Martin's, a drying-out place. How people speak and how the author describes things can provide another way for you to get interested in the book and in the characters.

You might remember that I said a few chapters back that it's not worth looking up every word you don't know. Well, that's doubly—no *triply*—true in fiction. Often authors will use a foreign or specific word to say exactly what they mean. They know when they're doing this and will try to make it clear in context why they are using it and just what they mean by it. If they're not using a word in this way, don't worry about it, because it's probably not that important. If they are, don't let that word you don't know slow you down. Put a mark next to it, and plow through to the end of the chapter. If you still haven't figured out the word, then (and only then) look it up. Usually, looking stuff up is counterproductive because it's distracting and time-consuming.

# Reading Zone 9

Read the following passage and the answer the questions that follow. You can check your answers on page 245.

> The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there." Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far Western than Middle West. The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang, a ranch-hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes. The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.

Holcomb, too, can be seen from great distances. Not that there is much to see—simply an aimless congregation of buildings divided in the center by the main-line tracks of the Santa Fe Railroad, a haphazard hamlet bounded on the south by a brown stretch of the Arkansas (pronounced "Ar-kan-sas") River, on the north by a highway, Route 50, and on the east and west by prairie lands and wheat fields. After rain, or when snowfalls thaw, the streets, unnamed, unshaded, unpaved, turn from the thickets dust into the direst mud. At one end of the town stands a stark old stucco structure, the roof of which supports an electric sign—DANCE—but the dancing has ceased and the advertisement has been dark for several years. Nearby is another building with an irrelevant sign, this one is flaking gold on a dirty window—HOLCOMB BANK. The bank closed in 1933, and its former counting rooms have been converted into apartments. It is one of the town's two "apartment houses," the second being a ramshackle mansion known, because a good part of the local school's faculty lives there, as the Teacherage. But the majority of Holcomb's homes are one-story frame affairs, with front porches.

Down by the depot, the postmistress, a gaunt women who wears a rawhide jacket and denims and cowboy boots, presides over a falling-apart post office. The depot itself, with its peeling sulphur-colored paint, is equally melancholy; the Chief, the Super Chief, the El Capitan go by every day, but these celebrated expresses never pause there. No passenger trains do—only an occasional freight. Up on the highway, there are two filling stations, one of which doubles as a meagerly supplied grocery store, while the other does extra duty as a cafe—Hartman's Cafe, where Mrs. Hartman, the proprietress, dispenses sandwiches, coffee, soft drinks, and 3.2 beer. (Holcomb, like all the rest of Kansas, is "dry.")

And that, really, is all. Unless you include, as one must, the Holcomb School, a good-looking establishment, which reveals a circumstance that the appearance of the community otherwise camouflages: that the parent who sent their children to this modern and ably staffed "consolidated" school—the grades go from kindergarten through senior high, and a fleet of buses transport the students, of which

there are usually around three hundred and sixty, from as far as sixteen miles away—are, in general, a prosperous people. Farm ranchers, most of them, they are outdoor folk of very varied stock—German, Irish, Norwegian, Mexican, Japanese. They raise cattle and sheep, grow wheat, milo grass seed, and sugar beets. Farming is always a chancey business, but in western Kansas its practitioners consider themselves "born gamblers," for they must contend with an extremely shallow precipitation (the annual average is eighteen inches) and anguishing irrigation problems. However, the last seven years have been years of droughtless beneficence. The farm ranchers in Finney County, of which Holcomb is a part, have done well; money has been made not from farming alone but also from the exploitation of plentiful natural-gas resources, and its acquisition is reflected in the new school, the comfortable interiors of the farmhouses, the steep and swollen grain elevators.

Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few Americans—in fact, few Kansans—had ever heard of Holcomb. Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe track, drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings, had never stopped there. The inhabitants of the village, numbering two hundred and seventy, were satisfied that this should be so, quite content to exist inside ordinary life—to work, to hunt, to watch television, to attend school socials, choir practice, meetings of the 4-H Club. But then, in the earliest hours of that morning in November, a certain Sunday morning, certain foreign sounds impinged on the normal nightly Holcomb noises—on the keening hysteria of coyotes, the dry scrape of scuttling tumbleweed, the racing, receding wail of locomotive whistles. At the time not a soul in sleeping Holcomb heard them—four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives. But afterward the townspeople, theretofore sufficiently unfearful of each other to seldom trouble to lock their doors, found fantasy re-creating them over and again—those somber explosions that stimulated fires of mistrust in the glare of which many old neighbors viewed each other strangely, and as strangers.

1. According to the passage, the word "hamlet" could best be defined as
   (A) an urban center
   (B) a Prince of Denmark
   (C) a train station
   (D) a small town
   (E) a river-bounded island

2. The tone of the passage can best be described as primarily
   (A) journalistic
   (B) explosive
   (C) technical
   (D) tragic
   (E) personal

3. The best description of Holcomb before the shotgun blasts would be
   (A) homogeneous and peaceful
   (B) volatile and isolationist
   (C) frightened and unfriendly
   (D) placid and picturesque
   (E) impoverished and picaresque

4. The violence of the shotgun blasts seemed, to the author, to be
   (A) an expected occurrence, predictable in this violent town
   (B) a rare occurrence in an otherwise regularly violent town
   (C) a shocking occurrence, forever changing this otherwise peaceful town
   (D) a welcome occurrence, breaking the monotony of the otherwise boring town
   (E) a painful occurrence, embraced and forgiven by this otherwise picturesque town

5. It can be inferred from the passage that the people killed by the shotgun blasts were
   (A) strangers visiting the town
   (B) relatives of a member of the town
   (C) criminals who lived near the town
   (D) residents of the town
   (E) the founders of Holcomb, Kansas