

10:04 Study Guide

10:04 by Ben Lerner

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Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure of this novel, quotes are referenced by page number. This guide refers specifically to the October 2015 Picador USA paperback edition.

“10:04” is a novel by Ben Lerner in which Lerner has composed a novel based on a short story in which the never-named narrator seeks to write a novel from a short story, while the narrator in the short story seeks to write a novel from a short story. As the novel begins, the New York-based narrator explains he has written a short story that he is seeking to turn into a novel. At the same time, the narrator’s best friend, Alex, has asked him to donate sperm to her so that she can become pregnant. She is worried that her chances at marriage have all passed her by. The narrator himself wonders what it would be like to be a father, a question that yields some answers in his decision to mentor a young boy named Roberto. He helps Roberto to write a book on the brontosaurus, and how it was mistakenly classified early on.

As the narrator struggles to write his novel, he must also contend with the knowledge that global warming is sending massive storms the way of New York. He also struggles with the fact that he has been diagnosed with a serious heart condition which could potentially kill him. Between disasters within, natural disasters, and a potential disaster of the self through struggling to write a novel expected to be bid upon by numerous publishers, the narrator begins to experience sensations of unreality, surreality, and time warps. For example, one evening he suspects he may be in 1883, 1912, or 2012 when he comes upon gaslight streetlamps in Brooklyn. At various points throughout the novel, the narrator questions whether what he is experiencing is real, and where it is occurring. He decides that his novel is going to be open-ended with many possible explanations and futures.

The short story of discussion is then reproduced in its entirety. “The Golden Vanity” features a writer seeking to turn his short story into a novel for the big publishers to bid upon. The novel is largely reflective of the novel-narrator’s life. Circumstances and names have been changed ever so slightly, warping reality just enough to call it fiction, but retaining enough truth to write it realistically. For example, Alex becomes Eliza in the short story, while the novel-narrator’s heart condition becomes the story-narrator’s brain condition. The short story contains the story-narrator’s father playing a song from childhood called “The Golden Vanity”, in which a young boy is lost at sea. The story-narrator has had his father alter the ending so the child is saved, leading to the reality of the song and therefore the short story being altered.

As the novel continues, the narrator struggles to write his novel. He goes to Texas on a fellowship, only to end up writing poetry instead of the novel. He also nearly wrecks his unstable health by attending a party and doing drugs. After he sobers up, he decides his novel will definitely be open-ended with many possible futures. He returns to New York where he puts his relationship with his girlfriend, Alena, on hold, so that he can have sex with Alex to impregnate her. At this time, a hurricane hits New York, causing moderate damage which includes a blackout over part of the city. Here, Ben Lerner supplants the

narrator as narrator, directly addressing the reader. He explains that his walk through the darkened city, and his looking at photos of the event lead to the cover of the novel, and how he has pushed the edge of fiction.

One

Summary

The never-named 33-year-old narrator of the novel is a writer who has just had lunch with his agent in New York. While sitting and watching traffic afterwards, the narrator explains that everything does and does not seem the same, as if something is different. He feels as if various futures press down upon him. The narrator has been working on transforming a short story into a novel, which all the major companies are already interested in. The narrator is also carrying the weight of a recently diagnosed potentially fatal heart condition. It means the largest artery in his body could rupture at any moment, and will require surgery. The narrator's closest friend, 36-year-old woman named Alex, offers moral support. She also wants to have a baby by the narrator, having first met him in college and believing her chances of getting married are bad. The narrator worries how this will affect his relationship with Alena, an artist who works with two of the narrator's oldest friends, a married couple named Jon and Sharon, who edit documentary films.

The narrator is writing a book on the brontosaurus with his mentee, Roberto, a third grade student in Aaron's class. The narrator and Aaron have long been friends. Roberto is worried about global warming and the ice age that will follow. A warm cyclonic storm bears down upon New York. People are out in force, stocking up on supplies. Things feel different to the narrator, making him realize that once again, various futures press down upon him at the same time. The narrator and Alex spend the night together to wait out the storm. Early in the morning, word comes that most of the storm has missed the city, which has sustained only some flooding. The narrator receives word that Bernard, husband of the narrator's mentor and literary hero, Natali, has fallen and injured himself. The narrator is once again stunned by how the world has changed. It had been Natali and Bernard who helped the narrator get into the literary world.

Alex explains to the narrator she has to have a dental operation to remove her wisdom teeth. She struggles with doing local anesthesia or IV sedation, since sedation will cause some amnesia. In the past, she and the narrator attended a film of clock towers in films, called "The Clock", which included the clock that struck 10:04 in "Back to the Future". To the narrator, the film represented many different possible futures. It inspired the narrator to fictionalize his current situation in life, slightly change the circumstances and the names (such as turning Alex into "Liza"). He ends up with the short story published by "The New Yorker", and he now seeks to turn into a novel.

Analysis

"10:04" is a novel by Ben Lerner in which Lerner has composed a novel based on a short story in which the never-named narrator seeks to write a novel from a short story, while the narrator in the short story seeks to write a novel from a short story. From the



start, the reader understands that ideas of reality will be questioned in the novel, as to each of the narrators, the worlds in which they appear are real to themselves, and to their writers, even though those worlds are fictitious to the reader. However, even this assumption will be challenged at the end of the novel by Lerner himself.

Indeed, the idea of what could happen in the future becomes an important theme in and of itself, as the narrator in this section clearly states that he feels as if different futures are pressing down on him all at once. This is confirmed by the clock film, and the various situations that arise around the clock towers portrayed in the movies. Different times and different situations mean different futures. It is through the potential futures that the theme of time also comes into play. The narrator explains that he can feel time shifting around him.

This sensing of the shifting of time is in conjunction with the theme of change, all cause the narrator to think about how quickly life can change. For example, in just this first section the narrator experiences multiple forms of change or possibilities for change; he is shown sitting on the bench after meeting with his agent, learns about his potentially fatal heart condition, discovers Alex wants to have a baby by him, learns about Bernard's fall, and learns about the storm approaching New York. These changes also lead to new various possible futures. The narrator may or may not die. Alex may or may not have a child by him. Bernard may or may not recover from his injuries. New Yorkers are in a panic for survival rather than bustling with life like normal. New York may or may not be destroyed in the storm. The narrator may or may not die (here, the theme of mortality emerges). And these are only the extreme futures. For example, New York may sustain some damage, but not a tremendous amount – and this is what actually happens in the novel.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways can the narrator feel and recognize things changing around him? Why does change have such an impact on the narrator?

Discussion Question 2

The narrator recognizes that there may be many possible futures to the changes he experiences. What leads him to these conclusions? Are any potential futures revealed in this section of the novel? If so, what are they? If not, why have they not been revealed?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the narrator so taken with the clock film that he and Alex go to see? What does seeing the film help propel the narrator to do?

Vocabulary

intuited, earnest, indefinite, simultaneously, craniate, infantilized, proprioceptive, spatial, infinitesimally, invariably, incommensurate, paradoxically, statelessness, vibrancy, intergenerational, autumnalia, intermingling, officiated, learnedness, fragility, incrementally, myoclonic, cursorily, inexorably, transvaluation, impertinence



Two: The Golden Vanity

Summary

The narrator is trying to decide between local and IV sedation to have his wisdom teeth removed. The narrator discusses it with his best friend, Liza. The narrator is conflicted because he isn't sure if eliminating the memory of the pain is the same thing as eliminating the pain itself. The narrator wonders if removing the memory of something is the same thing as removing the thing itself. The narrator worries about experiencing something which he will have no memory of, and of dealing with a repressed trauma that could affect him in unknown ways in the future. Additionally, the narrator understands that the world will change without his knowledge while he is out. He ultimately resolves to do local anesthesia.

As the narrator heads out to a bar through Brooklyn Heights, the gaslight streetlamps make him feel as if he is in 1883, 1912, and 2012 all at once. It is as if time has stopped in that moment. Likewise, the narrator and author of the story feel as if they are both reading and writing and existing in the story all at once. The narrator meets with Dr. Roberts, who wants to know why the narrator thinks that, as a man in his early thirties, the narrator could possibly have any papers a university would want to collect. The narrator does not know, either, but knows universities are interested. He feels as if it is a premonition that he will die. A few days later, the narrator learns he has a benign mass in his brain, which doesn't require surgery provided it doesn't grow any larger. However, surgery will also be difficult to do because of the mass's location.

The narrator attends dinner with his family, where his father plays the song "The Golden Vanity", in which a boy is left to drown in the ocean in the original version. But his father has changed the song so that the boy is rescued. The family has been made aware of the narrator's brain mass. His mother believes he will be fine. The narrator then has his dental procedure, ultimately deciding on IV sedation. As he heads home in a taxi with Liza, he sees how beautiful the city and the Brooklyn Bridge can be, but then realizes he won't remember it because of the sedation. However, the next morning, the narrator is thrilled to discover he does indeed remember it.

Analysis

In the second section of the novel, the reader is introduced to the short story that the narrator of the first section has written that is being transformed into a novel. The theme of reality once again becomes central. The short story, "The Golden Vanity", has actually been written by Ben Lerner, but it has been attributed to his first section narrator, who in turn has written about the second section narrator writing the short story that Lerner himself has had written and published. The narrator in "The Golden Vanity" is writing a short story and seeking to turn that into a novel, while Lerner's first section narrator has written "The Golden Vanity" and is seeking to turn that into a novel, while it is clear that



Lerner is the true author of “The Golden Vanity” and “10:04” is his effort at turning “The Golden Vanity” into a novel.

The surreality of the novel is given further credence in the experience the narrator has while journeying through Brooklyn Heights. The historic lampposts, lit by gaslight, give the narrator the impression that he is in 1883, 1912, or 2012, blurring together time and just what reality may actually be if time is transient in such a way. 1883, 1912, and 2012 are all various possible futures that the narrator recognizes he could be living all at once, even if he himself has never personally experienced these futures, or never will. In other words, he is experiencing potential futures, and potential pasts. It defies the logic of time and reality.

Reality is rocked in two important ways in this section of the novel. First, the narrator relates how his father used to sing the song “The Golden Vanity” to him as a child. Unhappy with the ending of the novel – the future – the narrator had his father add more stanzas to allow the child in the song to be rescued – a different possible future. The shifting of fiction for the narrator shifts reality for the character. The boy in the song, dead, is now alive and living a new future. The writer may do the same for his characters. The first section narrator’s fictionalized version of himself in the second section reveals a brain condition rather than a heart condition. New futures are possible, as reality has been shifted.

Second, the idea that one may have memories of events that one does not recall – in this situation, the beautiful view the narrator has on his way back from dental surgery – also becomes central to the novel’s second section. Because he can remember the view and being beside Liza in the cab, it is as if they never happened whereas if he could not remember these things, they truly must have happened. In other words, he has forgotten what truly happened – the surgery, the pain, how the ride truly was – and has replaced it with an idealized view of what did not actually happen. The view may have been nice, but not necessarily beautiful, for example. The aspect of beauty did not actually exist. He has created a fiction that he remembers and takes for reality. The same is true of the various layers of the novel, each taken as real by someone else, though considered fiction overall by the reader. Yet again, the reader should be reminded not to take this for granted.

Discussion Question 1

How does reality shift between fiction and reality in this section of the novel, especially as it relates to the narrators of the first and second sections, and “The Golden Vanity”? Why does this matter?

Discussion Question 2

How does the narrator of “The Golden Vanity” in the novel’s second section relate and differ from the narrator of the first section? Why?



Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the changing of the outcome of “The Golden Vanity” and the narrator’s return home from dental surgery? How does this affect the idea of reality and the future?

Vocabulary

ruminations, sublimity, coeval, artisanal, enumerate, tactically, precocious, institutional, premonition, incommunicable



Three

Summary

The narrator arrives at New York-Presbyterian Hospital to donate sperm for Alex. The narrator is both nervous and embarrassed, and so leaves quickly upon completion. At the Park Slope Food Cooperative, the narrator befriends a young Lebanese woman named Noor, who explains her biological father was not the man she had grown up believing was her father, and that her biological father and mother are back together. At a lecture later on, the narrator reveals he decided to become a poet at the age of seven on January 28, 1986, when the space shuttle Challenger exploded, killing all aboard. The narrator explains that even his family, who were politically opposed to President Ronald Reagan, were deeply touched by the address Reagan delivered about the disaster, in which the astronauts “slipped the surly bonds of Earth to touch the face of God”. The narrator himself was deeply touched by the address, and by the poem by John Gillespie Magee which inspired the address, which in turn inspired him to want to write.

After the lecture, the narrator explains to curious readers that he does not, in fact, have a brain tumor like his character. The narrator ends up having dinner with a female author interested in his work and that he wanted to be a writer as a child. She explains she has not been able to have children due to surgery as a child. The narrator relates his own efforts with Alex. He also discusses the story he is trying to expand into a novel. He explains he is considering adding a college relationship between the story’s narrator and an older girl who pretends to have cancer. The next day, after visiting with Alena, the narrator sees a boat on the river which reflects the sky, making the boat seem like a plane for a moment. The narrator relates how, as he writes his novel, his protagonist tells people his mother is dead, while the mother is actually alive and well. The narrator’s own mother, however, is diagnosed with cancer. This startles the narrator into stopping the novel, only to have his mother – successfully treated for cancer – urge him to continue writing.

The narrator and Roberto go to look at dinosaur skeletons at the American Museum of Natural History. While walking through the exhibit on the origin of species with backbones, the narrator wonders whether the child produced by his sperm will have any defects, and whether or not he will be a good father. The narrator prepares for a five-week residency at a foundation in Marfa, Texas, where it is hoped his novel can be completed.

Analysis

The novel shifts realities once more, putting the reader back with the narrator of the first section. The reader is able to recognize many of the similarities between the narrator’s life, and the world of his short story. Many of the elements incorporated into the short



story are realistic reflections of the narrator's life (from having a potentially life threatening health issue, to having a female best friend who wants to have a baby by him, to having an acute sense of time, and so on). This challenges conceptions of reality, as what is supposed to be fiction is merely a fictionalized version of the truth. It is difficult to argue where truth ends and fiction begins.

This is certainly the case when the narrator explains his motivation for becoming a writer: President Ronald Reagan. Though the narrator's family members were not political fans of Reagan, they were deeply moved by his Challenger address. Reagan and his speechwriter, Peggy Noonan, borrowed words from Canadian poet John Gillespie Magee, which in turn inspired the narrator to become a poet. That the words of a writer should be borrowed by the most powerful man on Earth, and his speechwriter, is a stunning revelation to the narrator. He recognizes the value and importance of the written word as a way to comfort and make people think. The narrator notes that many people believe the words in the address were wholly attributed to Reagan, when in reality, they were borrowed. Here, reality again blurs as what seems to be real may not actually be real at all – or it might be more real than previously thought.

Reality is rocked twice more in this section of the novel. First, the narrator encounters a boat sailing on the river which is a perfect reflection of the sky. The boat therein seems more an airplane in the sky than a boat on the water. What is real may not actually be real, or may be more real than one thinks. Second, the narrator is horrified to discover his mother has cancer when his narrator's mother ends up dying. Although this is impossible, the lines between reality as it is written in fiction, and reality as things actually exist, have been strongly blurred. The reader should bear this in mind since it will become increasingly important in the final two sections of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it difficult to tell where reality (for the narrator) and fiction (the narrator's short story "The Golden Vanity") begin and end? Explain with examples.

Discussion Question 2

What inspires the narrator to become a writer? How does this reflect the idea and theme of reality?

Discussion Question 3

What importance do the narrator's mother's cancer diagnosis, and the observation that a boat appears to be in the sky, have? Why does the narrator seem to spend so much time considering these two things?



Vocabulary

perceptibly, exorbitantly, autonomy, usurped, incommensurability, arterial, communal, presumptuous, prosody, bejeweled, solemnity, aesthetically, conceptually, ululations, voluble, circuitous, osseous, spontaneity, insubordination

Four

Summary

Michael, caretaker of the residency houses in Marfa, picks up the narrator at the airport in El Paso. The narrator is amazed by the stars in the sky and the wide open area around the small town. The narrator struggles to get to work, writing poetry instead of his novel. He writes about creators immerse themselves in their work, and how realities blur together between what is real and what is created. When a creator puts much of himself into creation, it is difficult to tell where one reality ends and another begins. The narrator receives a visit from Diane, a painter and gallery owner, and a man whose name and identity the narrator cannot place at first. He then meets a German painter named Monika, and an intern at Diane's gallery, whom he hugs. This makes everyone laugh and puts everyone at ease.

The narrator wonders what else he will do that is out of character before the world changes around him. He attends a party where he begins to do cocaine, but stops, remembering he has a heart condition. He smokes what he thinks is a cigarette, but ends up being laced with an unknown drug – possibly ketamine – which disorients him, and makes the intern vomit. The narrator learns that Diane's male friend is named Paul. He also does his best to comfort the intern, who is crying from the experience of the drugs. The narrator, relatively sobered, leaves the party and drives several miles out into the night to the place where phantom lights supposedly can be seen. He smokes one actual cigarette after another, during which time he decides his novel will be about an actual present with multiple futures.

Analysis

The blurring of truth between reality and fiction, and reality and fictionalized reality, continue in this section of the novel. The residency that the narrator takes up in Texas can lead to any number of possible futures, as the narrator notes – but he also comes to recognize the importance of a totally immersive creative experience. Here, the reader should note that the narrator speaks plainly about a writer putting himself, figuratively and literally, into his creation. The creator draws on personal experiences and real life events to help fuel his creation, making the fictitious creation all the more real. Because a creator will put so much of himself into a work of art, it is difficult to tell where reality ends and the fictitious reality begins. The narrator ultimately decides his novel will be about an actual present with multiple potential futures. The use of an “actual present” denotes the presence of reality being used in fiction.

The idea of possible futures and mortality is again visited in this section of the novel. The narrator makes a poor, arguably idiotic choice by taking drugs while at a party in Texas. He knows he has a heart condition that can only be compromised even more by the use of drugs, but does them anyway. All people make mistakes at some point; this is



clearly a mistake on the narrator's part, as he later admits. It is a mistake that decreases the number of possible futures the narrator may have, increasingly the likelihood of one: death. For a person obsessed with possible futures, time, and change, the narrator's lapse of judgment is baffling but in keeping with the idea of reality. Interestingly enough, the narrator does not rely on the hallucinogenic reaction he has to the drugs to forge his creativity, but chooses to sober up before considering how he will approach his novel. It can be argued that the true genius, the true creator, does not rely on drugs or unnatural approaches to expanding creativity, but relies simply on himself or herself. This is the case with the narrator.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrator relate the creative process to losing hold of what is real and what is not? Why does this matter to the plot of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Why are reality and fiction so closely related, oftentimes indistinguishable, to the creator?

Discussion Question 3

For what reasons does the narrator choose to take drugs? Given the narrator's medical condition, how can this be explained?

Vocabulary

epistolary, refurbished, art installation, circadian, dissociative, fraudulence

Five

Summary

The narrator and Alex have dinner one evening with Alex's mom and stepdad. They talk about whether or not the first moon landings ever actually occurred, or whether it was an invented reality to distract the public from the Vietnam War. That night in the guestroom in the basement, the narrator and Alex get high using weed through a vaporizer, and have sex. Upstairs, the narrator finds Alex's stepfather, Rick, on cancer message boards online. Rick confesses that he keeps hoping his wife, Emma, will be faking cancer the way that his girlfriend, Ashley, did in college. The narrator ends up putting his relationship with Alena on hold to keep having sex with Alex, who cannot handle the narrator sleeping with someone else while she is trying to get pregnant. The narrator later goes in to the hospital to have his heart checked. The doctor relates that, even though the scan shows the aortic diameter has increased to 4.3 from 4.2, it falls within the range of the margin of error, meaning there has been no change. The narrator considers this real and unreal.

Another massive cyclonic storm bears down on New York. The narrator has a conversation with a graduate student named Calvin about O'Brien's "Metropole". Calvin contends O'Brien's writing is such that it can be read a thousand different ways. Meanwhile, the narrator has the book he and Roberto have written on the mistaking the reality of the brontosaurus self-published. He orders fifty copies for Roberto's family and friends. Roberto is already thinking about his next project, on the scarcity of water. As the cyclone nears, New York buckles down and parts of the city are evacuated. There is some damage and some flooding, but the city survives. The narrator breaks character as the narrator, and as the writer – Ben Lerner – directly addresses the reader here, talking about how he and his friends walk through the city, some of which has lost power, and how one photograph of the darkened city will be the cover for the book "on the edge of fiction". It is then revealed that Alex is pregnant. The novel ends with a quote from Ronald Reagan, who in turn quotes the film "Back to the Future" in his 1986 State of the Union Address: "Where we're going, we don't need roads."

Analysis

The use of reality in fiction increases in important ways in this section of the novel. Even simple asides – such as someone dating a girl in college who pretended to have cancer – is revealed to have a real-life equivalent (the stepfather of Alex). Indeed, Rick hopes that his wife is faking cancer so that she will definitely survive. He can't imagine a future without her. Here, the idea of multiple futures comes to the fore, in conjunction with the theme of mortality. The greatest abrogation of any potential future, though it is a potential future in and of itself, is death. Likewise, the narrator must contend with the idea that his heart's artery, though having grown in size, is within the margin of error and therefore has not "actually" grown. That something can both be and not be adds to the



idea that what is real can be both real and not real at the same time. The same is true of fiction. Even reality is sometimes warped, as noted by the confusion over whether the brontosaurus actually existed, or was merely believed to have existed.

Reality is rocked yet again as the novel concludes. As the next storm bears down on New York, it is clear that New York will survive and go on to any one of many possible futures. However, it is at this point that Ben Lerner not only breaks the proverbial fourth wall of literature by directly addressing the reader, but at which time he inserts himself into the novel, supplanting the narrator and stretching fiction to the very edge of possibility. Here, what is fiction intertwines with reality until both become indistinguishable from one another as Lerner and his friends traverse a darkened New York City. There, Lerner speaks about the photograph that will become the cover for “10:04”, and it becomes clear that Lerner himself has had to struggle with transforming “The Golden Vanity” into “10:04”, just as the narrator of most of “10:04” has had to struggle with turning “The Golden Vanity” into a novel, just as the narrator of “The Golden Vanity” is seeking to turn his own short story into a novel. Lerner succinctly sums this up through Regan’s appropriation of “Back to the Future”, in which, having pushed the boundaries of fiction to the breaking point, Lerner has taken on territory without roads.

Discussion Question 1

What purpose does Ben Lerner serve by injecting himself into the novel, and supplanting his fictionalized narrator? Does this have the desired effect? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why is the narrator so baffled by the idea that his heart artery could and could not grow in size? How can this be related to the idea of reality and fiction?

Discussion Question 3

In what places does Ben Lerner blur the line between fiction and reality? How is this accomplished? What is Lerner’s purpose in doing so?

Vocabulary

gibbous, emaciated, asymptomatic, idiopathic, nostalgic, supplanted, eschatological, obliquely



Characters

The narrator of "10:04"

The narrator for most of "10:04" is a 33-year-old, never-named New York writer who struggles with turning a short story he has written – "The Golden Vanity" – into a novel. The narrator is obsessed with time, reality, and the potential for possible futures.

Best friends with Alex, the narrator is sought by Alex to give her a baby. At the same time, the narrator must put his relationship with Alena on hold so he can have sex with Alex because Alex cannot handle his having sex with more than one woman at a time.

The narrator learns that he has a heart condition which may kill him should the arteries of his heart enlarge. By the end of the novel, Alex has conceived and the narrator's heart has not grown in danger. The narrator is ultimately denoted as a fictionalized version of Ben Lerner, who personally supplants the narrator at the end of the novel.

The narrator of "The Golden Vanity"

The narrator of "The Golden Vanity" is a 33-year-old New York writer who is struggling to turn a short story he has written into a novel. The narrator in many ways mirrors his creator – the narrator of "10:04" – though some details have been fictionalized. For example, the narrator's best friend "Alex" has been changed to "Liza", and the narrator's heart condition has been changed to a brain condition for the narrator of "The Golden Vanity". Like the narrator of "10:04", the narrator of "The Golden Vanity" has decided to focus his novel on the idea of possible futures.

Ben Lerner

Ben Lerner is both the writer of the novel "10:04" and becomes a character in the novel itself, supplanting his own narrator. Lerner supplants the narrator just as the storm hits and passes New York. He begins by directly addressing the reader, and then during the walk following the storm, becomes the narrator himself. He speaks about the photograph taken of the post-hurricane city that he will use for the cover of the novel the reader is now reading, thus defying reality and fiction, and stretching the boundary of fiction.

Ronald Reagan

Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) was the fortieth President of the United States of America, serving two terms from 1981-1989. Although the narrator and his family are not politically fans of Reagan, they are moved by the beauty of Regan's borrowed and original words, especially Reagan's Challenger address. Reagan's address to the nation



after the Challenger disaster, drawing on words from speechwriter Peggy Noonan and Canadian poet John Gillespie Magee, helps lead the narrator to want to become a poet and the nation to heal. The narrator notes that many people believe the words in the address were wholly attributable to Reagan, when in reality, they were borrowed. Reality blurs as what seems to be real may not actually be real at all – or it might be more real than previously thought.

Alex

Alex is the best friend of the narrator of “10:04”. Thirty-six and beautiful, Alex worries her chances at marriage have passed her by. Still, she wants to have a child, and so she enlists the narrator to help her conceive.

Liza

Liza is the best friend of the narrator of “The Golden Vanity”. Alena is a fictionalized version of Alex. Alena, like her real life counterpart (as far as the short story is concerned), seeks to have a baby by the narrator because she believes that her chances at marriage have all passed her by.

Jon

Jon is the husband of Sharon, and is a longtime friend of the narrator of “10:04”. Jon is a documentary film editor who works with his wife. He becomes a peripheral character in the novel, important only so far as his assistant, Alena, becomes the girlfriend of the narrator.

Sharon

Sharon is the wife of Jon, and is a longtime friend of the narrator of “10:04”. Sharon is a documentary film editor who works with her husband. She becomes a peripheral character in the novel, important only so far as her assistant, Alena, becomes the girlfriend of the narrator.

Alena

Alena is an artist working as an assistant documentary film editor for Jon and Sharon. She is the girlfriend of the narrator of “10:04”. Intelligent, young, and beautiful, Alena is aggravated when her relationship with the narrator is put on hold, having wanted something more lasting than a relationship which can be put on hold as the narrator wishes.



Literary agent

The narrator's never-named literary agent reveals to the narrator of "10:04" that several companies are interested in having the narrator turn "The Golden Vanity" into a novel. She encourages the narrator to work on the novel throughout "10:04". She also reminds him not to work too quickly, because companies will be more in love with the idea of what a novel could be rather than what it might turn out to be. The promise of the future may be better than the actual future itself.



Symbols and Symbolism

"Back to the Future"

"Back to the Future" is a 1985 time travel film that the narrator of "10:04" is obsessed with. The film features a scene with a clock tower that strikes 10:04, ensuring travel through time. The idea of time and the potential for so many possible futures ensnares the narrator's attention, and helps pave the way for the plot of the novel.

"The Clock"

"The Clock" is a montage of movie clips featuring clock towers in various plots and situations. The narrator and Alex go to see "The Clock" in "10:04". The narrator is captivated by the idea of time in so many different films, each with a different situation. Here, he becomes moved by the idea of time having so many possible futures, and decides to begin outlining his novel based on this concept.

"The Golden Vanity" (short story)

"The Golden Vanity" is a short story written by Ben Lerner which inspires the novel "10:04". In turn, "The Golden Vanity" is the short story written by the narrator of the novel "10:04". The short story is about the efforts of a writer to turn his short story into a novel for large publishers to bid on. The story includes reference to the song "The Golden Vanity" in which a boy is lost at sea. As a child, the narrator has his father change the song to ensure the boy lives, thus providing for the idea of possible futures.

"The Golden Vanity" (song)

"The Golden Vanity" is a song about a boy drowning at sea. The changing of the fate of the boy from drowning to being rescued by a sea turtle by the narrator's father at the narrator's behest is crucial to the story and the novel. It demonstrates that futures can be changed, and any number of futures is possible.

"10:04"

"10:04" is a novel by Ben Lerner which also features in the novel itself. "10:04" is essentially a fictionalized account of Lerner's life and efforts to turn his short story "The Golden Vanity" into a novel, just as the characters in the novel and the short story seek to do the same. At the end of "10:04", Lerner directly addresses the reading audience, talking about selecting a cover for the novel the reader is now reading.



Challenger Address

The Challenger Address delivered by President Ronald Reagan on January 28, 1986, inspires the narrator of “10:04” to become both a poet and a writer. Reagan and his speechwriter, Peggy Noonan, borrowed words from Canadian poet John Gillespie Magee to end the address. The narrator recognizes the value and importance of the written word as a way to comfort and make people think, and notes that many people believe the words in the address were wholly attributed to Reagan, when in reality, they were borrowed. The Challenger Address blurs what seems to be real may not actually be real at all – or it might be more real than previously thought.

Fellowship

The narrator of “10:04” is selected for fellowship in Marfa, Texas, whereas Ben Lerner, the author of “10:04”, was selected for a MacArthur Fellowship. The narrator heads to Texas for five weeks with the intention of working on his novel, where all of his expenses will be covered by the fellowship. The narrator ends up writing poetry and doing drugs instead of actually working on his novel until late in the fellowship period.

Brontosaurus book

The narrator and his mentee, Roberto, work on a Brontosaurus book through the course of “10:04”. The book is about how the brontosaurus was discovered, thought to be a real dinosaur, declared not to be a real dinosaur, and then proved once more to be a dinosaur. The book on the brontosaurus reveals how even the truth may be considered fiction, and how the truth-turned-fiction may be proven real eventually.

Storms

Two massive storms bear down on New York in the novel. The first storm mostly misses the city, resulting only in some flooding. The second storm hits the city harder, resulting in more flooding and power outages. The outages, and a walk through them, lead Ben Lerner to decide on a photo of the outages for the cover of “10:04”. The second storm acts as a symbolic destruction of what is real and what is fiction, as the journey through the post-storm city becomes narrated by Ben Lerner himself because Lerner has supplanted the narrator.

Photo of New York

An aerial photograph of New York after the storm captivates Ben Lerner. He decides it will be the cover of “10:04”. He explains this directly to the reader at the end of the novel when he supplants the narrator. He uses the selection of the photo for the cover to blur the line between fiction and reality.

Settings

New York

New York is a bustling port metropolis and the largest city in the state of New York. It is home to the narrator of “10:04” and most of the characters in the novel. In the novel, New York is threatened by rising water due to global warming. It is also the main setting of the short story “The Golden Vanity” and is where Ben Lerner breaks the fourth wall by directly addressing the audience, and then personally inserting himself into the plot.

Financial District

The financial district of New York’s Manhattan is an area of New York that mostly loses power during and after the second storm that hits New York. It is while walking through this specific part of the city that Ben Lerner supplants the narrator by addressing the audience directly, and talking about the cover of the novel the reader is now reading. The cover features a photograph of the blackened financial district of New York, selected by Ben Lerner to be the cover of the novel.

Brooklyn Heights

Brooklyn Heights is a section of Brooklyn in New York. It has historical areas, including one lit by gaslight street lamps. Here in Brooklyn Heights, the narrator has a sense of timelessness, of being present in 1883, 1912, and 2012 all at once due to the timelessness of the lamps. It causes him to evaluate the idea of time and multiple futures.

Brooklyn Bridge

The Brooklyn Bridge is a beautiful, massive bridge that connects Manhattan to Brooklyn. The narrator believes it should be called the “Manhattan Bridge” because Manhattan is prettier than Brooklyn. It is while crossing the Brooklyn Bridge that the narrator sees a perfect reflection of the sky in the river on which a boat is passing. It makes it appear as if the boat is actually a plane, and demonstrates that reality can easily be blurred together with fiction and with what is perceived to be real.

Marfan, Texas

Marfan, Texas, is a small town in southwestern Texas where the narrator travels in Section Four of the novel. The narrator travels to Marfan after accepted a five-week fellowship to work on his novel, though he ends up working on his poetry instead. While in Marfan, the narrator is amazed by the beauty of the wide open spaces. The narrator

also jeopardizes his health by ingesting drugs. He also comes to the determination that his novel will be about the present with many possible futures.

Themes and Motifs

Change

Change is an important theme in the novel “10:04” by Ben Lerner. Change, both figurative and literal, affects the narrator and the plot of the novel in various ways. Change is something that comes to preoccupy the mind of the narrator, and to help inform other themes in the novel.

The narrator of the novel first becomes aware of change early on. He feels as if things are changing around him in New York City, and he is powerless to affect those changes in any way, shape, or form. At first, he can't quite determine what exactly has changed, but knows that something in reality around him has shifted. Likewise, he considers the idea that multiple futures may come out of present circumstances, each triggered by changes. Time alone is a change, he knows, which means that things will happen no matter what.

The narrator learns that Bernard, husband of Natali, both writers who helped him establish a presence in the literary world, has had a terrible fall. It is a clear change from how things were just a few minutes before he received the text message informing him of the accident. The narrator cannot wrap his mind around how quickly something can change, and how in one instant, everything is normal, but the next, something happens that changes everything.

The narrator also contends with other changes that arise in the novel. The insistence of Alex that the narrator father her baby is a clear departure from, and change in the status of the narrator and Alex as friends. Global warming brings weather pattern changes which in turn produce storms that threaten New York twice in the novel. The interest of big publishers in the narrator's short story signal a change from his being a relatively unknown writer to a major figure in the literary scene. The narrator's own diagnosis with a potentially life-threatening heart condition also point to a change from the normal.

Possible Futures

Possible futures are an important theme in the novel “10:04” by Ben Lerner. Possible futures include all potential outcomes that may arise from any circumstance or situation in the present, or those rooted in the past. Throughout the novel, the narrator feels as if he is contending with various possible futures and outcomes, and this in turn directly influences his novel.

The first time that the narrator becomes aware of possible futures, he is watching traffic while sitting on a bench after lunch with his agent. He explains, simply, that things feel to have shifted and changed around him, and that multiple futures weigh down upon him all at once. He knows that his novel, like he himself, can go in any direction from where he begins, resulting in multiple possible futures.



And the futures that the narrator faces in the novel all stem from changes he encounters. Alex may or may not become pregnant by him, and this may or may not ruin their friendship. A massive storm may or may not hit New York, and may or may not cause massive damage. Bernard may or may not recover from his injuries after falling. The narrator's novel may or may not be a success – if the narrator manages to finish his novel at all. There are no shortage of possible futures ahead of the narrator.

The narrator (and later Ben Lerner) ultimately decide that the novel will be about the present, with the potential for many different futures. The narrator decides upon this in several different places in the novel, including while in Marfan and including while he is watching “The Clock”. The narrator's novel with any number of potential futures is reflective of Ben Lerner's own novel with any number of possible futures.

Time

Time is an important theme in the novel “10:04” by Ben Lerner. Through the novel, time is among those things the narrator is obsessed with. Time, in its own way, informs not only the plot of the novel, but provides a launching point for change, possible futures, mortality, and even reality. As a result, the narrator reflects on change at various points throughout the novel.

Early on, the narrator feels the weight of time passing around him, leading to any number of potential futures. As he sits on a bench after lunch with his agent, he realizes how time can fly by, and how quickly in time things can change. Just a short time before, for example, he was a relatively obscure poet and writer. Now, all the big companies are looking to purchase his next novel.

While traveling through Brooklyn Heights, the gaslight lampposts give the narrator room to pause and consider their historic nature. The narrator suddenly loses track of time, wondering if he is in 1883, 1912, or 2012. He cannot be sure, but knows that time ebbs and flows as it will. This also explains, in part, why much of the narrative of the novel often leaps back and forth between the present and the past, usually without warning.

Ultimately, the novelist – while in Texas and at a screening of “The Clock” – decides that his novel will be about the present in time, and about all the possible futures that there may be in time. The narrator therein ties the present directly into the future. Ben Lerner himself challenges the nature of time by directly addressing the reader in the present at the end of the novel, even though what Lerner has written has been written in the past.

Mortality

Mortality is an important theme in the novel “10:04” by Ben Lerner. Mortality is essentially the idea that life on Earth ultimately ends. A sense of mortality pervades the novel, especially where the narrator and those associated with him are concerned. The idea of mortality is inspired largely by the idea that things change and time passes.



When the novel begins, the narrator's biggest struggles seem to be converting a short story into a novel and helping his best friend Alex get pregnant. A sense of mortality can be seen in 36-year-old Alex's desire to be pregnant, for she worries that she will never get married and have kids. She feels as if her chances are all running out. This makes having a baby all the more important to her before she gets too old.

As the narrator comes to find out, mortality haunts others he loves as well. His mother is diagnosed with, but survives cancer. Alex's mother is diagnosed with cancer, and her fate is uncertain at the end of the novel. Bernard takes a terrible fall, and his future is likewise left uncertain as to whether or not he will make a full recovery. The lives of many New Yorkers, adversely impacted by the storm, are left uncertain at the end of the novel.

The narrator himself lives under a constant source of mortality – his heart. The narrator is diagnosed with Marfan syndrome, which affects his heart. His heart condition may end up killing him. As a result, the reader must constantly live carefully to avoid added stress to his heart in order to increase his chances of surviving long term. However, even the narrator tempts fate by ingesting drugs and compromising his heart's health. Nevertheless, the narrator recognizes his stupidity and resolves to keep sober. Mortality isn't something to be challenged.

Reality

Reality is an important theme in the novel "10:04" by Ben Lerner. What is real and what is fiction, as well as what is real and surreal, is challenged extensively in the novel. "10:04" provides a window into multiple realities simply by virtue of the plot: it is a novel by Ben Lerner that Lerner has composed based on a short story in which the never-named narrator seeks to write a novel from a short story, while the narrator in the short story seeks to write a novel from a short story.

Lerner and each narrator incorporate elements of their own lives into their creations. Lerner's general situation is the situation the narrator of "10:04" encounters, while his situation is the situation the narrator of "The Golden Vanity" faces. Likewise, the narrator of "10:04" has a best friend named Alex who seeks to get pregnant, while in "The Golden Vanity", the narrator has a best friend named Liza who seeks to get pregnant. Elements of real life bound in fiction make the fiction more real, and blur the line between what is real and what is fiction. Other incidents – such as the narrator's perceived memories following dental surgery, and his observation that a boat sailing on a perfect river reflection of the sky might be a plane – further blur the line between reality, perception, and fiction.

Ben Lerner – and the narrator by extension – also tackle reality in the creative process head on. Creating a work of art – whether a painting or a novel or anything – is a totally immersive experience. The creator puts much of himself or herself into the creation, thereby making the creation utterly real to the creator, and confusingly real to the reader or viewer. This in turn blurs the divide between reality and fiction.

Lerner himself confounds the division between reality and fiction by first addressing the reader directly late in the novel, and then supplanting his narrator with himself very later in the novel. Ben Lerner takes over the narration directly, where Lerner's narrator's fictionalized experiences clearly become Lerner's own experiences. He demolishes the fourth wall by including the reader, and then goes on to describe the process whereby he selected the photo for the novel the reader is now reading.

Styles

Point of View

Ben Lerner tells his novel in the first-person stream of consciousness narrative from the point of view of the narrator of “10:04”, the point of view of the narrator of “The Golden Vanity”, and the point of view of himself as writer. This is done for various reasons. First, Lerner seeks to break down the wall between the worlds of reality and fiction. He does this by inserting large elements of his own real life in fiction, thereby fictionalizing reality. He also does this by including a short story narrator within the novel narrator’s story. Essentially, the three distinct narratives ultimately become one, wherein reality is nearly impossible to separate from fiction. This becomes especially challenging when Lerner inserts himself directly into the novel and begins speaking to the reader. Likewise, the stream of consciousness aspect of the narrative means that one thought, feeling, or experience ultimately blends seamlessly into the next, leading to a wandering kind of plot in which what is real and what is fiction are effortlessly blended.

Language and Meaning

Ben Lerner tells his novel “10:04” in language that is both simple and educated. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the novel is written in the 2010s, and takes place in the 2010s, so the language utilized in the novel is reflective of the time in which the novel takes place. The language used in the 2010s is casual, simple, and straightforward. This also keeps in mind the 2010s-contemporary target audience of the novel. However, the novel is broken up by educated language, with words like “intuited” and “circuitous” being used instead of more common words like “thought” and “going around”. This is done in order to demonstrate the narrator is a young man of high education and sound knowledge. It makes the narrator’s character all the more believable.

Structure

Ben Lerner divides his novel “10:04” into five primary, linear, but achronological sections, numbered One through Five. Each section deals with a specific set of events or situations in the narrator’s life, while Section Two is given entirely to the short story “The Golden Vanity”, written months before the first section of the novel takes place. Section Four, for example, largely takes place while the narrator is in fellowship, while Section Five deals with the second storm that hits New York. Within the sections themselves, the plot leaps back and forth between the past and the present, often without warning. This is to help add a level of surreality and timelessness to the novel in order to further advance the idea that reality is often difficult to discern. However, the simple and straightforward identification of sections makes the plot itself easier to follow by reducing the obstacles in the reader’s way.



Quotes

We sat and watched the traffic and I am kidding and I am not kidding when I say that I intuited an alien intelligence, felt subject to a succession of images, sensations, memories, and affects that did not, properly speaking, belong to me...

-- Narrator (One)

Importance: When the novel begins, the narrator and his literary agent have just finished lunch. They sit down at Tenth Street to watch the traffic, where a sense of surreality sets in by way of the narrator. He explains that everything seemed the same, but somehow felt different, as if something had changed ever so slightly. This will be incredibly important as the novel progresses, for changes of all kinds are coming to the writer's life.

I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously.

-- Narrator (One)

Importance: Here, the narrator considers what his response to his agent should have been when his agent asked him how he would expand his short story into a novel. The narrator, however, is making a statement not merely about writing, but about life in general. He has been diagnosed with a potentially fatal heart condition, he stands to make a windfall profit on a future novel, rising sea levels threaten New York, and a female friend will soon ask him to be the father of her child – all various futures happening all at once.

As I read I experienced what was becoming a familiar sensation: the world was rearranging itself around me while I processed words from a liquid-crystal display.

-- Narrator (One)

Importance: While off to meet with Dr. Andrews, The narrator receives word that Bernard, husband of the narrator's mentor and literary hero, Natali, has fallen and injured himself. The narrator once again reflects on how the world has changed, and is stunned to discover it has happened again. The narrator realizes that time and change are impossible not to deal with.

I can't figure out if abolishing the memory of the pain is the same thing as abolishing the pain.

-- Narrator (Two)

Importance: Here, the narrator in the short story "The Golden Vanity" wonders what kind of anesthesia he will have to get his wisdom teeth removed. He discusses it with his best friend, Liza. The narrator wonders if removing the memory of something is the same thing as removing the thing itself. The narrator worries about experiencing something which he will have no memory of, of dealing with a repressed trauma that could affect him in unknown ways. He also understands that the world will change without his knowledge while he is out.



No: it was as if the little flame in the gas lamp he paused before were burning at once in the present and in various pasts, in 2012 but also in 1912 or 1883, as if it were one flame flickering simultaneously in each of those times, connecting them.

-- Narrator (Two paragraph 67)

Importance: While walking through Brooklyn Heights in the evening, the narrator is surprised by the gaslight streetlamps. Because they are old-fashioned, he feels as if he is living in multiple pasts and multiple futures at once, and feels as if time has stopped. Likewise, the narrator and author of the story feel as if they are both reading and writing and existing in the story all at once. This is in keeping with the themes of time, change, and the future.

I won't remember this. This is the most beautiful view of the city I have ever seen, the most perfect experience of touch and speed, I've never felt so close to Liza, and I won't remember it; the drugs will erase it.

-- Narrator (Two)

Importance: Here, the narrator reflects sadly on how he will not remember the beautiful way the city looks, or how wonderful Liza feels when he wakes up because of the sedation he has been given during dentistry. The narrator recognizes that his desire not to feel the pain means he won't remember the pain, or anything else. He realizes then that choosing an IV sedative over a local sedative was surely a mistake.

I do remember the drive, the view, stroking Liza's hair, the incommunicable beauty destined to disappear. I remember it, which means it never happened.

-- Narrator (Two)

Importance: The narrator remembers the beautiful view after his dental surgery and IV sedation after all. The narrator has been so worried about remembering things, he is thrilled when he realizes he can remember them in the end. Because he can remember these things, it is as if they never happened whereas if he could not remember them, they truly must have happened. In other words, he has forgotten what truly happened – the surgery, the pain, how the ride truly was – and has replaced it with an idealized view of what did not actually happen. The view may have been nice, but not necessarily beautiful, for example.

I looked down at the water to see a small boat slowly pass; the craquelure of its wake merged with the clouds reflected there and I briefly saw the vessel as a plane.

-- Narrator (Three)

Importance: As the narrator heads home across the Brooklyn Bridge, he sees how clearly the sky reflects the water, and sees a boat in the water as though the boat was a plane because of the sky's reflection. It makes the narrator contemplate reality, what is real and what isn't, what the future is, and what the future might not be. The narrator's sense of time and space also come together here, as he feels as if he might be in more than one time and one place at once. This is importance because it continues to blur the line between the narrator's life and his writing.



In my novel the protagonist tells people his mother is dead, when she's alive and well. Halfway through writing the book, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer and I felt, however insanely, that the novel was in part responsible, that having even a fictionalized version of myself producing bad karma around parental health was in some unspecifiable way to blame for the diagnosis.

-- Narrator (Three)

Importance: In a further example of reality and fiction blending together, the narrator relates how his protagonist is telling people his mother is dead when she isn't even sick, and how the narrator's own mother comes down with cancer, though is successfully treated for it. The narrator feels he is somehow responsible for it because he wrote about his protagonist's mother being dead. It is as if somehow the narrator has managed to affect reality through his writing, which disturbs the narrator greatly.

I loved this idea: my virtual novel was worth more than my actual novel.

-- Narrator (Three)

Importance: In another synthesis of reality and the future, the narrator learns that the publishing houses interested in his new novel could be more excited about the potential novel rather than the actual novel. The auction to secure the new novel is essentially the art of predicting a next novel will be better than the one before, as the narrator's agent explains. Here, what doesn't exist is in actuality better than what actually exists. The future may be worse or better than the novel that doesn't exist.

You can't/ rise from the loom so quickly that you/ overturn the stool and rush toward the plane/ of the picture without startling the painter, hear/ voices the medium is powerless to depict/ without that registering somewhere on the body./ But from our perspective, it's precisely/ where the hand ceases to signify a hand/ and is paint, no longer appears to be warm/ or capable, that it reaches the material/ present, becomes realer than sculpture because/ tentative: she is surfacing too quickly.

-- Narrator (Four)

Importance: While on residency in Marfan, Texas, the narrator writes poetry. In one such poem, he describes the creative process and reality combined. One cannot exist without the other. An artist immerses himself in the world he or she is creating; to rise too quickly from that world is a startling thing, because it removes one reality for another. Likewise, it is difficult to tell where reality ends, and the created reality begins, especially when the creator pours so much of himself or herself into what is being created.

We saw a bright glow to the east among the dark towers of the Financial District, like the eyeshine of some animal. Later we would learn it was Goldman Sachs, see photographs in which one of the few illuminated buildings in the skyline was the investment banking firm, an image I'd use for the cover of my book – not the one I was contracted to write about fraudulence, but the one I've written in its place for you, to you, on the very edge of fiction.

-- Ben Lerner (Five)



Importance: Here, Ben Lerner breaks character as the narrator of the novel to reveal his own personal experiences which led to the cover of the novel. He also reveals that the novel itself is on the edge of fiction, for it contains much reality within the fiction, making the fiction alarmingly real. Reality shifts back and forth between the narrator, the narrator of “The Golden Vanity”, and Ben Lerner as narrator controlling everything through the novel he has written pretending to be the narrator. The novel pushes the edge of fiction, as it blends together various realities, and as Ben Lerner directly and personally addresses the reader.