, Ness’ full story again shows the reader that the Hinterlands is not the magical world that people dream about. After posting every day for nine months straight, she suddenly disappears. This implies that she is either in the Hinterlands, or discovered something that broke her obsession of it. When Alice goes to her home, both of these are confirmed. Ness is a shadow of her former self, living in a dirty apartment without the desire to work or the proper emotions to handle anything at all. When Alice asks Ness why she would invite her and not tell her how to get to the Hazel Wood, Ness says, “I thought it would change something. Seeing you. Wake me up again, make me care, or feel something. The night in the Hazel Wood was the longest night of my life. I saw things nobody should see. My friend was killed - I should be sad, right? But I’m not. I haven’t felt anything since that night. I’m just numb. Half of me is still there, trapped in that hell. While the rest of me is here, trapped in this room” (149). Once again, a character who has been to the Hazel Wood and come back is telling Alice to stay away. Unlike Ella, who was able to live a relatively normal life around Alice, Ness is broken. Her regular human emotions are gone. She feels nothing. At this point, both Alice and the reader knows the pain that awaits Alice if she continues on this path to find Ella. Yet, Alice resolves once again to continue, proving that her love toward her mother, Ella, is stronger than her fear of the Hazel Wood.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of birds in the story so far?

Discussion Question 2

What does Ness’ blog do for the narrative?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author use Ness to further the narrative and explain the Hinterlands?

Vocabulary

bungalow, aperture, coaxed, slithered, antiquarian, karmic, foxing, spangled, paisley, bodega, sheaves, snarl, runnels, fortuitous, convulsively



15 - 17

Summary

Alice returns to Finch and tells him what Ness said, despite not fully remembering the rhyme. Finch asks if they are still going. Alice runs, suddenly terrified, but stops herself as she realizes what she is doing. Finch tells her he wants to make sure that she is not backing out. Alice considers telling him to leave, but does not want to be alone. They get a rental car and buy snacks for the trip. They plan to drive until they find the same place Ness entered. That night, they leave and Finch teaches Alice how to play a game called memory palace. However, they argue when Alice is unable to share any important memories aside from the books that she read. Along the way, Alice sees a woman bite a jogger's neck, but Finch does not see it. Alice remembers the article and realizes they need to go to Birch because the murders are likely linked to the Hinterlands. Finch briefly tells her the fairy tale about Jenny and the night women where Jenny- a selfish daughter who was angry at her parents- let the night women into her home, and who then killed them both. Alice then asks if there are any fairy tales about doors, and Finch begins to tell her about the "Door that Wasn't There,"

In the story, a young girl named Anya and her sister live with their mother while their father is out on business. Their mother constantly locks herself in her room. When Anya is 16, she finds that her mother has gone missing and left behind a pool of blood. In spring, their father remarried and left again six months later. Their stepmother became abusive and locked them in their previous mother's room for days at a time. One day, she locks them up and never came back. Anya hears a voice from the bloodstain. It tells her that she and her sister will die unless they give it blood. They, like their mother, will use magic to make a door. Anya lied to her sister, saying that the blood could not be her own. Then, Anya cuts her sister's wrist and paints a door. However, when the door forms, Anya's sister dies. Anya carries the body through the door and realizes she has entered the land of death. She buries her sister before continuing. She finds no one and realizes she cannot hurt herself. After many days, the voice leads her back to her sister's grave, where she finds a dress, a pair of slippers, and translucent stone that allows her to see the living world. Anya is able to trick her father's new son into killing himself to open a door so she can escape. She then kills his new wife, and leaves behind the glass so that he can see his son, but can never save him.

The novel returns to Finch and Alice where Alice smells fire and blood. Alice remembers a day when she had to go to the hospital as a child when she cut herself after hearing someone scream. Her mother had driven them far away, despite having a hospital nearby. Alice decides to drive and they agree to find a motel in Birch. However, she comes across a policemen who tells them the road is closed due to an accident. Alice lashes out at the officer for talking down to her. Finch tells her to turn around and she does so, while calling Finch privileged. Finch says the cop would not have let him go if he had acted the way she did. Suddenly Alice turns them into the forest, before yanking them back on the road when she realizes what she has done. She tells Finch to take the



wheel as she does not know why she did that. He does not and they find a motel. Alice realizes she has become attached to Finch because she desperately needs Ella. In their room, Alice apologizes but he tells her not to say it. He then confirms that the accident the cop claimed seemed more mystical. Alice teases him for his innocence, but Finch tells her he is capable of being mean before the two fall asleep.

Analysis

Alice's rash and dangerous decisions are a way for the author to show that something terrible is beginning to affect Alice's decisions. The reader already knows that she has a temper. However, that has only led to shouting matches or snide remarks to other people. The most recent example is her interaction with the policemen. After he tells Finch to make her turn the car around instead of talking directly to Alice, she snaps and says, "just because we're in whatever shitstain town is under your jurisdiction, it doesn't mean you to get to act like I'm a baby. How dare you treat me like a fuckin' housewife!" (176). The reader has also seen examples of Alice running away on impulse, then stopping with no idea why she ran in the first place. These sudden decisions, however, have never risked the lives of her or Finch. That is, until she nearly crashes their car into a tree on purpose. She tells the reader, "before my brain could catch up, I jerked the wheel and turned the car off the road, sending us rattling toward the trees" (178). She later admits to Finch that she does not know why she did it, while telling the reader "I'd left myself drift too close to the dark continent at the core of me, a lawless place I tried never to visit" (178). The author is using this as foreshadowing. The only other characters to be shown so far acting cruelly for the sake of it have been from the Hinterlands. This implies that Alice is more related to the Hinterlands than she knows. The closer they get to the truth of Althea's novel, the more erratic Alice becomes.

The author uses the fairy tale of the "Door that Wasn't There" to provide insight on the motives of Hinterland characters, while sharing more about the world of the Hinterlands. Since the reader now knows the Hinterland is real, that would imply Anya's story is real. This means that it is possible to make a door between worlds by using blood. While Anya's door lead her to the land of the dead, it is easy to assume that there are more doors that lead to other worlds. This means that the people who kidnapped Ella and are stalking Alice want to create a door, possibly back to the Hinterlands, but more likely to other worlds so they can continue their cruelty. This also creates tension, as the reader is not sure if Ella has already been sacrificed for a door, or if they have another plan. Regardless, the purpose of Anya's fairy tale is foreshadowing for future events.

The author shows Alice's memories with her mother Ella to show how dependent she is on her mother and what she must overcome to finish her journey. The reader knows that Ella is the only person Alice has any kind of relationship with due to their frequent moves and lack of stability. Even Alice's memories are tied directly to what Ella allowed her to do. When Alice and Finch play the memory palace, Alice becomes frustrated because all of her memories are book related, as she and Ella did not do much except move frequently while hiding from the Hinterland. However, this dependence on her mother has led Alice to rely on Finch to track her down. In order for Alice to make any



growth as a character, she will need to break out on her own, which will require something drastic that forces her out of her comfort zone, because it is unlikely that Alice is willing to go looking for Ella alone.

Discussion Question 1

What reasons might Alice be making such rash decisions?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the story of "The Door that Wasn't There"?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author show Alice's dependence on Ella. Is this healthy?

Vocabulary

abated, acquisitive, besotted, lintel, soporific



18 - 21

Summary

Alice tries to comfort Finch who is having a nightmare. He snaps awake and tells Alice they should go back to good fairy tales. He dreamed that everything in the Hinterlands is real and asks Alice if she is willing to go beyond the end of the earth to find her mother. Alice realizes she should not take him all the way with her because she cares too much.

Hours later, Alice wakes up again and is upset when Finch tells her she talked in her sleep, but he will not tell her what she said. Outside, they find their car filled with water, and Finch tells Alice that they cannot go back. Inside, Alice finds a dying catfish, which Alice calls a victim of the Hinterland. Back in the motel, the desk clerk tells them they can catch the fisherman's bus which will take them close to Birch. Alice asks Finch if his parents have tried to call him, and he tells her not to worry. They stay at a diner as they wait for the bus. Finch says that Alice's hands are cold, but she dismisses him. They wonder what they will find in the Hazel Wood. Finch tells her that when she talked in her sleep, she said the feather, the comb, and the bone. Alice realizes they are items she has in her bag. The bus pulls in and the driver confirms the murders in Birch. Once Finch falls asleep, Alice pulls out the items as Ness' cryptic poem plays on the radio. She repeats the rhyme until she remembers it.

Finch wakes up as they reach Birch. When they leave, the driver warns them to not go in the woods after dark. When the bus leaves, Finch suddenly tells Alice he has made a mistake and they need to leave. He says he made a promise to someone and they told him not to tell Alice. They see the cab from New York with Twice-Killed Katherine as the passenger. Finch explains he promised to take Alice to the Hazel Wood after she passed out at the bookstore. He tells Katherine and another Hinterland boy that he no longer wants the reward: entrance to the Hinterlands. Alice tells them she wants to see her mother, but Katherine insults her instead. Alice slaps Katherine, and her hand burns in pain. The boy with Katherine gets angry as Alice and Finch try to run. However, the boy uses magic to turn the world around so they run straight back. Katherine gives Alice a knife and tells her to kill herself. Finch tells Alice they cannot touch her, and Katherine kicks him. She says Alice is going to kill herself and make a door. The boy grabs Finch and slits his throat, takes his body and disappears into the forest. Alice tries to touch Katherine again, and feels her soul hit against her body as Katherine swears Alice will kill herself by nightfall.

Alice experiences a memory of her mother. As they were driving one day, Alice was awakened by her mother humming a nursery rhyme. Alice had asked her mother if she was ever a young girl like her. Ella says she had been, and liked everything but fairy tales. Katherine then wakes Alice up and tells her they are at the Halfway Wood. She tells Alice Finch would be alive if Alice had just killed herself. She then tells Alice she will wander until she kills herself, and throws Alice into the wood before driving away.



Alice walks into a clearing, furious at Finch and his killers. She begins to run as Finch's death weighs on her. She tries to tell herself that everything is okay, but also thinks she is going insane. Trees begin to attack her and she runs until she finds a lake. She realizes she still has the items: the comb, bone, and feather. A translucent creature grabs her from the water intending to pull her in. The water turns to ice and the creature suddenly lets go and tells Alice she cannot pass. However, Alice offers the comb in exchange for safe crossing. It takes the comb and disappears. Alice runs onto the ice, but her leg falls through as she is about to reach the other side. The creature throws her to safety and Alice climbs the hill. In the distance, she sees a roof. However, she crosses paths with a little girl with a picnic blanket cutting the pages of an atlas. Alice asks why she is doing that, but the girl says her grandmother does not want her to talk to strangers. She points to the sky where Alice sees a disapproving face in the moon. Alice introduces herself and the girl, named Hansa, tells Alice she cannot talk to strangers after she made friends with the thief Vanella. Suddenly, a bright light from the moon causes Alice to tumble back down the hill. There, she sees people walk through a broken part of the hill. Most of them, except for a man and a woman, sit down. Then, the woman attacks the man. The audience claps as the man dies. The woman notices Alice and tells her to come out and show herself. Alice says she is leaving as the people begin turning into monsters. Alice grabs the bone which turns into a sword and begins to sing. The creatures retreat and Alice uses it to kill the leader. The bone shrinks and Alice puts it on the dead woman's chest.

Alice continues toward the Hazel Wood to find trees made of silver, gold, and copper. Alice remembers the rhyme about the leaves turning red and begins to run. She reaches a ravine and pulls out her feather. It turns into a pair of rings and she flies to the Hazel Wood.

Analysis

The reason the author shows the rental car filled with water is to show that Alice and Finch cannot return to their previous life. There are a few times throughout these few chapters that both Alice and Finch question if they should continue on. The reader finds out that Finch's hesitance is because he regrets betraying Alice to the Hinterlands. For Alice, however, is beginning to question her decision to take Finch with her. She tells the reader, "I knew I couldn't let him go all the way with me. Not into the black hole of the Hazel Wood" (187). Alice is determined to find Ella, but cares enough for Finch that she considers going back to New York, at least to return him to his family. By having magic from the Hinterlands fill their rental car with water, neither of them can turn back. Finch must finish his promise to the Hinterlands. Alice must find the Hazel Wood. As Finch says, "even if we wanted to (go back to New York). It's like... we have no choice but to keep going" (190). They cannot go back on the decisions they have made, for better or for worse.

Finch's betrayal is important from a narrative standpoint because the author wants the reader to sympathize with him, even though he has made a terrible decision. The author has made certain that everything about Finch's past has been revealed. His mother's



suicide. His terrible relationship with his father. His stepmother's desire to have a new baby and give it the inheritance instead of Finch. The reader knows he is desperate to leave his life behind. He has even told Alice that he is obsessed with the magic of the Hinterlands. This makes his decision to betray Alice understandable. However, this does not make it acceptable. Finch himself tells Alice this when he says, "I made a promise... but I don't want to keep it" (201). The author wants the reader to sympathize with him, but she does not want them to blindly believe he made the right decision. The situation between Finch and Alice is much more black and white. Finch desperately wants a new life because his has becoming meaningless. He is human. He has desires that cause him to make rash decisions to fulfill them. This leads to Alice being thrown into the Hinterlands, and Finch getting his throat slashed: an outcome he never considered despite being an observant and forward thinking character. In the end, both Alice and the reader are angry at Finch, but wish he was still there, creating an emotional paradox.

Twice-Killed Katherine's goals are purposely ambiguous because she is not meant to be a main villain. Instead, from a narrative standpoint, she was meant to get Alice into the Halfway Wood and remove Finch so that Alice must find her own self-worth and answers for living. While Katherine has done many evil things, such as murdering people and telling Alice to kill herself, the actual threat she has toward Alice is minimal. This is for two reasons. The first comes from the story "The Door that Wasn't There" from the previous chapters. In order to make a permanent door between worlds, Katherine needs the blood of another: Alice. The second is the fact that Katherine cannot harm Alice without suffering extensive pain herself. The reader sees this when Alice slaps Katherine after the latter calls Alice a house cat. Katherine does not retaliate because, as Finch tells Alice, "they can't make you do anything... they can't even touch you" (206). This explains many questions both the reader and Alice have had up to this point. Why kidnap Ella and not Alice? Because they would be severely hurt if they tried. When Katherine drops Alice off in the Halfway Wood, she promises that Alice will kill herself before nightfall. Except, Alice does not have to. Katherine has no control over her. She was never meant to. The real villain lies somewhere in the Hinterlands, and Katherine provides Alice a direct path right to it.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the car filled with water?

Discussion Question 2

Is Finch's betrayal justified? What is the significance of his death to Alice?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Katherine throw Alice into the halfway wood rather than kill her?



Vocabulary

formulating, conferred, fervent, prosaic, lurched, stunted, pensive, aviatrix, devoutly, suburbanite, haphazardly, coursing



22 - 24

Summary

Alice lands and a thick fog forms behind her. A gust of wind blows her wings away and Alice enters the Hazel Wood for the first time. She calls the mansion perfect. She stops at the door, concerned as to what is inside. Finally, she enters into a foyer with a massive staircase and statues of stone. Alice hears someone humming Hickory Dickery Dock. Then, Alice sees a young Ella who runs away. Alice follows, realizing the house is much larger than it looks. On the seventh floor, she finds a freshly used cigarette and a typewriter with a story about Alice. She leaves to see that the sun has come out. She runs into a man with a gun as it turns to night again. He leaves and Alice sees young Ella again and thinks she is seeing snapshots of someone memories. She runs into a kitchen and finds newspaper clippings about death in the real world. Alice hears a scream below followed by absolute silence. She then walks into a ballroom filled with people and thinks she sees a teenage Ella. However, she also sees Finch dancing with a girl that looks exactly like her. Finch and the other Alice kiss, the music stops, and a person shoves Alice into the dance. Instead, she tumbles into an empty hallway with a closed door. Inside the new room, she sees something she does not believe: Althea alive.

Althea looks just as Alice imagined. Althea asks a teenage Ella if she wants to hear a story. Despite the later saying no, Althea tells one. She talks about a Queen who built a bridge to bring herself home, but made a terrible mistake. She took the stories back with her and opened a portal between worlds. The Queen noticed dark things happening, including the death of the King. The Queen herself was a door between worlds, and her princess grew up with her. Althea gets older and looks directly at Alice as Ella disappears. She says that the demons from the Hinterland could not hurt Ella until the latter stole a princess from her fairy tale: Alice Three-Times. Alice says she does not remember living in the Hinterlands, but Althea questions if her memories are true. Alice demands to know where Ella is, but Althea says that Ella is not in the Hinterlands. The letter of Althea's death was meant to bring Alice back because Alice herself is a bridge between worlds. The other characters would suffer if they hurt Alice, but if she killed herself she would open a permanent door. In the real world, Alice's eyes changed from black to brown but she never lost what connected her to the Hinterlands. All of their bad luck was Alice's fault. Althea then reveals she cannot die as long as Alice is outside the Hinterlands. She yells to an known person that she is giving Alice back. Heat consumes Alice and she falls into the Hinterlands.

The new forest is very different from the Halfway Wood. Alice begins walking and realizes that Finch is somewhere in the Hinterlands. She wonders if he is actually dead. As she walks, the flowers give off a variety of scents and Alice comments that the world was too different. She knows she is alone. Alice believes she is, in fact, a story from the Hinterlands. She finds a path where she is stopped by a man. He says he is from Earth and is surprised she just arrived. She does not tell him who she really is. He explains



there are a lot of refugees from Earth and other places. He tells her to stay away from stories and that he is dating an ex-story. He tells Alice to go find an old woman who will grant a wish in exchange for a chore and Alice needs to ask to be taken to Janet. When he shakes his hand, Alice's hands turn an icy white-blue. He panics, gives her gloves and runs. She follows the man's directions until she runs into a story where the main character smells just like Harold's apartment had. She confronts him, but he claims he does not remember what happened to Ella. She grabs him with her icy fingers and he says he recalls the sound of both Ella and her father's blood. Alice tells him she will kill him if he hurt Ella, but he says she would be happy if he had killed her real mother. The man leaves and Alice runs until she finds an old woman who asks her to retrieve an apple. Alice does so and the grandmother turns into a bored fairy before granting Alice's wish to be taken to Janet. Alice lands in front of a cottage.

Analysis

The mystical nature of the Hazel Wood acts as a shift from Earth to the Hinterlands both for Alice and the reader. Once she reaches this point, there is no going back to Earth without solving the mystery of her life in the Hinterlands. The Hazel Wood is where everything in Alice's life collides and forces her to begin making decisions to save herself rather than being driven purely by the need to rescue Ella. The Hazel Wood itself seems to straddle both worlds. Although she never saw it, Alice knows it exists in the real world. The author confirms this later in the same chapter when Althea says, "the queen's daughter (Ella), grew up strong. She grew up fast and feet, forever running between the Other Kingdom and that of her birth, because she couldn't remember a life that was any other way" (246). Yet, it is clear that Alice is on the Hinterland side because of the things she sees in the Hazel Wood. Memories of Ella running around. Time and weather rapidly changing as she moves between the rooms. Hundreds of people - including a ghostly version of Finch - dancing in a ball. These phenomena prove that Alice has fully crossed into the magical world of the Hinterlands, and there is no going back without seeing her adventure to the end.

The author uses the reveal of Althea's life in order to show the dangers fame can have on a person who is unable to maintain relationships with friends or family. First, the Hazel Wood is a conglomeration of Althea's memories. The illusions of a young Ella running around the mansion are from Althea's mind; a time she remembers more fondly. Even the look of Althea herself is a memory. When Alice first sees her, she tells the reader, "Althea looked good. She looked real. She wore cigarette pants and a striped boatneck shirt and, oddly, short white gloves. Like the Hazel Wood, she resembled exactly my idea of her - the level blue yes, the elegant bones" (243). It is only as Althea tells Alice her story, and expresses her bitterness, that Althea transforms into her true self. Alice says, "All the magic had gone from the telling. SHE spoke fast and flat. The room was changing, and Althea was, too. Her shoulder slumped: gray licked through her hair. Without warning, her gaze swiveled toward my face. Her teeth were stained, and her eyes spun like pinwheels" (246-247). The real Althea, one no longer surrounded by magic and consumed in her own, happy memories, is a terrifying and desperate woman. The author reveals why in Althea's story. She (who she calls the



queen) made a terrible mistake. Althea says “she didn’t need to find a door, because she had become one. A bridge, too. A place where the demons could get in” (246). Here the author reveals that Althea is haunted by demons, which are likely the Hinterland characters trying to get out. Even though she locked herself away, she is still tormented. Then comes the bigger reveal: the truth about Ella. Althea tells Alice, “The Other Kingdom (Hinterlands) didn’t hurt the queen’s beloved daughter... Clever Princess Vanella... Until the day the princess found a baby in the Halfway Wood, left by her parents and their hunting party to sleep beneath a tree. The princess loved her right away, and she stole her out of her fairy tale” (247). Ella, Althea’s only living family member after the death of her “King” (246), stole Ella and ran from the Hinterlands. She ran from Althea. This means that Althea has been alone in the Hazel Wood for close to 17 years. Those that love her are distant fans. Her family is gone. Althea found the fame she wanted, at the price of her own happiness. She is even willing to give up Alice, the one person who wanted to find her not driven by Tales from the Hinterlands, in exchange for death. “I’m giving her back to you!” she cried. “Now will you let me go?” (254). Althea’s desperation to escape the prison of her own making forces her to live the rest of her life sad and alone.

The minor scene with Alice and the old woman-turned-fairy-godmother is significant because it once again shows how typical fairy tale tropes are subverted in the Hinterlands. Many happier fairy tales contain fairies, whether they be godmothers or kind souls that grant wishes in exchange for favors. The Hinterlands is no different. Except, this fairy only seems to interact with refugees. Even more, while fairies are generally elusive creatures only found by a select few and usually on accident, the existence of this unnamed fairy is common knowledge. The first man Alice meets on the road sends Alice straight to her with explicit instructions on what to wish for. He already admitted that he is not very good at helping new refugees (259), yet he knows to send Alice to this fairy. This implies that every refugee has either interacted with her, or knows to send lost people to her to find Janet. hilariously, the tone of the fairy also proves this concept to be true. When Alice retrieves the apple, the fairy - in an obviously bored tone befitting of someone who has repeated the same line multiple times and knows that everyone is aware of what she can do - says, “You were kind to me when you thought me an inconsequential old woman... I will repay that kindness by granting you a wish” (267). The author uses this funny interaction to add more to the backstory of the Hinterlands and defy reader’s expectations of fairy tales.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author show the mystical nature of the Hazel Wood?

Discussion Question 2

How does the author use Althea to show the dangers of fame without family?



Discussion Question 3

What fairy tale trope does the author subvert? Why does she do this?

Vocabulary

marrow, tumbledown, sheerest, intrepid, furred, lurid, picturesque



25 - 28

Summary

After a woman begrudgingly lets her inside, Alice heads into a warm room. She is questioned about the Hinterlands tattoo, and Alice says she did not know where it had come from. Janet introduces herself and her lover, Ingrid. She asks if Alice is truly a new arrival. Alice says yes and Janet pours her a drink. Alice is surprised that the flavor changes so many times as she drinks it. Janet then reveals they both drank truth serum. Alice tells Janet she has no intention to hurt anyone, did arrive in the Hinterlands today, and does not remember being there before. Janet says she made it her mission to protect refugees and ex-stories. Alice asks how one becomes an ex-story. Janet explains that the Hinterlands is full of many kingdoms, and thus, many fairy tales. One becomes an ex-story when their fairy tale is over, but many go mad. Alice then tells Janet everything about herself, praying that she does not tell her that she is a story. Janet says she came to the Hinterlands with Althea, and is shocked that 50 years have gone by.

Janet reveals she and Althea were together, but Althea had not offered to take Janet back with her. It was Janet who found the Hinterlands door and told Althea about it. Althea was too eager to leave, and got bored of her new life very quickly. She began to seek out stories, talking to minor characters and even communing with the dead. When Althea wrote *Tales from the Hinterlands*, she opened holes between the worlds. Many people who loved her stories accidentally wandered in, only to find that the Hinterlands were a terrible place to live. The ruler of the world known as the Story Spinner, is attempting to clean up the mess Althea made. Alice accidentally reveals who she is and says her mother took her to Earth. Janet asks if the leaps in her age that happened in her story happened on Earth. Alice says no and Janet asks to hold Alice's hands which she dips in water. Janet then asks if Alice could have saved Finch. Alice gets angry and the water freezes. The ice on her skin shifts up to her shoulders. Janet tells Alice to seek out the Spinner. Alice apologizes for bringing her issues to their home, and Janet's lover Ingrid tells her that regret is good, for it proves Alice's mind is still her own.

That night, Alice dreams of Finch. She wakes up to see that the ice had crawled further towards her chest. She is able to hide it under her clothes. Janet tells Alice if she lets the world know she is there, the Spinner will find her. When Alice goes outside, she trusts her intuition and follows a path. She finds a refugee bar where most people ignore her. The bartender asks her about information from Earth as a second bartender gives her a free tea. Alice tells them about famous books, songs, and music. She is sad she is not the same as them, and knows she cannot stay. The people began to leave and the last bartender reveals herself as the Spinner. She explains that she starts the stories and lets them unfold, allowing her to somewhat control the populace. The Spinner wants Alice to finish her story and explains that stories loop until she stops telling them because they keep the Hinterlands alive. The Spinner says she will not let Alice go easily, but if Alice is able to create a new ending for her story, she can escape. However,



Alice does not know her real ending and the Spinner says that might help her create a new one. The Spinner tells Alice that the Earth she knows will be different because time passes differently between worlds. Determined, Alice follows the Spinner out of the bar.

They walk through empty cobblestone streets and the Spinner keeps Alice from exploring the town. The Spinner changes her appearance as they grab a pair of bikes and head out onto a path into the woods. Along the way, they run into a military caravan and Alice sees a beautiful woman. The ice begins to rise into her throat, but the Spinner stops it with her hands. She says not yet, confusing Alice as to what she means. They continue riding after the Spinner warns Alice to never trust a Hinterlands horse. They ride through the night and Alice hears music from a refugee camp. The Spinner takes Alice to a castle which she recognizes as her real home. When they stop, Alice finds a playing card in the spokes of the Spinner's bike and sees Katherine on it. The Spinner calls it a bad joke and tells Alice she needs to go into her story without baggage from Earth. Alice realizes the Spinner brought her back with no intention of letting her leave. However, she has no choice but to enter.

Inside, Alice hears music looping the same few seconds. She realizes as she enters the hall that everyone inside the castle is stuck in time. Since Alice left, everyone involved in her story was returned to the beginning, stuck until she returned. They reach a courtyard at the center of the castle. Alice realizes she is being pushed to something, both by the Spinner and the scene. They climb the stairs into a room with a woman caught in labor. The Spinner tells Alice she will return her to the beginning of her story and live out a perfect life in a never-ending loop. Alice tells the Spinner that that is not living, but the Spinner says Alice has died before. She touches Alice's cheek and ice consumes the latter. The Spinner whispers the first line of Alice's story and Alice begins to implode. She sees the sociopathic gaze of the Spinner as she dies.

Analysis

The author shows Janet's relationship with Althea in order to solidify the dangers Althea's ambition had on others. First, we need to establish that Janet did have a relationship with Althea, whether working or otherwise. Thankfully, the author clearly states this through Janet's own admission. She tells Alice, "She mainly liked me for what I could do for her. We had fun, but it never would've lasted longer than the summer. She was a pretty American tourist who'd run away from her friends. I was an idiot who never could resist a tough girl" (276). However, the author also makes it clear that Janet feels bitterness toward Althea. First, she hates that Althea did not offer to take her back to Earth. She tells Alice, "She didn't even offer to take me back with her, the selfish bitch" (276). Janet also despises the problems Althea and her book causes in the Hinterlands. When Alice tells Janet that Althea locked herself up in the Hazel Wood to try and contain the holes between worlds, Janet angrily responds, "If she were really so considerate, she would've killed herself... we've had refugees as young as ten, little girls obsessed with fairy tales, and now they're stuck living at the fringes of them" (281). Whatever relationship the two women had is in shambles now. However, what the author wants the reader to understand is exactly how Althea hurt both the people of



Earth and the Hinterlands. Her actions brought in hundreds (possibly thousands, though it's never confirmed) of refugees enamored with her stories, only to find themselves trapped in a brutal world. It also let other dangerous characters out to terrorize the earth. Ingrid, Janet's lover, tells Alice "stories started using the door, when they could sneak away. They like to cause trouble in your world" (281). The reader knows this to be true through the existence of Twice-Killed Katherine and the murders around Birch. Althea did not just draw hopeful people into the Hinterlands, she also let the evil ones out. Even worse, she drove away the few people willing to stand by her. Janet sees her as "selfish" (381). Ella hated her enough to run away with Alice and never seek out Althea again. Even Alice, who was the single person interested in speaking with Althea, is disappointed in her. Ultimately, Althea's ambition has done nothing but harm people in both worlds, and herself.

The author shows the power of the Spinner in order to show the Spinner's weakness. At first, the Spinner (who is generally referred to as 'she' despite her ability to transform on a whim), seems all powerful. After getting everyone in the bar to leave Alice and her alone, the Spinner says, "I just tweaked the narrative. Made it the right time for them to go" (295). When Alice asks if the Spinner controls everyone in the Hinterlands, the spinner says, "I don't have to control anyone, least of all the Stories. Once I set them going, they're like clockwork. A self-contained engine" (295). This is important because it proves that the Spinner, despite looking like the ultimate, unbeatable deity of the world, is not as powerful as she seems. It gives the reader a reason why Alice might be able to escape. This does not mean that the Spinner is weak. She is more than capable of manipulating people to her will. She is able to keep Althea from dying to get Alice back to her world. The Spinner is also able to create any stories she chooses, even small ones such as convincing everyone to leave the bar at the same time. However, the Hinterlands itself proves that it can create stories as well. When Alice asks the Spinner why they are riding bikes instead of a horse, the Spinner says, "horses are unpredictable... Even for me. They tend to turn into Stories halfway there.. Never trust a Hinterland horse" (303). This implies that the Spinner is a conscious user of a power that the world itself already has. She adapts the rules of the world to fit what she wants. Rules that Alice has to break to escape. By showing potential weaknesses, the author gives the reader a sense of hope for Alice. She can escape, if she finds the right rules to break.

However, Alice's trust of the Spinner is the author's way of showing that obtaining her freedom will not be easy. As we have established before, the Spinner is a powerful entity. While she does have weaknesses, she is more than capable of convincing Alice to follow her all the way back into the very story she is trying to avoid. There are numerous times along the path that Alice feels she should not trust the Spinner. The most obvious is when she finds a playing card of Twice-Killed Katherine in the spokes of the spinner's bicycle. This is a woman Alice continually associates with Death, foreshadowing that the Spinner will kill Alice to return her to the beginning of her story. Once they are inside the castle, the Spinner herself drops many hints that Alice will not get out as easily as she thinks. When they see the other characters trapped in time, the Spinner says "nobody can fix a broken machine if they don't have the parts" (311). It is clear that Alice is that missing part, and the Spinner intends to fix her story. Lastly, Alice



has to contend with the Spinner's beliefs that her stories, despite their cruelty, are perfect. The Spinner tells Alice, "you won't want to (change anything), Alice. Can't you see that yet? These Stories are perfect. The Stories are worlds. I made a whole world just for you, and in it you get to do what nobody gets to: you get to live, and live, and live. And everything will come out the way it's mean to, no matter what. I made it that way" (313). It is even implied that Alice's story will be nearly impossible to break free from. The Spinner tells Alice, "You burn so brightly, Alice Three-Times. So much anger, so much ice. A story wouldn't have waited like this for just anyone" (313). By contrasting the Spinner's possible weaknesses with her strengths, the author builds tension going into the ultimate resolution, leaving readers to wonder how Alice might escape a world designed to keep her locked in her fairy tale.

Discussion Question 1

How does Janet relate to Althea, and what does she show about Althea's ambition?

Discussion Question 2

How does the Spinner maintain control of the world? Is she an absolute leader?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Alice trust the Spinner, even though everything is telling her not to? How does this help or hurt the narrative?

Vocabulary

opaque, subterfuge, prudish, ostensibly, genuflect, meek, companionable, kasha, ambled, accosting



29 - 31

Summary

Alice wakes up to the blue eyes of her real mother and lives out the fairy tale that Finch told her earlier in the novel. However, she has no memories of her life on Earth or her goal to find Ella. She experiences every painful and sudden growth spurt, and every hateful remark from her family. She tells the reader she felt like she had done it all before, but her mind is only clear when she stops thinking. She torments her siblings and defies her mother. She becomes fascinated with ice before eventually growing into a woman. After demanding her suitors bring her ice from a far away cave, Alice is put into the service of two brothers who accomplished the task. As they take her away, she murders the first brother and prepares to be tied up by the second. However, he grabs her and asks her to remember him, and remember Ella. Her memories come back as she recognizes him as the red haired man from earth. She remembers her mother's name, and he says that the story is almost broken. However, his brother comes back to life and kills the red haired man with a knife. Threads appear and begin stitching the story back together. It reaches into Alice's mind and Alice forces herself to remember her mission to keep from being pulled back into her story. The threads revive the younger brother, as Alice was meant to kill him if the fairy tale continued. The older brother comes to life a second time and attacks Alice. She kisses the older brother in pure anger, and he dies. The thread begins to trap her.

Suddenly, two people on bikes arrive. She recognizes, but her fading memory makes it difficult to remember names. A boy grabs her and she realizes that he has been following her all throughout the Hinterlands. He calls her name and she realizes he is Finch. The woman with him is Janet. Janet explains that every ex-story broke out of their fairy tale because of the Spinner, or because a refugee wandered in at the right time. Alice tells the reader that Finch looks much older as he tells her to get on Janet's bike. The story's fabric moves with them, looping them back to where the story should continue. Alice decides to get off the bike and approach the thread on her own. She begins to tell a new story about a girl who got away. The more she says, the more the story's fabric breaks. She concludes the story by saying she will live happily in another world with Ella and no ice on her skin. A hole appears. She, Janet, Finch, and the red haired man escape to a refugee camp. Finch explains that the guy who slit his throat dropped him off accidentally near a refugee camp and they saved him. Finch and Janet decided to save Alice together. Another ex-story approaches the group with water. The red haired man realizes he no longer has to die in Alice's story. He explains that Ella was going to steal him before she stole Alice. He brought Alice back to finally break the story and permanently free herself. He says he cannot return to Ella because he has lived too many lives. Alice wants to return, even if time has passed beyond Ella's death. Finch tells her he is staying in the Hinterlands because it is what he always wanted. He tells her to find the Spinner and Janet gives Alice her bike. After Janet declines to come with Alice, the latter leaves.



Alice finds the Spinner on the edge of a desert. The Spinner says Alice's story is not worth telling anymore. Alice says it was never her story, but the Spinner's. The Spinner reminds Alice that time is different between worlds, but Alice steps over the border and returns to Earth anyway. She arrives in the Hazel Wood to find Althea's estate in shambles. She assumes Althea is actually dead and leaves without going inside. She finds herself exiting a forest where a woman stops and asks Alice if she is okay. Alice struggles to speak, as her speech is no longer bound to a predetermined story. The woman calls paramedics and informs Alice that two years have passed since he disappeared. Paramedics arrive and she tells them both her mother's name, her own, and her fairy tale name. She passes out on the way to the hospital, and wakes up to see Ella waiting for her.

Alice calls Ella "mom" and the two embrace. Ella asks if Alice knows what she did, and Alice says Ella is still her mother. After sending doctors and police away, Ella explains that she was kidnapped and locked in an apartment for three days. The door suddenly unlocked and she rushed to Birch, but was unable to enter the Halfway Wood. A few weeks later, Ella finally found the real Hazel Wood with a recently dead Althea inside. She spent two years working odd jobs in Birch, hoping that Alice would return. She admits she never thought Alice was a bridge. After being released from the hospital, the two move to Brooklyn, and Ella sells the Hazel Wood estate to a woman who turns it into a writer's retreat. Alice rereads books to remind herself of her childhood on earth. She sees Audrey a single time and the two reconnect before Audrey leaves for good. Alice thinks about Finch whose parents seem unaware is gone.

A year later, Alice sees Janet and her lover at a coffee shop. Janet shows Alice a passport with Hinterlands written on it, and all the stamps inside are locations of doors found by Janet and the refugees to other worlds. Janet says that other doomed princesses had begun to break out of their stories, causing the Hinterlands to collapse. She says Finch is traveling to different worlds, and Alice says she does not know what she will do without her ice. Janet gives Alice an address for a psychic. Later that week, Alice sits in a room with others from the Hinterlands. The group meets every week to talk about their experiences. Any violent characters who could not change are either missing or dead. Back at home, Alice resolves to cherish her memories. She meets another former princess who calls herself Sophia Snow, and the two decide to go to school together. The novel ends with Alice looking at her own reflection, thinking about how much her eyes look like her mother, Ella's.

Analysis

The way the author cleverly writes Alice's point of view on her own fairy tale is important because it shows the reader how different Alice Three-Times is from the Alice that lived on Earth. First, it is important to establish that these two characters, despite being in the same body, are different. Throughout the novel, the author has shown Earth's version of Alice as someone with an occasional temper who has difficulty maintaining relationships except for her dependence on Ella. However, she is also curious and trusting, as shown by her exploration of Althea's life and her relationship with Finch respectively. Alice



Three-Times has no relationship with anyone, tormenting her family and murdering the men who take her away. The Hinterlands version of Alice does not question her life. The reader knows this because Alice, who has been returned to her story by the Spinner, says, "I never knew how hard I'd worked to keep the darkness at bay - I remembered, distantly, that I'd done this before, under other circumstances. Lived, grown up. When I thought too hard about it, something silvery and webbed flickered over my sight. When I stopped thinking, my vision went clear" (316-317). Although it is impossible to know the truth without having seen Alice's point-of-view when she experienced her story before the novel began, it is fair to think that she never had any thoughts of repeating stories or living multiple lives. However, it is Alice's memories of her life on Earth that frees her from her story. One example is when she is able to change her story - killing the older brother with fire instead of ice - simply by thinking differently. She says, "I blew out ice's opposite: the heat and the rage of being away from Ella. Trapped here. Forced into the role of a murderer by a distant storyteller with no horse in the race" (325). Thanks to Ella stealing her away, Alice has become someone new. A character capable of escaping her story, while her previous self never realized she was trapped in the first place.

The way that Finch and Alice change from the beginning of the novel to the end is important because it shows how Finch and Alice's fates have changed for the better. Finch is an Earth born person destined to inherit a fortune, or fall into obscurity at the whims of his stepmother. Alice is a Hinterland-born story destined to live out her story on repeat until the Spinner gets bored and discards her fairy tale. Both of these characters found happiness in the alternative world. Finch, in particular, longed to escape to the Hinterlands from the day that he first read Althea's story. After Alice asks him to return to Earth with her, he says, "this was what I always wanted. Not quite the way I got it, of course. It shouldn't have been like that. Alice, it shouldn't have been blood money... I wanted to see something through all the way to the very end. And I've been living here all this time, in this world. It isn't all bad. It's beautiful, and strange. And bigger than you think" (336-337). Finch is entranced by the Hinterlands. It is something different than his painful and lonely life on Earth. He and Alice both realize that he belongs here. Alice tells the reader, "No matter how much time had passed in this world or the other, Finch had changed. He'd grown up. At the fringes of my story, in a brutal make-believe world" (336). Interestingly, Alice follows this up with a comment about herself. She tells the reader, "I was feeling more human all the time" (336). Again, this shows that Finch and Alice have changed places. Alice is a story-turned-human that longs to return to Earth. Finch is a human-turned-Hinterland who wants to find new life in the Hinterlands and other worlds. Janet confirms this idea when Alice sees her again on earth. She tells Alice, "that boy has other worlds to explore. We're not always born to the right one, are we?" (353). Both Alice and Finch were born in the wrong place, and found happiness when they moved to the new one.

Lastly, the author establishes the changes within the Hinterlands to show that it no longer has a hold on Alice, Ella, or anyone else's life. After Alice breaks free from her story, other characters begin to do the same. Janet confirms this when she tells Alice, "things haven't been so up to snuff in the Hinterland these days. I'm afraid we started a bit of a trend. One broken story begets another - you weren't the only doomed princess to want a happier end" (352). The reader also sees this shift when Alice goes to a



psychic Janet recommends for the first time. There, she finds a dozen or more ex-stories; all characters that the Spinner had doomed to live a cruel life, seeking shelter and peace on Earth. Alice says, “we were each our own island, gathered together into one messed-up archipelago” (354). While adjusting to the new world will be difficult, there is hope. The Hinterlands itself is beginning to crumble. The cruelest characters, such as Twice-Killed Katherine, “were already gone. Faded into the crowd, burying themselves where they could do the most damage, or dead” (354). The Hinterlands itself is dying. Alice, no longer connected to her fairy tale, is no longer a bridge. Even the bridge at Althea’s estate closed upon her death. While there are doors to allow people to slip between worlds, Alice is no longer a part of them. Her connection to the Hinterlands lies in the process of adjusting to Earth with other ex-stories. She tells the reader, “with a girl whose fairy tale had been so dark I didn’t see how she could be anything less than a sociopath, I made a pact we’d go to school. Her for the first time, me again” (354). Alice and the other ex-stories are ready to live on earth, where the weakening Hinterlands will never be able to reach them.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author show the reader Alice’s story without repeating everything? What does this show about Alice?

Discussion Question 2

How has Finch changed and why is this important?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author establish that Alice is safe from the Hinterlands?

Vocabulary

pendulous, frivolous, latticework



Characters

Alice “Three-Times” Proserpine

Alice Proserpine (also known as Alice Three-Times in her fairy tale) is a character from the Hinterlands who was raised to believe she is the daughter of Ella. Since she moved so much as a child, she feels restless when she stays in one place for too long. The only stable thing in her life are the books she reads, which she uses to remember events from her childhood. Alice has a quick temper and is shown to snap easily on numerous occasions. In her fairy tale, Alice is obsessed with ice and is cruel due to the magical nature of her birth and the hatred she receives from her parents. Both Alices are shown to be resourceful and quick thinkers. However, Earth Alice cares for her mother, while fairy tale Alice hates her family and is implied to have killed them in the ending the reader never sees.

Alice’s relationship with most people is strained because of her aggressive. She distrusts most everyone except for Ella, leading her to argue with people like Harold and her stepsister Aubrey. Her friendship with Finch is an odd exception. While Alice initially tries to ignore him, she accepts his flirtations and even relies on him fully once Ella disappears. She builds respect for him over time, despite originally seeing him as a spoiled rich kid. Her most positive relationship, however, is with her pseudo-mother Ella. Although they fight a lot, especially when Althea or Tales from the Hinterlands is involved, Alice is willing to go to the Hinterlands to find her. Even after learning Ella stole her from the Hinterlands, Alice still calls Ella mother and considers herself to be Ella’s biological daughter.

Ellery Finch

Finch is Alice’s closest companion after Ella is kidnapped. He is obsessed with the Tales from the Hinterlands and idolizes Althea. He is incredibly smart and capable of reasoning through problems with relative ease, even when magic is involved. However, despite his wealth, Finch is unhappy and his relationship with his family is strained at best. His stepmother, whom his father was having an affair with before Finch’s real mother died, does not treat him like a son, while trying to convince his father to replace Finch with a new biological child. Finch’s desperation to escape this life causes him to irrationally betray Alice to characters from the Hinterlands, an act he deeply regrets.

His friendship with Alice is complicated. It is clear for the beginning of the novel that he loves Alice, asking her on dates, waiting by her locker to talk to her, and accepting her when she comes to him for help. However, it is unclear until they reach Birch if he likes her for who she is, or because she is Althea’s granddaughter. After betraying her for his own gain, Finch realizes he cares for Alice and does everything he can to save her from her fairy tale. This friendship is not enough to keep him from exploring the other worlds instead of returning to earth with Alice.



Vanella “Ella” Proserpine

Vanella - Ella for short - is Althea's daughter and Alice's pseudo-mother. She stole Alice from her fairy tale as a baby and ran from the Hinterlands. Ella believed the longer Alice was in the human world, the less control the Hinterland would have on her. Ella has a terrible relationship with Althea after the former was locked in the Hazel Wood for 14 years. When Althea passes away, Ella makes no effort to claim her inheritance and is even relieved (though it is revealed later that Ella believed Althea was responsible for her and Alice's bad luck and not Alice herself). The most important person in Ella's life is Alice, who Ella loves like a real daughter.

Althea Proserpine

Althea is Ella's mother and the writer of the Tales from the Hinterlands. She first entered the Hinterlands with her lover Janet, but quickly became bored and sought out stories. She met with minor characters, and even communed with the dead to capture every fairy tale she could find. After convincing the Spinner to write her back to earth, Althea released these stories, inadvertently creating holes between the Hinterlands and earth. After Ella steals Alice, Althea is trapped in a memory world of her estate, unable to die. Once Alice returns to the hinterlands, Althea is finally allowed to pass away.

The Story Spinner

The Story Spinner is the ruler of the Hinterlands due to her ability to create and control fairy tales. Since the Hinterlands survives off of her stories, she keeps them in a permanent loop, reviving any dead characters over and over to continue the cycle. While she tells Alice it is to preserve the people in the stories, she is actually a psychopathic, which explains why all of her stories have cruel main characters and dark endings. Although she can manipulate others through her storytelling, she does not have complete control over them, and loses interest in anyone who is able to escape their fairy tale.

Red-Haired Man

The Red-Haired Man (also known as the younger brother in Alice's fairy tale) is a Hinterlands character trying to escape his story. He is never given a name, as he is only a side character in Alice's fairy tale. However, he is instrumental in freeing Alice from her story by giving her items to get through the Halfway Wood as well as reminding her of her time on earth after the Spinner returns her to her fairy tale. He is freed from the story when Alice breaks the threads.



Harold

Harold is Ella's short-term husband who divorces her after he and his daughter are kidnapped with Ella by Hinterland's characters. He is a rich man who cares about his reputation more than his family. He moves so frequently through marriages and relationships that his daughter Aubrey can always tell when he is about to divorce someone or has found another woman, even if he does not tell her. He is said to be happy at the end in another relationship.

Audrey

Audrey is Harold's daughter. As a spoiled rich kid, she often taunts Alice about her poor past, but is shown to somewhat appreciate Alice as a sister. Since Harold constantly changes wives, Audrey has never built a lasting relationship with her various step-families. However, she does care about Alice enough to sneak a phone call away from Harold and tell Alice about the Hinterland kidnappers. At the end of the novel, the two girls reconcile and Audrey is shown to be more down-to-earth.

Janet

Janet is an older woman who entered the Hinterlands 50 years ago with Althea, although she does not realize she has been away from earth that long. She became an advocate for refugees and protects them from both the Spinner and the stories. She helped establish various refugee camps and provides supplies and advice to any new arrivals. At the end, Alice learns Janet and her Hinterland lover escaped to earth as the Hinterlands begins to fall apart.

Twice-Killed Katherine

Twice-Killed Katherine is a Hinterlands character who kills men to keep herself young and avenge her death. Although her full story is never told, the reader knows that she is trying to use Alice's blood to escape the Hinterland's permanently. However, after dropping Alice off in the Halfway Wood, she is only seen on a playing card as a hint to Alice to not trust the Spinner. Katherine is implied to be dead at the end of the novel as all of the cruel stories died off as other stories changed.



Symbols and Symbolism

Tales from the Hinterlands

The Tales from the Hinterlands novel, written by Althea, represents wonder and mystery. Everyone who reads the book is said to be enamored by the dark stories and fantastical tales. This leads to countless refugees believing that the Hinterland is a magical place that can erase the problems they have in the real world. However, when they manage to find their way inside, they find it is a dark and unforgiving place that they can never escape. The book itself also represents a gateway between the worlds. Without its' existence, the Hinterlands and Earth would have never been connected.

Ellery Finch

Ellery Finch represents the human desire to find a place to belong and a better life. At home, he is generally ignored as his stepmother is determined to have a child that she can give his father's inheritance to instead of Finch. Even after he disappears, his family does not seem to notice that he is gone. Yet, Finch finds happiness moving between worlds and seeing the different stories without being chained to one of his own. He is also an example of how desire can cause someone to do stupid things when he betrays Alice to the members of the Hinterlands. However, he apologizes and stresses that it is never okay to sacrifice another for one's own desires.

Althea

Althea represents the depression that comes from selfishly acting on one's own desires. Those who have not met her idolize her. Those who have - including her own daughter and previous lovers - are shown to resent her. She gained fame by stealing the stories of the Hinterlands and upsetting the balance of that other world. By using these stories for her own personal gain, and rejecting those who wanted to help her, Althea becomes a lonely and bitter old woman with no one but distant fans to love her. Even in her final moments, she throws Alice out into the Hinterlands instead of sheltering the girl who considered Althea her grandmother.

Halfway Wood

The Halfway Wood represents the divide between the Hinterlands and Earth. This is both literal and figurative. The only way to reach the Hinterlands without entering through an unseen hole between worlds is to cross the Halfway Wood. It is also a mix between both worlds, with some aspects of a normal earth forest such as trees and a lake, but laced with magic from the Hinterlands. The people in the Halfway Wood are not true stories, but still have the magic and cruelty of the Hinterland fairy tales.



Hazel Wood

The Hazel Wood - particularly Althea's estate - represents the passage of time. It is a connection between the Halfway Wood, Hinterlands, and Earth. On the Hinterland's side, it is frozen in time, filled with Althea's memories over the 50 years she has been trapped there. On earth's side, the estate is old and decrepit. Only after Althea's true death does it get repurposed into the modern era.

Thread

Threads represent the boundaries of a story. This is seen most prominently at the end when Alice is trapped in her fairy tale by the Spinner. Alice, Finch and Janet attempt to escape the story, while golden threads constantly try to bring the story back together. It stitches back dead bodies, corrals them into returning to where Alice's story can continue, and even begins to capture Alice itself to force her back into submission. Only by breaking the thread - and thus, destroying the designated path of the story - can Alice escape her fairy tale.

Fairy Tales

Fairy tales represent the foundation for the world itself. In the Hinterlands, fairy tales are what keeps the world functioning, providing magic for the people and the forest to thrive. On earth, however, they provide an escape by drawing people out of the real world and into a more primitive, but magical world. Fairy tales build off the foundations of human desires and enticed readers to seek out their own stories. These stories are ultimately what connects the various worlds to each other, even if only Earth and the Hinterlands are shown.

Alice

Alice represents the need to create one's own story. Throughout the novel, Alice is bound to the Spinner's story. She is drawn back to the Hinterlands, and given every tool she needs to be brought back into her fairy tale. The bad luck that plagued her was because she never truly escaped her story. Only by literally breaking the threads of her fairy tale is Alice able to create her own story instead of acting as a slave to someone else's idea of living.

Twice-Killed Katherine

Twice-Killed Katherine represents the dark horrors of the Hinterlands. She is the first person from the Hinterlands that Alice and Finch observe, and her first act is to murder someone. Her cruelty is a representation of the dark nature of the Hinterlands. It foreshadows Alice's own story, and reminds readers that fairy tales in this universe do



not have happy endings. More often than not, their main characters are evil and their endings are unforgiving.

Ella

Ella represents the idea that the only way to solve one's problems is by running away. After she steals Alice from her fairy tale, Ella never stops running. A single hint of Hinterland's bad luck causes her to take Alice somewhere else. Never once does she realize that she is running alongside the very thing that is drawing the Hinterlands to them - a bridge connecting the worlds through Alice. Only when Ella is taken out of Alice's life can Alice confront her problems and break free of them.



Settings

New York

New York is the first place the reader meets Alice and Ella. It is also one of the places Alice says they have stayed in the longest. This is where Ella is first kidnapped, as well as the state where the Hinterlands entrance is. Lastly, New York - Brooklyn, specifically, is where Ella and Alice finally settle down after Alice escapes her story. The reader learns that there is a psychiatrist here that secretly works with ex-stories, implying that there have been many people who escaped their stories and the Hinterlands both before and Alice broke her own fairy tale.

Birch

Birch is the town that Finch and Alice go to in order to find the Hinterlands. This is the main source of the bridge between the worlds as Althea's Hazel Wood estate is hidden somewhere in the forests outside the town. This is also where Finch betrays Alice, getting her kidnapped by Twice-Killed Katherine and his throat slashed. While Alice was in the Hinterlands, Ella came here to work odd jobs and wait for her to return.

Halfway Wood

The Halfway Wood is a land between Earth and the Hinterlands where Althea's estate the Hazel Wood also resides. It has more magic and mystery than Earth, but less stories than the Hinterlands. The Halfway Wood, however, is filled with deadly monsters and ex-stories. Very few who go in without going through the Hazel Wood first make it out.

The Hazel Wood

The Hazel Wood is the name of Althea's estate. It is magically hidden somewhere between the Hinterlands and Earth, while acting as a bridge between the two worlds. Althea is trapped on the Hinterland's side, with the mansion playing out her memories of Ella and time spent with people from the Hinterland. The one on the earth side is only discovered after Althea dies, implying that the bridge has severed and the estate is no longer linked to the Hinterland.

The Hinterlands

The Hinterlands is a world of fairy tales controlled by the Story Spinner. It is linked to a variety of worlds. However, only when those stories are taken outside the Hinterlands - such as when Althea wrote the Tales from the Hinterlands - do pathways open between

worlds. It is unclear if people from other worlds can enter the Hinterlands, as all the refugees are either from earth, or an ex-story. The Hinterlands is a cruel place. However, after Alice escapes her story, many other doomed characters begin to break free of their own and the Hinterlands is beginning to collapse.



Themes and Motifs

The Dangers of Obsession

All throughout the novel, the author highlights the suffering the Hinterland causes to show how dangerous obsession can be. All of the refugees and Finch suffer because of their fixation on the fairy tales of the Hinterlands. Only by taming this passion are they able to find happiness.

The most obvious example of this theme is Ellery Finch. The reader knows from the beginning of the novel that he is obsessed with Althea's novel *Tales from the Hinterlands*. When Alice asks him why he likes novel so much, he says "It was perfect. There are no lessons in it. There's just this harsh, horrible world touched with beautiful magic, where shitty things happen. And they don't happen for a reason, or in threes, or in a way that looks like justice" (111). Finch is a teenager who has suffered since the death of his mother. He watched his family go from happy and stable to dark and depressing. His stepmother is trying to replace his right to the family inheritance with a child of her own. Even his father is forgetting him. The dark, terrible world of the Hinterlands is an escape because it confirms what he already knows: that bad things happen sometimes without reason. Using it as a way to cope is fine. Where problems arise is when that coping turns to obsession. Finch becomes so desperate to leave his old life behind for the Hinterlands that he betrays Alice to Twice-Killed Katherine. In *Birch*, he tells her, "I wanted my life to change. I wanted for it to be real. And it is. But I don't think this is worth it." Finch recognizes immediately that his obsession has gone too far. However, he fixes his mistake by saving Alice from her fairy tale before going off on his own adventure. He finds happiness once he realizes that friendship is more important than obsession.

In general, the public's obsession with *Tales from the Hinterlands* leads to countless refugees who find themselves trapped in the land they believed was better than real life. Unlike Finch, many of these folks do not want to stay in the Hinterlands. Some have built a life in the refugee camps. Others have been away so long that they have merely accepted that they have nothing left outside of the Hinterlands. The commonality between them, however, is many of them regret their decision to go to the Hinterlands. When Alice meets her first refugee, she asks him if he is the only one. He denies this by saying, "of course I'm not the only one, assuming by 'only one' you mean the only jackass stupid enough to think it was a good idea to beg, borrow, or steal his way into a place without record players, bourbon or chocolate. There are lots of refugees here" (259). This quote highlights how blinded one can become when obsession takes over. All these refugees believed their life would be better in the Hinterlands, and did not consider the idea that everything they loved from their world would not be there. Their fascination with fairy tales blinded them from reality. At the end of the novel, after Alice breaks free from her story and others begin to do the same, many of these refugees return to the real world, even those displaced from their time. Many realize that life in their world is not as bad as they believed. Those that stay accept their decisions, and



make the most out of choices made by their obsession. Everyone is able to find a happy ending that they choose by letting go of the unhealthy fascination with the Hinterland's fairy tales.

Finding Happiness in One's Choices

Alice and Finch's endings are fundamentally different to show how one can find happiness in their decisions instead of accepting the expectation of others.

Alice is a character whose life begins in the Hinterlands, and happiness is found on Earth. It is important to realize that Alice did not know her true origins until halfway through the novel when she travels to the Hinterlands to look for her mother. However, this does not change the fact that the Story Spinner did return Alice to her own fairy tale. She lives out her time as Alice Three-Times, and is forced to remember her life on Earth in order to escape. That is what is most important. Alice chooses to break free from her story. She chooses to go back to Earth and live with Ella, who was never her mother to begin with. Alice knows that her happiness is in the other world, outside of her fairy tale. This is a huge contrast compared to most of the other characters in the novel, including the refugees. So many people - aside from the characters of the fairy tales themselves - wanted to get into the Hinterlands. They believed that happiness would be found in these fairy tales. Yet, Alice believes she is better suited for life on Earth. Away from magic and life as a princess. Away from the Story Spinner who dictated her entire existence. Alice finds her purpose back in a world where she controls her own fate.

Finch, by contrast, is a character who begins on Earth, but finds his true calling in the Hinterlands. In many ways, Finch's life is very similar to Alice's fairy tale. His parents are cruel. His stepmother hates him, just like how the queen in Alice's story hates her. Alice's ending is implied to be miserable as she lives out her days as a murderous ice queen. Finch is destined to lose his inheritance to a child that is not even born yet and live his life without a loving family. Finch knows that he cannot find happiness on Earth. He longs for the world of the Hinterlands because their stories provide something different. Something new. They present the idea that bad things happen for unexplained reasons, but magic is always present. Even more important is that the Hinterlands acts as a central hub to all the other worlds. Finch is free to find where he truly belongs. At the end of the novel, when Alice finds Janet back on Earth, Alice asks if Finch came back with her. Janet says, "that boy has other worlds to explore. We're not always born to the right one, are we?" (353). Finch made the decision to seek out a new life in the Hinterlands, and he sticks with it, even when given the opportunity to return to his natural home. For Finch, like Alice, knew that where he was expected to live is not where he belonged.



The Benefits of Parents Allowing Their Children To Make Their Own Choices

A comparison between the perceived personality of Althea and the actions of Ella shows that every parent needs to give their children room to grow.

The reader knows from the beginning of the novel that Ella dislikes her mother, Althea. For one, Althea kept her trapped in the Hazel Wood estate for years until Ella escaped with Alice. Ella lived her childhood walking between worlds, but never able to pursue her own life. When Alice tells Janet that she is Ella's daughter, Janet says, "Ella Proserpine. I remember hearing about her, even before she took you. Poor thing grew up wild in the Halfway Wood, in and out between worlds. She's probably half mad by now" (283). It is clear that Althea loved Ella. When Alice enters the Hazel Wood estate, she sees Althea's memories of Ella running around the mansion. These are Althea's most cherished memories. The time she spent with her innocent daughter. Yet, Althea ultimately prioritizes her own needs over Ella's. Althea knew that she had to stay in the Hazel Wood in order to limit the damage her novel created between the worlds. However, instead of giving Ella a way to find her own path - whether on Earth or in the Hinterlands - she made sure her daughter was stuck in the Halfway Wood. She could go lightly into each world, but never far enough to find her own place. This made Ella resentful towards Althea. After learning of her death in the beginning, Alice says that Ella only "sobbed once" (4). She even tells Alice that Althea's death means that they are "free" (5). Ella still loves Althea as her mother, but no longer wants to be a part of her life. Ella is happy that Althea has passed because, theoretically, the Hinterlands no longer has any control over Ella and Alice. However, this attitude Ella has toward Althea makes the latter very bitter. When Alice finds Althea in her estate, Althea says Ella is "(Alice's) kidnapper. That girl is nobody's mother" (248). Althea resents Ella as much as Ella dislikes Althea. This all stems from the way Althea treated Ella as a child.

Ella, but contrast, is incredibly protective of Alice despite the later not being her true daughter. She moves them all over the country whenever there is a sign of Hinterland meddling. Ella protects Alice from her past, while also running from her own. This, however, makes it difficult for Alice to settle in one place or build normal relationships. Ella also shows some tendency to act like her mother, Althea. When Alice tries to look up information about the Tales from the Hinterland or Althea, her mother always stops her. She does not give Alice the chance to discover the world for herself. Whether it be the origin of her birth, the mystery of the Hinterlands, or even earth itself. Ella dictates everything Alice does and sees to keep her safe from the past Ella stole her from. However, unlike Ella, Alice gets a chance to find what she wants out of life without her mother controlling her. She learns about her past in the Hinterlands, but accepts that her life on earth is for her. Ella admits that was the right way for Alice to live when she says "I've learned my lesson... don't run away from your inheritance" (348). Ella's willingness to give up her life to protect Alice, as well as accepting that Alice needed to find her own answer, allows them to maintain a loving relationship that Ella and Althea never could. The author wants readers to see that parents who allow their children to



make their own choices in life without resentment will have happier and longer lasting relationships.

Fame Without Love Leads To Bitterness

The author wants readers to know that obtaining fame by stepping on the lives of others leads one unfulfilled and alone. Despite Althea's fame, the reader sees that her selfish actions and alienation of others leads to a bitter and desperate end.

First, it is important to establish that Althea's fame was reliant on the sacrifices of other people. The most obvious example is that her novel itself, *Tales from the Hinterlands*, disrupts the entire inner workings of the Hinterlands. It opens holes between the Hinterlands and Earth. This lets the cruel characters out to wreak havoc on regular people, while also letting in those obsessed with the fairy tales. It is made clear that Althea was not aware her actions would open a gate between worlds. In a story she tells Alice about herself, Althea says, "the queen (Althea) felt rich, richer than she'd ever been, until she realized what she'd done: by carrying the Other Kingdom's greatest treasure across her bridge, she'd drawn the two kingdoms tight, tight together - until they were like two hills rising side by side, then the sun and the moon in eclipse, then a hand in a glove stitched too snug" (245). Althea used these fairy tales for fame and fortune, never considering the problems she may cause in doing so.

The second example of Althea using others for her own fame is in Janet's story. Back on Earth, before Althea ever wrote *Tales from the Hinterlands*, Janet had discovered the existence of doors that allowed people to walk between worlds. It is unclear if these doors only lead to the Hinterlands, or to other worlds in general. Regardless, Janet found a door to the Hinterlands in a book. Janet tells Alice, "I told (Althea)- too much. By the next morning, I already had regrets, but I couldn't put her off. But she had a... she seemed to have the right spirit for it... We fell in love, or so I thought, and she never seemed to have a doubt about the Hinterland. I should've been suspicious, I know. I'd had years to get used to the idea of leaving the world behind. I'd cut my ties rather harshly. But she did it spontaneously. Thoughtlessly. That came clear when we got here" (277-278). While we do not know the exact reason Althea wanted to go to the Hinterlands, it is clear that she used Janet in order to escape her world. When she grew bored, however - which was inevitable for someone who left for the Hinterlands spontaneously- she sought out the stories and the Story Spinner. Janet explains further consequences of Althea's hasty actions. She tells Alice, "We've had refugees as young as ten, little girls obsessed with fairy tales, and now they're stuck living at the fringes of them" (281). Althea's brash decisions, as well as her desire for fame, leads to the entrapment of hundreds of refugees, many of them young children who did not know any better.

The author makes certain to show the reader that all of Althea's decisions have created a bitter and lonely woman. Her own daughter despises her, and prefers stealing a Hinterland child (Alice) to maintaining a relationship with her own mother. After Ella takes Alice away, Althea is trapped in her estate, unable to die. The only love she has is



from distant fans, many of whom have become trapped in the Hinterlands themselves. Even her actions on her final days are selfish. Instead of protecting Alice, who considers Althea to be her grandmother, she offers her to the Story Spinner by proclaiming “I’m giving her back to you! Now will you let me go?” (254). Although her novel may live on, Althea herself died a bitter, old woman, proving that fame on the backs of others only leads to misery.

Cruelty Leads To Unhappy Endings

All of the Tales from the Hinterlands and Alice’s story itself proves that cruelty for the sake of harming others only leads to pain and terrible endings.

The first time the reader is introduced to an actual story from Tales from the Hinterlands is when Finch tells Alice a story called “Alice Three-Times” (which neither of them knew was Alice’s own). The story follows a princess with black eyes who is hated by her mother and cruel to all her siblings. Alice Three-Times kills any suitors unable to find the exact ice she is looking for. The two successful brothers, while also cruel since they wish to turn her into a slave instead of a wife, are also murdered by Alice Three-Times. While the ending of her fairy tale is never shared, Janet does call her a “doomed princess” (352). This implies that Alice was likely going to die, or live out a miserable life as she murders her family and anyone who opposes her. Every single cruel person in Alice’s story - aside from possibly the queen if Alice does not kill her in the ending - dies. This is the author’s way of telling the reader that viciousness ultimately does not pay.

The reader also sees this theme in the other Hinterland characters. The second story Finch tells Alice called “The Door that Wasn’t There” tells the tale of a girl named Anya who accidentally kills her sister by using the latter’s blood to create a door to the dead. Anya suffers for years, unable to reach anyone from the living world. The real cruel characters, however, were Anya’s father and stepmother. The former left his family and slept with other women. The later locked the sisters in the room where their mother disappeared, intending to kill them through starvation. While the stepmother’s fate is unknown, the father is left broken and alone after Anya killed his new wife and trapped his son in the other world, just like his ex-wife had trapped her. Anya herself is not cruel like her father. It was desperation that caused her to seek out her mother and accidentally kill her sister. It was anger that caused her to murder her father’s newest love and trap his son on the other side to get herself out. Yet, it is difficult to deny that Anya’s ending is certainly an unhappy one. She is alone now. No sister. No mother. Her father never truly loved her and she is traumatized by the land of the dead. Anya will not have a happy life.

The author also confirms this theme through the existence of other cruel characters. Twice-Killed Katherine, for example, is a vengeful woman who kills men to keep herself young. Katherine does not achieve any of her goals in this novel. She does not get Alice to kill herself and create a door. She is not able to harm Alice, nor was she able to kill Finch as he survived thanks to the refugees. In fact, Katherine herself is only seen in the Hazel Wood once on a single playing card that is meant to warn Alice about trusting



the Spinner. It is heavily implied that Katherine and the other cruel characters begin to die as they are unable or unwilling to change their ways for a better ending. When Alice, who has escaped her fairy tale by being a better person, meets other ex-stories who have traveled to earth. Alice tells the reader, “the violent ones... were already gone” (354). Without the Hinterlands to sustain them, the cruelest characters die out as the others willing to change find a happy ending.



Styles

Point of View

The point of view is in the first person following Alice. The author uses Alice's unique voice to telling the reader stories from her past, while keeping the reality of her previous life a mystery. There are two times when Finch tells Alice a story from the Tales from the Hinterlands. Both are told in the third person, but is implied to be exactly what Alice is hearing without her personal feelings being included. The reader learns everything about both worlds through Alice knows nothing about the Hinterlands, just like the reader. Since Alice is honest about her feelings and does not hide anything, she is a reliable narrator. Even during the chapter where she is revealing her fairy tale, Alice tells the reader how the events make her feel, and how she cannot think about anything else. This keeps the reader's trust, as they know she is telling the truth.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is easy to understand. Since it is told in Alice's point of view, the word choice is authentic. The occasional vocabulary words fit with someone who learned everything she knows from her mother. The language lets the reader know that Alice is intrinsically intelligent and articulate. There is never a moment where she comes off as confused or unable to say what she wants. This helps the reader connect with Alice as she speaks in the same way they would. Nothing is dumbed down, while also not being overwritten. Instead, the language feels authentic for a teenager.

There are a few chapters, whoever, where the author challenges the reader to grasp the true meaning of what is written. The first two examples are in the Fairy Tales Finch tells Alice. The first is about "Alice-Two Times," foreshadowing what will happen to Alice when she returns to the Hinterlands. The second story, called "The Door that Wasn't There," provides a clue to what Katherine wants Alice for, while simultaneously showing that the other Hinterlands characters cannot hurt Alice, nor can they open the door themselves. Finally, when Alice is returned to her fairy tale near the end of the novel, the author continues to write in first person, but pulls back a little to explain how Alice feels and allows the reader to recognize that fairy tale Alice and earth Alice are very different. This increases the tension as the reader questions when Alice will remember her life with Ella and break out of her story.

Structure

The novel is told in chronological order with the occasional flashback provided directly from Alice as she remembers moments from her past. There are two times in the novel where Finch tells Alice stories from Tales from the Hinterlands. Both of these have their own chapters and include special borders to distinguish them from the rest of the novel. None of the chapters are titled. Instead, they are given special images at the beginning

to represent something that happens in that chapter. For example, Chapter 10 - where Alice and Finch first see Twice-Killed Katherine and her demonic bird- has a picture of a bird cage. The year the novel is set in is also left as a mystery, but the author includes various pop culture references - such as a mention of Harry Potter - to show readers that the novel is set in the present day. Any passage of time, such as the two years Alice spent in the Hinterlands, is stated to keep the reader informed. This decision makes the novel timeless, as the references used are all popular and could theoretically be important in any future era.



Quotes

Her dress seemed designed to call attention to the tattoo climbing up her arm and almost to her throat: a psychedelic flower on a spiny stem that could've been a botanical illustration of a blossom found on Mars. I had its twin tattooed on me in a mirror image - a misguided Mother's Day gift Ella had blindsided me by hating.

-- Alice (chapter 3 paragraph 13 and 1)

Importance: This quote is important because it establishes the relationship between Alice and Ella, while foreshadowing the importance of that tattoo. The reader knows that Alice and Ella have a strong, if occasionally difficult relationship. They love each other, but Ella continuously avoids any subject pertaining to Althea or her novel *Tales from the Hinterlands*. This implies that the tattoo, which Alice says Ella hated, pertains to the *Hinterlands* or Althea in some way. It is unlikely that Ella would hate a gift like a matching tattoo if it is unrelated to a past she is trying to forget. This foreshadows that the two will most likely be involved with Althea and her novel in the future.

The person who married Harold six weeks later wasn't my mother. The woman who was making him miserable now? That was the Ella I recognized, coming out of deep freeze.

-- Alice (chapter 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote is important because it tells the reader a bit more about Ella and Alice's relationship, as well as how Ella acts towards other people. First, this shows that Ella and Alice have a strange relationship. Alice calls her "mother" occasionally, but refers to her as Ella much more often. This would imply a small amount of distance or possibly contempt from Alice toward Ella. This quote also shows the reader that Ella's moods swing depending on what is expected of her. She was able to show off a fun and flirtatious side with Harold. However, Alice believes Ella makes people miserable, again showing the resentment Alice has toward her mother. Alice's feelings toward her mother will be important for the rest of the novel.

You know what I mean. It's the eyes, I think. You look like you've got a million things going through your mind, but you're not saying them.

-- Finch (chapter 7 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote is important because it shows the reader both how perceptive Finch is, as well as how much Alice is struggling with Ella's disappearance. First, Finch is able to see the pain in Alice's eyes despite the fact that she has not told him anything that has happened before she got to his house. This may also be because Finch likes her, and is more aware of how she feels. Secondly, we know that Alice, despite trying to pretend everything is okay, is actually really struggling. This is the first moment that the reader knows that Alice relies on Ella, even though she has a bit of resentment toward her.

I'd assumed Althea's work would have a strong feminist message, allegorical undertones, a clear arc of story. I'd expected Angela Carter at best, *Animal Farm* with



princesses at worst. But this story had no allegiance to anything. It was winding and creepy and not even that bloody. There were no heroes. No wedding. No message.
-- Alice (chapter 10 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is important because it sets up the difference between Althea's novel and traditional fairy tales. The story of Alice Three-Times, which preceded this quote, is dark. The supposed hero of the story is a cruel murderer. Not a single main character in the story shows any good qualities. In fact, this story does not seem to have a message at all. By contrast, most fairy tales have happy endings with likable heroes and princesses devoted to good. This should signify to the reader that the Hinterlands is not a place people want to be, despite the obsession the public has with it.

Then I got my hands on Althea's book. And it was perfect. There are no lessons in it. There's just this harsh, horrible world touched with beautiful magic, where shitty things happen. And they don't happen for a reason, or in threes, or in a way that looks like justice.

-- Finch (chapter 11 paragraph 6)

Importance: This quote is important because it shows the reader Finch's state of mind. He used to be someone who loved regular fairy tales for how predictable they were. Now that he has suffered loss by the death of his mother, and abuse through his stepmother, he prefers difficult stories. He enjoys worlds that confirm his feeling that bad things do not always happen for a reason. That life can be cruel, but there may be another world out there to escape to. This also foreshadows Finch's goals that he has not told Alice directly.

I thought it would change something. Seeing you. Wake me up again, make me care, or feel something. The night in the Hazel Wood was the longest night of my life. I saw things nobody should see. My friend was killed - I should be sad, right? But i'm not. I haven't felt anything since the night. I'm just numb. Half of me is still there, trapped in that hell. While the rest of me is here, trapped in this room.

-- Ness (chapter 14 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is important because it sets up the dangers of traveling to the Hazel Wood and, by extension, the Hinterlands. Ness is a writer who spent years of her life searching for the Hazel Wood. She was completely consumed by it, and obsessed with the stories Althea told. Yet, when she got to see her dream, she came out worse than when she went in. A broken woman. A warning to Alice of what she will suffer if she goes into the Hinterlands.

At some point in the past thirty-six hours, he'd joined the tiniest, saddest clique of people, of which Ella had previously been the only member: people I, Alice Crewe, couldn't bear to see die. Hell is caring about other people.

-- Alice (chapter 18 paragraph 3-4)

Importance: This quote is important because it shows part of Alice's character and how



she feels about Finch. Alice is someone who is shown to have trouble developing relationships with anyone that is not Ella. However, she feels a connection to Finch. She feels responsible for him, and is terrified that her quest to find Ella might lose him. Alice hates caring about other people because she hates the idea that she might lose them.

None of it fit together; it was a scrapbook of times and places and someone else's memories. Althea's, or Ella's maybe. Was the Hazel Wood even real? Had it ever existed? Wherever I was, it wasn't a house. It was a kaleidoscope.

-- Alice (chapter 22 paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote is important because it establishes what the Hazel Wood actually is. Alice had originally believed it was Althea's estate on Earth. However, it's mystical nature and her inability to leave implies that it actually exists in the Hinterlands or, at the very least, sits between the two worlds. This also acts as an indicator to the audience that Alice has shifted from the regular rules of Earth, to the magical and unpredictable rules of the Hinterlands.

The queen realized it wasn't the kingdoms that had changed - it was her. She didn't need to find a door, she had become one. A bridge, too. A place where the demons could get in. So she and her daughter ran away to a castle in the woods.

-- Althea (chapter 23 paragraph 3)

Importance: This is important because it establishes what Althea did that led to the novel itself. It is obvious that the queen is referring to Althea, and the daughter is Ella. Althea is telling Alice the truth: that her escape to Earth created a bridge between the worlds that let the Hinterland out. This also tells the readers why she is in the Hazel Wood; because it is her castle in the woods, and the place that she tried to minimize the damage her existence as a bridge would do to the worlds.

If she was really so considerate, she would've killed herself," Janet said bluntly. "We've had refugees as young as ten, little girls obsessed with fairy tales, and now they're stuck living at the fringes of them.

-- Janet (chapter 25 paragraph 8)

Importance: This quote is important because it establishes the real damage that Althea's novel did to people on Earth. The Tales from the Hinterlands - which was never meant to leave the world they began in - entranced many people, including young children who are most vulnerable. This also shows how the other characters feel about her. Nearly everyone the author has introduced that had interacted directly with Althea despise her. This shows how fame is not worth losing the respect of loved ones.

I blew out ice's opposite: the heat and the rage of being away from Ella. Trapped here. Forced into the role of murdered by a distant storyteller with no horse in the race. I did it because a girl doing nothing in a fairy tale ends up dead or worse, but a girl who makes a decisions usually gets rewarded.

-- Alice (chapter 29 paragraph 10 and 1)



Importance: This quote highlights the theme of breaking expectations and making one's own decisions. At this point in her fairy tale, Alice is expected to kiss the older brother to death with her ice magic. Instead, this kiss is pure rage. It is meant to defy what the Spinner wrote for her, and the only thing that keeps the older brother dead even when the threads try to bring the story back together. Alice recognizes that she needs to force her decisions if she wants to create a new future for herself.

No matter how much time had passed in this world or the other, Finch had changed. He'd grown up. At the fringes of my story, in a brutal make-believe world. But that wouldn't have been his whole life. He must've been living with more of the displaced all this time.

-- Alice (chapter 29 paragraph 8)

Importance: This quote shows how Alice and Finch's fates have switched. Alice, who was meant to live out her fairy tale over and over until the Spinner got bored, has now decided to pursue a future on Earth. Finch, who was born into a wealthy family and meant to continue that on Earth, has found his happiness in the Hinterlands. Both have matured and made the decision to pursue what they want, and not what others want from them.