

***This Tender Land* by William Kent Kruger**
 (2020 PB; 2019 HB; NY Atria PB: 444 Pages)
 Excerpts chosen and notes by Barbara Keating, March, 2021.

Characters +	Notes
Part I: God is a Tornado: Prologue & Chapters 1- 11	
Setting	1932 in Minnesota; journey on the Gilead (Minnesota) River
Odysseus “Odie” O’Banion	Narrator; orphan white boy at Lincoln Indian Training School because of lack of room at orphanage when parents died.
Albert O’Banion	Odie’s older brother; smartest boy at the Lincoln Indian Training School; very good with mechanics.
Moses Washington	Sioux; friend of Odie and Albert’s at the school; hard worker; found as when four near his dead mother; his tongue had been cut out so he cannot speak; Odie and Albert teach him sign language they had learned with their deaf mother. Called “Mose” in the first three parts. Changes his name to “Amdacha” in Part 4 after visiting the Mankato site of 1862 execution of 38 Sioux warriors.
Faria	The rat in the isolation cell; Odie feeds him crumbs
Thelma Brickman	Superintendent at the Lincoln Indian Training School; cruel
Clyde Brickman	Thelma’s husband
Herman Volz	Carpenter at Training School; kind to the boys
Vincent DiMarco	Groundskeeper at Training School; beats students; abusive at night;
Cora Frost	Teacher at Training School; widow; has orchard and garden
Emmaline “Emmy” Frost	Cora’s daughter; child
Hector Bledsoe	Farmer; exploits free labor from boys at school; claimed to be “training.”
Billy Red Sleeve	New boy at the school; disappears
Lincoln Indian Training School	Former military outpost, Fort Sibley, near the western side of the Gilead River. Forced boarding school for Indian children; not allowed to speak native languages. Isolation room to discipline was a former solitary confinement cell.
Gilead River	Presumably the Minnesota River that flows across Minnesota southeast to Mankato and then northeast joining the Mississippi River south of Minneapolis-St. Paul near the historic Fort Snelling. (From Wikipedia) “Gilead:” name of three persons and two geographic places in the Bible; may mean “hill of testimony”
Part 2: One-Eyed Jack: Chapters 12 – 20	
Jack	Farmer; lost eye in WW I; alone; nicknamed “Pig Scarer.”
Part 3: High Heaven: Chapters 21 – 34	
Hawk “Forrest” Flies	Sioux; provides catfish & spends evening w Odie & others. They encounter him again in Part 4 near Mankato.
Eve	Faith healer with the Sword of Gideon Healing Crusade
Sid Calloway	Revival show’s manager / promoter
Pappas “Dimitri”	Cook for revival show
Gregory “Whisker”	Musician / piano player for revival show
Mamba	Cobra-type, nonvenomous snake; used in show in the South, not the North
Lucifer	A venomous rattlesnake; used show in the South, not the North
Roy P. Pfeiffer, MD	Doctor (son Julius “Julie” and wife “Sammy”)

Part 4: The Odyssey: Chapters 35 – 48	
Hopersville	Re-named Hooversville camp near Mankato.
Captain Bob Gray	WWI veteran; war injury leg amputation; activist traveling to Washington DC to pressure federal government to keep promises for bonuses.
Powell Schofield	Farmer; lost farm; alcoholic; camping at Hopersville to fix truck; traveling with family to Chicago to be with family and look for work.
Sarah Schofield	Powell’s wife
Alice Beal	Sarah’s mother
Maybeth	Powell and Sarah’s daughter; Odie and Maybeth fall in love.
Lester & Lydia	Twin children of Powell and Sarah Schofield.
Part 5: The Flats: Chapters 49 – 57	
Gertie Hellman	Forrest’s friend in St. Paul. Runs simple café. Hires vagabonds to help.
Flo	Gertie’s partner; cook
John Kelly	Alias for Shlomo Goldstein (to hide Jewishness from cops); newspaper carrier; Odie’s friend
Wooster Morgan	Gertie’s acquaintance; riverman
Calvin	Forrest’s brother; riverman
Truman Waters	Flo’s brother; riverman
Part 6: Ithaca: Chapters 58 – 64 & Epilogue	
Ithaca	Greek Island in Ionian Sea; considered the home of Homer’s Odysseus
Julia	Odie and Albert’s aunt in Saint Louis

Excerpts

Part I: God is a Tornado: Chapters 1- 11

Page 53-54: (Odie and Albert) “‘Maybe it really is like it says in the Bible,’ I offered. ‘God’s a shepherd and we’re his flock and he watches over us.’ ¶ ... Finally Albert whispered, ‘Listen, Odie, **what does a shepherd eat? ... His flock ... One by one.**’”

Page 60: (at tornado ruins) “... I stood numb atop the broken roof beams that had once sheltered Cora and Emmy Frost, and that, for a brief time, I’d let myself believe would shelter me, too. ¶ I’d lost my mother and my father. I’d been beaten, degraded, thrown into isolation, but until that moment, I’d never lost hope that someday things would be better.”

Page 80: (Odie gives photo of Emmy’s family to her) “I lost my mother when I was a kid like you, Emmy. I can’t even remember now what she looked like. I don’t want you ever to forget your mother or your father. So I brought you that. Keep it somewhere safe, somewhere the Brickmans will never find it. **Your folks were good people. They deserve to be remembered.**”

Part 2: One-Eyed Jack: Chapters 12 – 20

Page 91: “I finally decided that maybe what I’d lost in killing DeMarco was my old self, and what I was feeling was a new self coming forth. The reborn Odie O’Banion whose real life lay ahead of him now.”

Page 94: “Letter after letter read much the same, requests of one kind or another with a small amount of money included. I looked at the pillowcase and wondered if every dollar in there had come with some hope attached, a hope that had probably gone unrealized.”

Page 142: (Jack) “There are two kinds of people in the world, Norman. People who have things and people who want the things other people have. A day don’t go by that there’s not a war somewhere in this world. A war to end all wars? That’s like saying a disease to end all diseases. **Only way that’ll happen is when every human being on this earth is dead.**”

Page 150: (Jack) “Your people have a story about this,” he said to Mose. “They say that all the stars in the sky are actually made inside the earth. They seek out the roots of cottonwood trees and slip into the wood, where they wait, real patient. Inside the cottonwood, they’re dull and lightless, like you see here. Then, when the great spirit of the night sky decides that more stars are needed, he shakes the branches with his wind and releases the stars. Then they fly up and settle in the sky, where they shine and sparkle and become the luminous creations they were always meant to be.’ He looked at the star in that cottonwood branch with a kind of reverence. ‘And we’re like that, too. Dreams shook loose. You boys and me and everybody else on God’s earth. Your people, Geronimo, they got a lot of wisdom in ‘em.’ ¶

Page 151: “Never was a churchgoer. God all penned up under a roof? I don’t think so. Ask me, God’s right here. In the dirt, the rain, the sky, the trees, the apples, the stars in the cottonwoods. In you and me, too. It’s all connected and it’s all God. Sure this is hard work, but its good work because it’s a part of what connects us to this land, Buck. **This beautiful, tender land.**’ ¶ ‘This land spawned a tornado that killed Emmy’s mother. You call that tender?’ ¶ ‘Tragic, that’s what I call it. But don’t blame the land. The land’s what it’s always been, and tornados have been a part of that from the beginning. Drought, too, and grasshoppers and hail and wildfire and everything’s that’s ever driven folks off or killed’em. This land is what it is. God is what God is. You and me, we’re what we are. None of it’s perfect. Or, hell, maybe it all is and we’re just not wise enough to see it.”

Part 3: High Heaven: Chapters 21 – 34

Page 163: “From the height of a certain wisdom acquired across many decades, I look down now on those four children traveling a meandering river whose end was unknown to them. Even across the distance of time, I hurt for them and pray for them still. Our former selves are never dead. We speak to them, arguing against decisions we know will bring only unhappiness, offering consolation and hope, even though they cannot hear. ‘Albert,’ I whisper, ‘stay clearheaded. Mose, stay strong. Emmy, hold to the truth of your visions. And, Odie, Odie, do not be

afraid. I am here, waiting patiently for you on the banks of the Gilead.”

Page 165: “We were afraid, sure, but that was only part of it. We were also grieving, but that, too, was only part of it. There is a deeper hurt than anything sustained by the body, and it’s the wounding of the soul. It’s the feeling that you’ve been abandoned by everyone, even God. It’s the most alone you’ll ever be. A wounded body heals itself, but there is a scar. Watching Emmy weep in Mose’s strong arms, I thought the same must be true for a soul. There was a thick scar on my heart now, but the wound to Emmy’s heart was still so recent that it hadn’t begun to heal. I watched as Mose signed on her palm again and again, *Not alone. Not alone.*”

Page 169: “The Indian ... shook his head. ‘**There’s no end to the cruelty in this world, and no matter how far down you reach, no bottom.**’”

Pages 208-9: “She laughed and put her arm around my shoulder. ‘Only God is perfect. To the rest of us, he gave all kinds of wrinkles and cracks.’ She lifted her hair from her cheek, showing me the long scar there. ‘If we were perfect, the light he shines on us would just bounce right off. But the wrinkles, they catch the light. **And the cracks, that’s how the light gets inside us.** When I pray, Odie, I never pray for perfection. I pray for forgiveness, because it’s the one prayer I know will always be answered.”

Page 214: “We cut jimsonweed from a cornfield, ... just as I’d done for Hector Bledhoe, but it was difference this time because we were helping folks desperately in need so the labor didn’t feel onerous. I thought how different it might have been at Lincoln School if the reason we were helping out Bledsoe had simply been that he was a man in need and not that he and the Brickmans got wealthy from our labor.”

Page 215: “I sat on the crossties staring down into the opaque, cider-colored water below, and tried to imagine what it might have been like if I’d been born to the quiet life in New Bremen. ¶ Which turned out to be a thing I couldn’t do. Not because imagination failed me, but because I was afraid to dream in that way. **In my whole life, I could recall no dream ever coming true.** ¶ ... **I felt a deep desire to belong there, to belong anywhere.**”

Page 216: (Odie and Eve) ““Wherever we take the crusade, I try to find somewhere set off a bit so I can be by myself. It’s not always a place as lovely as this.’ ¶ ‘So you can pray?’ ¶ **‘So I can refresh myself.’** She spread her arms wide as if to embrace the river. ‘And so I can open my heart to the beauty of this whole divine creation. If that sounds like prayer to you, then call it prayer.’ ¶ **‘It was painfully clear that she felt something I didn’t, something wondrous and fulfilling in that place where I possessed only a deep longing.’**”

Page 220: “All that might have been good in my life had been destroyed by the Tornado God. Though I recalled my early years only vaguely, I remembered them with a sense of happiness. Then the Tornado God had taken my mother. After that, despite being on the road constantly, my father and Albert and I had found ways to be a family and to be happy. Then the Tornado God had lodged three bullets in my father’s back. The Lincoln Indian Trading School might not have been such a bad place, all things considered, but I knew in my heart that the Tornado God had put the Brickmans in charge just to make it hell. For a brief moment, I’d hoped that my life might be saved by Cora Frost, but the Tornado God had snatched her away, too.” ¶ So I didn’t trust that everything would be okay. The Tornado God was watching, always watching, and I was sure he had something diabolical and destructive up his sleeve.”

Page 226: “I hated Sister Eve. I’d believed her. About God, about her healing, about the beautiful life that might be ahead of us with the crusade, about everything. Now I could see she was a fake and none of it was true. How stupid could I be? **How many times did my heart have to be broken before I wised up?** ... before I knew it, I was crying. They were hot, angry tears ...”

Page 248: (Odie and Mose) ““A miracle,’ I said quietly. ‘Do you believe in God?’ ¶ I could see him rolling the question around in his head. *I don’t know about the God in the Bible,* he signed. *But I know you and Albert and Emmy, and now Sister Eve. And I think about Herman Volz and Emmy’s mother. I know love. So if it’s true, like Sister Eve says, that God is love, the I guess I believe.’*”

Part 4: The Odyssey: Chapters 35 – 48

Page 278: (Police break up Mankato gathering of veterans; Bob Gray) ““You, Mr. Cop, did you fight in France?” the man with the megaphone called out. But I guessed not, because the policeman he’d addressed simply whacked him on the head with his billy club and I saw him stumble.”

Page 285: (Bob Gray) ““There are plenty of us here in Minnesota desperate for the money. It’s no handout we’re asking for. It’s what was promised. A government should keep its promises.’ ¶ ‘I don’t know why a government would behave any differently from the people who comprise it,’ Mother Beal said.... **‘When it comes to money, people often behave in ungracious and ungrateful ways.’**”

Page 296: “At the harshness in my voice, she stepped away. But instead of leaving, she took my hand. **‘When you don’t have anything else to believe in, that’s when you need to believe in miracles.’**”

Page 341: “We risked a fire that night and sat together, talking quietly around the flames, as we had on many nights since we’d taken to the river. It began to feel to me as if what had been broken was coming together again, but I knew it would never be exactly the same. With every turn of the river, **we were changing, becoming different people,** and for the first time I understood that the journey we were on wasn’t just about getting to Saint Louis.” ¶ “‘I’m sorry,’ Albert said. ¶ *What for?* Amdacha signed. ¶ ‘I knew my mother and father. I know where I came from. ... I never thought how hard that must be for you,’ ***What’s most important is who I am now.***”

Page 367: “For me at that moment, religion was the hypocrisy of the Brickman’s Sunday services. They’d painted a picture of God as a shepherd watching over this flock. But as Albert had bitterly reminded me again and again, their God was a shepherd who ate his sheep. Even the loving God that Sister Eve believed in so profoundly had deserted me time and again. **I didn’t believe in one god, I decided. I believed in many, all at war with one another and lately it was the Tornado God who seemed to have the edge.**”

Page 368: “We breathe love in and we breathe love out. It’s the essence of our existence, the very air of our souls. As I lay on the bunk in the old shed behind Gertie’s, I thought about the two women and pondered the nature of the affection I’d witnessed. Flo was a beautiful flower, Gertie a tough mother badger, and I tried to make sense of the love they shared. ... With every turn of the river ..., the world had become broader, its mysteries more complex, its possibilities infinite.”

Page 379: (Amdacha signing about Cal to Odie) *He’s my people.* ¶ **‘I thought Albert, Emmy and I were your people.’** ¶ *Still are. There’s room in my heart for all of you.* ¶ *‘What about Saint Louis?’* ¶ *I don’t know Saint Louis. But I’m getting to know the Flats, and it wouldn’t be a bad place to settle down. Gertie and Flo love Emmy, and she’s taken to them. And you’ve got a friend here now, best friend, the way you talk.* ¶ Albert had always been my best friend. But he was changing. I’d seen how proud he was to be sitting next to Truman Waters, drinking the man as if they were almost equals. Since his near death from the snakebite, he was becoming someone different, and I felt a deep sadness, as if I was seeing the end of us somehow, or at least the end of what we’d been to each other.” ...

“I felt like crying.... Instead, I turned everything inside me to anger. The Flats, I understood, was just another promise that would somehow be broken. **We’d been lulled into a sense of the possibility of belonging, but if we stayed, I knew it would destroy us, or at least destroy our need for one another.** It would end what we’d been for each other. It would end our search for our true home.”

Page 382: “Flo ... explained to us, ‘We grew up on the river, Tru and me. We’ve been up and down the Big Muddy more times than I can remember.’ ¶ ‘Nothing like watching the sun come up on the Mississippi, Norman,’ Tru said. ‘The water like fire all around, and the whole river empty except for you and your tow. I swear, standing in the wheelhouse on such a morning, you know what a king must feel like when he’s looking out from his castle across all the land he owns.’”

Page 388: “Then it hit me. The horrible truth I’d been unwilling to face. DiMarco’s murder. The shooting of Jack. Albert’s snakebite. The relentless pursuit by the Brickmans. This was all my doing, all my fault. This was my curse. I saw now that long before the Tornado God descended and killed Cora Frost and decimated Emmy’s world, that vengeful spirit had attached itself to me and had followed me everywhere. My mother had died. My father had been murdered. I was to blame for all the misery in my life and the lives of everyone I’d ever cared about. Only me. I saw with painful clarity that if I stayed with my brother and Mose and Emmy, I would end up destroying them, too. The realization devastated me, and I stood breathless and alone and terribly afraid.”

Page 390: “I stood above Emmy, who’d had always been as cute as a fairy princess. In our long odyssey, she’d become my sister. My sweet, little sister. ... I turned and stared where Mose shared a bunk with Albert. His face was peaceful in the way that reminded me of the old Mose, the big Indian kid with a ready grin and a huge, simple heart. All that he’d learned about himself and all that he’d come to understand about the world he was born into had made his grin less frequent, but it was still there sometimes, and **his heart would always be huge**, I was certain, though never again quite so simple.”

“And then I considered my brother. There had been only one constant in my whole life, and that was Albert. **He was at the beginning of all my memories, beside me on every road I’d traveled,** had saved me from a thousand perils, knew my heart better than any other human being. Sister Even had told me that **what my brother wanted, his deepest wish, was to keep me safe.** And I loved him for it. I loved him with every atom of my being, with a love so fierce it threatened my resolve. I wanted to lay my head on his shoulder, as I’d done a million times, and have him put his arm around me and tell me everything was all right and I was safe and we would always stay together, because that’s what brothers did. Leaving Albert was the hardest thing I’d ever done.”

Part 6: Ithaca: Chapters 58 – 64

Page 423: (Odie and Sister Eve) “‘You see the past, ... She sees the future.’ ... ‘Maybe just tweaks it a little. Like a good storyteller rewriting the last sentence.’”

Page 429: “**We are creatures of spirit, I have come to believe, and this spirit runs through us like electricity and can be passed one to another.**

That’s what I felt coming from my mother’s hand, the spirit of her deep longing.... The photographs in her lap, the money she’d sent, her naïve willingness to believe the lies of the Black Witch, all told me that she’d never stop loving me.”

Page 436: “‘Listen, Odie, you’re the biggest part of every memory I have. You *are* my brother. The hell with everything else. I love you so much it’s nearly killed me sometimes. **Until the day I die you will be my brother.**’ ¶ Mose stepped in and signed, **And mine.** ¶ Emmy smiled and said, ‘**And mine. We will always be the four Vagabonds.**’”

Epilogue

Page 439: “**There is a river that runs through time and the universe, vast and inexplicable, a flow of spirit that is at the heart of all existence, and every molecule of our being is a part of it. And what is God but the whole of that river?**”

Page 440: “**All that we’re asked to give others in this life, the most difficult to offer may be forgiveness.** For years after that fateful summer of 1932, there was a heavy stone of anger in my heart with the name Brickman etched upon it. For me, the journey that had begun in a small canoe didn’t end until, with the gentle urging and guidance of Sister Eve, I was finally able to let go of my enmity. In that moment of release, I also let go any need to believe in a Tornado God, and I began to have my first inkling of this great river we are all part of and to see **how right Mose had been when, comforting a grieving Emmy on the banks of the Gilead, he’d told her she was not alone.**”

Page 444: “In every good tale there is a seed of truth, and from that seed a lovely story grows. **Some of what I’ve told you is true and some ... well, let’s**

just call it the bloom on the rosebush. ... Far better, I believe, to be like children and open ourselves to every beautiful possibility fir there is nothing our heart can imagine that is not so.”

Author’s Notes

Page 447: The Great Depression was hard on almost everyone, ... devastating to families. In 1932, the United States Children’s Bureau reported that there were at least 25,000 families wandering the country. ... an estimated 250,000 teenagers had left home, willingly or not, and had become itinerant.

Page 448: “I love the works of Charles Dickens, and in part, my decision to open This Tender Land in a fictional institution called the Lincoln Indian Training School was a nod to his powerful novels of social inequity. The history of our nation’s treatment of Native Americans is one of the saddest litanies of human cruelty imaginable. Among the many attempts at cultural genocide was a horribly ill-conceived program of off-reservation boarding schools.... Beginning in the 1870’s and continuing until the mid-twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of Native children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to live in boarding schools far from their reservation homes. In 1925, more than 60,000 children were being housed in 357 of these institutions in thirty states. Life in an Indian boarding school wasn’t just harsh, it was soul-crushing. ...”

Page 450: Some of what I’ve told you is true. The rest ... well, let’s just call it the bloom on the rosebush.”

For more information and insights about *This Tender Land:*

See William Kent Krueger’s website at <https://williamkentkrueger.com/standalone/this-tender-land/>

Star Tribune review by Christine Brunkhorst at: <https://www.startribune.com/review-this-tender-land-by-william-kent-krueger/558724422/>