

## **Make Them Know: An Analysis of Skeetah, a Boy Dealing With the Loss of His Mother**

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The loss of a loved one can affect the lives of people who were close to that person. In *Salvage the Bone* by Jesmyn Ward, the main characters all lost their mother when they were very young. We see how this affects behaviors each character exhibits. The family is left to be raised by their alcoholic father, who seems to be very unhappy. Skeetah, Randall, and Junior all seem to lack an interest in women. They all seem to have hobbies to distract themselves. Skeetah's hobby has to do with taking care of his female dog China. Although Skeetah lacks an interest in women or having a relationship, he holds the women that are present in his life very close. The loss of his mother and lack of a father who fulfills parental duties are the reasons he has a fear of commitment and keeps the current women in his life extra close. The current women in his life are Esch and his dog China. He strives to keep the women he already has very close, yet distances himself from allowing anymore into his life so he will never have to hurt.

In Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, we learn that when Skeetah was just nine years old his mother was pregnant with Junior. His mother had all of her children in their house. During the birth of Junior, there were complications. Skeetah's father took her to the hospital as quick as he could, but she did not make it. Esch says, "Daddy dragged her from the bed to his truck, trailing her blood, and we never saw her again" (Ward 2). It is so important to the story that we find it out on the second page. This loss has had a huge impact on Skeetah and the entire family. At the beginning of the novel, we see Esch mention this loss. It is one of the first things, as readers, we learn. According to Luca Cerniglia, who has a degree in psychosocial disciplines, "It has been suggested that the loss of a mother during childhood may impede the process of formation of an

adolescent's identity, as this process also takes place through parental relationships" (553).

Throughout the story, we can tell this statement holds true for Skeetah in particular, especially when it comes to the women he holds close in his life and his fear of intimacy. Although fear of intimacy stems from this loss, so does the fact that he keeps China and Esch so close to him. He will protect and keep these women close at all costs, therefore taking care of China becomes one of his top priorities in life. She becomes his hobby, just like Randall's is basketball.

Skeetah's main priority throughout *Salvage the Bones* seems to be taking care of his dog China. Although the book is through the eyes of Skeetah's Sister Esch, we still get to see how deep his love for China runs. The way he cares for China is very comparable to the way any man would care for their partner. Esch even says, "Skeetah ignores Junior because he is focused on China like a man focuses on a woman when he feels that she is his, which China is" (Ward 3). We are able to see an instance of him making sure China is completely taken care of, when she is giving birth, the family seems to be crowding around her and this make Skeetah fearful for her. Skeetah says, "She need room to breathe" (Ward 2). This is particularly important, because Skeetah's own mother died in the process of giving birth. He is doing every single thing he can to insure what happened to his mother does not happen to his beloved China. While the birth is happening, we even see Esch thinking about her own mother's birth. Therefore is keeping her very close, sticking by her side throughout this entire birthing process. We are able to see Skeetah stay in the shed with China during this process the whole time, he rarely leaves. Even after the process is over, he still is with her constantly. This shows us that the process of birth really had to have scared Skeetah. One of the only woman he knew who gave birth died, so he had to keep an extra close eye on China to insure this would not be the case for her. At one point, he even requires Esch to watch China, so he does not have to leave her alone. This could also

just be linked to the fact that Skeetah has an issue with a sense of hope. Howard Learner, a psychologist, points out in “Themes of Early Parent Loss in *My Life as a Dog*” that a child and a parents relationship is “...this earliest relationship, the natural contact with and communication of feelings, and with it the active repair of communicative mismatches, that gives the child a sense of competence, security, hope, and strength (Learner 3). If you lack a sense of hope, you will always have worries. (Ward 238). This is why Skeetah is so protective and keeps China close. If Skeetah had hope, he would have just let China give birth completely alone. He would not have had to be directly by her side. He feels this need to protect and cling to her, like a man would to his wife. We are able to see Skeetah’s lack of hope in the novel, when he loses China and the puppies in the hurricane. Skeetah says “I failed her” (Ward 238). Typically when a woman gives birth, the husband or father is present. This shows us that he does not have hope that he can save her, he thinks there is no way she could be alive. As mentioned above, Esch even points out how similar the bond between China and Skeetah is to a couple. This essentially makes China like a human girl to Skeetah. Since it would be one of the only girls in his life, we see that he keeps her very close. This is particularly important for us to understand when discussing how Skeetah keeps the woman in his life very close. China is one of the main women in his life. We can also see this behavior is linked to the loss of his mother during a birthing process. The memory of the day his mother died was one that stuck with him, so it for sure makes him worry about China giving birth.

We see that he keeps China close, but Skeetah also has a close relationship with his fifteen year old sister Esch throughout the entire novel. We can see how close they are when Esch mentions, “Sometimes he confesses to me; I always listen” (Ward 21). The quote is a great example of the bond they have. Skeetah doesn’t confess much to anyone “...not even China” so

this shows us he must trust Esch (Ward 21). China is his prized possession. When he needs to go shower, he only trust Esch to stay in the shed with China. If he is willing to allow her to watch the most important thing in his life, it shows us that he trusts Esch to keep her safe. He could have asked someone else to watch her, but he chose the person he trusts the most. Another reason it seems as though they are so close, could be because Esch reminds him of his mother. She has some of the mother's features, as well as some of her characteristics. Skeetah says, "You look like her. You know that?"(Ward 222). This is another reason Skeetah holds her close in his life. Looking at Esch is similar to looking at their mother. It allows him to remember his mother. They also have a shared reminiscence of her memory. When talking to Skeetah about their mother, Esch points out "At least we got the memory" (Ward 221). According to Paul Rosenblatt and Carol Elde, who both interviewed sixteen adults that had lost a parent, "One part of coping with the loss and coming to terms with it is shared reminiscence with siblings and others about the parent who has died" (1). This creates a close bond. In turn, the death of their mother brought them closer together. In the novel, we are able to see this shared reminiscence when Skeetah and Esch are discussing the day their mother gave birth to Junior. They even discuss the last words she ever said to them when Skeetah says, "She told us she loved us when she got into the truck. And then she told us to be good. To look after each other." (Ward 222). Being able to share memories of someone who is no longer here with someone who experienced them along with you, does help form a closer bond. Throughout the novel, Skeetah only discusses his mother with Esch, therefore we can tell that he is extra close to her. When it comes to Skeetah's bond with his two brothers, it doesn't seem as strong compared to that of him and Esch. Junior is basically ignored by Skeetah and even seems to irritate him at some points. Junior does not have any memories of his mother therefore that is not something Skeetah would be able to discuss with

him. In the novel, Skeetah even mentions how “Junior don’t have nothing” (Ward 222). He is discussing how lucky he and Esch are that they have these memories. We can see that sharing each one of these memories allows them to keep their mother’s spirit alive. When it comes to Randall, they do not do things together near as much as he does with Esch. It does not seem like Skeetah and Randall share memories of their mother together, at least not the way he and Esch do. Skeetah never seems to open up to these two. We never see him confess anything or have a very personal conversation, the way he does with Esch. The personal memories these two share, really allows the readers to get an insight to the bond Esch and Skeetah have created with one another. Skeetah fails to share these memories with anyone else in the entire novel.

We see how the loss of his mother brought Skeetah closer to the women he has in his life, but this same loss also strained the relationship he has with his father. The interaction Daddy has with Skeetah is completely different than the way he treats the other children. We even see Skeetah and his father get in a fight. Esch witnesses this fight and says, “Daddy tries to shove him but he is slow to let go; it is as if his hands are deaf to what his brain wants them to do, and they grip Skeetah’s shoulders hard” (Ward 105). They just don’t seem to see eye to eye on things, especially when it comes to China. When the storm is approaching, Skeetah wants to bring China and the puppies inside. This sparks another fight between Skeetah and his father. Skeetah says “If they go in the shed, I go in the shed” (Ward 212). His father fails to see that China is his life. Luca Cerniglia comments on how relationships are with the surviving parent and their children by saying, “This result is in line with several studies that have suggested that psychopathological risk in the surviving parent may impair an attentive relationship with sons and daughters” (553). Cerniglia is saying that since the parent also lost someone this may cause them psychological problems, which may impair their ability to parent. The loss has definitely

strained their relationship. Daddy does not even really take care of the children. Esch does the cooking and the rest of the family does chores. Skeetah even wants to give money he could make from selling China's puppies to his brother Randall. He wants Randall to get to go to the basketball camp. Providing money for these types of things are normally what a parent does. Daddy's priorities do not involve taking care of his children the way a father should. He seems more focused on doing whatever he wants, which most of the time is drinking with his friends. Cerniglia also states, "Our results suggest that the psychological profile of the surviving parent can have an impact on the psychopathological symptoms of the pre-adolescent and adolescent (553). We are able to conclude that these behaviors can be a cause of the way his father acts towards him as a parent, as well as the fact that Skeetah lost his mother.

We see that Skeetah keeps the women he already has in his life very close, but this loss also led Skeetah to have a fear of commitment. There are girls around Skeetah's age that live in the same area as him, but he never once seems interested in them. We see these girls at the basketball game and at the park. Skeetah never once talks to them or even acts interested in them at all. The only interest he seems to have is talking with the people he is already familiar with and taking care of China. When at the basketball game, there must be plenty of girls there. Skeetah seems more interested in making sure Esch is okay and defending her, than he does in talking to these girls. We can see that he has plenty of opportunity to meet them, as well. It is important for us, as readers, to realize that there are plenty of girls his age around the area. According to Luca Cerniglia, "In sum, the loss of a parent during childhood can affect the capacity to form and maintain intimate relationships in later life, cope with stressful life events, and fulfill developmental tasks" (546). He never tries to form intimate relationships, even when the girls are around. He is scared he could fall in love and lose these girls the same way he lost

his own mother. He does not seem to feel like the potential pain is worth having these intimate relationships. If he were to have an intimate relationship with one of these girls and they died, he could end up becoming exactly like his father, which would be awful. He sees firsthand how this loss has affected his father. His father's room hasn't even changed since his mother died. His father seems to drink more than he used to. He can clearly tell that his father is not a happy person. A boy in the novel who is around Skeetah's age, Manny, has not dealt with the loss of a loved one and he takes every opportunity he can with girls. He doesn't treat them in the best ways, but he does have many interactions with different girls. Skeetah's brother Randall does not worry about girls either. This shows us that the loss of their mother really does have a huge impact on building intimate relationships or even wanting to have a relationship at all. This lack of commitment was a direct cause of the loss of his mother. We can also see this by observing the behaviors the other boys in the novel, that have mothers, are like when it comes to sex and relationships. The other boys in the novel, that are not in Esch's family, seem to be very interested in girls. We even get a hint that Big Henry is interested in Esch, yet the only boys in the novel that don't have an interest in intimate relationships are the ones that dealt with a loss of their mother.

Traumatic events shape the people we become. Our whole identity can be changed by just one of these events. It does not even have to be loss, even though in Skeetah's case it is. These events can change the way we think and act in situations. It can be something as simple as a break up, that turns out to change the way you think of situations. In Skeetah's case, it is much more serious. Parental loss clearly affects the way we go about day to day life. We can see how Skeetah is afraid of commitment and that it stems directly back to the loss of his mother, as well as back to the way his father acts. By analyzing the behaviors of Skeetah, we can see that they

link back to these events. Parents, or even guardians, are essential to us figuring out our own identities. Having a healthy identity is essential, especially when it comes to having healthy relationships in your life. Relationships can become strained, when one lacks a healthy identity. We learn from the people around us. Cerniglia sums this up well by saying, "Several international studies have confirmed that the loss of a parent during childhood is a potentially traumatic event bearing possible consequences for the child's psychological functioning over time." (552). This loss affected Skeetah psychologically. It is important to gain a better understanding of anyone in our lives or literature, to realize that events and experiences we deal with shape the person we become. Skeetah does not make an attempt to have a love interest and it stems directly from this loss. Why would he want to risk having to experience more pain in his life? We need to know why these behaviors are exhibited to gain a better understanding of him. We, the readers, need to know. Make us know why he is the way he is. It is important for us, as humans, to understand each other. It is important to understand why someone exhibits behaviors. It helps us to provide people with empathy and to cut them slack when they are going through these hard times. Empathy is an important trait to have in daily life. These behaviors cannot be helped and stem from our past, all that we are able to do is provide empathy and an understanding of where these behaviors come from.



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