Dante's Peak

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Summary

Dante’s Peak was written in 1997 as a novel based on the film of the same name. Dante’s Peak is a small town in the north-west of the United States, situated on the side of a volcano that has been inactive for thousands of years. When the mountain starts showing signs of activity, Harry Dalton, an expert on volcanoes, is sent to investigate the movement. Harry finds a volcano which he believes is going to erupt in a very short time, but finds that no-one in the town is willing to listen to him. Even his own boss feels that he is exaggerating the danger, and that Harry is over-reacting because his girlfriend was killed in a volcanic eruption some months previously. Then the volcano starts to erupt, and everyone realises that Harry was right. But has this realisation come too late to save the people of the town?

Introduction and Chapter 1: The story of Dante’s Peak is similar to the real volcanic eruption of Mount St Helens in 1980 in the United States. Harry Dalton, a scientist, works at the United States Volcano Office. His boss, Paul Dreyfus sends him to Dante’s Peak, a small town in the north west of the US, to investigate a mountain that is moving. Harry thinks the volcano will explode. Local businessmen and the mayor don’t want to hear this. Harry’s girlfriend died in a volcanic eruption some months previously. Then the volcano starts to erupt, and everyone realises that Harry was right. But has this realisation come too late to save the people of the town?

Chapters 2–3: Harry meets Rachel Wando, the mayor of Dante’s Peak when she is thanking the newspaper for calling the town ‘the second best town in America’. Elliot Blair, a businessman, wants to put lots of money into Dante’s Peak and make it a centre for winter holidays. However, there is a problem. A young couple go for a swim in the lake up on the mountain. There is a small earthquake and hot gas explodes into the lake. The couple die. Harry also meets Rachel’s son Graham who likes playing in a disused mine with his friends.

Chapters 4–5: Rachel drives Harry up the mountain. They meet Ruth. Rachel used to be married to Ruth’s son. Harry notices that there are brown, dead trees and says there is acid in the water, Lauren, Rachel’s daughter, finds two dead animals. Next they see dead fish and then they find the two dead swimmers, face down, in the water. Harry telephones his boss, Paul, who decides to come to Dante’s Peak. However, Paul and Harry don’t agree. Harry thinks the volcano will explode and Paul doesn’t. They decide to take their equipment up the mountain and agree to tell the businessmen what they find.

Chapters 6–7: Paul and Harry meet in Rachel’s café. They decide to take a helicopter up the mountain. Although they go up in the helicopter, they don’t see an earthquake that causes rocks to fall down the mountain, because it happens underneath the helicopter. Rachel asks Harry to dinner. That evening when they are at dinner, Rachel talks about herself and her marriage to Brian. Harry tells Rachel what happened to his girlfriend, Marianne. The next day, they take the equipment up the mountain. Terry Furlong takes one of his robots. The robot can find smoke and gas. The following day, Terry is up the mountain and the team is reading the messages from the robot down below. They realise an earthquake is happening but it is too late. A rock falls on Terry and breaks his leg. Harry and Hutcherson go up in the helicopter and rescue him.

Chapters 8–9: The earthquake is bad for business but Paul says that not a lot happened up the mountain and that Terry was unlucky. However, Harry thinks that lava is moving up nearer to ground level. They have a fight. Paul decides they need to leave and both Paul and Harry tell the business people that they don’t think Dante’s Peak is dangerous. No-one realises that the fish in the lake near Ruth’s house are dying. Harry walks Rachel home. He puts his arm around her. When they get to Rachel’s house, Lauren wants a drink, but the water is brown. Harry wants to see where the water comes from, so they all go up the mountain. There is gas everywhere. When Harry finds the other scientists, they think the mountain is ready to explode. The people of the town have to leave, but Ruth doesn’t want to. Ash and smoke start to come out of the mountain and the school building moves. People start to run and scream.
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**Chapters 10–11:** A building falls onto the school bus and there are earthquakes all the time. Harry goes in the car with Rachel to get her children and Graham goes to get Ruth. Elliot Blair, Les Worrell and some other businessmen pay a lot of money to escape in the helicopter. However, there is too much ash in the air and it stops the engine. The helicopter crashes. There are rocks falling everywhere. Harry, Rachel and the children meet at Ruth’s house and start to drive down the mountain. Lava starts to flow into Ruth’s house and it is too dangerous to continue by car. They take Ruth’s boat onto the lake. However, the water is acid and starts eating into the boat.

**Chapters 12–13:** They cannot reach the other side of the lake, so Ruth jumps out. The acid starts to eat into her legs and she dies. Suddenly, water, trees, rocks and buildings start moving down the mountain. Paul tells Harry by radio that the scientists have to leave. The river is very high and it carries Paul’s car away. He dies. Harry finds a car that works and they start driving down the mountain again. Roughy jumps in. When they get to Dante’s Peak there is a cloud of hot gas and ash (pyroclastic flow) coming towards it. Their only chance of escape is to go underground into the mine. They drive into the mine. Graham and his friends have left food and drink in there. They go to find it, but Harry has forgotten the radio. As he goes back to the car to get it, rocks fall down. He gets separated from the others but sends a message for help. Two days later, when the earthquake stops, people come to rescue them. They all survive.

**Background and themes**

The placement of the town Dante’s Peak in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon and Washington states in the United States was no accident. It was in this area that the United States experienced one of its worst ever volcanic eruptions, in 1980 when Mount St Helen’s erupted. The volcano had been dormant for over 120 years when it started showing signs of activity in early 1980. It erupted in May 1980, when the top of the mountain was blown off by the force of the explosion and its height was reduced by about 400 metres. More than sixty people died and an area of 600 square kilometres was devastated. The volcano continues to spit steam and ash today. The book is therefore based on a reality which people in that area of the United States know very well.

**Conflict between humans and nature:** One of the most important themes of the book is the conflict between humans and nature, and the fact that we should never take nature for granted. Harry is a man with a great affinity and respect for volcanoes and for nature in general. He is therefore willing to take notice of the subtle changes in nature which point to the danger, such as the acidity of the water and the number of dead trees in the area. On the other hand, his boss and his colleagues place their trust in the computers and other man-made machines that monitor the volcano and they are proved wrong in the end. Nature wins and takes her revenge on Paul Dreyfus, Harry’s boss, as he loses his life in the eruption. In this way, the story acts as a warning not to place too much trust in modern technology, but to respect the old ways of interpreting nature’s signals.

**Making decisions:** The main character of the book, Harry Dalton, an expert on volcanoes, is trying to rebuild his life after his girlfriend was killed in a volcanic eruption. Although he suspects that the volcano at Dante’s Peak is going to erupt, he feels that it is possible that he is now over-anxious about other people being killed in the same way as his girlfriend, and that this anxiety is affecting his judgement. For this reason he is prepared to put aside, for a while, his own suspicions about the volcano at Dante’s Peak, and listen to his boss, who believes that there is nothing to worry about. This decision in fact has tragic consequences for the townspeople.

**The influence of big business:** The other main theme of the book is the influence that big business can have on people’s lives and fates. Dante’s Peak is about to receive a large investment from a wealthy businessman who wants to build a winter holiday complex there. This would make the town much richer than it is, and the plan is enthusiastically supported by the members of the business community in the town. When Harry Dalton arrives with his predictions of a volcanic eruption, the business people don’t want to listen to him, as they know that a volcanic eruption or even rumours of one would ruin their plans. They are happy to support Paul Dreyfus’s opinion and to refuse to believe Harry. In doing so, they allow something far worse to happen to the townspeople than the loss of the anticipated holiday complex.
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Discussion activities

Before reading
1  Guess: Write these words on the board: earthquake, acid, smoke and lava. Have students guess what they mean by giving them a context. 
   a This is hot and red and comes out of a volcano. 
   b This is a liquid that can burn you. 
   c Where there is a fire, you often see this in the air. It’s black. 
   d This is when the earth moves.

2  Research: Have the students look up the states of Oregon and Washington in books or on the Internet. Ask students to find out as much as they can about these states. Ask them also to locate the Cascade mountains. 
   What can you find out about the Cascade Mountains? Is there anything unusual about these mountains? Are they safe or dangerous?

Chapter 1
After reading
3  Pair work: Ask the students to think about how Harry felt when his girlfriend died. How do you think Harry felt when this happened? Why do you think he continued to work with volcanoes? Did this help him feel better after his girlfriend’s death, do you think?

Chapter 2
4  Artwork: Ask the students to imagine what the winter holiday centre will look like. Ask them to draw a plan of the centre and include everything the town will need.

Chapter 4
Before reading
5  Predict: Have the students work in small groups and talk about the title of Chapter 4. 
   What do you think ‘Dead fish on the water’ means? Why do you think the fish are dead? What has killed them? Is this important? Why? 
   Have the students write down their ideas.

After reading
6  Check: Students see if their predictions for activity 5 are right.

Chapter 5
After reading
7  Role play: Student A is Rachel Wando. Rachel wants to know everything about the mountain and if it is dangerous. Student B is Harry Dalton. Harry thinks there is a problem and that the mountain is dangerous. He wants people to leave the town. Student C is Paul Dreyfus. Paul doesn’t agree with Harry and wants Rachel to think everything will be OK. Have the conversation.

Chapter 7
Before reading
8  Predict: Have students work in pairs and discuss the following questions. 
   What do you think Terry’s Robot is? What do you think it will be used for? Why would people use a robot on a mountain? How could the robot help the scientists? Have the students write down their ideas and predictions.

After reading
9  Check: Students see if their predictions for activity 8 are right.

Chapter 8
After reading
10 Role play: Student A is Elliot Blair. You want to know everything about the mountain and if there are any problems. You ask a lot of questions. Student B is Paul Dreyfus. You don’t think there are any problems with the mountain and you don’t want Elliot to take away his money or worry about the mountain. Have the conversation.

Chapter 9
After reading
11 Pair work: Ask the students to work in pairs and to imagine they are looking at smoke and ash coming from the top of Dante’s Peak. 
   You need to decide what to do. Write a list of the most important things you need to do. What should you do first? Think about your friends and family? Think about the things you own. What should you take with you?

Chapters 10–11
After reading
12 Pair work: Ask students to work in pairs and to talk about Ruth. How does Ruth feel when she sees her house destroyed? See how many describing words you can think of together and write them down. Think of words in your own language and look them up in your dictionary.

Chapter 12
Before reading
13 Discuss: Ask students to discuss whether they think the boat will get across the lake. Will everybody on the boat live? What could happen?

Chapter 13
After reading
14 Write: Ask students to write a paragraph about what they think will happen to the family. Will Rachel and Harry get married? Where will they live? What will they do? Write down your ideas.