

Strange as this Weather Has Been: Discussion Questions

Since the novel doesn't have traditional, numbered chapters, each set of questions follows the order of the chapters of the book marked by character names.

Main Characters:

- ★ Lace & Jimmy Make
 - Children (oldest to youngest): Bant (only daughter), Dane, Corey, Tommy

LACE

- Our first introduction into Lace's character is through an act of rebellion at a young age. What is Lace doing, against the wishes of her parents? What is her age at this time, and how is this an important time in a young girl's life?
- A recurring theme in this novel is the concept of people looking for "signs" and sometimes using those signs as justification for their actions. What three "miracles" happened that allowed Lace to go to the game?
- How was Lace's reaction to her punishment different, and how does this reflect a change in the mother-daughter dynamic?
- Why does Lace begin to feel like an outsider in her own hometown? Is this a feeling with which you can sympathize? Explain.
- Despite her desperation to get out of her hometown, it doesn't take long for her to feel homesick while she is in Morgantown for college. What is it about her home that made her feel safe?
- For a while, Lace is not really content at home or college. Describe her love/hate relationship with home and compare it to your own personal experience living in Appalachia. Do you feel the same love/hate that Lace describes? Explain your answer.
- Lace quickly becomes enamored with Jimmy Make. What is it about him that stands out to her?
- Lace's parents made sure to carefully watch over Lace when Jimmy Make was around; however, she was able to sneak out to the old chicken house before walking him home. It was at this point that she and Jimmy Make were intimate for the first time. How was this moment not really the special experience that she had envisioned, and what could this experience be foreshadowing for their relationship together?

BANT

- Similar to the opening of the first chapter, this section opens with a teenage girl breaking the rules. This time, however, she is doing so with the help of her father and at the encouragement of her mother. Why is Bant helping her father break a lock, and how do we know she is not as courageous/reckless as her mother?
- Bant thinks back to the tragedy and horror she witnessed when the May flood destroyed part of their land. What is the tone of this passage (beginning on page 17), and how is that reflected in the imagery and syntax used in this passage? Use textual evidence to support your answer.
- What does Bant witness with Jimmy Make when they finally make it to their destination? How does it make her feel? Why?

COREY

- How is the opening paragraph of Corey's chapter reflective of his personality? Explain your answer.
- How does Corey's reflection on the flood compare to Bant's description in the previous chapter? How much of this is a result of his age? How much is due to what he values?
- Even at just ten years old, Corey has the same yearning to leave that his mother, Lace, felt at eighteen. Why is he so desperate to leave his hometown? Use textual evidence to support your answer.
- Why is Corey so obsessed with Seth?

- What details are given about the “monkey,” and what do you think it could symbolize? Why would they refer to it as a monkey?
- Why do you think Corey is mesmerized by the train loaded with fresh coal?

BANT

- What is the story behind Bant’s name? What insight does this give us about Lace, since she was the one who named her?
- Unlike Corey, Bant seems to have a strong connection to her homeplace. How do we see that deep love of the mountain she grew up on in this chapter?
- How did things change for Bant once they came back from North Carolina?
- Why does Bant value her “special place”? Do you have a similar place you like to go to be alone and think? If so, explain how this place is important to you.
- What is it about Mary and Mogeys place that makes Bant feel welcome and comfortable?
- What three actions earned Bant a whipping from her grandma? What do these things have in common? In other words, what is most important to her grandma?
- How did Mary and Mogeys change after North Carolina?
- Why does Bant keep thinking about when an elementary school teacher said the expression “skin you alive”? Why does this remind her of what her grandma said to her? What could this symbolize?

DANE

- Describe the setting of Mrs. Taylor’s house in the opening of this chapter, and discuss how the setting could be symbolic of something deeper.
- Mrs. Taylor always talks about two things--the Buffalo Creek Disaster and the “upcoming End of the World” (44). What happened at the Buffalo Creek Disaster?
- Why does Mrs. Taylor struggle to breathe? To what does Dane compare her labored breaths? How is this an appropriate analogy?
- Like any disaster, Dane has his own vivid memories from the day of the May flood. Describe what he witnessed and how his story is a little different than that of his siblings.
- What does he mean when Dane notes that Mrs. Taylor tells stories about the Buffalo Creek disaster “as prophecy, as threat” (48)?
- Dane thinks of all his siblings stronger than him, yet “it is Dane who must take and carry the stories” (49). What does it mean to be the one to carry the stories, and how could that be a burden?
- As Dane is washing the dishes, he is listening to Mrs. Taylor talk about her son trying to get her to move to Cleveland with him. Why does Dane experience a homesickness for Cleveland, a place he has never visited let alone lived?

BANT

- What is the “Scab Resort,” and why is it called that? Why does Jimmy Make reluctantly allow Bant to work there as a painter?
- Describe Hobart and Bant’s interview with him.
- How do we see the complexity of Lace and Jimmy Make’s relationship at the Dairy Queen?
- How are secrecy and dishonesty prominent in the novel so far?

COREY

- How do we know that Corey admires Jimmy Make? Provide at least two examples with textual evidence to support your answer.
- Who is Rabbit, and what are some of the stories that surround him?
- Why is Corey so interested in working with Rabbit?

- What new details about the day of the May flood does Corey discuss in this chapter? How is it a little different than what he described in an earlier chapter?

DANE

- What is actually happening when Dane says “a big stump whams into the bottom of Dane's chest and splashes back down in his stomach” (71)? How is this analogy effective at describing what he is feeling?
- Why does Dane feel both “shamed and loved” (71) when Bant helps him move Mrs. Taylor’s furniture to the smaller bedroom?
- What item in Mrs. Taylor’s room haunts Dane, and why is he so afraid to see it?
- What does she mean when Mrs. Taylor says (regarding the flood), “we didn’t lose nothing. We didn’t lose nothing. Not compared to what other people lost” (77)?

BANT

- What changed for Bant that made her more concerned about what the coal companies were doing?
- Describe Bant’s first few days working for Hobart.
- Dane’s burden is to be the keeper of the stories. As the oldest child, what seems to be the burden Bant must bear?
- How is Bant both drawn to and resistant of Lace’s stories about what the coal companies are doing to the land?
- Lace and Jimmy Make always fight, and as Bant says, “the bottom line never changed” (85). What was the end result of each argument?

LACE

- This chapter goes back in time to the point when Lace was first pregnant with Bant. How does Jimmy Make react to the news?
- In what ways did Lace disappoint her family?
- For much of her pregnancy Lace wouldn’t leave her room as she was experiencing deep grief. Who or what was she grieving?
- Who helps Lace out of her grief and depression, and how does he do it?
- How does Lace’s relationship with her mother change? What is she starting to realize? In other words, how is her mindset, particularly about the mountain, altering?
- How was Jimmy Make when Lace got pregnant? How does he act during her pregnancy? Why does this leave her feeling angry yet conflicted?
- How do the mountains make Lace feel safe and loved?

BANT

- How has Bant’s relationship with the land changed as she’s gotten older?
- How has the weather been strange, and to what does Lace think it is connected?
- Why does Bant feel like the destruction kept calling her to it?
- How does the guard “reassure” Bant that she doesn’t need to worry about the land? Is he to be trusted? Why or why not?
- Why does Bant “wish” she had been arrested? What does this tell us about how she is feeling?

DANE

- How is the analogy of fish swimming in his stomach an effective metaphor for what Dane is feeling?
- Explain the following quotation: “Dane is full of fish, Tommy of moths. Corey is full of metal, a little steel-made man” (108).
- How is Dane’s sensitivity and anxiety front and center in this chapter?
- How was Dane’s relationship with his grandma special?

- What are the “boxes” that Dane uses to hold his connection to his grandma and God?
- Why does Dane think that God left their area on the mountain?
- Why do you think Dane is wearing Jimmy Make’s black rubber boots in bed?

BANT

- Why does Jimmy Make hate the coal companies but also understand why some people have to work there?
- How is Bant’s relationship with R.L. developing?

COREY

- How is Seth’s family different from most of the people living along Yellowroot?
- Where do we again see Corey’s envy toward Seth?
- Who is Paul Franz, and how are Corey’s feelings about him complex?

BANT

- Why is Jimmy Make so adamant about Lace staying away from environmentalists? Are his concerns valid? Why or why not?
- What does Lace warn Bant about boys/men? Why does this warning not really matter?
- How was their 4th of July celebration different this year?
- Why was Bant so unhappy when they were in North Carolina? What does she mean when she talks about leaving her “ghost” behind?

LACE

- What is the story behind why Lace actually chose Bant’s name for her?
- Why do you think Lace’s parents were so supportive of having Jimmy Make meet Bant and getting Lace to warm up to him again?
- Describe Bant as a baby? How is this reflective of who she is now?
- How did Lace and Jimmy Make start to develop a stronger, deeper bond?
- What hurt Lace’s father more than being in a wheelchair? Why was this?
- Describe Lace’s special day on the mountain with her father. What did it take to make it happen? Why was it significant?
- Discuss the beautiful but heartbreaking paradox of her father’s love for the dirt that they call home.
- How was Lace’s pregnancy with Dane different from her pregnancy with Bant? How did this “mark” him?

BANT

- How has the fighting between Lace and Jimmy Make gotten worse, and how is it affecting Bant?
- Why does Bant take Corey up the mountain? What does she hope to accomplish by doing this?
- What are “Grandma places,” and how are they important to Bant?
- Who/what do you think is the voice that keeps encouraging Bant to go?
- What happens to Corey and Bant when she gets to the part she wants to show him?

COREY

- What is Corey’s reaction when he sees what has happened to the mountain? To what does he compare it? How is this an effective comparison?
- What does Corey imagine himself doing?

BANT

- Why is Bant glad (in a sense) that her grandma died?

- How is the result of the mountain removal similar to “the moon upside down” (165)?
- Bant describes Corey as standing like he’d “been freezetagged” (166). What does this mean, and why would she choose to describe him in this way instead of saying he was frozen or stuck?
- What is the purpose of yellowroot, the “country” name for the mountain? How is this ironic?
- Why does Bant have such a complex relationship with Jimmy Make?

MOGEY

- What is Mogey’s connection to the natural world and the woods around him, and why does it make him feel guilty?
- Summarize the story of the buck Mogey saw with his cousin when he was just ten years old. Why does this story mean so much to him?
- Mogey explains the difference between the mountains in the east and west: “In the West, the mountains are mostly horizon. We *live* in our mountains. It’s not just the tops, but the sides that hold us” (173). Why is this an important distinction?
- Mogey struggles to connect his relationship with God in the traditional sense (i.e. a church) with what he feels in the woods. What is his ultimate conclusion?
- Although the coal companies haven’t pushed Mogey out of his house, he claims that they have “taken it from me without even walking on my land” (175). How can this be?
- Why was the realization that the trees were dying one of the scariest things for Mogey?
- Why do you think that some churches have spoken about the destruction of the land, but many, like Mogey’s church, have not?
- What dreams/nightmares does Mogey keep having, and how are they affecting him?
- How is it true that, as Mogey suggests, “what we’re doing to this land is not only murder. It is suicide” (179)?

LACE

- Lace and Jimmy Make argue about what he calls “the old house” and what she refers to as “the homeplace.” What is the difference, and why does it matter so much to her?
- How was Bant’s early childhood different from that of her siblings?
- Lace’s mother tries to encourage her to be happy with Jimmy Make because “at least he’s not a drinker” (183). What is her response, and how does this show a change in marital dynamics and what women were willing to accept in a relationship?
- Why is Jimmy Make referred to as a “boy wearing a tough man mask” (183)? Is this a fair assessment of him? Why or why not?
- What events led to a drastic change in Jimmy Make?
- What was life like for the family in North Carolina?
- Ultimately, why do they move back to West Virginia?

DANE

- Dane says that “Mrs. Taylor’s boy Avery looks like city, but he talks like home” (200). How is this ability to be both an important quality for many people in Appalachia?
- As usual, Mrs. Taylor can’t stop herself from talking about the Buffalo Creek disaster. How is this conversation, with her son and her neighbor, different?
- Why does Mrs. Taylor feel like she can’t forgive herself?

AVERY

- How does Avery feel when he is back in West Virginia?

- According to Avery, why does his mother *need* to tell her stories?
- When Avery takes a walk in the woods, what does he notice about how things have changed?
- Why does Avery not quite feel welcome when he's outside of West Virginia? Have you ever had a similar experience? If so, explain what happened.
- Why is Avery "satisfied" to see the destruction of what the coal companies have done to the mountain?
- How did everything change for Avery when he was in college, specifically with the sociology course?
- When Avery tells his story of what happened during the Buffalo Creek disaster, it is a shockingly devastating tale. Summarize Avery's experience and what he had to do in order to survive and get back to his parents.
- Why did Avery have to teach himself about the history of West Virginia? How is this emblematic of issues we see all across the country?
- According to Avery, what did they learn in school (235)? Why would this be what schools chose to focus on instead?
- According to Avery, how will the ending of the world differ from the stories his mother tells?
- How has the Buffalo Creek Disaster permanently changed the lives of the people who survived it?

DANE

- Why does Dane feel the need to follow Corey and Tommy? Why does he keep his distance instead of just joining them?
- Why was Corey taking his bike into the woods? What was the bet he was trying to win?
- Why does Seth target Dane in order to hurt Corey? How does Corey make Dane feel even worse? How does this affect Dane?
- Where does Dane run to after this incident? What does he discover?

BANT

- How is Bant's relationship with R.L. growing?
- Explain the following metaphor about R.L. and Bant's relationship with him: "Scab. How one called you to pick it. Until the pink hurt under the crust" (263).

LACE

- According to Lace, why didn't Jimmy Make get a job when they returned from North Carolina?
- What causes Lace to become more concerned about what the coal companies are doing to the mountain? Who does she reach out to for help?
- Just like Avery, Lace has to educate herself. How does she do this?
- What does Lace learn from Loretta? Why doesn't Jimmy Make want Lace to hang out with Loretta?
- What seems to scare Jimmy Make the most?

COREY

- Why does Corey tie Tommy up? Why is he so desperate to go someplace without him?
- Why does Rabbit want Corey's help? What happens when he tries to do what he wants?
- What happens to Rabbit on their way back to his house?

BANT

- Why did Bant feel like she had to do more exploring to understand the extent of the destruction?
- What does she discover?

DANE

- What wakes Dane?
- Why would Pancake include this short chapter? What effect does it have on the story as a whole?

LACE

- Lace believes that “anger is easier than grief” (300) and that “around here, the majority had never ruled” (301). Do you agree with these sentiments? Why or why not?
- What steps did Lace take to try to save the mountain?
- How do both Lace and Jimmy Make believe they are fighting for what’s best for the kids?
- How have the fights between Lace and Jimmy Make gotten worse? How did things change when he specifically mentioned their marriage?
- Why does Lace feel like her life has been a series of choices between two bad options?

BANT

- What deal does Bant make to convince R.L. to take her up past the gates to see the real damage to the mountain?
- Why does she agree to it?

COREY

- What is Corey’s plan while Seth is at the beach with his family? How does he use Tommy to help make this plan happen?

BANT

- What was Bant’s first intimate encounter with R.L. like, and how does it compare to what her mother experienced?
- When did R.L. agree to follow through on his part of the deal? What else was happening this same day?

LACE

- Lace notes that she loves each of her kids in a different way. Explain how she loves each one.
- How are things now different for Lace and Jimmy Make? What changed?

DANE

- Why is the house quiet and empty?
- How is Dane feeling at this point? Why?
- What does Dane see at the end of the hall? What do you think it symbolizes?
- Why does Dane have a very complex relationship with Corey? How is this shown when he’s spying on Corey while he’s riding the 4-wheeler?
- How does Corey’s accident occur, and how does each witness react differently?

BANT

- Why do you think Dane doesn’t cry about Corey’s death? How does everyone else attempt to cope with his death?
- How again is strange weather coupled with catastrophic events in this chapter?
- Why does Jimmy Make come back a month after he left?
- Why do Tommy and Dane choose to go with Jimmy Make? Why does Bant stay with her mother in West Virginia?
- Why does Bant feel like her life has been a series of lessons on letting go?
- When Bant finds Dane’s box, what do we learn he added to the original items? What does this show?
- Bant changes her mind about not caring about things like the mountain. Ultimately she decides that “to not care wasn’t to save yourself at all. It was only another loss” (356). Do you agree or disagree with her statement?
- What advice did Bant learn from Mogen that now suddenly made sense to her? How is this an important theme of the novel?