

Synopsis of *Rivers Through Green*

In Argentina, sometime in the late 20th century, two North American researchers meet in a bus stop and discover that they are traveling to the same village in order to pursue unrelated research projects for the same period of time. They form a relationship which quickly becomes sexual but not romantic. Their research is not discussed much, and their names are not revealed. They are simply Americans who drop into a rural community of Latin America for long enough to form meaningful relationships but not long enough to make a lasting difference.

Significant attention is paid to the physical environment of the village. It is always full of mists, which prevent the narrator and the companion from fully witnessing their environs, and which provide the seclusion they both need in order to focus on their research. The mountains are verdant and cut through by swift red rivers that separate rural communities from one another.

Together, the narrator and the companion rent a cabin from the matron of the community, a land-rich elder with a large family who runs a type of rural convenience store. The storefront is a gathering place where the men play poker to cover up the debts of their more serious betting. Neither the men nor the women of the village are named. The men work in agriculture, and the women take care of their families and houses. Both the men and the women sometimes take work at the nearby vacation houses of the rich.

While they are there, the narrator, a man, becomes friends with a local youth. The youth, also a man, involves the narrator in a secret gambling ring with most of the other village men, in which most bet too much of their families' money on animal fights. They bond over the gambling ring, and the friend becomes interested in the narrator's relationship with the beautiful woman referred to as the 'companion'. The narrator is not certain about their relationship and has little to say. Meanwhile, the companion forms relationships with the women of the community by learning to cook regional dishes and by making friends with a young woman.

The friend invites the narrator to see the nearby vacation home of Don Errázuriz, who provides both a contrast with, and valuable insights into, the people around him. He is one of two named characters. The other is also a rich man, Don Chevalier, who is more of a story and a piece of the setting than an actor in the plot. The only other names mentioned are places: the United States, Argentina, and Buenos Aires. The name of the village is not mentioned.

As the narrator becomes more directly involved in the men's gambling ring, the companion becomes more involved in the life of the young woman, sometimes called the ingenue because of her innocent, trusting character. Through the observations of both the narrator and the companion, clues emerge that the ingenue is in a relationship with the narrator's friend, although the young couple has conflicted ideas about where their relationship is headed.

The relationship between the narrator and the companion is pulled apart by the opposing male and female forces of the community. Just as they become antagonistic toward one another, the

companion summons the narrator to an informal meeting in the cabin of the ingenue in which her father and the bookie of the gambling ring ask the narrator to settle a dispute. The father has won a bet in the same amount as the rent of parcel of land he leases, apparently from the bookie. However, the bet was placed on an animal fight, part of the men's secret gambling ring, and is therefore off the books. The bookie does not want to recognize the winnings, because they would enable the ingenue to go to school out of town. Her education is problematic for the bookie in part because he is resentful of the privilege, and in part because does not want to separate his son, the narrator's friend, from the ingenue.

Throughout the development of the dispute, the narrator wonders why he is involved. The companion states that it is because the narrator is the only white man around and is therefore treated with special deference. Don Errázuriz states that it is because the narrator has been trying to connect with the community, and that the community has responded by giving him a chance to do through arbitrating a dispute. Other characters imply that the narrator is brought into the dispute because they have no one else. None of these reasons are directly at odds with one another, but neither do they provide clear direction for the narrator.

In attempting to settle the dispute, the narrator turns to Don Errázuriz for help. The Don doesn't help directly, but rather suggests that the narrator ask an old man who lives in the village, a storyteller called the raconteur, who has a perfect memory and is known to be honest. It happens that the raconteur was present when the bet was placed, and thus can act as a witness. By the time the raconteur is enlisted, the narrator is convinced the father placed and won the bet in question. He wonders why the bookie would risk his reputation over something like a young woman's education or his son's first crush, and concludes there must be something bigger at stake.

By involving the raconteur, the narrator inadvertently exposes the men's gambling ring to the women of the village. However, the witness the raconteur provides fails to settle the dispute. When the narrator realizes he can't help any further, he unexpectedly turns the responsibility of arbitration over to the companion, without consulting her first. She is angry at him for doing so, and in her anger discloses the real motives behind the dispute: the ingenue is pregnant with the illegitimate child of the narrator's friend, claiming that the ingenue was raped. The ingenue wants to leave the village as a result of the pregnancy.

The narrator immediately searches out the friend, who denies rape. The narrator mentions her age and asks about verbal consent, to which the friend replies that she is old enough to know what she wants, that she didn't want to use words, and that he didn't want to make her. The narrator returns to ask the companion why she thought the ingenue was raped. The companion claims that the ingenue didn't want to have sex but wound up doing so anyway. The narrator accuses the companion of double standards, recalling that in their own relationship he was never asked for verbal consent, even when she was aggressive. The climax of the novella lies in their dialogue immediately afterward.

Companion: "There is a history of violent power dynamics between men and women here, which you seem to care nothing about, and if that's not reason enough to stand up for a wounded girl, then I suggest you never interact with anyone who doesn't look just like you."

Narrator: "Punitive double standards solve nothing."

Companion: "Neither does abuse."

After this argument, the narrator and the companion do not speak to each other again. Word spreads quickly through the community about the gambling ring, which puts the narrator, the ingenue's father, and the raconteur in an uncomfortable position. The matron steps in to cancel the father's land debt, which enables him to send his daughter to school. The matron also tells her son, the bookie, not to come back to town. The companion accompanies the ingenue to Buenos Aires to help look after the child while the ingenue pursues an education. The narrator returns to the United States.

Key Questions

- 1) What barriers do power and privilege put between people of different races, different socioeconomic classes, and different sexes? How might overcoming those barriers be different from each side of a power dynamic?
- 2) Are double standards ever appropriate or fair? If so, when? If not, how do we account for differences in race, socioeconomic class, and sex?
- 3) When specific forms of violence are inherent in a culture, should they be tolerated? Why are they tolerated?