

Grades 11 & 12; Ages 13-18



Teacher's Guide: The Pain Eater
By Beth Goobie

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About the Author

BETH GOOBIE grew up in Guelph, Ontario. Beth moved to Winnipeg to attend university, became a youth residential treatment worker, and studied creative writing at the University of Alberta. She is the award-winning author of more than twenty books, mainly for young adults, including *Born Ugly*, *The Throne*, and the CLA award-winning *Before Wings*. Her first adult novel was *The First Principles of Dreaming*. Beth makes her home in Saskatoon. (Beth Goobie, *The Pain Eater*, p. 249)

For more information about the author, see: www.fantasticfiction.com/g/beth-goobie/

Book Summary

The Pain Eater is for the most mature audience. It's about a girl who was raped in the summer by a group of boys, some of whom took part and some who watched. She has not disclosed to anyone by the time school starts and the English teacher assigns a collective novel to the class. Each person gets to write a chapter, each one following the previous student's lead. The novel takes on a decidedly non-fiction tone until it's finally the girl's turn to write a chapter. The book is by Beth Goobie and is a fascinating study of abuser, victim, and observer and how all play upon each other as they realize the story is being told.

★Note to Teachers: It may be useful to explore Mindfulness before class starts before tackling some of the difficult subjects in this book. Including the school's social worker in some of the pre-study discussions may be a good idea as well.

Pre-Study Discussion

★**Trigger Warning:** Offering a short “trigger warning” for sexual abuse, self-harm, and bullying before beginning the pre-study discussion might be helpful for students given the heavy nature of the subject. Also, accessible opportunities for students to come forward privately to discuss any concerns they might have with the topic outside of class time should be offered throughout the readings; students should feel comfortable coming to their teacher for further support before, during, and after reading the book.

★**Note:** The first discussion questions might be best suited for small groups within the class, as the nature of the subject may be uncomfortable for some students.

1. From the cover and title of the book, what do you think this novel is going to be about?
2. When you hear *pain eater*, what do you think of? How can something “eat” pain?
3. How do you define *trauma*?
4. How can trauma affect us on a physical level? How can it affect us mentally?
5. What types of coping mechanisms might humans have for when they are experiencing pain from trauma?

- Self-harm
- Drug use/substance abuse
- Eating food
- Anger/outbursts of rage
- Running/exercising
- Meditating/practising mindfulness
- Art/creative expression
- Attending therapy regularly—group or one-on-one

★It's important to remind students that labelling any of these methods as "good" or "bad" is not constructive or helpful—these are all ways that may help some people to cope, and most people don't use the same coping method all the time. There are several stages of coping with grief and trauma that might induce us to behave in certain ways, and no one should be judged or made to feel bad for their choice of coping mechanism at a particular point in their journey; on the other end, students should be wary of labelling at the risk of glamorizing specific methods—no one coping mechanism is "better" than another, and nobody copes or reacts to trauma in the same way. Throughout the healing journey, we might bounce back and forth between destructive habits and healthy habits, and this will be different for everyone. So, when this discussion is brought up, guide the conversation to ensure that it unfolds in a constructive and non-judgemental manner. (Follow this same idea for the last question of this discussion and throughout the entire reading of the book, and students will get a lot out of these units!)

6. Consider how the experience of trauma may change the way someone acts in a social situation or among friends and family. What types of behaviour changes might you notice in a person who has experienced trauma?

- Inability to be in large crowds
- Fear of loud noises
- Anxiety or panic attacks
- Depression and/or feelings of hopelessness/suicidal ideation
- Inability to work a regular job or attend basic social events
- Difficulty being comfortable around men, strangers, etc. (depending on the source of trauma)

Chapter Summaries— *The Pain Eater* by Beth Goobie

Chapter 1:

After a school play, fourteen-year-old Maddy Malone is violently assaulted by five masked boys who are students at her school; three of them gang rape her while the other two aid and abet the crime. Following the attack, Maddy begins identifying each of the masked boys by name.

Maddy is reluctant to tell anyone what happened. She fears there isn't enough evidence, maybe people won't believe her, or she will be judged or blamed. She reflects on a past student who was also a victim of rape; this student suffered deeply following the incident and committed suicide after being humiliated by schoolmates. Maddy tries to ignore it and let it pass.

Maddy enters her first English class of the year only to realize that several of the boys who raped her are in her class. The English teacher introduces a collective class assignment. Each student will be given the opportunity to write one chapter of collectively written story. The first chapter is written by Kara, who introduces the story as "The Pain Eater." It is about a place called Faraway and a tribe that has its own "pain eater" named Farang.

Chapter 2:

In Maddy's treehouse we are introduced to one of the coping skills Maddy has developed to deal with the trauma following the attack. She self-harms with lit cigarettes in an attempt to quell her pain and memories. Her sister, Leanne, enters the treehouse and confronts Maddy about her behaviour. Maddy is obviously facing a bout of depressive episodes, but Leanne doesn't understand why Maddy has lost interest in her most loved activities such as art class. Maddy distances herself in an attempt to quell the pain that might erupt if she is honest with her sister.

In class, Maddy faces severe panic attacks and flashbacks. The toll of the trauma becomes more pronounced as time passes. Maddy is nervous about presenting her chapter when the time comes. In his chapter, Harvir introduces more characters into the story including a high priestess who steals peoples' souls. Because she doesn't sleep at night, Farang is the only person who knows about the high priestess's sneaky acts.

Chapter 3:

At home, Maddy recollects the rape in a nightmare. When she awakes she self-harms with lit cigarettes to calm herself. Maddy feels like she is releasing the pain and the story of her rape through the burns she makes in her flesh.

In class, Maddy navigates everyone’s feelings but her own. She wonders how she can make everything that happened disappear; she contemplates how she can maintain the privacy and secrets of her rapists. This is an example of Maddy “eating” the pain of others. But she self-harms whenever she has to swallow the pain of others, including her rapists’ and that of the people around her. Kara notices the scars on Maddy’s hand made from her thumbnail digging into it—another form of self-harm—and she reaches out to Maddy. It’s Julie’s turn to present her chapter, which paints Farang, the pain eater, in a bad light and introduces the class to the concept of “The Beautiful Land.” When Farang eats the villagers’ pain, and in turn experiences the pain herself, she can enter The Beautiful Land where everything is perfect. This story point can relate to how Maddy self-harms, thereby entering a state of numbness caused by physical pain. Maddy is deeply affected by Julie’s chapter but feels there is something wrong with it—perhaps this chapter doesn’t properly represent the experience of a “pain eater”—but she doesn’t say a word.

Chapter 4:

At home, Maddy’s sister ignores her. When her father tickles Maddy playfully, it triggers a panic attack. Her parents are deeply concerned by this, but Maddy becomes defensive and shuts them out, too scared to tell her parents the truth about what is going on.

In class, it’s Paul’s turn to present, and he seems very nervous. He begins by considering what pain might taste like and why we humans feel we must hurt others in order to take away our own pain. Paul’s chapter offers a glimpse from Farang’s perspective, as the pain eater for an entire tribe. He considers whether the tribe’s members ever feel guilty for what they do to Farang. Maddy takes comfort in Paul’s chapter, and Kara notices that Maddy hasn’t self-harmed that day, and she points this out to Maddy.

Later, Maddy overhears two popular girls in the bathroom complaining about this collective assignment. She hears them scheming to take over the story of the “pain eater” by influencing what other students write. Maddy’s phone rings and she is caught eavesdropping on their conversation in the bathroom stall. The girls threaten to hurt her, but a friend of Maddy’s sister walks into the washroom and saves Maddy from harm.

Chapter 5:

At home, Maddy checks her social media and sees that she has received a photo of a white Greek drama mask—a symbol of the night she was raped. She falls into a panic attack and quickly judges herself for her inability to “keep everything together.”

In class, Vince presents his chapter, and afterward the two girls Maddy had overheard in the bathroom, Julie and Dana, argue with Vince about his chapter. Maddy considers telling

someone else what she overheard them saying but decides to avoid “making a fuss.” Maddy’s thought process is focused on accommodating those around her rather than herself, but she continues to harm herself to cope with this decision.

When Maddy is out biking alone, the boys that raped her cycle past, hurling hurtful words at her. But she is able to identify one of the boys by his wolf howl. Maddy might consider how deeply this trauma is affecting her, but she just can’t face it.

Chapter 6:

In class, Christine’s chapter of “The Pain Eater” asks, “Where does all of this pain we are filled with *come from*?” It notes that most people never talk of their pain, so their secrets become more powerful. Farang eats the villagers’ pain and so she knows all their painful secrets. Christine says that Farang is doing everyone a favour by keeping their guilt and secrets, but that this also gives her power over them. Maddy then realizes who the fifth masked attacker is, but also that he wasn’t one of those who raped her; instead, he was an onlooker, a witness. She is being watched by Ken and David, and she now feels unsafe. Maddy realizes that, like Farang, she too knows many secrets.

At home, Maddy is tempted to tell her parents the truth because they can tell something is deeply wrong but decides against it. Instead, she lashes out, attempting to distance them. They suggest she see psychiatrist, but Maddy is offended by their suggestion.

In class, Brent presents a riveting chapter of “The Pain Eater” involving zombies, and it makes Farang appear materialistic and shallow. Maddy thinks about how the zombies are a lot like crazy people, something she *certainly is not*.

Chapter 7:

Maddy suspects that Julie is manipulating other classmates to change their chapters of the story, and she tries to think of ways to avoid her own chapter. Meanwhile, she continues to be bullied by some of the students and feels panicky when she finds a decal on her locker of the familiar white mask.

Maddy is also coping with physical symptoms of trauma, like stomach burns and difficulty breathing. She avoids her phone for fear of what she will find. Maddy feels controlled by her rapists, the trauma is taking over her life, and she wonders who will eat her pain.

In class, Jeremy’s chapter discusses Farang’s dread of full moons and the symbolism of pain as being something external, like an alien inside of you needing to get out. Maddy panics when she is placed in a study group that includes her rapist, and she self-harms to the point of bleeding. Maddy asks her teacher if she can switch groups, but cannot explain why when asked.

Maddy is living in constant fear, reliving the trauma over and over, unable to escape. In an attempt to push the pain back into her gut, she begins smacking her head against the wall.

Chapter 8:

In class, Elliot declares that “there’s no such thing as a pain eater” (p. 89), and he refuses to take part in such a silly assignment. Maddy finds that her rapist is absent that day, and for the next few days, Maddy does not see him.

In the following chapter by Dana, Farang goes on strike and refuses to eat the villagers’ pain, so one of the priestesses has to sit in. The priestess eats the villagers’ pain and the allura leaf poison, then tragically dies. Farang is sorry and decides to return as the pain eater. The class erupts into debate over Farang’s strike and who is responsible for all the pain in the story.

In her treehouse, Maddy brainstorms reasons David hasn’t shown up to class for several days. Perhaps he is afraid of her. This thought makes Maddy feel powerful and brave. She picks up her phone and blocks the social media account that has sent her unwanted messages. Maddy feels more courageous than she has in a long time.

Chapter 9:

In class, David is back, and Maddy returns to her anxious state of being. In Rhonda’s chapter, the story intensifies when Farang builds her own temple and an altar where she would like to keep her soul, but she gets caught by the high priestess. Back in their groups, Maddy has a panic attack as she is forced to sit across from David. Maddy tries to “get a grip” but struggles to keep calm and mentally leaves her body as the group works away without her.

In her treehouse, Maddy ponders her sister’s distance and looks through photos of her “old self,” mourning the death of the Maddy *before* the attack. Here it’s important to note that she blames the death of the old Maddy on herself, not on her rapists. She berates herself with expectations of how she *should* be reacting to all of this. She rips up the photos and self-harms to regain the control she feels she lost when she was gang raped.

Chapter 10:

In class, it’s David’s turn to speak. In his chapter, Farang swallows her soul stone, and a boy witnesses a horrific attack against her by the village’s four high priestesses. David describes the boy’s intense feelings of powerlessness and rage as the onlooker in such an awful attack. David’s chapter symbolically relates him to the boy who witnessed Farang’s attack and in so doing reveals that he was a bystander and witness to Maddy’s rape. His chapter allows him to navigate his moral position as that bystander and, potentially, to reach out and tell Maddy his experience and let her know she’s not alone. In group, Maddy musters up the courage to speak up—for herself and others.

In the treehouse, Maddy observes her “groan” drawing. She decides to try to add some light to the darkness. The treehouse is a space where Maddy is able to let down her guard and create if she feels compelled to. It’s a space for her to process her pain slowly, at her own pace.

In class, Emeka’s chapter asks what a tribe consists of. Class discussion focuses on “tribe

mentality” and what happens if you think differently from those in your tribe. The students attempt to differentiate themselves as more modern and “logical” than those in Farang’s tribe—not least in their blind belief in everything the high priestess says. Maddy digs her thumbnail into her hand, trying to keep her pain from spilling out again.

Chapter 11:

Kara doesn’t show up for class. Maddy learns that something tragic has happened in Kara’s family. August, a student in Maddy’s class, notices Maddy’s struggle with pain and assumes a role as Maddy’s friend and protector.

Walking home from school, a group of students violently attacks Maddy and threatens her to keep quiet about what happened to her.

Maddy hears a rumour that Kara’s brother has committed suicide and that this is why Kara is absent. The regular teacher is also absent, and a substitute teacher is taking her place. Sean presents his chapter with little care. He clearly wrote it at the last minute with little concern for maintaining the mystery and intensity of the story. Maddy feels powerless having lost her ability to keep her pain hidden; self-harm is how she copes.

In her treehouse, Maddy regrets inconveniencing her loved ones and wishes the pain would go away. She contemplates killing herself, but is called to create and begins drawing.

Kara is absent again and the substitute teacher is still there. In Nikki’s chapter, Farang is developing a habit of partying and gets pregnant, so the high priestess adds an abortion drug to Farang’s poison. Nikki becomes emotional reading her chapter, and perhaps parallels are being drawn between herself and Farang—a pain eater who *liked* the poison because it gave her attention; Farang was *hungry* for attention.

Chapter 12:

In the treehouse, Maddy’s sister discovers Maddy’s blackened mural and confronts Maddy in front of their parents, upset that what was once a light and colorful wall is now dark and murky. Maddy’s parents continue to show concern as Maddy tries to connect with them without revealing what happened to her.

Her regular teacher is back and Maddy is feeling better, as she begins to gain control. Lilian’s chapter describes how the villagers of Faraway become violent and angry with Farang when the priestess impersonates her. Maddy feels a glimmer of hope.

Maddy continues to work on her mural, which is morphing into the scene of her attack the night of the show. She uses art to cope with her pain, which flows out of her and onto the wall.

Chapter 13:

In class, Theresa has Farang discover that she can access “The Beautiful Land” without the poison. The chapter brings up discussions of destiny and reputations in school. The students dive deeper into their discussion of “tribal mentality.” Maddy notices a fellow student who

has been positive yet quiet the entire year, and she reflects on the fact that the girl has been mostly alone around school. Maddy also thinks of Kara in her time of grief.

As Maddy is walking to school, bullies surround her and taunt her. Maddy is overwhelmed by the abuse and vomits from sheer panic.

The family is heading to visit Grandma for Thanksgiving weekend. Maddy strains to swallow her anxiety so as not to worry her grandmother. Maddy feels numb and disassociated from her body. Arriving home, the Malones find a white mask hanging on their front doorknob. Maddy walks outside and crushes it, ensuring it is gone forever.

Chapter 14:

In class, Ken, one of her rapists, glares darkly at Maddy. She notices others around school staring at her and taunting her. Maddy feels overwhelmed by the negative attention and continues to vomit from the stress. Kara is back in class and seems different—quiet and meek. They exchange notes and Maddy feels better.

Maddy’s mural is coming together. She realizes she must let the night return so she can face it and touch it slowly, adding each component and meeting it again. She has added each masked perpetrator—but without their masks.

In class, Maddy struggles to drown out the bullies who taunt her. She receives a horrifying note and is overtaken with shame. Amy presents her chapter and Kara responds to the teacher’s inquiries about the chapter with a lack of interest. Maddy empathizes with Kara, but in that moment, she also finds something other than pain inside of her—strength.

In the hallway, Maddy is taunted by aggressive boys. They try to pull her into the boys’ washroom but are stopped by August, who suggests to Maddy that they report the incident to the principal. Maddy is reluctant but agrees. August mentions the last few chapters of “The Pain Eater” and offers Maddy the opportunity to get the last word of the story.

Having added each of the perpetrators to her mural, Maddy draws a figure in the middle of the mural. This figure represents the “pain eater.” Painting this mural has offered Maddy many therapeutic benefits.

Chapter 15:

Maddy struggles to watch Ken present his chapter. It speaks of Farang as a “dirty,” “lazy” person who had a choice and is to blame for her own miserable life. In relation to the rape he committed, his chapter rids him of all responsibility as the perpetrator. Maddy finally learns the truth about the rumour that has been circulating around the school.

Maddy is taunted in the hallways. David approaches Maddy and breaks down in front of her in a tearful apology. Maddy is triggered into a flashback and asks him for a cigarette. When David brings up his brother (another of the boys who raped her), Maddy refuses to continue conversing, stating that she won’t eat his pain too.

Maddy has trapped the “monster” on the treehouse wall. She admires her work. She feels lighter, like her spirit is free of it now. August and Kara show up at the treehouse and see

the mural for the first time. Maddy tells them of the attack. This is the first time she has told anyone. She begins to sob, and August and Kara let her, knowing it is what she needs.

Chapter 16:

At school, August is ready to recite her chapter, but is eager to give Maddy the final word. Maddy feels overwhelmed as August rushes to get going. Maddy approaches her old art teacher and bravely confronts him over his treatment of a fellow student. The teacher respects Maddy and thanks her as she leaves.

In class, Maddy enters the room surrounded by support. The students are tense. It is Shen's chapter today. In it, Farang is again presented as choosing her own destiny, and the teacher prompts the students to reflect on the concept of "choice." In the heat of discussion, Ken jumps down David's throat for defending Farang's character. August will present her chapter next.

Chapter 17:

In class, Maddy realizes that she and August will finish writing "The Pain Eater." She reflects on the entirety of the story that has developed over each class and each student. August ends her chapter with an open-ended question as Farang is offered a choice: to stay, or to leave her village to become the king's pain eater. August announces that Maddy will write the last chapter and the teacher agrees, despite Ken's protests.

Maddy and Kara go to the principal's office for an update on the earlier assault of Maddy outside the boys' washroom. The principal seems unconcerned when Maddy mentions having been raped in the past. Their meeting proves futile in serving justice, but Maddy is steadfast and demands action be taken. Afterward, Kara gifts a poem to Maddy that symbolizes rebirth and healing. Maddy is touched by Kara's love and support.

At home, Maddy catches her sister snooping through her phone. Her sister reaches out to her in an attempt to reconnect. Maddy resists but quickly realizes her sister is someone she really needs right now. They talk, but Maddy has a hard time opening up about the actual incident. She makes an agreement with her sister to wait until after Wednesday, the day she will present her chapter of "The Pain Eater."

Chapter 18:

At school, Maddy spends the day with her sister. She feels new tension from people, specifically Jennifer Ebinger, who isn't speaking to her. Maddy meets Julie and Dana in the girls' washroom at lunchtime. They sneer and make nasty comments about her. Maddy explodes and tells them about the rape. Julie is shocked but doesn't believe Maddy, and they are both silent when the story is revealed.

In class, Maddy's friends support her bravery with Julie, but she still feels insecure and struggles not to blame herself. Ms. Mousumi approaches Maddy and asks if everything is okay. Maddy reassures the teacher that she's fine and that her chapter will be done for the next day.

In the treehouse, Maddy writes her chapter of “The Pain Eater” as she reflects on the mural she’s created. Maddy is drawn to the figure of the bright “cream-gold” moon in the mural and relates it to her soul—it helps her to enter back into her body in what feels like the first time since that fateful night.

David calls Maddy and explains that her rapists want to speak to her before her presentation.

Maddy hears someone snooping around below the treehouse and calls her dad to let him know. They clear the backyard but confirm someone has been there. Maddy invites her family up to the treehouse. She tells them about the rape that happened the night of the play. The whole family goes to the police station.

Chapter 19:

Maddy gave her victim statement to the police the previous night. A fellow student tells Maddy that “The Pain Eater” novel has been hacked and changed to have Maddy’s name in it. Maddy reflects on this being the moment that she and Farang are one and the same.

In class, Maddy presents her chapter bravely and courageously. She receives praise and applause from her classmates. Ken and Julie are noticeably shaken by her presentation, but Maddy feels proud and strong and ready to face whatever may come.

To refer to

The Story of Farang: “The Pain Eater,” as told by individuals in Ms. Mousumi’s class,

go to the following pages in the book.

★**Note:** The chapter numbers in the list below are from the story authored collectively by the students, not from the novel itself.

- Chapter 1: As told by Kara Adovasio (pp. 14–17)
- Chapter 2: As told by Harvir Amin (pp. 27–30)
- Chapter 3: As told by Julie Armstrong (pp. 36–37)
- Chapter 4: As told by Paul Benitez (pp. 45–46)
- Chapter 5: As told by Vince Cardinal (pp. 56–58)
- Chapter 6: As told by Christine Considine (pp. 63–65)
- Chapter 7: As told by Brent Doody (pp. 71–74)
- Chapter 8: As told by Jeremy Dugger (pp. 81–82)
- Chapter 9: As told by Dana Ferwerda (pp. 92–94)
- Chapter 10: As told by Rhonda Hinkle (pp. 102–104)
- Chapter 11: As told by David Janklow (pp. 113–116)
- Chapter 12: As told by Emeka Kumalo (pp. 122–125)
- Chapter 13: As told by Sean Longstreet (pp. 131–132)
- Chapter 14: As told by Nikki Nutter (pp. 136–138)
- Chapter 15: As told by Lilian Pickersgill (pp. 146–148)
- Chapter 16: As told by Theresa Pronk (pp. 152–156)
- Chapter 17: As told by Amy Rupp (pp. 168–170)
- Chapter 18: As told by Ken Soong (pp. 182–184)
- Chapter 19: As told by Shen Yoo (pp. 205–207)
- Chapter 20: As told by August Zire (pp. 210–212)
- Chapter 21: As told by Maddy Malone (pp. 240–244)

As you go...

★Have students either reflect aloud on each chapter in class or submit one-page reading responses/reflections for each chapter—students are expected to produce “personal and critical responses” to literature and describe feelings invoked by the literature they read.

(Refer to “Writing” section in The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: pp. 51–55.)

- Once students have written their own responses to each chapter, small groups can present their reading responses to each other during class time and discuss their reactions to *both storylines* as they go.

★Students are expected to not only analyze their own responses to the literature but analyze others’ responses as well; students should be asked to use group skills to assess each response presented and then, as a group, formulate a response to an important question/discussion point.

(Refer to section 2.2: *Interpersonal Speaking Strategies* and 1.2: *Using Active Listening Strategies*, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: pp. 43–44.)

★Have groups come up with responses to give in front of the class to an important question or the discussion points listed below in Post-Study Discussion.

To promote rich discussion within the groups, ask questions such as:

- How do voice and style function to communicate meaning to the reader? How are these taken by the reader?
- How does the author’s use of language enhance the impact and layers of the story?
- How does the author’s writing style and use of language impact the way we read and digest the book?
- How does the author use a pattern (with things like setting, characters, feelings, etc.) to reinforce a theme?

(Refer to “Reading and Literature Studies” and “Writing” in The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*.)

(Refer to “Oral Communication” section of The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: pp. 43–46.)

Some things students should reflect on as they go:

- Genre
- Time period and the contrasts within this book (tribal vs. modern)
- Themes and symbols
- How does the author use setting/location to produce a pattern in the book and communicate deeper meaning?
- What motivates the characters of the stories? Why do they behave the way they do and make the choices they do?
- Comparing and contrasting the experiences of Maddy and her schoolmates and the experiences of Farang and the villagers of Faraway, how do the two stories intersect?

Post-Study Discussion

1. What themes and symbols have you identified in the book after reading it?
(Refer to section 1.3: *Demonstrating Understanding of Content*, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: p. 47.)

Some of these themes might be:

- Assault or rape
- Processing trauma or pain, sexual violence
- PTSD; mental health and wellness, asking for help
- Challenging authority figures; power and control
- “Group think,” *tribal mentality*, or collective belief systems
- Bullying
- Self-harm
- Art as an avenue for processing pain
- Confronting fears
- Mythology and storytelling
- Symbols mentioned might be:
 - The Greek drama mask
 - The treehouse/Maddy’s mural
 - Maddy’s self-harm as a symbol of moments she feels she is losing control (Maddy self-harms when she feels she’s losing control, when she is expected to swallow pain, when she needs to “act normal,” when the memory becomes too much, when she is near any of her rapists, when she feels misheard/misunderstood, etc.)

2. What types of *pain eaters* exist around us in our schools and in our wider society?

Can you relate to a time when you've felt you had to eat pain?

(Refer to section 1.5: *Extending Understanding of Texts*, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: p. 48.)

3. How does this book provide insight into diverse human experiences? How does the author convey to us what it is like to navigate the external world as a sexual assault survivor? Consider the ways in which sexual assault victims are expected to “swallow the pain” of others around them by having to navigate social settings while hiding their own pain or anxiety.

- One of the biggest aspects of navigating life after a sexual assault or other traumatic event is the expectation of compromising one's own safety or comfort for the safety and comfort of others.
- There is a lot of selflessness expected from those who are being victimized in these parallel stories.
- Both Maddy and Farang are constantly expected to take responsibility and blame for their own victimization, despite the fact that it is others who are furthering their victimization.
- In the chapter 1, Maddy reflects on the experiences of the sexual assault survivors she has known prior to now—one of whom is a girl who committed suicide following her assault, as the weight of the bullying and taunting became too much for her. Maddy sees herself in the stories of these survivors and wonders what will happen to her as she navigates this same world.
- In chapter 3, Maddy spends time wondering how she can take all of the pain away, as if it is her responsibility to “fix” something; she feels she is forced to put the reputation and secrets of her rapists above her own mental stability or mental wellness.
- In chapter 5, Maddy worries how she will ensure her attackers know “their secret” is safe with her, navigating the feelings of those who victimized her instead of coping with her own feelings.
- Similarly, in chapter 8, Dana explains how Farang decides to return as the pain eater because the priestess who had to take her place died because the allura leaf poison was too much for her. Farang decides to victimize herself in place of someone else even though she is treated poorly by the villagers and priestesses (pp. 92–93).

4. How can *The Pain Eater* contribute to a wider public dialogue regarding sexual violence, truth, and power? What is the social function of a book like this? (Refer to section 1.8: *Critical Literacy* and 1.6: *Analyzing Texts*, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: p. 48.)
5. How does the use of language in storytelling shift narratives and change the way we view others through such storytelling avenues as school rumours or ancient mythologies about “the gods”? What are some forms of storytelling that you can think of? Both Maddy and Farang fall victim to rumours and myths that claim they should continue to be hated and persecuted. How prevalent are these forms now, both in the modern world and in traditional societies (e.g., myths, television shows and movies, school rumours, stereotypes, ancient beliefs, conscious lies, etc.)?
6. Consider how being bullied could be considered a form of “eating pain.”
- How can delving into complex or difficult literature help us gain perspective on our own world?
 - A good discussion starter for *why* people bully others is *circumstances*; for example, abuse or violence in the home, financial issues, grief over a death, or any other kind of pain that might happen in a person’s life can become a reason why someone might bully or pick on another—because bullies often take their pain out on others.
 - Perhaps if students are having a hard day, they may be more likely to lash out and bully; *they might feed pain to a student who has been chosen as the person whose role has been morally justified to be the pain eater* (e.g., those perceived as nerdy, misfits, poor, those with bad hygiene, those targeted for reasons of race, religion, gender, or sexuality, and so forth). For Ken, his excuse for justifying Maddy as one deserving of ridicule and torment was simply that *any woman “like Farang” deserved it*.
 - The class has a discussion at one point about whether Farang’s position as the pain eater is justified because she is just one person who has to suffer and she helps the *entire* village (around p. 65). Similarly, in schools, there are often one or two kids at a time who are ganged up on or targeted as “the ones to bully”—*perhaps these people are allotted as “pain eaters”*—the people who eat the pain of the villagers or of the bullies and bystanders at school.

7. How does a book like *The Pain Eater* illustrate to us how literature might influence social attitudes around topics such as race and gender?

(Refer to section 1.8: *Critical Literacy* and 1.6: *Analyzing Texts*, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: p. 48.)

- By delving into difficult topics like this, *The Pain Eater* motivates us to have tough conversations about trauma and the gendered experience.
- This book also offers us a vast illustration of what it is like to experience sexual assault in the school environment.

8. What types of reading comprehension strategies did you use throughout this novel to help you better understand the themes and complexities that the author is trying to communicate?

(Refer to section 1.2: *Reading Comprehension Strategies* and 4.1: *Metacognition*, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: pp. 48–50.)

Working with the Themes of *The Pain Eater*: Suggestions for Essays/Assignments

★ Students can either choose to complete a written essay or complete a creative assignment that requires both a written component and a creative component. You can assign specific themes to students, or students can choose to identify the theme(s) they'd like to work with from the book based on what they might be experiencing in their own lives.

★ For a creative assignment, students can be asked to provide a written portion and a “creative” portion, and they should be expected to pull evidence from the book and from their own lives in order to offer a rich expansion on the theme they've chosen to focus on. The creative portion can be a collage, a piece of artwork, a poem, a dramatic presentation, a mixed-media presentation, etc., so long as it offers a rich and creative response to *The Pain Eater*. The written aspect of the assignment can ask for a deeper analysis of the thematic focus they've chosen.

Possible Essay/Creative Assignment Topics:

- 1. Compare and contrast the village environment of Faraway and today's school environment. Are the same things—such as tradition, storytelling, art, and tribe mentality—as important to students in the school environment as they are to villagers in a secluded tribe with its own belief systems? Pull examples from both the book and your own experience to support your findings. Some possible discussion points are below.**

(Refer to section 1.5: *Extending Understanding of Texts* and “Writing” section, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: pp. 48 & 51.)

- Throughout the book, the colliding of Maddy's world and Farang's world draws closer and closer; the moment Maddy reads her story and speaks *as Farang* in the final chapter is the moment when Maddy and Farang become one. Maddy is the school's “pain eater.”
- Furthermore, the rapists and the high priestesses have a lot in common; the

high priestesses trick and lie in order to gain power over others. The boys who raped Maddy deceive the students into believing Maddy deserves the pain she is going through—that this was her choice. They do this to hide that *they* are actually the ones to blame for all of this pain, not the other way around.

- Like the high priestess, who steals the souls of all of the villagers and Farang, the boys who raped Maddy stole Maddy’s soul while raping her. We find this out near the end of the book as Maddy is viewing her mural and realizes the brightness in the corner of the mural is her soul—she watches it leave her body as she is being raped, and at the end of the book, she watches it, represented as a bright glowing circle, re-enter her body from the walls of the treehouse.

2. Examine the themes of power, control, authority, and “primitive” versus “modern” belief structures in both the book and in the world around you in relation to *The Pain Eater*. Analyze how power relationships work within each storyline of the book to influence the behaviours and motivations of four characters.

(Refer to section 1.5: *Extending Understanding of Texts* and “Writing” section, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: pp. 48.)

- How does the high priestess control the villagers and continue gaining their trust?

What parallels do you see between the high priestess and the boys who abused Maddy?

- Students should be expected to pull in themes on this topic. For example, the white drama mask functions as a symbol, not only of Maddy’s pain of that night but of the trickery in general—the boys hide behind the masks during the assault and use it to hurt Maddy.
- Similarly, the priestess hides by shape-shifting, for example, as she continues to hurt Farang and trick the villagers into believing everything she says.
- What parallels might we see between these stories and the stories in our own time with respect to politics and the corporate world?
- The high priestess does things to invoke fear in the people of Farang’s village in order to gain trust, control, and compliance—“Why was the high priestess doing this to the tribe? Because she liked it. The more scared the people got, the more they begged

her for help. So she got to be more and more important.” (p. 65) Similarly, the boys who raped Maddy, and specifically Ken, use carefully selected narratives to invoke fear in fellow students whom they wish to gain control over and whom they wish to encourage bullying Maddy; Ken tells them that “being a girl like that” or “being like Farang” will get you in trouble or will get you hurt.

This could be used as a starting point for a discussion regarding the ways in which governments/larger organizations can use control tactics in order to regain trust over a population or a group of people.

3. Examine the way in which the author of *The Pain Eater* uses setting/location/time to create meaning and produce a literary pattern. (What do the treehouse and the mural represent for Maddy? What does the classroom represent? What does the outdoors represent as she is walking to and from school? What does the forest mean to Farang? Her secret altar? The cage? What about the phases of the moon?) How does the author give subtle meaning to each setting in order to deepen the pattern of the story? How do these settings contribute to the overall theme of the book?

(Refer to section 1.7: *Evaluating Texts*, 2.1: *Text Forms*, 2.2: *Text Features* and 2.3: *Elements of Style* and “Writing” section, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: pp. 48, 49, & 51.)

- The treehouse represents a place where Maddy is safely allowed to process pain through art and other means of healing (similar to Farang’s secret altar). Additionally, the mural represents Maddy’s state of healing throughout the process; the treehouse wall is provided as a space through which Maddy can take her time to meet her pain at her own pace and slowly process what she needs to each day.
- The mural changes throughout the story depending on where Maddy is in her state of mind and healing—at first the mural is bright and fun, symbolizing the innocence and lightness of Maddy’s life prior to the attack. As the story progresses, Maddy is called to darken it to allow her pain to pass through her, and it becomes a source of therapy for Maddy.
- The mural allows the pain to “be seen, pointed to, defined” (p. 180).
- In chapter 14 (p. 166), Maddy explains that with this mural, she is allowing the night to return so she can face it in a therapeutic way.

- When Kara sees the mural, she says, “I wish...my brother could’ve screamed like this” (p. 193). Kara’s statement reminds us that creative excursions can oftentimes be symbolic of the processing of pain and trauma—that with creation comes rebirth.
- It is through the mural that Maddy discovers that what she believed was dead was just missing temporarily, and that it could come back to her; the mural is also where Maddy ends up being able to return her soul home to her body (pages 230 -231).

4. Examine the way language in literature functions to create connections and invoke specific feelings about personal topics. How does the author of *The Pain Eater* use language to describe pain and trauma? How is Maddy/Farang’s trauma/pain illustrated and described? How does the book create a visual illustration of trauma for us, using symbols and objects like the Greek drama mask and the Allura leaf poison?

(Refer to section 1.7: *Evaluating Texts*, 2.1: *Text Forms*, 2.2: *Text Features* and 2.3: *Elements of Style* and ‘Writing’ section, The Ministry of Education (2007), *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12*: pp. 48 & 51.)

- Maddy sees her pain as foreign to her, alien, or external; Farang is a pain eater— she consumes the pain of others—meaning the pain is also external to her/not meant to be inside of her.
- There are plenty of examples of this type of metaphor throughout the novel; for example, “But mostly I think it’s like something coming awake inside of you. Something that isn’t part of you, something like an alien that’s gotten into you and hidden down deep” (p. 82).
- The way Farang’s feelings are described in the above excerpt sounds like how Maddy might explain the pain she experiences during an episode/flashback— as though it were something inside her that was not supposed to be there, trying to come out.
- In chapter 3, Maddy self-harms using a lit cigarette and explains that it brings her relief because she feels the need to release something, and when she burns her skin, she creates spaces through which the pain can be released out of her.
- Also, when Maddy is drawing her mural, she uses many words to describe how what ends up on the treehouse wall is something that needed to “come out of her,” something external that needed to leave her body.

- Farang also experiences a recurring feeling of something external entering her and making her sick—each full moon, she not only “consumes” the villagers’ pain but also consumes the allura leaf poison—something that is not meant to be in the human body as it causes severe illness that can kill a person.
- Maddy sees her pain as an inconvenience and as her own fault.
 - In Chapter 9, Maddy rips up photos of her “old self” taken before she was raped; she feels that this person has died, and she blames the death on herself as opposed to those who have hurt/victimized her. *Both Maddy and Farang are constantly expected to take responsibility and blame for their own victimization despite the fact that it is others who are furthering their victimization.*
 - Maddy is consistently blaming herself for her inability to “keep it together”—even though she did not choose to be victimized, she is constantly beating herself up for what she is feeling and how she is handling it—specifically when others begin to notice that she is struggling.
- The language surrounding victims (specifically sexual assault victims) often functions to justify or rationalize their victimization:
 - A lot of this language focuses on personal choice (e.g., whether a girl is “easy” or is said to have a lot of casual sex) and on perceived “cleanliness” or “purity” of a woman in general. These expectations are applied strictly to women only; the same expectations of “cleanliness” or “restraint” are not applied to men. In fact, in Ken’s chapter, he says, “Soon the boy can’t stop himself, because that’s what boys are wired for. Besides, Farang *made* him do it” (p. 183). The double standard for men and women is representative of these sexist ideas used to justify the pain of Maddy and Farang.
- The misogynistic undertones of Ken Soong’s chapter demonstrate how women’s lives are devalued or seen as less deserving of basic human rights on the basis of “cleanliness” or “purity”; “dirty” or “lazy” girls are asking for what they get (pp. 182–184). In his chapter, Ken states, “There’s only one reason a girl like Farang goes to a party. She knows what she’s getting into” (p. 183); “You’ve got to watch out for girls like Farang, keep yourself *clean* of them” (p. 184, emphasis added).
- Throughout the students’ story of “The Pain Eater,” the language that surrounds Farang is about how she is “dirty” and “impure”; many of the

students' chapters attempt to justify or rationalize Farang's situation (i.e., "she deserves it because she started to party and she got pregnant," "she deserves it because she did this or that").

Offering Support...When It's Needed

Here are some helpful links you can offer as resources for students who are interested:

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/lets-stop-sexual-harassment-and-violence>

<https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/what-sexual-assault/>

<http://www.draw-the-line.ca/gethelp.html>

References

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The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 11 and 12 (Revised ed., English, Rep.). (2017). Ontario, CA: The Ministry of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english1112currb.pdf>