



Sweet Hereafter

By Russell Banks
ISBN: 9780060923242

Introduction

A town that loses its children loses its meaning.

On the morning of January 27, 1990, bus driver Dolores Driscoll picks up the children of Sam Dent -- "one of those towns that's on the way to somewhere else." At each stop, she opens her door to them, offering temporary shelter from the snowy mountains of upstate New York. Once all the kids are gathered, she continues on her usual path to the schoolhouse. But then, the unthinkable happens.

Swerving off the road, the bus plunges through the ice and into the water-filled sandpit below ... taking most of the children with it. What emerges is a town traumatized and forever severed from their lives before the accident.

"A writer of extraordinary power" (*Boston Globe*), Russell Banks tells the story of this grief-stricken community by using four distinct voices: Dolores Driscoll, the popular bus driver who tends to her invalid husband; Billy Ansel, a parent to two of the victims and the only witness to the event; Nichole Burnell, a teen beauty queen who survives the accident but is left paralyzed; and Mitchell Stephens, the New York City negligence lawyer who ignites a town lawsuit.

Through these four narrators -- each with their own demons reaching to break the surface -- readers will travel to a small American town where they will discover that blame doesn't always have a recognizable face, and that even the darkest roads can still lead to hope.

Discussion Questions

1. Narrating the story of a tragic bus accident and how it affected the community of Sam Dent are four different characters. Do you think having multiple narrators was essential to the novel? Or do you think it was a distraction from the story? Was there a narrator who you trusted more than the others?
2. Each narrator tells his or her story in one chapter, with the exception of Dolores Driscoll. Why do you think the author framed the book with two chapters from the bus driver?
3. Although three of the four narrators were at the scene of the accident, we never learn what actually happened when the bus entered the water. Why do you think the author avoided showing us this scene?
4. "...because you can listen to children without fear, the way you can watch puppies tumble and bite and kittens sneak up on one another and spring without worrying that they'll be hurt by it, the talk of children can be very instructive. I guess it's because they play openly at what we grownups do seriously and in secret" (page 17). What do you think Dolores' comment reflects on in this story?
5. "And as I have always done when I've had two bad choices and nothing else available to me, I arranged it so that if I erred I'd come out on the side of the angels" (page 34). Do you think Dolores came out on the side of the angels?
6. "It's a way of living with tragedy, I guess, to claim after it happens that you saw it coming, as if somehow you had already made the necessary adjustments beforehand" (page 38). Do you agree with Billy -- that people feel the need to explain tragedies with predictions?
7. "Mourning can be very selfish. When someone you love has died, you tend to recall best those few moments and incidents that helped to clarify your sense, not of the person who has died, but of your own self" (page 43). Would you call Billy Ansel, a Vietnam vet who has lost his wife and children, a selfish person?
8. "I knew instantly what the story was; I knew at once that it wasn't an 'accident' at all. There are no accidents. I don't even know what the word means, and I never trust anyone who says he does" (page 91). Does Mitchell Stephens say this in order to justify aspects of his job? Or do you think there is some truth to his beliefs?
9. Russell Banks shows us both sides of the confrontation between Billy and Mitchell near the wrecked school bus. Each recounts the conversation (Billy in pages 83-85; Mitchell in pages 134-136) for the reader. Discuss where the text differs and whether this is significant to the characters or the story.
10. "We were becoming a strange family, divided between parents and children, and even among the children we were divided ... No one in the family trusted anyone else in the family" (page 198). Do you think Nichole's realization of her fragmented family life is what led her to lie at the courthouse? Do you think Nichole did the right thing by lying in court? Why or why not?
11. "The accident had ruined a lot of lives. Or, to be exact, it had busted apart the structures on which those lives had depended -- depended, I guess, to a greater degree than we had originally believed. A town needs its children for a lot more than it thinks" (page 235). What do you think Dolores means by this? Overall, what do the children in this novel represent?
12. What is the significance of the last scene with the demolition derby and Dolores' car Boomer?
13. "A close and haunting story of a small town in distress" (*Mirabella*), *The Sweet Hereafter* exposes our narrators' secrets to us, but not to each other (i.e. Billy's affair, Nichole's relationship with her father, Mitchell's struggle with his daughter, and the truth regarding Dolores' driving that day). Do you feel satisfied with the author's decision to keep these secrets veiled from the town? What is the one thing about this novel that haunts you still?

About the Author

A plumber, shoe salesman, and window trimmer, Russell Banks tried his hand at many jobs before he could support himself as a writer. The eldest of four children and a Phi Beta Kappa from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Mr. Banks has taught at a number of colleges and universities. His works include *Searching for Survivors*, *Family Life*, *Hamilton Stark*, *The New World*, *The Book of Jamaica*, *Trailerpark*, *The Relation of My Imprisonment*, *Continental Drift*, *Success Stories*, *Affliction*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Rule of the Bone*, *Cloudsplitter*, and *The Angel on the Roof*.

Two of his novels have been adapted for feature-length films, *The Sweet Hereafter* (winner of the Grand Prix and International Critics Prize at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival) and *Affliction* (starring Nick Nolte, Willem Dafoe, Sissy Spacek, and James Coburn). He is also the screenwriter of a film adaptation of *Continental Drift*.

The winner of numerous awards and prizes for his work, Mr. Banks is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. *Continental Drift* and *Cloudsplitter* were finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in 1986 and 1998 respectively. *Affliction* was short listed for both the PEN/Faulkner Fiction Prize and the Irish International Prize.

Currently, he lives in upstate New York with his wife, the poet Chase Twichell, and is the father of four grown daughters.