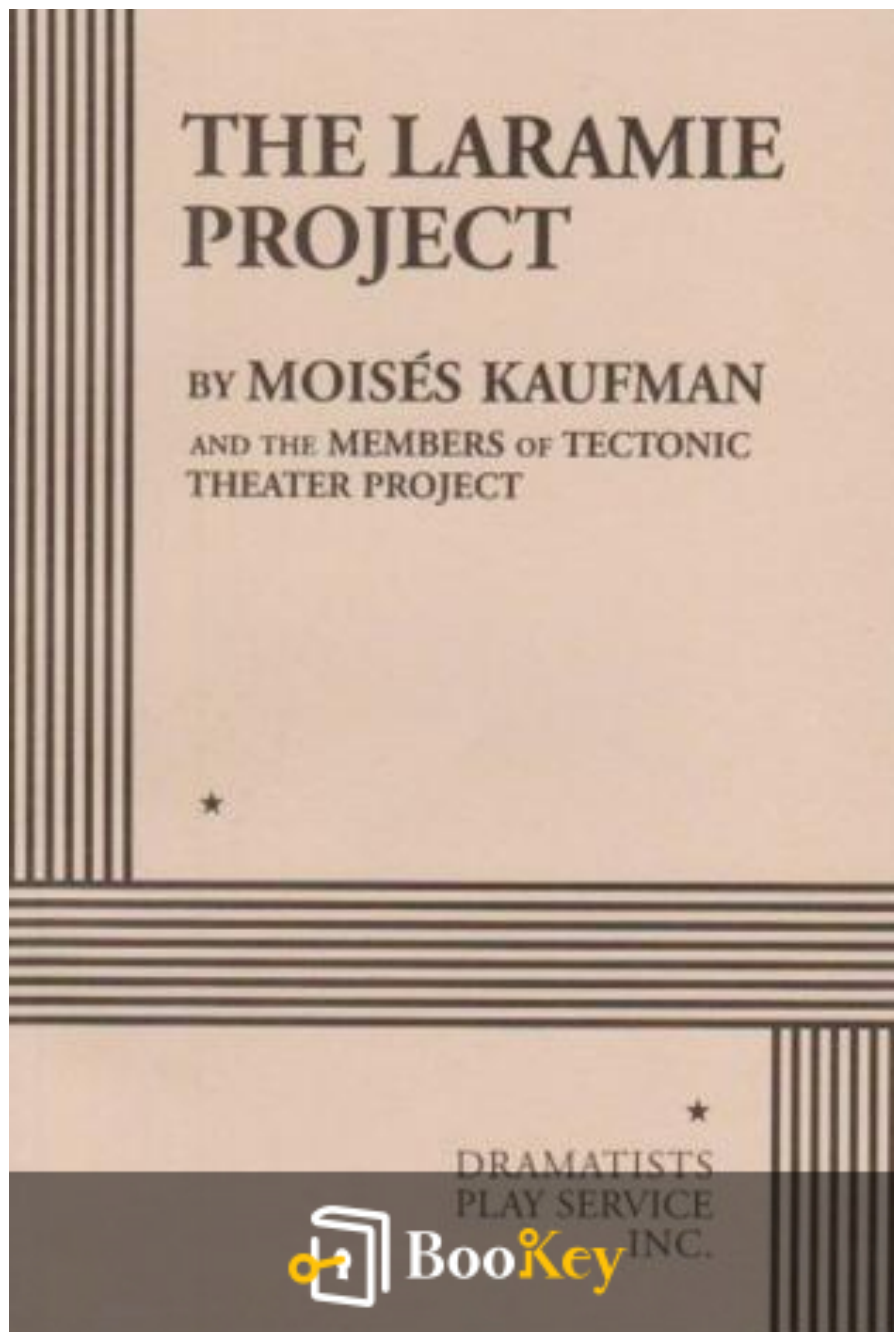


The Laramie Project PDF (Limited Copy)

Moisés Kaufman



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The Laramie Project Summary

A Community's Response to a Tragic Hate Crime.

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About the book

"The Laramie Project" by Moisés Kaufman is a poignant and powerful exploration of community and resilience in the wake of tragedy, inspired by the real-life murder of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man in Laramie, Wyoming. Through a series of interviews with the town's residents—ranging from friends and family to community leaders and law enforcement—Kaufman crafts a chilling yet illuminating tapestry of responses, revealing profound insights about love, acceptance, hate, and the repercussions of deep-seated prejudice. As the voices of Laramie come together to recount their experiences and perspectives on this heartbreaking event, the play challenges us to confront our own beliefs and biases, ultimately inviting readers to reflect on the ongoing struggle for equality and compassion in a divided society. This heart-wrenching yet hopeful narrative compels us to listen, to learn, and to engage in the urgent conversation around tolerance and humanity.

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About the author

Moisés Kaufman is a distinguished playwright, director, and co-founder of the Tectonic Theater Project, known for his innovative and impactful approach to theater. Born in Venezuela, Kaufman moved to the United States, where he emerged as a prominent figure in contemporary drama, particularly through his exploration of real-life events and social issues. His acclaimed work, "The Laramie Project," is a poignant response to the brutal murder of gay student Matthew Shepard in 1998, using a unique documentary theatre style that combines interviews, journal entries, and personal reflections from the Laramie community. Through his craft, Kaufman not only highlights the complexities of human experience but also seeks to promote understanding and compassion, making him a significant voice in modern theatrical discourse.

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Chapter 1 Summary: Introduction

In the introduction to "The Laramie Project," Moisés Kaufman reflects on how certain historical events act as catalysts, sharpening the focus on the ideologies and beliefs of a culture. He draws parallels between the societal impact of Oscar Wilde's trials and the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, asserting that both events reveal deep-seated beliefs about sexuality, violence, and tolerance within American society. Kaufman was particularly drawn to understanding the circumstances surrounding Shepard's murder and the culture of Laramie, Wyoming, which prompted him to engage his theater company, Tectonic Theater Project, in a quest for deeper understanding through the medium of theater.

1. The Core Motivation: Kaufman expresses a desire to comprehend the motivations behind Shepard's murder and to explore the nuanced perspectives of the citizens of Laramie. He emphasizes the importance of listening to their voices, juxtaposing Laramie's uniqueness with broader national themes.

2. A Call to Action: The tragedy posed a profound question for Kaufman and his team: What role could theater play in addressing such a significant social issue? This question aligned perfectly with Tectonic Theater Project's mission, aiming to analyze the subject matter while simultaneously innovating theatrical language and forms.



3. Redefining Theater: Kaufman notes the necessity for theater to evolve in response to contemporary issues, distinguishing it from the traditional methods of storytelling prevalent since the 19th century. His commitment to finding a new way to present theater reflects an eagerness for innovation amidst changing cultural landscapes.

4. Inspiration from Brecht: Kaufman was inspired by Bertolt Brecht's ideas on "epic theatre" while planning the project. He imagines a model where eyewitness accounts—like a traffic accident—serve as a foundation for the narrative, establishing a connection between theatrical presentation and real-life events.

5. The Journey to Laramie: In November 1998, just weeks after Shepard's murder, Kaufman and nine members of his theater company embarked on their journey to Laramie. Throughout the next two years, they conducted over two hundred interviews, capturing the complex emotions and thoughts of the community, ultimately weaving them into a theatrical piece.

6. A Wellspring of Experience: The process of creating "The Laramie Project" proved to be a profound emotional journey filled with sorrow, beauty, and significant insights about the American societal fabric. The play opened in Denver and eventually in New York City, culminating in a performance in Laramie itself, bringing the creation full circle.



Kaufman's introduction sets the stage for an exploration of crucial social themes through the perspective of individuals directly impacted by tragedy, highlighting theater's potential to spark dialogue and foster understanding in the face of violence and prejudice.

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Chapter 2 Summary: A Note from Moisés Kaufman

The creation of "The Laramie Project" emerged from an innovative collaboration orchestrated by the Tectonic Theater Project, led by Moisés Kaufman. Over a year and a half, Kaufman and his team made six visits to Laramie, Wyoming, where they conducted extensive interviews with the townspeople, transcribed the conversations, and refined the material through collaborative writing efforts. A dedicated writers' group, including head writer Leigh Fondakowski and associates Stephen Belber and Greg Pierotti, played a pivotal role in organizing and editing the growing volume of interviews, enhancing the narrative that would ultimately shape the play.

As the play neared its debut in Denver, the focus of the actors shifted to performance preparations, while Fondakowski and new associate writer Stephen Wangh continued refining drafts. "The Laramie Project" premiered at The Ricketson Theatre under the auspices of the Denver Center Theatre Company on February 19, 2000. Directed by Kaufman, the production featured a talented cast performing various roles, ranging from local residents to figures involved in the tragic events surrounding Matthew Shepard's murder.

Following its successful Denver run, the play opened Off-Broadway at The Union Square Theatre in New York City on May 18, 2000, produced jointly by Tectonic Theater Project and other partners. The ensemble cast once



again highlighted its versatility by embodying the diverse characters reflective of the Laramie community, introducing audiences to the complex narratives that arose from the tragedy.

The characters in the play represent a cross-section of Laramie society, from university students to teachers, religious leaders, and local citizens. Each character brings their perspective and experience to the narrative, contributing to a richer understanding of the community's response to the crime and the broader implications of intolerance.

The staging of "The Laramie Project" emphasizes simplicity, focusing on the actors and their performances without extensive set design or elaborate costume changes. This approach aligns with the creators' vision of highlighting the authenticity of the voices from Laramie rather than attempting to recreate a specific physical environment. Costumes are kept basic, suggesting rather than replicating, while all technical transitions on stage are undertaken by the performers themselves, reinforcing the raw essence of the storytelling.

The play's language also reflects a unique structure, utilizing "moment work," a technique pioneered by Kaufman. Rather than dividing the narrative into conventional scenes, "moment work" condenses the narrative into discrete units of time, juxtaposing moments to deepen thematic resonance and emotional impact.



Set in Laramie, Wyoming, the timeline of the narrative spans from 1998 to 1999, capturing the moments surrounding the brutal hate crime that shocked the nation and ignited discussions about violence, sexual orientation, and the quest for acceptance in American society.

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Chapter 3: Act I

On November 14, 1998, the Tectonic Theater Project embarked on a mission to Laramie, Wyoming, conducting over two hundred interviews with the town's residents over the subsequent year. This effort was to culminate in a play that sought to illuminate the profound impact of a tragic event—the murder of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man whose death sparked national outrage and discussions about hate, violence, and discrimination.

Initially, Detective Sergeant Hing of the Laramie Police Department shared his deep-rooted connection to the town, describing it as a space filled with good people and expansive landscapes, a place where individuals could reflect and find happiness. This sentiment was echoed by local residents and individuals associated with the University of Wyoming, such as theater department head Rebecca Hilliker, who highlighted the sense of community and warmth among its residents, along with the opportunity for self-identity. However, she also recognized the shadow cast over Laramie by the incident involving Matthew and its ramifications on the town's identity.

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Chapter 4 Summary: Act II

In this chapter of "The Laramie Project," the unfolding tragedy surrounding Matthew Shepard's brutal attack demonstrates the profound impact on a small community, grappling with questions of violence, identity, and the media's role in the narrative.

1. Early Reactions to the News

As the news of a young man's violent beating emerges, Jon Peacock, Matthew's academic advisor, shares his disbelief upon learning that it was Matthew Shepard, a promising student he had known. Universally across the town, feelings of shock and horror abound. Romaine Patterson's initial conversations hint at a communal fear—the realization that it could indeed be a friend and a beloved member of their community. This worry is compounded as more details surface about the horror of Matthew's condition.

2. The Arraignment and Evidence

The courtroom comes alive when Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson face charges for the attack. Witnesses describe the haunting solemnity of the arraignment, where community members gather with media present to absorb the details. The stark evidence is recounted, painting a chilling picture of betrayal and brutality, igniting a communal grief. As the prosecution lays bare the facts, emotional turmoil grips everyone inside the



court.

3. Community Reflection and Media Firestorm

The violent crime starkly contrasts with Laramie's self-identity as a tolerant, welcoming town. However, the realization dawns that local youth can propagate hate, prompting discussions about societal accountability. As media attention balloons, residents express a fierce pride for their community and frustration at the sensationalism that accompanies tragedy. This scrutiny leads to a fear of misrepresentation but also a recognition of the need for a collective response to such incidents.

4. Matthew's Condition and Public Outcry

As the public learns of Matthew's critical injuries, expressions of love and support flourish through vigils held across the nation. Rulon Stacey, the hospital CEO, provides updates that reveal the community's fragility as they await news about Matthew. The overwhelming public interest calls for a reflection of how society values lives, especially those marginalized for their identity.

5. Diverse Perspectives on Homosexuality

The chapter features a wide range of community perspectives on homosexuality, revealing deeply rooted prejudices but also the conflict of compassion. Some locals share conditioned beliefs against the LGBTQ+ community, while others express remorse and sympathize with Matthew's



plight. This dichotomy illustrates the complicated landscape of acceptance and rejection within Laramie, highlighting a society reflective of broader national attitudes towards homosexuality.

6. Responses from the Accused and the Accuser

Unexpected insights come from those connected to the accused—friends of McKinney—who offer glimpses into his psyche, suggesting a mix of economic desperation and possible homophobia. This examination doesn't excuse the violence but unpacks the complexities that contribute to it, questioning societal norms and collective responsibilities.

7. Vigils and Public Mourning

The outpouring of grief leads to national vigils, displaying solidarity and calling for justice. Voices across the country echo feelings of loss and a desire for change, reflecting Matthew's impact even beyond Laramie. Plans for collective remembrance and calls for anti-hate legislation begin to surface, illustrating a growing movement fueled by outrage and yearning for progress.

8. The Aftermath of Loss

The journey culminates in the personal toll of these events on Matthew's family and those directly involved in medical efforts, showcasing the stark realities of such violence. As Matthew succumbs to his injuries, the community faces the dire need for self-reflection and healing amid the



tragedy. Rulon Stacey's emotional public announcement underscores a universal call to love, urging families everywhere to cherish their loved ones while acknowledging the bitter injustice of losing Matthew.

9. Hope and Reflection

Despite the darkness, the narrative closes on a note of hope—Matthew's story inspires calls for understanding and compassion rather than retribution. The complexities of hatred are recognized as interconnected with notions of identity and belonging, emphasizing that healing lies in unity and remembrance.

Throughout this chapter, the tragedy of Matthew Shepard catalyzes profound discussion about societal values, prejudice, and the need for transformation within communities, paving the way for future dialogues around acceptance and love.



Critical Thinking

Key Point: The need for collective understanding and compassion in the face of tragedy.

Critical Interpretation: Reflecting on the chapter's exploration of community responses to Matthew Shepard's attack, you are inspired to cultivate a deeper sense of empathy within your own life. As you engage with friends, family, and even strangers, you recognize the importance of understanding their experiences, especially those shaped by prejudice or hardship. This tragic event serves as a stark reminder that acceptance and compassion should guide your interactions. You begin to prioritize conversations that bridge divisions and challenge misconceptions, fostering a space where love and support can flourish. By actively participating in dialogues around acceptance—whether through local advocacy or simply extending kindness in your daily dealings—you can honor Matthew's legacy and contribute to a more understanding world, knowing that every small act of compassion can ripple outwards, creating a more inclusive community.



Chapter 5 Summary: Act III

In an evocative scene reminiscent of a somber congregation, the portrayal of Matthew Shepard's funeral unfolds amidst a heavy snowfall. Matt Galloway reflects on the day, where an overwhelming number of attendees—dressed in black and carrying umbrellas—gathered at two churches to mourn the loss of a bright young man whose life was tragically cut short. Within this solemn assembly, a priest leads prayers that resonate with themes of grief and hope in the face of loss while recounting the teachings of Jesus.

The narrative shifts to Tiffany Edwards, who describes the storm as a manifestation of universal forces, suggesting a cosmic impact in response to the tragedy. As the service continues, dim tensions arise with the entrance of the notorious Reverend Fred Phelps, whose presence evokes sharp oppositional feelings. Phelps vocalizes his anti-gay sentiments and the motivations behind the protest, creating a vivid contrast with the mourners who strive for a more loving response.

The arrival of high school students, singing “Amazing Grace” to counter the negativity, infuses hope. This spirit of resilience continues as Romaine Patterson pledges to challenge Phelps’s message of hate by organizing a peaceful protest adorned with angel costumes to promote love and acceptance.



As the court proceedings for Russell Henderson—the first perpetrator—commence six months later, a stark emotional landscape is painted through the sentiments of locals expressing their fear around jury selection. The atmosphere is charged with tension, as community members navigate their biases and the impending justice surrounding Matthew’s brutal murder. Henderson ultimately pleads guilty, showing remorse and seeking mercy, which is met with a mix of sympathy and anger from the community.

A broader societal reflection emerges through discussions on the death penalty, where different individuals voice their conflicting perspectives on retribution for heinous acts. As the details of the court trials unfold, the defense's use of a “gay panic” argument becomes a point of outrage for many, while others are grateful for a truth that exposes the underlying prejudices.

Amid the legal turmoil, the impact of Matt’s death reverberates throughout Laramie, catalyzing some community members to reconsider their beliefs about acceptance and humanity. The testimonies of law enforcement officials reveal personal transformations, showcasing how the case has forced many to confront their biases head-on.

The case culminates in a tension-filled courtroom as McKinney faces the jury. The verdict reveals mixed emotions—guilty of many charges yet



exonerated of premeditated murder. Dennis Shepard's powerful statement embodies a journey of grief interwoven with compassion, as he chooses to grant McKinney life instead of death, highlighting the theme of mercy and the enduring memory of his son.

The aftermath plays out in a community still grappling with its identity and the implications of what happened. Local theater productions begin a healing process while attempting to redefine Laramie's narrative, showcasing the transformative power of art and reflection. The play concludes with a poignant departure, leaving behind the sparkle of Laramie's lights—a metaphor for hope amid darkness, as individuals from diverse backgrounds contemplate their roles in fostering a more inclusive society.

1. The impact of community grief illustrated through the funeral's overwhelming attendance and presence—a reflection of collective mourning.
2. The juxtaposition of hate and love exemplified by the contrasting messages of Reverend Phelps and the high school students.
3. The legal proceedings serving as a catalyst for personal and societal change, prompting individuals to confront their biases.
4. Dennis Shepard's choice to show mercy highlights themes of compassion, reflection, and the enduring legacy of Matthew Shepard.
5. The concluding reflections promote a vision of growth and healing within the community, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and understanding.



Critical Thinking

Key Point: The juxtaposition of hate and love exemplified by the contrasting messages of Reverend Phelps and the high school students.

Critical Interpretation: In witnessing the raw display of opposing forces during Matthew Shepard's funeral, you are reminded of the profound impact your words and actions can have in the face of adversity. As the high school students rise up, singing 'Amazing Grace' amidst a storm of negativity, you feel a surge of hope—a call to embrace love over hate in your own life. This moment inspires you to take a stand, to cultivate compassion where division reigns, and to use your voice to counter discrimination and prejudice. You realize that even in the darkest times, your commitment to kindness and acceptance can create ripples of change, fostering a more inclusive world for everyone.



Chapter 6: Authors' Note

The Laramie Project, which premiered in Denver in 2000, has emerged as one of the most frequently produced plays in America, spurred by the tragic legacy of Matthew Shepard, whose life and death resonate deeply beyond the confines of Laramie. This widespread interest reflects both the powerful impact of Shepard's story and the commitment of those engaged in its retelling. Productions span from professional to amateur, involving community and educational theaters, and eliciting remarkable passion from participants, especially students, who often undertake performances amidst personal and professional challenges related to themes of hate and homophobia.

The narrative of Laramie is not just about the town itself; it delves into the lives of ordinary Americans confronting extraordinary circumstances. Matthew Shepard's murder served as a pivotal moment, laying bare the deep-seated issues of human character and societal values. Over a year and a half, the theater company conducted extensive interviews with Laramie residents, capturing their experiences and perspectives which formed the

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Chapter 7 Summary: Characters in Order of Appearance

In Chapter 7 of "The Laramie Project," the narrative unfolds through an array of characters, primarily reflecting the community wrestling with the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's tragic murder. This chapter captures the poignant responses and varied perspectives from Laramie's residents, emphasizing a collective journey towards understanding and healing amidst grief and anger.

1. The chapter opens with individuals personally connected to the events surrounding Matthew Shepard's death, particularly the impact on his family and friends. Their emotional turmoil provides a rich contextual backdrop, deepening the audience's empathy towards the victims of hate crime. Judy and Dennis Shepard, Matthew's parents, express their profound loss and confusion, grappling with the reasons behind such violence against their son.
2. A significant aspect of the chapter is the diverse reactions from the community. Various locals, such as police officers, university professors, and friends of Matthew, share their thoughts on the societal implications of the crime. The law enforcement perspective, particularly from officers like Reggie Fluty and Dave O'Malley, underscores the challenges in addressing hate crimes within their jurisdiction, illustrating the procedural intricacies involved in such sensitive cases.



3. The voices of advocates and educators emerge, including figures like Beth Loffreda and Catherine Connolly. Their dialogue highlights the necessity for cultural change within Wyoming, particularly in fostering inclusivity and understanding toward LGBTQ+ individuals. They advocate for educational reforms and awareness campaigns, aiming to combat prejudice and promote a safe environment for all.

4. Notably, personal narratives from friends and theater students, such as Jedadiah Shultz and Romaine Patterson, emphasize the human connection to the tragedy. Their recollections weave a tapestry of memories that celebrate Matthew's vibrant spirit while mourning his loss. This distinction serves as a reminder of the individual lives affected by societal animosity.

5. As a contrast to the hurt expressions, characters like Governor Freudenthal reflect on the political dynamics at play, indicating the need for legislative action to safeguard marginalized communities. The chapter signifies a vital interplay between community, government, and advocacy, illustrating how the aftermath of one individual's murder can influence broader societal change.

6. Furthermore, the contrast between conservative and progressive viewpoints within the legislative structure is palpably explored, showcasing how the echoes of hate extend beyond personal loss into the realms of policy and governance. This complex dialogue emphasizes the multifaceted nature



of community responses grappling with an act of violence that transcends individual tragedy.

By weaving together these rich narratives and perspectives, Chapter 7 of "The Laramie Project" encapsulates a community in flux, navigating the painful repercussions of Matthew Shepard's murder while striving for compassion, understanding, and resolution in the face of deep-seated prejudice. The chapter serves as both a memorial to the fallen and a clarion call for ongoing dialogue about acceptance and justice.

Key Themes	Description
Emotional Impact	The chapter begins with personal accounts from Matthew Shepard's family and friends, highlighting their grief and confusion regarding the violence against him.
Community Reactions	Diverse responses from locals, including police and university staff, illustrate the societal implications of hate crimes and the challenges faced in addressing them.
Advocacy for Change	Voices from educators and advocates call for cultural change in Wyoming, emphasizing the need for inclusivity and awareness campaigns aimed at combating prejudice.
Personal Narratives	Friends and theater students share memories of Matthew, celebrating his spirit while mourning his loss, reflecting the human impact of the tragedy.
Political Dynamics	Governor Freudenthal discusses the need for legislative actions to protect marginalized communities, indicating political responsibilities in the wake of violence.
Conservative vs.	The chapter explores the clash between differing viewpoints in legislation, showing how hate and violence affect policy and



Key Themes	Description
Progressive Views	governance.
Overall Message	Chapter 7 encapsulates a community in transition, seeking understanding and resolutions to societal prejudices while memorializing Matthew Shepard's legacy.

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Chapter 8 Summary: Act I

In this segment of "The Laramie Project," reflections and conversations ten years after the murder of Matthew Shepard reveal the complex interplay of change, memory, and cultural attitudes in Laramie. The narrative begins with Beth Loffreda, who poignantly recounts how the autumn light brings back memories of the horrific events surrounding Matt's death. She reflects on the community's growth and the mixed emotions of progress versus unfinished work in addressing the issues of hate and acceptance.

Upon returning to Laramie, the theater company members note significant growth in the town with new developments, fueled by an energy boom, indicating economic change. However, beneath these surface transformations lies a lingering discomfort regarding how the community copes with its association with the crime. Many residents express fatigue from the media attention that has framed their town in a specific, often negative light.

While some residents like Marge Murray and Reggie Fluty recognize a change in public sentiment, others reinforce notions that desire to shift away from the narrative of hate crime to view it as a robbery gone awry fueled by drug use. Despite the local improvements, deeper cultural changes regarding acceptance and acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ issues remain inconsistent, as indicated by the lack of progress in implementing domestic partner benefits



at the University of Wyoming.

Interviews with locals illustrate a spectrum of beliefs surrounding the murder – some dismissing it as a product of drugs rather than hate, while others contend the crime’s fundamental nature was deeply rooted in homophobia. Key voices from the community, such as law enforcement personnel who investigated Matthew’s murder, reiterate that the circumstances surrounding the crime were not just about robbery but about a targeted act of violence against Matthew as a gay man.

Despite attempts at memorializing Matthew through ceremonies and benches dedicated in his honor, conversations reveal a troubling trend among younger generations, who are either misinformed or indifferent to the specifics and significance of the events that transpired. This suggests a subtle erosion of memory and the critical lessons that should be derived from Matthew’s story.

Finally, the narrative brings forth emotional testimonies from family members, community activists, and educators who witness hate lingering in even the younger generation’s interactions. The complicated nature of healing and moving forward is navigated through conversations about acknowledgment—both of the past and of the ongoing issues of intolerance that the community faces. In a poignant coda, the letter from Russell Henderson appears, reflecting his willingness to share his perspective and



perhaps facilitate understanding, closing the chapter on a note of hope amidst the ongoing challenge of confronting homophobia and violence.

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Chapter 9: Act II

In Chapter 9 of "The Laramie Project," a deep exploration unfolds through interviews with Russell Henderson, one of the murderers of Matthew Shepard, and various community members who reflect on the aftermath of the tragedy and its broader implications. This chapter interweaves personal regrets, societal change, and the enduring impact of hate crimes.

1. Russell Henderson stands as a central figure, portraying a complex mix of shame and remorse. During his interview, he reveals that he was not deeply involved in drugs or previous criminal activities before the murder but was influenced by his co-conspirator, Aaron McKinney. He admits to not resisting the violent actions against Matthew, expressing regret for his inaction during the crime and a desire to take back his choices. His reflection hints at a potential for change—a victim empathy course he has taken illustrates his struggle to reconcile with his past.

2. The narrative shifts to institutional responses to hate crimes, as highlighted by Catherine Connolly, who emphasizes the continuing

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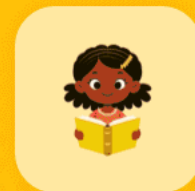
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