

***In the Place of Last Things* by Michael Helm**  
Guided Reading by Janet Somerville

**PART I: 1-68**

Colliston, SASKATCHEWAN and Helena, MONTANA

**A) CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

Provide attributes for each of the following:

Russ Littlebury	Joyce Stone
Mike Littlebury	Lea Bollins
Reese Littlebury	Grant Bollins
Jean Littlebury	Jack Marks
David "Skidder" Shute	Richard Vanover

**B) SETTING**

Copy down three examples of sensory detail that show Helm's talent at describing the punishing prairie winter.

Page #      Passage


C)      Diagram Skidder’s narrative about his “outlaw blood relative” Levi Shute. (pp. 42-43)

**D)      QUOTABLE QUOTES**

Consider how each of the following excerpts either pushes the plot forward, develops character, or illuminates theme in the novel.

1.      *He woke in the new utter dark and swung his feet to the floor, maintaining motion until he was dressed against the chill already gaining the interior. (p. 1)*

2. *The first quality of soul is patience—it was a line from his learning. Patience was his company lately. (p. 3)*
3. *To really forget a thing you had to forget it in your hands, on your tongue. This was a place for such forgetting. White, featureless, cold. (p. 6)*
4. *He was my twin brother, and I'm telling you, after his conversion I would not recognize him as the same man. The man I grew up with was just plain gone, and a part of me didn't want to accept it. I told him I didn't buy his god-fearing act but he never changed back. (p. 12)*
5. *I don't even think Skidder expects anything, but the way it's laid out for him in increments, he'll maybe take that as a kind of final judgment on his character. (p. 33)*
6. *And before the clock unnotched another minute, her father and Jean arranged to catch up with one another while she spent the afternoon in Virginia City with Russ and God's little agent. (p. 51)*
7. *She smiled in her unshakeable faith. It was the first moment in which Russ realized she was, in truth, a little dangerous. (p. 59)*
8. *His disability was he's a lazy asshole. Assholes don't limp. They don't move around much at all, even when they're paid to." (p. 66)*

## **PART II: 69-162**

### **A) STRUCTURE**

- Russ following the trail of Lea and Skidder

- **FLASHBACK:** Toronto/ Wellington College/ Tara Harding/ John Overstreet moral dilemma (70-87)
- South Cheyenne: Lea’s Diary (87-92)
- **FLASHBACK:** faking marks for Overstreet/ tension between Russ and Tara about the “dead worthies” (92-106)
- New Mexico: Russ calls Grant Bollins and Richard Vanover (106-108)
- **FLASHBACK:** Russ breaks up with Tara/ decides to move back to Saskatachewan to be with Mike as he faces death from cancer (110-123)
- Las Vegas, New Mexico: email from Clete Dirks P.I. about Jack Marks (124-128)
- **FLASHBACK:** Mike’s last Christmas/ letter from Tara/ confession from Jackie and Lyle about Mike’s generosity (128-147)
- Santa Fe, New Mexico: voicemail from Skidder/ meeting Joyce Stone to deliver letters she wrote to Mike (148-161)
- **FLASHBACK:** Mike’s death/ funeral director in blue ski jacket/ taking Mike’s mattress and bedclothes to the dump (161-162)

**B) QUOTABLE QUOTES**

- a) “There are no names for those things amongst which one is completely alone.” (70)
- b) “I don’t want him thinking I don’t want to be home with him.” (78)
- c) “Listen, I know why you’re hounding me—we’re both getting something from that girl—but I can’t pass your course by the book, so either do like she says, or don’t and face the music.” (84)
- d) “After a certain point, people deserve marks for just surviving.” (85)

- e) “...Simone Weill wrote that—“  
“I don’t care, Russ. She wasn’t the one walking out of the room.” (97)
  
- f) “If he heard him talking with Tara, Mike would know his son was a stranger to him. Russ couldn’t let him come to know that.” (105)
  
- g) “She had him. She’d had him all along. But trouble for others was at large now. And all because he’d behaved true to form.” (110)
  
- h) “He could not tolerate the moment. If she could imagine a morning scene, she had probably imagined a future in which both of them were together, something he wouldn’t allow himself to conceive of. His foreseeable future was Mike. He would begin to fail him the moment he allowed himself to think of a world beyond it.” (119)
  
- i) “At least the little fictions he was capable of were useful, he thought, to see him through a tough moment.” (123)
  
- j) “Violence could grow in any part of a lone soul, from rage or hunger or narcissism. Or from the physical pleasure of using one’s strength. Or the beauty of retribution, the elegant simplicity of setting right a wrong through the most direct, least ambiguous of responses.” (127)
  
- k) “I’m seeing the tumout. I close my eyes and I see it. It’s the size of a grapefruit but I imagine it shrinking. Grapefruit, orange, golf ball, a little pebble, then a speck of dust washed away in the blood. I see it shrinking every day and every night.” (130)

- l) “I understood instantly why she’d hit me. She felt I’d judged her, and her life, and she was right.” (135)
- m) “I love men, and I don’t mean to be essentialist, but the numbers mean something. Whether or not they express it, men are stupid with violence.” (138)
- n) “... he had taken the role of the hockey fighter and an undefeated fighter at that, one of the last sure things anyone could honour or love.” (143)
- o) “He wouldn’t want you to make a big deal out of it. All he expects is, you know, that we see each other through.” (147)
- p) “... the fact was that the actual Joyce Stone wired him straight into a bitter grief that Mike could not have imagined when he thought up this little get-together.” (154)
- q) “Mike wanted his dying to be an example to you, Russ. An example of the power of faith in a believer.” (158)
- r) “The horse was the size of a collie, lying on its side, stiff-legged, the paint faded and chipped from its rust saddle. It was beyond him how anyone could let go of something like that.” (162)

### **PART III: 163-202**

#### **A) STRUCTURE**

- Skidder/Lea in Ricksford (where Levi Shute came down from the mountain and was labeled a cannibal ) en route to Vegas where Skidder gets a tattoo of Jesus (163-170)

- Russ near Tucson, Arizona: reads Lea's diary (171-173)
- Skidder/Lea trying to steal Mr. Bickles (not dead) (173-175)
- Russ calls Lyle to set up meeting Skidder at the Saskatoon airport/ Jean's trailer park in Tucson/ Lea admits to Russ she thinks she's pregnant with Marks's baby (175-188)
- **FLASHBACK:** funeral home/ Russ's last wishes for Mike (188-194)
- Tucson airport: Skidder sent home/ Lea and Grant reunited (194-202)

## **B) QUOTABLE QUOTES**

- a) "She'd called Skidder a godsend and he had naturally wondered just what kind of sweets an impression like that could buy him." (164)
- b) "I am a desperate character. As you will guess, there's a story behind this leg concerning the evils of which I am capable." (164)
- c) "Levi Shute. Heroicly Came Down Here With Remanes Of Departed Friend (Leg All He Could Carry)" (165)
- d) "A woman came out and called the dog's name. She took hold of it by the collar and pulled it into the house. 'Jesus Russ,' said Skidder. 'Like hell he's dead.'" (175)
- e) "She just doesn't have the money, Russ. People our age can't afford to be healthy in this country." (183)
- f) "If you mean Mary, Queen of Scots, she had what's called an hysterical pregnancy" (187)

- g) “He called him a faggot. I don’t know whether he is or he isn’t and I’ve known him all my life and I don’t care. But all the homophobes and racists should be rounded up some spring and set on an ice floe. And between you and me, Rob, if I see him again, I’ll hit him harder.” (193)
- h) “Whatever happens

#### **PART IV: 203-281**

##### **A) STRUCTURE**

- El Paso, Texas: Garrison Hotel, “Dillinger Room”, Russ is trailing Jack Marks/ enters Marks’s room 214 (203-214)
- LETTER TO TARA: Mike died 5 weeks previous/ asks for her forgiveness (215-217)
- Russ observes Marks’s cruelty to a dog
- Juarez, Mexico (218-226)
- **FLASHBACK**: asking Mike about his mother when Russ was a young boy (226)
- Juarez, Mexico: Russ trails Marks (226-237)
- **FLASHBACK**: conversation with Mike about reading (237-238)
- Jack Marks’s perspective: knife/Bible/ woman hunt/ predatory in church/ bar “Buster’s” Russ beats Marks and then cabs back to hotel (240-253)
- **FLASHBACK**: remembering Jean cooking for Mike/ bathing Mike/ death/ coroner/ adding to morphine dose (254-256)
- El Paso, Texas: Russ confronts Marks again and gives him Lea’s letter/ Pedro’s story (256-262)
- **FLASHBACK**: Russ’s boyhood (263)
- Juarez, Mexico: Russ goes to warn Pedro of personal danger/ don’t trust Marks/ Russ ambushed and beaten bloody (265-280)
- El Paso, Texas: Russ goes to Marks’s room to look for clues/ receives delivery of \$\$\$ for Pedro/sister’s deaths; their “endings in place.” (280-281)



## **B) QUOTABLE QUOTES**

- a) “The number was simply to mark the divide between where he was and where he might have been. Her voice, though. He could almost live inside it.” (208)
- b) “My father died five weeks ago. I’m currently unemployed and have no prospects. Now you’re caught up.” (215)
- c) “With no explanation I’ll lose this stranger to whom I’ve attached an importance I don’t even fathom. I’ll return to the hotel and find him gone, and that will be it. I won’t even know for sure if I saw him.” (223)
- d) “Your mother was a good woman. That’s all you need to know. Don’t ever live in the past, son. You sure won’t catch me there.” (226)
- e) “He understood that Mike didn’t fear death, or even hell, having known them. He feared only judgment, and had lived his last decades against that moment to come.” (238)
- f) “Young girls in church. There was nothing like them.” (241)
- g) “Nowadays if I’m feeling lonely, I just limp into the right kind of church on Sunday morning and get myself healed.” (251)
- h) “His senses abandoned him, it was as if he were still falling. The blood in his mouth made him think to scramble away but his legs wouldn’t listen.” (252)
- i) “He had merely brought the end on a little sooner, a liquid compression of time. He told himself that the act was not uncommon. He’d given him the dose and kissed him on the head and gone to the bathroom and washed up.” (256)

- j) “I was not equal to my duty...There it was. He had said the unsayable thing, and now his one hope was that something, a consolation, a judgment, almost anything would follow.” (264)
- k) “ He saw that the doors had been removed from the stalls and understood there was no place to hide. In the mirror he saw a beaten stranger.” (280)
- l) “When he opened the case and saw the money, he knew that the news was bad for everyone. For Pedro, whether or not he’d escaped this morning, and for his sister and for his crew, the endings were in place.” (281)

**PART V: 283-330**

**A) STRUCTURE**

- Tuscon airport: Russ calls Jean about change of plans/ cashes in ticket for Saskatoon/ flies to Denver and takes bus north to Helena, Montana (283-286)
- Helena, Montana: Russ tells Lea he found Marks/ leaves Grant a note at his office/ offers \$\$\$ to Lea (rejected)/ crosses USA/Canada border with 50K undeclared (286-294)
- Colliston, SK: Jackie and Lyle pick Russ up/ deceit of money to Jean in repayment of debt to Mike (Russ’s found money)/ gives Skidder a new truck (297-303)
- **FLASHBACK:** Tara at Wellington College in Toronto (304)
- **FLASHBACK:** Vancouver, BC: calls Tara/ meets William (Beth Overstreet’s impoverished father)/ sends donation of 1K writing on Orrin Carr’s business card “for your good works” (304-330)
- en route to Colliston, SK: “picked up his bag and stepped out into the throng of other travelers to begin the last leg home.” (330)

**B) QUOTABLE QUOTES**

- a) “You were never pregnant. You know that now.” (288)

- b) “Of the debts he was coming home with, the one to her at least could be cleared. He owed an apology. He promised himself to write her soon if he could just make it home.” (291)
- c) “He’ll have told them Mike had wanted to leave it to Jean but knew she wouldn’t take it, would give it to Russ or to charity, so he left Russ the money and the task of getting it to her sideways.” (298)
- d) “He said it was gonna be hard on you but you were the type to handle it better alone. He said you’d just want the quiet.” (302)
- e) “She stepped up and kissed him on the cheek. ‘Hello,’ she said. They were catching up to the moment.” (316)
- f) “She had made up her mind about Russ long ago, he realized, and now he couldn’t save himself. He couldn’t give her up when he loved even her calculations, all her layered deceptions.” (321)
- g) “He imagined using the old words to ask for her heart, like in the songs. If he could win it, if only he knew how, he would give his own to her.” (328)
- h) “On the back of Orrin Carr’s business card, he wrote, ‘For your good works.’ He sent forth the hope that he would be repaid in beauty.” (330)

**Reading for Detail**  
**(PART I: 1-68)**

**QUIZ #1**

**/10 marks**

*In the Place of Last Things*

1. What animal is frozen to death in Russ's tool shed when he starts the generator?
2. Why is Russ upset with his father's gravestone?
3. Who is Reese Littlebury?
4. Describe Skidder's place.
5. What does Skidder hope to steal in Arizona?
6. How did Russ's mother die?
7. Who is Levi Shute?
8. What does Russ have to deliver to Joyce Stone on his father's behalf?
9. Where does Russ think Lea and Skidder have gone?
10. What does the figure on Jack Marks's back remind Russ of?

**Reading for Detail  
(PART II: 69-162)**

**QUIZ #2**

*In the Place of Last Things*

**/10 marks**

1. What kind of job does Russ have in Toronto?
2. Who is John Overstreet?
3. Name Russ's girlfriend.
4. What disturbing video does Lea describe in her diary?
5. Describe one of the ways Mike lost a finger.
6. What mistake does Russ make that loses him his job?
7. To what is Tara referring when she says, "The record indicates an escalating violence. If you chart it on a line you can predict the end?"
8. Who does Russ ask the P.I. Clete Dirks to find?
9. Who is Joyce Stone?
10. What did Skidder get tattooed on his hand in Las Vegas?

**Reading for Detail  
(PART III: 163-202)**

**QUIZ #3**

**/8 marks**

*In the Place of Last Things*

1. To whom does “The Legend of the Monster in Buckskins” refer?
2. What does Skidder discover about “Mr. Bickles?”
3. Who does Russ call to meet Skidder at the airport back in Saskatoon?
4. What does Russ learn from Jean’s friend Jim at the trailer park in Tucson?
5. What is Lea’s response to Russ when he tells her “you can’t get pregnant by yourself?”
6. Where does Russ want Mike’s body to stay on the night before his funeral?
7. What items did Skidder steal from the church that “look gold, but they’re not?”
8. What does Lea reveal to Russ about her dad Grant’s past?

**Reading for Detail**  
**(PART IV: 203-281)**

**QUIZ #4**

**/10 marks**

*In the Place of Last Things*

1. Russ books a room at the Garrison Hotel. Who is in the room next to him?
2. The P.I. Clete Dirks tells Russ he's found Tara. Where is she living?
3. What does Russ ask Tara for in his email to her?
4. What does Jack Marks do to a German shepherd that is cruel?
5. What does Mike tell Russ about his mother?
6. Where is Marks most interested in seducing young girls?
7. What does Russ do to help his father die?
8. Marks tells Russ that Lea thinks he's "God's \_\_\_\_\_."
9. The "unsayable thing" for Russ is that he "was not equal to [his] \_\_\_\_\_."
10. What is in the large camera case that gets left outside Marks's room?

**Reading for Detail  
(PART V: 283-330)**

**/ 10 marks**

**QUIZ #5**

*In the Place of Last Things*

1. What does Russ tell Lea back in Helena after he has delivered her letter to Marks?
2. How much undeclared cash is Russ taking with him across the border back into Canada?
3. What lie does Russ tell the border guard about his facial injury?
4. To whom is Russ planning to give most of his “found” money?
5. Since Mike’s will is “executed in stages,” what does Russ give to Skidder when he returns to Colliston?
6. Where does Russ store his luggage when he stops off in Vancouver for the day on his way home?
7. Who is William?
8. What does Tara watch “every day for three minutes” that “calms [her] stupid?”
9. Who is Orrin Carr?
10. How much money does Russ send to the Bread Exchange using Orrin Carr’s business card and the words “for your good works?”



## Culminating Activity

### *In the Place of Last Things*

Select ONE of the following topics. Your piece should be between 800-1000 words.

- a) Re-write the ending of *In the Place of Last Things* mimicking Helm’s style and tone. Begin with the lines: *He imagined using the old words to ask for her heart, like in the songs. If he could win it, if he only knew how, he would give her his own.* (p. 328)
- b) Write an essay that traces the Russ’s journey of self-discovery. Be sure to address his relationship with Tara and with his father.

Item	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Mark
Content	30	Voice unconvincing or inconsistent, limited diction, limited support, not always relevant, below expectations  (15-17)	Voice sometimes convincing, limited diction, some relevant detail, approaches expectations  (18-21)	Voice convincing, appropriate diction, significant relevant support, meets expectations  (22-25)	Voice absolutely convincing, appropriate diction true to character, superb relevant support, exceeds expectations  (26-30)	
Grammar and Punctuation	5	more than ten errors (2)	six to ten errors (3)	one to five errors (4)	no errors (5)	
Spelling	5	more than ten errors (2)	six to ten errors (3)	one to five errors (4)	no errors (5)	
Style	10	Communicates with limited clarity  (4)	Communicates with some clarity  (6)	Communicates with considerable clarity; uses varied sentence structure  (8)	Communicates with a high degree of clarity; uses varied sentence structure  (10)	

**/50 marks**