

Fifth Business Summary

Fifth Business by Robertson Davies is the first novel of the *Deptford Trilogy*. The protagonist and narrator Dunstan Ramsay has an impassioned interest in hagiography, or the biographies of saints and other spiritual beings. Throughout the story, he carries the guilt from an accident during his childhood involving Mary Dempster, and is convinced Mary is a fool-saint. Known also as holy fools and blessed fools, this term refers to someone who gives up all of their belongings and joins a monastic order or goes against the grain in society in order to serve a religious goal. This behavior is more common in Christianity than other religions.

An epistolary novel, *Fifth Business* is split into six parts. Epistolary novels use structures such as journal entries or letters to tell the story. In part one, "Mrs. Dempster," it is 1908 and ten-year-old Ramsay is having a quarrel with his friend Percy Boyd Staunton. Percy tries to hit him with a snowball, but Ramsay jumps out of the way and it hits Mary Dempster instead. Mary is the pregnant wife of the local Baptist minister. The snowball surprises her, and she goes into premature labor, delivering a son named Paul Dempster. Though Paul survives, his constitution is weak for a while; for this, Ramsay feels guilty his whole life.

Mrs. Dempster, meanwhile, has also endured lasting effects from the snowball. Her mind is not what it was. She and Ramsay become good friends despite this. He falls in love with her despite the fact that their association damages his popularity with his classmates. He starts working at the library, where his interest in hagiography sparks. He also becomes interested in magic tricks, which becomes a bone of contention between Ramsay and his mother, and a common ground for him and Paul. The minister, who feels burdened by Mary, forbids Ramsay to continue seeing her or Paul.

When Mary goes missing, Ramsay finds her in the arms of another man—Joel Surgeoner—who is banished from the village. The minister resigns, deciding to live in poverty. He forbids Mary and Paul to leave the house. However, when he leaves, Ramsay sneaks in to visit. In 1914, World War I breaks out, and Ramsay's brother, Willie, falls ill. Willie seems to die, so Ramsay brings Mary to pray for him and reports that Willie comes back to life. Ramsay and Percy have a falling out, and Ramsay joins the army. Before he leaves for war, he has a brief fling with Percy's girlfriend, Leola.

In part two, Ramsay says little of his time at war, save that he was an infantryman and spent much of his free time reading the Bible. In the Third Battle at Ypres, he is injured but manages to crawl to safety. There he sees a statue of the Virgin and Child and thinks he sees Mary Dempster's face in the statue before he passes out. He spends six months in the hospital, during which time everyone thinks he died. He learns later that he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. He learns also that his parents and brother are dead. His nurse, Diana, helps him to use a prosthetic leg. She wants to marry him, but he declines.

Upon returning home, he and other veterans are given a parade. He mends his friendship with Percy, who is engaged to Leola. He learns his father had accumulated great wealth before dying of the influenza outbreak, Paul ran away to join the circus, the minister died, and Mary Dempster went insane and was taken away by family.

Part three finds Ramsay in college where he earns an MA in History and subsequently begins working as a schoolmaster. On a return trip to Europe to find the statue he saw when he was wounded, he starts to learn more about the Catholic saints and becomes an expert in hagiology. Back in Canada, he encounters Joel, who claims Mary Dempster is a saint and she led him to God. Ramsay considers this to be one of three

miracles she performs—the other two being resurrecting his brother and appearing in the statue.

Ramsay meets with a Catholic priest to ask about Mary Dempster and learns about the fool saint. He travels to Toronto, where he finds Mary in the care of her aunt, Bertha Shanklin. In his travels to study the Portuguese saint, Wilgefortis, Ramsay attends a traveling circus and meets Paul, who goes by Faustus Legrand. Paul is not happy to see Ramsay and later, Ramsay discovers Paul lifted his wallet.

In part four, Percy and Leola's marriage is floundering. For four years, Ramsay visits Mary; when her aunt dies, Mary is left in his care. He places her in a hospital in Toronto, but she is not happy there. He starts to think of visiting her as a burden. Percy's family falls apart in 1936 after Edward abdicates the throne in England. Leola tries to kill herself and blames Ramsay, but he manages to nurse her back to life.

Despite his efforts, Leola dies of pneumonia in the beginning of part five. In his travel to Mexico, he once again comes across Paul, who is known now as Magnus Eisengrim. He travels with him to ghostwrite Paul's fictional autobiography. He sleeps with one of Paul's associates, Leisl, and begins to heal from the guilt he has carried his whole life.

In part six, Ramsay returns to Canada and tells Mary that he found Paul, which troubles her. Mary dies in 1959 after she is transferred to a private hospital. Ramsay returns to Europe, where he finally relocates the sculpture. Ramsay connects with Paul again and confesses the snowball Percy threw had a rock inside it. In 1968, Percy is found dead in his car with a rock in his mouth. Paul is suspected, but not charged. Ramsay has a heart attack at the end of the story.

Main Characters

Dunstable/Dunstan/Dunny Ramsay - The narrator and focal point of the story. He is a highly intelligent man who only wants his life to mean something.

Percy/Boy Staunton – Dunstan's lifelong friend and rival. He is a spoiled child who retained his rotten attitude well into adulthood.

Mrs. Mary Dempster – a complicated character that Dunstan feels great guilt over because of what happened to her while she was pregnant with her son, Paul.

Paul Dempster/Magnus Elsengrim – a premature baby as a result of a snowball incident that happened while he was still in his mother's womb. He grows up to become a magician after running away from home.

Liesl – a bearded lady that serves as a business partner to Paul and therapist for Dunstan.

Diana Marfleet – the woman that nursed Dunstan back to health when his leg got amputated. She was the one who sexually awoke Dunstan.

Leola – Boy Staunton's tormented and long-suffering wife who also became Dunstan's love interest before he went to war.

Fifth Business Character List

Dunstan

Dunstan Ramsay, the novel's narrator and protagonist, is an intellectual man looking for meaning in his life, forever haunted by the effects of a wayward snowball that struck Mrs. Dempster. As described by Liesl late in the novel, he is "Fifth Business," the type of person always destined to play a supporting (and never a lead) role in life.

Dunstan is, however, a rebel in his own academic way. Even as a boy, he was not afraid to challenge the conventions of society. When the town of Deptford condemned Mrs. Dempster as a social pariah, Dunstan embraced her as a saint. He is a man who changes yet fundamentally stays the same. Dunstan strives to solve his personal paradox through the study of Catholic Saints and his mythic adventures with a traveling magic show.

Percy

Percy Boyd Staunton is the epitome of an entitled, spoiled little boy. Unsurprisingly, he grows up to be an entitled, spoiled man. And yet he is arguably Dunstan's oldest friend, a foil in many ways to the main character.

In Deptford, Percy comes from the town's richest family. However, he reaches his greatest success later, by parleying his father's small fortune into an industrial empire. Along with such wealth, Percy learns to get what he wants. He bullies and humiliates others, and buys his way to the upper echelons of society. Despite his uncanny knack for making money, he remains emotionally stunted. Though he recreates himself as Boy Staunton, he always remains the same person who threw the wayward snowball at Mrs. Dempster so many years before.

Mrs. Dempster

Mary Dempster is a kind lady, a shameless adulterer, a mentally unbalanced introvert, and for Dunstan, a saint. Though viewed through several lenses, she remains something of an enigma. Dunstan feels tied to her through his guilt over the snowball which Percy threw and which hit her, leading to the premature birth of her child Paul.

At the beginning of the narrative, she is wife to Deptford's minister Amasa Dempster. While her neurotic husband feels God is constantly testing him, Mary Dempster takes things in stride. She is calm, placid, and believes that things eventually resolve. She is eventually ostracized from Deptford because her simplicity breeds contempt, and for sexually satisfying a vagrant because "he wanted it so badly" (42).

Nevertheless, Dunstan believes her capable of miracles, and marks three - bringing his brother Willie back to life, saving him on the battlefield during WWI, and changing the life of the tramp. Throughout his life, she remains a powerful presence in his psyche.

Paul

The odds are stacked against Paul Dempster from the beginning. In Deptford, he is born pre-mature to a woman who is soon enough ostracized, and is himself teased for his physical shortcomings. His father retreats further from reality, and his only playmate is Dunstan, himself a marked introvert.

However, Paul takes what Dunstan teaches him (magic) and later re-invents himself, first as a carnival performer and then as world-famous magician Magnus Eisengrim. Like Dunstan and Percy, Paul becomes a new person, and yet remains tied to the childhood feelings (of resentment and insecurity) that plagued him as a child.

Liesl

Liesl, Magnus Eisengrim's (Paul Dempster's) business partner, is like a Faustian Mephistopheles to Dunstan. She is a rather hideous bearded woman, but most important for leading Dunstan to explore the dark shadows of his soul. Liesl exhibits intellect and wisdom that transcends even Dunstan's.

Her methods of leading him into his 'shadow self' employ Jungian theories, and she is the one to explain to him his destined role as "Fifth Business." Liesl eventually convinces Dunstan to embrace his dark side in order to finally become whole.

Padre Blazon

Padre Blazon is a member of the Jesuit Bollandistes, the group who welcomes and aids Dunstan in his European saint research. Though equally intellectual, Blazon also possesses a wicked wit and a transgressive streak. Many priests consider him eccentric, but his sense of a personal mythology is extremely important to Dunstan's development. Overall, he is the first mentor to lead Dunstan to explore his inner contradictions and ultimately his darker impulses.

Diana Marfleet

The beautiful Diana Marfleet is the first person Dunstan sees after awakening in an English hospital. A devoted nurse, she helps Dunstan to adjust to life as a wounded man and to reinvent himself (from Dunstable to Dunstan). She is clever, witty, and refreshingly honest (all a nice contrast to his childhood crush, Leola). Though the two enjoy a deep romantic relationship, her matriarchal nature reminds Dunstan too much of Mrs. Ramsay, and so he breaks up with her. They nevertheless remain friends throughout his life.

Leola

Leola Cruikshank is the prettiest girl in Deptford. Though Dunstan always admires her as a boy, she soon enough aligns herself with Percy, eventually marrying him. Her simple tastes and character prove a poor fit for life as a trophy wife to a playboy like Boy, so Dunstan maintains a deep sympathy for her struggles even though his affections dwindle. Overall, Leola continues to represent the small-town mentality that both Dunstan and Boy attempt to transcend in their own ways, and she suffers a tragic end because she cannot adapt to a world of reinvention.

Mr. Dempster

Amasa Dempster is Deptford's Baptist preacher, wife to Mrs. Dempster, and father to Paul Dempster. Though he was always marked by a humorless nature, he becomes far more obsessive and fanatical after his wife is hit with the snowball and her simple-mindedness grows more apparent. Believing his wife the cause of his misfortunes, he treats her like a child, eventually locking her away after her tryst with the vagrant. For Dunstan, Amasa personifies the town's disgust over his wife, as well as the perils of religious zeal.

Mrs. Ramsay

Dunstan's strong-willed but judgmental mother is a source of torment to him in his youth, constantly criticizing his eccentricities. Her staunch morality is one of the main reasons Dunstan leaves Deptford.

the current headmaster

The current headmaster of Colbourne College is the man to whom Dunstan is addressing the letter that comprises the narrative. He was

appointed after WWII, following Dunstan's temporary assignment to the post.

Dr. McCausland

Deptford's primary physician, Dr. McCausland helps to deliver Paul Dempster and later mocks Dunstan for believing that Mrs. Dempster brought Willie back to life.

Milo

Milo Papple is the son of Deptford's barber, and somewhat of a clown. He later grows up to replace his father as the town barber, and shares gossip with Dunstan from that vantage.

Mrs. Staunton

Percy's mother, who calls Percy Pidgy Boy-Boy, a name that Dunstan uses to mock him.

Joel Surgeoner

Joel is the vagrant with whom Mrs. Dempster is caught having sex in the Deptford gravel pit. He had intended to rape her but did not have to when she gave herself willingly out of pity for him. He later devotes his life to philanthropy for the poor and homeless. Dunstan considers this transformation the third of Mrs. Dempster's miracles.

Mabel Heighington

A sexually promiscuous young girl in Deptford, Mabel temporarily disrupts Percy and Leola's courtship when she is caught in sexual congress with Percy. The Stauntons pay her family off to avoid any obligations.

Mrs. Heighington

Mother of Mabel, who is caught in sexual congress with Percy when both children are young. Mrs. Heighington accepts payment from the Stauntons, and in return does not put any pressure on Percy to marry Mabel.

Willie

Willie is Dunstan's older brother. After seeming to die from an unspecified sickness, Willie returns to life under Mrs. Dempster's hands. Dunstan considers this her first miracle. Willie later dies in WWI.

Bertha Shanklin

Bertha is Mary Dempster's aunt, which whom she lives after Paul leaves and Mr. Dempster dies. Dunstan later develops a relationship with Ms. Shanklin once he reconnects with his saint.

Le Solitaire

This is the stage name used by the carnival performer who seduces Paul Dempster into running away with the circus. His pedophilia is implied.

Mr. Mahaffey

When Dunstan returns to Deptford on his search for Mrs. Dempster, Mr. Mahaffey is the magistrate who tells him about Bertha Shanklin and implies that Dunstan was somehow involved in the tragic snowball accident.

Father Regan

The Catholic priest in Deptford, Father Regan mocks the adult Dunstan for considering Mrs. Dempster a saint.

David

David is the son of Percy (Boy) and Leola. He later attends Colbourne College, and Dunstan looks after him there. David has a deep resentment of both of his parents.

Orpheus Wettenhall

Orpheus is Bertha Shanklin's lawyer. An affable fellow who loves hunting, he later kills himself after squandering his client's money in the stock market before the crash. As a result, Dunstan is left as Mrs. Dempster's guardian, but without any extra income with which to care for her.

Magnus Eisengrim

This is Paul Dempster's stage name, which he uses after forming his own show. Dunstan writes the stage biography for Magnus.

Faustina

This beautiful young woman performs in Magnus Eisengrim's stage show, and enchants Dunstan when he tours with them, into a rather juvenile affection. He assumes she is sleeping with Paul, but later discovers she is involved with Liesl.

Denyse Hornick

Denyse is a politically savvy woman whom Percy (Boy) marries after Leola's death, in order to help his political career. An unpleasant woman, she ostracizes Dunstan and Percy's children (David and Caroline).

Caroline

Caroline is daughter to Percy (Boy) and Leola.

Mr. Staunton

Percy's father, the wealthiest man in Deptford and a snob who raises Percy to expect great wealth. Percy (Boy) later surpasses his father's fortune by a remarkable degree.

Mr. Ramsay

Dunstan's father runs the printing business in Deptford when Dunstan is young. He is a much weaker person than Mrs. Ramsay, who as a result runs the household.