

The early deaths of the men of Norvelt—from hard and dangerous work in the coal mines—the death of Norvelt itself as a result of the children of Norvelt fleeing for a more prosperous lifestyle, and the death of Miss Volker’s war generation all combine to produce the dead end of the title. Thus, the book itself is an obituary, an ode, to that which is passing, a time when the country and its common citizens held different ideals. Yet that cycle of life promises a rebirth in young Jack, a sense that his time with Miss Volker has been so influential that he will carry the words and actions of Mrs. Roosevelt forward into his future. In this promise, the book, appearing to be a dead end, with its many stories of lives taken prematurely, for no one in this story dies naturally, including Wat Tyler, Anne Frank, the people of Hiroshima, and Virginia Dare, provides a vision of the future in Jack, a lover of history, and that future looks bright in his hands. The novel’s obituaries emphasize two themes. First is the innate goodness of hardworking Americans, unsung and unknown outside of their small world, yet significant to the well being of the country and its ideals. The second is the connection all share with historical figures and events. The lives of the unremarkable residents of Norvelt and the lives of the greatest and most famous events and individuals are equally enlightening, inspiring, and cautionary.