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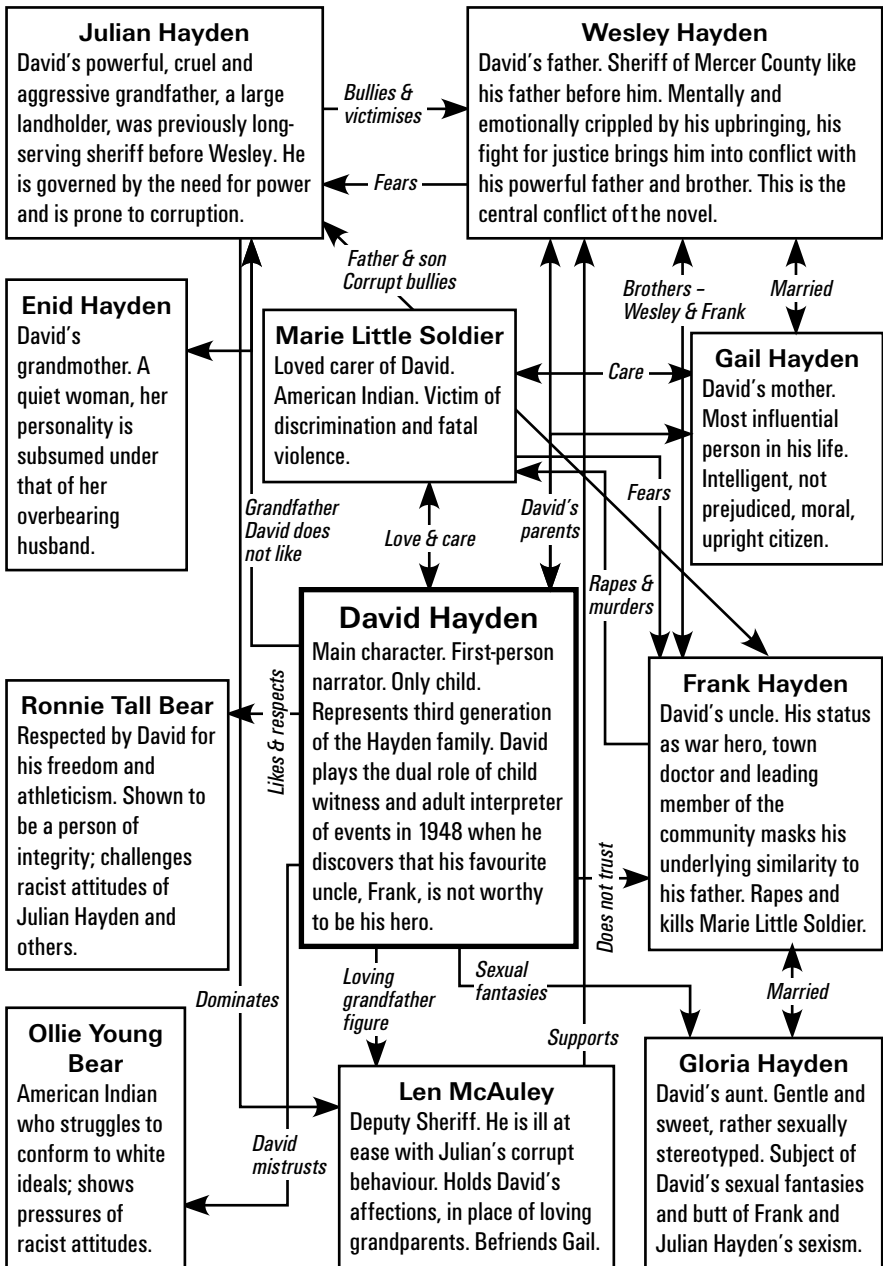
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# CONTENTS

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<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CONTEXT &amp; BACKGROUND</b>	<b>6</b>
Montana - 6; Montana and White Explorers - 6; Native Americans — Indians - 6; Sioux Resistance to Whites - 7; Sioux Defeat and Reservations - 7; The Indians of Bentrock - 8; World War II - 8.	
<b>GENRE, STYLE &amp; STRUCTURE</b>	<b>10</b>
Genre - 10; First-Person Narrator - 10; The Adult Narrator - 10; Structure - 11.	
<b>CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER ANALYSIS</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Prologue - 13; Part One - 13; Setting - 13; The Hayden Family of Bentrock - 14; Wesley's Loyalty to his Father, Julian; Marie's Illness - 14; David's 'Wild' Side and his Mother's Views - 15; Adult Narrator - 15; David and Marie Little Soldier - 16; Marie's Illness - 16; David holds Marie when she coughs - 17; Young David's Role in the Novel - 17; Marie's reaction to Doctor Frank - 17; David learns about racism - 18; Aunt Gloria - 18; Wesley and Frank contrasted - 18; Frank visits Marie Little Soldier - 20; Gail Hayden reveals Frank's perfidy and sexual crimes - 20; The McAuleys - 22; Part One ends — David's perceptions irrevocably changed - 22; <b>Part Two - 23; Investigation into Frank Hayden's crimes - 23; An Ominous Silence in the House - 24; Wesley interviews Marie - 24; David's desire to be included as an adult - 24; David's family visit grandfather's ranch - 24; Julian confirms Frank's guilt and his own - 25; Frank and Gloria's Wedding - 25; David's Sexuality and New Self-awareness - 26; David shoots the magpie - 27; Wesley and Frank — Blood Brothers - 28; The sheriff decides to take no action - 28; Marie asks about coyotes - 29; Marie's Death - 29; Deputy Sheriff bridges two generations of justice - 30; David reveals that Frank saw Marie the day she died - 32; End of Part Two — David's Vision of Indians - 32; <b>Part Three - 33; Wesley tries to preserve the family honour - 33; Wesley hides Frank in the basement - 33; Painting the House — Gail's Civilising Influence - 33; Julian and Enid Hayden visit - 34; David's Responses - 35; David cries for Nutty - 35; The Hayden name; David's Sexual Shame - 36; Grandfather attempts to release Frank - 36; Frank confesses to Marie's murder - 38; Frank smashes the jars - 39; End of Part Three: Frank's suicide discovered - 39; David's reactions to the suicide - 39; <b>Epilogue - 40.</b></b></b></b>	
<b>CHARACTERS &amp; RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>43</b>
David Hayden - 43; Wesley Hayden - 50; Julian Hayden - 51; Len McAuley - 51; Enid Hayden - 52; Gloria Hayden - 52; Frank Hayden - 52; Marie Little Soldier - 53; Ollie Young Bear - 53; Ronnie Tall Bear - 53.	
<b>THEMES &amp; ISSUES</b>	<b>54</b>
Racial Prejudice - 54; Power and corruption - 55; Sexuality/masculinity - 57; Violence and Sexual abuse - 58; Loyalty & Justice - 59.	
<b>QUESTIONS &amp; ANSWERS</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>REFERENCES &amp; READING</b>	<b>64</b>

# CHARACTER MAP



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# INTRODUCTION

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Larry Watson was born in Rugby, North Dakota. Like his grandfather before him, his father was the sheriff of this small town in northeastern North Dakota and Watson has drawn upon this background for *Montana 1948*<sup>1</sup>, a novel which topped the bestseller lists in the United States and won the National Fiction Prize there in 1993. Watson pursued a Ph.D. in creative writing at the University of Utah, then taught at the University of Wisconsin. He is now pursuing a full-time career as a novelist.

The novel is set in a small town in northeastern Montana, a countryside that epitomises the tales and action of Wild West movies. The Indians no longer wear war paint and ride the plains brandishing spears and tomahawks, they are collected together on small reservations, dispossessed of their land and their heritage, defeated by the superior power of the white settlers. It is against a background of racial prejudice that the incidents of the drama are played out. When twelve-year-old David Hayden's uncle is accused of the sexual abuse of Indian women, the family must choose between loyalty and justice.

David's craving to be included in adult matters costs him his childhood innocence in many ways and affects his sexual development at this critical time when he is on the threshold of sexual maturity. His love for Marie Little Soldier, the Indian housekeeper, who is also his carer, is tinged with sexual attraction. When she dies, it seems to David that the freedom and open affection that she has seemed to represent for him has been compromised. He is irreparably damaged by the revelations of that summer.

The author explores the themes of innocence and experience, not just through the child, but also through his father who faces deep conflicts over family loyalties and his responsibilities to uphold the law. This shows him that moral choices are not clear cut, that there are not always clear alternatives and that lines of principle can be blurred.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Watson, *Montana 1948*, Pan Books, London, 1995

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# CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

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## ***Montana***

Montana is a northern state of the United States of America, close to the border of Canada. It became the 41<sup>st</sup> State in 1889. The novel is set in the northeast corner of the state in the flat plains area where the land is barren and windblown. The average daily temperatures range from minus 8 degrees in winter to 18 degrees in summer.

Helena is the capital of Montana but Billings (p. 18) is Montana's largest city with a population of more than 100,000, almost an eighth of the total population of the state. Only three other states — Alaska, Texas and California — have an area larger than Montana and only two states — Alaska and Wyoming — have a lower population density. Cattle and sheep outnumber people in Montana by a ratio of 100 to 1.

## ***Montana and White Explorers***

The first white explorers to the area were members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1804-6, which was the first overland expedition to the Pacific coast and back. Montana was not really opened up until the 1860s with the discovery of gold. Cattle and sheep grazing began in the area shortly after, the herds driven overland from Texas, leading to protracted and bitter battles with the Indians who opposed incursions on their hunting grounds and decimation of the buffalo. Farmers followed in the 1900s but after a few good harvests the land's harshness meant a failure of crops and many farmers left the area.

## ***Native Americans — Indians***

The Native Americans were misnamed Indians by Christopher Columbus who thought he had discovered a new route to India. For some time they were called Red Indians or Redskins, because of their copper-coloured skin, but this is now recognised as derogatory and racist, especially as skin colour has been the basis of discrimination against the Native Americans as inferior to whites. The novel reflects the attitudes of the day with Julian referring crudely to Indian women as "red meat". The term 'Indian' is retained here as it is used throughout the novel.

## ***Sioux Resistance to Whites***

Before the white man's arrival, the tribes of the Great Plains area populated the country. They were essentially big game hunters, particularly of the buffalo. The main nations to occupy the Montana area were the Cheyenne and the Dakota, properly known as the Sioux. Marie Little Soldier is a Hunkpapa Sioux of the Lakota or Teton division of the Sioux nation. Of all the Plains tribes, the Sioux were the most resolute in resisting white men's incursions upon their land. They were particularly incensed by the government's attempt to build a road to Bozeman, across their favourite hunting grounds in the Bighorn Mountains. In 1865-67 Chief Red Cloud led thousands of Sioux warriors in a campaign to halt the road's construction. On December 21, 1866, a band under Chief High Backbone was responsible for the Fetterman Massacre, a battle in which more than eighty government soldiers were trapped and killed near Fort Phil Kearny. The United States government eventually agreed to abandon the Bozeman Trail and guaranteed the Sioux exclusive possession of the area in South Dakota, west of the Missouri River.

However, when gold was discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota, thousands of miners disregarded agreements and swarmed into the Sioux reservation, thus precipitating another round of hostilities. In 1876 George Custer and his men were defeated and slain at the Battle of Little Bighorn<sup>2</sup> and the Nez Perce nation won a battle in the Big Hole Basin in 1877.

## ***Sioux Defeat and Reservations***

Despite their victories, the Indians were overwhelmed and ceased fighting in 1877, most returning to their reservations with the exception of two of the great Indian chiefs, Crazy Horse (killed in 1877) and Sitting Bull (killed in 1890). Finally, though, the U. S. troops' massacre of Sioux men, women and children at the Battle of Wounded Knee<sup>3</sup> in December 1890 marked the end of all Sioux resistance to white domination.

The reservations are tracts of land, usually very poor, unproductive and even hostile, that the US government allocated to the Native Americans.

<sup>2</sup> For details of Custer's Last Stand: Battle of the Little Bighorn: [www.linecamp.com.museums/americanwest/western\\_.../little\\_big\\_horn\\_custers\\_last\\_stand.htm](http://www.linecamp.com.museums/americanwest/western_.../little_big_horn_custers_last_stand.htm)

<sup>3</sup> For details of the Battle of Wounded Knee: [www.linecamp.com.museums/americanwest/western\\_.../wounded\\_knee\\_massacre.htm](http://www.linecamp.com.museums/americanwest/western_.../wounded_knee_massacre.htm)

These were administered by the Federal Government and meant that these proud, independent people lost control over their own lives. Today, two-thirds of the Native Americans live on these reservations.

## ***The Indians of Bentrock***



*The dispossession of American Indian lands and thus their failure to survive on their own terms was little understood by whites in 1948. The Indians were a marginalised minority not accepted as part of town communities because of their race. Their culture was not seen as a valid alternative to white Westernised ideas and learning.*

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Throughout *Montana 1948*, the Indians of Bentrock are not the romanticised Hollywood representation of this proud people ‘mounted on war ponies, streaked with war paint, bristling with feathers, and brandishing bows and arrows...’ (p. 101). The attitude of the white community in 1948 towards the Indians was still similar to that of the settlers who ‘tamed’ the land in the previous century. However, there was an additional element: the developing view that Indians were ‘useless’, not functional members of society in white terms. These are the feelings of Wesley Hayden towards their ‘ignorance’ while Frank exploits the women sexually and Julian Hayden regards the women as merely “red meat”.

## ***World War II***



*Whilst no part of World War II was fought on the mainland of the United States, the human cost was deeply felt as USA forces served between 1941-1944 — their estimated losses were 211,987. Most families were affected in some way by the trauma of war.*

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Frank Hayden served his country and was welcomed home as a war hero while Wesley Hayden, as many men were, was unfit for active duty and was left behind with the women and children. As a consequence he is scarred because his father thought he was less than a man.

The narrator observes that the relief of the war’s end was still being felt

and when the soldiers came home 'they wanted nothing more than to work their farms and ranches and to live quietly with their families' (p. 16). The novel demonstrates that this was an ambitious aim and, also, that anyone who disturbed that peace was likely to be unpopular. When Wesley Hayden stirs up the community over his brother's sexual assault of Indian women, it rejects him.

Although many women went to work during the war to keep the factories and other services going in the absence of the men, after the war they were encouraged, as never before, to leave the workforce and become housewives and mothers. The baby boomers, the largest generation of children ever born in the western world, were the result of this policy. Gail Hayden, however, is a full-time secretary who has only one child. Further, countries like America and Australia were then on the edge of an economic boom based on primary products and consumerism which glamorised the role of mother and encouraged the purchase of numerous new domestic appliances.

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# GENRE, STYLE & STRUCTURE

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## **Genre**

*Montana 1948* is a novel which purports to reconstruct the events of one summer in 1948 for the reader. It is a chronological narrative told by an adult narrator, David Hayden, who recounts events from the perspectives of himself as a twelve-year-old boy and an adult. It is a story of a boy on the threshold of adolescence, awakening to maturity and finding that the adult world is complex and not always fair or just.

Larry Watson achieves a balance of fine writing and suspense while recreating David's painful realisation that maturity brings pain and suffering. As narration progresses, the reader gradually realises the extent of David's psychological damage, sustained from being an indirect participant in the fate of his family.

## **First-Person Narrator**

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*The main narrator is the twelve-year-old David Hayden who plays a double role. He eavesdrops on the adults to learn about important events and then pretends ignorance of what is happening.*

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This strategy of using a first-person narrator, 'I', allows the author to establish a first-hand, reliable account by the protagonist. Indeed, as the action progresses, there is no evidence that David Hayden is unreliable, but he does both filter the story and impress his own views of people and events on the reader.

## **The Adult Narrator**

Although speaking directly in both the Prologue and Epilogue, and the early part of the novel in which the setting is established and the main characters introduced, the adult narrator only occasionally intrudes, usually at crucial points of the story, to point out how some things might have been different. For example:

If I had left the porch and followed Frank's steps down the front walk — I would never have heard the conversation

between my father and mother, and perhaps I would have lived out my life with an illusion about my family and perhaps even the human community. Certainly I could not tell this story...(pp. 44-45)

- Note other points where the adult narrator speaks directly to the reader and see also the Chapter-by-chapter Analysis.

## **Structure**

The novel opens with a Prologue, which foreshadows the action and contributes to the building of suspense before the story begins. It closes with an Epilogue in which the adult narrator summarises the aftermath of the summer of 1948.

The story is divided into three more or less equal parts without chapter divisions. The action is divided into smaller, self-contained parts which mark the progression of events. Each part ends at a crucial point of development in the story:

- Part One ends with David aware that his father, Wesley, knows that Frank, his brother, is guilty of raping defenceless Indian woman.
- Part Two ends with the Wesley's realisation that now Frank is guilty of murdering a defenceless Indian woman – Marie Little Soldier.
- Part Three ends with the twelve-year-old David's naïve belief that his uncle's suicide has solved all outstanding problems.

Much of the story is revealed only through the narrator's eavesdropping. The author uses these occasions as structuring points to advance the action and the reader must trust that David accurately records what he overhears.

## **Commentary on Structure**

1. The Prologue is extremely important in quickly establishing the drama, the authority of the narrator, and Watson's mastery over language.
2. The flashbacks provide a very economical retelling of the events as they are focussed on the most important incidents, on significant character responses and on important changes in attitudes.
3. The use of first-person narration heightens the drama. We often share